

RESTING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

READING + PRAYING

Psalm 37:1-6

We're taking a short diversion into the practicals of meditative habits of the Christian life.

Reason for this is to emphasize the importance and the need for spiritual health, as well as emotional and physical health. There is a growing emphasis on soul health in our culture today.

That, combined with the seemingly shocking (but courageous and wise) decision of the greatest gymnast of all time, Simone Biles, to withdraw from certain Olympic events out of a concern for her own mental health wellness, again exposed the importance for mental and physical health being a priority in our lives.

I was extremely encouraged to hear about her decision to do that, and if she were here this morning I would commend her for setting an example for all the world to see, that there are far more important things in this life than simply being the best, or giving everything for your country, or having a name and fame which puts your own personal health at risk. It showed us that there is a life outside of these competitions, one that continues one long after the competition is over, and they age out. I would say, Thank You, for letting the rest of us normals remember that it is not just OK, but necessary, to keep our spiritual, mental, and physical health as a priority in our life, because it will bring a better quality of life, not just to ourselves, but to all in our lives too. Plus, it honors God when we care for that which He has given to us to steward for His glory.

I got really sick at the beginning of the week. Had to take a full day off of work just to get better. The level of guilt that I felt for taking that time off in order to attend to my physical health, and the anxiety I had that I was somehow messing things up for my family and the church, exposed for me the lies that I tend to believe, and operate out of, that everything depends on me, to the point where I must sacrifice my own well being in order to keep this church, my family, or anything else in my life, afloat. That everything is dependent on me, that I am the Superman who alone can save.

As Christians, we believe that we have an eternal soul, one that is connected to the spiritual life that God has created all of us with. For those of us who are in Christ, our souls are united to the very source of life itself, and have been given a new life, one that will never taste eternal death which awaits those who are not in Christ, and which will always live in the presence of the LORD God Himself. This means that it is of utmost importance that we feed our souls with the good things of the LORD, and to make sure that we are putting a priority on soul health.

Historically there are lots of ways that the Church has developed habits which cultivate and grow soul health, starting from the very earliest days of the Church. In light of the focus in our culture right now on soul health, I wanted to take a short diversion into some of the habits of the church for growing and keeping soul health. We have touched on these at various points in our study of the book of Hebrews, but I wanted to draw our attention to a passage out of the Psalm which hits on these themes explicitly, and which remind us of the blessings which come from them. It is one of the psalms of David as he is writing to the people in his old age. It is one of the very few psalms which never directly address God, but is intended to be an instructive psalm to teach the people about the way of living a life of faith.

Psalm 37:1-6

*Fret not yourself because of evildoers;
be not envious of wrongdoers!
For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the Lord, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.*

Spiritual Habits

Starts by addressing common emotions we all feel (anxiety, worry, jealousy, envy) perhaps life with God is not better than what the world offers.

Moves to the way forward in cultivating a rich and healthy life of faith looks like...trust, delight, doing good, feeding on God's faithfulness, waiting on Him.

For the psalmist, God's word was the primary means of relating and interacting with Him (Psalm 119).

Why We Read God's Word

God's word is unique in that it is active and penetrating exposing the soul of distortions and setting forth a life giving way leading to human thriving (Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:23-25; Isaiah 55:11).

God's word is in fact the personal expression of God Himself, to engage the word of God is to enter an experience of internalizing the presence and will of God. The Scripture expresses clearly an image of God. Jesus is the exact representation or imprint of God's nature (Hebrews 1:1-3). Meditation or contemplative reflection on God's word is not merely the internalization of a word or of a set of values or guidelines, it is the internalization of the very presence of God as made known in Christ, which we have seen in our study through the book of Hebrews.

Internalization is further enhanced by contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer fosters cognitive transformation as the person engages personal dialogue with God. In contemplative dialogue the believer does more listening and attuning one's soul to the beauty of God than talking. The person's mind, and inevitably, their affections, engage the very person of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

This prayer dialogue, when structured by Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, serves as a means for healing and restoring of our image of ourselves, God, and others.

