

PSALM 119

THE ALEPH-TAV JOURNEY
THROUGH GOD'S WORD



SAMEKH

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

PSALM 119:120
(ESV)



Psalm 119:113

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

Samekh is the 15th stanza on our pilgrimage to the blessed life, and it starts with a sharp contrast. The psalmist hates double-mindedness, but he also loves God’s law. Those two attitudes belong together. The more deeply God’s Word captures our hearts, the less willing we are to live divided lives. And it is a proper fear of God that drives us forward and into God’s heart.

Think

The *Samekh* stanza begins with a surprisingly strong statement: “I hate the double-minded, but I love your law.” The word translated “*double-minded*” (סֵפִימִים, *sē’āpîm*) can refer to divided thoughts, opinions, or loyalties. The idea is of a person whose heart is pulled in competing directions. Rather than living with a settled allegiance to God, the double-minded person wavers between God’s ways and other ways. You may remember that James warns us against this mindset (James 1:8).

We’ve encountered this concern before in Psalm 119. The blessed life began with those who seek God “*with their whole heart*” (v. 2). The psalmist later prayed, “*Give me an undivided heart*” in effect when he asked God to incline his heart toward His testimonies and away from selfish gain (v. 36). Then the *Nun* stanza ended with the psalmist saying, “*I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end*” (v. 112). Now *Samekh* begins by showing us the opposite kind of life. Verse 112 describes a heart deliberately inclined toward God. Verse 113 rejects a heart divided between God and competing loyalties. That transition is important.

The word “*hate*” may initially sound harsh to us, but the psalmist is expressing moral revulsion toward the divided life, not permission for personal hostility toward people. Scripture sometimes uses the language of love and hate to express fundamental allegiance and rejection. The psalmist has come to see double-mindedness for what it is. He does not want to make peace with a divided heart because he knows where divided loyalties eventually lead. You do too.

Then comes the contrast: “*but I love your law.*” The psalmist doesn’t overcome double-mindedness merely by hating it. His heart has found something better to love. That’s the key to living an undivided life. God’s law represents God’s revealed will, and the psalmist loves it because through it he hears the voice of the God he loves. His allegiance is increasingly settled because his affection is increasingly settled on the God who is worthy of his first love.

That’s an important principle of spiritual formation. We don’t become wholehearted Christians merely by eliminating competing loves. Henry Scougal, a seventeenth-century minister, once counseled a dear friend, “*The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love.*”¹ Indeed, a greater love must increasingly displace lesser loves. The psalmist loves God’s Word, and that love is gathering his scattered heart into a singular devotion to God.

Reflect

¹ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868), 45.

Most of us understand what it means to have a divided heart. We love God, but other loves compete for our allegiance. We want to obey Him, but we also want approval, comfort, success, security, control, or pleasure. We know what God has said, but part of us still wonders whether another path might give us something better.

The psalmist points us toward that something that is better. He loves God's law. His obedience is sustained by affect, not just determination. The Word has become precious to him. The *Nun* stanza began with God's Word as a lamp before his feet and ended with God's Word as the joy of his heart. Now that love is producing an increasingly undivided allegiance.

So, think about this. Where is your heart presently divided? What competing love most often causes you to hesitate when God's Word has made His way clear?

And here is where the gospel meets us. Jesus lived with a perfectly undivided heart. He loved His Father completely and never wavered between His Father's will and another way. Even in Gethsemane, with the cross before Him, He prayed, "*Not my will, but yours, be done*" (Luke 22:42). Where our hearts wander between competing loyalties, His remained wholly devoted to the Father. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He has forgiven our divided allegiance and given us new hearts. And now, by His Holy Spirit, He is changing what we love, drawing our hearts increasingly toward Himself and forming within us the wholehearted devotion we could never produce on our own.

Apply

Identify one place in your life where you know what God's Word says but still feel pulled toward another way. Don't simply ask whether you are obeying. Ask what competing love makes obedience difficult. Is it the desire for approval? Comfort? Control? Approval? Security? Recognition? Something else?

Bring that divided place honestly before God. Then return to His Word and remind yourself not only of what God commands but of who the God is who commands you. Ask the Holy Spirit to deepen your love for God until obedience becomes the expression of what your heart desires rather than merely something your will demands.

Then take one specific step today that reflects an undivided allegiance to God. You may still feel the pull of competing desires, but you don't have to follow them. Walk according to the Word you love and trust God to continue gathering your heart to Himself.

And remember this. The answer to a divided heart is a deeper love for God and His Word, not simply stronger determination.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, You alone are worthy of my whole heart. Yet You know how easily my heart becomes divided and how often other desires compete with my love for You. Forgive me for the times I have known what You have said but still looked for another way.

By Your Holy Spirit, expose the competing loves within me and deepen my love for Your Word. Gather my scattered desires and increasingly incline my heart toward You. Teach me to love what You love, reject what draws me away from You, and walk with a settled allegiance to Your ways.

Thank You for Jesus, who loved You with a perfectly undivided heart and remained obedient even to death on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, forgive my divided loyalties and continue forming His wholehearted devotion within me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 119:114

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life reminds us that when trouble comes, God does more than give us instructions for surviving it. He gives us Himself. The psalmist finds both refuge and protection in the Lord, and because of who God is, he can continue hoping in what God has said.

