

The Practice of Presence

Good to see everybody this morning. If you have a bible, go with me to the **Psalm 139**. The book of Psalms, chapter 139. If you're new here today, you're joining us on the **final week of a series** we've been in all about *rest*. We've been unpacking how God's desire for our lives is that we would regularly prioritize *rest*. **But we said that at least for an awful lot of us, when we hear that, our immediate pushback is "but I just don't have time to rest. Even if I wanted to—which I very much do—I just can't. I don't have enough time in the day or the week to make that a priority."**

So we've been spending a *lot* of this series discussing how to **create space** in our lives so that rest can happen. **We talked about the Sabbath**, which is about setting aside an *entire day* of rest once a week. **We talked about Silence & solitude**, which is setting aside moments of time *throughout* our days to rest. **We talked about digital discernment**, which is re-evaluating our relationship with our *phones* so that we squander time on them that could be devoted to rest. Everything we've done so far is about *creating uninterrupted space* in our lives, away from the hustle and bustle of life, where rest can happen.

But today, as we close out the series, I want us to shift gears a bit and talk a bit about how we find rest *right in the midst* of our day-to-day. **Not what we do when we press pause on life as usual, but how we rest while life as usual is happening.** Now, here's **why I think that matters**: as good as a Sabbath day is, as good as silence & solitude is, as good as time away from our phone is—the reality is that those *uninterrupted* moments *don't* make up the *majority* of our lives, right? That's not how we spend the majority of our time. **Unfortunately, we can't just spend the majority of our life sitting in complete silence with a bible open in our lap. Rather, we spend the majority of our lives doing normal life things.** So if we want to become the type of people who regularly experience the *rest* of God, we're going to have to figure out a way to rest in him *within* the everyday rhythms of our lives. Not just when we set life aside.

So today I want us to talk a little about **how to do that**: how we can *rest* in the reality of who God is, even in the midst of our day-to-day rhythms and normal life. And to do that, we have to *start* by understanding some things about **God's presence**. And *that* is what **Psalm 139** is largely about. So I'll read our entire passage, all the way through v. 18 and then we'll work our way back through some of it. Starting in v. 1:

[1] *You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. [2] You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. [3] You discern my going out*

and my lying down; you are **familiar** with all my ways. [4] Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, **know it completely**. [5] **You hem me in** behind and before, and you **lay your hand upon** me. [6] Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. [7] **Where can I go** from your Spirit? **Where can I flee** from your **presence**? [8] If I go up to the **heavens**, you are **there**; if I make my bed in the **depths**, you are **there**. [9] If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, [10] **even there** your hand will guide me, your **right hand will hold me fast**. [11] If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” [12] even the **darkness** will not be dark to **you**; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. [13] For you **created** my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. [14] I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. [15] My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. [16] Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before **one of them** came to be. [17] How **precious to me** are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! [18] Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am **still with you**.

So this is a psalm, at its core, **about God’s presence**. More specifically, it’s about the *location* of God’s presence. In it, **the psalmist jumps from place to place, location to location, situation to situation, and just marvels at the constant, everywhere, always presence of God**. In v. 2-5, he talks about God’s presence in every one of his **day-to-day actions**. “God, you’re present when I sit still and when I stand up to go. When I come and when I go. When I wake and when I sleep. Before I formulate words in my mind and speak them with my mouth—God you know those words already.” He says “God, you *hem me in*, behind and before,” which is a way of saying that God’s presence *envelops* him as he goes wherever he goes. The author sees God’s fingerprints, God’s *presence* and *activity* all over each of those things.

He then talks **geographically**. In v. 8-10, he says “where can I go from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, the highest of highs, you’re there. If I descend to the lowest of lows, your presence is *there*. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I go to the far side of the sea, your presence is in each and all of those places as well. Then he talks about **light and darkness**. Now here, he could just be talking about *literal* light and darkness, or he could be talking *figuratively*, as in *moral* darkness and *moral* light. His point may be that God’s can still be found even when there seems to be nothing but *sin and injustice and hopelessness* all around us. If *that’s* not a word for the past year or so of our collective lives, I don’t know what *is*. He goes on to talk about God’s presence **from the very beginning of his life**, saying “you created me, you knit me together in my mother’s

womb from the very beginning. God, you *made* me.” God was present and active in his life *then* too.

