

A Disciple's Devotion: This One Thing Do I Seek

Psalm 27

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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In the 1992 movie “A River Runs Through It,” Norman and Paul are two boys growing up in Missoula, Montana, in the 1920s. Their father, a Presbyterian minister, works them hard. The boys love to go fly fishing in the nearby Blackfoot River. However, they are not allowed to go fishing until they have completed their homework and religious study under the watchful tutelage of their father.

Norman is the gifted writer of the two sons, and his father is especially hard on him, trying to bring out the very best in Norman. And so every time Norman finishes writing an essay, the father takes a red pencil, marks the essay up and down, crosses out several sentences, and hands the paper back to Norman with this advice: “Go back and re-write it, and this time cut it in half.” They go through this routine several times, until finally Norman’s father pauses, nods his head, and says, “Good work.” The instant those words roll off the father’s lips, Norman and Paul are dashing out the door, fishing rod in hand.

In my doctoral work at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the director of the Doctor of Ministry program uses that scene from “A River Runs Through It” to make a point: a good subject to study must go through several processes of “half-again”, until finally we come to one specific topic to study in our research. And so I would turn in a project proposal that I thought was good and tight, and Dr. Jones would say, “No, you’re trying to measure too many things here. You need to go half again.” We’d go through that routine until finally I had narrowed my focus sufficiently.

Half again. It’s a good exercise to go through in order to make the most important priorities rise to the top. Of all the things that are important to you in life, make a list and cut it in half again and again, until the number one priority remains. And for that number one priority, you should be able to say, “This one thing do I seek in life...”

The psalmist says, “This one thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and seek him in his temple.”¹ This one thing do I seek: to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life... After some intense soul-searching and several iterations of the half-again exercise, the psalmist has finally arrived at the number one priority in his life: communion with God.

The psalm is attributed to King David. Communion with God is David’s number one priority. Do you have any idea of the kinds of priorities that King David may have passed on just so he could finally arrive at “dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of [his] life” as his number one priority? All the material wealth he had accumulated—that wasn’t David’s “one thing.” All the power and fame he had mustered for himself—that wasn’t David’s “one thing.” All the status and privilege that came with his kingship—that wasn’t David’s “one thing.”

For David, the one thing above all else that was most important to him was simply to dwell forever in the presence of God in all of God’s glory. He wasn’t talking about going to church, although going to a house of

¹ Psalm 27:4

worship is a vital and indispensable part of living in fellowship with God. No, David vocalizes that which is true for all of us, namely, that deep down what we crave most in our soul, what we desire above all else in the most profound depths of our being, is to be in unbroken, unhindered communion with God. Until we find the communion with God that our soul so deeply longs for, all else will crumble away into meaninglessness. Wealth, power, happiness, status—all become meaningless if we pursue them apart from or above our relationship with God. St. Augustine put it well when he said, “My heart was restless until it found its rest in [God].”

This one thing I ask of the Lord, says David, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and seek him in his temple.

How about you? What’s your “one thing”? Look at the things that are important in your life, and halve them again, and again, and again. What is the “one thing” that remains?

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It is one thing to say what your “one thing” is. It’s something else to live toward the fulfillment of your “one thing.” In terms of our faith, to confess our faith is often based on what we have experienced of God in the past. But living our faith means engaging God in the midst of the present situation. For David, he confessed his faith as he reflected on the ways God has been his light and his salvation, his mighty stronghold against his enemies. And it was also in the face of hostile adversaries that he sought the guidance and protection of God. His “one thing” was lived out in the context of the conflict in his life.

You and I probably don’t face the same kind of hostility that David faced. You and I don’t have armies of zealous warriors chasing after us. But still, the world in which we live is a hostile world. It presents dangers, whether they be actively poised against us, or simply perils of which we need to be aware and around which we need to navigate. And so, even though our situation is not the same as David’s situation, nevertheless we can learn from him the way to live toward the fulfillment of our “one thing”. Like David, we can seek God’s face. Like David, we can look to God for wisdom and guidance. And like David, we can seek the protective shelter that God provides for those who come to him. And we do these things by living a life of prayer.

Making communion with God our “one thing” means seeking God’s face. Seeking God’s face is an intentional act of turning to God and asking God to look with favor and kindness upon us. On many Sundays, that is what I pray for you when I pronounce the benediction: “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up his countenance toward you, and give you peace.” It is a blessing that is framed in Hebrew poetic fashion, with the first phrase in each line being echoed in meaning by the next phrase. And so the Lord “making his face to shine upon you” is the same as the Lord “being gracious to you.” And the Lord “lifting up his countenance toward you” means “to look upon you with peace, shalom.”

