

“I Have Set the Lord Always Before Me”: Giving God Our Full Attention

Introduction

The Text

¹ Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. ² I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”

³ As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. ⁴ The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.

⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. ⁶ The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

⁷ I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. ⁸ I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. ¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps. 16:1-11)

Our Attention

A. When we get out into the woods, out into creation as a church, I feel like it offers us a chance for a bit of a reset and a refocus—a time to reflect a bit more on where we’ve been with God and what it would look like to get right, if necessary, before we “get back” to our lives on down the mountain as it were.

1. And so that’s what I want to consider with you this morning.

B. In particular, I want to talk about our attention.

1. We’re going to look at three things regarding it: (1) What It’s Worth; (2) Where It’s Set; and (3) How It Goes.
2. And then I’ll try to give a few quick tips at the end as we attempt to get our attention fully and undividedly back on God.

(1) What It’s Worth

“Treasure Your Attention”

A. Truth be told, the inspiration for this year’s All Church Campout sermon, with this focus on our attention, came from a quote Joey read during a sermon a few weeks back. He took it from the

commencement address delivered by the social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt to the recent graduates of New York University.

- B. And actually what I wanted to do now was simply read it to you again, to get things started, to get the juices flowing for us on this somewhat chilly June morning.

1. Here's the excerpt I'm most interested in: "If there's just one thing from my address that you remember tomorrow, next week, and 20 years from now, make it this: Treasure your attention.

In 2014, when she was nearly 80 years old, the poet Mary Oliver wrote a short poem titled 'Instructions for Living a Life.' It goes like this: 'Pay attention. / Be astonished. / Tell about it.'

It sounds simple. But paying attention is in fact one of the most challenging and meaningful things you can do. Because what you pay attention to shapes what you care about. And what you care about shapes who you become.

In 2005, the writer David Foster Wallace gave one of this century's best-known commencement addresses, at Kenyon College. He said, 'the really significant education-in-thinking that we're supposed to get in a place like this isn't really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about.' He was right, and he seemed to anticipate that, two decades later, there would be so many powerful people and big companies trying to take that choice away from you. They compete with each other to capture your attention. Think about that phrase. It acknowledges that your attention is valuable. But it also reveals that some of the biggest corporations in human history aren't trying to earn your attention, or deserve your attention. They're trying to take it from you.

Consider just one example. Meta is valued at well over a trillion dollars, even though few of us have given it any money. How is that possible? Because it invented a business model that extracts attention from nearly half of all human beings and sells it to advertisers. Other industries followed: video games, dating, gambling—even investing has been gamified and optimized to keep us all staring and swiping. We've all had the experience of picking up our phone, maybe for a good reason, only to find ourselves, an hour later, mindlessly scrolling. That's not an accident. That's our phones and apps, doing what they were designed to do."

- C. When he first read this it hit me like a falling redwood.

1. Of course, I'm aware that most of us haven't paid money for these apps on our phones we enjoy and use all through the day. I'm glad we don't have to pay money for them. I probably wouldn't use them if they did ask for my money.
2. But I never really thought about the fact that, nevertheless, we all do still pay something to use them, don't we. We pay attention.

- a. They may not get our dollars.
- b. But they get our eyes, our focus, our attention.

- i. And that's perhaps the most valuable commodity of all.

- D. I wonder if you've ever heard the term "attention economy"?

1. It refers to that economic model that treats human attention as a scarce commodity that can be mined, harvested, captured, then analyzed and traded for profit.
 - a. If they can get you to look, they can sell your look for a buck.
 2. They know, what God knows, what Jonathan Haidt is trying to get across: Your attention is worth a lot.
 - a. It's, therefore, not something to trifle away, but to, as he says, "treasure."
- E. On this subject, Runo actually sent me a link to an interview where Harvard professor and psychiatrist Robert Waldinger makes the following profound statement: "Our undivided attention is the most valuable thing we have to give."
1. At this point, the guy conducting the interview pulled back in his seat with marked concern and responded with a sort of grief: "The only thing we have these days is divided attention. We can't even watch TV without also checking social media and sending a text."
 - a. So, even though our attention is one of the most valuable things we have, a lot of times we just give it away to a thousand uninspired things, sometimes all at once.
- F. With this first point, I simply want to underscore the value and worth of our attention.
1. But now I want move us towards that second point and ask: So where are we setting it? What are we giving, or paying, attention to?

