



◊ Samek

## REFLECTIONS ON THE WICKED

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

Catalog No. 806  
Psalm 119:113-120  
Seventh Message  
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October 20, 1991

It has been a painful week for our nation. For days, the entire country has been glued to their televisions watching the grueling cross-examination of Judge Clarence Thomas and Professor Anita Hill by the Senate Judiciary Committee. We heard the grim accusations of sexual harassment, the painful descriptions of deviant sexual perversions, the pornographic innuendo, paraded before a watching nation. To compound the evil, we saw some of the Senators serve their private political objectives at the expense of the reputations of others, rather than using the proceedings to seek the truth. One man from the PBC North congregation was so saddened by this national prime time debacle that he wrote a letter to the local newspaper decrying what he had seen on television. Here is part of what he wrote:

After just a few hours of watching the recent Thomas hearing, my zeal for the proceedings melted away into grief. The biggest lies of all were not from the lips of either Clarence Thomas or Anita Hill, but from the men to whom we have entrusted the running of our government. In the name of “the process,” Republicans, Democrats, conservatives and liberals urged us to throw away our deepest convictions about decency and grace. Before the cameras of a watching nation they have led us step by step to relinquish the personal respect we must always have for one another if we are to grow together through the difficulties that face us. The tragic result of such indecency is the slow desensitization of all of us to principles we once held dear.

I certainly did not enjoy the proceedings either. They brought home to me once more the fact that we live in a fallen world, where none, not even our national leaders, are immune from evil.

There are times in our spiritual journey to the heavenly Zion when God forces Christians to reflect on the nature and the extent of evil. We think of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the oppression of the Kurds in Iraq, our drug-infested cities, and so on. Even more personally and painful, some of you have memories of growing up in an abusive home. Now our first response when we are faced with the fact of evil is to run from it. But God wants us to reflect and meditate on these things for our good. And today we come to a section in Psalm 119 where the psalmist does just that: he reflects on his evil world and the impact that living in this world has upon his soul.

Psalm 119, of course, is written in the form of an acrostic, and the letter which the psalmist builds his text on in this section, verses 113 through 120, is *Samek*. In this instance, however, rather than using word repetition to build his structure, the psalmist builds on five synonyms to describe the wicked: one word speaks about their heart and attitude, three words refer to their character, and one word speaks about their end. In the first part of this section the psalmist meditates on his own character and life in the midst of evil; and in the second part he meditates on God’s response to evil.

### I. Meditation on his character in the midst of evil (119:113-114)

**The *double-minded* ones I hate,  
But Your law I love .  
Thou art my hiding place and my shield;  
For Your promise I wait.**

#### (a) A strong aversion to evil (119:113)

“Double-minded” is the key word in this text. This is a rare word in the OT. As a matter of fact, its root is found in only one other instance. When you come across a rare word usage like this, it is usually a reference to an incident that has occurred previously. Now the only other usage of this word double-minded is found in 1 Kings 18:21, in the account of Elijah’s confrontation with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. This wicked couple had imported Baal worship into Israel and instituted it as the state religion of the nation, but all the while they held on to the name of Yahweh in a charade that they were actually worshippers of the Lord. Here is what this text says, from 1 Kings 18:

**So Ahab went to meet Elijah. And it came about, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, ‘Is this you, you troubler of Israel?’ And he said, ‘I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Ashera, who eat at Jezebel’s table... And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long are you limping on two *divided* [there is our word] opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ (1 Kings 18:16-21)**

The people wanted to serve both God and Baal, and they were limping along, paralyzed between two opinions. Elijah found this to be revolting. This is what the Laodicean church was doing too, according to Jesus. He castigated this church in the book of Revelation because they too were limping along, divided between two opinions. Here is what he said of them: “Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:16).

So the psalmist felt a strong aversion to evil, brought on by the evil environment around him.

But evil had another effect upon him.

#### (b) An intensified love for God and His Word (119:113b-114)

**But Your law I love.  
Thou art my hiding place and my shield;  
For Your promise I wait.**

The only words which he repeats in these eight verses are the words love, and statutes. Living in an evil environment has caused his love for God’s statutes to increase and intensify. He has fled to God for security, has found him in the cleft of the rock, and now he is quietly waiting for God to do what

he promised.

