

The Shepherd and His Word

Psalm 119:169–176

Taw

Intro: With this stanza, we've reached the end of Psalm 119. After 168 verses, how does it end? You might expect the psalmist to finish standing on a mountaintop. You might expect something like, *"I have learned your Word. I have kept your commandments. I have finished the journey. Look how far I have come."*

Instead, verse 176 reads, *"I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant."* Isn't that remarkable? The man who has spent 176 verses telling us how much he loves God's Word ends by admitting how much he still needs God. And that is one of the great lessons of Psalm 119.

IMP: Spiritual maturity doesn't make you independent of God. It makes you more aware of how completely dependent on God you are.

We began Psalm 119 with this, *"Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!"*

And now we end with this, *"I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant."*

Between those two statements lies the Christian life.

- We desire the blessed life.
- We learn God's Word.
- We love it.
- We obey it.
- We fail to keep it.
- We repent.
- We grow.
- We wander.
- God restores us.

And through it all, He keeps drawing us back to Himself through His Word.

That brings us to our

Big Idea: The blessed life is the life that 1) depends on God, 2) delights in His truth, and 3) trusts our Shepherd to keep seeking us when we wander.

And I see five movements in this final stanza. The blessed life,

First: Depends on God's Word. 169–170

Tav begins with a prayer. After everything the psalmist has learned, he still cries out to God. “*Let my cry come before you.*” The word translated “cry” an urgent cry that deeply needs to be heard. And what does he ask for?

“*Give me understanding according to your word.*” Why?

Because the psalmist has learned the blessed life is a Word-centered life.

APP:

- You can own a Bible and still need God to open your eyes.
- You can read the Bible every morning and still need God to give you understanding.
- You can study Hebrew and Greek, read commentaries, listen to sermons, and earn theological degrees, and still need to come before God saying, “*Give me understanding.*”

The mature Christian never graduates from that prayer. In fact, the farther you travel with God, the more you realize how much you need Him.

Then v 170 moves from understanding to deliverance - “*Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word.*”

Yesterday, in your devotions, I said it this way:

- in v 169 he needs God to help him see.
- in v 170 he needs God to act.

The Hebrew word for deliver means to snatch someone from danger.

But notice the qualification: “*according to your word.*”

This is the difficult part of Christianity. It’s Jesus in the Garden praying, “*Not my will, but yours be done.*”

IMP: The psalmist knows what he wants, but he trusts what God wants rather than he trusts his own understanding of how God should answer. That's prayer shaped by Scripture.

- Sometimes God delivers us from trouble.
- Sometimes God carries us through trouble.
- And sometimes His answer is sufficient grace while the trouble remains.

Paul learned that with his thorn in the flesh. He prayed three times for God to remove it. God answered, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

- Paul asked for one kind of deliverance.
- God gave him another.

And that is where a Word-centered life changes the way you pray. You can say, “*Father, this is what I want. This is what I need. This is what I'm asking You to do.*”

And then you can say, “*According to your word.*”

- That isn't weak faith.
- That isn't indecisive faith.
- That's mature faith.

It trusts God's wisdom more than our own.

APP: Submit your prayers to God’s wisdom.

The blessed life depends on God's Word. It also

Second: Delights in God's Word. 171–172

It's one thing to desire God's Word. It's another thing to delight in it. And so the psalmist says,

“My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes. My tongue will sing of your word, for all your commandments are right.”

Something changes here. The psalmist has been praying, and now he starts praising. And notice something else. We aren't told that his circumstances have changed.

He praises God because God is teaching him. *“My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes.”*

Over 170 verses so far, the psalmist has learned that God's word, God's will and God's way are best for him.

“Pour forth” describes something bubbling or gushing out. This isn't reluctant praise. It overflows. Why? *“For you teach me your statutes.”*

This is an amazing thought. The psalmist desires God's Word, which tells him God's will and God's way. And then, he delights in learning it in his circumstances.

That's another mark of spiritual maturity. We may know the Bible very well. We may have studied it for fifty years. But there is always more to learn because ultimately, we're learning more than information. We're learning God.

And when God shows us His truth, truth should become praise.

Theology is meant for doxology.

APP: Let the Bible shape your purpose.

Then v 172 says: “*My tongue will sing of your word, for all your commandments are right.*”

The word translated “sing” can also carry the idea of answering or responding.

