

## SEEKING GOD

When I was a kid, my friends and I tried a lot of goofy things on our bicycles. We stripped our bikes down to bare frames and wheels and raced them around a dirt-bike race course we mapped out through a demolished lumber yard. I'll never forget watching one of our gang miss a curve, sail over a containment wall and land wrong-side-up in thick brush along a creek bank. Fortunately the brush cushioned his fall.

I remember flying down hills with spotters posted to warn us of cross-traffic at the stop signs we blew through.

I also remember wondering what would happen if I twisted my handlebars back and forth rapidly while riding down the street. The front wheel came off and my bike came to an immediate stop on the front forks. I, unfortunately, didn't stop until I had flown over the handlebars and landed on the pavement. After I replaced the wheel, I securely tightened the nuts, assuming that the wheel came off because the nuts had come loose. Actually, there must have been a loose screw because I tried it again—with the same result.

One thing I never mastered was keeping the bike upright while waiting at a stop sign. I'd roll slowly to a stop, waiting for traffic to clear. Then I'd keep my feet on the pedals for as long as I could, trying to maintain my balance while not moving.

Bicycles don't work that way. They require the gyroscopic effect of spinning wheels to keep you balanced and upright. Whenever I stopped moving forward, I always tipped over one way or another until I put my feet down to catch myself.

That memory snapshot of myself as a ten year old kid trying to stay upright on an immobile bike has provided me with a great metaphor for my walk with God. I have to keep moving forward. Whenever I slow down or stop, I lose my spiritual balance and fall off.

It's important to keep moving spiritually—to keep growing. But it is just as important to know what to do when you wake up to the realization that you have coasted to a stop. And all of us know what that is like. We drift away into our pleasant amusements and diversions until stirred by a vague dis-ease that all is not well with us spiritually. We find ourselves distant from God—the heaven's have been strangely silent and we haven't even missed God's voice.

To change the metaphor, we find ourselves spiritually flat. We haven't had a blow-out, but a long, slow leak.

What do we do in times like that?

When Israel stood poised on the east bank of the Jordan, ready to enter the land God promised them, Moses had one final word to the nation. We know it as the Book of Deuteronomy. Their redemption from Egypt was now some forty years past. An entire generation of rebellious Israelites had died in the wilderness wanderings. God would make a fresh start and Israel would claim its inheritance.

Moses reminded them of all God had spoken: "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you" (Deut. 4:1). Then he stacked imperatives on top of imperatives, passionately urging the people to obedience: "follow them; do not add to nor subtract from them; observe them carefully; be careful; watch yourselves closely; do not forget what you have seen and heard; do not let them slip from your heart; teach them to your children; remember; watch yourselves very carefully."

Moses was especially wary of idolatry. He worried that as time passed, people would drift into the worship of the pagan gods that surrounded them. It was a reasonable anxiety because all persons seek God-substitutes that displace the one true God. They need not be carved images although they may be just as tangible. Our idols are those things we love ultimately or fear ultimately. They are those things we serve and obey. We may gain a sense of our idols by thinking about where our minds easily go when we are alone with our spare moments—what we daydream about.

Moses was aware of humankind's inertia of soul by which we always drift back to our idolatries whenever we are not intentional about our life in God.

Listen to what Moses says—Deut. 4:23-31.

Moses severely warns Israel of the dire consequences of idolatry. Even though God had promised to multiply the descendants of Abraham like sand on the seashore, if they drifted away into idolatry, they would be reduced to a few survivors. God would scatter them as captives to invading nations. There they would be forced to serve the man-made gods of the people to whom they have become enslaved. The punishment for sin is more sin. The punishment for idolatry is more idolatry—bondage to idolatry.

Until they came to their senses.

Look at v. 29-30. Moses uses four verbs that would mark *their* way back to God—and *ours*. Each one adds something making a cumulative impact.

### *Seek the Lord your God*

The first step back redirects our attention. We get sidetracked because we focus on other things—sometimes good things, necessary things, and sometimes idolatrous things.

Money is an American idol. So are fame, sensuality, power. There are idols of acceptance, security, even family. It is possible, for instance, for a mom to become absorbed in her kids. They fill empty places in her heart. She loves being loved by them, so she does everything she can to get them to love her. She feels so good when her kids snuggle with her or hug her. And she feels so threatened when they are rebellious or argumentative. All her energy goes into keeping them happy to keep her happy. She loves them ultimately and fears losing them, so she serves them slavishly and gives in to their demands.

When that happens, her children have displaced God. They have become life-giving idols.

