

Getting Out Of a Religious Rut – 3

Do you know who the most miserable discontented person on earth is? The lukewarm Christian! The Christian who is neither on fire for Christ, nor sinning without restraint, is the unhappiest of creatures. He is neither true to his new nature, nor does he fully obey that old nature. He is untrue to both of them, and so always feels cheated, and at the same time, like a cheat.

The Christian in a religious rut is in a sad place. We've been looking at what the rut is, and how to get out.

2 Chronicles 7:14 ¹⁴ *If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*

In this passage lie all the elements of revival. Firstly, there must be a humble recognition that we are not where we are supposed to be. Secondly, there must be repentance, as we saw last week - '*turn from their wicked ways*'. The third element is also found in this verse - '*pray and seek my face*.'

The most direct way we seek God is in prayer. Prayer is seeking Him. We study the Word so as to know Him, and His will and His ways and His purposes. But prayer is then making contact with Him.

To come out of a rut, we must repent of all known sin in our lives, and then we must seek God in prayer.

To understand this, I want us to examine this passage in Jeremiah. 'Seek God and pray' have become such clichés that I want us to unpack them, so we understand what it is God is calling for to get us out of a rut.

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters; that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the LORD. For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

This was a passage written to the people of Judah who were deported to Babylon. God promised that He would return them to Israel. He tells them in the meantime to get on with life – raise families, seek the peace of the city and avoid the false teaching of the false prophets. After seventy years, the captivity would be over. He reminds them of His love and faithfulness.

And God tells them what they are to do spiritually. They are not to take things for granted, nor be spiritually complacent. They are to call on Him, seek Him, search for Him with all their heart.

Here was a people who had hit rock-bottom spiritually. Disciplined. Deported. Removed from the Temple. Without sacrifice. Without priests. Without the Law being read to them. But God gives them hope.

What does it mean to seek God? This passage in Jeremiah teaches us at least three things about how God wants us to seek Him.

I. Seeking God is Personal

The Lord tells the Jews driven into Babylon – ‘you shall call upon **Me**, and pray to **Me**. And you shall seek **Me**, and find **Me**, when you search for **Me** with all your heart. And **I** will be found by you’.

God is clear what Israel will seek. Not the blessings of God. Not the things of God. Not the religious formalism which got them in trouble in the first place. They were to seek a Person. Seeking God is seeking Him personally.

If that sounds too obvious then think on it for a moment. How personal have your dealings with God been this week?

People are easily attracted to the things of religion, but are not easily attracted to seeking Him personally. Prayer is the most personal approach you can make to God. And that is why so many Christians do so little of it.

The truth is, most people are happy to seek God impersonally. That is, they like the things to do with God, but they do not always like having to deal with God personally.

To illustrate; we filled the tables with people for our discipleship courses. Of that, I am glad. But I ask, what would have been the response if we had said, “We are beginning special small group prayer meetings at 9 o’clock on Sunday mornings.” How many would have come?

We are going to begin some home groups for the interim. The focus will be prayer. How many will come?

Why is it that churches where 7000 attend a Sunday morning preaching service, will not find a fraction of that at a prayer meeting?

People say – ‘I can pray by myself’. Do you really? I have not known of the phenomenon where a private prayer warrior does not earnestly desire to pray with others.

The truth is, it is always easier to hear a sermon; read a book; view a programme, than it is to seek the face of God personally. It is possible to be a pastor and prepare effective sermons and not seek the face of God. It is possible to do all kinds of church administration and finances and working in various ministries and not seek the face of God. It is possible to teach and preach while keeping God at arm’s length. It is possible to tell others about Him when you have not been seeking Him.

It is possible to read your Bible and not seek the face of God. It is possible to even pray in a manner where you do not seek Him; you only seek things from Him.

It is possible to busy yourself with knowing all about this and that false teaching, and debating every controversy that hits the church, but never seeking the face of God. You will find some Christians who just love to read up on the Word-Faith movement, on who is a false teacher and why, on Bible versions, on this cult and this false religion. They read up on creation vs. evolution. They read up on evidences for Christianity. And they love it. They love arming themselves with knowledge about these things. But, in the case of some Christians, they do all this as a means of keeping God at bay, while telling themselves they are busy with the things of God.