- God speaks.
- We respond with praise.

And the psalmist tells us why: “*All your commandments are right.*” Once again, that little word, “all” carries an enormous amount of weight.

- There are truths in the Bible that confront us.
- Truths that challenge us
- Truths that change us
- Truths that would be easier to ignore or, if we couldn’t, at least resist.

The psalmist says, “*All your commandments are right.*”

Why? Because the God who gave them is righteous.

For six months we've been learning that God's Word reflects God's character. So when I don't understand a command, God is still right. When a command confronts something I want, God is still right. When friends or culture says something completely different, God is still right. The Word-centered life eventually settles that question. God is right.

So, the blessed life depends on God’s Word, delights in God’s word and...

Third: Chooses God’s Word. 173–175

173 - “*Let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts.*”

Those are two important statements:

- “*I have chosen.*”
- “*Help me.*”

That's the Christian life. The psalmist has made his choice - “*I have chosen your precepts.*”

The Hebrew word means to choose or prefer something deliberately.

IMP: You can drift into sin, but you can't drift into obedience. The psalmist has decided.

- Your Word is true.
- Your way is right.
- So I choose Your way.

But immediately he adds, “*Let your hand be ready to help me.*”

Why? Because choosing the right road doesn't give you the strength to walk it.

IMP:

- You were never meant to obey God without God.
- You can't obey God without God.

That is why Scripture can call us to obedience while simultaneously calling us to dependence.

Think about Jesus. He could say, “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*” (John 4:34).

Jesus delighted to do His Father's will. Why? How? Because He carried out His earthly ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Before He began his public ministry, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and afterward, Luke says,

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness (Luke 4:1).

And 13 verses later he says, *And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country (Luke 4:14).*

Then, Jesus promised that His followers would receive the Spirit as well. *“If I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).*

IMP: So Christian obedience is never simply gritting your teeth and trying harder. We choose God's way, and then we reach for God's hand.

The psalmist says it like this - *“I have chosen your precepts.” “Help me.”*

APP: Choose obedience and ask God for the strength to obey.

Then the psalmist says in v 174: *“I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight.”*

There are two directions here.

- He looks forward - *“I long for your salvation.”*
- And he looks at what God has already given him - *“your law is my delight.”*

He is waiting for something God hasn't done yet while delighting in something God has already given. That is how Christians live. You know this. We live between promise and fulfillment. Between the “already” – look what God has already done, and the “not yet,” God has not yet done everything he promised.

- You have been saved from the penalty of sin.
- You are being saved from the power of sin.
- You will be saved from the presence of sin.

And we are waiting for the day when God's saving work will finally and completely be revealed.

Paul says that we “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

So, again, longing for everything to be right, to be dissatisfied with the status quo, isn't necessarily evidence of weak faith. Longing is evidence that our faith is alive and pointed in the right direction; home.

- We know this world isn't home.
- We know sin isn't going to have the final word.
- We know pain isn't going to have the final word.
- We know grief isn't going to have the final word.
- We know death isn't going to have the final word.
- We know Jesus is coming.
- So we long.

Why do you think people sin? They are longing. But they are settling for something that promises satisfaction, can't provide it and, in the end, hurts more than it helps.

But, while we wait, we delight in His Word. Hope feeds delight, and delight strengthens hope.

ILL: C. S. Lewis was an incredible apologist for longing or desire and these works best illustrate his argument:

- Best literary illustration: His book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*.
- Best autobiographical account: His autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.
- Best theological exposition: His sermon, “The Weight of Glory.”
- Most concise apologetic formulation: His book, *Mere Christianity*, Book III, Chapter 10, “Hope.”

There, he develops his argument for desire in three stages:

1. Natural desires have corresponding satisfactions. Hunger points toward food, and sexual desire toward sexual fulfillment. Lewis reasons that the existence of a desire ordinarily suggests something capable of satisfying it.

2. Human beings experience a longing that earthly pleasures cannot completely satisfy. Lewis mentions marriage, holidays, and learning. These are genuinely good things, but they never quite deliver the fulfillment we anticipated. He argues that this doesn't make them deceptive. They awaken a longing for something greater.
3. That unfulfilled longing points toward our eternal home. This leads the famous sentence about being made for another world.

