

The Practice of His Presence

Psalm 139:7-12 and Others

Series: Loving God and Loving Others (Summer 2020)

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Topic: Loving God and others with our hearts

Worship: In His Presence

Key Sentence: The presence of God is a conversation

Outline:

I. God is always present. (Psalm 139:7-12)

II. We speak to him constantly and inwardly (Psalm 63:1-8)

III. He speaks through creation and conscience (Romans 1:18-20, 2:14-15)

IV. He speaks through His word and his Spirit (Psalm 19:7-8, John 14:25-26)

Psalm 139:7-12 Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? ⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! ⁹If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Psalm 63:1-8 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. ⁸My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Romans 1:18-20 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Romans 2:14-15 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their

conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Psalm 19:7-8 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;

John 14:25-26 “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

The Practice of His Presence Psalm 139:7-12 and Others

Brother Lawrence was a Carmelite monk, best known for the devotional book known as *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He was born in 1614 in the Lorraine region of eastern France. He grew up during the devastating Thirty Years War. His parents were peasants, his schooling was limited, and his poverty forced him to join the army. In 1635 he was wounded. His sciatic nerve was probably damaged, leaving him lame. After convalescence in his parents' home, he entered the employment of the French king's treasurer. Serving as a footman, Lawrence says he was "a great awkward fellow who broke everything."

A few years later his religious conviction led him to join a community of Carmelites in Paris, where he became "Lawrence of the Resurrection." He spent 40 years working in the kitchen, as the community grew from a few to over a hundred brothers. Despite his lowly position, his character attracted many. He had a reputation for profound peace and visitors came to seek spiritual guidance. The simple wisdom he passed to them in conversations and letters, would later become the basis for *The Practice of the Presence of God*. This little book has one big idea, expressed in a variety of ways. Within the first few pages Brother Lawrence says "we should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him." It's a simple statement of a simple idea. My own key sentence for this message is just as simple "the presence of God is a conversation." Conversation, of course, is two-way communication. That's the beauty of it. I want to look at some Scriptures this morning that show first that God is present with us and then how we communicate with God and finally the many ways that God communicates with us.

Countless Scriptures point to God's presence. One that I love is Psalm 139:7-10
Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
⁸*If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*
⁹*If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,*
¹⁰*even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.* The Psalmist, David, begins this Psalm with well-known verses that describe God's knowledge of us. O LORD, you have searched me and known me! ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ³You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. God knows us, intimately, inwardly and outwardly. The implication is that he knows all this because he is constantly with us. Verse 5 "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." Which leads to verse 7 "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?"

I do not believe, as some do, that David is seeking to escape God's presence. Rather he is in awe, not only of God's knowledge but of his presence. Verse 7 is rhetorical. Where can I go away from your Spirit? Nowhere. God's Spirit is everywhere. He is present here with us now and present within us as believers. You can no more go away from the Spirit than you can go away from yourself. Where can I flee away from your presence? Nowhere. The Hebrew is literally "where can I flee that I am not before your face?" Nowhere. Every place is before his face. He is always present, always regarding us and knowing us.

Verses 8-12 show that this presence is a reality no matter how extreme our supposed distance from God. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!" Can't go up to escape God's presence. Can't go down. "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me." Wings of the morning is a metaphor for going east and uttermost parts of the sea for going west. Can't escape God that way either. Notice in verse 10 that David's true motives are seen. He's not trying to get away from God. He's rejoicing that even at the extremes, God's hand is on him, protecting and guiding. Verses 11-12 "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,'¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you." All of us at times, some of us often, feel the despair or the threat of night. We feel alone in the darkness and fear the bad things, real and imagined, that happen in the deep of the night. But there is no night to God and no place where we need fear his absence.

This truth, that God is with us always, pervades the Bible. I believe this is part of the big idea of Scripture. Leviticus 26:11 "I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you.¹² I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." This promise is repeated and amplified in many forms. Moses said to Joshua "It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you." The New Testament quotes this: "for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Jesus says "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He says, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

But on top of all that, he promises the Spirit. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." Then he says "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." He comes to us in the person and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. So, the promise "I will dwell with you" is true and fulfilled in this moment for believers.

