

## **The Word of God and the Trials of Life (Psalm 119:17-24)**

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### **Introduction & Review**

#### **Form**

As we have covered in previous lessons, a defining feature of Psalm 119 is that it is an acrostic poem. The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 letters, and this psalm contains 22 sections of eight verses each. Each one of the 22 sections is given a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each line in that section begins with that letter.

Today we come to the third section of Psalm 119, each line beginning with the Hebrew letter Gimel, and the anonymous poet now also includes a new feature we had not yet encountered in this poem: the description and activity of those who oppose the Lord and his people. Now it's not just his own weaknesses that he must contend with, but adversaries now compound his difficulties, giving us a model on how to react to similar circumstances. Therefore, a central theme in this section has to do with the effects of keeping and meditating on God's Word in the midst of trial. In his book *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of God's Word*, Hywell R. Jones cleverly describes the theme of this section as "serving among scoffers."

#### **Language**

During our study of this Psalm, you'll notice that we will frequently refer to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) as the Greek words often add significant insights to the meaning of the verse. In a sense, the Septuagint functions somewhat like a "commentary" on the Hebrew text. In fact, many (if not most) of the Old Testament quotations made by the writers of the New Testament are taken not from the Hebrew text but from the Greek text, the Septuagint.

Most word studies and definitions will be taken from [PreceptAustin.org](http://PreceptAustin.org), and [BlueLetterBible.com](http://BlueLetterBible.com) which includes *Strong's Concordance*, as well as Hywel R. Jones's 2009 book *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of God's Word*, referenced above.

### **Prayers for Abundance and Insight (vv. 17-18)**

17 Deal bountifully with your servant,  
that I may live and keep your word.  
18 Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wondrous things out of your law.

The Psalm 119 poet opens this section with prayer. In fact, this psalm has been primarily a prayer since verse 4, and verse 17 begins with the speaker asking for a lot. The psalmist has large expectations. Is his request for the Lord to "deal bountifully with" him presumptuous? His prayer is more like a bold expectation for God's glory. I remember someone once saying that a little grace won't do him any good; he needs grace and God's blessings *in abundance*. If we could illustrate God's bountiful dealing as a milkshake, it would be no mere simple milkshake that the speaker is asking for, but rather something like the second image below. However, the motivation for this lavish request is not self-centered, but rather so that he can "live," implying

that his life may be in danger, and so that he can “keep” God’s word in the midst of that danger. This parallels the psalmist’s attitude, as he refers to himself as God’s servant, he does not ask for personal benefit, or even comfort (despite the trials he is facing as we will soon read), but he asks for bountiful dealings, or abundant blessings so that he may live and keep God’s word. His attitude is that of a servant dependent on his master so that he can obey God’s word despite the difficulties he is facing.



This writer was well acquainted with suffering. As mentioned in verse 17, he knew fear for his life and deprivation (v. 17). He has known seasons of life where he didn’t seem to get anything from God’s word (v. 18), which will prompt him to pray for his eyes to be opened. He had known persecution as we will see in verses 22-23. He felt loneliness, rejection and abandonment as seen in verses 19-20. If you have felt any of those before, I hope today’s lesson will serve as a blessing to you! In the midst of those trials, the psalmist prayed to not only survive, but he wanted a better quality of life, spiritually speaking, amid trials and suffering. And to do so he knows he needs abundant, or bountiful grace.

He follows up this request for bountiful blessings with a prayer for his eyes to be opened. This word translated “open” (galah) in verse 18 can be translated as “uncover” or “remove.” Interestingly, the Septuagint uses the word “apokalupto,” from which we get the English word “apocalypse.” It literally means “to remove the cover from” and so the idea is to remove that which conceals something. Almost all of the New Testament uses have a figurative use, especially to some aspect of spiritual truth that was once hidden but has now had the “lid removed” so that it can be seen or understood. The same Hebrew word is first used in Genesis 9:21 and also in Numbers 22:31. It also brings to mind the imagery of Acts 9:18.

