

Finishing Well: Seeking God's Face

This past summer Brenda and I had a three-month sabbatical focused on “finishing well.” One concept from Scripture that captured my imagination was “seeking God’s face.” This is one of many images the Bible used to urge us to seek hard after God. Today we are going to look at some key Scriptures which urge us to seek God’s face. I’d like to invite you to dream with me about what our lives might be like if we purpose in our hearts to seek God’s face.

If you’re a “dog person” I’m sure you’ll agree that dogs illustrate many profound spiritual truths. At least my dog does. She’s got a couple bad habits, but on the whole she’s a great dog. More than anybody else, Molly “seeks my face.” Sometimes I’ll be sitting in my chair reading a book and I’ll look up to find Molly standing there staring at my face. She’s waiting for me to look at her because she wants something. Or if I whisper, “Molly!” she will sit up and lock in on my face; she intently wants to know what I want. In an analogous way we are to be that attentive to the face of God.

A Vision for Seeking God's Face (*Psalm 27:7-9, 2 Chronicles 16:9, 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, Psalm 105:4, etc.*)

A key passage about seeking God’s face is Psalm 27:7-9. In this psalm David is crying out to God for deliverance from his enemies. Because David believed that the safest place on earth was the presence of God, he longed to “dwell in the house of the Lord” (i.e., the temple). There he would “behold the beauty of the Lord” and “meditate” and “sing praises” (vv. 4-6); in the presence of God he would be safe.

In that context listen to verses 7-8.

7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice,
And be gracious to me and answer me.
8 *When You said, “Seek My face,”* my heart said to You,
“Your face, O Lord, I shall seek.”

Some of your translations might be a bit different from mine (NASB 95). Instead of God saying, “Seek My Face,” David’s heart was telling him, “Seek God’s face” (as in the NIV); the Hebrew isn’t completely clear on which translation is best. In either case David is having an internal dialogue. He is being prompted (either by God or by his own heart) to seek God’s face. His reply was simply, “Your face, O Lord, I shall seek.” He had a heart commitment to seeking God’s face.

Notice in the next verse how in David’s mind the worst thing that could happen in his day of trouble was for God to turn His face away from him. For God to hide His face or turn away from David meant to abandon him.

9 Do not hide Your face from me,
Do not turn Your servant away in anger;
You have been my help;

Do not abandon me nor forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

When you hide your face from someone, you are ignoring that person. When your “face” is turned toward someone, you are paying attention to that person. If God hid His face from him, David would be abandoned to his own strength, his own protection, His own resources. Instead, as David sought God’s face he wanted God to turn His face fully toward Him, paying attention to him and giving him everything he would need in the day of trouble.

This is one of many examples of how the Bible uses anthropomorphic language to describe God. Even though God is not a man (or a human), the Bible describes Him in human terms so that we can understand more about Him. For example, we read of God delivering the children of Israel “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15) - even though God doesn’t have a body. It’s a way of describing how strong and powerful God is.

The Bible speaks of God’s face as a way of telling us that God is a personal God (as opposed to being merely a force or a power); it’s a way of reminding us that God sees and hears, that God speaks, that God has emotions. When we “seek God’s face” we intentionally notice these things about God. As opposed to ignoring God or assuming all sorts of things about God, we make eye contact with Him, we lean in close to hear what He might be whispering to us, we try to discern whether He’s pleased or annoyed or even angry at how we’re living our lives.

This may sound extremely weird to you. Admittedly, it’s a little abstract talking about perceiving an invisible God in these ways. In a few minutes we’ll talk about how we go to Scripture to notice and discern these kinds of things. For now I want us to take seriously the prospect that seeking God’s face might lead to a personal encounter with the one true living God.

For example, in 2 Chronicles 16:9 we are told this:

9 “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. . .”

We’re told that God notices the human heart. The heart is the command and control center of our lives; we live from the heart. God’s eyes are roaming the earth to find people who have said, “God, my heart is completely yours.” Those are the people who experience His power and strength. God isn’t looking for those who say, “God, I appreciate many things about a relationship with You, but there are areas of my life that are off-limits to you.” It’s not that God is looking for perfect people, but that He’s looking for those whose heart is completely His - people who grant Him access to every area of their lives.