Some Christians love to get into theology and the meaty doctrines of the Word. And soon they are telling you about Dispensationalism vs. Covenant Theology and Calvinism vs. Arminianism; and this doctrine of future things vs. that doctrine of future things. But it can be nothing more than a smokescreen – to be busy with truths about God, but never dealing with God.

It is possible to go for years doing things to do with God, but never seeking His face. And the result is a deadness of soul. The result is all kinds of pride creeps into the life undetected. All kinds of sins of character sit there unnoticed. You might be effective, but there is no power. Seeing God work, seeing His hand in your life is forgotten. Having divine appointments to witness and counsel go missing. Experiencing true illumination becomes a memory.

This is the penalty for busying ourselves with the things of God, but not seeking God Himself.

Picture a fan of a certain actor or actress. They have pictures galore of this actor, they have their wall plastered with posters, they have every video and DVD in which this person appears, they go to websites about this person, they are official members of the official fan club. One day the actor comes to town, and this fan has the chance to meet them personally. And they shrug, and say, ‘no thanks’.

How odd that would be. How odd then that Christians can watch all kinds of DVDs about the things of God, read all kinds of books about God, listen to hundreds of sermons about God, talk to others about God, but never meet with God Himself.

Sometimes I will hear a Christian say, “I don’t have set times when I pray to the Lord. I am always praying throughout the day.” My answer to that is, ‘you must be stronger

than Jesus, because I am sure Jesus prayed throughout the day, but the Bible records the fact that He often withdrew for solitary times of prayer.'

To get out of the rut means you must seek Him personally in prayer. You must seek Him for extended time alone. You must seek Him with others. God does not grant revival to hearts that are still distracting themselves with everything but God Himself.

God calls us to seek Him. In fact, He does so continually, and, I believe, particularly at the start of each day.

I think there is still something of Adam in us. We hear His voice calling us to seek him, and we hide. We feel ashamed, as sinners; and instead of reminding ourselves that God has clothed us in Christ, we put on our fig leaves and hide. We busy ourselves with other things – with getting ready, and appointments, and work and errands to run, and meetings, and meals and we might read a chapter of Scripture, or read something Christian during the day. But have we sought the face of God? Have we appeared before our Saviour and sought His will for the day, and asked for His heart, and experienced His glory, such that it touches all we do?

To be before God does mean humbling ourselves. It does mean being quiet and being willing to face our sin and failure. It is about glory to another and submitting to His will. It means fighting the distractedness of our minds. It means active concentration and focus, instead of the passive distraction our entertainment culture has taught us. It is work. To be before the Lord of glory is to be totally revealed.

But it is also about safety and acceptance in Christ. It is finding our place again. It is cleansing and restoration. It is empowerment and strengthening. Above all, it is communion with Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

II. Seeking God is Purposeful

“and ye shall find me”

The Lord made sure He added a promise to the command to seek here in Jeremiah 29. God has always added a promise to the instruction to seek – ‘you shall seek me and you shall find’.

God, throughout Scripture, gives promises to seekers:

- [Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.
- [In Athens, Paul preached to the crowd and told them that God had made all men and determined their dwelling places.. *“so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”* (Acts 17:27)
- [You might remember the words of Jesus - *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."* (Mat. 7:7-8)

Seek – because there is something to be found!

I think many Christians do not pray, because they do not expect that anything different will occur if they do. It is like closing your eyes and talking into the air for twenty minutes. Who wants to do that? It is because they lack any sense of purpose in their seeking – they do not seek so as to find. The kind of praying which God wants is the deliberate talking to God to seek Him and find Him.

After 1886, there were many, many people from all over the world on the area around the farm Langlaagte. They were looking for something, something very valuable - Gold. They were trying to enrich themselves, so they did not look for gold in birds' nests, in tree bark, or in the air. They did not look anywhere and everywhere. They looked on the ground for gold nuggets. They looked in the rivers for alluvial gold. They dug into the ground for hidden gold. They were seeking in a way which showed they expected to find.

