

Theology of Entertainment

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] Psalm 46 is a psalm written about our confidence in God, even in the face of great trouble.

The earth may collapse, we may experience all kinds of political turmoil, but the Lord is still good. And more to the point, the Lord is still in control. I'll read just the last stanza of this psalm. This is Psalm 46, beginning with verse 8.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how He has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Now, I've read this primarily because of what the Lord says in verse 10. Be still and know that I am God. You'll notice a contrast in this psalm. Going back to verse 6, we see the nations rage.

They're worked up into a frenzy. They're shaking. But God says to His people in Israel, don't be like them. Stop. Just stop. Stop moving. Stop fighting. Be still and know that I am God.

[1 : 42] In Ecclesiastes, Solomon says, remember your Creator. Well, the sons of Korah in Psalm 46 tell us to remember our sovereign Lord who is in control despite how things may seem at any given moment.

Verse 10 comes to my mind quite often. When things seem busy or frantic or stressful, I often hear the Lord whisper, be still and know that I am God.

But I have a slightly different application for this verse today. I'd like to consider how this might be applied when our world isn't crumbling all around us. Let's say it's a perfectly ordinary day.

Nothing is going wrong. Is Psalm 46:10 still relevant? I believe it is. So we have a rule at our house. No one is allowed to get up from the dinner table until everyone is finished. Now my kids act as though this is cruel and unusual punishment. About five seconds after chewing their last bite, they will ask, can I get up? No, we'll say not everyone is finished.

Then inevitably one of them will ask, well, what am I supposed to do? Well, you could just sit there. You could talk with us. Reflect on the meaning of life. I don't know. Just, you need to stay at the table until we're all done. But it's boring, they'll say. To which I reply, embrace it. You'll thank me when you're older. Maybe you'll disagree, but I believe we have a problem in the developed West. We cannot be still. We cannot tolerate boredom for more than a few minutes. If we have more than a couple of minutes with nothing to do but maybe think or observe the world around us, we go scrambling for some form of entertainment. Of course, entertainment isn't hard to find, is it? When you have a smartphone in your pocket, this is why the checkout lines at the grocery store are full of people staring at their phones. When I pull up to a stoplight, there's a good chance if I look over at the car next to me, I will see someone on their phone. I took our daughter to school the other day, and as we were waiting in the drop-off line, I noticed kids in the van in front of us watching TV. We simply refuse to let ourselves be bored for even a moment. When I think back to my childhood, you know, those formative years of a person's life, I'm actually thankful I didn't grow up with smartphones. In fact, I remember when we got our first cordless phone in the house. What a technological marvel that was. You mean I don't have to stretch a tangled cord 30 feet down the hallway to have a private conversation over the phone? Wow. I didn't get my first mobile phone until I was a senior in high school, and now to be clear, when I say mobile, it was more like a semi-mobile phone because it was attached to a briefcase in the car that had to be plugged into the cigarette lighter in order to use it. And to my knowledge, I never once used it because it cost about \$20 a minute to make a phone call, and my dad made it clear it was for emergencies only. I was probably 10 years out of high school before I got my first smartphone, and I'm thankful for this because I'm sure it's at least part of the reason I don't feel like I've ever really struggled with smartphone addiction.

[5 : 48] When I read these articles about how much time people spend on their phones each day, and articles about the the pervasiveness of smartphone addiction in our world, there's a part of me that thinks, well, just delete your apps and put the phone down. What's the problem? But that's coming from someone, again, who didn't grow up with these phones. If I was bored as a kid, and I'm assuming this was true for most of you, I didn't have much choice. I went outside to play. Growing up in Georgia, I explored the woods behind our house, hoping not to run into any poisonous snakes. When we moved to Indiana, I explored the cornfields, hoping to run into something as exciting as a snake.

Then again, I grew up with a slightly different problem. I didn't have an entertainment source in my pocket at all times, but we did have the TV. And even though my parents typically watched shows I wasn't interested in, I remember our TV being on a lot. I think most evenings it was on for hours.

I even remember watching some cartoons in the morning before school, very early in that limited window of time. Given a choice, assuming I could find a kid's show on one of our five channels, I probably would have opted for watching TV instead of going outside more times than not, if I had been allowed. Of course, today we've multiplied the problem.

We can watch pretty much anything we want on demand at any time. And then we watch the TV while simultaneously scrolling on our phones. Maybe you've been to a family gathering over the holidays where someone turns on the football game. Well, grandpa's hard of hearing, so you have to crank up the volume on the TV. And then everyone sits around the living room staring at their phones.

