



The Word: Uniting the Heart Psalm 119:113-120

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This morning I want to look at the 113th through 120th verses of Psalm 119. Last week we looked at that well-known stanza in which David writes that the Word of God is a lamp to his feet and a light on his path. This week David continues with this theme, but whereas in the last stanza he was looking to his feet, in this stanza he's looking to his heart—and that may be even more fundamental. As we've seen over and over, our feet will always walk according to the desires of our hearts. If God's Word is going to be a light to our feet, if it's going to be our light as we walk through a dark world, we need to start by letting it lighten our hearts.

God's Word needs to be our support. In fact, David built this stanza around the idea of support. In this stanza each verse begins with the Hebrew letter *samek*—it corresponds to our letter “s”—but it's also the word for “support” or “pillar”. Has anyone ever accused you of using your faith as a crutch? That's something that the world does often. It's a trick of the enemy, because it strikes at our pride. Someone tells us that our religion is just a crutch—that we can't make it or stand on our own without it—and our natural reaction is to tell them that of course we can stand on our own. The accusation hits us in a vulnerable place; it triggers a prideful response and pride doesn't want to rely on something or someone else. But brothers and sisters, that's just it. If you've been paying attention for these last months, you've seen that the whole point is that we can't stand on our own. The man who thinks he can—the man who sneers at faith as a crutch—is living under the illusion of being able to stand on his own. As Christians we know that we can't. That's why we have put our faith in Christ, that's why we have trusted him for salvation—because we aren't good enough or strong enough to save ourselves. We'll see David reminding us of that again in these verses. He implores God to uphold—to support—him and reminds us that the wicked will fall. The pillar imagery reminds us of the pagan Philistines, who rejected God and sought to destroy his people. What did God do to them? He used Samson to

pull down the pillars of their temple and as the roof collapse it crushed them all. Through Jesus Christ, God supports his children. Those who reject him will one day be crushed under the justice of God.

But what does it mean to be God's children; to follow him; to walk in his ways; ultimately to be in a place where he is our support? Look at verse 113:

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

Being double-minded is something that Scripture warns us about over and over. And God needs to remind us because, maybe more than anything else, this is where we struggle. We commit to Christ, but we make a half-hearted commitment. We'll profess his name on Sunday morning, but not so much Monday through Saturday when we're around our non-Christian friends or family. We say we trust in God, but when it comes to things like our finances we're unwilling to give him back even ten percent of what he's given us. We say we love God, but almost anything that comes up on a Sunday takes precedence over coming to express our praise for him and take part in the banquet he offers us here at his Table.

The Hebrew adjective that David uses for “double-minded” comes from a noun that refers to the branches of a tree. Think of a tree and how it has all sorts of branches that stick out in every direction around it. Now ask yourself how much your heart is like that tree. Do your desires stick out in all sorts of different directions? Or do you have one great, single desire for God that overrides and supersedes and directs all the others?

My parents were in India earlier this year to visit some friends who run an orphan home and two churches there. When they met the people of those two churches they were overwhelmed by the commitment those people had to Christ. It was a commitment they said you hardly ever see in North America. And when they talked to their friends about why these people were so committed, their friends explained: The people in India are poor—dirt poor—and they came from lives that were hardly worth living. Most of the people in those two churches are “untouchables”, from the lowest caste. First, they truly understand the love of God, because they can see that he loves even the lowest of the low. But they also have few distractions. They have no bank accounts, no retirement plans to trust in, they have few material possessions and no concept of “keeping up with the Joneses” like we do. Their security rests entirely in Christ and their lives are totally devoted to

him. In contrast, in our prosperity we often don't really know what it means to truly trust in God for our daily bread and our lives are so full of earthly “stuff” and activities that God is easily crowded out. And that's a dangerous place for us to be. Remember Jesus' words to the Laodicean church in Revelation 3:16: “Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” St. James warns us that, “The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6-8).

Think of the Israelites in the time of Elijah. They were observing all the religious rules and regulations that God had given to them. They were making all the sacrifices and observing the holy days. They were doing the right things. But their hearts were divided. Not only were they worshipping God in the temple, but they were also worshipping pagan gods like Baal and Astarte. They set up their altars and images right next to the altar of God. That's when Elijah gave his challenge and he and the prophets of Baal had their showdown on Mt. Carmel. The prophets of Baal sacrificed and chanted and danced and even cut themselves with knives all day, but no fire ever came from heaven to accept their offering. That's when Elijah built his altar, put the sacrificial bull on it and then doused it with water three times. It was not only soaked, but sitting in the middle of a small lake. Then he prayed and God sent fire down that not only consumed the wood and the bull, but even consumed the very rocks of the altar and the water that was pooled around it.

