

If My People - 17

Seeking God's Face (1)

2 Chronicles 7:14 *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

Seeking the face of God is all about intimacy with God and I want us to spend some time looking at this vital issue of our intimate relationship with God. I pray that He will open the eyes of our heart as we draw near to Him. Let's read this declaration of God to His people from many years ago:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 *"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.*

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Being a Christian is all about our relationship with God. It is not what we know *about* God that defines our faith. We can know a great deal *about* God without having much knowledge *of* God personally.

James 2:19 *"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder."*

Just knowing stuff about God makes us no better than the demons! Nor is it primarily about religious works and disciplines (baptism, communion, worship, prayer, Bible reading, etc.), however valuable they may be. Nor is it primarily about good behaviour, about holy living, although that too is important. Like the Pharisees, we can know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God Himself.

The essence of New Covenant living is knowing God personally. This is what distinguished it from the Old Covenant: *"They will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest."* It is about having a genuine relationship with the Living, present God. And this is not supposed to be something abstract or theoretical, but an ongoing experiential reality affecting every part of our being. It is not just about head-knowledge, but also about heart-and-soul-and-spirit-knowledge.

Do we truly know God personally, or is He just a vague acquaintance whose book we may have read? I read Nelson Mandela's lengthy autobiography and so now I know a lot about this incredible man – but I never met him and never knew him personally. It seems that many people are happy to talk about knowing God without there being a deep daily reality behind their words. What a tragedy that being a Christian has so often been reduced to accepting a few truths and following a few rules.

As Jeanne Guyon wrote three hundred years ago, *"What inexpressible damage new Christians - for that matter, most Christians - have suffered because of the loss of an inner, spiritual relationship with God."*

Jesus made it very clear that our relationship with God was at the heart of everything:

John 17:3 *"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*

But even before Jesus came, knowing God was commended and valued.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 *"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me."*

What do we boast about? Whatever the depth (or shallowness) of our personal experience of God, we can always know Him better. In this life we shall always only know God in part, but Paul's prayer for the Ephesian believers should also be our own daily prayer:

Ephesians 1:17 *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better."*

There is no greater pursuit than the pursuit of a deeper relationship with God and nothing should have a higher priority in our lives. James Packer summarises it like this:

"What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowing God. What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives Him most pleasure? Knowing Him."

As Henri Nouwen once put it, *"The only thing that really matters is your relationship with God."* But what kind of relationship can we expect to have with the Lord Almighty? How are we supposed to relate to the infinite, awesome, holy King of the universe Who reigns in glory and majesty? The answer to this question is really quite astounding.

We would perhaps expect that God's 'wholly otherness' would create an uncrossable canyon between the us and our God, and that we could only know Him at a distance. But that isn't how we are meant to relate to Him at all. His amazing grace has completely bridged the gulf between us, and He now calls us His friends. On His way to Gethsemane, Jesus made this startling revelation:

John 15:15 *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you."*

Even under the Old Covenant, it was possible to know God as a friend. Three times in Scripture, Abraham is described as God's friend. Similarly, it was said of Moses that the Lord would speak to him face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. And in the dark days of his suffering and apparent abandonment by God, Job exclaimed, *"Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house!"*

How much more should we, who have received the Holy Spirit under the New Covenant, know God as our intimate friend! The King of kings wants us to relate to Him as friends and not just as His subjects.

We can relate to God just as we relate to our closest human friends. As our friend, we know He is committed to us; He is on our side; He wants the very best for us; He sticks with us through thick and thin. We can relax in His presence and be totally open with Him because we can trust Him, knowing that He is *for* us. He wants us to share our lives with Him and for us to do everything in partnership with Him. He desires to be our companion and partner in all we do.

Not only is God described as our 'friend' in the Scriptures, but He is also portrayed as our 'husband' or a bridegroom. Jesus referred to Himself as the bridegroom and His return is described in the book of Revelation as the wedding of the Lamb. Jesus is returning as the bridegroom for His beautiful bride. Indeed, Paul sees human marriage as but a reflection of the profound mystery of the union between Christ and His Church. In the uniting of man and wife lies an illustration of the intimacy of the close relationship God desires to have with His people.