(2) Where It's Set

A Y in the Road

- A. We see in our Psalm that, at a fundamental level at least, there really are only two options at this point . . .
1. The road forms a Y in front of us and on this side we have the one true God. We can give our attention to him.
 2. But then, on the other side, we have what the Bible refers to as idols or false gods. And, though there are many, an infinite number it would seem, they can all still be lumped into this same basic detour, as it were. We can give our attention to lesser things.
- B. The former idea comes out straightaway in the opening two verses, where David writes this: " ¹ Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. ² I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you'" (vv. 1-2). In other words: "God you have my attention! You're the one I'm looking to. If I don't have you, I have nothing!"
1. He says this even more forcefully down in the first part of v. 8: "I have set the LORD always before me . . ."

- a. Those words are really the whole reason I chose this psalm in the first place.
 - b. He has determined one thing: “I will always set the Lord before me so I can always set my attention upon him.”
- C. But then the latter idea comes out for us there in v. 4 when he refers to “those who run after another god . . .”—pouring out their “drink offerings”, taking their gods’ “names” on their lips, as they cry out to them for help!

We Set Our Attention Where We’ve Set Our Hearts

- A. When we bring both of these together I think we’re given quite a bit of insight into why we set our attention wherever we do.
 - 1. We set our attention, in this fundamental way, on that which we think will save us, protect us, help us, satisfy us, bring in the good life for us.
 - a. That’s why David turns to YHWH.
 - b. But it’s also why we can be tempted to turn to all manner of things, isn’t it?
- B. Just to carry on with the social media and the tech and the phone and screen idea . . . why do we turn to it? Why do we give our attention away to such things so easily?
 - 1. We can’t be too quick to discard such behavior as a mere force of habit or something like that.
 - 2. We have to ask: Why did it become a habit in the first place? What are we hoping to get?
- C. Let me read a bit on this from an article from TIME: “[I]n our ultra plugged-in world, we’re so used to constant stimulation that we feel uncomfortable when we’re not doing anything, even for just a few seconds.

Phones are so good at relieving such discomfort that Shiri Melumad, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, calls them ‘adult pacifiers.’ Much as a child totes around a toy or blanket to feel safe, adults draw comfort from the constant, familiar presence of their phones, Melumad says. You may lean on your digital pacifier deliberately—when you’re alone at a party and feeling awkward, say—or simply because you’ve become accustomed to always having something to occupy your brain.

[Adrian] Ward [, an associate professor at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin who studies people’s relationships to technology,] . . . calls smartphones a ‘supernormal stimulus’ Our brains are hardwired to seek out rewards like knowledge, entertainment, and social connection, all of which were much harder to find before we had tiny computers at our fingertips, Ward says. Now that we do, our phones are basically 24/7 all-you-can-eat buffets for our brains, endlessly and easily serving up the things they want. Of course our minds can’t help but gorge themselves.

. . . [R]eaching for the phone gives us something to do, and a feeling that that ‘something’ is more rewarding than whatever is happening to us in the real world. ‘Unless what you’re doing right here, right now, is the most interesting thing you could possibly be doing, your phone at some level’—perhaps not even a conscious one—‘represents a better alternative’”

D. You see what's happening here, don't you?

1. We set our attention where we've set our hearts.
2. Our looking follows our longing.
3. The giving of attention, then, is, at the deepest level at least, an expression of worship.
 - a. It is a turning to that which we think will make us comfortable, happy, fulfilled in some way.

