

THIRSTING FOR GOD

PSALMS 63

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In the first few pages of the Biblical narrative we learn that sin separates humanity from God. Even though humanity was created in the image of God, after the Fall, humankind was separated from God because of sin. Due to our arrogant self-reliance to be “god” (Edith Humphrey) and our lack of gratitude for the created order, humankind was not only separated from the ease of communion with God, as experienced in the Garden of Eden, but also received the wages of sin, suffering and death (Romans 6:23). It is out of our creaturely limitations that our whole being longs to grasp to know and have a relationship with our Creator. While one would think this would be easy for the image bearers (Genesis 1:27), ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) and royal priests (1 Peter 2:9) to obtain; it certainly is not! The following sermon will explain three truths of how we got distant from God and will then finish with three steps a person can take to embrace His transforming love!

Truth #1: Our noble efforts to find God is “only dust building on dust” (A. W. Tozer) because for a person to seek God, God must first seek the person.

In his book “Knowledge of the Holy” A. W. Tozer masterfully outlines the incompressibility of God. Opening prayer by Tozer: “Lord how great is our dilemma, in thy presence silence best becomes us but love inflames our hearts and constrains us to speak. Were we to hold our peace the stones would cry out, yet if we speak what shall we say? Teach us to know that we cannot know, for the things of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God. Let faith support us where reason fails and we shall think because we believe, not in order that we may believe. In Jesus name, Amen.” One of the greatest questions ever asked by humanity is: what is God like? For Tozer one simply cannot answer this question except to say that God is not exactly like anything or anyone we can imagine. We learn by using what we already know as a bridge to pass over to the unknown. Even the most vigorous mind simply cannot create something out of nothing by a spontaneous act of imagination. Those strange beings of mythology and superstition are not mere creations of the mind. Someone has used the ordinary elements of the earth, air and sea and taken their familiar forms and extending them beyond their normal boundaries. No matter how grotesque or beautiful these creations of the mind might seem, they are not new for they are like something or someone already known.

The effort of the inspired writers of Scripture to use words to describe an unknowable God has placed great strain upon both their thoughts and language. Karl Barth explains the limitations of human language. Words for Barth have meaning but only are limited when used to describe God because what can be said about Him never truly represents Him. Having received a revelation above nature, the writers are forced to use many like words to make what they saw understood, not only by themselves but also by their readers. When the prophet Ezekiel saw heaven open and saw visions of God he found himself looking at that which he had no language

to describe. What he saw was wholly different than anything he had ever known so he fell back on the language of resemblance and concluded his description was merely “the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezekiel 1:28).

When Scripture says we were created in the image of God we dare not state in the exact image for that would make man a replica of God and would end in no God at all. We simply cannot break down the infinite wall that stands between that which is God from that which is not God. To assign to God mere human attributes is to rob God of His divine attributes and to make humanity on equal par with Him. When we try to describe God we have to out of necessity use that which is not God to describe that which is God. Whatever, we visualize God to be, He is not. If we insist on imagining God we end up with an idol of the thoughts and the idol of the mind is as offensive as any idol made by hands. Left to our own imaginations we tend to create God in manageable terms. We want to get Him to where we can control Him. What He is like often becomes a composite of ourselves in a mirror.

If God is unknowable, then how are we to come to satisfy our longing for Him? How can we come to know He who cannot be known by the mind or the heart? How can we be held accountable for knowing He who cannot be known? No one can know the Father except the Son (John 14:16). Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:11 that we can only know God through His Spirit that lives inside of us. Deep calleth unto deep and though polluted by sin of the Fall, the soul senses and longs to return to its origin. It is in Christ and by Christ that God discloses what can be known not by reason but by faith and love. While God can be known by the soul in personal tender experience, while remaining infinitely aloof to the curious eyes of reason, constitutes a paradox best described as darkness to the intellect but sunshine to the heart. God will take the soul by the hand and lead the person into faith and love. If we ask the question what is God in Himself – there is no answer, but if we ask what has God revealed about Himself there is plenty a temporal being can know (most of this section is direct quotes from A. W. Tozer).

Truth #2: Following God’s commands does not mean life will be easy. God, not material blessings, must be the reason for your thirst!

¹You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you;

I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you,

in a dry and parched land where there is no water.

Palms 63

David wrote this passage of Scripture during some very trying times. David started very close to God and with all the blessings Moses promised on Mount Gerizim (Deuteronomy 11:29). I can only imagine what must have gone through his head when Samuel came to his

house and anointed him as the next king of Israel at a tender age of 15 (1 Samuel 16:8)! The blessings did not end there for David soon became a musician at the palace of Saul (16:18-23), a hero for killing Goliath (17:49) and then a great warrior who killed tens of thousands (18:5-7). If I could only stop the story right there, David's life would be a love story of one who obeyed and danced with God in all His blessings!