So the **point the psalmist is making**, in great detail and with great repetition, is that **God’s presence is quite literally everywhere around us**. It’s everywhere. **Theologians have often called this idea the *omnipresence* (“*omni* meaning *all*”)—so the “*all-presence*” of God**. The entire world, top to bottom, beginning to end, from eternity past to eternity’s future, God is *present in every bit of it*. That’s the idea behind Psalm 139.

So put *another way*, that means that for you and I, **God’s presence can be perceived** in every interaction, every moment, every experience, and every conversation, we encounter. **No square inch of creation is hidden from the presence and activity of God**. God is present in **our morning commute**. He’s present in our interaction with the barista taking our morning coffee order. The news headline or tweet flashing across our device in the middle of the day. The elevator ride on the way to class. The brief moment of quiet when we sit down at our desk (if that quiet *exists* for you, at least). **Every one of those moments and interactions are opportunities to be attentive to the presence and activity of God**.

Aaron Neiquist, in his excellent book ***The Eternal Current***, puts it like this:

If we are already fully submerged in the presence of God and the reality of the kingdom, then every moment becomes an opportunity to open our eyes and partner with God’s present work of grace. While putting our kids to bed, we can partner with God’s work in our kids, or we can miss out. When we get into a fender bender, we can partner with God’s work in the person who wasn’t paying attention and hit our car, or we can miss out. When our boss overlooks or mistreats us, we can partner with God’s work in and through the situation, or we can miss out. Every moment offers an opportunity to align with God’s immersive presence and get swept up in God’s healing activities in our lives and the life of the world.

God’s presence is *everywhere*. God’s activity can be seen in most anything. And we have the opportunity, to borrow that language, get “swept up in it” all. **I once heard someone describe this ability—getting “swept up in” the reality of God’s presence—like having a “sixth sense.”** Discerning the activity of God in our world is like having a *sixth sense* about life. It’s developing the ability to see the things *happening* in our lives, but also to see *through* them to what God might be doing *in them*. Does that make sense? To see past the surface to the constant presence and activity of God.

It's like this. Is anybody here old enough to remember the **WWJD bracelets?** I know we have a younger crowd, but do you guys know what I'm talking about? There were these cheesetastic bracelets that Christians (and seemingly everybody else) wore at one point in the 90s that just had some sort of design on them and had the letters WWJD on them—which stood for *What Would Jesus Do*. And the idea was that in every scenario, every conversation, every interaction we find ourselves in, we as followers of Jesus should be asking the question *what would Jesus do*, in this situation. What would he say or do or be or help with? And I actually *love* that question. I know people love to knock on those bracelets, but the question itself is actually a really good one for us to be asking. But I'd like to **add another question** for us to ask first as it relates to what we're talking about today. I think we should start off by asking not *WWJD*, but *WIJD*: what *is* Jesus doing?

Because **remember, from Psalm 139:** God's presence is *everywhere*. God's activity is *everywhere*. He's already working and has been working well before we step foot into the situation and well before we set foot onto this earth. So the question we should be asking first is *what is he doing, already? What is he doing in this situation? What is he doing in my interaction with this person? What is he doing in my circumstances, my environments, my activity?* What if we, as followers of Jesus, developed the habit of constantly asking, *what is God doing, right now?* **Figuring out what Jesus would do, I think, starts with understanding that he and the Father have been working from eternity past, and we get the privilege of joining ourselves to that mission.**

And it **is possible** for us to live our day-to-day lives in constant awareness of all of that...*if we have the eyes to see it and ears to hear it*. Now *that* is a **pretty big "if,"** right? Because the reality is that most of us *struggle* to do that. **There is a vast difference between knowing that God's presence and activity are all around us, and being regularly dialed into that presence and activity.** The *latter* is where many of us struggle. I think all of us know this, but I think it bears saying anyway: **the problem is never God's presence.** God's presence is *everywhere*. That's the psalmist's point: "where can I go from your presence? Where can I run where you won't already be?" So **the problem is never God's presence—the problem is nearly always our awareness of God's presence.**

I think **Dallas Willard articulates the problem** so well when he says this:

The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds...This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in thus practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him. In the early time of our 'practicing' we may well be challenged by our

burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits—not the law of gravity—and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. 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.

So Willard says that the *problem* is that **our default tendency** as human beings is to dwell on things “less than God.” That’s about the nicest way possible of putting it. **Next time you are just fuming at your roommate or spouse and somebody asks you what’s wrong—you should say “I’m sorry—I’m just dwelling on things less than God right now.”** ~~Next time you zone out while someone’s talking to you, tell them “sorry, I was processing some things just shy of the Almighty.”~~ So it’s a very *positive* way to spin it, but what he means is that we get *distracted*. We *sin*. And we live large portions of our life with little to no active awareness of God’s presence.