**Genesis 9:21** He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent.

**Numbers 22:31** Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face.

**Acts 9:18** And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;

Just as Paul's eyes were unveiled when he was converted, the psalmist didn't need new revelation either. He needed to see the revelation that was already given. He didn't need new eyes; he needed to see with the eyes he already had. When the psalmist says "open my eyes," he reminds us that it isn't the word of God that needs changing, as if it were obscure; we are the ones who are veiled and can't understand the word of God apart from the work of the Spirit. We are continually in desperate need for God to remove the lid from his word, so that we might see and understand and obey.

We can't understand the word of God apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. We are the ones who need the bountiful blessing for our eyes to be opened, but what does the psalmist want his opened eyes to literally "behold"? He wants to behold "wondrous things," a word derived from the verb "pala" which means "to be difficult, to be hard, to be extraordinary or amazing, be surpassing or to cause a wonderful thing to happen." In most of its Old Testament occurrences, "pala" refers to acts that are performed by the Lord expressing actions that are beyond the bounds of human powers or expectations, particularly his deliverances of Israel.

**Exodus 3:20** So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.

**Psalms 106:22**

wondrous works in the land of Ham,  
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

**Psalms 136:4**

to him who alone does great wonders,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

When this word is used with reference to men, the idea conveyed is of something being too hard to accomplish or comprehend as when God confronted Job about his inability to comprehend the workings and ways of the Almighty. Job humbled himself and admitted his inability to comprehend God's wonderful ways.

**Job 42:3**

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'  
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

So the Psalmist prays for abundant blessings to obey God's word, and for his eyes to be opened to understand the depths of God's extraordinary works, especially his deliverance, a topic that

can be found all over the Bible. When we read the account of God's wondrous work in delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt, for example, we see a picture of the miraculous work of Christ's delivering us from bondage to sin and death. The psalmist wants to see God's extraordinary work clearly. Recognizing the potential danger of his human frailty while reading the word of God, he prays. Thus, prayer is an important, and too often neglected part of Bible study. When we do see the wondrous things from God's word we should see that as evidence of God's blessing and favor; it is a gift of God. Jesus rejoiced that this is how God reveals himself.

**Matthew 11:25 - 30** 25 At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."



God made us with a sense of wonder. What makes us humans wonder? The mysterious, new, unknown, and beautiful cause us to wonder. God made us this way and the Holy Spirit helps us see these things in the scriptures. Too often we may look to satisfy that sense of wonder without looking to the word of God. I think the psalmist is praying this in response to a season when he is having difficulty focusing and getting things out of God's word. Either that, or he's trying to avoid such a season. Either way, this is a good prayer for us! The Holy Spirit reveals the truth in God's

word to us. May we receive grace to better see the depth and wonder of our salvation when we look into his Word! Do you approach reading the Bible with such excitement that you ask God to show you "wondrous," extraordinary, and amazing things?

We may be tempted to think that the hard work of Bible study is not important because the Holy Spirit is doing the heavy lifting. Does this mean that Bible study is unnecessary? James Montgomery Boise once said, "If we want to see wonderful things in the Scriptures, it is not enough for us merely to ask God to open our eyes that we might see them. We must also study the Bible carefully. The Holy Spirit is given not to make our study unnecessary but to make it effective."

### **The Prayer of a Stranger (vv. 19-20)**

19 I am a sojourner on the earth;  
hide not your commandments from me!  
20 My soul is consumed with longing  
for your rules at all times.