When we get so wrapped up in something that displaces God, we don't have time for God. Or perhaps better, we won't take time for God at the expense of making these things subordinate to him.

The first step back is to seek God. When we were doing prayer summits, we talked about the difference between seeking God's face and not his hand. To seek his hand is another ask—we want something from God. To seek God's face is to want God.

Want God.

### *Look for Him*

Moses expands on that when he urges us to “look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.” We refocus our attention *and* our affections. He envisions an intense pursuit, not a half-hearted wish-prayer thrown up in odd moments. This is a flat-out, anxious search. We take the time to get on our face and cry out for God's presence.

One of the training tools we used with our hunting dogs was hiding. Dogs like to hunt for

themselves, to be on their own. They needed to learn to hunt for me, to stay close to me. So while they were still young, when they would wader off too far, I would intentionally hide. Eventually you would see them look about anxiously and come racing back to where they had last seen me. They needed to feel the fear of being lost so they would instinctively stay close.

God sometimes hides himself. It is a severe mercy. He wants us to become anxious with a healthy anxiety, fearful of being away from God. He does this so we will seek him and look for him heart and soul, like lost puppies look for their owners.

### *Return to the LORD your God*

Then Moses goes on to talk about the necessity of returning to the LORD our God. Returning is a Hebrew way of describing repentance. It involves turning away from the idols of our heart that have so pre-empted our affections and attentions and turning back to God.

This returning means confessing sins we may have committed. The Prophet Hosea puts it this way: “Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously...’” (Hosea 14:2). We acknowledge that we have let the idols of our hearts get between us and God. We have let them push God aside so that we have no longer taken time for him. And it has been our choice to do this.

Returning is an act of love and submission by which we once more love and fear our heavenly Father as the one true God, and thereby offer to him our service and obedience.

### *Obey Him*

And that brings us to the fourth verb. Return to “...the LORD your God and *obey* him.” Any seeking and looking and returning that does not result in renewed obedience is shortsighted. It’s false. It pursues a feel-good encounter with God that does not demand any real change in our conduct and preoccupations. It will not restore us to God. If we have not returned to God with our obedience and service, we have not yet returned to God.

Moses suggests that time is our enemy. It works against us. He speaks to Israel of that time in the future “when you have lived in the land a long time.” And here we come back to that soul inertia we described earlier. Left to itself, our soul always drifts back to its idolatries. If we are not intentional of our life in God, we will unintentionally drift away from him.

It’s like riding a bicycle. When we stop moving forward, we fall off.

We are at the end of one year, facing the beginning of the new. I wonder, as you look back, are you still moving forward? For many of you, 2009 has been a tough year. How is it with your soul? Where is God? Are you still close? If so, outstanding! Stay fresh. And remember that time and the cares of this world work on us all. Determine that in 2010 you will maintain the disciplines that keep you close to God.

But if God seems oddly absent, consider this an invitation to come back. Seek God’s face. Look for him heart and soul. Return to him and to obedience to him.

When we are away from God, coming back can be scary. We’re afraid of how we might be received. We’re afraid of God’s rejection.

Look at v. 31: “For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant...”

Remember the story about hiding from my dogs? Can you imagine what would have happened if I had disciplined my dogs severely when they came back to me? The next time they wandered off, and I hid, how eager to you think they would have been to come looking for me. I

was always glad they came back and I always loved on them.

God is much wiser towards us than I was toward my dogs. The LORD our God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy us. He will not forget or be unfaithful to the covenant promises he has made to us in Jesus Christ. He won't treat us as our sins deserve. He rejoices to have us back. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from every kind of wrong-doing.

Listen to a word from Jeremiah. Jeremiah wrote to a people who found themselves suffering the very judgement against which Moses had so clearly warned. They were in captivity in Babylon where on pain of death, they were forced to bow before Babylonian gods. God spoke through Jeremiah reminiscent of words that reached all the way back to what Moses said in Deuteronomy. Listen: "...I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back..." (Jer. 31:12-14).

As I look forward to 2010, I realize that I must go on a diet. I have watched my weight climb to my absolute outside limits, and then creep past those absolute outside limits. I *must* shed some pounds. And I have tried for the last couple of months. I've made half-hearted attempts to cut back. But when it comes to me and dieting, half a heart doesn't cut it. I have to push myself over that tipping point and decide absolutely to cut back.

Seeking God requires that same kind of decision. A vague notion about doing better will dissolve under the most ordinary distractions. We must forge time to sit before God and seek him, look for him, return to him and obey him.

Is that a decision you need to make this morning? And more significantly, will you?