

Daily Routines Be Holy

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-week series

February 28, 2021

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Psalms 139 (The Message)

A DAVID PSALM

1-6

GOD, investigate my life;
get all the facts firsthand.
I'm an open book to you;
even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking.
You know when I leave and when I get back;
I'm never out of your sight.
You know everything I'm going to say
before I start the first sentence.
I look behind me and you're there,
then up ahead and you're there, too—
your reassuring presence, coming and going.
This is too much, too wonderful—
I can't take it all in!

7-12

Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit?
to be out of your sight?
If I climb to the sky, you're there!
If I go underground, you're there!
If I flew on morning's wings
to the far western horizon,
You'd find me in a minute—
you're already there waiting!
Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark!
At night I'm immersed in the light!"
It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you;
night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you.

13-16

Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out;
you formed me in my mother's womb.
I thank you, High God—you're breathtaking!
Body and soul, I am marvelously made!
I worship in adoration—what a creation!
You know me inside and out,
you know every bone in my body;
You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,
how I was sculpted from nothing into something.
Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth;
all the stages of my life were spread out before you,
The days of my life all prepared
before I'd even lived one day.

17-22

Your thoughts—how rare, how beautiful!
God, I'll never comprehend them!
I couldn't even begin to count them—
any more than I could count the sand of the sea.
Oh, let me rise in the morning and live always with you!
And please, God, do away with wickedness for good!
And you murderers—out of here!—

all the men and women who belittle you, God,
infatuated with cheap god-imitations.
See how I hate those who hate you, GOD,
see how I loathe all this godless arrogance;
I hate it with pure, unadulterated hatred.
Your enemies are my enemies!

23–24

Investigate my life, O God,
find out everything about me;
Cross-examine and test me,
get a clear picture of what I'm about;
See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—
then guide me on the road to eternal life.

When we come to the Bible, it is easy to see it as one spectacular event after another, far removed from the mundane hours that make up much of our lives. But the spectacular in Scripture often emerges from the mundane. Moses is tending his flocks when he meets God in a burning bush. . . . Samuel is sleeping when God awakens him (1 Samuel 3) . . . Simon and Andrew are just casting a net into the sea when Jesus calls out to them. James and John are just mending nets. . . . Cornelius is hanging out at 3pm doing whatever Centurions do when God comes to him (Acts 10) . . .

These stories of encounters with God all emerge from daily routines and work and busyness. No one has headed to a mountaintop in search of the Holy One. Instead, the Holy One has come to them. The Psalm before us today, #139, is a psalm of David, who acknowledges that God is inescapable, though there were plenty of times David would have liked to escape from God (2 Kings 11). But, no, God is always with us.

I copied the entire psalm into the study this week. I hope you will take the time to read it slowly, perhaps daily, this week. I used *The Message* paraphrase by Eugene Peterson because I want the psalm to be as immediate and present with you as possible. For here is the big lesson for today: **the psalms are not meant to express our hearts**, though they may do so, **they are meant to form our hearts**.

Thus, Psalm 139 is meant to help our hearts grasp and live out the truth that God is always with us, that the Holy can be found in the most mundane of moments and places. I imagine we are all ready to endorse this, but really, truly, embedding it in us at the deepest level, in our core convictions, is another matter.

The hide-and-seek God?

A student in one of my classes once came to me with a question. He began it this way: "I know, of course, that God created everything, is letting things run forward and isn't involved in the day-to-day, but here's my question . . ." N. T. Wright tells the story of a student who came to him to say that he didn't believe in God. When Wright asked him to describe God, the student said, "You know, the god¹ who doesn't get involved in the daily muck of our lives, but keeps a list of what we do wrong." Wright replied, "Well, I don't believe in that god either." Neither do I. Neither the writers of Scripture.

In both cases, we're seeing the students' core convictions – that there may be a god, but this god is pretty much an absentee landlord, who created the universe but who stays out of the picture except, perhaps, on those rare occasions when this god intervenes in what we call a "miracle."

Sadly, I think that God-the-Absentee-Landlord is a core conviction held by many Christians. They may not articulate in that way, but they just don't see God as being involved in their day-to-day lives. Instead, God is a superhero who shows up once in a while. Why sometimes and not others? Who knows? . . . The truth is that this was once

¹You'll notice when I write that I reserve the capitalized "God" for the God revealed in Scripture. All the other "gods" get lowercase treatment. I find this to be a clarifying practice.

among my core convictions. Christianity was about stuff that happened in the past and a set of beliefs I affirmed, but not the reality of an ever-present, ever-caring, ever-loving, ever-faithful, ever-personal, ever-relational God.

But when I began to take Scripture seriously, I began to see just how wrong I had been. “Absentee” is the last label you’d pin on God based on even a cursory reading of Scripture. God is everywhere and deeply involved. This is the while point of Psalm 139.

This is why I am such an advocate of regular Bible reading, study, and engagement. If all we work from is our own feelings, what we learned in Sunday School as a youngster, and what can be gleaned from the latest History Channel special, we will never dislodge the mistaken core convictions that lurk in our minds and hearts, including the Absentee Landlord.²

Take the story of the Exodus for example. God has led his people out of Egypt. God is present with them in a way that God has not been present with any other people. God is present with them in the pillar of fire that led them through the wilderness. God is present with them in the clouds that settle on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain to talk with God, as he had spoken with God at the burning bush.