Think

Verse 114 in the *Samekh* stanza moves naturally from the divided loyalties of the previous verse to the psalmist’s settled confidence in God. He has just declared, *“I hate the double-minded, but I love your law.”* Now he explains where his heart has found security: *“You are my hiding place and my shield.”* His allegiance is not divided because his refuge is not divided. God Himself has become the place to which he runs.

The first image is deeply personal: *“You are my hiding place.”* The Hebrew word (סֵתֶר, sēter) refers to a secret or concealed place, somewhere a person may find shelter from danger. The psalmist doesn’t merely say that God provides a hiding place. He says to God, *“You are my hiding place.”* His safety is ultimately found not in changed circumstances, increased resources, or escape from his enemies, but in the Lord Himself.

That distinction matters. We naturally ask God to give us refuge by removing whatever threatens us. Sometimes He does. But the psalmist has discovered something deeper. God can be our refuge even while the danger remains. The security of the blessed life is not that nothing threatening ever reaches us, but that nothing can remove us from the care of the God in whom we have taken refuge.

Then the psalmist adds a second image: *“and my shield.”* A hiding place shelters a person from danger, while a shield protects a person in the midst of danger. The Hebrew word (מָגֵן, māgēn) describes the defensive shield carried into battle. Together, these two images give us a rich picture of God’s care. He is the One in whom we hide, and He is the One who stands between us and everything that could ultimately destroy us.

Notice how personal the language is: *“my hiding place and my shield.”* The psalmist is not merely affirming theological facts about God. He has learned to apply them personally. God is not simply a refuge. He is *my* refuge. He is not simply a shield. He is *my* shield. The blessed life grows as what we know to be true about God becomes what we personally trust about God. That’s an essential growth pattern.

Then comes the response: *“I hope in your word.”* We encountered this same language earlier in Psalm 119. Hope is not wishful thinking. It is a confident expectation rooted in what God has spoken. The psalmist can hope in God’s Word because the God who spoke it is his hiding place and shield. His confidence in the promise rests upon his confidence in the Promiser. That is the movement of the verse. God is his refuge. God is his protection. Therefore, God’s Word becomes the ground of his hope.

Reflect

We all look for hiding places. When life becomes frightening or uncertain, we instinctively search for something that will make us feel secure. We may hide in money, relationships, control, work, distractions, or our own ability to solve problems. Some of those things may provide temporary relief, but none of them can carry the weight of our ultimate security. The psalmist directs us somewhere better. “*You are my hiding place.*” Faith doesn’t mean pretending there is nothing from which we need shelter. Faith means knowing where to run when we do.

There’s also something wonderfully comforting about the fact that God is both hiding place and shield. Sometimes we need a place to rest because we are exhausted by the battle. At other times we need strength to stand while the battle continues. God is sufficient for both. He shelters the weary and protects those who must continue walking through difficult circumstances.

So, think about this. When you feel threatened, anxious, or uncertain, where do you instinctively run for security? What would it look like today to consciously make God your hiding place before looking anywhere else for refuge?

And here is where the gospel meets us. Jesus entered the full danger of our fallen world without turning away from His Father. He was rejected, betrayed, falsely accused, and finally crucified. Yet throughout His suffering, He entrusted Himself to the Father. At the cross, Jesus endured the judgment our sins deserved so that everyone who takes refuge in Him might be forever safe from condemnation. Through His resurrection, He defeated our greatest enemies, sin and death, and now everyone who belongs to Christ is hidden with Him in God. By His Holy Spirit, He teaches us to run to the Father with the same confidence He perfectly displayed. Sanctification is the name we use for that process of becoming like Jesus.

Apply

Identify what presently makes you feel most vulnerable. Perhaps it is a health concern, a strained relationship, financial uncertainty, opposition from another person, or simply fear about what the future may bring.

Before asking God to change the circumstance, begin by praying the words of this verse personally: “*You are my hiding place and my shield.*” Stay with those words for a few moments. Remind yourself who God is before concentrating on what is happening around you.

Then identify one promise from Scripture that speaks to your fear or uncertainty. Write it down or return to it several times throughout the day. Let God’s character become the foundation beneath God’s promise. You do not hope in words detached from God. You hope in the Word of the God who is already your refuge and protector.

And remember this. Your safest place is not where trouble can’t find you. In a fallen world, it always will. Your safest place is where trouble can’t separate you from God.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, You are my hiding place and my shield. Forgive me for the many times I look for security in things that cannot ultimately protect me. When I am afraid, teach me to run first to You and to rest in the safety of Your faithful care.

By Your Holy Spirit, strengthen my confidence in Your Word. Remind me that every promise You have made rests upon Your unchanging character. When danger remains, shelter my heart. When I must continue walking through difficulty, be my shield and give me courage to trust You.

Thank You for Jesus, who endured the cross for me and through His resurrection defeated sin and death. Thank You that in Him I am safe from condemnation and that nothing can separate me from Your love. Teach me to live today with the settled confidence that You are my refuge, my protector, and my hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 119:115

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life reminds us that following God sometimes requires us to distance ourselves from influences that continually pull us away from Him. The psalmist has chosen his hiding place, his shield, and his hope. Now he recognizes that if he’s going to keep walking faithfully with God, he can’t allow those committed to evil to determine the direction of his life.