The psalmist's next supplication ("hide not your commandments from me") is the same request made for a different reason ("open my eyes"). The psalmist wants to know and keep God's word because he realizes that this earth is not his home, and so he needs communication with his homeland. The image of a sojourner on the earth is not that of a lonely man in the wilderness, but that of a stranger in a foreign land. As he tries to follow the Lord's commands, the world sees that as a foreign or strange concept and so it treats him like a stranger. I think we can look to current events as an object illustration. According to a 2023 survey of immigrants conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *The Los Angeles Times*, about half of all working immigrants surveyed reported that they have experienced discrimination in the workplace, including being threatened or harassed on the job, and many reported being criticized or insulted for the way they speak and told to "go back home." This report and history demonstrate this sad aspect of human nature: sojourners, or immigrants have it tough. They are often treated like they don't belong. I am certainly not condoning this type of behavior towards anybody; as believers we are called to love our neighbors. I am also not trying to convince you to take any kind of political stance, but I'd like to use this as an illustration of the experience of a sojourner. Similarly, for us Christians, as we live our lives in submission to God's word, as we seek to follow Christ and imitate his example, we will be treated like a stranger in a world in which we do not belong.

### **1 Peter 1:1**

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,  
To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

**1 Peter 2:11- 12** 11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

In verse 20, the psalmist feels a longing for his true spiritual home so strongly that his "soul is consumed;" it longs for a taste of home. For many people, having a specific dish or meal reminds them of home. Especially if you moved from out of town, whether it's from another city, state, or country, there might be that pastry that reminds you of grandma's kitchen, or that aroma unique to the special sauce when it's simmering on the stove, or that savory taste that makes you feel like your back





home. I think this serves as a great demonstration of our spiritual life as Christians, and our experience with the word of God. We are strangers in this world because we follow Christ, and seek to exalt him in every way. Our true citizenship is in fact in heaven (Philippians 3:30), and we are “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). This makes us different from the world we live in. What can provide us with a connection to our heavenly home? God’s word! The psalmist recognizes this truth so well, that his “soul is consumed with longing for [the Lord’s] rules.” Notice how often: “at all times”!

May we have that obsessive compulsion for a constant connection to our spiritual home like the psalmist! May we share his prayers to deal bountifully with us so that we can live and keep God’s word, open our eyes to see the mysterious, beautiful, and incredible truths found in his word. May we want that with the soul crushing passion the psalmist describes. In the coming verses, he is going to explain what has made this prayer so relevant to him. It has to do with the comfort he finds in the scriptures amid life’s trials. How then does the word of God provide comfort?

### **A Prayer to Find Refuge in the Word of God (vv. 21-24)**

21 You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones,  
who wander from your commandments.  
22 Take away from me scorn and contempt,  
for I have kept your testimonies.  
23 Even though princes sit plotting against me,  
your servant will meditate on your statutes.  
24 Your testimonies are my delight;  
they are my counselors.

In the opening lines to Psalm 119, the psalmist describes the “way” of those who walk in obedience to the Lord as being “blessed” (119:1-3). Then beginning in verse 9, the second section of this psalm, he details the key to keeping one’s “way” pure is guarding one’s path according to God’s word.

Now in verse 21, the psalmist introduces adversaries, describing those who “wander” from God’s commandments as “insolent” (proud) and “accursed.” The fact that they “wander from [God’s] commandments” implies that they have been recipients of the Lord’s revelation, but did not heed the advice to walk in and guard God’s word. This means that they were a part of the Israel of the day. Appropriately God rebukes them. “Insolent” or “proud” is a suitable description for their character because their actions are willful disobedience despite knowing and being exposed to the truth. In the Old Testament “insolent” is often used to describe those who oppose the Lord and his people, but this might actually be coming from within magnifying the degree of insolence. Proverbs 21:24 describes this type of person using the same word, but translated “scoffer”.

### **Proverbs 21:24**

“Scoffer” is the name of the arrogant, haughty man  
who acts with arrogant pride.

Not only are they described as insolent (or proud scoffers), the writer calls them “accursed.” They are cursed because no good will come from disobedience of God. The Bible, history, and our own experiences can attest to this.