Even in a restaurant, there are TVs everywhere. The music is usually so loud you can't hear the people at your own table. And as you look around the place, you see a lot of this.

[8 : 06] It seems we have an aversion to what the Bible sometimes calls quietness, or we might say stillness. And going back to Psalm 46, we're not just talking about people sitting still. Most people are pretty good at that. That's what TV was made for, sitting still as you watch. Now, the essence of stillness in the Bible isn't about being physically still. In fact, the Bible offers many warnings about being physically still, or at least unproductive. We read several passages to this effect in Proverbs alone. And I'll just cite a couple. Proverbs 6, verses 6 through 11.

Go to the ant, O sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise. Without having any chief officer or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard?

When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man.

Proverbs 19, 15. Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger. Proverbs 20, verse 4. The sluggard does not plow in the autumn. He will seek at harvest and have nothing. And the New Testament has similar warnings as well. But Psalm 46 isn't necessarily telling us to be physically still, though that is advisable at times. No, the essence of Psalm 46, 10 is that we need to still our hearts and our minds. In other words, we need to escape the constant noise and distractions so that we might be better positioned to know that I am God. What does the Lord mean by that?

Well, the word know in that verse implies a level of intimacy. The same word is used in Genesis 4, 1, where it says, Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain. In that case, it's physical intimacy. In other places, the same word is used to suggest a deeper, more profound understanding of something. For example, after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, we're told, Genesis 3, 7, the eyes of both were opened, the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.

[10 : 59] Well, there was surely a sense in which they already knew they were naked. I mean, they could look down and see that they weren't covered, right? But after they sinned, this knowledge suddenly carried more weight. Their understanding of nakedness changed drastically. The same word is used later in Genesis 3, where the Lord says in verse 22, behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.

Same word. Adam and Eve, they may have known what good and evil were, at least in the abstract, but their sin gave them a profound realization of what good and evil really are, right?

So when the Lord says, know that I am God, He wants, first of all, our attention, right? Look at me, consider me, study me, listen to me, become intimately familiar with who I am. Never mind your abstract notions of me. I want you to really know me. I want you to share in a genuine, loving relationship with you. I want to grow your understanding of me. And how is this accomplished? The Lord uses only two words here. Be still. Be still. The Christian Standard Bible does an excellent job of capturing this statement within the context of Psalm 46. It says, stop fighting and know that I am God. You see, the nations are raging.

They won't stop fighting. But God steps into this perpetual battle and says, stop, just stop and look at me. Now, for the purpose of broader application, I love how most Bibles render this phrase, be still. Be still.

There's another similar word used in the Bible that I like, and that's the word quietness. For example, Ecclesiastes 4.6 says, better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil in striving after wind. Some translations use the word tranquility or rest. But I like that word, quietness. The prophet Isaiah uses the same word. Isaiah 30, verse 15 says, in returning, that is to the Lord. Now, notice how he connects repentance and faith with rest and quietness. What's the connection?

[14 : 06] Well, a person who is perpetually busy and always distracted is not in the right frame of mind, or more importantly, the right position of heart to seek the Lord. Without quietness, without stillness, there are too many things standing between us and the Lord. Think about that family at the restaurant or at home during the holidays where everyone is together, but not really because they're all on their phones. They're all at the same table or in the same room, but they're simultaneously worlds apart because each is focused on something that no one else can see. Is that an environment that fosters healthy, growing relationships between them? Certainly not. They're not talking to one another.

They're not even looking at one another. Well, our relationship with the Lord isn't any different. A while back, I was listening to an interview with Elon Musk, who of course is the wealthiest man on the planet. He's also quite brilliant in many ways, but he was defending people, even adults, who play a lot of video games. And he mentioned that surgeons who play video games have statistically higher success rates in the operating room. Now, I don't know if that can be verified or proven, but he explained that video games not only improve hand-eye coordination, but also train a person to make split-second decisions, which a surgeon will inevitably need. In short, he argued that video games are far from a mindless form of entertainment. Well, when I heard this, for a brief moment, I thought, huh, I guess that makes sense.