If you seek God's face, you'll be very attentive to the fact that He is looking at your heart. You'll acknowledge this and you'll welcome His scrutiny. You'll find yourself praying what David prayed in Psalm 139:23-24.

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

This is a person who actually cares whether or not God is pleased with his/her life. If you're merely trying to be a moral person you don't really need to seek God's face; just try to live by your principles and do the right thing in every situation. You can ignore God and be a moral person. But if you want to bring pleasure to the heart of God, you'll need to seek His face. You'll need to notice when He's smiling and when He's grieved; you'll need to notice where He's looking and the things to which He's listening.

This summer I thought about "seeking God's face" in the context of my "finishing well" as a pastor and as a son of my Heavenly Father. Seeking God's face is one of the things that can keep me from becoming a "professional Christian" - seeking God only because my job involves studying and teaching the Bible.

This summer I read Eugene Peterson's memoir (simply entitled "The Pastor"). He described how as a child he took seriously God, the Bible, the church, and even prayer. But he basically dismissed pastors as irrelevant. His observation was that they were competent enough on Sunday mornings, but he got the impression that the rest of the week "they weren't all that interested in God." As a pastor, I take that as a personal warning. "God, may that never be true of me. Your face, O Lord, I will seek."

Before we consider how we might seek God's face in the context of the new covenant (in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus), I want to make a couple of clarifications. **First**, there's nothing wrong with seeking God's protection, God's provision, or God's power (all are advocated in Scripture). But in all of our seeking, we **also** need to seek God's face. We not only seeking Him for what He can do for us; we also seeking Him because we can't get enough of Him.

Second, lest we find ourselves thinking that the only people who have any right to seek God's face are those who have it all together or those who don't have any overt sin in their lives, consider 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. In these verses God is replying to Solomon's prayer in the previous chapter. God assures Solomon that in the future even if the people are living in rebellion, God will forgive and heal in response to their repentance.

13 "If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, 14 and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

This is one of the most comprehensive descriptions of repentance in the entire Bible. Repentance isn't merely feeling badly about our sin; it's actually changing course. If you repent of heading north, you turn around and head south. If you repent of slandering someone, you not only stop slandering but you also bless that person with your words (1 Peter 3:9). Here God speaks of this four-fold process of repentance: we humble ourselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from our wicked ways.

Seeking God's face in the context of repentance is so very important. If we seek God's face we'll notice that our sin isn't merely a violation of some regulation buried deep within the law. We'll notice that God is actually grieved when we prefer our own ways to His. We'll notice that God takes delight in our obedience and in our efforts at obedience. Seeking God's face in the context of repentance keeps repentance from being a self-centered effort at fixing our lives. It keeps repentance as a God-centered pursuit of holiness. Never think that you're not eligible or worthy to seek God's face.

Seeking God's Face in the New Covenant. In some ways we seek God's face in exactly the same ways that Moses and David and everyone else did under the old covenant. That's because God is the same now as then. But in some significant ways we have great advantages because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

God's Promise. We can be greatly encouraged by all of the promises God made to us concerning the new covenant in Jesus' blood. Ezekiel 39:29 is a verse that looks forward to the day when God would bring His people back from exile and would pour out His Spirit upon them. He promises this:

29 "I will not hide My face from them any longer, for I will have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel," declares the Lord God.

God had hidden His face from His people during the exile. But there would be a day when He would no longer hide His face. By pouring out His very Spirit upon them, He would reveal Himself to them in the most immediate, personal way. We understand from the New Testament that the exile wasn't really over when the people were returned to the Land. The exile was over when Jesus took on humanity, lived a sinless life, died for our sin, rose from the dead and ascended back to the right hand of the Father. Those who put their faith in Jesus are truly "home." This is confirmed by the indwelling Holy Spirit. If you have the Spirit dwelling within you, you can be certain that God is not hiding His face from you. You can therefore seek His face with great confidence.