"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

Lewis' point is that earthly pleasures should be appreciated as anticipations of a greater reality rather than mistaken for the ultimate reality itself.

The important additional point is that Lewis doesn't stop with the existence of the longing. He explains how we should interpret the good things that awaken it. They are signs pointing beyond themselves.

Here is his sermon, "The Weight of Glory in PDF format:

<https://faithandlaw.org/wp-content/craft/docs/The-Weight-of-Glory.pdf>

This longing is why v 175 says, "*Let my soul live and praise you, and let your rules help me.*"

Why does he want life? Read it again. So he can praise God. "*Let my soul live and praise you.*" (175a)

That is a searching statement.

- Why do you want another day?
- Why do you want another year?
- Why do you want more health?
- Why do you want God to answer your prayers?

The psalmist says, “*Give me life so I can give that life back to You in praise.*” Why? Because he knows a God-centered life, a Word-centered life, is the blessed life.

A Word-centered life eventually becomes a God-centered life. And there should never come a time when he should enjoy the blessing and forget the Blessor. Why? **Because the Blessor is the ultimate blessing.**

So, he says, “*let your rules help me.*” (175b)

We sometimes think God's commands restrict us. The psalmist has learned to see them as help.

2 Timothy 3:16 - *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

- *Profitable for teaching* – The Bible tells you what’s right
 - *For reproof* – The Bible tells you what’s wrong
 - *For correction* – The Bible tells you how to make wrong, right
 - *For training in righteousness* – The Bible tells you how to keep right, right.
- God's Word tells him where to walk when he doesn't know the way.
 - It warns him when he's approaching danger.
 - It corrects him when he's wrong.
 - It comforts him when he's hurting.
 - It gives him promises when he's afraid.
 - It gives him truth when his feelings lie to him.

And so he prays, “*Let your rules help me.*” (175).

And then we arrive at the last verse.

After 175 verses, how will this psalm end? We desire God’s Word, we delight in God’s Word, we depend on God’s Word, we choose God’s Word. Why do we do all of this?

Fourth: (Because) We trust the Shepherd of the Word. 176

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.”

I don't think I would have written the ending that way. If I had written 176 verses about loving God's Word, I probably would have wanted a stronger finish. Something like Paul at the end of his life –

2 Timothy 4:7-8a - *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* ⁸ *Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,*

- “I have finished the journey.”
- “I have kept your Word.”
- “I have conquered myself and my enemies.”

Instead, the psalmist says, “*I have gone astray*” and the Hebrew there means what you think it does; like a sheep, to wander away from the shepherd. Because that's exactly what sheep do. They don't make one step and get lost. They wander.

- A little here.
- A little there.
- Something greener grass catches their attention.
- They move toward it.
- Then something else catches their attention.
- And eventually they look up and realize they are far from where they began.

Isn't that how spiritual wandering often happens? Most Christians don't wake up one morning and decide, “*Today I'm going to walk away from God.*” We drift.

- Prayer becomes less important.
- The Bible gets pushed aside.
- Sin becomes a little easier to excuse.
- Worship becomes optional.

- The voice of self or the world gets louder.
- And the voice of God seems quieter.

One small step at a time. Until suddenly we realize, “I’ve wandered.”

But listen to what the psalmist does when he realizes it. He says, “*Seek your servant.*” That may be the most beautiful prayer in the entire stanza.

Earlier in Psalm 119 he said, “*With my whole heart I seek you*” (v 10). Now at the end he says, “*Seek me.*”

IMP: After an entire psalm about seeking God through His Word, we discover something even more fundamental beneath it all: **There is a God Who seeks us!**

*Oh, long and dark the stairs I trod,
With stumbling feet to find my God:
Gaining a foothold bit by bit,
Then slipping back and losing it:*

*Never progressing, striving still,
With weakening gasp and fainting will,
Bleeding to climb a God: while He
Serenely smiled, unnoting me.*

*Then came a certain time when I
Loosened my hold and fell thereby.
Down to the lowest step my fall,
As if I had not climbed at all.*

*And while I lay despairing thereby.
I heard a footfall on the stair,
In the same path where I, dismayed,
Faltered and fell and lay afraid.*

*And lo! when hope had ceased to be,
My God came down the stairs to me.*

- Theodosia Pickering Garrison (1874-1944)

And notice what he calls himself. “*Your servant*.” He has wandered, but he still knows to whom he belongs. And so he says, “*Seek your servant*.”