But then the interview continued, and they began discussing God and religion. And it became apparent to me that for all of his success and all of his brilliance, Elon Musk has never seriously sought after God. He's never genuinely tried to understand the Christian worldview. He's never studied the Bible or attempted to know God in any meaningful way. And that's probably true for many doctors and surgeons, right? So maybe video games can have a positive effect in some areas of worldly success. I don't know, but I'm left asking, what effects do they have on our spiritual lives? Because that wasn't part of Elon's evaluation. For the record, I'm not suggesting someone who plays video games can't genuinely, know the Lord. God knows I played my fair share of Pac-Man and Mario Brothers when I was a kid.

But I have the same concerns about video games as I do about TV or smartphones. For the most part, it's all very shallow, passive, easy entertainment that I think is destroying our our ability to concentrate, to think deeply, and consequently to be productive in any creative or intellectual work. Recently, I was reading a study about our decreasing attention spans. You've probably seen this before. So they have various ways of measuring attention spans through behavioral tasks, eye tracking, and so on. And back in the year 2000, so before smartphones, the average attention span was 12 seconds. Now granted, that doesn't sound like much, but it has since dropped supposedly to eight seconds.

That's a 33% decrease from what was already a relatively low number. Supposedly, goldfish now have a higher attention span than human beings. And I think this problem is perpetuated through a continual cycle.

[18 : 22] Constant distractions and entertainment on demand wherever we go prevent us from rarely entering into quietness or a state of quietness or a state of stillness. And in turn, our attention spans go down.

And we become increasingly uncomfortable with a lack of distractions and entertainment. So we quickly turn to distractions and entertainment at the first hint of boredom. And on and on it goes.

Meanwhile, our relationships suffer. Is it just me or have you noticed people becoming less patient and less tolerant of each other, particularly in public places, on the road, in stores? I don't know. Maybe I've just become more aware of it, but it seems the culture has changed over the years, quickly so in the last few years.

People in general do not seem to have as much respect for one another. I mean, we just had two people shot and killed in Elkhart by an irate customer, about 30 minutes after I left the store, by the way. And for what?

Well, supposedly he was upset because the cashier was too young to ring up the alcohol he was purchasing. How do you feel about customer service these days?

[19 : 54] Has it improved over the last 20 years? Sometimes I leave a store thinking the clerk is mad at me for bothering to give them my business. You know, I get that big eye roll when I walk up to the counter.

Never mind hearing, hello, how are you today? No, I get an eye roll as the clerk is begrudgingly forced to put down his or her phone so they can help me out.

Well, I'm sure there are many underlying causes for this. My gut tells me that these technologies have become so pervasive in our world that they're contributing significantly to the problem.

Smartphones in particular have conditioned us for instant gratification. If we're bored for more than a few seconds, we can reach for our phones. For many people, especially young people, real-life interactions have become secondary to virtual relationships.

So suddenly, face-to-face interactions, they feel like interruptions. So we're losing the ability to be still, as God himself implored us to do.

[21 : 08] We're also witnessing the negative effects of this on our relationships with other people. So what do you think this is doing to our relationship with the Lord? Psalm 46 says we need to be still to know that he is God.

Now, if our lack of stillness is hurting our relationships with tangible people we can see with our own eyes, how much is it hurting our relationship with God whom we cannot see?

In his book, Technopoly, Neil Postman wrote, Technology always has unforeseen consequences, and it is not always clear at the beginning who or what will win and who or what will lose.

Well, with each passing year, I think we get a better sense of what we're losing. And at the risk of sounding hyperbolic, we stand to lose our souls.

In Mark 8, 36, Jesus asked, For what does it profit for a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

[22 : 22] Well, we now have the whole world within reach. If you want to see any place on the planet, well, we're only a Google search away. If we want to learn about anything, we can get information within seconds.

And while this might feel like a tremendous blessing, and it certainly comes with many advantages, it also has its unintended consequences.

I was reading from the book, Ask Pastor John, by Tony Ranke and John Piper this week, and came across this section titled, Far Too Easily Bored.

They write, The mobile screen in our pocket offers us an endless stream of fascinating, weird, strange, wonderful, shocking, spellbinding, cute pictures and quotes and videos and stories and links.

And many of us have gotten to the point where we are almost addicted to the need for something striking and bizarre and extraordinary and amazing. The pattern was true before smartphones.

[23 : 31] Generations have turned to illuminated displays to find glory because the fallen human heart grows quickly bored with God's revealed glories in creation. We go to the Alps, see them for the first time, and are stunned, speechless.

We rent a little chalet at the foot of the mountains, and for three mornings we get up amazed, and by the fourth morning we are watching television. This is the result of the fall.

If I may paraphrase, we're missing out on the glories of God because we're so consumed by lesser versions of that glory.