King David is a wonderful illustration for us here. He had to live in an evil court with Saul, a man struggling between two divided opinions. To save his life, David escaped the evil circumstances of the court and fled to the cave of Adullam. There, hidden in the cleft of the rock, he wrote the beautiful words of Psalm 57:

**Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me,  
For my soul takes refuge in Thee;  
And in the shadow of Thy wings I will take refuge,  
Until destruction passes by.  
My soul is among lions...  
But My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;  
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!  
Awake, my glory;  
Awake harp and lyre,  
I will awaken the dawn!** (Psalm 57:1,4a,7,8)

In that protected spot, the cave of Adullam, David's love for God so intensified that he composed this psalm of praise to God. He who waits for God's promise will assuredly be answered—and the answer came to David, as we read in 1 Samuel: "And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter of soul, gathered to him; and he became captain over them" (1 Sam 22:1-2). This is exactly what happened to our Lord Jesus Christ. He came to a divided Israel which was limping along on two opinions, and he felt repulsed by that evil environment. Like David, he too was an outcast, but everyone who was in debt to sin, everyone who was bitter of soul and in distress gathered to him, and God answered his prayer.

So it is with the psalmist. Living in a world surrounded by evil actually caused spiritual appetites to be awakened and intensified in his soul. He found himself hating evil, but loving and clinging to God and waiting for him to act on his behalf. The apostle Paul picks up this theme in the NT in his admonition in Romans, "Let love be without hypocrisy, abhorring what is evil; cleaving to what is good" (Rom 12:9).

Now what kind of petitions does the psalmist make in the midst of an evil world? We find three of them in the following verses.

## **II. Requests in the midst of evil** (119:115-117)

*Depart from me, evildoers,  
That I may observe the commandments of my God.  
Sustain me according to Your word, that I may live;  
And do not let me be ashamed of my hope.  
Uphold me that I may be safe,  
That I may have regard for Your statutes continually.*

His aversion to evil, coupled with his intensified love for God, give him courage to confront the evildoers. And what is his word to them? Basically, it is, get lost!

### **(a) Depart from me!** (119:115)

**Depart from me, evildoers,  
That I may observe the commandment of my God.**

This is the only occasion where the psalmist directly addresses the wicked in this psalm. It's important to remember that he is not addressing his remarks here to the unbelieving world. If this was what he was doing he would have no place to go. The people he is calling on to depart from him are those who claim to be believers in the Lord, yet they persist in evil. They are a distraction to his own obedience, thus he is saying, "Leave me that I may wholeheartedly obey my Lord, without distraction." Christians today should act no differently. God

wants us to be bold to confront evil within his church. Thus there may be times when we have to say "Leave!" to someone who has been sitting on the fence too long, who claims to be a believer yet is enslaved to idols. Unqualified growth in the numbers attending a church is not a good barometer of spiritual life; pruning and cleansing from within rather, resulting in purification, is a much better sign. As a pastor, I don't like confronting evil within the church. Yet there have been times when I have had to tell people hard things about their behavior and they have left as a result. This is the point to which the psalmist has come: "Depart from me, evildoers, that I may observe the commandments of my God."

He addresses his next petition to God himself.

### **(b) Sustain me!** (119:116)

**Sustain me according to Your word, that I may live;  
And do not let me be ashamed of my hope.**

He asks that he may live long enough to see the promise of God fulfilled. He has put his life on the line and does not want to be ashamed.

Caleb is a great OT example of the two requests which the psalmist makes in these verses. When he and Joshua were forty years old, they returned from the spy mission to the Promised Land with a glowing account of what they had seen. But then came the majority report, from the ten who focused on the giants in the land. As a result, the people became immobilized by fear and denied their faith in the Lord. For forty years they went limping around in circles in the wilderness, going nowhere and dying in the process—and Caleb and Joshua had to endure going nowhere with them. When at last they came to the borders of the Promised Land, and Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, the sheep herders, saw this well-watered region that seemed so good to them, they asked, "Why would we cross the Jordan to go into a land that we can't see, when what we can see is so good?" They took their proposal to Moses, who just about had a fit. "Haven't we limped along long enough?" he demanded, in effect. "You want to stay here? Then stay." These men ended up having to fight battles, and they became the first tribes to fall into idolatry, apostasy and deportation. Finally, when at last Israel entered the land, and the inheritance was divided, Caleb spoke up and said,

**"So Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance to you and to your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God fully.' And now behold, the LORD has let me live, just as He spoke, these forty-five years, from the time that the LORD spoke this word to Moses, when Israel walked in the wilderness; and now behold, I am eighty-five years old today. I am still as strong today as I was in the day Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so my strength is now, for war and for going out and coming in. Now then, give me this hill country...with the Anakim (and their) great fortified cities; perhaps the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out as the LORD has spoken."** (Joshua 14:9-12)

This is what the psalmist is saying here: "Depart from me, evildoers, you who want to limp along. I'm tired of this distraction. I'm going after the hill country, and may God sustain me."

And now his third request.