During Moses’ absence, the people make a religious idol, a golden calf, and begin to worship the hunk of gold, giving it credit for rescuing them from Pharaoh. God has told Moses that God can no longer be present with his people as he had been. But Moses tells God that he must remain with them, present with them. And God relents. God will remain with his people. God’s dwelling place will be inside the tabernacle the people will build and there Moses will be able to talk with God.

God’s presence, his empowering presence, is a major theme throughout the Old Testament. There is even a Hebrew word, *shekinah*, for God’s presence, though “spirit” and “wisdom” are also images of the God-who-is-present. . . . Never absent, always present.

This same God is present with us now. Just as the psalmist knows that there is no escaping God, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?,” (Psalm 139) so God is present with us now.

We talk much of the Holy Spirit in church, but, sadly, I think the Spirit is absent from many Christian’s core convictions. They don’t grasp that the Spirit is simply God-present-with-us. That’s who the Spirit is. God involved in all the daily muck of our lives, in ways seen and unseen. The Spirit is both the evidence that the kingdom of God, promised by Jesus (Mark 1:15) at the beginning of his public ministry, has arrived and the guarantee that God will bring his work in this world to its glorious conclusion.

The Spirit as Evidence

The Holy Spirit (a.k.a. “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of Christ”) is not a what but a who. The Spirit is God. Not the Father and not the Son, but still God. Fully and completely God though not all of God. The Spirit is every bit as personal and genuine and God as Jesus is personal and genuine and God. In Acts, we are told about people who lie to the Spirit (Acts 5). Who lies to electricity or even to their dog? We lie to other persons.

Paul refers to Jesus as the “first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). “First fruits” is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus’

²For those more familiar with the jargon of theology, the Absentee Landlord is pretty much a synonym for Deism, the belief system of some of our founding fathers, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

resurrection and the arrival³ of the Spirit marked the coming of God's kingdom, which has arrived already but has "not yet" been consummated.⁴

Like Jesus' resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God's new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul's own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God's work had come to its climax.

The Spirit as Guarantee

Though Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit are the first fruits of God's harvest, we want to know when it is all going to be consummated. When will suffering, sickness, sin, and tragedy be swept away? Paul is no fool. He knows that there is much wrong in the world. But he sees the Spirit as the guarantee that all will be put right – that, not only will God's victory be won, it *has* been won!

Paul writes, "When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . ." (Ephesians 1:13-14 (TNIV). Again, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30, TNIV). And, "But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NRSV)."

In the ancient world, letters were sent on a piece of rolled up papyrus that would often be marked with the seal of the sender. If the sender's seal arrived intact, then the recipient could be sure of the sender and confident that no one had opened the letter. The Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to everyone who has faith in Jesus, is God's seal on each of his people, marking us out as belonging to God.

But the Spirit is more than a seal, the Spirit is a down payment, a first installment on all of God's promises. It is a bit like the old lay-way plan. The store would hold the merchandise as payments were made, guaranteeing that the item would one day belong to the customer.

The experience of Pentecost was not limited to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. Every Christian experiences a Pentecost of his or her own, for all Christians are empowered by the Spirit of God. Some Christians have a very powerful experience of the Holy Spirit while, for others, it is a quiet experience. But the Holy Spirit seals us *all* for God.

God never hides

Our feelings can fool us. We all feel separated from God from time to time. Indeed, such feelings can linger for long periods. We wonder where God has gone, why he isn't listening to us, why our prayers seem to go unanswered.

This is where those core convictions come into play. If your core convictions are grounded upon a God who is an absentee landlord, then, of course, you'll be convinced that just when you need him most, God is nowhere to be found. He'd just be absent, leaving you to make your own way forward as best you can, leaving you to be the master of your fate, the captain of your soul.

³Huh? Did God go somewhere. Not long before the destruction of the temple, God's dwelling place, in 586BC, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision of God's presence leaving the temple. After all, how could the Babylonians destroy the temple in Jerusalem if God was still present there? The NT writers' perspective is that God's Spirit returned to his people after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). And, indeed, God returned to the temple, only now the temple is (1) the Church, the body of Christ and (2) individual believers.

⁴Every time I come to this topic, I get a bit nervous. The kingdom of God has come already, but not yet?? Really? In a word, yes. Both are true. How do we know this? Because God resurrected Jesus and the Spirit has returned (already), though we still live in a world marred by sin and suffering (not yet). The June 29, 2003, Weekly Bible Study has the basics on this including a couple of helpful diagrams. The study can be found at www.scottengle.org.

But if your core convictions are grounded upon the God whose ever-presence is revealed by his actions with real people in this very real world, as told in Scripture, then you can move through the sense of separation confident that God hasn't gone anywhere. If anything, you have. Trust me, it makes all the difference.

Being confident that God is always present with you, in the person of his Holy Spirit, doesn't mean that all will go as you hoped or that all that all your prayers will be answered in the way that you wanted. But it does mean that you are never alone, that nothing can separate you from God. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

And the love of which Paul speaks is not some sort of distant affections from a remote god, but the active, caring, faithful, in-the-daily-muck love of God. If you were to say to Paul, "But I just don't feel loved," I'm confident his reply would be along these lines: "But you are loved, you are loved, you are loved . . . look at that cross. That's real love. On it hung the God who loves you and is never apart from you."

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of James -- We just started, so now is a great time to join us!

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.