

Finishing the Day Well

Psalm 63

Last week we began a four-week series from the Psalms. We're noticing an emphasis found in the Psalms on delighting in and experiencing and seeking God "all day long." Instead of seeking and experiencing God infrequently or superficially, the psalmists advocate an ongoing, substantive experience of God through the Scriptures. Last week we introduced the idea from Psalm 1:2 of delight in the Law of the Lord and meditating on it "day and night" – all day long.

Today we are going to consider the habit of meditating upon Scripture/God at night. Next Sunday we'll talk about meditating and praying in the morning. We're considering things in this order because in the Hebrew mind, a day begins at sunset. The Sabbath, for example, was from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. This understanding is reflected in the creation account which speaks of "evening and morning, the first day . . . evening and morning, day 2." In Psalm 55 we read, "Evening, morning, and noon . . . you will hear my voice."

This is just the opposite of the way we think about our days, isn't it? We think of the day beginning when we get up in the morning. But they thought of the day beginning in the evening. I think there are some conceptual advantages of thinking about our days beginning at night – especially as they relate to seeking God. Seeking God at night primes the pump, so to speak, for seeking God when you wake up the next morning.

Today we consider Psalm 63 as a case study in "ending the day well." We aren't going to find "rules" or "laws" for meditating at night. Rather we are going to learn from David's habit of meditating upon God at night. Specifically we see how his practice fits into the larger context of seeking God all day long.

Psalm 63 – A Case Study in Night-time Meditation.

The heading of this psalm is: "A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah." He was either hiding from King Saul who had been rejected by God (1 Samuel 23) or from his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15). He begins with an expression of desire/delight for God.

1 O God, You are my God;
I shall seek You earnestly;
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.

You can probably think of a time when you're parched – maybe even a bit dehydrated. When you're that thirsty, nothing else matters much and nothing else will satisfy you except a drink of water. David had that type of longing/yearning for God Himself, and so he sought after God like a thirsty person "in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

I love how David addressed God: "O God, You are my God." There's nothing arrogant or possessive in addressing God in this way; he was simply taking God at His word when He promised Abraham's descendants, "I will be your God" (see Genesis 17:7). David was affirming that he welcomed God having this role in his life. He lived as a person who belonged to God.

In verses 2 through 5 the psalmist rehearses how he had "seen" God and experienced His

covenant love.

2 Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary,
To see Your power and Your glory.
3 Because Your lovingkindness is better than life,
My lips will praise You.
4 So I will bless You as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in Your name.
5 My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness,
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.

David had obviously spent a great amount of time dwelling upon the attributes of God that he had experienced. You get the distinct impression that these attributes of God (such as His power, glory, and lovingkindness) were more than just theological concepts for him. He had experienced them firsthand and had internalized their significance for his life. That's the fruit of meditation – growling over the attributes of God like a lion growling over its prey. Because he had experienced so much satisfaction in God, David expresses a commitment to “bless” God, lift up his hands in God's name, and offer praises with joyful lips. In light of his experience of God, David makes a bold commitment to worship.

Such deep, substantive contemplation of God will form the reservoir for David's night-time meditations. He will draw upon this reservoir when he is alone with God at night. The same thing can be true for us. Experiencing God throughout the day provides the raw material for night-time meditation.

In verse 6 David mentions his habit of meditating at night (at bedtime):

6 When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches,
7 For You have been my help,
And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.
8 My soul clings to You;
Your right hand upholds me.

Again, in the context of Psalm 1 and the psalms as a whole, this is an example of how David delighted in the law of the Lord and meditated “day and night.” Here he mentions that he “remembers” God on his bed and meditates on God “in the night watches.” In Hebrew culture, the night was divided into three four-hour “watches” or periods of time. When David speaks of meditating on God “in the night watches” he is saying that he ponders God's attributes when he is awake during the night. We aren't given details of what David was experiencing, but if 1 Samuel 23 is the context of this psalm, David and his men were in the wilderness because Saul wanted to kill them. David may well have meditated during the night watches in light of the danger he faced.

Of course nobody was *making* David meditate on God during the night watches; it wasn't a law that he had to be careful to observe. Rather, he was internally motivated to dwell upon God because he had found God so satisfying. He had a reservoir of experiences and convictions from which to draw. That's what David makes clear in verse 7. He meditated in the night watches . . .

“For You have been my help.” He didn’t forget how good God had been to him that day; his meditation flowed from his experience of God throughout the day. He savored the conviction that God’s lovingkindness had been better to him than life.

Psalm 119:148 expresses a similar thought, making clear that such night meditation wasn’t a duty but a delight:

148 My eyes anticipate the night watches,
That I may meditate on Your word.

The psalmist looked forward to the peace and quiet of the night watches so that he might focus his attention more fully upon God and His word. I wake up in the middle of the night quite often. Sometimes it’s frustrating; all I can think about is how tired and unproductive I’m going to be the next day. But sometimes I take advantage of the stillness and the solitude; sometimes I get up and enjoy rich times of fellowship with God. I don’t recommend setting your alarm for 3 a.m., but if you are awake, why not take advantage of the opportunity? Night-time meditation fits into the overall pattern of “meditating day and night” on God’s word.