If not, altogether secular entertainment. And let me give you some examples of what I mean. So, borrowing from Piper and Rehnke, looking at photos or videos of the Alps on the internet will never compare with seeing them in person or even seeing and enjoying God's creation in our own backyard.

But we may be drawn to the lesser versions, if you will, because it's easier to look at our phones than it is to go outside.

[24 : 54] I know people who will like and share Bible quotes on Facebook all day long, but never read or study the Bible for themselves.

Again, it's easier. Plus, it's more stimulating to get your Bible fix, if you will, as you're scrolling through funny memes. I ran into an old friend not long ago, and he recommended I watch the show *The Chosen*, which, if you don't know, is about the life and ministry of Christ.

I've never seen it. But he told me he's watched every episode. But a moment later in the conversation, he confessed to me that he struggles to pray.

He told me he might pray for all of five minutes on a good day. Clearly, time isn't the problem. But he struggles to focus in prayer, in part, at least, because his mind is so accustomed to do passive and exciting entertainment.

I once had someone tell me that he watches pretty much every movie released because, as he put it, every movie is good thanks to CGI.

[26 : 15] Now, what I think he meant by that was every movie is stunning because of special effects. Movies are captivating, in part, because they create scenes that the real world can't replicate, and often do so with surprising realism.

I would say most of our daily entertainment is entertaining for that reason. Movies, TV, the Internet, the content we consume is visually stunning, more dramatic, possibly funnier than our everyday lives.

So how can real life possibly compete, especially when these various forms of entertainment are so readily accessible and so easy to consume? By the way, you may have noticed that I haven't even begun to address the content of our entertainment.

But I felt that we should start at the base level, asking why we feel the need to be constantly entertained in the first place. Why do we impulsively reach for our phones first thing in the morning or in the checkout line at the grocery store or at the stoplight or perhaps in the bathroom?

Why do we make a beeline for the TV as soon as we get home in the evening? I'm sure you can think of your own examples, but the question is, why?

[27 : 47] Why are we so obsessed with entertainment? Why do we find it so hard to be still? Well, I believe the answer is relatively simple.

Discontentment. A few years ago, I wrote about a time when I made the conscious decision to delete most of the apps from my phone and make every effort to keep my phone in my pocket if I carried it at all.

I wanted to embrace the so-called boredom of life. You know? Let's say I'm in the waiting room of a doctor's office. Well, instead of using my phone to entertain myself, I could pray or strike up a conversation with someone else or just sit quietly with my thoughts.

And here's what I wrote about that in hindsight. The impulse to frequently unlock my phone and begin mindlessly tapping without any explicit reason to do so never left me.

Whenever I felt its drawing power, I think of the Apostle Paul. I'd imagine him afflicted in every way but not crushed, writing his most thankful and joyous epistle from the confines of Roman imprisonment.

- [29 : 06] He told the Philippians, I have learned to be content. I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. I know how to make do with little and I know how to make do with a lot in any, in all circumstances.

I have learned the secret of being content. Though Paul did not own a smartphone or share our trivial first world struggles, his words have implications nonetheless.

Personally, they caused me to question whether I knew the secret of being content. If I needed entertaining stimulation every dull moment of the day, was I truly content?

Well, my conclusion on the matter hasn't really changed. I believe the reason we're so quick to reach for our phones or tablets or TV remotes is because there's a restlessness in our hearts.

why are we restless? Why are we discontent? Well, the problem goes all the way back to the fall of Adam. When he sinned against God, the consequence was even worse than death.

- [30 : 15] He was cut off from God. He was cast away from God's presence. Genesis chapter 3 ends by telling us the Lord God sent him out from the garden.

He drove out the man and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way. And from that time forward we have found ourselves trying to fill a void in our souls that cannot be adequately filled by anything other than God himself.

Jeremiah 2.13 describes our vain attempts to fill the void this way. This is the Lord speaking.

They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters and hewed out cisterns for themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water.

So the Lord says I'll give you water that never runs out. I will give you water like you've never tasted. Life giving water.

- [31 : 27] But instead you refuse my water and you build for yourselves broken wells that don't even hold water. Where's the sense in that?

Well of course it doesn't make sense. we're settling for less and when we settle for less we still feel unsettled. And because we feel unsettled we seek out more of less.

This is why people build false idols for themselves. This is why we pursue wealth and fame and power. This is why we can't go five seconds without checking social media or without watching YouTube or whatever it is.

