

September 8, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

Week 16 | Psalm 119:113 | Samekh

Today, we move on to the fifteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Samekh. <Insert Picture>

Easier seen here than anywhere else in the chapter is the chiastic¹ structure of this stanza.² As the Psalmist travels along his eight-verse journey, he lays new ground but then ends, more or less, right where he began. Thus, in the first half, our wanderer speaks about his love for God's word but then pivots and acknowledges the fear he has for God. These seem so diametrically opposed to each other that it seems unlikely that they are linked in any way. Yet, throughout the Scriptures, we learn that affection for God and being in awe of God ought to go hand-in-hand. As such, this is a stanza of comparison. "The psalmist gives expression to his sturdy devotion by means of contrasts: loyalty versus treachery, hope of life versus doom. His love for God, evidenced in his love for God's revelation, is balanced by a wary sense of divine wrath."³

READ: Psalm 119:113-120 (ESV)

Samekh

¹¹³ I hate the double-minded, but I love your law.

¹¹⁴ You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.

¹¹⁵ Depart from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commandments of my God.

¹¹⁶ Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope!

¹¹⁷ Hold me up, that I may be safe and have regard for your statutes continually!

¹¹⁸ You spurn all who go astray from your statutes, for their cunning is in vain.

¹¹⁹ All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross, therefore I love your testimonies.

¹²⁰ My flesh trembles for fear of you, and I am afraid of your judgments.

What are the principles the Psalmist is trying to instill in this fifteenth stanza?

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Chiasmus," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Chiasmus&oldid=1039248171>, [accessed September 8, 2021].

² Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Psalms 73-150*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2001), p. 210.

³ Allen, Leslie C., *Psalm 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 190.

- Vs. 113 Our sojourner has little regard for those who are "double-minded." In fact, he goes so far as to say that he actually "hates" them (cf. Gen. 37:4-5, 8). Strong words, to be sure, and quite shocking to the believer who is told explicitly by Christ to have "love" for one's enemies (Matt. 5:44; cf. Lev. 19:17). But we must remind ourselves that Psalm 119 is an uncensored poetic expression of a heart in a desperate situation. We mustn't allow ourselves to be unmoored from the many explicit morals taught elsewhere in Scripture. We must be discerning with how we approach such raw emotion. Thus, while we should not encourage such a sentiment as hate in our own lives, we can more than sympathize with the one expressing it. Had we been as beaten down and belittled in the same way as our wanderer, we too would've despised those who attacked us. What's more, it seems that our singer/songwriter dislikes his enemy's double-mindedness rather than their actual personhood. Joshua's parting words to the children of Israel illuminate the Psalmist's feelings when he said, "...choose this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh 24:15) Joshua set a fork in the road before the Israelites: either serve *the* God or serve some other false god. He would rather them live in outright rebellion than in quiet hypocrisy (cf. Mat. 6:24; 2 Pet. 2:20-22; Jam. 1:8; 4:8). Following God with mere lip service is the sort of thinking that our Psalmist hates. He's desperate to disassociate himself from this characteristic.⁴ This is why he contrasts his hostility towards bigotry with his "love" for God's "word." After all, he is not a hateful person who looks at the world with utter disgust. No. In this world, he has found at least one thing that he thinks of as being truly lovely: the Scriptures.
- Vs. 114 The Psalmist now looks back to when the Lord was a "hiding place" sheltering him from the elements and a "shield" protecting him from attack. Understanding the Lord as a shelter and a shield are common metaphors found throughout Scripture (cf. Gen. 15:1; 2 Sam 22:3; Ps. 3:3; 18:2; 27:5; 31:20; 32:7; 91:1, etc.). The point in thinking of God this way is to show that the Psalmist looks for no other defense than what is found in the presence of the Lord (cf. Ps. 23:4). Why run to anyone else when the Almighty is there, ready and willing to preserve and secure His followers? The catch,

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VanGemenen, William A., *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Volume 5, Editors, Tremper Longman, III & David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 880.

however, is that God acts on a timetable that is all His own. He arrives precisely when He means to—never early, never late, but always on time. As such, the Psalmist finds that he has to wait (“hope”) in the “word.” Sometimes, all we have to go on is God’s promises that are as yet unfulfilled. And while we know that this is par for the course, the waiting game can sometimes be unbearable. Sure, our sojourner may feel like he’s been left waiting for far too long, but he will remain hopeful for however long it takes (cf. Gal. 6:9). Though God may seem to linger, He never delays (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9).