When Elijah had issued his challenge, he had asked the people, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). And the text says the people just stood there, unwilling to answer—unwilling to commit themselves. Well, when God sent fire and consumed even the water and the stones, those same people committed. They fell on their faces in worship, then they jumped on the priests of Baal and killed them all!

We haven't setup any pagan altars alongside the Lord's Table here. We don't have a crescent or a star of David hanging next to the cross. But our loyalties can be just as divided. Just because our distractions and wrong commitments in life aren't religious in nature doesn't mean that they aren't in direct competition with our commitment to God and his kingdom. Periodically we each need to take time to evaluate where we stand

and what's important to us. Are we committed to God? Do we love our brothers and sisters and our neighbours the way Jesus said his followers will? Do we obey his commandments the way he said his followers will? Are we generous with our time, talent, and, probably most importantly in our culture, our treasure, or do we hoard it all to ourselves and look for our security in earthly things instead of trusting God?

David reminds us to trust God—to have our hearts focused on him. Look at verse 114:

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

Notice, first though, that the Word isn't David's hiding place and shield; God *himself* is. His commitment was to God. He loved the Scriptures because it was through them that God revealed himself to David. David's commitment was to walk in the way of God's commandments and he loved the Scriptures because they showed him how.

God's being his hiding place and shield are dramatic pictures that portray David's trust in God. When I think of a hiding place, I remember the instructions they gave us in school when I was young. If there was ever a Soviet nuclear attack, we'd be notified by the TV or radio and everyone in our neighbourhood was supposed to meet at the school, where buses would pick us up and take us to a building at the University. That basement was a radiation-proof bomb shelter. When I was about seven or eight we got to see that basement on a field trip. It scared me, but at the same time I could see that it was a safe hiding place. We have all sorts of earthly hiding places—places where we feel safe. But think about those places with an eternal perspective. Fifty years ago paranoid people were building elaborate bombs shelters for their families, where they could live for decades in case of a nuclear attack. But what good would it do you to survive an atomic blast only to die thirty, forty, or fifty years later and end up in hell because you trusted in yourself, not in Jesus Christ?

David not only trusted in God for his soul, but he knew that if God could care for his soul, he could also trust him to take care of his body. In the midst of all the trouble and danger and intrigue in his life, he could declare that God was his hiding place—God, not a Tenth Century B.C. bomb shelter or panic room. And God was his shield, not an army of bodyguards. Why? Because he hoped in God's Word. He knew the Word and because he knew it he knew God's

character. He knew God's promises and he knew that God always keeps them. He knew that when God promises to care for his children, he *always* will.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be proactive. We need to take responsibility for staying out of places and situations that will distract us. We can be totally focused on God and serving him, but have our attention drawn away by the company we keep. David knew this, so we see him saying to the ungodly around him in verse 115:

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

David's son, King Solomon, would write in Proverbs, "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent" (1:10). Or as Thomas Manton wrote, "Depart from them that depart from God." We're influenced by the company we keep, and as much as many Christians argue that by spending time around ungodly friends or by dating non-Christian members of the opposite sex they're just being salt and light and trying to evangelise, in the end it doesn't usually work out that way. The nonbelievers are usually the ones who do the "evangelising". Bad company tends to drag us down to its level. Over and over I've seen men and women marry non-Christians and more often than not, it's the non-Christian who drags the Christian away from God and away from the Church, not the Christian who brings his or her spouse to Christ.

But it's not just a matter of actions or way of life. The Scriptures warn us over and over to stay away from those who practice false religions. God went so far as to tell the Israelites that when they conquered Canaan, they weren't to let a single one of the pagans live—not even the women or the children—because he didn't want their idolatrous influence among his people. The New Testament warns us against associating with those who preach false corruptions of the Gospel, not just as a matter of church discipline, but to protect us from their influence. Irenaeus tells us that St. John, his spiritual grandfather of sorts, wouldn't even sit in the same public bath with heretics. Cerinthus, who denied the divinity of Christ, was known to frequent the same baths as John and when he came, John left. As we saw in our study of 1 Corinthians, the Corinthian Christians struggled to be separate from the world. In 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, St. Paul wrote to them:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has

righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

God has made a claim on us. We are his. He has marked us in our baptism. And that means, as David says, that he is ours. Verse 115 is the only place in the whole psalm where David uses the word "God" and here he uses it coupled with "my": "my God". He claims God as his own because God has a claim on him, but consider: If you have passion enough for God to claim him as your own, how can you have a passion for the things that God hates?

And David knew that he couldn't do any of this on his own. His passion was for his God, but he knew that passion for God is the result of God first drawing us and changing our hearts, so he prayed for God's help. Look at verses 116 and 117:

Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope! Hold me up, that I may be safe and have regard for your statutes continually!

