

“On His Law They Meditate Day and Night”

Psalm 1:2

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There is a lot of great stuff in our scripture readings again this week. There is the “ode to a capable wife,” in the last chapter in the book of Proverbs, 22 verses of poetry in honor of a most excellent wife. Some of the images follow traditional gender roles, but she is also a merchant, a vineyard owner, and a woman of both strength and wisdom. I have to wonder what we would read if some biblical writer had written an “ode to a capable *husband*.” What virtues would *that* poetry lift up? I suspect that chief among them would be a husband’s faithfulness to God, and fidelity in his marriage.

There is also the wise passage from the letter of James. Be wary of any envy or selfish ambition that may rise up in your hearts; be wary of the temptation to boast, or tell falsehoods; for all such things, James says, are “earthly, unspiritual, devilish.” He talks about “conflicts and disputes” – words that our society really needs to hear right now – and the need for us to “submit ourselves to God.” “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you; draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” There are behaviors we need to continually turn away from – and a *God* we need to continually turn toward.

There’s also the gospel passage, which tells of an argument among the disciples about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus tells them that whoever wants to be first must be “last of all and servant of all,” and he picks up a child and says that welcoming children is one of the most important things we Christians need to be doing. Remember that, next time you think that some child is being disruptive; remember that, as we try to make sure this place is a *safe* place for children to be.

Finally, there is the psalm, the very first psalm, which outlines two different paths. The first path involves following the advice of the wicked, sitting in the seat of scoffers, and engaging in the ways of sin; the second path involves delighting in the law of the Lord, and meditating on God’s law day and night. Either you follow the path of wickedness, or you follow the path of righteousness; in the eyes of the psalmist, there is no middle ground. These two paths lead to very different destinations. The first leads to judgment and destruction; the second leads to fruit, prosperity, and the favor of God. It is obvious which path we are called to follow – but what does it mean, to “delight in the law of the Lord,” and to “meditate” on God’s law “day and night?” This is where I want us to focus our attention today.

I remember my very first day in seminary. I was 22 years old. A hundred and fifty brand-new students gathered in the lecture hall for the first session of one of our required classes: an introduction to the Old Testament. The class had two professors, one man, one woman, both of them senior faculty members, both of them extremely well-respected in their fields, both of them ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church. They go over the fifteen-page syllabus for the class, and they talk about the books we will be reading. There’s a textbook. There’s also the *Bible*. One professor holds the Bible in his

hand, walks away from the lectern, positions himself squarely in front of us, looks us all in the eye, and says, emphatically and unequivocally, “*This is the primary textbook in this class.*” He wanted to make it abundantly clear to us: *the Bible* is more important than any book *about* the Bible.

Presbyterian students are required to take a “Bible content exam” before they can be ordained. A hundred questions, multiple choice. None of them are terribly hard, *if you know the Bible* reasonably well. Large numbers of Presbyterian students *fail* that exam the first time they take it. I had the benefit of taking the exam after I had been in numerous Bible classes, and I got a score of 97. But believe me, if I had taken the exam a few years earlier, I would have failed it too. I hadn’t “delighted in the law of the Lord;” I hadn’t “meditated on it day and night.” I was like many mainline Protestants: I believed in God, believed in Jesus, believed in the Holy Spirit, went to church – but hadn’t read the Bible much at all.

Maybe you don’t either. Maybe these words from Psalm 1 are beckoning to you today. Maybe God is calling *you* to start “delighting in the law of the Lord,” to start “meditating on it day and night.”

One of the best examples in the Bible of a disciplined devotional life is the young man Daniel. He was in the habit of getting down on his knees to pray to God three times a day, every single day. (Daniel 6:10) He probably did this “evening and morning and at noon,” following a pattern that is mentioned in Psalm 55:17. He would get down on the floor, facing towards Jerusalem. Still to this day, Jews generally pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Daniel did this even after an edict was passed forbidding worship to anybody but the Babylonian king. His devotional life was *central* to his existence.

That pattern of prayer three times a day continues to this day in Judaism. There are prayer books used by observant Jews that include readings from the Law and the Prophets, as well as a variety of prayers and hymns. Observant Jews will offer these prayers at the prescribed times, regardless of where they are. When I was on the airplane flight to Tel Aviv at the beginning of my trip to the Holy Land a couple years ago, observant Jews stood up in the aisles, turned toward Jerusalem, and offered their daily prayers, as the flight attendants – who were clearly used to this – worked around them.

