

## Seeking God in the Second Half

As we have considered many topics such as dealing with fear and anxiety, strengthening our hope and perseverance, trusting God for our adult children, finding contentment as we deal with the aging process and many others, we have thought so often of the vital place of our walk with God and our personal devotion to Him, as key to finishing well.

By its very nature, this area of our lives is personal to each one of us and between ourselves and the Lord, and since we are very different individuals in personality, temperament, background, and life circumstances it would not be helpful to be prescriptive. But our aim is to be a source of encouragement to each other and to “spur one another on to love and good works”.

With that in mind, the following is mainly some Bible verses and questions for reflection to stimulate our thinking about this important area of our lives and to encourage us to share with each other what has helped us over the years to draw near to God.

“What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the ‘eternal life’ that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. ‘This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent’ (John17:3). What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God. ‘This is what the Lord says, let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me.’ (Jeremiah 9:23).” (J.I. Packer p31)

We all long to have this aim in our lives, but at times that desire can come and go. It may help us to remember that although we might be aware of our need for God and His resources in our lives, He also delights in our coming to Him and indeed calls us to do so.

### **Come to me.....the call to meet with the Living God**

“Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

After a particularly busy time of ministry Jesus called his disciples to come aside with him to a quiet place. He knew that their need was for both physical and spiritual rest and renewal:-

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” (Mark 6:31)

“Come all of you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money come buy and eat!.....Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live.” (Isaiah 55:1-3)

The scriptures often use the metaphors of thirst and hunger for both our felt need for God and to emphasise how important our fellowship with Him really is to our spiritual health and survival. The Lord Jesus takes up this metaphor in John’s gospel:-

“Then Jesus declared ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.’” (John 6:35)

“On the last and greatest day of feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink’” (John 7:37)

We can know with certainty that our Creator and Redeemer longs for us to come to Him, to spend time in His presence, to listen to Him, to rest in him and for our souls to be refreshed and nourished.

*For reflection:-*

*Are you aware of God’s call to you personally and daily to come to him?*

*Would you feel more comfortable with a call to serve or to ‘do’ for God?*

*Do you sense that God delights in you coming to Him?*

### **Desire for God**

“The stirring of spiritual desire indicates that God’s spirit is already at work within us, drawing us to himself. We love God because He first loved us. We long for God because He first longed for us. We reach for God because He first reached for us. Nothing in the spiritual life originates with us. It all originates with God.” (Ruth Haley Barton p25)

“O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” (Psalm 63:1)

David wrote this psalm in the Judean wilderness on the run from Saul. The words ‘earnestly seek’, ‘thirst for’ and ‘long for’ capture his deep sense of both need and desire for God. He also recognises that the land he is in offers no water, nothing to meet his deepest needs, which only God can satisfy.

Psalm 42:1-2 also vividly describes this deep desire to meet with the living God:-

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I go and meet with Him?”

Another aspect of desire for God and His presence is in the use of the words ‘yearns’ and ‘long for’. Isaiah records “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.” (Isaiah 25:9)

Psalm 84:2 also speaks of this longing “My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God.”

The image of ‘seeking’ is often used for this desire for fellowship with God:-

“One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.”

“Hear my voice when I call O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, “Seek his face!” Your face, Lord I will seek.” (Psalm 27:4,7,8)

Isaiah exhorts us to “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”  
(Isaiah 55:6)

*For reflection:-*

*Do you identify with this deep desire and longing to meet with God?*

*If not, what helps to stimulate that desire? What can stifle it?*

*David looked around and saw no water in the wilderness to satisfy his thirst. Are there ways that we seek to satisfy our real need for God with other things or distractions?*

### **When there is dryness – but no thirst; darkness – but no light**

“All of us have periods of darkness in our lives, moments of despair or doubt when we feel we might be losing our way. The crises of life touch us all, and we may feel that we have been abandoned by God, and that we are on our own. It feels as if God has hidden His face from us – a common complaint in the Old Testament. Normally such experiences do not last too long, and we quickly recover. There is another experience of spiritual darkness, however, for which there seems to be no apparent reason, and which feels as if it will go on for ever. This has been traditionally known as the ‘dark night of the soul’.” (Horsfall p97)

Russell Metcalfe describes this experience like the lights going out, the screens going black, the lines going dead and God not answering his phone and that no matter how hard we look there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

David knew this experience when he cried out to God in Psalm 13 v1-2:-

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?”