The internalization process engages the very presence and word of God in Christ and Scripture. It helps to restructure cognitive and affective dimensions of our soul. The same work of the Spirit is supplemented by our engagement with others in the community of faith. Godly men and women who are mature of mind and affections and live obediently to God's word provide forms for internalization that transform our cognition.

Internalization is ultimately, and foundationally, a work of the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth and will serve to illumine our minds and guide our souls. He is at work progressively transforming us (2 Corinthians 3:18). Consequently, the Spirit of God is at work in all things for God's people (Romans 8:28) and is engaged in active intercession before the Father with "groanings too deep for words" according to God's will (Romans 8:26-27).

So God's transformative work of our minds occurs throughout the day in every circumstance by the continual work of the Holy Spirit.

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness because we don't even know what to pray for as we ought... – **Romans 8:26***

By meditation on the word of God, written and incarnated, and in the contemplative dialogue of prayer, along with the active work of the Holy Spirit of God through and in the community of faith as well as our obedience, our minds and hearts are being transformed

God is at work in us by His Spirit for all who are in Christ. The primary goal is not doctrinal growth but relational growth in Christ.

READING

(historically called 'lectio' ... it is the careful ATTENDING to Scripture)

And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God... – Deuteronomy 17:19

Our spirituality is dependent on our capacity to pay attention to what God is up to in our lives. But paying attention is not a matter of will-power it is not concentrating with a tight focus on something. Instead attending is a matter of being open to whatever it is we are encountering at the present moment. This is why 'attending' (paying attention) is foundational to this habit.

Contemplative Reading has at its core an attentive openness and expectancy. With a receptive spirit we listen carefully for the voice of God to us in a personal way. Consider those times when you may have desperately wanted to hear a word from God, so you simply opened the Bible somewhere in the middle and started reading. This demonstrates a knowledge that God really does speak to us via His Scriptures.

I suggest that you start with a brief prayer asking God to help you be present to the Spirit and the Scripture.

Then read the Scripture slowly, repeatedly and out loud (whatever you are reading it is important to read it out loud). As we repeatedly and slowly read the passage, the Spirit of Christ brings us to a word or phrase that meets us where we are in the present moment. We read until a phrase or word or picture begins to "pull us in" (i.e. what strikes you).

This stage of contemplative reading is active receptivity that opens us to the sacred: to whatever it is that the Spirit of God brings to your attention be it a word or phrase or mental picture from the passage of Scripture you read.

It is a matter of suspending our evaluative, or assessing, thoughts and being present to whatever the Spirit makes present. It is a matter of being "seized by whatever is present to us in the present moment" through the Spirit.

As we do this, we are moved beyond our self-preoccupations. We will be open to what is beyond us but present to us.

One way of developing the gift of awareness is to pay close attention to our senses. This is because senses bring us into the present moment (which is the goal of awareness/ attending. We can remember the past and anticipate the future but in the present we can only be aware) honoring our senses avoids the Gnostic error of denying the incarnation and human embodiment.

REFLECTING

(historically called 'meditatio', it is the careful PONDERING on what come to our attention in our READING).

The first step of 'ATTENDING' is one of intuition. The second step of 'PONDERING' is more a matter of head and heart, reflecting on both our thoughts and emotions which have been stirred by our reading. We ponder what is present.

We can illustrate this by remembering what was said of Mary after the shepherds told her about the angels announcing the birth of the Messiah, she "*pondered these things in her heart*" (Luke 2:19). She did the same after finding Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:51), both her head and heart were involved.

In this component we reflect on what is rising in our spirit ... allow the text to trigger memories and associations that are at a deeper level in your soul and trust that the Holy Spirit is working in you ... this is usually done via our feelings ... this is called 'Compunction' (feelings the Bible inspires).

It is crucial that you initially sit with whatever arises in you as you read ... it may be sorrow, satisfaction, emptiness, fullness, anger, resentment, joy, hope ... don't try to solve it, respond to it, feel guilt or shame or fear or pride over it ...invite Jesus to look at whatever it is. Sitting without judgment on what arises gives God permission to continue to pull back the curtain of our soul so that we see more and more of what has been hiding... a couple of questions which may help here are "What kind of God would be saying this to me?" or "How does what I am feeling impact my relationship with God, with others?"