- Vs. 115 In the whole of Psalm 119, our writer has addressed only two audiences so far. By and large, the Psalmist is having a one-on-one conversation with God, but, sometimes, he breaks from form and addresses others like a teacher might instruct his students (cf. vs. 1-3). However, what is curious is that he talks an awful lot *about* his enemies, but nowhere do we find the Psalmist actually talk directly *to* his opponents, except here.⁵ In a show of exasperation, the Psalmist turns his attention to the very ones who smeared his name, and says, in no uncertain terms, go away (“depart”). Why? Because, should they remove themselves from his presence, our wanderer will be better able to obey (“keep”) the “commandments” of his God. After all, these “evildoers” are the sole source of trouble for the Psalmist. Thus, in his mind, should they leave him alone, he will find it far easy to follow God than if they were to continue with their relentless abuses.
- Vs. 116 It seems our wanderer oscillates between courageous declarations and anxious pleas. We do not fault him for this. Many will speak boldly to others but, inwardly, will hear the whispers of worry creeping around the edges of their consciousness. And the Psalmist is no different. This is why he moves from asserting his hope in the Lord (cf. vs. 114) to begging the Lord for help. Our sojourner asks God to “uphold” him according to His “promise.” This habit of using Yahweh’s own words as the basis for his plea is quite common at this point (cf. vs. 25, 28, 41, 43, 58, 76, 107, 133, 154, 156, 169, 170). However, out of 176 verses, the idea of God keeping him from falling is something entirely unique to this verse and the one that follows. The term

⁵ Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:424.

Psalmist uses for “uphold” is the Hebrew word *saw-mak'*. In its most basic meaning, it means nothing more than to rest a hand on something (cf. Ex. 29:10, 15, 19). However, metaphorically—as it is used here—*saw-mak'* conveys the idea of being sustained, reassured, or established (cf. Gen. 27:37; 2 Chr. 32:8; Ps. 3:5; 112:8). This latter usage has far richer connotations than its more mundane one. Thus, it seems that our Psalmist is worried that he may slip back into temptation or fall prey to his enemies and so would like God to keep him from stumbling. In doing so, God will preserve his “life.” And rather than being disgraced (“shame”), his “hope” will find vindication in God’s ability to sustain him. Nothing bolsters our confidence more than when the Lord upholds us with His mighty right hand (cf. Isa. 41:10).

Vs. 117 Rather than use the term *saw-mak'*, as before, the Psalmist uses the Hebrew word *saw-ad'*. Undoubtedly, the two are nearly identical synonyms with little to distinguish them apart. However, what distinguishes *saw-ad'* from *saw-mak'* is that the term is *only* used metaphorically in the O.T. (cf. Judg. 19:8; 1 Ki. 13:7; Ps. 41:3). Interestingly, the word often refers to how the stomach is satisfied with food (cf. Gen. 18:5; Judg. 19:5; Ps. 104:15). Thus, it seems, just as a piece of bread sustains the belly, the Psalmist is asking God to support him during his time of need. Logically, this kind of support would make him “safe” from harm. And being safe from harm, our sojourner would become so engrossed (“have regard”) in the Lord’s “statues,” that he would have little time for anything else (“continually”).