The writer shifts again to request something in verse 22, recognizing that God is a refuge from the “insolent, accursed ones who wonder from [God’s] commandments.” Recognizing that these individuals will throw “scorn and contempt” in his direction, he asks God to deal with it for him, specifically to take away the scorn and contempt. Both of these terms relate directly to our stranger status. “Scorn” refers to an expression of disapproval or disappointment. Worse than that is “contempt,” which describes a feeling that a person or thing is beneath consideration, worthless and useless. In verse 23, the writer addresses a third, progressively worse effect: plotting against him, or slander. When the world sees us as strangers they will treat us as outsiders, that is to be expected, but slander, plotting against, is worse, involving lies and false accusations. Verse 23 shows the extent of the slander as “even... princes sit plotting against” him. How much much worse is this that it may be coming from a person of influence (ie “princes” in verse 23) from within Israel.

On the heels of writing that his “soul is consumed with longing for [God’s] rules at all times,” notice what the afflicted psalmist focuses on amid the scorn, contempt, and slander he is suffering: “I have kept your testimonies” (v. 22), “your servant will meditate on your statutes” (v. 23), and “your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors” (v. 24).

If we dwell on and think about the things other people say, particularly what unkind people who do not believe the word of God say, we will be agitated and anxious and uptight. But if we keep and meditate on what God says, the wondrous things he has opened our eyes to, those things are described here as a source of delight and counsel even amid scoffers. Let’s take a quick moment to focus on keeping, meditating, and delighting in God’s word. “Keep” means “to guard or protect.” In this sense we can understand it as obeying God’s word with fidelity. We find peace in knowing that we respond in a way that obeys the Lord. “Meditate” carries a sense of musing, studying, or pondering, all repetitive actions. Meditating involves constant visitation, the kind of thing you do as a result of “longing for [God’s] rules all the time” (v. 20). Finally, the Lord’s testimonies, a synonym for the scriptures that speaks of the trustworthiness and faithfulness of what God says, are described as “delight” and “counselors.” While some find delight or enjoyment in gossip, listening to rumors and lies about people, the psalmist says that he finds delight in meditating on God’s word. When lies about you cause you pain, you can find comfort from the wondrous truth in God’s word just like this writer. Besides delight, God’s word is described as a counselor, or literally “the men of my counsel.” Authorities, friends and even enemies may want to give us counsel, but the word of God is going to always be the best source for counsel. Whatever your difficulty is today, turn to the Bible and let it counsel you. Let it saturate your mind, heart, and will. This is why we should seek to imitate the psalmist’s soul-consuming longing for the Bible.

Have you experienced scorn, contempt, or slander? Our refuge is God through his word! Verse 24, it's his delight much more than the princes of this world. Even if a celebrity, politician, or a "prince" gave us a high-five, they would not be our delight or counselor. God offers this to each of us. More than just superficial reading of God's word, more than a box-check. It's going to take genuine seeking after lord with everything we have and are but it will be richly rewarded.

### **Conclusion**

The psalmist saw the various things that hindered his receiving God's word and fellowship with God, and he prayed that he'd be protected from those things. He saw the potential for a cold heart that may not live or keep God's word, especially in his position on the receiving end of scorn, contempt, and slander, so he prayed for God to deal bountifully with him in verse 17. He needed a lot of grace so he asked for it. He saw the danger of darkened understanding. He, like I suspect each of us has had moments where he looks to the scriptures, and has a hard time understanding. So prayed for God to open his eyes in verse 18. He also recognized the danger of living as a stranger in a strange land in verse 19, so he prayed "hide not your commandments from me," describing in verse 20 his longing for that connection to his spiritual home that comes through savoring the truths in scripture. He saw dangers of pride in those who attacked him, so he prayed recognizing that the proud are the cursed in verse 21. He saw that suffering scorn, contempt, and slander might shake his standing, so he prayed for God to remove it in verse 22, but also recognized that keeping, meditating and delighting in God's word provides true comfort.

In each one of these challenges, the psalmist turns to prayer rooted in God's word to find his strength and confidence in God. May we, as we face the trials of life, bow to God in prayer that is based on the word of God.