But in practice we don't always experience this presence. He is there always, but we have the sad capability of ignoring or quenching the Spirit. He desires that we pursue the sense of his presence, seek the constant relationship he offers, not just with himself, but with Jesus the Son and God the Father. This big idea promise that he will be our God, we will be his people and he will dwell with us is found in the simple inward reality of relationship with those he redeems.

One key way to pursue this presence is by conversation with Him. Brother Lawrence says we can "accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him, with freedom and in simplicity. We need only to recognize God intimately present with us. We may beg His assistance for knowing His will in things doubtful, and for rightly performing those we plainly see he requires of us." He says that "in this conversation with God, we are also employed in praising, adoring and loving him incessantly, for his infinite goodness and perfection."

The most significant thing about a conversation is that two people are involved and communication goes both ways. So if the practice of the presence of God is a conversation, it follows that we must speak to God and God must speak to us. How do we speak to God? We call it prayer, but not just formal prayers. We address our thoughts, our whole mental conversation to God. There are many examples in Scripture, especially in the Psalms. Let's read Psalm 63, verses 1-8 *O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. ⁸My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.*

The first thing to notice in this Psalm is, maybe, the most important, that the Psalmist addresses himself to God. "O God." This is a stepping into his presence, which we can do any time, in any place. "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you." I've often quoted the Puritan Thomas Horton who said "The life of our life consists in our communion with God, which we maintain not only by set performances of prayer, morning and evening . . . But we maintain this communion more especially by a daily, and hourly, and frequent, and constant lifting up of our hearts to God in sighs and groans, and so follow him, as that we will not let him go, or be one moment out of our sights." As David says "earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

Verse 2 “So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.” One of the ways we listen to God is by looking upon him in his word and his works and seeing the evidence of his power and glory. We’ll get to that. Verse 3 “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.” This conversation, this prayer, has now moved from the mind alone into words, into continual praise, and into lifting up of hands. We say to two-year-olds “use your words.” We need to use our words, and our body language to express praise and thanksgiving to God. And look at what character quality of God is better than life itself to the Psalmist: God’s steadfast love, his hesed, his loving kindness. As Michael Card says, hesed is when “the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything.” Because of our sin toward God and others, and because of our self-centered rebellion against God, we deserved nothing but judgment and separation. But because of his hesed God gives us what we don’t deserve. In Jesus, in his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, he gives us forgiveness, restoration and renewal.

Verse 5: “My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.” When David is awake in the night he does not let his mind wander to his worries or his to-do list or his human desires. He thinks of God. He remembers God. He meditates on God, and this is what satisfies his soul, just as a burger and fries – rich and fat food – satisfies the appetite. But does it feel that way to you? So often we find the fast food of the world more satisfying than the solid food of God’s presence. But the Psalmist knows better. Verse 7 “for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. ⁸My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” The Psalmist knows God. He knows he’s in the shadow of his wings, no matter what the circumstances. He knows that God is so ever present that his soul can cling to his creator and redeemer. He knows the wonderful truth that the right hand of God, the strong hand of God holds him. This knowledge can be experienced by those who daily and continually practice the presence of God.

So one half of our conversation is the freedom to speak openly to God; to pray, to cry out, to address our inward thoughts not just to ourselves, but to the one who truly dwells with us and within us. The other half of our conversation is to listen. It wouldn’t be a conversation if God didn’t speak. Yet in fifty years as a believer I can only think of one or two times when I thought I heard an audible voice. On the other hand I’ve had countless times when he has spoken in ways other than an audible voice. It’s those we’re going to look at now, and we begin with creation. God speaks through creation. Consider Romans 1.

