

How to Find GOD When You've Looked Everywhere

Connecting with God
Abiding in God
Walking with God

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How To Find God When You've Looked Everywhere

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Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	xi
Chapter 1	
God Wants To Be Found	1
Chapter 2	
How God Finds Us	17
Chapter 3	
How To Connect To God	34
Chapter 4	
What It's Like To Get Closer To God	54
Chapter 5	
Getting Closer To God Through Worship	80
Chapter 6	
The Cleansing Relationship	106
Chapter 7	
Some People Just Don't Want To Find God	132
Notes	146

CHAPTER 1

GOD WANTS TO BE FOUND

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw the light, and saw that it was good. God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." There was evening and there was morning, the first day (Genesis 1:1-5)

If we read the Bible as a whole from a Christian perspective, then the end is contained in the beginning. The New Testament affirms that God is love. With this affirmation, we may then read the first chapter of the Bible. God's creation begins the greatest love story ever told. Our Lord created this world, saying "it was good" (Genesis 1:31). Out of love for the people of his creation, God offered good things. The best thing of all is for us to receive God's love and to love him in return.

Creating this world was not a mere experiment on God's part nor a trial as if just a practice session for the next big thing. Not an experiment (which might go wrong), the universe became a home for the most complex creatures ever made: man and woman. God made the people of this world so they could think, reason,

and have opinions. We were built with free will and the power of choice. God made us people who share in his creativity. We make and create things. We were made to give and receive love, both in relation to God and each other. We were made in God's image (Genesis 1:26).

This new earth would be a perfect home for God's creation. Designed to make us comfortable and provide for our every need, the earth was beautiful to behold. Everything was alive. This world would be self-sustaining in order to receive and support the population that would become the offspring of the first couple, Adam and Eve. Through it all, the new people made by God would share love with each other and with the Creator of all things. The God of love desires to share his good creation with human beings.

People who wish to be connected with God must do so through the bond of love. Love will be in our hearts as surely as the love that binds us to our friends, our children, and our spouses. Love is a mystery, difficult to describe. Our love for others can only be understood through an experiential understanding. Love for God, similarly, involves experience and intuition. Everything we know, or think we know about God must begin from the affirmation that God is love. The New Testament sings of God's love:

God is love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him (1 John 4:16).

We love him, because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

All love that we have in our hearts is from God. There is no other source, for God is love itself. He created love inside of us as certainly as he created the world in which we live.

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

The first verses of Genesis describe the first day of creation. What a day it was! Even though the sun and moon were not created on the first day, there was light. The light described is the divine light, a source that goes beyond created sources of light (e.g., planetary bodies) in physical or material terms. Since the sun and moon were not put in place until the fourth day of creation, the light existing on the first day came directly from God. As the New Testament affirms:

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

By creating light on the first day of creation, God announced both his presence and his authority. The dividing line between daylight and darkness distinguished light and darkness in the naturalistic and physical sense. Darkness became the absence of light. Symbolically and metaphysically, light and darkness signify good and evil, respectively. This first act of God demonstrated that God's very nature is to be the light as the New Testament states (John 1:4). Those who wanted to be part of his kingdom longed for the light and move to the light. Those who did not want to be part of his kingdom would stay in darkness and move away from the light. There would be people in the new world, created by God, who would choose the darkness rather than the light.

From the start, God in God's omniscience knew that some would choose darkness. God prepared for that refusal. His people had free will, and he knew many would not come to the light. The Book of Revelation describes the future kingdom on earth, which is made new, as having no night (Revelation

21:25). When there is no darkness, in the new kingdom, there is no evil.

No one can know why some people choose evil and stay away from the light. However, he gives us the choice to stay in the darkness away from him. God wants to be surrounded by people who truly love and want to be with him. For this freedom to be preserved, they must have the ability to say no. Love, according to God's definition, depends on free will and cannot be forced.

"For only love can satisfy love, and love cannot be compelled! To win a person's friendship, you clasp his hand – you do not clench your fist. All genuine affection springs from free volition, and you cannot truly love without the power to choose." (W. Ian Thomas)¹

Freedom sets the stage for potential conflicts, since some choose light and others darkness. As a result of this conflict between light and darkness, God the Father, through his only begotten Son, is on a mission to eliminate the darkness. By establishing a kingdom based on love, which will last without sin for all eternity, God aims to gather a people who want him to be their God; they want to be his people. The people of his kingdom leave the darkness for the kingdom of the light.