Think

The language of verse 115 is unusually direct: *“Depart from me, you evildoers.”* The psalmist is establishing a boundary. The word translated “depart” (סוּר, sūr) means to turn aside, leave, or remove oneself. He isn’t expressing personal hatred or refusing to love people who do wrong. Rather, he recognizes that some relationships and influences can make faithfulness to God more difficult.

Notice how this follows the previous two verses. In verse 113, the psalmist rejected double-mindedness and declared his love for God’s law. In verse 114, he confessed that God is his hiding place and shield and that his hope rests in God’s Word. Now, in verse 115, that inward allegiance begins to affect his relationships. A heart settled on God eventually has to make decisions about influences that continually pull it in another direction.

The psalmist calls these people “evildoers.” The Hebrew expression (מַרְעִים, mēre’im) refers to those who practice or promote what is evil. The emphasis is on an established pattern. These are not imperfect people who occasionally sin. If that were the standard, none of us could remain in relationship with anyone. Here, the psalmist is describing people whose way of life stands in opposition to the way of God.

But the second half of the verse is especially important because it tells us why he wants them to depart: *“that I may keep the commandments of my God.”* His concern is faithfulness more than ungodliness. He understands that he must love God more than anyone or anything else and he also knows the people we allow to influence us can eventually influence the way we walk. Notice also the personal expression “my God.” The psalmist doesn’t merely speak about keeping “the commandments of God.” He wants to keep “the commandments of my God.”

This reminds us that obedience grows out of relationship. The commandments belong to the God who has just been described as his hiding place and shield. He isn’t protecting himself from certain influences simply because he wants to live according to a stricter moral code. He is protecting a relationship he treasures.

There is an important balance here. Scripture never calls Christians to withdraw completely from unbelievers. Jesus was known for eating with tax collectors and sinners, and He sends us into the world as His witnesses. But there is a big difference between loving people in order to influence them toward Christ and allowing people who reject God’s ways to influence us away from Christ. The psalmist understands that distinction.

Reflect

We sometimes underestimate how deeply other people shape us. Their attitudes can become our attitudes. Their priorities can become our priorities. Their compromises can gradually begin to seem reasonable to us. What once troubled our conscience can eventually become something we tolerate and finally something we practice. That's what happened to Lot in the Old Testament and even the apostle Peter in the New Testament.

That is why the psalmist is willing to establish boundaries. He knows the blessed life is too valuable to allow another person to continually draw him away from God's commandments. This doesn't give us permission to become self-righteous, harsh, or isolated. We're called to love our neighbors, pray for our enemies, and carry the gospel into the world. But love doesn't require us to give everyone equal influence over our hearts. Jesus loved everyone, but He did not allow everyone to determine His direction. His rebuke of Peter in Mark 8 is a good example of this.

So, think about this. Who has significant influence over the direction of your life? Are the people closest to you encouraging your obedience to God, or are there relationships in which you repeatedly find yourself being drawn away from what you know God has said?

And here is where the gospel meets us. Jesus lived among sinners without ever being shaped by their sin. He loved those who were far from God, ate with them, spoke truth to them, and ultimately gave His life for sinners like us. Yet He remained perfectly devoted to His Father's will. Where we have allowed the influence of others to lead us into compromise, Jesus remained faithful. Through His death and resurrection, He forgives our wandering and gives us new life. And by His Holy Spirit, He gives us both the grace to love people who are far from God and the wisdom to refuse influences that would draw our hearts away from Him.

Apply

Think carefully about the voices that presently have the greatest influence in your life. Consider your closest relationships, but also consider the voices you regularly invite into your mind through entertainment, social media, podcasts, books, or other sources. Ask a simple question: Are these influences making it easier or harder for me to keep the commandments of my God?

If you recognize an influence that repeatedly draws you toward compromise, determine what boundary faithfulness requires. That may mean spending less time in a particular environment, changing what you watch or listen to, refusing to participate in certain conversations or activities, or creating greater distance in a relationship that continually leads you away from God.

But don't just remove a negative influence. Replace it with something that strengthens your walk with God. Seek relationships with people who love Christ, treasure His Word, and encourage you to walk faithfully. The goal is not isolation. The goal is obedience.

And remember this. You can love everyone without allowing everyone to influence the direction of your life.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, You are my God, and Your commandments are good. Forgive me for the times I have allowed the influence of others to weaken my obedience to You. Give me the wisdom to recognize the voices and relationships shaping my heart.

By Your Holy Spirit, give me courage to establish whatever boundaries are necessary for faithfulness while continuing to love others with the grace and compassion of Christ. Surround me with people who encourage me to love You, treasure Your Word, and walk in Your ways.

Thank You for Jesus, who lived among sinners and loved them perfectly without ever turning from Your will. Thank You that He died for my wandering and rose again to give me new life. Form His character within me so that I can love others faithfully without allowing anything to draw my heart away from You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 119:116

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life reminds us that perseverance depends on more than our determination to hold on to God. We need God to hold on to us. The psalmist has declared his hope in God’s Word and his desire to obey God’s commands. Now he prays for the grace he needs to continue: *“Uphold me according to your promise.”*

Think

The psalmist begins with a simple prayer: *“Uphold me.”* The Hebrew verb (שָׁמַךְ, sāmāk) means to support, sustain, or hold up. The picture is of someone who cannot remain standing without help. The psalmist understands something we sometimes forget. He cannot sustain his own spiritual life. If he is going to continue walking the path of the blessed life, God must sustain him.

