

*Ekklesia: Becoming the Community of God*

In 2015, Microsoft commissioned a study to examine the effect of the mobile cellphone and internet revolution on our attention spans. They found that the attention span of the average person had dropped all the way to eight seconds, which officially drops us below the attention span of a goldfish.

It was economist and Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon who coined the phrase, "The Attention Economy." For Simon, attention is the "bottle-neck of human thought." It limits and unleashes our ability to create and contribute. He once wrote, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

What makes an economy is the distribution and monetization of scarce resources. Although I am not an economist, nor would I attempt to play one, from my understanding, this is the new shift in our economics. It is less a material economy and more an attention economy.

Entire industries are now set up in view of this new economy, seeing the attention economy as a new gold rush. Smarter and smarter algorithms are able to cater their interests toward your attention, addicting you to their platform in an effort to make money off of your attention. For good or for ill, and if I were to make a guess, it is more often for ill.

This has caused a deep loss of our ability to focus for long durations of time, and maybe worse, is slowly eroding our ability for nuance and dialogue. The inability to focus results in all sorts of fallout, both within our world and our lives, but I would suggest that the biggest fallout occurs in our souls.

The question before us today is, how do we, as God's *Ekklesia*, become the alternative community of God in a world of distraction? At a certain level, all spiritual formation is actually "counter-formation." It is reversing the trends that are pulling our souls into a particular direction that is away from the things of God. So how do we become a transformed people - transforming the peninsula in this cultural milieu?

What I want to suggest is that if we are going to be a transformed people, we must counter the saturation of a world of distraction. If distraction is where culture zigs, then in order for us to be transformed, we must zag. And for us to zag, we must become a people of attentiveness in a world of distraction, attentive to the leading and presence of God.

We are going to spend our time together in Psalm 16. The author of this Psalm is David, and if you are familiar with David's life, you know that his was a life marked by significant and consistent turmoil. So we come to this Psalm with a level of connection to David. "Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge" (v. 1). It opens with a petition to God for safety. The psalmist recognizes the challenge of the situation he is in.

This is one of the central tenets of the faith; our center, our place of refuge, is in God. Chaos, unsettling, disorder, all of this is part of what it means to be human. It will always exist. Last week, we spent time talking through the narratives of hope the world offers that ultimately fall short. These narratives of hope are where many of us are seeking refuge outside of God.

God is the refuge we seek, and it is the refuge the psalmist is seeking as well. The need for us to tap into this same refuge in God in our day is just as high as in David's day. The question is, how do we do this? How do we take refuge in God?

Let's read on; the rest of the Psalm will essentially do two things. The next section (v. 2-4) will speak about what David will avoid seeking refuge in God, and the final section (v. 5-11) speak about what the psalmist will seek to do to find refuge in God.

**I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.' I say of the holy people who are in the land, 'They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.' Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. vv. 2-4**

At first, David begins with the declaration that God is Lord and the source of all that is good. This is part of why God is our refuge and why he can be trusted. "You are my Lord; apart from you, I have no good thing." For the Christian, we recognize that the source of all that is good comes from God and God alone. It is James that said, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). Our task, in light of this, is to stay connected to God as our refuge. I'm reminded of Jesus in John 15 and the metaphor of abiding in him as a branch abides in the vine.

There is a comparing and contrast that takes place in this section between the "holy people" and those who chase "other gods." The psalmist is intentionally drawing this contrast to demonstrate the differences between two countering ways of life.

The one group, "the holy people," David respects, honors, even models his life after them. The other group, "running after other gods," David sees the futility of their lives and seeks to disconnect from them. David goes on to talk about what and why he wants to avoid the second group. "Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips" (v. 4). David knows that those who chase those other gods will "suffer more and more." The outlook of their lives is not a good one.

Note that this is not necessarily suffering at the hand of God. We can often read that into the text. It may mean that, but it certainly isn't explicit in the text. What I think the suffering is, is suffering because of the incoherence of other claims of god. The natural end of so many of the "gods" that we chase are heartbreak and pain because whatever the god is that is being chased was never meant to be a god. It will always let you down. It is suffering at the very hands of the gods we are worshipping.