Before we can understand our Lord's vision for the lives of his people, we must have a good understanding of his desires from the very beginning.

GOD WANTS A PEOPLE TO SHARE HIS LOVE

Since love works through relationships, God seeks to establish

a connection and relationship with each person. By revealing himself to us, God invites us to come and join with him. Those who hear and accept this invitation come into the light. They become God's people of the light. He wants *all* who will to join him, "that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

If God's people cannot choose against him, they cannot truly love him in the way God desires, for they cannot be his friends. The kingdom is to comprise his friends, not his servants. The New Testament states this message through Jesus Christ, who is sent by God.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant doesn't know what his lord does. But I have called you friends, for everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you (John 15:15).

Eleven of Jesus' disciples had the privilege of hearing these words in person, from Jesus' own lips. This verse comes from the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, which contains final instructions to the disciples just a few hours before Jesus' arrest. Less than twenty-four hours after delivering these instructions, Jesus will have died and been lying in the tomb. The farewell discourse, recorded in the Gospel of John (chapters 13 through 17), may be the most poignant, intimate, and powerful talk of Jesus' ministry on earth. All who receive the words from this speech will be blessed. Jesus is speaking not just to his designated disciples but also to his friends and to all who read the gospel in later generations.

This final talk may address us personally if we listen with our hearts, as if we were being addressed directly and individually. Each of us is a friend of the Lord, who has something to tell us —

each of us, personally.

Let us think of our own friends, how many of them come and go, how few stay in our lives forever. In fact, friendship is special because, while a friend has the freedom to walk away, he or she stays and loves through thick or thin, in good times or bad, amidst rough times or smooth. Only the full commitment of friendship provides an honest and equal connection, from heart to heart, upon which a true relationship is built. Friends exchange ideas, back and forth, while listening and responding to each other. Friends respect each other, while exploring ideas, learning together, and loving. Such a relationship benefits both people in the partnership and those in their social circle.

Many couples form the mutually beneficial relationships John describes. These couples maintain a bond that is loving, affirming, and nurturing. Their sharing with each other is amazing to experience, just as Jesus desires. The marriage relationship, while different from friendship, is strengthened by friendship and God's love:

He answered, "Haven't you read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall join to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?' So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, don't let man tear apart" (Matthew 19:4-6).

In the divine scheme, marriage is as close to a perfect relationship as one can have in our lives. Marriage is a model of the relationship Jesus desires with each one of us. We are to become one with him as husband and wife are one: "no more two, but one flesh" (Matthew 19:6). Similarly, Jesus prays for unity among his disciples:

That they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that you sent me (John 17:21).

Most couples do not achieve an ideal of total oneness. Not even the followers of Jesus will be capable of total oneness with him on this earth. But we should not get discouraged. He wants the relationship between himself and each of us to begin in this world while extending into the world to come. A whole eternity stretches out in which we may grow closer to God. Love does not change. Love is timeless.

We usually focus on what our Lord is doing for us and what we are receiving from God. However, God asks for something from us. Beyond the gifts of God, such as life, love, salvation, acceptance, and eternal life, God seeks a relationship with us, which entails mutuality. Relationships are about both parties. Both contribute and receive benefits, one from the other. Yes, God wants to receive benefit from us: our love, freely given.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him was not anything made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it (John 1:1-5).

We serve an incredible creator God. "It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:3). Having created this wonderful world in which we live, God created Adam and Eve to share his creativity. He left it to us to procreate and give birth to the rest of humanity. We share in this divine creative power. God created the

people of earth with special endowments:

- We are given dominion over the earth.
- We have the ability to reproduce.
- We have the ability to think and to act and to accomplish.
- We are created to be in the image of God.

Wonderful things indeed! We are special because God made and loves us. Each of us must decide how we should live our lives and how we will fit into this world in which we live. The creator God is all about love. So, our lives are intended to be fulfilled (and fulfilling). Our joy is to be full. This universe is to be filled with people with whom to share God's love. We as human beings are to be with God forever as Jesus explains:

I am going to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you to myself; that where I am, you may be there also (John 14:2-3).

God did not create robots or even servants. We are created as friends, friends according to our free will. Genuine friends can stop loving if they choose to so, but they will never make that choice. Such a community of friends may seem like an impossible accomplishment. With God all things are possible.