In Psalm 16 we get further insight into what happened in David’s mind and heart during the night:

7 I will bless the LORD who has counseled me;
Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night.
8 I have set the LORD continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

What David describes in verse 7 would never have happened without the habit David describes in verse 8. David said, “I have set the Lord continually before me.” David was in the habit of placing God front and center in his life; this is another way of meditating “all day long.” Because David continually placed the Lord front and center, he found, “Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night.” Since his mind was saturated with thoughts of God, it had the capacity to instruct him in the night – telling him whatever he needed to hear. If he was especially discouraged, his mind might say (as the “sons of Korah” in Psalm 42 and 43), “Why are you downcast O my soul? Hope in God, the help of my countenance!”

I think we can all see the value of having minds that can instruct us in the night (or at any other time). Sometimes a person’s mind is a great liability in experiencing God; an untamed, undisciplined mind can lead a person away from God. But it’s possible for our minds to be our greatest asset in experiencing God. That should be the case since in the new covenant God has promised to write His law on our hearts. If we allow “the word of Christ to richly dwell within us” we’ll have a reservoir of wisdom that our minds can utilize at the proper time.

Let’s read the last three verses of Psalm 63. I won’t make much comment on these verses other than to say that David is contrasting his own life with those who seek to destroy him. Whereas David clings to God and experiences His protection, those who seek to destroy him (whether Saul or Absalom) will themselves be destroyed:

9 But those who seek my life to destroy it,

Will go into the depths of the earth.
10 They will be delivered over to the power of the sword;
They will be a prey for foxes.
11 But the king will rejoice in God;
Everyone who swears by Him will glory,
For the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.

This stark contrast between David and his enemies reflects the two types of people described in Psalm 1. Those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate “day and night” will be like trees planted by streams of water that yield their fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither; those who mock God and His ways will be like chaff which the wind drives away.

Let’s think about the prospect of adopting David’s habit of meditating “in the night watches” or “in bed.” The following ideas/suggestions flow from what we’ve seen in the psalms.

Remembering God. In 63:6 David mentioned that he “remembered God” when he was lying on his bed. Specifically he remembered how God had “been his help.” Remember how Jesus healed 10 lepers and only one turned back to thank Him and worship. One simple exercise is simply to think back over your day and consider how you’ve experienced God that day. You could do this ***tonight*** actually. Before bed or in bed, think back over the day and ponder, “In what ways have I experienced God today?” Maybe you’ll remember something that’s been said here today; maybe you’ll remember a conversation that you found helpful; maybe God disciplined you in some way. Realize that God is with you and that He is continually at work in your life. Like David, remember Him at night.

“Casting all your anxieties upon Him, because He cares for you.” This is from 1 Peter 5:7. I find that this is especially important at night. During the day we often stay busy enough to keep our fears and anxieties at bay. But at night they often catch up with us. When you’re lying in bed at night – or when you wake up in the middle of the night – sometimes issues come to mind that make you anxious and that you cannot ignore. Here are some of the things that rush into my mind at night:

- A conversation I’ve had during the day that wasn’t particularly pleasant. Sometimes I replay a conversation in my mind, imagining that I’d said something different or better. Funny thing is that the actual conversation never changes.
- An unresolved conflict/issue.
- Guilt over some sin I’ve committed – either in thought or deed. We can run from guilt only so long; it often catches up with us at night.
- Sometimes I find myself thinking about all of the things I have to do the next day; anxiety over tomorrow threatens my sleep and rest.

When such thoughts flood our minds, that’s what we pray about; that’s the context for crying out, “God, you are my God. . . . You are my help and my Rock. . . . You provide everything I need.” You cast your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. Many times God will give a type of peace that only He can give.

Meditating on Scripture. You can think of this as a bedtime snack if that would help. Generally speaking, you don’t spend an hour preparing a bedtime snack; you just grab something quick that

sounds good at the time; you open the fridge and grab a few grapes or whatever. Sometimes we need to go to the Scriptures that way as well. Maybe we need less of an “all or nothing” attitude (“Either I’m spending an undistracted hour of focused time in the Word or I’m not doing anything. . .”). Sometimes two or three minutes of reading/meditation can be very nourishing – especially if the meaning of the passage you’re reading is apparent.

Again, this isn’t a “have to”; we’re not piling on more obligations. Rather, we’re seeking to experiencing a God whose lovingkindness is better than life, more satisfying than anything else.

About a month ago a verse from John 4 captured my attention. After Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman (a.k.a. the woman at the well), his disciples showed up and were shocked that He was talking with a woman. When they tried to get Him to eat something, Jesus said, “I have food to eat that you don’t know about.” They didn’t “get” what He was saying, so Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work.” That basic idea that Jesus considered the “will of God” to be His food captured my attention. He didn’t dread doing the will of God; He didn’t resent the sacrifice and the strain of it all; the will/work of God was like food to Him – it kept Him going and nourished Him. I began to ask, “God, would you give me this same perspective? Teach me to think of Your will the way I think about food.”

Numerous times recently this Scripture has come back to me at night when I find myself getting anxious or dreading something that I need to accomplish the next day. I am finding that this Scripture is giving me freedom to do the will of God with joy (instead of dread or obligation or grumbling). It’s really giving me a deeper experience of God. I commend taking a few minutes at the end of the day to think about a specific Scripture.

Let me close with this thought: Ending the day well is both a cause and effect. On the one hand, pondering God and His goodness at the end of the day is the *effect* of thinking on God all day long. On the other hand, dwelling on God at the end of the day can *cause* us to experience God more fully the following day; it can be a stimulus for meditation when you get up the next day. That will be our topic next week.