Now, this idea of worshipping other gods can be hard for us to understand because, in a secular world, our gods have been de-spiritualized. Meaning, we don't struggle with actual bowing down and worshipping a statue or something else, but ours are much more subtle. The gods of our age look much more secular than they do spiritual: money, sex, power, etc.

As Christ-followers, we approach certain things drastically different than the culture. We think of money differently - generosity and tithing. We think of power differently - following the example of Jesus, we see power and influence as something to be laid down for the sake of others. In God's economy, the weak are strong, power in weakness. We think of sexuality differently - Our sexuality is not our central identity. We think of community and relationships differently - The community we develop with believers and non-believers is not fundamentally for our own benefit but is viewed in a mutually beneficial manner. We give ourselves to others in service.

This is where we have to remember that we are the *Ekklesia* - the called-out ones. To be the *Ekklesia* is to be a counter-culture or alternative community that resists the gods of the age.

David draws a line in the sand, "I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods." He refuses to make sacrifices to these gods. So too, we refuse to make a sacrifice of our resources to these gods. We will not give time and attentiveness to these gods because we recognize their ability to lead to suffering, as well as distract us away from better things. This past week, someone sent me a tweet by Christian thinker and writer Jackie Hill Perry. She writes, "If social media is the idol, my time is the burnt offering." That is what David seeks to avoid.

David now shifts to talk about what he will do to seek God as his refuge. "*Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance*" (vv. 5-6). Out of everything that the world offers as our potential portion, David says only God is his portion. This is a conscious choice for David. Latent within this choice is not choosing everything else that is on offer.

I think of Kierkegaard's famous dictum, "purity of heart is to will one thing." For David, he was continually seeking to "will one thing." Obviously, he had his failures and moments where he certainly willed things other than God.

We have to deepen our thinking on how we are formed. We can often get stuck thinking the only things that pull us away from God are those morally negative sins. The things that naturally come to mind that we shouldn't do. And of course, we should seek to avoid those things,

without question! But we also need to recognize that morally neutral things can also block us from intimacy and maturity in Christ.

To follow Jesus means we will not freely and without forethought give our mind and attention solely to the things that those in the world around us freely give their time and attention to. We may do so, in one sense, by necessity...work, food, logistics of living, etc. But even then, we do so with a different posture of gratitude toward God for that which he has given freely to us.

## **Church, who or what is your portion?**

I ask simply out of the recognition that we are finite beings with limited resources of time and attention to invest. Who is your portion? This is not a question of guilt or shame, but who or what has your deepest attention? We are finite beings, and if we are going to live within those boundaries, at some point, we have to choose.

David now shifts back to what he will do, to seek refuge in God.

**I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. vv. 7-8**

David says he will do two things, praise the Lord and keep his eyes on the Lord.

With everything available to David, his affection is turned back to God. Even among the other gods that are all around, David's convictions remain with Yahweh. The reason being, David understands God is not only worthy of worship but also counsels David. He provides direction, clarity, and a deep inner sense of direction. So too, for us, in an age of distraction, we are pulled to worship things other than God in a thousand different ways. Often by things that seem benign.

David also says he will keep, or other translations say fix or set God always before him. God will become the center focal point of David's life. The NASB says it really well, "*I have set the LORD continually before me; because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken*" (v. 8, NASB).

But how do you do this? How do you "keep your eyes always before the Lord?" This is what I mean by the idea of "attentiveness." And this can be done in several different ways, through silent prayer, solitude, scripture, worship, or stillness. Whatever it is that fixes God before your mind.

The idea here is that David will do everything in his power to keep his affection and heart's desire on God. He is trying to center his mind's eye on the presence of God. It means resisting distraction. It is the manner in which we are able to stay centered on God in a world seeking to distract you into spiritual oblivion.