The story of David's life is far from over. Saul soon became jealous of David and sought to end his life. For approximately 15 years David flees from one place to the next to escape various plots by Saul to kill him. I can only imagine what it must have been like to flee from Nain (19:18), to Nob (21:1-5), to Gath (21:10-15), to Moab (22:3), and to Ziklag (27:7). When David first found he was to be king how he must have dreamed of living in a palace with servants. In reality he spent most of his time hiding in caves, desert areas and desolate lands. Even when David did finally become king all was not rosy for he was always at war with his enemies who surrounded him on all sides. During his reign David must have wondered: what ever happened to Mount Gerizim, the place of all those blessings, and how did he get on Mount Ebal with all those curses?

Truth 3: Love of this world keeps us in a lukewarm relationship with God.

In Psalms 63 David shares with us one of life's greatest struggles. How does one keep one's eyes fixed on spiritual rather than material blessings? Since material things are seen and spiritual one's are not, we desire material things to a greater extent. At the time of the writing of this passage of Scripture David was most likely in the desert of Judah. David states he is living in a very dry land where it seems almost impossible to reach out and feel God's presence! Most commentaries state this passage was written either when David was fleeing from Saul (1 Samuel 23) or Absalom (2 Samuel 15:13-30) who both wanted to end his life. This must have really hurt David for Saul was like a father to him and Absalom was his own flesh and blood! In either case the outcome was the same – David's trials were many!

In the desert David learns it is easier to feel God's presence in times of blessings than in times of tribulations. He who roars like a lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 1:8) has not been called the great deceiver of humanity (Revelation 12:9) without good reason. How easy it would be to reject Satan's plans to take us captive (2 Timothy 2:26) to Mount Ebal, if only he made his true intent known. If only he would take off his disguise as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14) we might come to see the dragon, with his false promises as he truly is: a murderer and liar from the beginning (John 8:44). Satan simply does not paint his kingdom of unlimited choice as one that leads to destruction, for who would ever follow that path? Instead he presents his path as one of freedom to choose what best provides satisfaction for one's own desires. Day in and day out we are told by this world that freedom to choose any path is divine but following God's commands only leads to restraints of folly, after all who can actually become holy?

The modern day Christian in many respects has accepted these lies as truth and as a result has been assimilated into the kingdom of the air (Ephesians 2:2) without fuss or fight! In the television series Star Trek the Next Generation Captain Jean Luc Picard faces his greatest enemy – himself. An

ancient civilization, the Borg, assimilates Jean Luc into their collective hive and he soon finds himself powerless to resist the hive's collective pressure to conform. Jean Luc who initially resisted the Borg soon finds that he is the one telling everyone that "resistance is futile." While this story is purely fictional it also has a ring of truth for today's society. We live in a dry parched land in which living waters are rarely found. Faith for this generation has not led to deeds that correspond to purity (James 2:17) but instead to complacency that leads to a lukewarm attitude that is so vile to Jesus that all He can do with us is to spit us out of His mouth (Revelation 3)!

Step #1 in Getting Closer to God - Reject the ways of this world that says self, not Jesus Christ, is the true lord of a person.

When David said "his whole being longs for God" he certainly did not mean to seek the living waters from the dry grounds of this world! Going to church for an hour, praying or reading the Bible five minutes a week is certainly a good start towards having one's spiritual thirst quenched. However, does one really think one can meet the eyes of Christ with both feet in God's kingdom for moments a day and for the other 23 plus hours acting like a chameleon of this world? Does not Scripture warn us to not love the ways of this world (1 John 2:15)? Or do we perhaps think that God might change His mind and be ok associating with the willfully disobedient whose lord is still found within one's own sinful pleasures?

For Tozer, it is only when the cross is no longer seen as an ornament of beauty but instead an instrument of death that we truly come to see the eyes Christ. Self must die for Christ to live inside of us. People whose souls are crucified with Christ are quickened to life through the regeneration of the Spirit therefore they have the capacity to follow in His footsteps. You can overcome your love for this world! Only when a person is willing to surrender his or her complacent heart does God open one's eyes to see the reality of the spiritual kingdom. He is everywhere indivisibly present, the "City of God, shining around us." While no person can comprehend the incomprehensible, the Spirit who knows the deep things of God makes it possible in some measure to know Him. Salvation came to us by making Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives and this very same allegiance is the key to rejecting our love for this world and replacing it with a true love for our Creator. Those who genuinely thirst for God will be satisfied.

Step #2 in Getting Closer to God: It is through the daily practice of the spiritual disciplines of study, meditation, prayer, fasting, silence and solitude that one is transformed into His likeness.

Living in this fallen world of sin with a church that is "void of power and barren of fruit" (Tozer), how does one go about surrendering one's will to Jesus Christ? Can a church who has left those at the Lord's table starving to be fed, be restored as the body of Christ it was intended to be? We often dream of getting closer to God but truthfully as the weeks, months and years pass we find our moments with God are few and far between. Surrendering our will is not easy for it requires a great deal of discipline.

