

## **Making the Word of God at Home in Your Heart (Psalm 119:9-16)**

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### **Introduction & Review**

#### **Form**

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 units, what we might call stanzas 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.

In this second section of Psalm 119, each line begins with the Hebrew letter Beth, which happens to also be the word for house. Its central theme deals with the connection between meditating on the word of God and living a life of purity. Some have suggested that this section of the psalm is about making the word of God at home in your heart.

#### **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 book *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of God's Word*.

### **The Psalmist Poses a Question (v. 9a)**

How can a young man keep his way pure?

This section of Psalm 119 is often referred to as a "young person's psalm" because of the question posed at the beginning. While the subject of the question is a young man, it is a question that is relevant for all, young men or women, as well as old men and old women.

The world advises the young to sow those wild oats, but as JM Boice put it, "God says, 'If you are going to live for me, you must begin at the earliest possible moment, without delay, preferably when you are really young.'"

God rightly claims the best and first, and it's wise counsel to spare a young person from the bondage of sin. Whether youth is the best time of life may be debatable, but it is the first. This principle—of dedicating the first and best to God—is applicable at any age, and we can conclude that it is never too early to start asking this question. If you are sitting here reading this, know that it's also not too late to ask! While this is certainly true of literal young men, it's not any less true of old women (or any human of any age) for that matter. Perhaps the speaker is referring to

himself. Whatever the case, I believe asking specifically about a “young man” adds a sense of urgency to the inquiry. Experience has the power to build habits at any age.



Bringing our focus back to the question at hand, “How can a young man (or anyone really) keep his way pure?” we shall see that the psalmist is praying more than preaching. The word translated “way” here can also be translated as “track,” or “a rut, as made by the wheel of a chariot.” Using a more modern metaphor, think of the imagery as train tracks (of life). So we could read this statement as asking, “How can a man keep his upcoming path forward pure” and prevent a derailment? The word translated “pure” can mean “cleansed” or “translucent.” How then can we keep that track clear?

### **The Psalmist Provides a Quick Answer (v. 9b)**

**By guarding it according to your word.**

How do you keep that “track” mentioned above clear? By guarding it according to the word of God. How do we guard this track? It’s worth taking a close look at the word translated “guard” here which is the Hebrew word *shamar*, which means “to keep, watch, preserve, to guard, to be careful, to watch over, to watch carefully over, to be on one’s guard.” The Septuagint translates the word using the Greek *phulasso*, which means to guard like a military sentinel would at his post. If the image of a young man indicates a sense of urgency, then the image of guarding (or keeping) conveys a sense of gravity.

The first use of *shamar* in Genesis 2:15 is instructive: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and *keep it*.”

As Adam was placed in the garden of Eden—a perfect environment—he was commanded to “keep it.” Clearly Adam did not do a good job at “keeping” the garden safe from intruders! As a result of his failure, he was cast out of the garden and angels stationed to “to guard (same words *shamar* and *phulasso* in Hebrew and Greek, respectively) the way to the tree of life.” In Psalm 119:9, the psalmist charges his readers to watch over the “garden” of their heart, anticipating an image coming in the next verse. One final grammatical note of interest in the Greek translation of 119:9, is that *phulasso* is in the middle voice which means the subject (us) initiates the action (guarding our heart) and also gets to participate in the results. The passage from Proverbs below provides us with a useful complimenting imperative. Notice the imperative action words emphasized below.

### **Proverbs 4:23-27**

- 23 **Keep** your heart with all vigilance,  
for from it flow the springs of life.  
24 Put away from you crooked speech,  
and put devious talk far from you.  
25 Let your eyes look directly forward,  
and your gaze be straight before you.  
26 Ponder the path of your feet;  
**then all your ways will be sure.** ← *the fruits of these actions*  
27 Do not swerve to the right or to the left;  
turn your foot away from evil.

As you can probably attest, this does not happen naturally. Note that God provides his word, but we are responsible to keep it. He will not force us to keep it, but thankfully God has also provided his Spirit to enable us to daily make the choice to keep it.

**John 14:26** But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you

**John 16:13** When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

**John 15:3** Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

**John 17:17** Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

If you want to cleanse your way, you must put in the effort to guard it with the word of God, and now in the church age we have the Holy Spirit to teach and guide us.

### **How to Guard My Way According to God's Word (vv. 10-16)**

The psalmist now elaborates on his answer in verses 10-16, where we can see seven actions to guard your way according to God's word. We can also call this seven ways to make the word of God at home in your heart.

#### **Seek the Word of God (v. 10)**

10 With my whole heart I seek you;  
let me not wander from your commandments!

With the term "whole heart," the psalmist declares his dedication to God and in the latter line of verse 10, he admits his weakness to maintain that dedication as he prays that he won't wander. As he seeks to improve his commitment, we should always be seeking to improve our Christian living, never being satisfied.

