

Series: Seek

Title: God

Text: Deuteronomy 4:29

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The name John Knox is synonymous with the Reformation in Scotland. The man was used mightily by the Lord in his lifetime. He was known as being powerful in preaching, astute in biblical doctrine, and shrewd in civil affairs. His ideals shook not just his own native country, but they were used to influence all of England as well. Because of Knox's work, Roman Catholicism was eradicated from Scotland. In addition, the Church of England lost its grip over the nation. His legacy carried on via Scottish Presbyterianism.

Knox's life was not without hardship. Because of his devotion to biblical ideals, he was constantly under threat. He was exiled on more than one occasion, once fleeing to England and once going all the way to Geneva (in modern day Switzerland). For a season, he was enslaved as a galley slave in France, forced to serve as a rower on a large ship. What would cause one to endure such hardship for the the gospel of Christ and biblical truth? Perhaps the words of Knox can provide us with an answer. When summing up the course of his life, the reformer once said, "My life is in the custody of Him whose glory I seek."¹

Though not all believers will live lives that result in the notoriety Knox received, all are called to seek the Lord and the Lord's will. Throughout Scripture, there are numerous commands concerning this matter. The prophet Isaiah told the people of God, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call to him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). In His preaching, Jesus famously said, "But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). In a revival sermon entitled "Pressing into the Kingdom of God," Jonathan Edwards encouraged hearers in this matter, saying, "Let nothing stand before your resolution of seeking the kingdom of God."² In all generations, God's people are called to consistently seek after the Lord.

SEEKING GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

How can believers practically seek after God? The Word of God is our best guide in considering such a question. Several passages speak of the subject at hand. One of the most foundational texts is found in Deuteronomy. In the fourth chapter of the book, the Lord explained conditions and consequences related to His covenant with Israel. In regard to consequences, He warned of the threat of foreign captivity. If God's people did not remain faithful to His covenant conditions, they would experience exile from the Promised Land. However, the Lord graciously promised a return from exile if His people would seek Him during their time of captivity. In Deuteronomy 4:29, the Lord told the Israelites, "But from there, you will search for the Lord your God, and you will find him when you seek him with all your heart and all your soul."

The precepts of Deuteronomy 4 don't have direct application to New Testament believers. Promises concerning the land of Canaan and the threat of physical captivity are no longer in play for God's people. However, there are principles from Deuteronomy 4 that can be applied to New Testament believers. Since all of God's dealings with His people have similar elements, those living under Christ's Covenant can learn something about seeking God from those who lived under the Mosaic Covenant. Let's consider three ideas related to the pursuit of God by God's people.

Covenant

¹ Campbell, David. John Knox: Scotland's Great Reformer. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*: 697. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2021) 26.

² Carrick, John. *The Imperative of Preaching*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 176.

The act of seeking God in Deuteronomy 4:29 was set against the background of God's covenant with the Israelites. Earlier Moses had told the people, "Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you" (Deuteronomy 4:23). The Hebrew word rendered "careful" (*shamar*) appeared as an imperative in the original language. Thus, Moses issued a strong command for God's people to be conscientiously faithful to their covenant relationship to the Lord.

In some contexts, the word "careful" meant "to guard."³ Interestingly, the term was used of cherubim guarding access to the tree of life after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24). Use of the word in the context of Genesis 3 reveals that there is a holy seriousness to the word. Further uses of the word in the Old Testament unearth similar realities. In Leviticus, the Lord used the term to speak of the need for serious regard for worship, saying, "Keep my Sabbaths and revere my sanctuary; I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:30).

Along with the idea of "to guard," the Hebrew word for "careful" carried ideas of "paying attention to" something or someone. One has said it meant "to learn or remember information and take care to watch for spiritual dangers."⁴ The context of Deuteronomy 4:23 reveals that such was the immediate meaning of Moses' words. In the very next chapter, Moses used the exact same language to say, "Be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you are not to turn aside to the right or the left" (Deuteronomy 5:32).

Lest some thinking that such careful spiritual watchfulness is something for Old Testament saints alone, it is helpful to note how the New Testament gives similar instruction. The Greek Old Testament's (Septuagint) rendering of Deuteronomy 4:23, used the Greek word *proséchō*. The term was a nautical one that was used of holding a ship in its intended direction. It meant "to hold on one's course toward a place."⁵

Used in a spiritual sense, the Greek word referred to one maintaining a strong spiritual direction by paying attention to sound doctrine. The author of Hebrews enjoined his readers, saying, "For this reason, we must *pay attention* all the more to what we have heard, so that we will not drift away" (Hebrews 2:1). Peter said, "We also have the prophetic word strongly confirmed, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). In seeking God and His kingdom, disciples must remain watchful. There is need for continual spirit alertness when it comes to doctrine. Without careful attention to God's truth, one can easily be driven off course in a spiritual sense. This was Moses' concern in Deuteronomy 4:23. The people of God needed to stay vigilant in their commitment to God's covenant.