Let me tell you a story about St. Simeon Stylites (388-459 AD). Born in Cilicia Simeon spent his childhood following in his shepherd father's footsteps. At age 13 Simeon went to a church and heard a sermon that so deeply inspired him that he vowed to find God by any means necessary. Simeon decided that human, physical pleasure was evil and that the true path to God must be one that embraced suffering and pain. Simeon first started this journey by joining a monastery. Monasteries of that time believed that removing oneself from the sinful ways of this world was the only way one could come to see God. While the monastery practiced living with the bare necessities of life this was not enough for Simeon. Simeon chose to eat only once a week and chose to tie a palm rope around his torso until his flesh began to putrefy. It took days of soaking the rope to get it removed from being deeply embedded in his skin. Even this was not enough for Simeon so he decided to build a flagpole and lived on the top of that pole for over 36 years (source: <https://www.trivia-library.com/b/biography-of-father-of-flagpole-sitting-saint-simeon-stylites-part-1.htm>).

Does God want us to go to this extreme to get to know Him? The answer is no. You see we have not been called to ostracize this world and live as hermits, but are called to live in this world as salt and lights unto the nations (Matthew 5:13-16). While Simeon chose the flag pole as his method of getting close to God, I encourage you to choose God's method! Let me first say that spiritual "discipline" is tough. Throwing off the chains of sensual pleasure comes with great pain for the heart at its core wants what it wants! Self literally must be sacrificed on the cross daily or any attempt to reach God will remain a lukewarm platitude! There are several forms of spiritual disciplines that when followed leads to plowing seeds of righteousness in the furrows of our hearts!

1. **Study.** The goal of study is to train the mind to know what is right in God's sight. Being constantly bombarded with the message that any path that provides pleasure is the right one, it is hard to keep one's mind purely devoted to serving God. The mind must constantly be trained to replace old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits that only come from God's word. Since actions and thoughts are intertwined, if one wants to live a holy life one must first think holy thoughts. We are to study and read the Bible not to amass information but to transform the mind to think rightly about God and of ourselves.
2. **Meditation.** While study focusses on retraining the mind, meditation focuses on transforming holy thoughts into holy living. "Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on this law he meditates day and night" (Psalms 1:2). Christian meditation according to Robert Foster is very simply the ability to hear God's voice and obey His word. Boldly entering into the presence of God and asking Him to reveal those areas of our lives that still need to conform to His will can be quite frightening for the love of self often dies with shrieking pain. While the mind is inwardly fraught with distractions and anxieties, our vain imaginations can be harnessed into a singular love of God when His world is allowed to judge and change our daily living!

3. **Prayer.** Prayer should be as natural as breathing for that which has been created in the image of God has also been empowered by His Spirit to communicate with Him. Real prayer is life changing for it is the central avenue in which God chooses to transform us. We need not fear to use the right words when we pray for the Spirit of God will intercede for us by groaning with signs too deep for our words to comprehend (Romans 8:26). The goal of prayer is to hear His voice and to take whatever He commands as the bread of our very lives!
4. **Fasting.** The goal of fasting is not self-mortification or flagellation but to teach oneself that humanity does not live by bread alone but by the word of God (Matthew 4:4). Starving the body while feeding the soul reminds us that the source of all life comes from Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:16). Fasting is done to monitor the attitude of the heart. It helps identify those concerns of this world that are currently ensnaring us. Jesus expected His disciples to fast when He was gone for He knew when one gets in the presence of God to hear His voice, one should never interrupt Him with temporal concerns that are already promised to be fulfilled (Matthew 6:25-34)!
5. **Silence and Solitude.** The purpose of this spiritual discipline is to silence the mind of its thoughts so that one might hear the whisper of God! This society teaches us that we must always be doing something. It comes as no surprise that to be alone with God can be a frightening experience. What if He does not approve of our lifestyle and commands us to change? The tongue and the mind are powerful weapons of self-justification that must be silent to allow God to take command and control of our lives. It is precisely when every distraction of the body, mind and spirit has put into suspended animation that the deep work of transformation begins!

Step #3 in Getting Closer to God: Embrace God's love and be transformed!

I want to finish this sermon but pointing out the elephant in the room. Most of what I just said you have been taught before and have chosen to ignore. I too wrestle in my life to do what is right in God's sight. I wish I could say that I do not sin and that my mind has nothing but pure thoughts, but that would be a lie. Truthfully in many respects we all dream of being the man or woman that can live up to our Christian titles of image bearer, royal priest and ambassador. We come here today with sin polluted minds and with self still partially a god. You may feel like living in the dry parched lands is all God will ever grant you, after all what could He ever do with such a great failure and sinner like you?

To answer that question let me tell you the story of Israel and Babylon. Israel was told again and again to have no other gods but God the Father in heaven and yet they chose to obey idols made of the mind and of hands. God warned them to change their evil ways but they refused to let go of the god of self and kept living their lives with a resemblance of holiness but void of power and barren of fruit. As a result, God sent Babylon to conquer and exile them from their home lands. For 70 years they faced God's wrath during which time they must have

wondered: was God was so ashamed of them that He refused to acknowledge their existence? What I have said today concerning getting close to God you can easily dismiss in your sea of shame. Yes, like Israel we live way too often in the dry lands of our own sin. I hope we feel great shame of taking the treasure God has given us, His Spirit, and burying Him in the sand! That being said do not believe the Devil when he says you are not worth it! Do not believe him when he says getting close to God is only granted to the elect which is not you! Instead listen to the words God told Israel, repent and believe!

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)