Notice how naturally this prayer follows the previous verses. In verse 113, the psalmist rejected double-mindedness. In verse 114, he declared that God is his hiding place and shield. In verse 115, he determined to separate himself from influences that would hinder his obedience. Those are strong declarations of commitment. But now he acknowledges that commitment alone is not enough. He needs God to uphold him.

That confession isn’t a display of weakness in the life of faith. It’s wisdom. The mature believer increasingly understands that faithfulness is not ultimately the result of personal strength. We certainly make choices, establish boundaries, resist temptation, and pursue obedience. But before and beneath all our effort is the sustaining grace of God. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). We hold on to Him because He is holding on to us. We persevere because we are preserved.

But notice the basis of the psalmist’s request: *“according to your promise.”* He does not ask God to sustain him because he deserves to be sustained. He appeals to what God has said. Once again, the Word of God becomes the foundation of his prayer. God’s promises reveal God’s character, and because God is faithful to His Word, the psalmist can confidently ask Him to do what He has promised.

Then he tells us why he needs God’s sustaining grace: *“that I may live.”* Throughout Psalm 119, life is more than mere physical existence. The psalmist repeatedly asks God to give him life according to His Word. He desires the kind of life that flourishes in fellowship with God. He knows that such life cannot be manufactured from within himself. God must give it, preserve it, and sustain it. And by the way, we know that Jesus is that life (John 14:6).

The final phrase returns to hope: *“and let me not be put to shame in my hope!”* Just two verses earlier he declared, *“I hope in your word”* (v. 114). Now he asks God not to allow that hope to end in disappointment. In Scripture, to be put to shame often means to discover that what we trusted was ultimately unable to save or sustain us. The psalmist has placed his hope in God

and His Word, and he asks God to demonstrate that such hope is never misplaced. The movement of the verse is wonderful. The psalmist hopes in God's promise, asks God to uphold him according to that promise, and trusts God to prove his hope well placed.

Reflect

We often discover our need for God's sustaining grace when we reach the limits of our own strength. As long as we feel capable, we may imagine that we are doing rather well at holding ourselves together. But eventually life brings us to places where determination is not enough.

Sometimes the burden lasts longer than we expected. Sometimes temptation returns after we thought we had defeated it. Sometimes grief drains us, disappointment discourages us, opposition wears us down, or obedience simply becomes tiring. We may still love God and genuinely want to remain faithful while quietly wondering how much longer we can continue. Psalm 119:116 gives us a prayer for those moments: "*Uphold me.*"

You don't have to pretend to be stronger than you are. In fact, recognizing your weakness is one of the most spiritually healthy things you can do (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). The Christian life has never depended on your ability to keep yourself standing. God doesn't simply point out the path and then watch to see whether you can walk it. He accompanies His children along the path and supplies the grace necessary for every step.

So, think about this. Where in your life are you presently trying to stand in your own strength? What burden, temptation, responsibility, or uncertainty has reminded you that you need God to uphold you?

And here is where the gospel meets us. The Father didn't stop Jesus from going to the cross, and He willingly endured it for us. He entered death, bearing our sin and judgment, and on the third day the Father raised Him from the grave. Because Christ lives, everyone united to Him possesses a life that suffering, sin, and even death can't ultimately destroy. Our hope doesn't rest in our ability to hold tightly enough to Christ, but in Jesus who has taken hold of us and made us His. Now, by His Holy Spirit, He preserves, strengthens, and sustains us until our pilgrimage is complete.

Apply

Take some time today to identify where you feel weakest. Resist the temptation to hide that weakness from God or immediately devise a plan to overcome it yourself. Instead, turn the words of this verse into your prayer: "*Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live.*"

Then find a promise in Scripture that speaks to your need. Perhaps you need to remember that God will never leave or forsake you, that His grace is sufficient for you, or that nothing can separate you from His love (Hebrews 13:5; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Romans 8:38-39). Bring your weakness and His promise together in prayer.

And as you pray, continue doing whatever faithful obedience requires of you today. Depending upon God does not mean doing nothing. It means taking the next step while trusting that the strength beneath that step ultimately comes from Him.

And remember this. Your perseverance never depends on how tightly you can hold on to God, but on the God who faithfully holds on to you.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, uphold me according to Your promise. You know where I am weak, tired, discouraged, and afraid. Forgive me for the times I have trusted my own strength and imagined that I could sustain my spiritual life apart from You.

By Your Holy Spirit, strengthen me to continue walking faithfully with You. When I feel unable to stand, remind me that You are holding me. Fix my hope upon Your Word and keep me from placing my confidence in anything that will ultimately disappoint me.

Thank You for Jesus, who died for me and rose again so that I might have eternal life. Thank You that my salvation rests in His finished work rather than my strength. Keep me in Christ, sustain me by Your grace, and bring me safely to the end of this pilgrimage into the blessed life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Strength for the Next Step
Psalm 119:117

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life continues the psalmist’s prayer for God’s sustaining grace. In the previous verse he prayed, *“Uphold me according to your promise.”* Now he prays again, *“Hold me up.”* The repetition is important. The psalmist knows that he doesn’t just need God’s help occasionally. His whole life is continually dependent on God. He needs God to sustain him continually so that he can continue walking faithfully in His ways.

