

Contemplative Prayer

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[0 : 00] I want to say also to those maybe listening later on this week online, hey, thanks for following us and continuing to listen and keep up to date. I know it's hard to maintain this sense of belonging and community in our moment that we're in today.

But yeah, we got to do our best with whatever we can. So all you online folks, thanks for sticking with us. So back when COVID started, we actually pushed pause on our sermon series in Galatians.

And but good news, we're going to kick that up again, jump starting in next week. We're going to start in Galatians 5, kind of where we left off. So that's exciting.

But today what we're going to do is we're going to look at a practice that is a pathway. And it has been a pathway for Jesus's disciples to experience his transforming love and grace.

I'm really excited about this. So I'm going to be working out a Psalm 46 today. If you're old school and you brought your Bible with you, you can turn to Psalm 46. It's right in the middle. If you're new school and you have it on an app on a phone, totally get that.

[1 : 04] You'll be able to find it easily. It's Psalm and then chapter 46. And otherwise, if you have neither of those, that's totally cool. We'll have the verses on the screen as well. So let's read. Start from verse one.

It says this, The Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth.

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah.

[2 : 32] So what you see in this Psalm are three important players. You have God. Right? He was the most obvious. He's this unstoppable hero and the savior of his people.

Then you have the world. Then you have the world, which is full of chaos and rage and instability. And then finally, there's you and me.

And what are we to do with all of this swirling around us? What does this Psalm tell us to do? It gives us three commands. Selah.

Which means pause. Slow down. Meditate. Reflect on what's being said. Command number two is come, behold the works of the Lord.

And then three, be still and know that I am God. When we think of spiritual warfare, when we think of praying that way, this is not the picture we get.

[3 : 37] We want to put on the armor of God. We want to run into the fight, so to speak. Right? We want to call down the fire from heaven and help slay God's enemies.

And there is a time to pray that way. But this Psalm is inviting us into something different. It's inviting us not to act at all, but to be still and reflect.

Reflecting on what is happening all around us. What's happening inside us. Reflect on who God is and what he has done. Reflect on what he is doing and what he is going to do.

This type of prayer is old school. It's commonly called contemplative prayer. And it's about as old as Methuselah. In modern times, though, it's been largely forgotten. It's kind of what one author says, the lost ways of Christianity.

We've kind of cast it to the side. And it sits there unused with dust and cobwebs. Now, before you get freaked out, and this kind of prayer sounds really strange and difficult, sounds like something monks in monasteries do, I want to encourage you that this kind of prayer is actually simple.

[4 : 50] It's one of the simplest, purest, most accessible forms of prayer that you could pray. It's not wordy. In fact, you don't have to use any words at all. I think many of us are discouraged with prayer because we don't know what to do or what to say, which leads to inconsistency, which leads to guilt, which leads to prayerlessness.

In Richard Foster's book on prayer, he opens it this way, We today yearn for prayer and hide from prayer. We are attracted to it and repelled by it. We believe prayer is something we should do, even something we want to do, but it seems like a chasm stands between us and actually praying. We experience the agony of prayerlessness. Our problem is that we assume prayer is something to master the way we master algebra or auto mechanics. But that puts us in the on-top position, where we are competent and in control.

But when praying, we come underneath, where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent. To pray means to be willing to be naive.

So before we jump into learning about contemplative prayer today, let me be clear. There are no prayer experts in this room. There's no prayer experts on this stage. We are all humble novices, trying to learn, trying to do our best, like naive children.

[6 : 24] So, thankfully, there's very little to learning and practicing contemplative prayer, but something obvious with this is we have to slow down and become unhurried.

Three times in the psalm we just read, it says, pause, meditate, reflect. I wonder how that psalm would be written in today's climate, right?

I mean, the speed at which we work today and go about our business today, I think we would replace Selah with, okay, and then? We live at this crazy, frenetic pace.