### **(c) Uphold me!** (119:117)

**Uphold me that I may be safe,  
That I may have regard for Your statutes continually.**

The phrase “have regard for” (gaze) means “that I might be safe and in that state gaze steadily at your statutes, undistracted and continually.” More than anything else the psalmist wants to be taken out of the heat of battle, away from the double-minded evildoers, and transferred to a place of walled protection where he can contemplate on God without distraction. There is a beautiful play on words here in the Hebrew. The word *salvation* (Yeshua) comes from the word *safe*, and this word looks almost exactly like the word *regard*. If I were asked to paraphrase this in English, I would translate it this way: “*Deliver me, that I might deliberate on you.*” There is a prophetic oracle about this word *regard*. Israel always had a problem with idols. Instead of regarding the Lord they made a practice of regarding idols, seeking life from them, not their covenant God. But Isaiah predicted a day when God would so judge Israel that the prophet said,

**In that day man will have regard for his Maker,  
And his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel.  
And he will not have regard for the altars, the work of his hands.** (Isaiah 17:7,8a)

The psalmist has seen the exile and the judgment of his nation. Now he no longer has regard for the work of human hands; he has regard only for God and for his statutes. Living with the wicked has not only intensified his spiritual appetite, it has strengthened him to confront people with their choices. He is like an Elijah or a Joshua, calling men and women to account and then moving on to fully trust God, with or without human support. This is what God wants to do with us too. He wants us to have that kind of pure, bold faith that is ready to confront evil, regardless of whether we have anyone on our side.

Thus we learn of the psalmist’s meditation on his own character in the midst of evil.

Now he goes on to meditate on God’s perspective.

### **III. Meditation on God’s judgment of the wicked** (119:118-119a)

**You have rejected all those wandering from Your statutes,  
For their deceitfulness is useless.  
[Like] dross You have removed all the wicked of the earth;**

He says two things here about God’s judgment.

#### **(a) It is based on the truth of revelation**

Judgment is never based on ignorance, but on revealed truth—the truth we know and knowingly suppress. These people were judged because they wandered from God’s statutes. This is what Adam did. So did Israel. They were given God’s statutes and in every generation they were given prophets to warn them, before the judgment came, that they were wandering. This is true of the world also. The book of Romans says that the world has the light of creation, but they are judged because they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” The word wanderer, by the way, is the term used in Proverbs to describe the drunken one who is constantly swerving off the right course, causing great damage to his life and to the lives of others.

There is a second factor in God’s judgment.

#### **(b) It is progressive**

God’s judgment begins with rejection in this life: “You have rejected all those wandering from Your statutes.” If you don’t want to do things God’s way, in other words, he will let

you go your way. If you choose to serve an idol, you will become like your idol. This is what rejection means in this context. “For their deceitfulness is useless.” “Deceitfulness” is the term used for what Jacob did to Esau—he planned deceit to rob him of his birthright. But the treacherous deceit of those who choose to serve idols will be the means of their own deception; they themselves will be deceived in the process. Thus, speech or deeds which are false will never bear up under examination because there is no weight or life in them. This is exactly what Paul says in Romans about the ongoing wrath of God. “God gave them over,” says the apostle, repeating this phrase several times for emphasis. If you serve vain idols, you will become like the idols you serve—without breath, worthless—and your work will be a mockery. You become enslaved to things made with hands. This then is the wrath of God; this is how God rejects those who wander from his statutes.

So the wrath of God is based on the truth, and it begins with rejection. Finally, it ends with death.

“Like dross You have removed all the wicked of the earth,” says our text. Because they removed themselves from God’s statutes they will be finally removed from the earth; they will have no significance. There is nothing pure in them; they will make no lasting contribution; thus they will be completely removed in the coming fire.

Now how does the psalmist know this to be true? Well, he knows it to be true because he is student of history and the Scriptures. He is aware that this word *dross* comes from Ezekiel’s prophecy where God predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. He said he would *gather* all the wicked of Israel. This word is normally used to refer to salvation, but in this prophecy God declares that he is going to gather them into the temple, which they think is their salvation, but it is actually a furnace. Listen to these words:

**“Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to Me; all of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace; they are the dross of silver. “Therefore, thus says the LORD God, ‘Because all of you have become dross, therefore, behold, I am going to gather you into the midst of Jerusalem.’ As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I shall gather you in My anger and in My wrath, and I shall lay you there and melt you. And I shall gather you and blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and you will be melted in the midst of it. As silver is melted in the furnace, so you will be melted in the midst of it; and you will know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath on you.”** (Ezekiel 22:18-22)

The psalmist is reporting historical fact as he writes these lines; he had seen this judgment occur in history in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. But judgments like this are not one-time events; rather they are types of the ultimate judgment which is yet to come, when God will gather all the wicked, and what they anticipate will be their salvation and protection will in fact be a consuming fire which will destroy them and the entire heavens and the earth.

Though the psalmist is in the minority he is not swayed by those who wander from God’s statutes because he knows their end—they are like dross. Thus while his world is tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, the Scriptures give him an anchor for his soul, and he remains steadfast.

Finally, he gives his response to this judgment.

