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Living Well in the Ordinary: A Review of A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

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Abstract

"Permission is given to not focus on our work and effort, but for God's work to be at the center."

Posting about the book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/ordinary-inspirations-a-review-of-a-long-obedience-in-the-same-direction/?highlight=living%20well%20in%20the%20ordinary>

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Comments

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Living Well in the Ordinary: A Review of *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Sam Ashmore

July 28, 2021

Title: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*

Author: Eugene H. Peterson

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“There is nothing else. Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day. You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”¹ If you are like me, this stops me in my tracks. On the surface, it seems that the greatest enemy of the spiritual life today might be our ever-changing sex ethic and redefinition of marriage, God becoming a cosmic therapist and divine butler, deconstruction without reconstruction, the rise of political religion, or internet porn. But hurry...really? On second thought, it deeply resonates. How many of us respond “Busy. Good, but busy” when asked “how have you been?” or feel that we are always moving on to the next thing without allowing our hearts and minds to settle in the time between? Through fast food, wireless internet, computers in our pockets, social media, and Netflix, we have immediate and instant access to information, entertainment, dopamine hits, and more that support our hurry sickness.² We have been trained to expect the immediate and the instant, and it has seeped into our theology and understanding of Christian discipleship.

The late pastor, author, poet, professor, and loved one of God, Eugene Peterson, in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, addresses how hurry and the desire for the immediate stunts the Christian life. Peterson compares the Christian to a tourist looking to visit an attractive site at their leisure rather than a disciple and pilgrim on a journey of apprenticeship to Jesus. This is a needed word for our time, but this book was originally written in 1980, with a 2nd edition in 2000 and a re-releasing in IVP’s Signature Collection in 2021. It was written before cell phones, wireless internet, Netflix, and social media. These avenues of “instant” were not on Peterson’s mind at all, yet he still sensed that the Christian life was defined by the latest and newest: “Zen, faith healing, human potential, parapsychology, successful living, choreography in the chancel, Armageddon” (10). Too often, the Christian life is defined by the world, which is an unsatiating desire for the instant, constant striving for progress, and living for the high points. According to Peterson, Christian discipleship is not any of those things—it is a long obedience in the same direction.

Peterson borrowed the title from Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century German philosopher, who said, “The essential thing ‘in heaven and earth’ is ... that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”³ For Peterson, this is what the world discourages, but what is required of a disciple of Jesus. To convey this, Peterson uses the Songs of Ascent, the songs sung by Hebrew pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem for worship festivals (found in Psalms 120-134), to be the guide of pastoring people in the way of discipleship to Jesus. Each chapter is a different Song of Ascent attached with an essential item in Christian discipleship, such as repentance, providence, worship, help, joy, work, community, blessing, and more. Peterson’s work is not a scholarly exposition of the Psalms, but practical meditations for the journey of a long obedience in the same direction—life itself.

To understand a great strength of the book, it is important to start at the end. The final Song of Ascent is Psalm 134, with the theme of blessing. It asks the questions, “But when we get to where we are going, what then? What happens at the end of faith? What takes place when we finally arrive?” (184). The answer: blessing. Here’s the catch: blessing is also what influences the entire journey of discipleship to Jesus. Catherine of Siena said, “All the way to heaven is heaven” (191). The book teaches the Christian disciple to see “blessing” or “heaven” all throughout the journey, not simply at the end of it. One can understand how hurry and the desire for the instant forces the eyes forward on progress and striving, but a long obedience in the same direction trains the eyes to see blessing in the present and to abide in God each moment.

Another strength is that this book is livable. Peterson expresses that one of his major convictions as a pastor is that “everything in the gospel is livable” (195). In a culture focused on production and progress that highlights the strongest, wealthiest, most beautiful, and smartest, it feels like “ordinary” humans (me and most likely you) will never measure up, attain what is expected, or be able to climb whatever ladder we are supposed to. This is no different in Christian culture where celebrity pastors reign supreme, the Instagram Bible and coffee pic are a regular on our feed, and someone is always bringing up the latest Barna stat (maybe this is just my pastor friends). The picture of the Christian life conveyed is one that is highly fashionable, pure bliss, and full of pragmatic growth. This picture is not reality, and it is certainly not livable. The Christian journey Peterson describes is one that requires perseverance or “stick-to-it-iveness” (122). Peterson understands the normal rhythms and emotions and struggles and doubts of life. Permission is given not to attain salvation for ourselves, but for God to attain salvation for us. Permission is given not to build our own security, but to allow God to be a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him (Ps. 46:1). Permission is given to not focus on our work and effort, but for God’s work to be at the center. Permission is given to deny the American myth of no suffering and have hope in the midst of it, because God knows the meaning and conclusion. Permission is given to not search for God, but to know that God is ever-present and with us always. A long obedience in the same direction is livable. It is real. It is the good news needed for our time.

In conclusion, this book was originally rejected by 17 publishers. One does not have to wonder why. The book is not sexy, it is certainly not practical, and it is hardly inspiring, but it is rooted in the realities of life. It is strangely freeing, and more than anything, life-giving livable. Read this book. Live this book. Allow the ordinary and normal and mundane meditations of this book to open your eyes to heaven all around; and may you experience heaven as you journey a long obedience in the same direction.

1. Dallas Willard quoted in *Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* by John Mark Comer.
2. Rosemary Sword and Phillip Zimbardo in the article *Hurry Sickness: Is the quest to do all and be all costing us our health?* Give these symptoms of hurry sickness: moving from one check-out line to another because it looks shorter/faster, counting the cars in front of you and either getting in the lane that has the least or is going the fastest, or multi-tasking to the point of forgetting one of the tasks.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (London: 1907), sec, 188.