Think

At first, verse 117 sounds almost identical to verse 116. There the psalmist prayed, *“Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live.”* Here he prays, *“Hold me up, that I may be safe.”* In fact, the two verses use different Hebrew words. In verse 116, the word translated *“uphold”* (סָמַךְ, sāmak) carries the idea of supporting or sustaining someone. Here, the word translated *“hold me up”* (שָׁאֵד, sā’ad) similarly means to support, sustain, or strengthen.

The repetition tells us something important about the psalmist’s understanding of the blessed life. He knows his dependence upon God is not temporary. He does not imagine that God will strengthen him today so that tomorrow he can manage on his own. He knows he needs God’s sustaining grace for every step of the journey just like Israel needed daily manna.

The result of God’s support is expressed in the words *“that I may be safe.”* The Hebrew verb (יָשָׁא, yāša’) carries the idea of being saved, delivered, or brought to safety. The psalmist is surrounded by people and circumstances that threaten his faithfulness. But he knows that his security doesn’t ultimately rest in his ability to protect himself. God must preserve him. And notice what the psalmist wants to do with the safety God provides: *“and have regard for your statutes continually!”* He doesn’t want God to keep him safe so that his life will become easier. He wants God to sustain him so that he can continue living faithfully.

The expression *“have regard for”* translates a Hebrew verb (שָׁאֵה, šā’â). It means to look toward, pay attention to, or regard something. The psalmist wants his attention continually directed toward God’s statutes. The word *“continually”* is especially important. His desire is not occasional obedience or temporary spiritual enthusiasm. He wants a life persistently oriented toward what God has said.

That connects beautifully with the progression of the *Samekh* stanza. The psalmist has rejected double-mindedness (v. 113), declared God to be his hiding place and shield (v. 114), separated himself from influences that would draw him away from obedience (v. 115), and asked God to uphold him according to His promise (v. 116). Now he recognizes that God must continue holding him up if he’s going to continue looking toward God’s Word. God sustains the pilgrim so the pilgrim can keep walking.

Reflect

There is something wonderfully humbling about two consecutive prayers asking God essentially the same thing: “*Uphold me*” and “*Hold me up*.” We sometimes think spiritual maturity means becoming less dependent upon God. We imagine that as we grow stronger in faith, we should eventually need less help. Psalm 119 teaches us exactly the opposite. Spiritual maturity doesn’t make us increasingly independent of God. It makes us increasingly aware of how completely dependent upon Him we have always been.

Think about a child learning to walk while holding a parent’s hand. The child really is walking. His feet are taking the steps. But the strong hand above him keeps him from falling. In much the same way, God’s sustaining grace doesn’t eliminate our responsibility to walk faithfully. It makes faithful walking possible.

And notice the psalmist’s purpose again. He doesn’t pray, “*Hold me up so that nothing difficult ever happens to me*.” He prays, in effect, “*Hold me up so that I can keep looking toward Your statutes*.” His greatest concern isn’t surviving his circumstances. It is remaining faithful to God within them.

So, think about this. When you ask God to sustain you through a difficult season, what are you hoping His sustaining grace will accomplish? Are you asking only for relief, or are you also asking Him to keep your heart fixed upon His Word while you wait for relief if He chooses to provide it?

And here is where the gospel meets us. Jesus perfectly kept His eyes upon His Father’s will throughout His earthly pilgrimage. Even when that path led to suffering and the cross, He remained obedient to the end. He died for all the times we have stumbled, wandered, and looked away from God, and He rose again to give us new life. Now our risen Savior doesn’t just tell us to keep walking. By His Holy Spirit, He strengthens us from within and supplies the grace we need to persevere. The same Christ who saves us also sustains us. We need Him to sanctify us every day just as much as we needed Him to save us in the first place.

Apply

Begin today by acknowledging your dependence upon God. Pray the simple words of the psalmist: “*Hold me up*.” You may want to identify specifically where you need His sustaining grace. Perhaps you are weary from a prolonged trial, struggling with temptation, discouraged in a relationship, or simply tired of doing what you know is right.

Then pay attention to the second half of the verse. Ask yourself what you’ve been giving your attention instead of God’s Word. Difficult circumstances have a way of dominating our vision. We can spend so much time looking at the problem that we gradually stop looking toward what God has said.

Choose a particular passage or promise from Scripture and keep it before you today. Return to it whenever your attention drifts back toward your fears or circumstances. Ask God not only to change what is happening around you but to sustain what He is doing within you.

And remember this. God holds you up so you can keep walking with him. He never holds you up so that you can stand independently of Him. You can't.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, hold me up today. I confess that I sometimes imagine I should be strong enough to walk faithfully on my own. Forgive me for depending upon my strength instead of resting in Your sustaining grace.

By Your Holy Spirit, strengthen me where I'm weak and keep my attention fixed upon Your Word. When circumstances distract me, fears overwhelm me, or temptations pull at my heart, turn my eyes again toward what You have said. Sustain me so that I can continue walking faithfully with You.