There are hints of this even under the Old Covenant. In words very similar to those of Jesus above - the Lord says through Hosea to His people, *"You will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my master.'"* Similarly, He promises through Isaiah, *"As a young man marries a maiden, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."*

We, the Church, are the bride of the King of kings. We can relate to Him as His bride and not just as His subjects. The relationship between husband and wife is an intimate one, in which everything is shared, a relationship of oneness and love. This is the kind of relationship God wants us to have with Him. He desires to draw us into the depths of His heart. As well as being friends of the Lord and the bride of the Lamb, we are also referred to as God's children.

1 John 1:3 *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"*

Under the Old Covenant, the Lord declared, *"I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son."* And the Psalmist proclaimed, *"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."*

But Jesus revealed a new closeness to this relationship. He knew God as His personal loving heavenly Father. You will remember the voice which came from heaven at His baptism and His transfiguration: *"This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."* Jesus also used the Aramaic word *Abba* - the word of intimacy from child to father - to refer to the Almighty God, and this was a revolutionary departure for the Jews.

The astounding fact is that, like Jesus, we too can know God as *Abba*, father, 'daddy,' by His Spirit Whom we have received. We, too, can have the same depth of relationship with God that Jesus had as a man. We, too, can call the Most High God our 'dad.' Just before His arrest, Jesus prayed to His Father for us:

John 17:26 *"I have made You known to them, and will continue to make You known in order that the love You have for Me may be in them."*

We are God's beloved children and can know the same kind of relationship with our heavenly Father that Jesus did. We are children of the King. We can relate to Him as His children and not just as His loyal subjects. Our relationship with God should be like that of a small child who delights in being with his or her father.

Not many of us, I think, would ever naturally say that we have known God. The words imply a definiteness and matter-of-factness of experience to which most of us, if we are honest, have to admit we are still strangers. And yet the expectation of Jesus and of the New Covenant prophecies is precisely the opposite: that we would not only know God, but that we would know Him as our closest friend, the lover of our soul and our loving Father. Sadly however, if asked, *'Who is your best friend? – not too many of us would naturally respond with the answer, 'God.'*

Are we willing to lay down other goals in our lives in order to pursue the highest goal of all, that of developing and deepening our intimacy with God until we can truly say that He is our closest friend and confidant; until we are captivated and absorbed by Him and passionately in love with Him? For this assuredly is our primary calling: to love God.

Matthew 22:37 *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."*

This is the first and greatest commandment. This is an all-encompassing, radical type of love, isn't it? I wonder how our lives would be if we truly pursued this goal more than any other in our lives and in our Churches?

There are Christian Churches with many different emphases: worship, prayer, preaching, pastoral care, healing, evangelism, care of the poor, etc. But only rarely does one come across a Church that explicitly gives the highest priority to loving God - even though it's the first and greatest commandment! Perhaps equally revealing is the fact that none of the ancient creeds or confessions of faith (nor indeed the modern "doctrinal statements") contain mention of this first evidence of genuine Christian discipleship: our love for God.

If we truly experienced the Lord's extravagant love for us, then our hearts would respond in love. For it's our experience of His love for us that causes us to love Him in response. We love God because He loves us. A. W. Tozer expressed it well:

"Perceiving, as other mortals have not perceived, the burning love of God, the Christian gives God love for love. He cannot help it. Certainly, it is not the fruit of labour. Having seen the love of God, his own heart leaps in response. His heart is drawn out of him and lost in God's immensity. This dynamic of love responding to love should be at the very heart of the expression of our faith."

1 Peter 1:8 *"Though you have not seen Him, you love Him," the apostle Peter wrote, "and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."*

I have already explored, in the series *For God so Loved the World* (<https://robertgriffith.net/gsltw/>) something of the depth of God's amazing love for us. But what should we expect our love for God to look like? Surely it should look like the love we have for a close friend, the love of a husband and wife for each other and the love of a child for his or her father.

Each of these human relationships at best is but a weak reflection of what we can experience in our relationship with God, but the affection and fondness, the attraction and desire, and the devotion and commitment that characterise human love relationships at the very least should be present in our relationship with God. There should be a deep emotional reality in our relationship with God.