"The Eye Is the Lamp of the Body"

A. I think this is the sort of thing that Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount when he says the following: "¹⁹ Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴ No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:19-24).

B. What is the connection between all these seemingly disparate sayings? Well, I think when you look at it, it's actually quite simple . . .

1. With the first bit he's talking about your heart and how it will inevitably be set on something as it's treasure. "Here is what I think will make me happy. Here is where the most reward will be found."
 - a. And you have to choose: will your treasure be in heaven, namely with God; or will it be something on this earth, with idols in some way?
2. With the second bit, he brings in the idea of the eye, or we could say: the attention. And here we see a further progression in the logic.
 - a. It's true, where your treasure is there your heart will be also.
 - b. But now we see it's also true that where your heart is there your eye will go also. That's what you're going to be looking at. That's what you'll be giving your attention to.
 - i. So if you think that a relationship will make you happy in the deepest place, you'll give all your attention to trying to meet and keep someone.
 - ii. If you think that your career is going to be the way of fulfillment, you'll give all your attention to that.
 - iii. If you think that looking a certain way will bring you joy, you'll give your attention to diets and exercise routines and all this.
 - iv. And on it goes.

- (1) Where my treasure is, there my heart is; where my heart is, there my eye is.
3. And then, finally, with that last little bit, he just cuts right to it, and he says: “Listen, where your eye is, that’s where your god is. That’s your master. You’ll be serving it day and night for better or worse.”
 - a. And, again, fundamentally, you have two options here: you could be serving the true God, or you could be serving, in the Greek, “*mammon*”—the stuff of this world.
- C. I wonder what it is for you? I wonder where your attention has been lately? Trace it out.
 1. This psalm invites us to trace it back to our hearts in an effort to discern what’s going on there.
 - a. What am I trying to get from this thing that I should be finding, that I’ll only really find in a lasting way, in Jesus?

(3) How It Goes

- A. But then this Psalm also invites to trace things forward and make note of how where we set our attention ultimately shapes us and effects things for us. We see what results, how it goes.
- B. You caught it there already in the words of Jesus I just read: “²² The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (vv. 22-23).
 1. Where you put your eye, where you set your attention—it’s going to determine whether you’re walking in light or in darkness; whether you can see rightly and you’re thriving in life, or you’re blind and stumbling around and bumping into walls.
- C. In our psalm, things are fleshed out even further for us . . .

Another God: Multiplied Sorrows

- A. Look back at what David says in v. 4: “The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply . . .”
 1. So where does setting your attention elsewhere get you? Multiplied sorrows.
- B. This again is what we just saw with Jesus.
 1. Why is he concerned that you not set your eyes and your heart on the things of this world?
 2. Well, it’s because, as he says, such things are subject to “*moth*” and “*rust*” and “*thief*.”
 - a. In other words, even if you get what your gazing at, you won’t be able to keep it for long. And, even while you have it, you won’t be fully happy—your sorrows will be

multiplied—because you’ll worried about losing it, you’ll sense the fragility and vulnerability of it.

- i. So if you get that relationship, what if they turn on you tomorrow?
 - ii. If you get that job, what happens when your boss discovers AI can do it twice as fast as you for half the cost?
 - iii. If you get that body and those looks, what happens if you can’t maintain it, what happens if you get old and frumpy like you inevitably will?
- b. It’s not your joy that’s multiplied when you give your attention to these false gods. It’s your sorrows.
 - i. You’ll be overtaken at one point or another by anxiety, jealousy, envy, fear, depression, and so forth.

C. Returning to what we’ve been saying about our phones and all this, isn’t that the case there as well?

- 1. It’s nearly an established fact at this point that—even though we turn to these things for a little dopamine hit, to make us feel entertained, or pacified, or happy—they are not making us more happy, but more miserable.
 - a. That’s what Jonathan Haidt’s book *The Anxious Generation* is all about. He correlates the plunging mental health of our youth that first shook statisticians back in 2010 with the arrival and wide distribution of smartphones.
- 2. This is why, among other reasons, as I’m sure you saw in the news a few weeks back, the UK plans to ban children under the age 16 from using certain apps and things on their devices.
 - a. Because it’s not making them happier.
 - b. It’s making them more miserable.
- 3. That which at first promises us great joy turns out to be a great threat to it.