Some may think that Moses' instruction in Deuteronomy 4:23 has no application for modern believers. Such a perspective is based on an assumption that little to no Old Testament Scripture has meaning for New Testament believers. While there are certainly many things from the Lord's covenant with Moses that have no application for Christian believers, it is important to note that the principle of covenant faithfulness for God's people in every generation.

Consequences

A second important aspect of seeking God revolves around the idea of consequences. As a part of His covenant with Israel, the Lord enacted certain conditions. Faithfulness on the part of God's people was met with blessings. Faithlessness brought curses. Such conditional aspects of the Mosaic Covenant were spelled out in detail in Deuteronomy 28.

³ Swanson, James. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), [CD-Rom].

⁴ Swanson, [CD-Rom].

⁵ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), προσέχω.

The Lord referenced the reality of covenant consequences in Deuteronomy 4 by saying, “The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be reduced to a few survivors among the nations where the Lord your God will drive you” (Deuteronomy 4:27). The Lord’s words were a reference to the threat of foreign captivity. As we discussed earlier, the people of God experienced exile from their homeland on multiple occasions.

Throughout their history, the Israelites were mostly aware of the threat of captivity. They knew that disobedience to the Lord’s covenant would result in removal from the Promised Land. Evidence of this is seen in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple. In praying for the worship complex, he said:

When they sin against you—
for there is no one who does not sin—
and you are angry with them
and hand them over to the enemy,
and their captors deport them to the enemy’s country—
whether distant or nearby—
and when they come to their senses
in the land where they were deported
and repent and petition you in their captors’ land:
“We have sinned and done wrong;
we have been wicked,”
and when they return to you with all their heart and all their soul
in the land of their enemies who took them captive,
and when they pray to you in the direction of their land
that you gave their ancestors,
the city you have chosen,
and the temple I have built for your name (1 Kings 8:46-48).

Israel was mostly aware that sin would result in consequences. Yes, the people lost sight of such realities in times of great rebellion. However, the people’s ignorance concerning the covenant did not nullify the conditions of the covenant.

The Israelite’s continued unfaithfulness to the Lord eventually brought irreversible judgment on the nation. Jesus prophesied of such toward the end of His Earthly ministry. When visiting Jerusalem during the week of His crucifixion, He foretold of coming destruction. Speaking of the temple complex, He told His disciples, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another—all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:1). Our Lord’s prophecy would be fulfilled in 70 AD when Titus, a Roman General and soon-to-be emperor, laid siege on Jerusalem. Titus destroyed the temple complex, put thousands of Jews to death, and forced Jews to flee for safety to various parts of the ancient Near East.

Interestingly, Titus refused to receive the customary victor’s wreath after his defeat of the Jews. His rationale? He believed he was an instrument who had been appointed by the Jewish God to execute wrath upon the people of that God. Thus, he believed he was not worthy of an earthly reward.

According to Jesus, the physical destruction of Jerusalem was a sign of God’s judgment on the Jews. Because of their continual unfaithfulness to the Lord’s covenant, and because of their rejection of their Messiah, the Lord moved against His people. On top of the physical consequences associated with the decimation of Jerusalem, spiritual judgment fell upon the nation as well. In Romans, Paul explained, saying, “I don’t want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you will not be conceited: A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:26).

On top of the destruction for the temple, there was another first-century sign of God’s judgment. On the Day of Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles were empowered to speak in foreign languages (Acts 2:1-13). Just as the judgment of captivity involved God’s people hearing unknown tongues, the first-century judgment on the Jews resulted in the

hearing of unknown tongues. Paul affirmed these realities when writing to the Corinthians: “It is written in the law, I will speak to this people by people of other tongues and by the lips of foreigners, and even then, they will not listen to me, says the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14:21). It is because of covenantal conditions that Israel experienced captivity and the judgment of God in 70 AD. Their sin generated consequences.

New Testament believers aren’t subject to the same consequences of Jews living under the Old Covenant. However, there are still consequences for sin. The author of Hebrews remarked on such things, saying, “Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline?” (Hebrews 12:7). Paul said, “Don’t be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap, because the one who sows to his flesh will reap destruction from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Galatians 6:7-9).

