



# “Daily Routines Be Holy”

*Psalm 139*

When we come to the Bible, it is easy to see it as one spectacular event after another, far removed from the mundane hours that make up much of our lives. But the spectacular in Scripture often emerges from the mundane. Moses is tending his flocks when he meets God in a burning bush. . . . Samuel is sleeping when God awakens him (1

Samuel 3) . . . Simon and Andrew are just casting a net into the sea when Jesus calls out to them. James and John are just mending nets. . . . Cornelius is hanging out at 3pm doing whatever Centurions do when God comes to him (Acts 10) . . .

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

I hope you will take the time to read the Psalm slowly, perhaps daily, this week. I want the psalm to be as immediate and present with you as possible. For here is the big lesson for today: **the psalms are not meant to express our hearts**, though they may do so, **they are meant to form our hearts**.

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

## ***The hide-and-peek God?***

A student in one of my classes once came to me with a question. He began it this way: “I know, of course, that God created everything, is letting things run forward and isn’t involved in the day-to-day, but here’s my question . . .” N. T. Wright tells the story of a student who came to him to say that he didn’t believe in God. When Wright asked him to describe God, the student said, “You know, the god<sup>1</sup> who doesn’t get involved in the daily muck of our lives, but keeps a list of what we do wrong.” Wright replied, “Well, I don’t believe in that god either.” Neither do I. Neither do the writers of Scripture.

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

Sadly, I think that God-the-Absentee-Landlord is a core conviction held by many Christians. They may not articulate in that way, but they just don’t see God as being involved in their day-to-day lives. Instead, God is a superhero who shows up once in a while. Why sometimes and not others? Who knows? . . . The truth is that this was once among my core convictions. Christianity was about stuff that happened in the past and a set of beliefs I affirmed, but not the reality of an ever-present, ever-caring, everloving, ever-faithful, ever-personal, ever-relational God.

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<sup>1</sup> You’ll notice when I write that I reserve the capitalized “God” for the God revealed in Scripture. All the other “gods” get lowercase treatment. I find this to be a clarifying practice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***The Spirit as Evidence***

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

Paul refers to Jesus as the “first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). “First fruits” is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus’ resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit marked the coming of God’s kingdom, which has arrived already but has “not yet” been consummated.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Every time I come to this topic, I get a bit nervous. The kingdom of God has come already, but not yet?? Really? In a word, yes. Both are true. How do we know this? Because God resurrected Jesus and the Spirit has returned (already), though we still live in a world marred by sin and suffering (not yet).

## ***The Spirit as Guarantee***

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

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

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

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

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

## ***God never hides***

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

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

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

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

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