God has a plan so that we will be knit together in bonds of friendship. For our own benefit, God's dealings with us are as transparent as possible because God operates on the principle of full disclosure. His covenant with us is completely open. We receive this disclosure through a written record (the Bible) which has been passed down through the ages. Of course, God's first plan started in the garden with Adam and Eve. They met with God

daily. They learned from him face to face. There was no death, no separation. Later, separation ensued, a separation that God wants to mend so we might reconnect with him and more deeply love him again.

GOD'S CHANGING WAYS TO CONNECT WITH HIS PEOPLE

When Adam and Eve were initially in the garden, they were connected to God and walked with him. Their ways were the same, the divine and the human. As they matured, they developed doubts about God's leadership and authority. They must have been wondering whether all of his guidance was in their best interest. When the couple ate from the tree which had been forbidden, they broke the relationship of trust. They chose their way over God's way.

Everything changed. Adam and Eve also changed. They had lost their natural connection with God. They became separated from him. Their children would now be born without this special connection as well. They no longer had access to their garden home. They had to begin again in a less protected environment outside the garden of Eden.

Both God and the couple recognized the loss and God developed a plan of restoration. A special representative would be sent to enable a new union of humankind with God. This man would be a peacemaker, a mediator, specially appointed to reconcile the relationship that had been lost between humanity and God. Once they heard this new message of hope, the descendants of Adam and Eve (who constituted God's people) longed for the day of its coming. Throughout the history of Israel, God and his people were bound in a covenant. However, evil continued to abound. The

prophets glimpsed the coming of this appointed messiah and Savior whom God had ordained and set apart for a holy mission.

Once this messenger was sent by God, as the New Testament recounts, the story of Jesus Christ—and God’s love—spread entirely by personal testimony. During this period many people heard Christ’s invitation for reconciliation with God and they came into the light. Seeking a restored relationship with God, they chose the ways that Christ set out for them.

The history of Israel may be divided into epochs. The first epoch lasts from Adam to Abraham. The light was almost overtaken by the darkness during this time. But God and his people endured through the strife of Cain and Abel, the devastation of the flood, and the wreckage left after Babel. Righteous men like Noah and many others were approved by God. The light continued. Then, God changed his approach to humanity because humanity had changed. While tribalism and city-states were fading, nations were being formed. International trade began on a large scale. God’s goal remained the same: that people might know him and come into the light. He developed a different method to achieve this goal. His people would carry his message, as a nation among other nations.

God formalized religion while the Jewish nation took shape, a process that took five-hundred years beginning with the birth of Abraham in what is now eastern Iraq. Abraham and Sarah moved into the land promised to them in Canaan, which lies along the Jordan River. From Canaan, his people moved into Egypt. Five hundred years after the birth of Abraham, a million and a half Israelites walked out of Egypt at the time of the exodus. Struggling in the desert, they crossed the Jordan river back into Canaan after

forty years. Now they were carrying their tabernacle, their teachings, and their traditions. Thereupon they occupied the promised land promised to Abraham 500 years before. Jerusalem became the capital and the center of worship. Schools were started. A nation was born. People continued to hear God's invitation and come into the light.

After more than a millennium (about 1,500 years later), our Lord changed his approach to humanity once again, because humanity had changed. The same goal remained in place as in the garden. A different method would be required. God did not change, nor his goal; only the means to accomplish the goal. Now, God incarnated in Jesus Christ and came to earth himself. Having taken on human form, God through Jesus Christ fulfilled the law that had not been kept by human beings. He became the mediator between God and humanity, the one who could stand between the two and reconcile their differences.

After the time of Jesus, religious institutions became decentralized. This context meant that the message of the gospel could spread and multiply throughout the world. Jerusalem was no longer the center of worship. The blood sacrifice of animals stopped, a system that had been in place for four thousand years.

The priesthood of all believers was established, entailing a new set of beliefs and practices, namely:

- Faith in Jesus as the Son of God
- Repentance
- Baptism by the Holy Spirit

God's people quickly started to meet in groups. These congregations were called churches. God's people spread over the earth,

having heard the invitation from God through Jesus Christ. They came into the light, having chosen God's way.

Some believe that the previous approaches of God toward his people failed. However, we can think of such perceived failures differently. Every approach by God to draw humanity to himself has been successful. Each approach by the divine has been built on the foundation of the preceding ones. Millions of adherents have come to the light, no matter the approach. His methods of drawing human beings to himself have been adapted to the particular circumstances in each era. God's ways always meet our needs, and when our needs are met, his needs and goals are met. God is a servant God.