Imagination is key for transformation...Sometimes it is helpful to have a healthy dose of imagination ... as you see yourself in the text you see yourself sitting with Jesus and Jesus is talking to you using the words you are reading ... read with imagination so that you place yourself in the scene (if you are reading a story from the OT or from a Gospel or Acts)

RESPONDING

(historically called 'oratio')

The issue here is simply this, "Can I embrace God's interpretation of my story?" ... or to put it another way, is the divine meta-narrative reinterpreting my mini-narrative? Is God's story helping me re-understand MY story? If it is then we will find that our actions and reactions are different as well.

If there is a shift in the interpretation of my story (i.e. of what I am living) then I know something has happened at the implicit level of my soul (because that is the source of emotional meaning)

The response must begin with an attitude of submission toward what we have read and pondered ... this attitude of submission (like Mary when she said, “may it be done to me as you have spoken” in Luke 1:38) may very well be expressed in actions picturing our willingness to participate in God’s story (e.g. kneeling or prostrating, sitting or standing in silence, taking a slow and silent walk)

No matter what the action our response is always a form of prayer ... and that prayer usually involves the request for illumination, not for illumination of the passage read, but for the illumination of what has been stirred up in us

Whatever has risen to the surface needs to be interpreted by God’s love and purpose for us ... what we find is that our deepest longings are our longings for God which are alive in our True Self (St. Augustine, “Our hearts are made for thee, and they are restless until they rest in thee”) ... the one who loves more sees more (love is a form of knowledge)

As we respond with a prayer of understanding God begins to show us what has been acting in our souls below the surface ... as we see this we surrender our False Self into the loving hand of God ... in this way God works to re-form and trans-form our souls so that our unhealthy defenses, attachment patterns and exaggerated affects are not controlling us in ways we don’t even realize so that we can live more and more from our True Self in Christ

Again, the tendency we have is to find a quick resolution by either judging, blaming, withdrawing, resolving or whatever ... *we must learn to trust that God in us is greater than anything else in us and that it is God in us that must form and transform our souls ...* God is up to the task (“*He who began a good work in you will perform it...*” – *Philippians 1:6*) so trust that nothing can overcome divine love (“I am convinced that nothing shall ever be able to separate us from the love of God” *Romans 8:38*) ... as we have greater confidence in the grace of God (because it is only God who can do this kind of work) we can praise the God of all grace

Am I willing to embrace God’s invitation regarding God’s reinterpretation?

RESTING

(historically called ‘contemplatio’ ... we can also think of it as “BEING” with whatever it is that arises within us whether it is “positive” or “negative” emotionally)

By ‘BEING’ we mean living in the gift of God’s presence ... being in and with God. This is probably the step most difficult to describe and difficult to enter ... it is a moving beyond words to a kind of communion where no words are needed

Perhaps the most “mystical” part of this experience. Modern 21st Century Church culture often has a tendency to reject mysticism, especially as it has been understood in a pagan way...But Christian mysticism simply acknowledges that there is a spiritually experiential side of “me” that, through the Spirit, is connected to the living and Risen Christ...this is not mystical in the pagan sense, but Biblically rooted truth...

As we simply ‘BE’ in God there is less and less intellectual reasoning and a greater awareness of our longings and desires to be loved and to love ... here our False Self, with its autonomy, self-sufficiency, compulsive habits of exercising control, etc. begins to give way to the presence of the love of God for us because nothing else really matters to us any more

As we rest in God we find we are drawn deeper into what is truest about us ... we are drawn more and more into our True Self in Christ ... or to put it another way, we are stirred by the power of the love of Christ

Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.
– **Psalm 37:4**

The way that the Hebrew is written indicates that our desires will be transformed into one’s which delight God...

This is the importance of RESPONDING; to let our desires be transformed for God and by God

Practical Matters of Contemplative Reading

PLACE and TIME

These matters depend in part on our personality, disposition and place in life ... for many the only time one can have without interruption is early in the morning (e.g. young kids needing help getting off to school) ... but that is not the time that some of us find helpful ... what we are strongly encouraging is that you make time somewhere in your schedule when you can take at least 20 minutes to listen to the Scripture without distractions ... generally, God does not compete for our attention

Having a particular place AWAY from your normal work place, over time, helps our bodies prepare for God, our bodies have memory too... find a place that becomes a holy place for you. It often helps to have a similar place to go to consistently during CP. This habit helps foster focus during CP and becomes a “special place” where the soul begins to feel safe to open up in vulnerability to God.