Vs. 118 When ancient authors wanted to emphasize something, they would use a logical device called a “tautology,” which is an assertion that holds true in every possible interpretation (i.e., “to be or not to be, that is the question”) or a phrase used for emphasize (i.e., “the man walking was traveling on foot;” “always and forever;” “a widowed woman;” etc.). Critics of tautology think of it as being needlessly repetitive or it is so basic that it provides little clarity on a matter. However, when used sparingly, it can give heightened attention to a crucial principle. This is especially useful in poetry where the literary framework does not lend itself to prolonged exposition, so it must convey a lot of meaning in as few words as possible. The Psalmist uses such a device here when he says, “their cunning is in vain.” In the Hebrew, the phrase literally translates to “their empty thoughts are empty.” He could’ve

said they were deceitful and then moved on. Instead, he repeats himself to express that they weren't just liars; they were *lying* liars. This implies their actions aren't accidental but intentional and exceptional. When they wander ("go astray") from God's "statues," they are aware that their actions aren't right. God has little favor for such willful disobedience. In fact, the Psalmist says that the Lord disregards, dismisses, and despises ("spurn") all who purposefully drift from His pathway (cf. vs. 21, 51, 69, 78, 85, 122). Meaning, deliberate disobedience is worse than an accidental lapse in judgment.

- Vs. 119 *Seeg* is the Hebrew term translated as "dross." Dross is the substance that remains after a metal, such as gold, silver, or iron, has gone through the purification process. When heated, the natural compounds in a mineral begin to melt and thus break apart. The purer components of the metal sink to the bottom of the crucible while the impurities float to the top. The rubbish is then skimmed off the top and thrown away. The Psalmist uses this process metaphorically to describe what will happen to the "wicked of the earth" (cf. Ezek. 22:17-22). Rather than allow themselves to be refined by the Refiner's fire, the willful and insolent will be tossed away (cf. Pro. 17:3). Our sojourner, by comparison, has a clarified, purified, and rarefied "love" for God's word ("testimonies"). As such, he is precious and valuable in the sight of his creator. Far from being thrown out, the Psalmist is a tool fit for the divine Metalsmith (cf. Pro. 25:4).
- Vs. 120 While we do not gravitate to such truths, it is imperative that we have a healthy reverence—what is often translated as "fear" in our bibles—for God. For instance, in Exodus 20, we're told that the children of Israel were terrified when the Lord descended upon a mountain, and they heard the thunder and saw the flashes of lightning. Afterward, Moses tried to reassure them, but they remained shaken. What's more, after getting the Ten Commandments, Israel said, "This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live." (Deut. 5:26) They thought that whole ordeal should've killed them. Their level of reverence for God's Word puts mine to shame. How different would our devotions be if we came to them thinking, "this just might kill me today"? Anyways, here, our Psalmist shakes ("trembles") with a hearty dose of "fear" for God (cf. Job 4:15). He literally has

goosebumps ("my flesh") when he thinks about it.⁶ However, it is worth pointing out that this is not the kind of dread which causes him to retreat; instead, it is the kind of deference that causes him to obey. You see, unlike the disobedient, our sojourner knows that God's word has profound implications upon his life. As such, he not only respects God's authority but he reveres God's "judgements." Godly fear always works to produce obedience in our lives, not dread. After all, demons know God and shudder but do not amend their behavior (cf. Ja. 2:19-20). They may have a robust fear of God, but they do not have a loyal love for Him. The Psalmist is different. He has both. The follower of God must reside in the tension between awe and affection for God if they wish to remain on the straight and narrow (cf. Deut. 6:5, 13; 10:12).⁷ The Psalmist lives a life that has embraced what John Piper has calls the "wonders and warnings" of Scripture (cf. Jn. 3:16; Heb. 12:29).

"What's your takeaway?"

My takeaway this evening is this: the pruning and purifying processes of God are never pleasant but they are always paramount for growth.

⁶ VanGemeran (2008), p. 880.

⁷ Allen (2002), p. 190

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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TITLE: Samekh

TEXT: Psalm 119:113-120

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/bszAcfP>