When I’m on **my morning drive** to work, I’m not thinking about *God’s presence*—I’m thinking about the guy in front of me going 35 in a 45. When I’m with my kids, I’m not being attentive to God’s activity around me—I’m trying to keep Whit hitting her with a toy sword “accidentally.” When I’m washing the dishes, I’m not dialed into God’s *Spirit*—I’m dialed into *Designated Survivor* on Netflix. We get distracted, don’t we? It’s so easy to get distracted. To be burdened by the habit of “dwelling on things less than God,” in Willard’s words.

But I so love **what Willard says next**, because I find it to be so incredibly hopeful, especially for those like me that regularly struggle to set their mind and attention on God. And this is really the focus of our teaching today. He says “[**being unaware of God’s presence**] is a *habit—it’s not the law of gravity*.” In other words, it’s not *unconquerable*. Yes—short of God’s saving work in our lives and the Spirit’s sanctifying work in our hearts, we *will* live with an unawareness of God’s presence. But *with* those things, by the power of the Spirit living within us, all of *that can change*. We are not doomed to always, only live unaware of God’s presence. In his language: “...*new, grace-filled habits* can replace old ones, and our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly turns to the north.” That’s *possible*, and it just takes *grace-filled habits*.

So really, what *Willard* is saying is **what we’ve been saying** this entire series: **our habits, if we are willing to participate in them, can be used by God to shape the very trajectory of our hearts**. So you might feel, right now, like there’s no way you could have the presence of mind to be conscious of God throughout the day. You may be

thinking to yourself, “there’s just no way.” Maybe you feel like it’s all *you* can do to be conscious of his presence for fifteen minutes in the morning when all you’re doing is looking *at your bible*. Or conscious of his presence for an hour and a half while you’re here on Sundays. And hear me say: I know what you mean. I’ve been there, and feel like I *am* there a lot of days.

But at the same time, I want you to understand that **that’s a habit**—not the law of gravity. In other words, **it’s not that we *can’t* live aware of God’s presence. It’s that we **can’t do it yet**.** Those are different. Maybe it helps to connect it to something like running. A lot of us, right now, could not run a marathon. Maybe some of us we wouldn’t even be able to run a *mile or two* without stopping. I’m including myself in that category, by the way. Maybe we wouldn’t be able to do any of that. But it’s not that we *can’t ever do it*—it’s that we *can’t do it yet*. You realize everybody who currently can run a marathon, at some point, couldn’t—right? And the only thing standing between *us* and being *able* to do it, is *practice. Discipline. Repetition*. Doing a lesser version of it over and over again, on a regular basis, such over time we *develop* the ability to do it. Resting in God’s presence throughout each day is a lot like that. It’s not that you can’t do it—it’s that you can’t do it *yet*. You just need the empowering work of the Spirit, and *practice*.

I think this is **precisely why Willard uses that language, “*practicing the presence* of God.”** He actually borrowed that language from a guy named Brother Lawrence, who worked as a dishwasher at a French monastery in the 17th century. There’s a book attributed to him called just that, *Practicing the Presence of God*. But Brother Lawrence understood that the most vital thing for followers of Jesus to do was to learn to live continually aware of the presence and activity of God. But **he also knew that to do that took *practice* (hence the word “practice” in the title)**. He knew that being dialed into God’s presence isn’t something that *any* of us do by default. It’s something we *learn the ability* to do over time.

Now, I know that to some of us, all of this can feel almost **so big picture and theoretical** that it’s hard to know where to start. So what I want to do is just give you some *categories* of places to look for God’s presence and activity. This is far from an *exhaustive* list of categories—it would be *impossible* to make it exhaustive, because God moves in an infinite number of ways. But these are just some of the categories of ways I have tried to train *myself* to look for God’s activity, and hopefully they’ll give you something to go on as we seek to put this into practice. So, some categories of ways God makes himself known. You ready?

- He uses *circumstances* to expose our sin.
- He uses *difficulty* to reveal our need for him.

- He uses *other people* to interrupt our self-focus.
- He uses *conversations* as opportunities to display and share the gospel.
- He uses *enjoyment* to spark gratitude and worship.
- He uses *pressure* to motivate tough obedience.
- He uses *exhaustion* to speak encouragement and hope.
- He uses *spare time* to prompt prayer.
- He uses *conflict* to make us long for peace that only he can bring.
- He uses *love* to teach us the joy of quality relationships.