The point is attention and time are the means of loving and being loved by God. It is one of the primary ways that we cement our identity in God. Attentiveness forces us to slow down, and what results is the recognition of God's goodness. Attentiveness is what precedes love. Without it, you cannot love or be loved. If I do not give attention to Lindsey, she will never experience my love. The times I am most embarrassed with my parenting or being a husband is the all too frequent times I am in a

rush. I lose sight of my priorities, turn inward and selfish, and view those around me as means to my ends, not people to be loved. You cannot love people quickly. Love is fundamentally inefficient and slow.

Kosuke Koyama, in his book *Three Mile an Hour God*, wrote,

**Love has its speed. It is an inner speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is 'slow,' yet it is lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice or not, whether we are currently hit by a storm or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk, and therefore it is the speed the love of God walks.**

"Love has its speed." What a beautifully challenging reflection. We most clearly demonstrate our love through our time and attention. As much as we may not like to admit it, the way we spend our time and what we give our attention to clearly shows the ordering of our loves.

Now, I want to be careful not to romanticize this, because of course, we have to carry on with living, working, doing dishes, folding laundry, picking up kids from practice, making lunches, etc.

So be sure to hear me here; what this doesn't mean is that you can only read your Bible all day in quiet, reflective prayer. This is hard, but it can be done in whatever manner and under whatever context you experience. We have to think more creatively on what it means to commune with God.

What this does mean is that we find a way to live, going on about our ordinary ways of life that keep God before our minds. Maybe it is the quiet, reflective prayer while folding laundry. Or the quick re-centering of your heart before God as you go into a meeting. It is about the slow, continual, and persistent reminder that God is present with you in whatever you are doing. It is what Brother Lawrence would call "Practicing the presence of God." I think this is what Paul meant when he said, "pray continually." Not that we isolate from the world in folded hands, heads bowed prayer. But that we go about our days with an awareness of God always before us.

A challenge for you this week is to take a day and try to think of God at least once every hour. It doesn't have to be a long time, but just try and bring God before your mind once an hour. It is stunningly hard, and I'm a pastor! It is simple, don't overthink it. I mean, quite literally, just think of God. It could be a scripture you memorize; it could be a simple prayer, "Thank you for being here, Lord." Or just having the thought of God come before your mind.

So much of our growing inattentiveness is simple, simpler than we want to make it. I remember when both girls were younger. I would try and break free for just a few minutes without them interrupting, and the only place I could go was the bathroom. So I'd sneak into there for a few minutes and pray to myself.

But the point is time, and attention is how we must clearly experience love and give love.

David goes on and details the positive effects of fixing God before his mind provides for him. *"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay"* (vv. 9-10). The old seminary adage is important yet again. "When you come across a 'therefore' be sure to look back and see what it is 'there' 'for.'" David is shifting from writing about his experience and desire to keep God always before him and is now reflecting back on the impact that this attuning of his heart to God has had on him.

Three things he communicates have happened as he does this: Heart – Glad, Tongue – Rejoice, and Body – Secure. These are three good postures to live and operate from. It would be an interesting and probably obvious study to reflect on what we would describe as the state of our heart, tongue, and bodies after we engage in technological distraction. If you are anything like me, the response from the distracted heart is probably more of the inverse of these: Heart - frustrated and impatient, Tongue - short and cynical, and Body - vulnerable and exhausted.

As David sits in the presence of God, he realizes that his connection to God transcends circumstances. "because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay."

In another of David's Psalms, he writes of a similar theme,

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. Ps. 139:7-8

The presence of God transcends whatever circumstance we find ourselves in; we just have to become aware of God.

It isn't that our circumstances prevent the presence of God from being with us; our circumstances cloud our vision and perception of God with us. They distract us from seeing what was true all along, that God is with us, he is available for us to live into that reality here and now. Whether you are in the realm of the dead or are experiencing decay, God has not and will not abandon you.

*"You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand"* (v. 11). What is the output of a life lived with a deep attentiveness to the presence of God? God makes known "the path of life," being filled with joy and eternal pleasures. This is the life that we are longing for, whether we know it or not. And the greatest thing about following Jesus isn't what Jesus affords us or gives to us. No, the greatest part of following Jesus is Jesus. Being able to sit in the presence of Jesus and opening ourselves to the work of the Spirit so we can experience and give the love of God.