With his way pure, guarded by God's word, he can seek God. Strong defines the phrase translated "I will seek you" as "to tread or frequent; usually to follow (for pursuit or search); by implication, to seek or ask," which gives us a clearer image of what it looks like to guard our way according to God's word: it requires dedication on our part while being also dependant on the Lord. This is done whole-heartedly, not half-heartedly. The reason for the psalmist's whole-hearted searching for God in the first half of verse ten, is what he is praying for in the latter half of the verse—to not wander from God's "commands." When he prays, "Let me not wander from your commands" we see his dependence upon God to obey God's commands.

When we speak of God's commands, or his word, we can't just look at it as merely a rule book or even a textbook, but rather we must view it like the psalmist does: as the means by which he seeks and meets with God. It's also a two-way conversation; it's where God meets us.

This reminds me of some recent research on the brain and reading that found that the process of learning to read literally reshapes our brains, a concept called brain plasticity. In [an article](#) explaining her research, Maryanne Wolf wrote, "Human beings *were never born to read*. Reading or written language is a cultural invention that necessitated totally new connections among structures in the human brain underlying language, perception, cognition, and, over time, our emotions. The reading brain circuit emerged, which became a vehicle like no other for ever more elaborated connections, which gave literate humans an evolving platform for the development of new thought. Reading represents one of the most important epigenetic breakthroughs in the history of the species; our very history was made possible by it." Essentially, God created our brains so that reading does not come naturally. It takes effort. I find it fascinating that that is how God has chosen to communicate his will (his commands) to us. He has chosen to speak to us in a way that requires effort.



"Yes?"

### **Store the Word of God (v. 11)**

11 I have stored up your word in my heart,  
that I might not sin against you.

Verse 11 is a very familiar verse, and rightly so as it holds the key to achieving the ultimate goal in life. We can state the ultimate goal of life two different ways, either positively—by saying that the ultimate goal of life is to glorify God by enjoying him forever—and the other negatively, namely "that [we] might not sin."



**Ephesians 1:4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love...

We can say that sinning is falling short of glorifying God by embracing other things as more enjoyable. And in this verse the psalmist tells us what he's done to help him not sin. In other words, he's telling us how he is trying to glorify God and enjoy him, and that is by storing God's word in his heart.

The Hebrew word translated in the ESV as "I have stored up" in verse 11 is "tsâphan," which is translated "have I hid" and "I have treasured" in the KJV and NASB, respectively, can be taken to primarily mean "to hide, to keep secret, or to conceal something extremely valuable with a definite purpose, either for protection or hoarding." The Septuagint translates this word with the Greek verb *krupō*, which is used for "to cover, to hide, to conceal, to keep secret (either protectively or for selfish reasons)." Taking all this in mind, I think the NASB translation captures a useful nuance of this phrase: that it's stored or hidden because of its value, like folks used to do before banks. God's word is a treasure that is so valuable that it is worth storing. Both verbs "tsâphan" and "krupō" are used in Job's declaration below.

**Job 23:12**

I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;

I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

Essentially, Job is saying he would rather starve physically than starve spiritually. Can you imagine if we treated spiritual nourishment like we do physical nourishment? Note also the important principle that is captured in a common inscription that is often written in Bibles, "This book will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you from this book." We see this principle addressed in 1 Peter 2:1-2.

**1 Peter 2:1-2** 1 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—

Peter lists things we need to put off and keep off in order that we might have a healthy appetite, like newborn babies long for the pure milk of the word that by it we might grow in respect to salvation. Sin gets in the way of spiritual growth.

One way to keep from sinning, or in other words, to live for the glory of God by enjoying him forever, to attain the ultimate goal of life, is to store up or treasure the word of God in our hearts. When we have the word of God stored or hidden in our hearts, and treasure it like gold and silver, that word will function to keep us from sin.

Knowing the value of hiding God's word in his heart, keeping it hidden inside and safe so that no one can take it away, the psalmist heard and read God's word, thought about it continually, so it became ingrained in his mind and heart. It's readily available. This is more than mere

memorization, but I would call it internalization. He has memorized it because he's constantly around it because it is so valuable.

That it's hidden inside of him, in his heart, is significant because the words of God are not just kept in writing for the psalmist to consult outside of himself. They are kept for his consultation inside of him—in his heart. The heart in the Old Testament is a place of both thinking and feeling (Genesis 6:5; Job 36:12). So these words of God are being treasured in a place where they can be thought about and felt.

**Genesis 6:5** The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

**Job 36:12**

The godless in heart cherish anger;  
they do not cry for help when he binds them

The Word of God has a cleansing effect on our lives when we put it into practice.

**Ephesians 5:26** that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

**John 15:3** Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

When the word is safely stored and treasured, or in other words, made at home in our hearts, the better we can talk truth to ourselves.

**Colossians 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all

Continuing our list of ways to make God's word at home in our hearts...

