

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION: REFLECTION

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## Scripture Reference: Psalm 139

Good morning church. My name is Ken Flower, if you don't know me, and I serve as a part of our team here at Doxa and today we are starting a new quarter and a new spiritual formation practice focused specifically on the practice of reflection. Now last year, about this time we began these quarterly focuses. We, through 2020, focused on silence and solitude, on prayer, on Sabbath, and then last, most recently, Bible reading. And we're excited to continue these into 2021. We're going to focus on reflection this quarter, and then move on to talk about rule of life and then service and last hospitality. Why are we taking the time to do this every quarter? Why do we want to be a church that focuses on our spiritual formation? We do this because we believe that to be a disciple of Jesus means that we need to spend time with Him. And that as we do this, we are becoming more and more like him, and then are able to do the things that he's called us to do. The apprentice always grows to become more like his master and these spiritual formation practices that we're talking about each quarter, these disciplines, are the means through which the spirit is graciously working to form us into the image of Jesus. As a side note, we are always being formed as well. We cannot escape it. Formation is always happening. The question is not if you are being formed, the question is who are you becoming? We want to be a church that pays attention to who we're becoming and specifically engages in practices that will form us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. And in that we will find our true selves. So this quarter, we begin a focus on the practice of reflection, or as some people call it, self-examination. And before we get to this, I want to tell you a story. About 12 years ago, I was fresh out of seminary and had just started working as a youth pastor at a church in Southern California. And I knew that, you know, it's never helpful to check your email right before you go to bed at night.

And yet often I did it. And one night I opened my phone and I see this email that's come in from a parent in our church. And as I begin reading this email, my heart begins to pound, and my throat begins to tighten, and I experience my mind is just beginning to race as I see what this parent has written to me. This parent was upset and I don't even remember all the details or what had happened, but upset with the decision I had made, how I had handled a situation involving their student. And in the end, the parent wanted me to apologize and admit that I had made a wrong decision and treated their student poorly. And in this moment, my heart was just racing and my mind was spinning. And as I turned my phone off and I got back into my bed, I couldn't fall asleep.

I laid there awake, feeling anxious, feeling shame, wondering did I make the right decision? Did I do what the parent said I did? Did I treat the student poorly? Is this something I need to apologize for? Am I a bad leader? Am I a bad pastor? And my mind just spun and spun and spun. And needless to say, I didn't sleep well that night. I was filled with feelings of anxiety, fear and shame, worried about what I had done, worried about if I had done something wrong or not. Worried ultimately about if I would fail. Now, a lot of this is what people might call reflection. A lot of this time I spent that night, you might call self-examination, but this kind of reflection and self-examination left me feeling anxious, ashamed, and awake. I know this might sound a bit dramatic and you may not get why this is something that I would lose sleep over, but to be completely honest with you, from the beginning of my time starting ministry, a fear of failure just controlled me. I was desperately afraid of failing, and I felt this incredible need to prove myself. And so when criticism came, which it came on more than one occasion, no matter how much I tried to avoid it and tried to do things perfectly, when criticism came, I was filled with defensiveness and fear. Since that day, since that year, I've spent more than one sleepless night. Sleepless nights where I replay the events of the day and I wonder if I said the right thing. I wonder if I made the right decision. I wonder if I'm leading well. I wonder if I led that meeting well. I wonder if I performed how people expected me to perform. And for many of us, reflection or self-examination, stopping to look back on our day, is really hard. Now, perhaps like me, you too are afraid to fail and you live with a need to prove yourself. So reflection then becomes a time when you just replay the events of your day and you wonder how you performed and you're left feeling anxious and ashamed.

Maybe for some of you reflection ends up just bringing a weight of guilt. As you look back on your day and reflect, you see the way you treated your kid, or you see the addiction that you just feel stuck in, and you are just dominated and controlled by this overwhelming feeling of guilt. For some of us as we stop and we reflect on our day, it just leads us to an incredible feeling of fear and anxiety. We realize as we look back, how truly out of control life might feel and we don't even know what tomorrow may bring. Now, here's what I've come to realize is the problem with this kind of reflection. This kind that leads to sleepless nights, to feelings of anxiety and shame and fear and guilt is that this kind of reflection was done all by myself.

As I laid there that night, running through the events over and over in my head, this reflection happened all by myself. And the only voice I heard was a voice of condemnation, and shame, and fear. So often because this is hard for us and we don't want to face that, we often avoid reflection. We don't want to look back on our day and maybe we've trained ourselves to only look ahead and think about what the next day may bring. Maybe we've learned to distract ourselves, distract our minds, and keep ourselves from thinking too much about the day before us? But I want to say this morning, and this is what this spiritual practice is all about, that there is a kind of reflection or self-examination that leads not to fear and shame and anxiety, but it leads to rest and transformation.