Had you found a prospector just ambling along, kicking stones, picking daisies, sketching birds in his notepad – you would not suspect he was seeking gold with a view to finding it.

But many Christians do not indicate that they are purposefully, deliberately seeking the face of God, and expecting to find something.

They are very busy, very, very busy – but not busy seeking God.

We are all seeking something. And the things we seek – we are very deliberate and purposeful in doing so - because we expect to find. We seek money, so we do deliberate things to get money. We seek friendships, so we do deliberate things to find friends. We seek to look attractive, so we do things to make ourselves look attractive.

But a Christian is a God-seeker. That's what we are. We have the life of Christ within us which ever is drawn to seeking Him. If we can be purposeful and deliberate in seeking money, we can be purposeful and deliberate in seeking Christ.

Do you seek God, and expect to find Him?

What will we find if we seek?

We will find **His Person** – he will illuminate His glory to us.

We will find **His presence** – he will manifest Himself to us in ways we had not known before.

We will find **His purposes** – what He is doing, what He seeks to do in and through your life.

We will find **His promises** – what He has sworn by Himself to be and do for us on our behalf.

We will find **His power** – new and previously unknown enablement to perform His will.

When you read one of the biographies of the great Christians of the past – what immediately starts to become noticeable? They prayed. They sought the face of God. And they did so because they expected to find.

Any time expectancy is no longer present, our spiritual life is decaying.

III. Seeking God is Persistent and Passionate.

It is with the ‘whole heart’.

God told the Jews that it was not just any kind of seeking they were to do – it was to be a search with all their hearts. They were to seek Him personally; they were to seek purposefully, expecting to find; and they were to seek Him passionately.

God continually portrays the relationship of His people with Himself of a seeking God and a seeking people.

Read Matthew 13:45-46; Proverbs 2:1-6.

Or we could think of David in Psalms 42:1; 63:1.

Think of these images. We are thirsty deer; God is the flowing water brook. When you are thirsty, your thirst drives you to seek, not until you are tired, but until your thirst is quenched – you are passionate and persistent.

We are eager treasure hunters; and God is the priceless treasure. You do not stop digging or searching until you have found it. You give up all to get that pearl of great price – it is a passionate search.

Do you know what I mean when I say – ‘a token effort’. A token effort is when someone does something to make themselves or others think they have tried, when they really haven’t. Sometimes we’ve had to move things, and now and then there will be someone who will huff and puff with one item, wipe their brow and do very little else. But if you asked them, they would say – ‘I was working today’.

Do we deceive ourselves like that when it comes to seeking God? Have we given up after five minutes of prayer? Have we stopped because of one line in Scripture we didn’t understand? Have we stopped seeking God in His local church because of some petty mishap?

When you are set on the object, you pursue it passionately.

When last did you approach prayer like this? Seeking Him with an open Bible and a seeking heart until you found Him?

We have to confess that much of the aversion to prayer is because it takes concentration. It can be hard. It means disciplining ourselves. It means quietening ourselves. It means focussing. And your heart, bred on the instant ways of our world, hates it.

Many of us have become used to expecting maximum returns for minimum efforts, most of the time.

“The American genius for getting things done quickly and easily with little concern for quality or permanence has bred a virus that has infected the whole evangelical Church ... all over the world. Instant Christianity came in with the machine age. Men invented machines for two purposes. They wanted to get important work done more quickly and easily than they could do it by hand, and they wanted to get the work over with so they could give their time to pursuits more to their liking, such as loafing or enjoying the pleasures of the world. Instant Christianity now serves the same purposes in religion.” (*A.W. Tozer - That Incredible Christian*)

No revival comes to those who do not seek God. Seek and ye shall find. Don't seek, and you won't find. But don't fool yourself. Seeking the things to do with God isn't necessarily seeking Him. Are you willing to seek Him personally? Are you willing to seek Him purposefully – looking for the answer? Are you willing to seek Him passionately and persistently until you find and not give up?