Verses 18-20 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

I could, of course, have chosen verses that look at God's creation in praise. "The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky above proclaims his handiwork." God speaks in creation and as believers we rejoice to hear him. But Scripture takes it further. These verses in Romans expect non-believers to know about God through the voice of creation. Paul says that unrighteous people suppress this truth, as if truth were crying out all around them and they can only ignore it by plugging their ears. He says that knowledge about God is plain. "His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." Creation speaks. It tells all people about God's eternal power. Not just power, but eternal power. Why? Because creation self-evidently inhabits time. The seasons and years speak to a circle of time that repeats and repeats, always different yet always the same. Creation tells us that it was here long before we were as individuals, and that it will outlast us, unless the eternal God who is the power behind creation intervenes to end it. So as we look at the sun, the moon, the stars, they do proclaim his power. Who but God could create such vastness and energy. They also proclaim his eternity, for year after year they endure and he who made them must be more enduring yet.

Furthermore, creation speaks to us of the divine nature. The wisdom and creativity of God is evident, shouted by every detail of creation that we see. We've looked all morning at the Milky Way galaxy. This vast assembly of stars and nebulae is just one among billions of galaxies his word brought into being and his hand formed. This wonder speaks of the eternal power and divine nature of God. But it doesn't take vastness to tell us these truths. This past weekend Gail and I went briefly to the woods of north-eastern Arkansas. It wasn't mountain majesty or vast scenery, but if you looked you could see the creative hand of God in details. Flowers and fruit and leaves and the tiny tendrils of climbing vines proclaim his divine wisdom and creative hand. Furthermore the goodness of God is spoken by his creation, which has been designed to provide us with air, water, food and all our needs. So one way to hear God speak is to open your eyes and go outdoors. Houston is not the epicenter of creation. But there is much to hear even here. Paul affirms that people hear this speech. Almost every culture has understood that the God or a god or many gods must lie behind this complexity, this order, this goodness.

Yet most cultures have erred by substituting gods of their own making for the true God, or by flatly denying the evidence of their eyes. Our culture clings to a myth of time, chance and evolution which does little to explain and much to obscure the truth creation speaks. This is the enemy's ploy, to make created beings think they understand creation apart from the creator, and so to ignore his eternal power and divine nature to which we are ultimately accountable.

But God speaks to the minds and hearts of both believers and unbelievers not only through creation but through conscience. Romans 2:14-15 *For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.* God speaks through conscience, with a pervasive speech, words heard in virtually every culture. "This is right," conscience says, "this is wrong." C. S. Lewis points to this as one of the best arguments for the existence of God. When one person complains about another's behavior he "is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know. And the other man nearly always tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard." Or, in our culture, against the right understanding of the standard. But, Lewis says, "The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another, you are, in fact, measuring them both by a standard. You are, in fact, comparing them both with some Real Morality, admitting that there is such a thing as a real Right, independent of what people think, and that some people's ideas get nearer to that real Right than others." He concludes that the real right is established by the existence of a moral lawgiver who built conscience into the people made in his image.

So God speaks through conscience. This is not just how he speaks to non-believers about their sin; this is how he speaks to believers about their behavior. Look for this word in the letters of Paul and you'll find he considered conscience a serious guide. He says in the book of Acts "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." He talks in 1st Corinthians about the testimony, the voice of his conscience, and how it pushed him to "simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God."

God speaks through creation. God speaks through conscience. But more than that, he speaks through his Word and his Spirit. For the Word I'll read Psalm 19:7-8 *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.*

I love these verses because they show God's word speaking to our heart, soul, mind and strength. God speaks, first, to revive our souls. We pray. He speaks, through his Word, change happens within. Our souls, which may have been cast down and discouraged, are revived, new life brought back again. What more could you ask of a conversation with a friend? The testimony, the written record of God's speech, is sure, making wise the simple. We often need wisdom. We pray and ask God for it. One of the ways he answers is through the Word. What does Scripture say? This is not about proof texting or opening your Bible at random and pointing your finger. This is about consistent time with the Word so that God can speak wisdom not into your circumstances but into your whole life. Then, as you need wisdom for circumstances the shape of your life leads good choices. Next, the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. God speaks through his Word to your needy heart. He says "Oh, friend, this is true and this is true and this is true." Even as we've begun this series my prayers have been answered and my walk with God has been closer as I've heard him say "love me and love others with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