The Ephesian Christians used to be radically in love with Jesus, but the Lord exposed their hearts with these painful words:

Revelation 2:4-5 *"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen!"*

How many of us have lost our first love for God? You may remember what it was like when you first experienced God's love for you personally: how it eclipsed everything else in your life. How has your love for the Lord fared since that day? One of the saddest things is that when the love of a new believer fades over time - this is considered acceptable. Of course, our initial love is immature, but, like the love between husband and wife, its depth should actually increase, not decrease, as it matures.

If your love for God is not growing stronger and deeper, then it will grow cold.

Those who do not press on in pursuit of the breadth, length, height and depth of God, will eventually become bored with their faith. Their shallow understanding no longer captures their imaginations, much less inflame their passions. God created us to have a passionate, committed relationship with Him. But, so often, we replace service for relationship, focussing more on what we *do for* God than on loving Him personally.

Do you remember what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth? He said any kind of ministry or service without love is worthless. *'Doing our duty'* for God is totally absent from the New Testament, yet for many of us, much of what we do is out of sense of duty rather than as a love-response to God's grace and love towards us. It's not our work and achievements that warm and thrill the heart of God, but our love for Him. He is more interested in the attitude of our hearts towards Him than in the work we do for Him. The only true success is to know Him better. Our fellowship with Him should always be central. Then our 'ministry' will flow out of the love relationship we have with Him.

If we are not careful, we may find that we place the ministry God has given us above our relationship with Him. This is, of course, idolatry and spiritual adultery, but sadly, it's common among Christians, especially those in leadership. Do we get more excited about God Himself or about the things we do for God? Are we more concerned about the 'success' of our ministry, what people think of us, and our status as ministers of the Gospel, than we are about how well we are connecting with God personally? Often our busyness keeps us from drawing near to Him and in fact it separates us from the experience of His presence. We must seek to abide in Him above all else. Maybe, however, for you it is not service that takes the place of relationship, but the pursuit of knowledge.

1 Corinthians 8:1 *"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God."*

Some of us love to gain knowledge about God - more than loving God Himself. We behave as though it's more important to understand God than to know God. But if we wait until we understand everything about God before offering Him our devotion, we will never know Him. Our passion to know God, in humble dependence on Him, has to exceed our passion to understand everything about Him. Others of us place a higher value on studying the Bible than on developing a deep relationship with God, loving the 'book of the Lord' more than the 'Lord of the book'.

Hear again the words of Jesus to the Pharisees – the spiritual leaders of their day:

John 5:37-40 *"You have never heard His voice nor seen His form, nor does His word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one He sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life."*

Studying Scripture does not guarantee a personal relationship with God. This is because Spiritual truth is discerned not only through the application of our intellects, but through the work of the Holy Spirit in our spirit. It is not intelligence and education that is required (the Bible itself suggests that sometimes these are more of a hindrance than help), but humility and *"coming to Him."* What we think is very important. Our thoughts inform our hearts. But what we think is always only the beginning.

Until our knowledge touches and grips our heart – it is worthless. Oh, that we would pursue true 'heart knowledge' of God with the same discipline and persistence with which the scholar pursues 'head knowledge'! As Gene Edwards puts it so clearly, *"You need Christ - not in your mind, but in an all-consuming encounter."*

So, we've established the need for and the importance of seeking the face of God in intimacy ... now, how do we do it? How does this happen practically in our daily lives? Good question, and I will answer that in the next sermon in this series. Until then, take the time to review what has been said here and let the Lord speak to you.

I want to close with some words I believe came from the heart of the Father several years ago in a song I wrote which I sense He is saying to us every day in so many ways. Let the Father's heart grip your heart again as you hear His plea to you here:

From the Father's Heart

Why do you struggle and strive to achieve
You need to slow down for a while and believe
The power of heaven is yours for free
When you're that busy, you never receive.
Perhaps we could stroll in the garden again
I'll share your joys, your sorrow and pain
I just want to be a Father to you
Your love's more important than the work you do

*My precious child, I love you, come walk in the garden with Me
I long to be part of your journey, to open your eyes and see
The depth of My grace and mercy, the riches of heaven above
Come and taste My living water and bask in My glory and love*

There is so much that you'll never know
Unless I have time to help you grow
Draw aside, I'll meet you there
The secrets of my heart I share
I gave my son to bring you back home
It hurts me to see you still struggle alone
Nothing is good if it keeps you away
Turn to Me now and hear Me say:

© 1996 Robert Griffith