Fifth: This is Where the Gospel Meets Us

Psalm 119 ends with a lost sheep. The gospel introduces us to the Shepherd who goes looking for him.

Jesus said, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11).

And in Luke 15 Jesus asks: “*What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?*”

Did you hear that? Until he finds it. That's the gospel.

IMP: Our salvation doesn't ultimately rest on the strength of our grip on the Shepherd. It rests on the strength of the Shepherd's grip on us.

Jesus says of His sheep, “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:28).

- Psalm 119 begins with the blessed person walking in God's way.
- It ends with a sheep who has wandered from the way.
- And Jesus stands between those two realities.

- He walked the path we failed to walk.
- He obeyed the Father perfectly.
- He fulfilled the Word completely.

And then the Good Shepherd laid down His life for wandering sheep.

Isaiah said, “*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:6).

IMP: At the cross, the Shepherd became the Lamb. The One who never wandered bore the sins of those who did.

- He died.
- He rose.
- And now He seeks, saves, restores, and keeps His sheep.

And He hasn't left us alone.

- The Father has given us His Word.
- The Son has accomplished our salvation.
- And the Holy Spirit takes that Word and uses it to teach us, correct us, strengthen us, comfort us, and lead us home.
- That's the Christian life.

And that is where our Aleph-Tav journey ends. **Or** maybe I should say, that's where it begins again.

We started with, “*Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!*”

And we end with, “*I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant.*”

Those two verses belong together. The blessed life isn't the life of a person who never needs grace. It is the life of someone who has discovered where grace is found.

So after 176 verses, after months in Psalm 119, what have we learned?

- God has given us His Word
- We need God's Word.
- We need God to help us understand His Word.
- We need God to help us obey His Word.

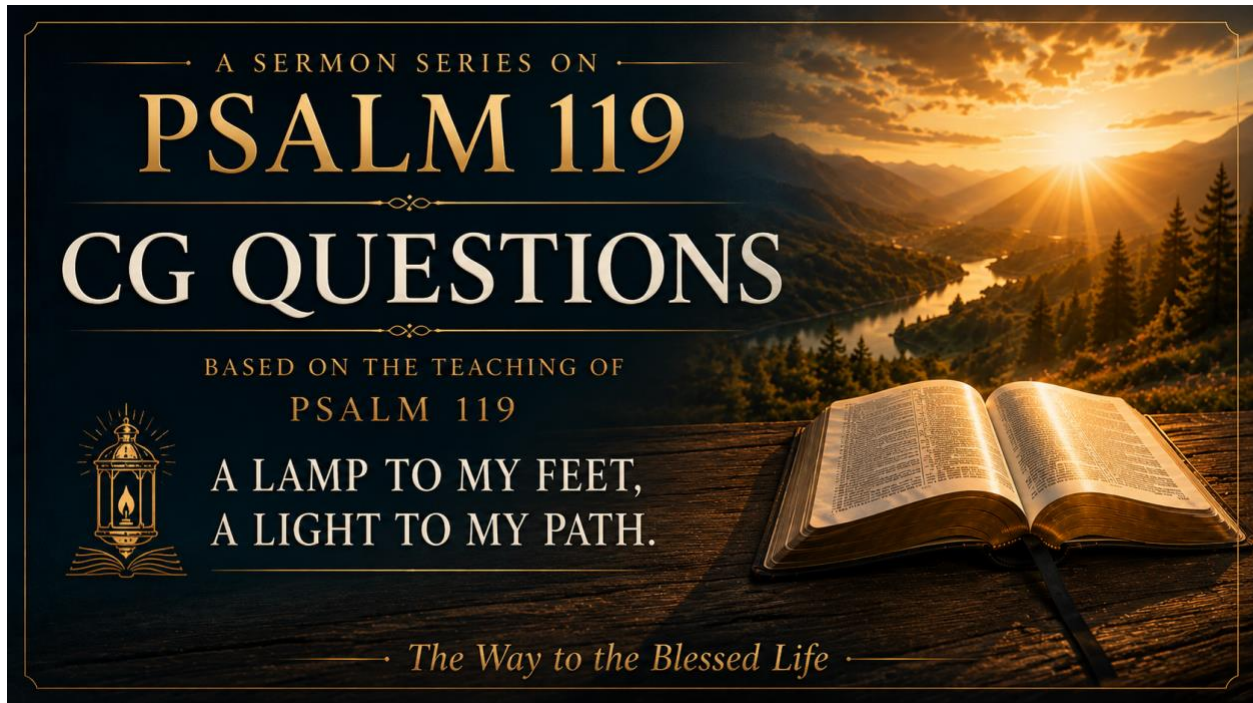
- We need God to use His Word to keep bringing us back when we wander.
- And ultimately, we need the Shepherd to come looking for us.