We don't know how to slow down. Man, we go full tilt on everything, food and work and Netflix and social media and news and radio and sports and shopping and hobbies. Something is on all the time, filling our eyes and filling our ears.

And the list of distractions is endless. We finish one activity and then it's okay and then? We read one Facebook post and then we find ourselves 30 minutes later still doing this.

[7 : 30] We are so used to living this way that we can't stand to be quiet and still. And why is that? Because we live in a fallen, broken world that values achievement above intimacy.

It values success more than surrender. It values performance above relationship. And this is the opposite of what God values.

Consider from the beginning, we look at what God did. Genesis 3.8, it says, He came walking in the garden in the cool of the day, right? He came when Adam and Eve's work was done.

He came to spend time with them. It wasn't a board meeting. He wasn't coming and saying, Well, Adam, how many hedges did you trim today? Oh, good job. Eve, how many babies have you had yet?

We don't want to fall behind on that filling the earth and subduing it and multiplying. It wasn't a time to figure out all the to-dos and what has been done.

[8 : 32] It was a time of connection. God wasn't running through the garden. It was a walk, an unhurried pace, the pace of intimacy.

Now, don't think intimacy in the way modern society has cheapened it and narrowed it to an erotic activity. Intimacy in the Bible is a beautifully, richly colored word.

It means oneness, unity in mind and heart and purpose. It means nearness. It means attentiveness, right?

We're not distracted. We're not hurried. We're present and engaged. And it also means nakedness. Not like that. Just means fully known.

Nothing's hidden. And here's the thing. This kind of intimacy, the kind of intimacy the Bible is talking about, can't exist in a hurried life.

[9 : 33] Busyness is the pace of performance and pride. Slowness is the pace of intimacy and love. And that's what practicing contemplative prayer does. It slows us down.

It makes us unhurried so that we could be intimate with God. But we have to be willing to do that.

We have to surrender our busyness to journey deeper into God's love.

Psalms 46.10, the first part says this, Be still and know that I am God. You know, for those of us that were already struggling with the idea of slowing down, being still is just another level of slow, right?

I mean, I'm pretty sure you can't get any slower than that. But what it's saying is God's connecting stillness with knowing him.

Knowing is the language of intimacy. And it's not talking about a head knowledge. It goes much deeper than that. It's connecting to the heart of a person. It's knowing them at the deepest level of who they are.

[10:43] And that kind of knowing can only be revealed by them. You can be sure of this. Where busyness is booming, intimacy isn't.

That's why many rich people have a string of divorces behind them. The marriage relationship couldn't survive the busyness. Consider today's hookup culture.

What it does, it attempts to unite busyness with intimacy. But that isn't intimacy. Right? No one is inviting an old Tinder date to their mom's funeral.

Doesn't happen. Because it's a cheap hookup. It's a cheap moment. Most of what we call religious practice today is just busyness with the occasional spiritual hookup with God.

We can't let our busyness for God excuse our lack of intimacy with him.

[11:47] We can't excuse the busyness of life for our lack of intimacy with him. If we look at Jesus' life, he had a busy ministry schedule.

But he always took time to stop and get away from it all. Mark 1 verse 32 says this. Evening at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons.

And the whole city was gathered together at the door. That's busy. That is busy. Healing the sick.

Casting out demons. Then look at what he does right away. Verse 35. Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place where he prayed.

Jesus took his mission seriously, but he didn't busy himself at the expense of intimacy with his Father in Heaven. He knew how to slow down, to get away from all the noise and the crowds and the demands.

[12:54] And have unhurried time connecting with the Father. Man, I wish, I wish we could know what he prayed in those moments. But scripture is silent on that.

I think the closest thing that we get is Gethsemane. On the evening before he was put on the cross, we see him praying. He asks his disciples to come pray with them, but you know what?

They fall asleep. So he's there by himself in the dark. Looking forward the next day to the cross. He knows what's happening. He knows what's coming.

