



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Seek the Lord

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Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

The prophet Isaiah tells us to seek the Lord while he may be found, and call upon him while he is near. But why should we have to seek God? If God is real, wouldn't God want everyone to know? Shouldn't God's existence be obvious?

At least two groups of people have trouble believing in God: those who are suffering and those who just don't see much evidence of God. Sufferers wonder, if God is real and God is good, why doesn't God take away all this suffering? Why does God seem so absent? Even the psalmist in the Bible asks, "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?"

Meanwhile, atheists and agnostics say they don't see much evidence for God. Science explains more and more about the way things work, and many people manage to live their lives without thinking much about God at all; and since God is invisible to our ordinary senses anyway, some people say there's not much reason to believe in God. They don't see the evidence. "If there really is a God," they say, "and if God wants people to believe in him, why doesn't he make himself more conspicuous?"

Is God playing some sort of Hide and Seek game with us? If so, why would God do that? That's the first big question about our having to seek God.

The second question has to do with that curious

phrase Isaiah adds, “while he may be found” or “while he is near.” What does that mean? Is God just passing through, just visiting our part of the universe? Is there some sort of “limited time only offer” for us to find God, as if the offer will expire soon and then God will be gone? Is it really the case, as some evangelical Christians imply, that if we don’t find God here and now before we die, we’ll be lost forever, since we had our chance and blew it? But what kind of God would that be?

If it’s so important that we find God, and we have only a limited time to do it, why does God so often seem to be hidden?

Those are questions we need to explore, because they’re the kinds of things that stand in the way of faith for many people. The Pew Research organization just released a report last week which said that, while 89 percent of American adults still say they believe in God, only 53 percent say religion is very important. Roughly 35% of millennials, young adults born between 1981 and 1996, say they are atheist or agnostic or no religion in particular—twice the percentage of baby boomers and three times the percentage of those born before 1945.

Of course, believing in God is not necessarily the same thing as being “religious,” but Christianity proclaims a God who is good and powerful and merciful and loving, a God who saves us from sin and death, and invites everyone into a relationship with God, and expects us to live in certain ways. People have all sorts of notions about God, and often the God they imagine for themselves has little to do with everyday life, or remains conspicuously congenial to their own interests. If we’re going to help people meet the God we know in Jesus Christ, we need to show them, and remind

ourselves, what it means to seek God, and how we can tell when we've found God, and why it matters.

Whenever we want to meet someone, we need to know what we're looking for. With human beings, that's not so hard to do. We can describe what a person looks like, or even find a picture, to help us recognize her. With God it's different. There's no photo of God. That seems like an obvious point, but people sometimes complain about not being able to see God, as if that was a reason not to believe—as if we *should* be able to see God, as if God could just step out from behind a curtain for all the world to see.

But of course God is not like that. Complaints about not being able to see God only point to our naiveté. When Christians talk about seeking God, we're not talking about seeing someone as if we were meeting a person on a blind date. We have to look for God in other ways.

Here there are some analogies with science, I think, if we don't take the analogies too far. Some of the most important insights of science have to do with things we can never see directly. We know, for example, that the forces of nature are real—gravity, electromagnetism, the strong and weak nuclear forces—but we never see those forces themselves. We know they're real because we see the effect they have on other things. Gravity causes a pencil to drop, and we see the pencil falling, but we don't see gravity itself. We watch movies produced by electromagnetic waves, but we never actually see the electromagnetic force.

The deepest parts of our character and our relationships are like that too. We never see a thing called "courage" the way we see a tree or a bicycle, but we see someone standing up to a bully, or a soldier sacrificing

himself for the sake of his buddies, and we recognize the kind of thing that courage does. We never see love as an object like an orange or a coffee cup, but we see parents caring for their children, and spouses looking after one another through some long illness, and lovers delighting just to be in one another's company, and we know what love is, and we know that it's real.

Seeking God means knowing how to recognize God's presence, and it's no more important that we can't see God directly than that we can't see gravity or courage or love directly. God is no less real for being invisible to the eye. The Bible says that God is Spirit, and part of what that means is that we should no more expect to see God than we expect to see gravity, and for a similar reason: which is that God is everywhere, behind all things, and at work in and through all things.

How can we tell when we've found the one true God we've been seeking? Well, we know some things about God, so we know what to look for among the signs of God's presence.

God is the Creator of all that's good in the world, so when we marvel at the beauty of creation, we see a sign of God's presence; and when we ourselves create something worthwhile we feel something of the presence of God within us. And God is love, so when we see evidence of love, and receive love, and learn to love ourselves, we see and feel the presence of God among us.

God is also the Redeemer of all that is bad in the world. God heals the sick, sometimes in this life and always in the life to come, so when we see healing of body, mind, or spirit, we're seeing the presence of God. God forgives and

reconciles and redeems broken relationships, so whenever love and community are restored we know that God is present among us. When we practice forgiveness, when we help people see that some ways of living are better than others, and when we're willing to be redirected ourselves, we know that God is at work within us.

When we practice the presence of God—that is, when we tune our hearts and minds to recognize all the ways that God is on the move—we find ourselves in a deepening relationship with God. Then, as in any other relationship, we talk with God, and we learn to listen more carefully as we come to hear the nuances of God's own voice.

In our deepening relationship with God, we find that our prayers are answered in countless ways. We're led to where we need to be, and people are brought to us just when we need to see them. We might say the right thing, and avoid saying the wrong thing, when we pray for God to guide us, and the outcome is so much better than what we could ever achieve on our own. We turn our fears and anxieties over to God and feel them dissipate in God's own love and compassion. We find courage to face the frightening things, and our capacity for gratitude grows as we discover more and more things to be grateful for.

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