Staying mindful of sin’s consequences is important to our pursuit of God. Though we are not subject to the threat of captivity, we should be aware that indwelling sin brings peril to our lives. We may not lose our cherished standing before the Lord, but we may compromise our experience of His joy and peace. Sin has a way of grieving the Spirit and stifling His work in our lives (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). It also has a way of sullyng our witness to a lost world (Matthew 5:13-16).

Though the precise application of Deuteronomy 4:27 may only apply to Jews of the Old Testament era, the principle of the text applies to believers of every generation. When God’s people are negligent to their count relationship with the Lord, they experience consequences for their sin. Awareness of such things is integral to the act of seeking God. Those who aim to know the Lord should be mindful of the deceitfulness and emptiness of sin.

Consecration

Deuteronomy 4:29 reveals a third important aspect of seeking God. Through Moses, the Lord told the Israelites, “But from there, you will search for the Lord your God, you will find him when you seek him with all your heart and all your soul.” Moses’ words were uttered in reference to the potential of captivity and exile in a foreign land. Throughout the history of God’s dealing with Israel, the Lord’s words were fulfilled on multiple occasions. Nations like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon carried God’s people away captive at different times.

Perhaps the most famous captivity was the one involving Babylon. The reason for this rests in the fact that the book of Daniel gives a detailed account of events related to the Babylonian captivity. In Daniel 1:1, we read, “In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar, of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it.” Later in the book, there is evidence that Daniel did what Deuteronomy 4:29 said — he sought the Lord while exiled in a foreign nation. In Daniel 9:1-2, Daniel gave testimony, saying, “In the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus, a Mede by birth, who was made king over the Chaldean kingdom— in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the books according to the word of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah that the number of years for the desolation of Jerusalem would be seventy.”

While in captivity, Daniel sought the Lord in accordance with the truth of Deuteronomy 4:29. He did so by consulting “the word of the Lord” (Daniel 9:2). He read and meditated on passages found in the book of Jeremiah. Through seeking the Lord through God’s Word, he learned that the Israelites would return to their land. He discovered that the captivity would only last 70 years. The promise of Deuteronomy 4:29 was fulfilled — Daniel sought the Lord while in captivity and Daniel found the Lord!

The call to “seek” the Lord is not restricted to Israelites like Daniel alone. In all dispensations of God’s dealing with man, there is a summons for the people of God to seek after the Lord. This is made obvious from looking at the language of Deuteronomy 4:29. Two verbs were used in the passage to speak of the act of seeking God. The first one was translated “search.” It was the Hebrew word “baqash.” The term strictly meant “to look for.”

More specifically, it meant “to try to learn information about an object.”⁶ The term was a strong one. It implied “diligence in the procurement of the information.”⁷

A use of the word within the Old Testament may help us understand its meaning more clearly. In 1 Samuel 9:3, the word was used in reference to the soon-to-be-anointed, first king of Israel. The story is told of how the prophet Samuel was to anoint one named Saul to become Israel’s first monarch. By providence, the Lord led Saul to the prophet. Donkeys belonging to the young man’s father had wandered away from their pasture. Saul’s search for the animal’s led him right to Samuel! Scripture speaks of the event by saying, “One day the donkeys of Saul’s father Kish wandered off. Kish said to his son Saul, ‘Take one of the servants with you and go look for the donkeys’” (1 Samuel 9:3).

The same Hebrew word for “search” in Deuteronomy 4:29 was used of how Saul went out to “look for” his father’s animals. From the Old Testament language, we learn that the act of seeking the Lord involves a diligent search. The activity could be likened to an in-depth investigation. It is not a careless, mystical activity devoid of substance or effort. Instead, it is a careful inquiry into realities related to the Lord.

Bible scholars make an important distinction concerning the Hebrew word for “search” in Deuteronomy 4:29. When used of a person, it implied that one desired to be in the presence of another person.⁸ Along with the use of the word in the incident related to Saul’s donkeys, this sheds light on what it means to search for the Lord. Those who seek God are to diligently search to experience God’s presence. The Psalmist used the term in this way, saying, “Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his face always” (Psalm 105:4). Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord did as well — “You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). In the Old Testament, the act of seeking God was revealed to be a fervent, fastidious search for the person and presence of God.

