

“Wisdom from the Porch Swing”

Psalm 121

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One day recently I was talking to our office manager, Carolyn. She and I were discussing what good things come from sitting on a porch swing. She and her husband Gary are moving soon and they needed time to coordinate their plans. They decided to sit on the porch at their home and compare notes. It soon became more than planning time; it was a chance to connect. Gary told her that he began to anticipate the time together as he was finishing up his work day.

This led me to share about the time I spend on the porch swing both with Richard and when I am alone. In the spring when it is barely warm enough to get outside, we sit on the porch, even if we are in our heavy flannel jackets and other warm clothing. We talk about things we need to do. We sometimes sit quietly and just take in our surroundings. Like our friends, it is a pleasant ritual. When I have mentioned this to some other folks at Calvary, I get the same response: a knowing smile.

Whenever people take some time to sit together in a more leisurely pace, it leads to good communication.

One day after I had spoken to Carolyn about our common experience, I mentioned my study of Psalm 121. She read it and then I asked her: does it remind you of sitting on the porch? She got it immediately. Yes it does. There is something about God “keeping our going out and our coming in” that is reassuring. Carolyn and Gary read the psalm together while sitting on their porch and he got the connection as well. Psalm 121 eloquently describes God connecting with us and being our keeper. Think about the motion of the swing: going forward, going backward. We are kept in God’s care no matter what direction life appears to be taking us.

To elaborate on this a bit more, there are benefits to taking the time to “sit on the porch” by ourselves as well. It has been my experience to have felt God’s presence in profound ways many times when I have been sitting quietly on my porch swing. One evening, I was sitting on the swing and was being very quiet. It had been a particularly busy day and it was time to wind down. I looked up at the beautiful streaks of pink in the sky and enjoyed looking at the very tall cedars that were right in my view. In psalm 121, it says our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Thank you, God for showing yourself to me in my beautiful surroundings.

One of my other favorite Bible verses is from Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.” This is the key to getting more out of our quiet moments. But, at least for me, it is not easy to plan quiet time much less be still once I try. I know I am not alone in finding it difficult to “be still.” It seems our culture rewards being active and producing results. Even in Biblical times people found it hard to connect with God. When we read Scripture, there are many examples where people say where is God? I suspect they, like us were not able to take the first step and “be still.” So, the first step in getting closer to God is to STOP.

Once we have made time to be still, the next step is to LOOK. How do we look for God? The first place is Scripture. We make use of God’s word to us, both in the Old Testament and the New. A testament is “something that serves as a sign or evidence of a specified fact, event, or quality.” God has

made every effort to reach us over the centuries. His words and interventions into human activity are plentiful. In the New Testament we have the person of Jesus who by his life and teachings embodies the result of "God with us." Another place to look is right around us. Everything that has breath and life is a reflection of God's gifts. There are many times in our lives when we experience the beauty of the earth and the many perfect life cycles of living things. These things hit us in our face, so to speak: God is present. I felt God in my yard that evening looking out over the sky, the majestic tall cedars and the many signs of life. I am sure that you have some similar experiences that you would attribute to God being present to you.

The next step in establishing a connection with God is to LISTEN. This is just about as hard as learning to be still. Sometimes we hear from God and do not like what He has to say. What do you mean love others as you love yourself? What if the other does not like me? What if the other is someone I find it hard to relate to? What do you mean give away my possessions in order to take care of the poor? Do you really know what you are asking? I am constantly being both amazed and chastened by the lessons God gives to me when I take the time to listen. I do not think I will ever stop learning what it means to be a servant of God.

So if we can manage to STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN then what? The railroad sign says it all LIVE: God's gift to us: Life in abundance. The psalm's last verses say it all. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Now I invite you to sit quietly for a few moments. Take a couple of deep breaths to help you slow down. Now, listen to God's word to you once again. (Read Psalm 121)