That's what I want to invite us to as a church for this quarter, is to learn how to look back on our days, to look back on our years, to look back on seasons of life, and be able to be honest about what we see, and at the same time, sit in peace and rest with God. And the key to this is that we don't do it alone, but we do it with God. Biblical reflection is a practice of looking back on your days. It's like you're exploring your day, but you're not doing it alone. Here's the key. You look back on your day with God as if God is there, right beside you looking back.

And in the end you experience real peace as you reflect on his presence with you. You experience real transformation as you receive his forgiveness and his steadfast love through you. One of the clearest examples of this kind of reflection or self-examination is King David's words at the end of Psalm 139. You may remember these where he says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

What's amazing about David's invitation here is that he invites God to come and search his heart, and he's not anxious about it. He approaches this conversation with enthusiasm and anticipation, longing to see what God might reveal. And the reason for this is that he knows that he's completely safe. He knows that as he invites God to look into the darkest corners of his heart and mind that he's completely safe.

His safety is rooted in what he knows to be true about his father. So as we look back to the beginning of Psalm 139, we're going to see truths that David understands and roots himself in that will allow him to go to God with genuine reflection and self-examination, and rather than being destroyed, he's able to open himself honestly to God to explore the inner most parts of his heart. And he's able to go with God into those places and see who he really is and be at peace and rest in the process. John Calvin, the reformer, writes that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face. And then he descends. Well Psalm 139, that David writes, will help us first begin to look at God's face before we get to the process of self-examination, we first look to God. And here we see specifically three important truths that we have to trust about who God is before we engage in genuine reflection. So open with me, if you're not already there to Psalm 139, and here's the first truth that David reveals that we have to see and believe and trust as we go into reflection.

It's that God knows you fully. God knows you entirely, completely. He sees every part of you. He sees every thought, every motive, every word that is on your tongue. Verses one to six, David writes,

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it."

We see David's first truth that he sees about God is that he knows that God knows him fully. That there is not a thought in his mind or a word on his tongue that God did not know or see. And the point here is not to get sidetracked into a debate about God's omniscience and sovereignty. As David said, these thoughts are too wonderful for him. The point is to realize that God sees and knows you completely. He knows you more than you know yourself. He knows the motives behind every action. He knows the thought behind every comment you make. He knows the feelings that you don't even know how to name. And if we're honest, this realization is really wonderful and it's really terrible. It's wonderful because I think at the core all of us long to be fully known, right?

Don't all of us really long for people to truly see us for who we really are? To know us completely. And that's what God does. He knows us fully. But if we're honest as well, this also can sound terrible because if God knows me fully, what does he think of me?

This leads us into the second truth that David knows about God is not only that God knows him fully, but that God is still with you. God is still with you. Read with me in verses seven through 12. David says,

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you're there!

If I make my bed in Sheol," which was the place of the dead, "you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you."

You see David knows that God is with him and he will never leave him. And that even in the place of the dead, God would be with him. Even the darkness is not dark to God. So after we reflect on the reality that God knows everything that we do and think, that he sees even the darkest corners of our heart, the good, the bad, and the ugly, we also need to reflect on the reality that God has not left us. That he was with us, holding us all day long. That he was present with you in that moment of impatience with your kids. That he was present with you when you escaped into the fleeting comfort of an addiction.

That he was with you, holding you, when you felt afraid, alone, anxious, or sad.

He was with you in the moments of joy and gratitude. That he was with you when your heart felt in tune with him. And also when he was the furthest one from your mind. Through it all, God was with you. There was nowhere that you could go to escape his presence. He never left you even when your heart was far from him.

Now, can we have the same kind of confidence that David had that God is with us and will never leave us? Well the gospel tells us yes, that Jesus Emmanuel, meaning God with us, came to be with us when we were his enemies, he gave his life to ensure that we could be with him. He sent his Spirit and promised that he would never leave us or forsake us. And as Paul writes, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. This means that though we are fully known by God. He knows everything about us. He sees our thoughts. He knows the words on our tongue before we even say them. That even though that's true, we are also fully loved by God. And he will never leave us.

Tim Keller in his book "The Meaning of Marriage" writes that "To be loved but not known is comforting, but superficial.