The True God: Multiplied Joys

A. But, of course, the opposite is true for those who set their attention fully on the one true God.

- 1. That’s what we see in this Psalm with David, isn’t it? Now it’s not the multiplication of sorrows, but the multiplication of joys.

B. I see four layers to the joy described here . . .

Layer #1: Contentment

A. This is what we see in vv. 5-6: “⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. ⁶ The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.”

- 1. So one commentator says of these verses: “[They describe] the psalmist’s satisfaction with the Lord and his provision. The terms ‘portion,’ ‘lot,’ ‘lines,’ and ‘inheritance’ evoke the

allocation of the land into family plots . . . ; the song promotes contentment with the arrangements of one's life, seeing them as providentially ordered" (ESVSB).

- B. Isn't that really what you want? Contentment. To just finally say: "You know what, this is enough for me. I'm good."
 - 1. Listen, you'll never get there by chasing down other gods.
 - 2. You were created for him. You only find your satisfaction, your contentment in him.
- C. It's like what Paul says in Phil. 4: "¹¹I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (vv. 11b-13).
 - 1. Steph Curry puts v. 13 on his shoes. But it's not talking about basketball. It's talking about contentment.
 - a. "It doesn't matter to me whether things are going great or horribly by worldly standards. I can be content because I have Jesus."
 - i. Honestly, if you find a person who's truly content in whatever circumstance, that's more miraculous than a halfcourt shot :)

Layer #2: Guidance

- A. This is what we see in v. 7: "I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me."
 - 1. When your attention is given to the Lord, when you really seek him—he counsels you, he instructs you, he guides you, he helps you along in the confusing stuff of life.
- B. Isn't it such a temptation these days to just give up waiting on God for guidance and go to our favorite "AI agent" or whatever?
 - 1. It's fine to utilize these tools, but just slow it down a bit.
 - a. Gemini has nothing on the Holy Spirit.
 - b. Claude is no replacement for what God has already given us in Scripture.
 - c. ChatGPT is a cheap replacement for the Good Shepherd.
 - i. Real counsel and care will come from him!

- C. And that's why there's this third layer as well . . .

Layer #3: Security

- A. We see this there in vv. 8-9: "⁸ I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. ⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. ¹⁰For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption."

1. I'm not scared of stuff threatening around me in the present.
2. I'm not scared of whatever may be coming in the future.
3. I'm not even scared of death itself, though, of course, that's not fun.

a. Why?

- i. Because "I have set the LORD always before me . . ." My attention is on him.
- ii. But here's the even better thing: his attention is on me! He's at my "right hand." He won't "abandon" me. He's got me. And he's got you.

Layer #4: Pleasure

A. Look at how the psalm ends there in [v. 11](#): "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

1. God is at my right hand as we just saw in [v. 8](#).
2. But what's at his right hand? "[P]leasures forevermore."

B. We tend to think of pleasure as a dirty word. It's something you seek out in the dark places doing things you know you shouldn't.

1. But it's not a dirty word.
2. It's a biblical word.

C. And God is the author and source and fountainhead of it all. Whatever pleasures you experience and enjoy in this life it's all downstream from him. It all ultimately finds its source in him.

1. That's why, if you cut yourself off from him in pursuit of pleasure—you find that, ironically, nothing will ultimately please you.
2. But, if you give all else up to get him—you find that nothing can take your away your joy!
 - a. With God, we're not talking about a little dopamine hit like your phone can give you.
 - b. It's something deeper. And it's only found in his presence.

How Can David (and We) Talk Like This?!