There may be a feeling of rejection; that God is just not there for us any more:-

“Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Saviour.” (Psalm 27:9)

“But I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:13-14)

Although David had a deep sense of feeling rejected and forsaken by God, yet his very heart cries to God for help, demonstrate that he is clinging on to his faith.

Job was described by God as blameless, upright and a man who fears God and yet Job knew great suffering out of which came a season of deep darkness and confusion:-

“Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor? Yet when I hoped for good evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness.” (Job 30:25-26)

It may not be as the result of suffering, but of more mundane causes such as exhaustion, ill health, the ‘neutral zone’ of a major life transition or the fallout of emotional or physical

trauma of some kind. But if we keep on seeking God, the lights will eventually come on again.

“You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.” (Psalm 18:28)

*For reflection:-*

*Has this sense of dryness, darkness and feeling far from God been part of your experience?*

*Could you identify a cause or was there no real reason?*

*What helped you at that time to recover and to sense God’s presence again?*

### **Approaching God**

“Once we have discovered that God is a God of grace, we will be free to approach him with confidence and begin to enter a life of intimacy and fellowship with him. As long as we think of God as harsh, critical and demanding, we will not want to come near – indeed we will want to hide ourselves away out of fear of disappointing or offending him. At best we will approach God in our ‘Sunday best’, showing only our presentable side to him and trying to create a front of acceptability. Once we realise that God loves us unconditionally, we will be liberated to come to him as we are, in the complete abandonment and childlike joy of those who know they are truly loved. Only then can we live before God in a way that is natural and authentic.” (Horsfall p125)

Paul reminds us of the freedom and confidence that we should have in approaching God:-

“In him (Christ) and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” (Ephesians 3:12)

In the letter to the Hebrews the writer also expresses how that access to God was won for us by the precious blood of Christ shed for us:-

“Therefore, Brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened up for us through the curtain, that is his body,” (Hebrews 10:19-20)

This letter was written to believers, who had come to Christ from a Jewish religious and cultural background. These believers would know all about the huge, thick curtain that had always separated them from the Holy Place in the temple at Jerusalem. It symbolised that sinful man could never enter the presence of the holy God, since he would have to face the wrath of God against his sin. When Jesus died at Calvary and his blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sin, he bore the wrath of God in our place and at that moment in time the curtain in the temple in Jerusalem was torn, by God, from top to bottom to open up the way into his presence for repentant sinners, who trust in Christ. (Mark 15:37-38)

In Christ, we not only have a Saviour for our sin but one who has walked this earth, felt its sorrows and frustrations, experienced loneliness and abandonment by his friends, suffered loss, humiliation, hostility and the greatest temptations in Satan’s armoury, but without sin.

This is the one to whom we come, naked of all pretence, free from all our hypocrisy, bringing only our need for mercy and grace.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16)

But our freedom and confidence should be balanced with the recognition of God’s holiness, purity and his majesty so that we also approach him with reverence, awe and humility. See Isaiah 6:1-8.

Psalms 37 verse 3 and verse 7 reminds us that we come both to delight ourselves in the Lord and to “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.”

In Psalm 46:10 God, himself, speaks to command us to “Be still, and know that I am God”, to remember who it is to whom we come; to approach with reverential fear as well as confidence; to seek him with all our hearts yet to be quick to listen and slow to demand.

*For reflection:-*

*How does your view of God affect how you come to him?*

*Are there times when you most need to come to God, but feel unable to do so?*

*What can help to prepare our hearts to come to him?*

### **The Joy of Intimacy with God**

“There is definitely a growing hunger for a more vital relationship with God among those who have been actively serving him for many years. It is as if we are waking up to the fact that the Christian life is not just about doing things for God but also about knowing him deeply and intimately.” (Horsfall p82)

We thought earlier that as we respond to God’s call to come to him with our weariness and our burdens; as we give them to him and take his yoke upon us we will find rest for our souls. (see Matthew 11:28-29)

Deep soul rest seems to be one of the great joys of spending time in God’s presence. In Psalm 62:1 David declared:-

“My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.”