To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, it humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and it fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us." So as you look back on your day in reflection, and as you begin to explore your day and think about what happened and who you were, your thoughts, your words, your actions, you can know that God knew every thought that was in your mind. He knew every word that was on your tongue. He saw everything and he never left you. Through it all he was with you, and he loved you. You're fully known by God. The darkest corners of your hearts and your mind are seen by him. And he's still with you holding you. And he will never let you go. Can you imagine what it would be like then to be able to look back on our day or look back on a year and truly be honest and reflect on our day, and to know that God is for us, that he will never leave us? Can you imagine the safety of being able to do that? This reminds me of one of

the parts of a favorite book by CS Lewis "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe", which I know probably many of you have read and spoiler alert, I'm sorry if I give away the ending to you if you haven't. Without going into the whole story, Edmund is one of four siblings who has betrayed his siblings by going to the White Witch, conspiring against them so that one day he could be the one that rules this land called Narnia. Well, once the witch gets the information she needs out of him, he is quickly thrown into prison and he realizes the gravity of his treachery. We fast forward a few scenes and Edmund is rescued by Aslan the noble lion, the good king of Narnia. And Aslan now stands with Edmund, whom Edmund had betrayed. Lewis writes this.

"There they saw Aslan and Edmund walking together in the dewy grass, apart from the rest of the court. There's no need to tell you (and no one ever heard) what Aslan was saying but it was a conversation which Edmund never forgot." I mean, can you imagine as Edmund and Aslan reflect back on his betrayal and his treachery? But just then the evil White Witch comes up to Aslan to accuse Edmund of his treachery and Lewis continues to write, "'You have a traitor there, Aslan' said the Witch. Of course everyone present knew that she meant Edmund. But Edmund had got past thinking about himself after all he'd been through and after the talk he'd had that morning. He just went on looking at Aslan. It didn't seem to matter what the Witch said." When we know that God knows us fully, that he has seen our betrayals and our treachery, that he has seen the darkest corners of our heart, and yet he still loves us completely, and he's still with us and he won't leave us, it doesn't matter what accusation comes against us, we're safe.

This is the place where real reflection and confession and transformation can take place. This leads us to the third truth that David talks about in this Psalm. Verses 13 to 16, David knows that God is committed to forming him more and more into his image.

He knows that God has a beautiful vision for him to make him into the man that he created him to be. Read with me starting in verse 13, David writes,

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

You see this third truth helps us see that not only does God know us fully and not only does God promise to stay with us, he never leaves us, but God is committed to forming us more and more into his image, into the image of Jesus, into the people that he created us to be. He's not just okay with us staying how we are. He doesn't just stay with us and let us be who we are. He has a vision for who he wants us to become. A beautiful vision. And he's committed to making it a reality.

And if you imagine a scientist who's in the field studying her subject and say, she's in the Savannah studying a pride of lions. And she studies these lions with an intense interest, right? She wants to observe everything she can about them. She's hoping to know them fully. But she doesn't have a purpose in mind for them. And she probably does form some kind of bond with them, but she through it all seeks to remain impartial, to not let her feelings cloud her observations because she cannot interfere in their lives. She isn't seeking to form them towards some greater purpose. Her only goals are observation and understanding.

But friends, this is not how God knows us. He doesn't study us the way a scientist studies its subject. He has the intense interest in love that a father would have for his son. He wants to know us like a father wants to know his son so that he can help him become the man that he was made to be. And as we come to times of reflection, we have to remember this truth, that God is not a distant observer of your life. He loves you deeply. And he longs to see you become the person that he created you to be. He's committed to forming you into this person. He won't let you stay where you are. He loves you too much, too much for that. He is committed to seeing you become the person that he made you to be, to become more like Jesus.

Now, these three beautiful truths, when we actually trust these, and we see these, when we start by looking at God and we realize that he knows us fully, he knows every thought, every action, every word, that he sees, the darkest corners of our hearts, but not only that, that he loves us deeply and that he is committed to staying with us and he will never leave us. And then on top of that, that he has a vision for our lives, that he is committed to forming us into the people he made us to be to become like Jesus. When we understand this, then it gives us the opportunity for a real reflection.

We can then look back on our days and our lives and not be destroyed, but actually experience peace and transformation. We see David here respond in two ways, and these are going to be the two responses that we are able to have when we know these truths about God. The first one is complete honesty. Verses 19 through 22, we see David just launch into what seems out of nowhere, just this statement of hatred for his enemies. And it really seems out of the blue. It kind of takes a harsh turn, right in verse 19, he says,

"Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me!" And he goes on to say, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?" He says,

"I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies."