We're discontent. But instead of seeking God to fill that void in our souls we turn to other things. As you read through the Bible pay attention to the Lord's invitations.

More often than not when the Lord invites people to come to Him His promise to them is that they will find peace or satisfaction or contentment or rest.

- [32 : 43] And I'll give you just a few examples. Isaiah 26.3 You keep Him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because He trusts in you.

Matthew 11.28 Come to Me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Psalm 107.9 For He satisfies the longing soul and the hungry soul He fills with good things.

John 6.35 I am the bread of life whoever comes to Me shall not hunger and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst. satisfaction.

Matthew 6.31 and 33 Therefore do not be anxious saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.

You see we're restless because we have a void in our souls as a result of sin and separation from God. So the only way to fill this void and to gain a sense of peace is through reconciliation with God in Christ Jesus and even then and even then we continue to wrestle with our flesh that wants us that wants to pull us away from God and throw us back into a state of restlessness and then instead of turning back to living water we build more broken cisterns.

[34 : 28] why do we do this to ourselves? Well regarding trivial entertainment we might think of it like someone taking ibuprofen for a week straight because they've got a toothache.

The medicine may ease the pain but it doesn't fix the problem. In fact it could make matters much worse because he's not addressing the real problem. just think about it.

Netflix seems to offer us rest. You don't have to do anything just kick back and watch but what it actually delivers is exhaustion sometimes physical exhaustion who stayed up too late binge watching some show that probably wasn't worth watching in the first place.

Social media it promises connection with other people. But what happens? We get sucked into a virtual world of very shallow relationships and might simultaneously grow apart from our real life family and friends.

We become increasingly isolated while also becoming increasingly discontent because all we're seeing from other people are these carefully curated versions of their lives.

[35 : 55] Why can't my life be like that we think? Constant stimulation promises fulfillment but it leads to emptiness.

The more we consume the less able we find ourselves to be still and commune with God. Here's what Tony Ranke and John Piper say about it and here you're going to get some practical advice.

We trade our capacity for glory to consume trifling and trivial substitutes. So how do we escape the triviality trap? Five practical responses.

Number one, repent. Confess to God all the sin that has led you here. Cry out to God for help that he would wake you up from the slumbers of emptiness and meaninglessness and boredom in the endless quest to be titillated in body while the soul is languishing and starving for greatness.

Two, engage. Set yourself on a conscious quest to obey God's strategy for cultivating a spiritual mind that is fully alert to the glories of God radiant in the world and radiant in the word.

[37 : 18] Take Paul's commission in Colossians 3 as your marching orders. Set your mind on eternal glories. Focus on what is excellent, on things that are worthy and that have the potential to deepen and strengthen and purify our souls.

Three, find a local church where the preaching is blood-earnest and serious, where God besought joy and not flippant silliness marks the wonders of the word of God.

Four, find eternally minded friends. Superficiality is a very, very, very contagious disease.

If you only hang out with superficial people, you will almost certainly become superficial. If you only hang out with superficial social media and TV programs, you will almost certainly be a superficial person.

Five, read the great Puritan authors whose books are unlike anything you will find in the 20th and 21st century because they are so non-superficial, non-silly, non-trivial, non-man-centered.

[38 : 40] We could add to that, but that's all great advice. great advice. Now, I want to clarify, I'm not suggesting that we completely eliminate entertainment from our lives.

I truly believe entertainment can be a very, very good thing if approached wisely. And I'll say more about that next time.

For now, I just want us to consider three things. And these are three questions that we'll have to leave here asking ourselves. First, how much of our time and attention do we give to entertainment?

Second, why do we give that much time and attention to entertainment? What's our motivation?

What moves us? And third, what are the unintended consequences of giving our time and attention to entertainment the way we do?

[39 : 56] we'll come back to this next time as we continue to develop what I'm calling a theology of entertainment. Let's pray.

Father, you are our refuge and strength. You call us to be still and know that you are God, but we confess that stillness does not come easily to us.

We are restless. We fill our lives with distractions, we chase after things that cannot satisfy. And in doing so, Lord, we neglect the peace and joy found in communion with you.

Help us to quiet our hearts. Teach us to embrace the stillness that draws us near to you. Help us to not be conformed to a world that is always hurried and distracted.

Satisfy us, Lord, with the living water of Christ so that we do not seek after broken cisterns. Draw us deeper into fellowship with you and with one another that we may live as those who truly know you.

[41 : 07] And we ask all of this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.