To seek God’s face means to desire the welcome embrace of God. To seek God’s face means to be certain that God is watching over us and caring for us. In times of trouble, when others abandon us, when others reject us, when others cast us aside, when we feel all alone, we must have Someone to whom we can turn who will receive us and welcome us as one of His own. And if not God, then who will that be? Even your mother and father are apt to forsake you at one time or another, says David, but not God. Seek God’s face.

Seek God’s face. But also seek God’s wisdom and guidance. If it is our “one thing” to live in communion with God, then that means we will walk in God’s ways. “Teach me your way, O Lord; lead me in a straight path

because of my oppressors.”² Ours is a world filled with influences clamoring for our attention and seeking to direct us in their ways. In a world that is hostile to God, many of the ways of the world are divergent from the ways of God. And so we must seek God’s wisdom and guidance. Among all the paths we will encounter, we must ask God to direct us along God’s path.

Seek God’s wisdom and guidance. I honestly don’t know of any better way to do this than to immerse ourselves in Scripture. The study of the Bible, both individually and together, is indispensable to learning God’s will and knowing God’s ways. Engage in the Word of God, and let your study be a time of listening to what God has to say to you, so that you can be taught in God’s way and led along God’s straight path.

Seek God’s face. Seek God’s wisdom and guidance.

And seek God’s protection and deliverance. David knew what it was like to be attacked by enemies. And David knew that no one could offer the protection and deliverance that God could offer. So it is to be with us. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we pray every week. Faith in God does not make us immune from trouble, but it does give us God’s presence to help us through our times of trouble. Seek the protection and deliverance that God’s presence will provide.

In the end, if we are going to join David in making the one thing we seek, to live in the house of the Lord forever, then we need to realize that it is not just a declaration of our life priority, but especially it is a choice to live the life of faith. For us to say it is our desire to dwell with the Lord forever, requires an orientation of our hearts toward God. As David said, “My heart says, ‘seek his face...’” The kind of life called for in the fulfillment of “this one thing” calls for a determination to live our lives informed by communion with God.

In the end, it will take a life immersed in prayer in order to fulfill that desire to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives. You can’t just talk about God; you have to talk to God as well. Daily. All the time.

Finally, David offers us these words of encouragement: “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.”³ It is the assurance that we can experience the goodness of God in this life, not simply in our heavenly home. God’s goodness and mercy will manifest themselves to us here. Watch and wait.

The kind of waiting David urges in us is not idly sitting by, but an active waiting. It is a “living as if” kind of waiting—living as if all that we hope for has already come to pass. It is a choice to live our lives based on the goodness of God.

I don’t often use e-mails as sermon illustrations, but the other day someone forwarded a story to me that shows what it’s like to choose to live into a life of communion with God, to live “as if”.

A man of 92 years, short, very well-presented, who takes great care in his appearance, was moving into nursing home. His wife of 70 years has recently died, and he is obliged to leave his home. After waiting several hours in the nursing home lobby, he gently smiles as he is told that his room is ready.

As he slowly walks to the elevator, using his cane, the director describes Mr. Gagné’s small room to him, including the sheet hung at the window which serves as a curtain. “I like it very much,” he says, with the enthusiasm of an 8 year old boy who has just been given a new puppy.

“Mr. Gagné, you haven’t even seen the room yet,” protested the director, “hang on a moment, we are almost there.”

² Psalm 27:11

³ Psalm 27:13-14

“That has nothing to do with it,” replies Mr. Gagné. “Happiness is something I choose in advance. Whether or not I like the room does not depend on the furniture, or the décor—rather it depends on how I decide to see it. It is already decided in my mind that I like my room. It is a decision I take every morning when I wake up.

“I can choose. I can spend my day in bed enumerating all the difficulties that I have with the parts of my body that no longer work very well, or I can get up and give thanks to heaven for those parts that are still in working order. Every day is a gift, and as long as I can open my eyes, I will focus on the new day, and all the happy memories that I have built up during my life.”

My friends in Christ, you and I have a choice. We can try to navigate life and all its perils on our own, or we can choose to seek God’s face, to seek to live on the path God sets out for us, to seek our protection and refuge and salvation in God. And then we choose to live into the fulfillment of that vision.

This one thing I ask of the Lord, this one thing I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, and to seek him in his temple.

What is your “one thing”?

Amen.