Thank You for Jesus, who remained perfectly obedient to You all the way to the cross and rose again to give me life. Thank You that He has not left me to complete this pilgrimage in my own strength. Hold me up by Your grace in Him and form His faithfulness within me until I reach the end of the journey. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When God Rejects What We Excuse

Psalm 119:118

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life reminds us that God takes seriously the paths we choose. The psalmist has just prayed for God to hold him up so that he can continually regard His statutes. Now he looks at those who choose another path and sees where that path ultimately leads. We may convince ourselves that wandering from God’s ways will somehow work to our advantage, but the psalmist reminds us that no plan succeeds when it leads us away from God.

Think

The opening words of verse 118 are strong: *“You spurn all who go astray from your statutes.”* The word translated *“spurn”* (סָלַח, sālāh) carries the idea of rejecting, treating as worthless, or casting aside. The psalmist is describing God’s response to those who persistently reject His revealed will.

Notice that he describes them as those who *“go astray.”* The Hebrew verb (שָׁגָא, šāgâ) means to wander, stray, or err. The imagery fits the pilgrimage language we have encountered throughout Psalm 119. God has revealed the path of the blessed life through His Word, but these people have chosen to leave that path.

There is an important warning here. We sometimes speak of wandering as though it were spiritually harmless. A small step away from God may not initially appear dangerous. But direction matters. Once we leave the path God has revealed, we are moving somewhere other than where He intends us to go. “Backsliding” as it is often called, is just that. It isn’t “cliff jumping.”

Then the psalmist explains why their departure from God’s way ultimately fails: *“for their cunning is in vain.”* The word translated *“cunning”* (תַּרְמִית, tarmît) can refer to deceit, fraud, or treachery. These people apparently believe they can accomplish their purposes through deceptive means. They have convinced themselves that disregarding God’s statutes will somehow work to their advantage. But God sees through it.

What appears clever from a human perspective is *“in vain”* before Him. No deception fools the God who knows everything. No manipulation places someone beyond His sight. No carefully constructed justification transforms disobedience into obedience. We may deceive other people. We may even deceive ourselves. But we can never deceive God.

That makes the contrast with the previous verse especially striking. In verse 117, the psalmist asks God to hold him up so that he can continually regard God’s statutes. In verse 118, others go astray from those same statutes and depend upon their own cunning. One person depends upon God. The others depend upon themselves. One remains on the path. The others wander from it. And like building on rock or sand, only one path is safe (Matthew 7:24-27).

Reflect

One of the great dangers of sin is our ability to make it sound reasonable. We rarely say to ourselves, “*I know this is contrary to God’s Word, but I simply do not care.*” More often, we explain, rationalize, minimize, and justify our sin. We tell ourselves that our circumstances are unusual, that our motives are good, that someone else is responsible, or that obedience would simply cost too much. Eventually, we can become remarkably skilled at defending what God has already called wrong.

That is why the final phrase of this verse is so important: “*their cunning is in vain.*” Every argument we construct for wandering from God eventually collapses before the truth of His Word. God is not impressed by our ability to explain away disobedience. He loves us too much to redefine the path simply because we have found an excuse to leave it.

And that should cause us to examine our own hearts before we examine anyone else’s. The psalmist’s words are not merely an invitation to identify people who have wandered. They warn us about our own capacity for self-deception.

So, think about this. Is there anything in your life that you know doesn’t agree with God’s Word but that you’ve become increasingly skilled at explaining or excusing? Have you mistaken a good explanation for genuine obedience?

And here is where the gospel meets us. Jesus never went astray from His Father’s will. He never rationalized disobedience, manipulated circumstances for His own advantage, or chose an easier path when obedience became costly. He remained perfectly faithful even when that path led to the cross. There He bore the judgment deserved by wandering people like us. Through His death and resurrection, He not only forgives our wandering but brings us back to God. And by His Holy Spirit, He exposes our self-deception, turns our hearts toward the truth, and gives us grace to walk again in God’s ways.

Apply

Ask God today to show you where you may be rationalizing something His Word has already made clear. Don’t begin by examining someone else’s life. Begin with your own. Perhaps you’ve excused an attitude, relationship, habit, conversation, decision, or pattern of behavior because you’ve found a way to justify it. Bring it honestly before God and ask a simple question: “*What does Your Word actually say?*”

Then allow Scripture to have the final word. If you discover that you’ve wandered, don’t spend more time defending the path you have taken. Confess it, receive God’s forgiveness in Christ, and turn around. That’s repentance. The wonderful thing about recognizing that we have wandered is that, by God’s grace, we can always return to an expectant Father Who is willing to forgive and cleanse us from our sin (1 John 1:9).

And remember this. A convincing excuse can never make a wrong path right.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, You know my heart completely. You see every place where I've wandered from Your ways and every excuse I have made for doing so. Forgive me for the times I've trusted my own reasoning more than Your Word.

By Your Holy Spirit, expose every place of self-deception within me. Give me humility to receive what You have said without trying to explain it away. When I wander, turn me around and lead me again along the path of the blessed life.

Thank You for Jesus, who never strayed from Your will but remained perfectly obedient even to death on the cross. Thank You that He bore the judgment my wandering deserves and rose again to bring me back to You. Keep my heart close to Him and my feet firmly on the path of Your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When God Removes the Dross

Psalm 119:119

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life reminds us that God’s judgment reveals the true value of everything. The wicked may appear secure, and their ways may seem successful, but God sees what we cannot always see. The psalmist compares them to dross, the impurities separated from precious metal in the refining process. Seeing the emptiness of a life lived apart from God deepens his conviction that God’s testimonies are worth loving.