We can be so familiar with Psalm 23 that we can overlook how refreshing and restoring a relationship with God David is describing:-

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul,” (Psalm 23:1-3)

As well as a place of spiritual nourishment and refreshment this is the only place where we are completely known, yet completely loved and accepted, just as we are, and are able to be totally honest, since God knows even the unspoken longings and anguish of our hearts:-

“All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.”  
(Psalm 38:9)

“Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out you hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”  
(Psalm 62:8)

This is a time of contemplating God that results in praise and a satisfied soul:-

“I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and you glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. (Psalm 63:2-5)

It is also a place where we can bring our needs and requests and know we will be heard:-

“Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” (Psalm 5:1-3)

Tony Horsfall explains that although we all know that a relationship only grows in intimacy when we spend quality time together, this is one of the things that we find most difficult to do in our spiritual lives.

“The greatest barrier to intimacy is our busyness and our inability to be still on the inside. This is why the classic spiritual disciplines of stillness, silence and solitude need to be rediscovered and taught to a new generation.” (Horsfall p126)

*For reflection:-*

*Does the idea of intimacy with God seem uncomfortable to you?*

*What have you found most helps to deepen your relationship with God?*

*What, for you, is the greatest barrier to deepening your intimacy with God?*

### **What are the benefits of time spent with God?**

We thought earlier that one of the sensations that drives us to meet with God is a realisation that, just as our bodies require physical food to function and to grow, we require spiritual food to nourish our souls and to help us to grow to maturity. A verse we often use to encourage new believers to get into the scriptures is also relevant for those of us who have been around a lot longer:-

“Like new born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” (1 Peter 2:2-3)

Psalm 19:7-11 is a treasure trove of the benefits of spending time with God, in his word. It revives the soul, makes wise the simple, gives joy to the heart, light to the eyes, warns us when we are going wrong and feeds us with food sweeter than honey.

The scriptures also use the metaphor of trees and roots to describe how living in vital union with Christ results in stability, security, spiritual nourishment and maturity as well as fruitfulness and perseverance under external pressures.

“And now just as you trusted Christ to save you, trust him, too, for each day’s problems; live in vital union with him. Let your roots grow down into him and draw up nourishment from him. See that you go on growing in the Lord, and become strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught. Let your lives overflow with joy and thanksgiving for all he has done.”  
(Colossians 2:6-7 Living Bible)

Psalm 1 identifies the person who delights in God’s word and meditates on it day and night:-

“He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does he prospers.”

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

These times of fellowship with the Lord in his word have many other benefits for us:-

Psalm 111:10 wisdom for life and ministry.

Psalm 119:105 guidance and direction for the way ahead.

2 Corinthians 3:18 transformation into the likeness of Christ

John 15:4-5 an abiding and fruitful union with Christ.

Galatians 5:25 keeping us in step with the Holy Spirits promptings.

“Once people discover the joy of intimacy with God and the delights of his presence, they want to stay there. The next challenge is learning how to abide in Christ and make him our dwelling place and the source of our life..... One painful lesson is hinted at in what Jesus says here (John 15) that apart from him we can do nothing. Most of us have spent a good deal of time trying to do things without God, and we have developed ways and means of getting through life on our own, of being strong, resilient and self-sufficient. In his love and wisdom God gently has to dismantle some of these patterns of independent living until we come again to the place of dependency upon him.” (Horsfall p127)

*For reflection:-*

*Do you still hunger for God’s word or has it become over familiar and ceased to impact your life on a daily basis?*

*What for you are the greatest benefits of time spent in God’s presence?*

*How has God been speaking into your life recently through his word?*

## Spiritual Disciplines

Although out of favour for a long time in Evangelical circles, the spiritual disciplines have become more popular as believers seek a deeper walk with God and perhaps as a reaction to our frenetically busy and distracted lifestyles. It might be helpful to mention one or two for you to think about.

“Solitude is a place. It is a place in time and is set apart for God and God alone, a time when we unplug and withdraw from the noise of interpersonal interactions, from the noise busyness and constant stimulation associated with life in the company of others. Solitude can also be associated with a physical place that has been set apart for times alone with God, a place that is not cluttered with work, noise, technology, other relationships, or any of those things that call us back into doing mode. Most important, solitude is a place inside myself where God’s Spirit and my spirit dwell together in union.”(Ruth Haley Barton p32)

This is the place to which Jesus called his disciples away from the clamour and the demands of people and ministry to be alone with him and to be at rest and peace:-

“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” (Mark 6:31)

Alan E. Nelson says of solitude “Most people hate being alone because we are so conditioned to be busy, doing, listening, talking, and thinking. Solitude is choosing to be alone with yourself, isolated from other humans and hectic activity. Much of our hurried living is lived out of pride, self-importance, fear or lack of faith. Solitude grants freedom from ingrained behaviours that hinder our integration into God’s order.” (p109)