A. But, of course, if you know your Bible and yourself at all, you're left wondering how a sinner like us, or even like we know David was, can enjoy all of this: contentment, guidance, security, pleasure—the presence of God!

1. To speak bluntly: the presence of God shouldn't be a joyous thing for sinful humans, it should be a terrifying thing.

a. So how can David, how can we, talk like this?

B. Well, the answer to the riddle is found when somewhere around a thousand years later both Peter and Paul would reference this psalm in their evangelistic sermons (cf. [Acts 2:25-28](#); [13:35](#)).

1. And do you want to know what the essence of their message is? The only way these things can be true for us is because they were first true for Jesus.
 - a. He is the true David, the true King, who gave his full attention to God his Father, who always set the Lord before him, who never turned aside from the narrow way . . . even when that way passed through the terror of the cross.
 - b. He endured our judgement willingly, knowing that his Father would not abandon his soul to Sheol or let him see corruption but would raise him up on the third day.
2. Now, because of him, this Psalm can be true for us.
 - a. This is why he could turn to that repentant thief on the cross and say: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).*
 - i. “You don’t deserve the paradise and pleasure of God’s presence.
 - ii. But, nevertheless, I’m carrying you there!”

Conclusion

- A. So what can you do to *“set the LORD always before”* you—to give him your full attention?
 1. I’m going to have leave a lot of that for you to work out for yourself. Go for a walk in the woods, on the drive home, sometime this week, consider it.
 2. I’m also happy to talk about it after if you’d like.

B. But for now I’ll give you just a few quick tips . . .

Tip #1: Slow Down

- A. Almost all our trouble comes from our impatience, our unwillingness to wait on God in uncomfortable moments. We want to make things go faster. We’re drawn to speed like moths to a flame.
- B. Every time Israel gets in trouble with idols and things it’s because their desired timeline didn’t match God’s.
 1. We do the same.
 2. If he’s not coming in the way I want, when I want, I’ll find a god that will. But it never works out well.
- C. The first step is just slow down on that.

Tip #2: Lean In

- A. Then lean in. Lean into the uncomfortable moments instead of hitting the eject button and going to your phone, or some other dopamine hit, or silver bullet. True joy isn't microwaveable. It takes time.
 - 1. You're not just waiting for God to change your circumstances.
 - 2. You're trying to locate God in them. What he's doing? What's he saying? Why are things going this way? Where is God in it?
- B. Slow down, lean in, and then . . .

Tip #3: Look Up

- A. Whatever else you're doing, whatever else you're attending to, give your attention to God.
 - 1. This could mean you're reading Scripture in the morning, yes—but then you're chewing on it in your heart as you go about your day.
 - 2. It could mean you set aside time for focused prayer in the morning, sure—but then you're "prayer walking" throughout your day—just keeping a continual conversation going with him as you go along.
 - 3. It could mean instead of listening to your favorite podcast during your morning commute, maybe you put on some worship music and you get your heart moving towards truth and you pick one of the songs to be your soundtrack for the day, you're going to keep humming and singing and worshiping whatever else you're doing at the office or school or wherever.
 - 4. It could mean you're getting in the church community and asking them to help you see him.
- B. Of course, you and I are going to have to attend to a lot of things when we head home later today.
 - 1. But whatever else we are attending to, let's give our full attention in and through it to the Lord.
 - 2. Let's slow down, lean in, and look up.
 - 3. Let's "set the LORD always before" us!

Up Next . . .

- A. Maybe what Josiah and Wendy have to share will help you get started in all this as well. This is the prompt I gave them . . .
 - 1. How have you been tempted towards distraction this past year—to give your attention to something other than the Lord? Why is it hard to set the LORD always before you? What else do you set before you sometimes? What else gets your attention? Why?
 - 2. What text from Scripture has God used to help bring you back and refocus on him? Share the text with us. Read it. Tell us what it means in general and what it means to you in particular. Then show us how it might apply to us as well.