And he knew it was his choice. Right? He says, no one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. But what we see in this dark moment, in that moment of authenticity, Jesus is praying.

And what does he say to his Father? Man, may this cup pass from me. Father, must I go to the cross? Must I experience the agony of you turning your face from me and not knowing your presence?

[13:59] What we learn from this is prayer isn't putting your best foot forward. It's stripping off all the pretense and pride.

It's taking down all the walls and masks we hide behind. And it's trusting in God's love and that you can be honest with him. That's what it looks like to be naked before God.

We have to bring the real us to our gracious and merciful God. Psalm 46 doesn't start with everything's great, no problems in life, don't worry, be happy.

Psalm 46.1 begins this way. God is a refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. You know, we won't ask God for God's help until we realize we need God's help.

You and I, we need to have a theology that Christians have problems. And it's okay for Christians to have problems. You know what? I don't live in perfect peace and perfect faith and perfect obedience all the time, and neither does any of you.

[15:14] We're all filled with worries and fears and guilt and shame. We're all filled with hurt. And that's our constant fight.

It's our constant battle. Yet we can play religious games and pretend like everything is hunky-dory down in our souls, put on a smile, walk about and say, yeah, everything's good, everything's fine. But we do the same thing with God. We don't come to him with any honesty of what's really going on inside of us. C.S. Lewis counsels us this way. Lay before him, lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us.

God knows the real us. He already knows what's in there. He looks into our hearts, and you know what? He ignores the superficial, curated versions of ourselves we put forward.

Unfortunately, we're the ones fooling ourselves most of the time. But contemplative prayer, it helps us listen.

[16:17] It helps you and I listen and learn the true state of our soul. We can get quiet enough to actually see what's really going on in there because we're not distracted from it.

Today, my soul, your soul will get filled with guilt and shame and regrets of things we've done. Today, my soul and your soul is going to get filled with concern and cares of a tomorrow we can't control.

Man has searched far and wide to figure out how to deliver himself from this trouble. Eastern philosophy gives us this advice.

Just detach yourself from it. Stop caring. Simply let it go. And when that doesn't work, there's always prescription meds.

That was a little bit cheeky. I understand sometimes they're necessary. There's physiological issues, of course. But the point is, only Jesus can heal our past.

[17:18] Only Jesus can heal us from the things that we have done. And only Jesus can give us and promise us a sure future. And this is the next and final movement that we have in contemplative prayer.

We have to remember what God has done. Psalm 46, 8 puts it this way, Come, behold the works of the Lord. And this is when we remind ourselves what God has done, what God is doing, and what he is going to do.

He's faithful. Now, in contemplative prayer, this happens in various ways. You can do this by reflecting on a characteristic of God. You could be thinking about his love, or his mercy, or that he's almighty.

Or maybe it's a picture you have of Jesus at a moment in his life. Maybe it's him on the cross. Maybe it's him washing the disciples' feet.

Maybe it's him with the woman at the well. Or with blind Bartimaeus healing his eyes. Whatever it is, you kind of fixate on that, and ruminate on that, and reflect on that, and what that means.

[18:28] It could be a simple verse that you're thinking about, and dwelling on, and just considering, and reflecting. You're letting God do the leading in those moments.

You're letting him speak to you, and you're just simply listening to what he's saying. And it's amazing in those times, what comes out of that. I know for myself, it's not always amazing, but I know for myself, man, sometimes I come away, and God's just bigger, in my mind, and in my heart. And the other part of it is, my soul feels so untangled, from all the chaos, and emotions that it was filled with. I didn't even realize they were in there. And you end up feeling, kind of like what Psalm 131 describes, as the quieted soul, like a weaned child, in the arms of his mother.

Just resting. Enjoying. At peace. I want to encourage us today, to start practicing contemplative prayer.

Make it a part of what you do. Maybe it's not a daily basis, but man, weave it in there, some, some place into your calendar. It's very simple. Pushing pause, from the busyness of life, finding a quiet place, being still, before God, quieting our soul, listening, more than talking, being real with God, and what we're feeling, and then reflecting, on who God is.