Finally, the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. We are awash, drowning in a sea of information and opinion, a social media chaos where every theory has it's die-hard proponents, shouting and shouting. It feels like there is no light in that chaos, but only increasing darkness. But God's word brings light to the eyes. Isaiah 8 addresses this. "Do not call conspiracy everything these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. ¹³The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread." And then a little further along "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn." God speaks to us through his Word. He answers prayer through his Word. He gives guidance through his Word. He teaches wisdom for right living through his Word. He comforts our hearts and revives our souls through his Word. I can't tell you how many times I have prayed to God and in the silence of listening, Scripture that has become part of my life glows neon someplace in my brain and God has spoken. For me this is the characteristic communication of God He speaks to me clearly, if silently, through the Word that has been embedded in my heart, mind and soul.

Finally, of course, he speaks through his Spirit. As we said at the beginning, God the Holy Spirit is the presence of God with us. He indwells us to comfort and to guide and so he speaks. This is what Jesus promised. John 14:25-26 *These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

The Father and Son have sent the Spirit to indwell us. He is present in you, believer, right now. He's the one who teaches your heart truth and brings to mind all Jesus has said and all the Father has said, and by extension all God is saying to you now concerning your present circumstances and behavior. It is through the Spirit that detailed guidance for your circumstances can be heard. One of my favorite, relatively recent stories showing this occurred when Sandy Zeek was in hospice care. Gail was praying for Sandy one morning and her eye fell, for some reason, on the afghan that lay across our chair. Suddenly she felt she should take that with her when she visited Sandy that day. No, she said, she's in a hospice, she's got plenty of blankets. But later, when she prepared to go out the door her eye fell on the afghan again. "Maybe I'll just put it in the car," she said. When she arrived to visit Sandy, she didn't quite believe it, and left the quilt in the car. Then she asked Sandy if there was anything she needed. Sandy said "Oh, my legs are so cold, and I can't get a blanket." Needless to say the trip to and from the car was joyful. God's Spirit speaks.

So the practice of the presence of God is a continual conversation. We talk to God and he talks to us. Part of the art of this is shaping your interior conversation so that often, instead of just thinking to yourself, you're speaking to God. That opens the door for the experience of his presence. He speaks to you personally directly, experientially, through creation and conscience, through his word and by his Spirit. Brother Lawrence showed many this practice of God's constant presence, and gave practical advice. One question he was asked was "How can I be constantly in the presence of God and get anything else done. I've got work to do, a family to care for, bills to pay, a church to serve. How can I do all that and be continually focused on the presence of God? Brother Lawrence had good advice. First he said, pray. "O my God, since you are with me, and I must now, in obedience to your commands, apply my mind to these outward things, I beseech you to grant me the grace to continue in your Presence." Then he "went to his work appointed in the kitchen. . . and having first considered the things his work required, and when and how each thing was to be done, he spent all the intervals of his time in prayer."

But what if you fail? What if God's presence slips your mind and you lose that focus. His counsel is simple. Don't dwell on the failure but get back up and step into his presence again. "When I fail in my duty, I readily acknowledge it, saying, I am used to do so: I shall never do otherwise, if I am left to myself. If I fail not, then I give God thanks, acknowledging the strength comes from Him." He says "we ought, without anxiety, to expect the pardon of our sins from the blood of Jesus Christ." And "thus, by rising after my falls, and by frequently renewed acts of faith and love, I am come to a state wherein it would be as difficult for me not to think of God as it was at first to accustom myself to it."

And I close with this “The King, full of mercy and goodness, very far from chastising me, embraces me with love, makes me eat at His table, serves me with His own hands, gives me the key of His treasures; He converses and delights Himself with me incessantly, in a thousand and a thousand ways, and treats me in all respects as His favorite, as I place myself in His holy presence.”