And like I said, there are so many more. It might even be **helpful for you**, this week, to **add to that list** with ways *you* regularly see his presence and activity in your life. But the point is that God's presence is all around us. It can be seen most anywhere. It's just a question of whether or not we will look for it. Every moment, every event, every interaction, every situation is an opportunity for us to ask the question, *what is God doing here? Where can his presence be seen and discerned?*

So I want to just give you a few real-life **examples of this from my life** the past couple weeks. I am *far* from an expert in all this—in fact, I would argue this is still a relatively new thing in my life. But I do feel like, slowly but surely, the Spirit has been giving me this sixth sense to discern God's presence and activity around me. So here are just a few instances over the past week or two where I sensed and recognized God's presence and activity.

Example #1. Last week, our **staff was just processing through a decision** that we were making, over some things that had recently happened. And I found myself, in that conversation, becoming more and more worked up over it. I found myself getting irritable with the other staff members about how I felt they were handling the decision. To where at one point, Sara asked “are you angry at *us* about this?” And I did the thing where I said “no I'm not *angry*, I'm just *upset*.” Which is a thing people say when they're angry.

But **her asking that question prompted me** to internally just ask myself the question, *why am I* angry about this? And by asking that question, I was able to discern why it was that I was angry. And it actually had nothing to do with our staff or the situation, it had to do with an insecurity in me that God was using this situation to expose. And God gave me the *clarity*, in that moment, to realize that. *Frustration* at my circumstances was an opportunity to notice something God wanted to do in my *heart*.

Example #2. This one is going to seem almost **silly**, but it's just an example of how basic this stuff can be. The other day, I walked into our house after running some errands around town. I think it was Monday or Tuesday—one of the days where the high was like

30-something degrees—very cold. But I walk into our house, and just immediately feel the 30 degree temperature difference the outside temp and our house, and I just thought to myself, “how amazing is central heating.” Like as a concept. Like at one point in history, if it was cold outside, it was just like “good luck everybody! Don’t freeze to death.” Or everybody in your house just had to huddle around the one fireplace and pray you didn’t run out of firewood. And here I am, in the year 2021, just walking in the door to my house, and my house has, by itself, heating every room to a perfect 70 degrees. Have you ever stopped to think about how *amazing* that is? Now, for backstory, our heat went *out* a few months back—so I’m sure that had something to do with my awareness of it. But *still*.

And what happened is that in that moment, **I didn’t just stop at being thankful for heat.** It led to me being thankful for the technology *behind* heat, which led me to being thankful for the people that invented that technology, which in turn made me thankful for the God who gave people the intelligence and innovation to create that technology. **The simple act of feeling heat hit my skin was an opportunity to be dialed into God’s presence and activity in my world.**

Example #3. One more. This one happened while I was waiting in the **Chick-Fil-A drive-thru.** Which is a pretty frequent occurrence in my life—I’m assuming it probably is for some of you too. But I was waiting in the drive-thru line, and I was just watching them on their iPads taking people’s orders, telling people who to follow in the drive-through line. And I was just watching all of this thinking to myself how attentive and alert and knowledgeable you probably have to be to work in a Chick-Fil-A drive-thru. I’m pretty sure you have to have a master’s degree in logistics, actually.

But **when I pulled up** to the person taking my order, I just felt the Holy Spirit prompt me to comment on all that. I told the lady taking my order how great of a job they were doing, and that I appreciated them standing out there so that people like me could remain lazy in our car. And when I said it, she laughed and then she teared up a little bit. And she said “you don’t know how much that means for you to say that—we just had two different customers come through here who were just absolutely awful to us. So thank you for saying that.” And all of a sudden I know precisely why the Spirit was nudging me to say something. And listen, I don’t tell you that story to make you think I am this amazing, considerate person. If it would’ve been most any other day, I probably would’ve been completely checked out. I just tell you about it to show you that every single moment is an opportunity to ask “what is God doing, and how might I participate in that?”