Peter Meadows expresses how difficult it can be for an activist, like himself, to take time to be alone with God:-

“The practice of the presence of God for me means living in the understanding that my life is lived before him; he knows all my actions, words, thoughts and motives. I am by nature an activist; my natural tendency is to rush ahead with things, to fix things, to get things done. It takes discipline for me to stop and reflect before moving to action: to remind myself that I have been bought with a price, my life is his and must be lived for him.” (p133)

Solitude may be important for you not just as a discipline but as exactly the place that you need in order to focus and to feel the freedom to meet with God, to worship him in an uninhibited way and to pray out loud or even to rage at the Lord about the things that are tearing you apart inside.

For others stillness and silence are necessary for healing and wholeness amidst the busyness:-

“Slowing down and finding stillness is never easy, but it pays remarkable dividends in terms of spiritual formation. It is in silence that we hear what is going on inside ourselves. Noise and hurry constantly mask our true condition and only when we are truly still can we recognise our own need for healing and wholeness. Further, silence provides us with a setting that makes it easier to develop spiritual sensitivity. Cut off from the distractions of television, the Internet and mobile phones, we are better able to tune into the still, small



voice of God. No wonder the Lord says, "Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10" (Horsfall p116)

Ruth Haley Barton describes silence as deepening our experience of solitude since it creates a place to listen to the depths of our inner soul, without having to worry about having to find words to express what we feel. Perhaps this was what Paul was getting at when he wrote "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit, himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." (Romans 8:26)

The Lord Jesus commends prayer, solitude and silence in the Sermon on the Mount:-

"But when you pray, go into your room, close your door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray do not keep babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:6-8)

He also practiced what he preached - "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." (Mark 1:35)

Solitude and silence can also be practiced in conjunction with other disciplines such as fasting or over an extended period of prayer or time of spiritual retreat. The aim is neither a form of morbid introspection or to glory in personal asceticism but always to draw near to God, to deepen our relationship with him and to surrender ourselves to his will and purposes for our lives.

Another important spiritual discipline is the discipline of remembering:-

"The Psalms have more to teach than any other book in the bible about the spiritual discipline of *remembering* (and the spiritual dangers of *forgetting*). Throughout the Old Testament, believers find strength and safety merely in the act of remembering God.....To remember God is to satisfy the soul and to re-calibrate our always shifting perception of reality. But to forget God is to forsake God. This spiritual plague of forgetfulness is not physical forgetfulness or mental dementia. Spiritual forgetting is sin, a sin that plagues youth and infests every demographic." (Reinke p185)

Reinke's concern is that in a technology driven and digital world we constantly live in the present and potentially become dislocated from the biblical history that reminds us of who God is, of his character and of all his mighty works; His plan of redemption and mission fulfilled in Christ. As we remember what God has already done it strengthens our faith and gives us hope for the future. Also remembering our own personal history, all that God has done for us, his grace and mercy, his love and faithfulness helps us to trust him for tomorrow and fuels our worship.

Tony Horsfall speaks of spiritual disciplines as holy habits that help us to access the grace of God:-

"We have already mentioned stillness, silence and solitude. They also include fellowship, teaching and breaking of bread (Acts 2:42), as well as fasting, confession, worship, giving

and service. We can add to this list the disciplines of reflection and self-examination, together with Bible study and meditation, awareness of God in the world around us, and attunement to the Spirit. This is not an exhaustive list nor is it meant to push us back into legalism. We use the disciplines so far as they are helpful and appropriate, and only as a means to an end – that through them we might encounter the risen Christ and receive his life into us afresh.” (p128)

*For reflection:-*

*Do you have ‘a place’ where you feel most able to meet with God? A special chair, a private room, or outdoors in the garden, a park or in the countryside?*

*Do you have a time of day that you are most able to focus and give your full attention to God?*

*Is there a physical posture that helps you to pray e.g. sitting, kneeling, walking?*

*What aids or tools do you find helpful e.g. listening to music, reading hymns or Psalms, written bible guides or notes, using different translations of the scriptures, visual aids to contemplation, journaling, prayer diary etc.?*

*Do you have a way of capturing what God has been speaking to you about e.g. journaling, verses stuck on the fridge, memorising verses, notes in the margin of your Bible, sharing with a trusted friend or prayer triplet etc.?*

Please come prepared to share your reflections, ideas, struggles and that which helps you to keep seeking God in the second half and will encourage us all to do so.

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