TEXT and TRANSLATIONS

It may be best to take one book of the Bible and stay with it for 3 to 6 months slowly working through it (maybe a paragraph or two at a time) ... or take a Psalm and spend a week reading it repeatedly and slowly and out loud

A different translation from the one you typically use may also prove helpful in hearing God in a fresh way ... it is important to have just the biblical text and not a study Bible or even a life application Bible where you will have interpretive notes or practical suggestions on the page ... it is probably best to have a Bible that uses paragraphs rather than verses

SPIRITUAL DROUGHT

Anyone who seeks God will be given 'dark nights of the soul' ... times when nothing connects at a sensory level ... times of disillusionment and depression ... the way we have been experiencing God no longer seems to be an avenue for a deeper relationship with God ... we feel stuck

When we find ourselves in the valley of despair we have one choice in moving forward ... that is to trust that God is somehow at work, possibly weaning us from our natural feelings so we can learn to be attentive to God as God is, rather than as we want God to be ... this is a posture of deep trust

God sometimes needs to be at work in our souls in ways that we must not know lest we try to help God out ... this is what the saints called an 'apophatic' experience (i.e. God being experienced in terms of what God is not) ... God's silence turns out to be God's presence ... the silence is God's way (probably the only way) of forcing the False Self to let go of everything that was familiar (maybe even some of our theological affirmations which our False Self has used to defend itself)

What is helpful here is a spiritual mentor/friend who can listen to you and with you in your time of darkness (think 1 Corinthians 11:1)... a spiritual mentor can encourage you to trust the silence of God... a spiritual mentor can help you entrust yourself to what is totally beyond yourself so that you can be liberated from your illusions about God and yourself

HOW DO I KNOW IT IS GOD SPEAKING

We can be like the boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3) ... we may not immediately recognize it is God speaking with us ... we may, like Samuel, need a Spiritual mentor to help us hear ... that being said we should remind ourselves that we have the Spirit of God within us who knows the very mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:11) ... thus we can remind ourselves of a couple things:

First, the Holy Spirit never leads us against the PLAIN meaning of Scripture ... Contemplative Reading is 'beyond' but never 'against' the plain meaning

We are safe when the Spirit points us to Christ in the THEOLOGICAL reading ... the Spirit's job is to reveal Christ to us ... we don't have to worry when we are hearing more of the nature of Jesus

The BEHAVIORAL or DOCTRINAL reading is not the primary point of Contemplative Reading ... the primary point of CP is bringing us more into a personal relationship with Christ

We know we are hearing God's voice in the DEVOTIONAL reading of Scripture when the presence of God for us becomes more and more our experience ... when we are responding with our head and instincts, not just our head to God's loving presence ... so whatever we hear will be congruent with the God of Luke 15

Conclusion

Contemplative Reading is a means by which God's loving presence is experienced and expressed through our mortal bodies ... Contemplative Reading is one of the ways God has ordained to expose our False Self, surrender it, and move more and more into our True Self in Christ ... Contemplative Reading is the way by which we grow in compassion for others ... Contemplative Reading is the means by which we enter the freedom of Christ's love

I pray that God will, through His Spirit, enable you to grow in your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and that you, planted in love and built on love, will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, that knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowing, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. And so, glory be to God whose power, working in you, will do infinitely more than you can ask or imagine. – Ephesians 2:16-20

Confession

Lord God, we confess that we do not make You the highest priority in our lives, but allow ourselves to be diverted away.

Assurance

Thank You, Lord, that You forgive us of our wanderings, and that You continue to draw us into Yourself so that our highest delight would be found in Your Son Jesus Christ.

Lord's Supper

Tactile reminder of the steadfast love of God, and the price He paid to have us close to Him in relationship through His Son Jesus Christ. Here we are engaged in a spiritual dialogue of thanksgiving and reverence, our souls filled with the presence of God's Spirit.