## IV. Response to God's judgment of the wicked

(119:119b-120)

**Therefore I love Thy testimonies,  
From dread of You my flesh trembles,  
And from Your judgments I am in awe.**

### (a) Looking to the past: A love for God who keeps his word (119:119b)

We have already seen that the psalmist has a two-fold response to the wicked world: hatred of evil, and love for God. Now, as he meditates on the judgment of God, he feels that same dual response welling up in his soul: he loves God's testimonies—he is confident that when God speaks, his word will stand forever—but as he looks ahead to the ultimate judgment that is yet to come he feels an aversion to it because he has seen God's wrath manifest in the past.

### (b) Looking to the future: Awe and dread (119:120)

**From dread of You my flesh trembles,  
And from Your judgments I am in awe.**

Meditation on God's judgment, rather than causing him to gloat in self-righteousness, gives him a deep sense of humility. He sees the events of his day as a microcosm of his own sin, and he has no guarantee that he will survive the coming judgment himself. During the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi war criminal, a survivor of the Holocaust had to confront his former persecutor in the courtroom. The Jew looked at him and collapsed. Afterwards, the man was asked why he fainted. He said, "When I came face to face with Adolf Eichmann, I expected to see a monster, but instead I saw a human being (adding poignantly) like *me!*" He went on to say that at that moment he learned that he, too, was capable of such atrocities. Who among us would like to be grilled by the Senate Judiciary Committee for what we did and said during the past 15 years? These hearings were a microcosm of my sin and your sin. But God's judgment will probe far deeper than anything we merely said and did. His video tape includes our thought life also—the things we harbored and played with and thought about. Everyone was throwing stones at one Senator who sat in judgment but may have been guilty of worse offenses, but if we took time to think about it, how often have we ourselves been in his position, perhaps when warning our children of certain evils, but our words lacked weight because we ourselves were guilty of the same things? "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," said Jesus. Can there be any doubt that our psalmist agrees with these weighty words? The end result of our reflecting on the judgment of God on the wicked therefore should not be self-righteousness, but humility and dread.

## V. Application in the New Covenant age

As we have already pointed out in this series, we will be helped in our understanding of Psalm 119 if we have the picture in our minds that these words were written by a man who has reached the midpoint in his ascent up the mountain to the heavenly Zion. He is leaving behind the Old Covenant and looking ahead to the New Covenant, anticipating the heavenly kingdom in Jesus Christ. Now here we need to ask, What new thing will happen with regard to the words of the psalmist when we enter completely into the New Covenant? I will make three points of application.

### (a) Love replaces hatred for enemies

This section begins with the psalmist's statement, "The double-minded ones I hate." In the New Covenant, of course, love replaces hatred for our enemies. Jesus was born into a sin-filled world. Even the religious establishment of his day were, in his words, hypocrites and double-minded ones who gave the appearance of righteousness but were in fact white-washed tombs. He was repulsed by this and by every kind of evil, yet he said, "Love your enemies."

Now the reason why he could say this is my second point.

### (b) The real enemies are identified and defeated

The Romans, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, etc., were not the real enemies of life. They were merely the earthly masks for the invisible enemies who lurked behind the scenes, namely the world, the flesh and the devil. Thus we must regard our fellow-men not as enemies to be hated and avoided, but as victims who need to be liberated. Jesus never once said "Depart from me" to the wicked whom he came across every day during his ministry. On the contrary, he welcomed all and exhorted them to come to him. The only time he addressed the words "Depart from me" was to the devil himself: "Get behind me, Satan!" Even to the lukewarm church at Laodicia, to whom he said, "I will spit you out of my mouth," to that church he also said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." He will never say "Depart from me, I never knew you" (Matt 25:41) until the last day, the great day of judgment.

This brings me to my third point.

### (c) Assurance of salvation is coupled with the awe of judgment

The psalmist looks ahead and says, "From dread of You my flesh trembles," wondering whether he will be able to survive the coming judgment. But I want you to know this: As a Christian, you do not have to live in fear of that awful judgment. It has already been carried out. And it fell, not upon you, but upon the Innocent One. I am sure that when Jesus meditated on this text, he too trembled. Can't you hear him saying in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My flesh trembles for dread of Thee"? Because the Father's judgment was carried out on him, you and I will not have to undergo this examination which the psalmist dreaded. Assurance of salvation, not fear, is the portion of the believer now. But let our joy be tempered with awe. As we gaze intently at the horror of the cross, his wounded head, his pierced side, let us be in awe for what God has done through Jesus Christ. Let us gaze at the crucifixion scene until our heart breaks, then we will be filled with the unqualified love that reaches out to liberate the captives, the wicked all around us, from the real enemy. Then we will sing, with the psalmist,

*Thou art my hiding place and my shield,  
I am in awe of Thy judgments.*

Amen.

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