What happens when we consistently, over time (think decades), attune our heart to the presence of God is that we are slowly transformed by God more and more into the image of Christ. Dallas Willard had this great quote where he said that as we keep God before our minds, "soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings."

Because here is the main idea, attentiveness is the gateway to spiritual formation in a world of distraction. I want to close really practically because I recognize (through my own ongoing experience) how challenging it is to cultivate a posture of attentiveness in a world of distraction.

## **Practice**

What would it look like for the church to be a community that is defined by our slow, methodical attention to God, as opposed to the frenetic distractions of our time that lure us into postures we don't want to embody?

Historically, the church has had many practices they have employed to tune our hearts the things of God consistently: silence and solitude, Sabbath, Scripture, contemplation, prayer, and Scripture meditation. All these historical practices have led followers of Jesus, just like you and me, into a slower encounter and experience of God's love that enables us to go forward to love others well. This is the avenue where we become a transformed people, living as an alternative community, demonstrating a new way that is both beautiful and plausible. Any of these will do, and I wish we had more time to talk through each of these practices in more depth.

If we are to begin to untangle our lives from the web of distractions that our world bombards us with, we have to do a few things. Here are three simple suggestions I have found helpful in my own journey toward attentiveness.

### **Carve Out Intentional Time**

For me, this happens a few ways, first through a time of prayer and scripture reading nearly every morning. I also try to create intentional breaks in my day (think 3-5 minutes) where I draw my heart toward God. The key is to integrate this into your regular rhythms of life.

### **Anticipate Distractions**

Our minds are wired for distraction; remember, your attention span is losing out to a goldfish. Recognize that when you sit down with your journal and Bible, or you sit ready to engage in silent prayer, the first thing your mind will do is start racing to the thoughts that it would have normally been thinking because that's how we have trained and habituated our brains.

It is okay! The goal is not to be good at this but to cultivate a posture of attentiveness. Showing up is the first step. While it is totally normal to have these distractions come to mind, have a way to deal with them. It may be helpful to have a notebook where you can write something down to get it off your mind and back to God.

### **Create a Plan for your Phone and Digital Life**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

This has been a constant battle for me in my life. Here are a few best practices that I use, which you in no way have to do yourself. And I also recognize that I am privileged to have a job that enables me to create these sorts of boundaries where others of you may not be able to. That is okay; find a way that works for you and your circumstances.

I try to "parent my phone." I put it to bed before I go to bed and wake it up after I have already woken up. I use digital Sabbath rhythms, which include 1-Hour a day, 1-Day a week, 1-Week a year. This means every day; I try to have at least one intentional hour where I am away from my phone. Every week, I try to shut down most tech things for an entire day (Saturday is our Sabbath). I am not great at this, but working on it. I have been able to completely detach from social media on Saturdays consistently, and that has been really helpful. Every year - This is one that I am still trying to figure out. Don't sleep with your phone in your room. I literally bought an old-school alarm clock to help me with this. I charge my phone down in my office at home overnight and allow that alarm clock to wake me up.

### **Start Where you Are, Not Where You Think You Should Be**

Lastly, and maybe most importantly, start with where you are, not where you think you should be. I love the idea that this is training for the presence of God. It takes effort, and it is hard. But slowly, over time, we become more able to naturally walk in step with the Spirit. So if it starts with five minutes of silence and or prayer, start there. Again, the goal is not to be successful or obtain some level of mastery; it is simply to move one step in the direction of God.

To close, I want to return to the question we asked above, "church, what is your portion?" Over time, we become what we give our attention to? And the psalmist is inviting all of us into a different pattern of thinking. He is inviting us to transform our default setting to the things of God, to displace the constant barrage of distracting frenetic thinking that lures us away into things less than God.

For just a moment, I want you to consider what you predominantly allow to fill your mind? If you launch that on a trajectory over the next decade, two decades, three decades? Who are you becoming? Is it more like Jesus? A life filled with peace, patience, love, joy, and self-control? That is the invitation before us, and it starts small. It starts with the direction and re-direction of our heart and our mind's eye back to God.

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