[20:00] I don't want to over promise, that it's going to start off, with a bang, and be super life transforming. Most likely, in the beginning, these prayers, are going to seem uneventful, but I want to encourage you, to stick with it.

It's good. It's good for you. It's good for us, and Alan and I, we feel like this is, something we want to lead, ourselves into a little bit more, and practice a little bit more, and so much so, that on September 24th, to 27th, we're going to, call all of us, to a media fast, all right?

Because there's probably, nothing that keeps us, more distracted, than social media, podcast, TV, Netflix, news, fantasy football, I was looking for one of my boys, online shopping, whatever your big distraction is, you know, whatever your big distraction is.

So on those dates, what we're going to do, is we're going to push pause, from those things. All of us together, I want to invite you, to join us in that, right? Now of course, phone calls, and text messages, and emails, those are going to be, necessary things, for work and all that, but man, let's cut out, all the other stuff.

Let's do that, and that's going to create, some significant time gaps. What do we fill that with, right? Because if you just leave, an empty space, you end up reaching, for something else, and sometimes, what you let go of, you just reach, for something even worse, than what you let go of.

[21 : 30] What are we going to fill, that gap with? Well, man, maybe it's, conversation with your spouse, board games with your kids, date nights, maybe a little bit more, than date nights.

There's a bunch of new kids, in nursery in nine months, I'm just saying, Jesse's a, works for boy and girl, names, all right? You're welcome. Go for a walk, you know, do something, but also, man, set aside time, set aside time, to slow down, be unhurried, get to a quiet place, and sit and listen, to your father, your creator, your savior, your counselor.

Next Sunday, we'll be handing out, a journal, to help us guide, and give us some ideas, of what to do, during that time. So, I'm looking forward to that, again, those dates are, September 24th to 27th. Man, really think, about joining in, with us on that, all right? We're not going to be, coming together to do that, we're just going to be, you know, doing that in our, in our own homes, and all that.

So, all right. So, getting to the end of the service, really excited, because we've got baptisms coming up, we're going to do that in a minute. I want to dismiss the folks, that are getting baptized, so they can go change, right down this hall, are some restrooms, you can get changed in, and you can go do that now.

[23 : 06] Now, while they're getting ready, I'm going to pray, we're going to, respond with a song, so if I could have the band come up, but before, we do anything, man, I want to say, if you're here, or you're listening, to this online, and you aren't a Christian, man, we are so glad, that you got to hear this message, and I want you to know, that Jesus is calling you, to salvation today, here's the thing, you cannot busy yourself, from the reality of eternity, it's coming, you cannot keep yourself, too busy, from dying, that is going to happen, and nothing that you do, can get rid of the guilt, and the shame of your past, nothing that you do, can get rid of the anxiety, of what happens, after death, and right now, I want to tell you, Jesus is offering you, a free gift, he died for your sins, he died to give you, eternal life, and what you have to do, in this moment, is surrender, surrender to that lie, that you don't need him, repent, of your sins, believe that he, is the only way, of salvation, salvation, and make him, your Lord and Savior, pray with me,

Father, we are, we're not good, at slowing down, I'm not good, at slowing down, it's hard to do that, in this world, that runs, at such a crazy pace, and so, Father, I just ask you, to help us, I ask you, I ask you, to help lead, and guide us, Lord, it's easy, to just walk out, these doors, and say, yeah, that was an inspiring sermon, and nothing changes, man, but I would pray, right now, that you would so, convict us, you would so, reveal to us, that most of the things, that we're running around, busying ourselves with, is a cheap, it's a cheap, alternative, to the intimacy, we really desire, that can only be found in you, I pray, as we sing right now,

I pray, as we witness, these baptism, we would get a taste, of that intimacy, we would get a taste, of that knowing, your heart, amen,