So the best way to end this entire series is with the prayer that ends the psalm is trusting in the living Word and say, “*Seek your servant.*” Or, as the psalmist says in this stanza,

APP:

- When I don’t understand, teach me.
- When I’m in trouble, deliver me.
- When You teach me, let praise overflow.
- When Your Word confronts me, help me remember that all Your commandments are right.
- When I know what I should do, give me Your hand to help me do it.
- When I grow weary, keep alive my longing for Your salvation.
- Let the life You give me become praise to You.
- And when I wander, Shepherd, come after me.

There isn’t a *better* place to end the psalm and a more *blessed* way to live.



Observation

What does the text say?

1. What two requests does the psalmist make in vs 169–170, and how does he connect both requests to God's Word?
2. According to vs 171–172, what causes the psalmist to praise God and sing about His Word?
3. In vs 173–175, what does the psalmist say he has chosen, what does he long for, and what help does he request from God?
4. How does the psalmist describe himself in v 176, and what does he ask God to do?
5. What contrast do you notice between the opening verse of Psalm 119 (v 1) and its closing verse (v 176)?

Interpretation

What does the text mean?

6. Why does the psalmist continue asking God for understanding after spending so much time learning and celebrating His Word? What does this teach us about spiritual maturity?

7. What does it mean to pray for deliverance "according to your word" (v 170)? How does this shape our expectations of God's answers to prayer?
8. Why does learning God's truth lead the psalmist to praise (vs 171–172)? What does the statement "all your commandments are right" reveal about his understanding of God's character?
9. In v 173, the psalmist says both "I have chosen your precepts" and "Let your hand be ready to help me." What does this teach us about the relationship between our responsibility to obey and our dependence on God?
10. Why do you think Psalm 119 ends with the confession of a wandering sheep rather than a declaration of spiritual accomplishment? What does this reveal about the blessed life?

Correlation

Where Else in the Bible do I find a text like this?

11. Read Luke 22:42 and 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. How do Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and Paul's experience with his thorn in the flesh help us understand what it means to seek God's help according to His Word (Psalm 119:169–170)?
12. Read Colossians 3:16 and Psalm 119:171–172. How does Paul connect God's Word with worship and thanksgiving? Why should learning biblical truth produce praise?
13. Read Philippians 2:12–13 and Psalm 119:173. How does Paul's teaching help us understand the relationship between choosing to obey God and depending on Him for the strength to do so?
14. Read Romans 8:23–25 and Psalm 119:174–175. How does Paul's description of our future hope help explain the psalmist's longing for salvation while continuing to delight in God's Word?
15. Read Luke 15:3–7 and John 10:27–29. How do these passages help us understand the psalmist's final prayer, "Seek your servant" (Psalm 119:176), and the security believers have in Christ, our Good Shepherd?

Application

How Can God Use This Text to Conform Me to the Image of Jesus?

16. Where are you most tempted to rely on your own understanding rather than asking God to teach you through His Word? What would greater dependence look like this week?
17. Is there a biblical command you know is right but find difficult to embrace or obey? How can you respond with both a deliberate choice to obey and a prayer for God's help?
18. The psalmist praises God for teaching him even though his circumstances haven't necessarily changed. How can you cultivate gratitude and praise while you're still waiting for God to answer a prayer?
19. Spiritual wandering often happens gradually. What warning signs might indicate that you're drifting from the Lord, and what practical steps can help you recognize and respond to them?
20. Psalm 119 ends with the prayer, "Seek your servant." How does knowing that Jesus is the Good Shepherd change the way you respond when you've wandered? How might that truth encourage you as we conclude our journey through Psalm 119?