And the point here is not whether or not David's anger is righteous anger. I think the point here is that David knows that he can be completely honest with God. That he can unload and just tell God exactly what he's feeling and thinking. And that it is a safe space that God already knows what he's thinking. That God already sees his thoughts. He sees his actions. That God is committed to him, that he will never leave him. And that God is going to form him into the man He has made him to be. David knows this and so he's safe to be completely honest. And he's angry, right? He is angry at his enemies who hate God. But God will be the one who will help him discern whether or not his thoughts are righteous. And David knows that it's safe to bring these thoughts and these feelings to God. And that God will enter into these with him and begin to help him discern where his heart truly is at.

This honesty then leads to an invitation. And here's the second response that we see David had. He invites God to come and search his heart. He invites him not scared that God's going to come and reveal something or bring a harsh word, but he invites him willingly, joyfully, knowing that God sees him fully, loves him completely, and is committed to making him the man he needs to be. So in verse 23, he says,

"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

David feels completely safe because he knows that God knows him, loves him and is committed to him, that he's for him, that he will never leave him. And so David can invite God to explore

his life, to look at his days, to look at his words and his actions and his thoughts, and to show him any way that is grievous or sinful.

There's no better place to be because when God begins to do this work in us, we're safe, and it gives us the opportunity to confess, knowing that God will forgive us, and to repent, knowing that God can change us. And as David says in another Psalm he wrote, blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity and in whose Spirit, there is no deceit. Friends, God is inviting you through times of reflection, to join him in exploring your life, exploring your days, looking at your thoughts, looking at your heart, looking at your actions, so that you can experience the real transformative work that he wants to do in you and through you. And it's not always going to be looking back to see where you turned away from him. He, as you walk through your days with him, God is going to show you new ways, surprising ways that he showed up. He's going to show you ways that he was present with you. Ways that he protected you, ways that he provided you, and through it all, you're going to be filled with joy and gratitude that God would be such a good God to you.

But it won't always be easy, as you explore your days, as you see the wickedness of your own heart. As you see the things that you maybe thought you had moved beyond, but you still struggle with, as God begins to reveal these things to you, it won't be easy, but there's no safer place to be.

I got to experience this for myself in a tangible way recently. I was sitting with a friend who knows me pretty well. And the previous week, the week before, the friend had seen me respond to a situation with anger. And as we sat together a week later this friend began to ask me about that anger. But he asked me with curiosity and with grace. He wasn't condemning me, but he was concerned. He wanted to understand more what I was feeling and why I was feeling it. He was forming. He wasn't going to walk away from me. And he has a vision as my friend to help me become the man that I was made to be. And it was in this safe place that I was invited to reflect on my anger with my friend. And through this, God brought both conviction so that I actually felt free to confess my anger and also comfort so that I knew I was forgiven and loved. Through this God has invited me to begin seeing even some of the underlying fear that led to this anger, to repent, and to turn towards Jesus as the one who would really make me secure.

Just as my friend who demonstrated the father's heart so well to me, our heavenly father is inviting you to reflect with him on your day, on your life, on this past year. He's inviting you to come along with him, to see your day, the good, the bad and the ugly of it. And he doesn't bring condemnation. He brings curiosity and care. He's with you in that moment. He's committed to forming you into the person he made you to be, into the image of his son. He's committed to giving you life. There's no safer place to be as you reflect with him.

And as you do this church, as you begin to make this practice that we're going to be talking about throughout this quarter, this practice of reflection, as you make it a part of your life, he will be present with you. And you will begin to see his presence showing up throughout your days in so many ways, and you'll get to experience real transformation and change.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that you know us completely. You know us fully. You see us. You know the fears that we have. You know the insecurities in our heart. You know the sadness that we wrestle with. You know the anger that maybe lays dormant. You also see our joys, you see

our hopes, you see our longings. You know what we truly need. You know us completely and you promise that you will never leave us. Thank you father, that you're with us. That you love us completely. That we are fully known and fully loved by you. And thank you that you are committed to us. That you have a beautiful vision for us to make us into the men and women that you created us to be. And so we ask that you would help us begin to walk with you through our days. Help us to be able to look with you at our lives, at our years, at our days, and to reflect and to not hear from you, we know that you won't bring a word of condemnation. You will bring conviction, but you'll bring an invitation for us to be transformed. Thank you father, for this good news. Please work in us. Change us. And use this practice of reflection to help us become a people that are aware of your presence with us and are changed into the men and women you created us to be. We ask all of this in your son's name, Amen.