Do you see how David is praying? "Uphold me according to your promise." He's pleading God's covenant back to him. Brothers and sisters, there's no surer way to pray "Thy will be done" and to be sure that our prayers are according to God's will and will be answered, than to plead God's covenant promises back to him—to take the Scriptures where God lays out for us his promises and his pledges to those who are in covenant with him, and pray them back to God. By virtue of our union with him through Jesus, those promises are ours. Claim them! And demonstrate your faith and your trust in God by praying them back to him when life is hard. David knew that God would give him life, that he would not let him be put to shame, and that he would hold him up continually as long as his goal was to faithfully walk in the statutes of his God.

Being in God's will is important. I've heard Christians ask or demand all sorts of things from God, but they ask selfishly. I've known Christians who were about to step way off God's path, they knew it was dangerous, and yet they prayed that God would keep them safe as they did it. I've known Christians who have bargained with God, offering to do one thing for him to make up for some sin in their life that they weren't willing to give up. But friends, it doesn't work that way. God has promised to uphold us and to keep us safe, but he keeps us safe by giving us the grace to walk in his way and keep his statutes.

We can never expect God to keep us safe if we walk apart from him. Look at verse 118:

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

The Hebrew is difficult to translate into English. The older translations were accurate too in saying that God "treads down" those who stray—he stomps on them. They think they're smart, as David says, but in the end they're really fools who reject God. And as he upholds the righteous, he will one day crush the unrighteous. That should serve as a warning to us. Jesus calls us to be salt and light—to follow God in such a way that we make the world constructively curious. The world is consumed by hate and anxiety and war and so it should be drawn to the Church as we live out the fruit of the Spirit. Instead of hate, we demonstrate love. Instead of anxiety, we demonstrate faith and hope. Instead of war, we demonstrate peace. But if our loyalties are divided, if we don't fully trust in God, our love and hope and peace aren't what they should be and we begin to conform more and more to the ways of the world. We live in anxiety, we live in hate, we live in turmoil and give the world no reason to ask why we're different—because we're *not* very different. We cease to be salt and light. And Jesus has strong words of warning for us: "If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matthew 5:13).

David goes on in verse 119:

All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross...

Discarded like salt that isn't salty. Our God, to whom the angels sing out, "Holy, holy holy," cannot tolerate sin. He is perfectly holy and he is perfectly just, which is why

he condemns every sinner to eternal death. It's why he had to send his own Son to die in our place. As much as he is love, his love can't cancel out his holiness and justice. He sent his Son who was equally perfect in holiness to become sin for us—to satisfy his holiness and justice so that he could restore us to his fellowship. He continues to be perfectly holy. And that gives us reason to praise him even as we mourn the death of sinners. David goes on in verse 119 and in 120

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

The fact that God punishes sin, but has caused his testimonies to be written in Scripture—his promises for those who follow him—ought to give us reason to love him all the more. We should have a passionate love for his testimonies as they point us toward him and toward the grace he offers us in Jesus that we might not be discarded like dross.

But God's judgements remind us too that he is as holy as he is loving. We forget this when the Church, as it so often does today, refuses to talk about sin or about judgement. When all we talk about is love and mercy and grace, we fail to truly understand love and mercy and grace. We start to think, as some people have flat out told me, that, "God loves me because I deserve his love." When we ignore the holiness and holy demands of God, we begin to take a cavalier attitude towards him. We see it in worship that lacks reverence and we see it in Christian living that isn't particularly Christian—in lives that compromises. Ultimately it leads to a divided heart and double-mindedness, which is where David started this stanza: a lack of appreciation for God and what he has done for us, because we lack a true understanding of the sinfulness of our sin and of the perfect holiness of our God. And when we lack those things, we lack a real understanding of what Christ has done for us. Grace and mercy become cheap and we have little reason to show our gratitude to God by truly committing ourselves to him and to his service. Brothers and sisters, the solution, as David has been showing us is a passion for God's Word—a passion to know it, to know all of it, to know it in depth, to study it, to meditate on it, and to store it away in our hearts and minds that it might lead us to God himself. Along the way he teaches us about his holiness, about the sinfulness of our sin, about his love, about the grace and mercy he has shown in the Saviour, and he shows us

the grace-filled path that leads to life. The Word is God's revelation to us. He gave it to us because he wants us to know him and to follow him. And if we will pledge to read and study and know it—and most importantly to follow it—God promises to care for us and to keep us on his path until we reach our journey's end and stand in his presence in the New Jerusalem.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, while we were yet sinners, you sent your Son to die for us. Because of your love for us, you paid the ultimate price in order to restore us to your fellowship. Forgive us for so often making light of your holiness and love and your grace and mercy. Give us a passion for you that takes away our double-mindedness and our divided loyalties and give us the grace to trust in your promises and always walk in your precepts. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.