Muslims observe a similar pattern of prayer, except for them it is *five* times a day, not three, and they face in the direction of Mecca, not Jerusalem. Perhaps you’ve seen pictures of Muslims lined up in rows, bowing down in prayer. Five times a day, every single day; an *essential* component of their faith.

So what about us Christians? How many times a day do *we* bow down in prayer? I don’t mean the quick, perfunctory prayers that we might pray at random times throughout the day; I mean daily disciplines that involves both scripture and prayer. These have existed throughout the whole history of Christianity. In the early days of the church, sometime in the second century, a little handbook called “The Teaching of the Lord Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations” (or “the *Didache*”) called for the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. That was probably modeled after Daniel’s practice of prayer three times a day, and the reference to prayer at “evening, morning, and at noon” in Psalm 55. Several prominent Christian writers in the early centuries of the church make reference to set times of prayer three times a day, which suggests that this became a widespread practice in the early church.

But another Christian writer named Hippolytus, in the early third century, didn’t think that three times a day was sufficient. He called for *seven*: “on rising, at the lighting of the evening lamp, at bedtime, at midnight, and also, if at home, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day,” that is, three hours after sunrise, like around nine o’clock; six hours after sunrise, like around noon; and nine hours

after sunrise, like around three o'clock in the afternoon. Hippolytus probably drew his inspiration from a line in Psalm 119: "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances." (Psalm 119:164) This practice took root and flourished. The seven specific times of prayer came to follow certain forms and became known by certain names, such as "Vespers" (at sundown) and "Compline" (at bedtime). In the Middle Ages, some Christian groups expanded the seven daily times of prayer to eight, or even nine.

Over time, the practice of praying seven (or more) times a day came to be done mostly by the monks and the clergy. The Roman Catholic Church still encourages the practice for common people, and many Catholics go to mass every day. But for many working people, seven times a day just isn't realistic. And generally speaking, in Protestant Christianity, the practice has almost completely disappeared.

In the last fifty years, there has been considerable interest in trying to renew a version of this ancient practice. In 1978, a new Lutheran hymnal and service book included a section on daily prayer. They offered outlines for Morning Prayer (Matins), Evening Prayer (Vespers), and Prayer at the Close of Day (Compline), along with a two-year sequence of biblical readings that covered the New Testament twice and most of the Old Testament once. The Episcopalians quickly followed; in 1979 they published a new *Book of Common Prayer*, which contained rites for Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Noonday Prayer, and Compline. It also offered the same two-year set of Bible readings that was in the Lutheran worship book, with a few modifications. When I was serving a church in Maryland, I had an Episcopal colleague who used the *Book of Common Prayer* every single day, and tried to teach me how to use it. I was very intrigued, but honestly I found it a little difficult to follow without a guide. Still, to this day, many, many Episcopalians – both clergy and laity – observe the rites in the *Book of Common Prayer* every single day. There is also a PDF version of the *Book of Common Prayer* available for free online.

We Presbyterians were a little late to the party, but we finally showed up in 1993, with the publication of a new *Book of Common Worship*. We even published a small volume with *just* the parts relevant for daily prayer: Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Midday Prayer, and Prayer at the Close of Day, together with a poetic translation of all 150 psalms, the same two-year daily lectionary, and a variety of related resources. I have utilized parts of this book in my ministry over the years. A revision of this book was just published three years ago. Last year, in the height of the pandemic, I decided it was time to take the next step, and actually *offer* a service of daily prayer. Since November, I have been recording four prayer services a day, and posting them online. This is the "daily prayer podcast" that I have referred to numerous times over the course of the past year. There have been over 27,000 downloads since I started. One reviewer said that he had been looking for something like this for years.

I'm not saying that you have to listen to my podcast. There are other daily disciplines you could follow. There are a variety of different lectionaries and prayer books, and *loads* of devotional books and magazines. I want to encourage you to find something that is rich and rewarding for *you*. Make sure it includes quality exposure to God's word – not just a verse or two per day. Over the last year, I've read parts of the Bible that I haven't read in a long time, and I'm richer for it. Also make sure it includes a dedicated time for prayer. I also think it's a good idea to follow a practice that many other Christians are following, and not just something you've come up on your own. There is value in community.

What was it that James said? "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." That is *so* true. I invite you, dear friends, to *delight in the law of the Lord*, and *meditate on his word day and night*.

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