

Vision 3: Seeking the abundant life of God (Psalm 27, John 4:1-26)

The old joke is told about the tourist in rural Ireland who gets lost on the way to Balbriggan. He wanders up and down the roads for some time, and eventually spies an old man, sat by the side of the road. 'Excuse me,' he asks the old man, 'how do I get to Balbriggan?' The man looks the stranger up and down. There is a long, awkward silence. Eventually he replies: 'You want to go to Balbriggan?' The tourist nods. 'Well, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here.'

Subject for today is 'seeking abundant life of God.' For many of us, if we're honest, like tourist looking for Balbriggan, if we had a choice, we wouldn't start from where we are now. Perhaps like me you sometimes sit and wonder what a truly empowered, abundant Christian life looked like. But then you compare what you think it might be with where you are, and you think: well, not much use starting from here.

I want to start by saying today: that's a good place to start, place of honesty. But challenge for us is that we need to move beyond that. The fact that our Christian life has not been all it could be, mustn't become an excuse to stay where we are, to give up. Following Jesus is a lifelong adventure – there's always more – how can we be a people that keep seeking – or to use a phrase from another well-known Christian leader – that stay hungry?

Practical tips from bible and experience. Want to say at start: sermon to myself as well – easy for me not to seek God too.

Advice from Paul James-Griffiths: 'There are no short-cuts. In the end, you have as much of God as you want.'

Why seeking so important. God is close to his people, but again and again the cry of God in the OT is 'why aren't you seeking me?' Or to use the positive phrase from Isaiah last week: 'Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.'

Encouragement and a warning – and that implicit warning reminds us of something significant: our natural inclination is to take God for granted.

If you have some time one day, plot timeline of your spiritual life – if we're honest many of us will see our periods of real growth and fervour link closely with times of crisis and trial. When we need God we seek him. And God draws close to us, and the crisis passes – and we return to default setting again.

None other than John Wesley recognised a tension at heart of Christian faith – to paraphrase: come to know Christ, and as our character changes and grows, we tend to succeed more in life – we get educated, we work hard, we take care of our bodies, we have better relationships – all the things we should be. But as we prosper, so we get more comfortable. So our very growth causes complacency. Like the church in Laodicea that God speaks to in Revelation ch3, we look successful, but God calls it something else: lukewarm.

Somehow we have to cultivate this culture of being God-seekers. We need to be seeking people i.e. people seeking life of God. **How?**

Not creating crises. Easy to look at what I just said and think: I get close to God in crisis, so I'm going to cause one. We all know people like that, who lurch from one self-inflicted crisis to another. No! Crises may come to us – but no need for us to cause them ourselves.

Tips from bible passages – start with Psalm 27:

'Seek the Lord in his temple' (the house of the Lord) – (27:4) dedicated time each week. Worship matters – first priority. Not for my benefit, but for yours. No substitute for gathering to worship God. If it's what you do when haven't got anything else to do, missing point. If God only gets fag end of your time, you will never experience more than fag end of his blessings.

May need creative solution. Is there a church near work? Or even something you can do at work – I had a group which met every week in my office for almost whole 12 years I was there.

If shift work – find midweek time (services Tues eve, Wed eve, Sun eve, midday every day).

Find a group. Find live streaming of service on internet. Record Songs of Praise. Best of all, come to your local church! Whatever you do, make some dedicated time for God each week.

'Seek his face' (27:8) – encounter with God. Not just to know about God, but to know God. Can't see God's face, but phrase represents mindset of wanting to be as close and personal with him as possible. 'Facetime' – Apple software. What about Facetime with God.

We are temple now – so actually not bound by building – think about personal ways. Where do you encounter God? (In worship hopefully a given) In creation? In service? In personal quiet time? Hopefully all of those? Prioritise focus on direct encounter with God.

Key to flourishing Christian life is arguably less what happens on Sunday than in capacity to cultivate sense of intimacy with his presence throughout the week. We have to find ways to do that in our busy lives. Can't allow ourselves to accept idea that 'can only do that when retire'.

Simple tips:

- Check in for 2 minutes or even 30 seconds regularly.
- Find the places – 5 mins in morning before family comes downstairs, daily commute, car between appointments, fresh air at lunchtime, for me - office toilet – build it into your normality.
- Memory-joggers – Screensaver (perhaps something interesting 'kiss your feet'), wristband
- Pray in tongues – EXPAND

Brother Lawrence – Practice of presence of God – can spend day with God when peeling potatoes. Cultivating awareness of God's presence throughout day. Great summary: 'Natural life more spiritual and spiritual life more natural.'

John 4 – inspiration for vision: **seek in Spirit and truth** – Spirit picks up on importance of encounter in last point. Balanced with truth. More we know of God, more we'll love him. Making time to seek truth matters. Take every opportunity:

- Church
- Groups
- Study notes/emails

Can do it anywhere – not tied to Jerusalem or temple anymore – can seek God anywhere in Spirit and truth. Mentality of being hungry for truth – usually distinguishes flourishing life from stagnating one. (Breaks my heart when bibles not open – can concentrate better – but what about engaging for yourself.) Irony that never been easier to read and study bible and yet easier it gets fewer people do it. Biblical knowledge going down and down. (Ordinands.) Read biographies and testimonies of believers in other countries – will do anything to get hands on a bible – like gold. Maybe a single beaten up old bible gets handed around a whole village. We have any bible in any format – and we hardly care about it.

We all have a choice – God doesn't force himself on us. Choose to seek – maybe challenge is to prioritise corporate worship. Maybe it's to build in more encounter day-to-day. Maybe it's to get to know word better.

Finish with return to those words from Isaiah last week: 'Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.' Implicit warning – may not be near forever. We cannot, we must not take God for granted. Maybe this is a word for some of you, that God is particularly calling you to seek him again. But for the rest of us, it's no less true. Seek and ye shall find. The amazing thing is that God in his great mercy longs to be found much more than we usually want to seek.

And so, may God grant us all grace to seek. Stay hungry, people, stay hungry.