Think

The psalmist continues the thought of the previous verse. In verse 118 he said, *“You spurn all who go astray from your statutes, for their cunning is in vain.”* Now he says, *“All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross.”* The image of “dross” is important. The Hebrew word (רָגִים, *sîgîm*) refers to the impurities or waste material separated from precious metal during the refining process. When metal was heated, the impurities could be separated and removed. What might have been mixed together before the fire was exposed for what it really was.

The psalmist uses that image to describe God’s judgment. From our perspective, it is not always easy to distinguish what has lasting value from what does not. The wicked may prosper. People who disregard God may appear successful, powerful, and secure. Their lives may even tempt us to wonder whether obedience to God is really worth the cost as it did momentarily for Asaph in Psalm 73. But God sees everything according to its true value.

That is why the words *“of the earth”* are significant. The psalmist is looking at people whose lives are rooted entirely in this present world. Whatever they possess, accomplish, or accumulate belongs to an earth that will not last forever, and he knows it. He also understands that when God’s judgment comes, everything will be revealed for what it truly is.

Then notice the psalmist’s response: *“therefore I love your testimonies.”* That “therefore” connects God’s judgment with the psalmist’s love for His Word. He sees where rebellion against God ultimately leads, and rather than making him resent God’s statutes, it causes him to treasure them more deeply. God’s testimonies reveal what is true, good, righteous, and lasting (2 Timothy 3:16-17). They keep us from building our lives around things that will ultimately be discarded.

The contrast is striking. The wicked reject God’s statutes and are eventually shown to have pursued what can’t and won’t last. The psalmist loves God’s testimonies and builds his life on what will endure forever. In this way, the blessed life learns to value things according to God’s estimation rather than the world’s.

Reflect

We live in a world that constantly tells us what we should value. Success, recognition, possessions, influence, comfort, appearance, and achievement can all begin to look enormously important simply because the people around us treat them that way. But Psalm 119:119 asks us to consider everything from the perspective of eternity.

The image of dross reminds us that there is coming a day when God will reveal the true worth of everything. Some things that appear impressive now will be shown to have had very little eternal value. And some things the world barely notices, quiet obedience, faithfulness, holiness, generosity, prayer, love for God and His Word, will be revealed as precious. That does not mean earthly accomplishments or possessions are necessarily wrong. The question is whether we have mistaken temporary things for ultimate things.

God loves us too much to allow us to believe that what is passing away can provide the life for which He created us. The psalmist has learned to look beyond appearances. He sees the end of a life lived apart from God, and his response is not envy but renewed affection for God's truth: "*therefore I love your testimonies.*"

So, think about this. What do you presently value because God says it is valuable, and what do you value primarily because the world tells you it matters? If God exposed the true and lasting worth of everything in your life today, what might turn out to be dross?

And here is where the gospel meets us. We have all valued things that cannot last and wandered after things that cannot save. Yet Jesus came into this world and perfectly treasured His Father above everything else. At the cross, He bore the judgment deserved by sinners who have rejected God's ways. He rose again, securing for us an inheritance that is "*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*" (1 Peter 1:4). And now, by His Holy Spirit, God is changing what we value, loosening our grip on what is temporary and teaching us to treasure Christ and His Word above everything this passing world can offer.

Apply

Take an inventory today of what receives the greatest amount of your attention, energy, money, and affection. Those things often reveal what you actually value more clearly than what you say you value. Then ask yourself a simple question about each one: "*Will this matter in eternity?*" Some temporary things will still matter because of the way they are used for God's purposes. Our work, relationships, possessions, and opportunities can all have eternal significance when they are offered to Him. But other things may be consuming far more of our hearts than their real value deserves.

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see your life from God's perspective. Then spend some time in His Word, not merely asking what it commands but reminding yourself why God and His word are worthy of your love. God's testimonies tell you the truth about what lasts.

And remember this. Do not measure the value of something by how important it may seem today, but by whether it will still matter when God reveals everything for what it truly is.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, You see the true value of everything. Forgive me for the times I have treasured what is temporary and neglected what is eternal. I confess that I am easily impressed by what this world calls successful, important, and valuable.

By Your Holy Spirit, teach me to see my life from Your perspective. Expose whatever has become dross in my heart and deepen my love for Your testimonies. Help me treasure what You treasure and build my life around what will endure forever.

Thank You for Jesus, who bore the judgment my sin deserves and rose again to give me an inheritance that can never perish. Fix my heart upon Him as my greatest treasure and continue forming within me a love for You and Your Word that this passing world cannot take away. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Trembling Before a Holy God

Psalm 119:120

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

Today’s step on our pilgrimage into the blessed life brings the Samekh stanza to its conclusion. The stanza began with the psalmist rejecting a divided heart and declaring his love for God’s law. Along the way, he has confessed God as his hiding place and shield, asked God to uphold him, and considered the certain judgment of those who wander from God’s ways. Now the stanza ends with the psalmist himself trembling before the holiness of God. The God who is his refuge is also the God he reverently fears.