**Study the Word of God (v. 12)**

12 Blessed are you, O Lord;  
teach me your statutes!

Verse 12 begins with a word of praise as an interruption, which again shows the psalmist's recognition of the deed to depend on God's direction. This is followed by a continuation of his prayer, this time asking for instruction. I think there is a difference between being a good student and being good at school. Sometimes we can simply cram information into our brain the night before (or the morning of) an exam, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the information has been internalized or even truly learned. This is what I'd call being good at school, but not necessarily good at learning. More than just reading and more than just memorizing, the psalmist prays that God *teaches* him his statutes. The word translated "statutes" comes from the root for engraving or inscription, and carries the idea of authority or permanence. So the

psalmist wants to learn, not just cram, what is God's permanent laws so that when he encounters tests, trials, crises in life, he will know what to do to glorify God in the midst of whatever the circumstances may be. That's why he cannot help but praise God before that prayer.



### **Speak the Word of God (v. 13)**

13 With my lips I declare  
all the rules of your mouth.

So far, we have seen that the psalmist understands the importance of silently reading, memorizing, and hearing the word of God, but now he acknowledges the value of also speaking the “rules.” Revisiting once again our glossary of the synonyms the psalmist uses for God’s word, this one refers to “a verdict (favorable or unfavorable) pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree, from the Hebrew word to judge, shows how rules are to be regulated cause us to discern to choose.”

The writer is declaring with his own lips all the judgements that come from God’s mouth. But to whom does he speak? While it doesn’t say I think we can apply some other passages to help us make an educated guess as to to whom we are to speak God’s word to.

**Romans 10:14, 17** 14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?... 17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

**Ephesians 5:15-21** 15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The Hebrew word carries the idea of counting, recounting, or relating facts. We should normalize speaking about the word of God to one another. If the Bible is at home in our hearts, we should “declare” it.

### **Savor the Word of God (v. 14)**

14 In the way of your testimonies I delight  
as much as in all riches.

“Testimonies” carries courtroom implications. It’s what a witness provides and is used as evidence. So the psalmist delights, or experiences joy when he considers the testimonies, or the evidence of God’s works. He describes recounting and thereby testifying God’s great works, as an enjoyment as much as the enjoyment “in all riches.”

This is especially useful to remember when we face moments of crisis and difficulties. Our natural, even biological, tendency is to remember the things that hurt. We can be tempted to dwell not on the things above, but on what has gone wrong and what could go wrong. But notice what the psalmist values as much as all riches. He values the record of the great things the Lord has done. If the word of God is at home in our hearts, then during the good times as well as the bad ones, we should delight in counting, recounting, enumerating what God has done and what he has revealed about himself and his will to us in this word.

### **Spotlight the Word of God (v. 15)**

15 I will meditate on your precepts  
and fix my eyes on your ways.

A series of three “I will” statements, three great resolutions are coming in the closing three lines of this section. Each is connected to “mind words.” The first of these is “I will meditate.” Meditating means to look or to pay close attention to. If we were to describe what it looks like we could say that it brings out what we have put into our mind or memory and choose to dwell on again and again. In regards to the Bible, we can do that for many lifetimes and still not work out the full implications. How appropriate that the synonym for God’s word that the writer uses here is “precepts,” which carries a sense of attending to or frequenting something often as in the sphere of an office or an overseer, like a person who is responsible to look closely into the situation and to take action. This term carries a sense of duty.

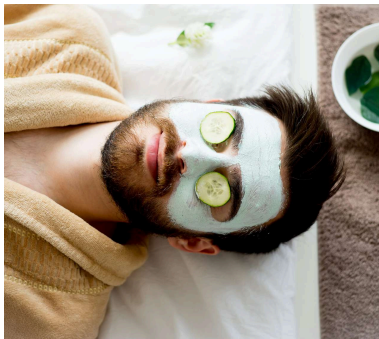
**Colossians 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Sometimes we choose to dwell on the wrong things: evil, complaining things, useless unprofitable things. There are a lot of distractions all around us, and it was no different for this psalmist. He chooses to fix his eyes, to cast a spotlight, to stare, and to focus on God’s ways instead of anything that will take his gaze away from God.

## **Smear the Word of God (v. 16)**

16 I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.

The poet makes his second resolution here and that is to “delight” in God’s “statutes” (same word used above in verse 12). The word delight literally means “to stroke, be smeared over, be blinded.” It describes that which gives pleasure or satisfaction, that which is pleasing so much so that it’s like an indulgence. A silly image that comes to my mind is that of Uncle Scrooge swimming in his gold coins. Perhaps a more grown-up image would be indulging in a spa day. The psalmist is resolving to indulge in God’s statutes. I think of delighting as a habit word; it’s the kind of thing one makes a habit out of.



Then he declares that he will not forget God’s word. If he is committed to seeking God’s Word with his entire heart, storing it like treasure in his heart, truly studying it so he can use it when he encounters times of testing, regularly speaking it to those around him, savoring it in light of the great things God has done, staring and fixating on it despite the abundant distractions swirling all about him, and figuratively smearing it all over like a soothing balm, then I think it’s safe to say that the word of God is at home in his heart, and he will not forget it. And the same is true for us. May we, like the psalmist, make the word of God at home in our hearts.