C.S. Lewis likened it to a dad playing hide-and-seek with his small children. He hides in the closet, but he leaves the door open and sticks out his foot ***because he wants to be found***. There's no joy in hiding so well that his kids give up and walk off. The joy for the father is in being found. If He wanted to, our heavenly Father could hide so well that we'd never find Him. But His greatest joy is in being found. That's one reason He tells us that He's not hiding His face from us. This means that we can have great confidence in seeking God's face.

Jesus' Incarnation. Sometimes people refer to Jesus as "God with skin on." John 1 refers to Jesus as "the Word" and says this:

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Down in verse 18 we read:

18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

Since God is Spirit (without a body), no one has seen Him at any time. Therefore Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity who is "fully God", has explained Him. Jesus explained through His words and actions and emotions what God really thinks and feels about all sorts of people and all sorts of situations.

Jesus made statements which confirm that when you look at the face of Jesus you are looking at the face of God. In John 14:8 Jesus told His followers, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." Jesus is the exact representation of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3). This means that the face of God is much more accessible to those of us who live after the incarnation than to those who lived before.

The question is whether or not we will seek God's face by fixing our eyes on Jesus. Will we be preoccupied with Jesus (as depicted throughout Scripture) day by day? Or will we basically ignore Him and live off of yesterday's insights and last year's spiritual highs? As the body of Christ, we are a privileged people. God's has promised that His face is turned toward us. We have the benefit of living after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The face of God is more accessible to us than to anybody who lived before Christ. That understanding should be an encouragement not to squander this privilege we've been given.

Examples. We can seek God's face in any number of different ways, but the foundation is always Scripture. Scripture reveals to us everything we know about God's face: where He looks, what He hears, when He is pleased or displeased, when He experiences joy and when He's annoyed. Since the Bible is about God, you can seek God's face in virtually any passage of Scripture. Let me give an example or two.

Some of you are incoming freshmen at K-State and MCC; you're away from home for the first time in your life. I'm told that all freshmen at K-State were each given the book *Ghost Map* to read; I hope you read that book (float me a copy when you're done because I'd like to read it). In the context of seeking God's face, I'd like to recommend that you read another book: it's in the Old Testament. . . the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs the father is telling his son what to pursue and what to avoid. If you seek God's face as you read Proverbs, you won't see a remote deity who mainly wants to keep you from having fun; you will see a Heavenly Father who wants you to pursue wisdom wholeheartedly so that you will experience life and avoid the heartache of sin and foolishness. Read Proverbs. . . if possible before next weekend. If you can't read

the whole thing, just read chapters 1, 4, 7, and 23 before next weekend. Walker Percy pointed out that "it's possible to get all A's and still flunk life." We want better for you.

Or consider how we might seek God's face in a passage like John 11. This chapter records Jesus' interaction with three of His closest friends: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. After Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, He waited two days before making the journey to their home in Bethany. When Jesus and His disciples arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. As we read verses 32-36, breathe the prayer, "Your face, O Lord, I will seek."

32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

"Your face, O Lord, I will seek."

33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!"

Even though Jesus knew Lazarus would soon be raised from the dead, He entered into the grief of His friends. He didn't tell them to suck it up because everything will be fine. Being so "deeply moved in spirit" and "troubled," "Jesus wept." There stood God in the flesh with tears streaming down His face.

If you are brokenhearted over some relationship or circumstance in your life, you may not feel like seeking God's face. You may be tempted to be self-centered instead of God-centered. But if you fix your eyes of Jesus you might be convinced that He has as much affection for you as He had for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He notices your heartache and is deeply moved in spirit. He doesn't make fun of you for your tears. He weeps along with you. If you seek God's face, you allow yourself to be convinced on a heart level that Jesus relates to you the way He related to people in the gospels. At times this realization will be a comfort (such as here in John 11); at times this realization will be a warning (such as Jesus' words in Matthew 23 to the Pharisees).

My encouragement to us all is to read the Scriptures breathing the prayer, "Your face, O Lord, I will seek." If this is the habit of our lives week in and week out, we will progressively see the face of God. And we will progressively take on the family resemblance: our faces will look like His face. We will become more Godly, more Christ-like, and more Spiritual.