The **point I’m trying to make** is that **in all of our lives, even in the absolutely mundane things, there are opportunities to recognize the presence and activity of God. And**

I want us to be people that learn how to do just that. *How to rest in the practice of the presence of God.*

Now here's **why I'm inclined to call all of this rest.** I was listening to a sermon this week from a pastor in Texas named Matt Chandler—some of you may have heard of him—amazing, gifted teacher of the Scriptures. And he kept repeating this one line that I just haven't been able to get out of my head, especially as I put together this teaching: he said **"you can't live for God, without also living with God."** Isn't that so true? I think a lot of us **might be exhausted because we're trying to live life for God, but not with God.** And we need to understand that God doesn't just say "here—here's what life should look like, here's how I'm calling you to live, here's what I'm calling you to do. *Good luck.*" Instead, he says "here's what life looks like—now walk *with me in it.*" **And it's by walking with him that we learn to rest. We become less and less overwhelmed by living life for God, and learn more and more to live with God.** To live in an awareness of the presence of God.

So one of the tools that Christians have used to learn to do all this through the years is something called the **Prayer of Examen.** That's the practice for this week in our **Practice Guide** that you can find online. **It originates with a guy named St. Ignatius of Loyola.** Which is an awesome name. If you want to sound more legitimate, I'd highly recommend adding "of" and then a location to your name. "Kent of Knoxville" sounds a lot more legitimate than just "Kent." But St. Ignatius (*of Loyola*) invented the prayer of examen as a way of discerning and recognizing "God's presence in all things." It's a way of regularly reviewing and processing through our day, with the intention of asking the question "what was *God* up to in it all?" If you go online to citychurchknox.com/rest, you can find all the specifics of the prayer and how to pray through it, so I won't go into all those details today. But essentially, it's just a way of reviewing your day in prayer. **To ask "where did I see God's presence today, and where might I have missed it?"**

But the **hope is that by doing the prayer retroactively** each day, it helps you develop the ability to recognize those things more and more *in the moment, as they happen.* **To me, it helps to compare it to something like football players watching tape of themselves after a game. They'll watch to review everything that happened in the game, but the goal is that, by doing that, they develop the ability to think better and play better in the moment.** In a similar way, reviewing your day with the prayer of examen helps you, over time, to discern God's activity more and more *in the moment.* That's the end goal of the *Prayer of Examen.* So take a look at the practice guide this week and give it a shot.

But the **last thing I want to mention** today—and this is so very important for us to remember: all of the practices we're participating in during this series—from the prayer of

examen today, all the way back to silence and solitude the first week—none of those things, in and of themselves, generate *change*. Richard Foster, in his famous book *Celebration of Discipline*, puts it like this:

We must always remember that the path does not produce the change; it only places us where the change can occur.

That's so important: habits *themselves* do not make us more like Jesus—they put us in a place where we have the time and space *to be changed by* Jesus. Without the Spirit of God moving, our habits are just that: *habits*. They will not change us on their own.

It may help to think of it like a bonfire. It's been real cold—anybody getting in on some bonfires lately? Okay, so when you want to start a bonfire, what do you generally do first? You have to put some sort of kindling around where you want the fire, right? So old newspapers, if you have any. Really small twigs or scrap wood. Maybe some dryer lint—anybody use that trick? That's our go-to. But whatever it is, you need *kindling*. You need stuff that will easily and quickly catch on fire. Okay, the kindling, in our lives with Jesus, are the spiritual disciplines. Habits. Practices and disciplines that we set up in our life.

But here's the reality. You can put the best kindling in the world around your firepit, and sit there and watch it, and that kindling will never light itself on fire. It simply will not happen. And one reason I bring that up is because you and I both know there are an awful lot of people in the American Church who have all sorts of habits set up in their life: they read their bibles every day, maybe for extended periods of time. They attend church religiously (pun intended) every single Sunday. They have a lot of religious ritual in their lives, and yet there is no *fire*. There is no abiding love for Jesus, there's no becoming more like Jesus in tangible ways. Because they are expecting the kindling to create a fire. And it doesn't work that way.

What do you need to start that fire? You need a spark. A flame. You need something to *ignite* the kindling you've laid out. That spark, spiritually speaking, is the work of the Holy Spirit. *He* is the one who comes along and offers the flame. I don't think it's any coincidence that the bible often uses the terminology of *fire* to talk about the Holy Spirit. Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters talk about "Holy Spirit *fire*" *often*. That imagery is spot-on. The Holy Spirit is who gives life and vitality to our practices. He is the one who breathes on them and makes them fruitful and makes them effective.

So here's where I'll close, both this teaching and this series. While focusing on creating space and setting up habits in our life for six weeks is a wonderful thing to do—those

habits will not create in you a passion for Jesus, or a restful heart. For that, we need the Spirit to come along and be the spark. So can we just spend a moment asking him to do that in our hearts? Go ahead and bow your head, close your eyes.

Let's pray together.