

Spiritual Practice (Part One)

“My eyes stay open through the watches of the night”

Reflection 43 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

There are many people these days – many thoughtful, caring people – who’ve essentially given up on church, who are tired of constant religious bickering over matters they don’t care about at all. And yet God they still care about. They seek to understand God. They seek to make sense of God. They even seek in some way to encounter the presence of God. They recognize that there is – that there must be – an Intelligence that underlies all that is or so much that we experience makes no sense and has no meaning: the moments in our lives in which we sense meaningful coincidence, the prayers to which we feel some response, the premonitions that turn out to be true, the dreams we have that seem more real than others, our falling in love and feeling that it was meant to be, even the stories we tell ourselves.

So just beyond the thin veil of nature all around us, within the rocks and trees, the streams and the hills, across the great plains and deserts, out in the surging sea, high up in the flowing air, they sense that a whole lot more is going on than we ordinarily suppose, more than our own sight is able to grasp: beyond what science can tell us, in the realm of love and friendship, of gratitude and inspiration, that is, in the realm where all that is most important happens. And so these people may have given up on church as they’ve experienced it but still want somehow to be part of a community, some gathering of people, who live out spiritual practice, who study and think together, who can make confession to one another and find forgiveness, who practice the arts of discernment and spiritual guidance, and of hospitality and service, who even in some way still worship, still acknowledge the Intelligence we know is all around us.

In pursuit then of spiritual practice we’re going to spend some time with the great 119th Psalm, the longest chapter in Scripture, at 176 verses, and perhaps the most artistic. It’s composed as this incredible alphabetic acrostic poem, that is, it has twenty-two 8-verse stanzas, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with each of the eight verses of a stanza beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. So the first eight verses all begin with the Hebrew letter “aleph.” Think of it as “A.” The next eight verses all begin with the letter “beth.” Think of it as “B.” And so on and so on.

But there is more. This psalm is a celebration of God’s law – “Oh, how I love your law!” the psalmist will say (119:97), and it uses eight words for law, loosely translated into the English as law, statutes, precepts, commands, laws, decrees, and two words for “word,” in Hebrew *dabar* and *imrah*. And in each eight-verse stanza, the composer seeks to use as many of these eight words as possible. So, for instance, verses 97-104 read:

Oh, how I love your *law*!
 I meditate on it all day long.
 Your *commands* make me wiser than my enemies,
 for they are ever with me.
 I have more insight than all my teachers,
 for I meditates on your *statutes*.
 I have more understanding than the elders,

for I obey your *precepts*.
 I have kept my feet from every evil path
 so that I might obey your *word*.
 I have not departed from your *laws*,
 for you yourself have taught me.
 How sweet are all your *words* to my taste,
 sweeter than honey to my mouth!
 I gain understanding from your *precepts*;
 therefore I hate every wrong path.

This guy loves God's law; he meditates on it all day long. At midnight he rises up to give God thanks for his righteous laws (62). He runs in the path of God's commands, for God has set his heart free (32). He walks about in freedom, for he has sought out God's precepts (45). His eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that he might meditate on God's promises (148). Seven times a day he praises God for his righteous laws (164).

At first this amazes us! After all, when was the last time you felt that way about Scripture? When was the last time you felt that way about God's law? Or about any law? So I grew up in a law-based religion, a religion of Do's and Don'ts: no smoking, no drinking, no bad language, no card-playing, no mixed swimming, no dancing, no movies, no Christmas (never mind that almost none of these things had much if anything to do with Scripture one way or another). Sex never came up, except to say that it was bad. Anyway, we took our religion very seriously. We were at church every time the doors were open. They got some things right back then! But we'd have these two-week Gospel meetings – every evening for two weeks, usually in the summertime on the very hottest nights of the year, and I remember sweltering through long, long, interminably long, sermons with no air-conditioning.

We took care to get our doctrine right – at least as it had been taught us. And we gave up a lot of fun, a lot of life, for it. But in all that, in all that we did and all that we didn't do, we did not consciously encounter the presence of God. It never came up. We had no real sense of the sacred all around us, and we were never able to press past the letter of the law, the way Scripture was reduced to a law code, to find the living God behind it all.

But then I look back at Psalm 119 and I wonder: What's up with this guy? What keeps his eyes open through the watches of the night as he meditates on God's words? What gets him up at midnight, what makes him praise God seven times a day, for his righteous laws? What's he seeing that I don't see? What's he experiencing that I don't experience? And so I go back and try to get inside the mind, inside the heart, of the Psalmist. I try to put myself back in fifth century BC Judea when this poem may have been written. He doesn't have a book called the Bible in front of him. He doesn't even have an "Old Testament." Maybe he has some scrolls he looks at from time to time, but maybe he still spends a lot of his time out on the hills of Judea tending sheep. He's not book conscious at all.¹

He doesn't even have a word equivalent to our English word "law." The Hebrew word most often translated "law" is *torah*, and it actually means teaching or instructions. You see this guy doesn't have all the centuries of Latin jurisprudence laid down as a filter over Scripture. His is a

much simpler view of things. We have, for instance, “The Ten Commandments.” He had “The Ten Words.” In Exodus 20, remember, that’s the word – *dabar*. It means “word.” The oneness of this God. No partial pictures of God. Not using God’s name for dark purposes. Resting every seventh day. Honoring your parents. Etc. These are simply the ten words at the heart of reality. They’re just the way things are.

So our Psalmist rejoices in God’s law, God’s *torah*, God’s instruction. He’s thrilled to have God’s teachings, God’s instructions, and he sees them everywhere, not just on a scroll or through the oral teachings of a prophet or priest. “The heavens themselves declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge” (Psalms 19:1-2). And he hasn’t had the Church Fathers, the Latin church, the New England Puritans, the countless self-appointed religious tyrants who claim to speak for God, wearing him down, stifling his spirit, and killing his spiritual passion.

So what does he know that I don’t know? A whole lot it turns out –

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.

ⁱ Paula Fredriksen, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, s.v. “Law.”