Think

The language of verse 120 is striking: *“My flesh trembles for fear of you.”* The Hebrew verb translated *“trembles”* (סָמַר, sāmar) describes something bristling or standing on end. We might say that something makes the hair on our arms stand up. The psalmist’s awareness of God’s holiness produces a physical response. He does not merely understand the fear of the Lord as a theological concept. He feels the weight of standing before a holy God.

And that response makes sense when we remember what he has just said. *“You spurn all who go astray from your statutes”* (v. 118), and *“All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross”* (v. 119). The psalmist has been considering the reality of God’s judgment. But rather than standing at a safe distance and thinking only about God’s judgment of other people, he allows that truth to turn his attention toward his own heart. And then he trembles.

That is an important mark of humility. It is easy to read biblical warnings and think immediately about someone else who needs to hear them. The psalmist does something different. When he considers the holiness and judgment of God, he remembers that he too lives before this God. Then he says, *“and I am afraid of your judgments.”* The word translated *“judgments”* (מִשְׁפָּטִים, mišpāṭīm) refers to God’s righteous decisions or ordinances. God does not treat evil casually. He judges rightly because He is perfectly righteous. The psalmist knows that the God whose Word he loves is also the Judge whose verdicts are always true.

But notice how beautifully this fits within the Samekh stanza. Earlier the psalmist said, *“You are my hiding place and my shield”* (v. 114). Now he says, *“My flesh trembles for fear of you.”* Those statements are not contradictory. They reveal two truths about the same relationship. The God before whom the psalmist trembles is also the God to whom he runs for refuge. That is biblical fear. This fear of the Lord is not the terror of someone wondering whether God is unpredictable, cruel, or untrustworthy. The psalmist already knows that God is his hiding place, shield, sustainer, and hope. His fear grows from recognizing the holiness, majesty, authority, and righteous judgment of the God who has graciously made Himself his refuge. In fact, the more clearly we know God, the less casually we should regard Him.

This brings the Samekh stanza to a fitting conclusion. The psalmist began by rejecting a divided heart. He ends with a trembling heart. Between those two statements, he has learned

again that God is his refuge, protection, sustainer, and Judge. The blessed life is lived with an undivided heart that loves God, depends upon God, and reverently fears God.

Reflect

We sometimes emphasize the love of God in ways that unintentionally make Him seem harmless. We speak of God as our Father, Shepherd, Refuge, and Friend, and He certainly is all those things. But familiarity with God should never produce casualness toward God.

Scripture holds together truths that we sometimes separate. God loves His children with an everlasting love, and He's infinitely holy. He invites us to draw near, and He's a consuming fire. He is our refuge, and He is our Judge. We can rest securely in His love while standing in awe of His holiness. In fact, grace should deepen our reverence rather than diminish it.

Think about what was required for us to be reconciled to this holy God. God did not save us by deciding that sin really was not as serious as He had said. He did not lower His standard of righteousness or simply overlook our rebellion. Our sin was so serious that the Son of God gave Himself on the cross to save us from it. The cross therefore teaches us both to rest and to tremble. It tells us how deeply God loves sinners and how seriously God regards sin.

So, think about this. Has your familiarity with God ever caused you to become casual about Him? Do you think about His love more often than His holiness? When was the last time you considered who God is deeply enough to leave you genuinely in awe?

And here is where the gospel meets us. We have every reason to tremble before a holy God because none of us has perfectly kept His Word. Yet Jesus perfectly obeyed the Father and then stood in the place of sinners like us. At the cross, He bore the judgment our sin deserved. God did not ignore our sin. Christ bore it. And through His resurrection, everyone who trusts in Him is justified and welcomed into the Father's presence (Romans 8:1). By His Holy Spirit, we can now approach God without the terror of condemnation, while never losing our reverence for His holiness.

Apply

Spend some time today considering the holiness of the God you call Father. You might read Isaiah 6:1–7 and notice Isaiah's response when he sees the Lord "*high and lifted up*." Or read Hebrews 12:28–29, where believers who have received an unshakable kingdom are told to "*offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire*." Then consider your own relationship with God. Have prayer, worship, Scripture, or obedience become so familiar that you sometimes approach them casually? Ask the Holy Spirit to deepen within you a healthy fear of the Lord, not a fear that drives you away from God, but a reverence that draws you nearer while causing you to take Him and His Word seriously.

And then remember where the *Samekh* stanza has brought us. The God before whom you tremble is the God who says you may hide in Him. You do not have to choose between refuge and reverence. In Christ, you have both.

And remember this. The grace that allows us to approach God boldly should never cause us to approach Him casually.

Pray

If you are unsure how to pray about this, consider praying something like this.

Father, You are holy, righteous, majestic, and worthy of all reverence and awe. Forgive me for the times I've become so familiar with the truths about You that I have lost something of the wonder of who You are. Give me a proper fear of You that deepens my worship, strengthens my obedience, and causes me to treasure Your Word.

By Your Holy Spirit, help me see more clearly both Your holiness and Your grace. Keep me from a fear that drives me away from You, but give me a holy reverence that draws me nearer and teaches me to walk faithfully before You.

Thank You for Jesus, who perfectly obeyed You and then bore the judgment my sin deserved. Thank You that through His death and resurrection I can come into Your presence without fear of condemnation. Teach me to rest in You as my hiding place and shield, while always trembling with wonder before Your holiness. In Jesus' name, Amen.