Here is the Old Testament plan, a covenant which puts God in relationship with his people:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says Yahweh: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jeremiah 31:33).

I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people (Leviticus 26:12).

Here is the New Testament plan:

For you are a temple of the living God. Even as God said, "I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Corinthians 6:16).

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days," says the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind. I will also write them on their heart. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Hebrews 8:10).

Here is the plan for the new earth, after the kingdom of God is established:

I heard a loud voice out of heaven saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with people, and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:3).

These scriptures reflect what God wanted for his people at different stages in salvation history, from the pre-flood world until today. God's purposes are consistent for each epoch depending on circumstances: for the kingdom of Israel (in the past), for his people here today (in the present), and for the new earth (in the coming epoch). God is to be our God, and we are his people. The goals of God, to love and be bound to us in relationship, are achieved—in the past, present, and for the future.

GOD'S PEOPLE RESPOND TO HIM

While we live on this earth, God invites us to be a part of his plan. The invitation is open for those with ears to hear his divine voice. Those who hear the invitation can respond. He has given this same invitation from the beginning of history.

By faith, Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had testimony given to him that he was righteous, God testifying with respect to his gifts; and through it he, being dead, still speaks (Hebrews 11:4).

Abel heard the voice of the Lord, believed it, and responded. He obeyed God. This obedience was counted to him as righteousness.

By faith, Enoch was taken away, so that he wouldn't see death, and he was not found, because God translated him. For he has had testimony given to him that before his translation he had been well pleasing to God (Hebrews 11:5).

Enoch listened to God and followed the divine ways. This obedience was counted to Enoch as righteousness.

By faith, Noah, being warned about things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared a ship for the saving of his house, through which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith (Hebrews 11:7).

Noah heard God, believed him, and acted on his belief. This act of faith was counted to him as righteousness.

And what is faith?

Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, proof of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

What about Abraham? God had promised Abraham that he would be the progenitor of a nation of many. However, Abraham was desperate when, at seventy years old, he still had no heir. He talked to God about this problem. He thought that Eliezer, his lead employee, would be his heir.

Behold, Yahweh's word came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir, but he who will come out of your own body will be your heir." Yahweh brought him outside, and said, "Look now toward the sky, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." He said to Abram, "So will your offspring be." He believed in Yahweh, who credited it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:4-6).

Abraham heard the word of the Lord and believed him, and it

was counted to him as righteousness.

Sarah stands out as unique in the list of the faithful, given in Hebrews 11. Sarah has a fascinating history (Genesis 16:1-10). Abraham told her about God's promise of not only bearing a son, but that she would also have children as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Some fifteen years later, considering the matter logically, Sarah became impatient with waiting for God to act. She took matters into her own hands. She told Abraham that there was no way she could have children because of her age. So, she provided her handmaid to him as a wife so he might have natural children.

Sarah's strategy for giving Abraham a son didn't work out well. Our personal strategies to do God's will often fail when we take things into our own hands. Her handmaid, Hagar, gave birth to Ishmael and the strife in Sarah's tent never stopped. Finally, Hagar ran away from the camp. The Lord brought her back, and she learned to live with Sarah.

Abraham was eighty-five when Ishmael was born. Abraham was ninety-nine when the promise was repeated for the last time. Sarah was included, specifically by name this time. Angels visited Abraham and repeated the promise a third time (Genesis 18:9-15). Abraham learned that the promise would happen within a year. Sarah was listening from the tent during this conversation. She could hear every word. Sarah laughed when Abraham was told that his wife would be pregnant in a few short months.

In the biblical story, God hears her laughter in the tent and rebukes her. Sarah denies laughing. God says, "Yes, you did" (Genesis 18:15), which is a second rebuke. This final rebuke was what Sarah seemed to need. She finally gets the point. She accepts God's word.

She gives up her own judgments and believes what God has told her. Within a few months, she is pregnant. What does the scripture say about Sarah?

By faith, even Sarah herself received power to conceive, and she bore a child when she was past age, since she counted him faithful who had promised. Therefore as many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as innumerable as the sand which is by the sea shore, were fathered by one man, and him as good as dead (Hebrews 11:11-12).

These followers of God had one thing in common. They could hear their Master. He called them by name, and they followed him. They heard his voice—they believed—and acted on their belief. Then, it was counted to them as righteousness.

In Eden, at the time of the flood, and after the flood until today, the principles of faith are constant. After the cross, similarly, our belief in God's word is counted to us as righteousness.