SEEKING GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We previously examined the Hebrew word for “seek” (*baqash*). It was frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the spiritual pursuit of God. The Psalmist used the term on multiple occasions. In the twenty-seventh Psalm, he said, “...Lord, I will seek your face” (Psalm 27:8). When Jesus walked the Earth, Jews in the Hellenized world used a famous Greek translation of the Old Testament known as “the Septuagint.” Within that translation of Scripture, translators used the Greek word *zētēō* as an equivalent for the Hebrew word *baqash*. The Greek word appears in the Septuagint’s rendering of aforementioned passages like Deuteronomy 4:29; Psalm 27:8; and Psalm 105:4. The same Greek word (*zētēō*) was also used on numerous occasions by New Testament authors to speak of the spiritual pursuit of the Lord. By examining the use of the word, we can discover what’s involved with seeking God.

Priorities

First, management of one’s personal priorities is critical to the pursuit of God. To know and experience God, one must make time for Him. Unfortunately, busyness binds many. Most have either too many priorities or they have misplaced priorities. The end result of such things is a godless existence. Because life is so hectic and hurried, there is often no room for God in the life of the average believer.

Jesus used the Greek word for “seek” to speak of the need for proper priorities in the lives of His disciples. He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you” (Matthew 6:33). Our Lord’s words were uttered within a discussion on the necessities of life — food and clothing (Matthew 6:25-31). Jesus told His

⁶ Swanson, [CD-Rom].

⁷ Swanson, [CD-Rom].

⁸ Swanson, [CD-Rom].

disciples to not become too obsessed with such things. Possessions were not to be the predominating principle in their lives. The Lord and the Lord's kingdom were to be the first priority.

As a pastor, I have seen the power of priorities demonstrated in the lives of a number of believers. At times, I have been asked to help believers recover from a moral downfall. At others, I have been asked to help people experiencing depression and anxiety. I'm often amazed at how misplaced or unclear priorities are often a large part of the problem with such things. It's no wonder that Jesus gave His disciples such strong instruction — "seek first the kingdom of God!" Seeking God involves making Him a priority in our lives. If we don't intentionally put Him first in life objectives, our calendars, our budgets, our homes, our relationships, our families, and more, it is unlikely we will experience His power and presence.

Prayer

Prayer is another key ingredient to the pursuit of God. Jesus also used the Greek word for "seek" in Matthew 7, saying, "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Our Lord used the terms "ask," "seek," and "knock" synonymously. Together, the different terms depicted various qualities and character traits needed for powerful praying — humility, persistence, and boldness.

Jesus' use of the term "seek" in reference to prayer reveals that prayer is an integral part of seeking and knowing God. Concerning prayer, Charles Spurgeon once said:

There is real power in prayer; the Lord assuredly hears the cry of his people still. As certainly as the electric fluid bears the message from one place to another, as certainly as the laws of gravitation control the spheres, so certainly is prayer a mysterious but a very real power. God does answer prayer. We are as sure of this as we are that we breathe.⁹

Do you pray? Communion with your Creator is fundamental to seeking Him and knowing Him. Without prayer, you will surely be spiritually weak and anemic. Commit yourself to this spiritual discipline. If you feel you don't know how to pray, learn how to pray. Ask the Lord to teach you (Luke 11:1). In time, your prayer life will grow, and so will your relationship with God.

Person of God

God is not simply a concept, an idea, or a principle. He is a real person. In articulating theology, theologians affirm an attribute known as "the personhood" of God. Such an attribute implies that God has personality. He has emotions, mental schemas, thought patterns, and volitional desires. Furthermore, He communicates, acts, and interacts in relation to human beings. The Lord is not an "impersonal spirit" as some philosophers and theologians would claim.

Focusing on the person of God is another key activity involved in seeking God. It is by beholding our Lord that we experience true spiritual transformation (Job 42:5-6; Isaiah 6:3; Hebrews 12:1-2). Paul understood such to be true. Consequently, he told the first-century Colossians, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:1-2). The word rendered "seek" is the same one used in passages like Deuteronomy 4:29; Psalm 105:4; Matthew 6:33; and Matthew 7:7.

The Puritan Stephen Charnock once said, "The consideration of God's adorable perfections, discovered in the gospel, will make us come to him with more seriousness, beg blessing of him with more confidence, fly to him with winged faith and love, and more spiritually

⁹ Spurgeon, C.H. The Man Whose Name was Help. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: July, 2017*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 15-16.

glorify him in our attendance on him.”¹⁰ Via Scripture reading and studying, we have special revelation concerning who God is. By meditating on what we learn of Him in Scripture, we can experience spiritual transformation. Gazing on the person of God is fundamental to the proper pursuit of God.

Conclusion

Our study of the word “seek” in Scripture will lead us to examine several other subjects. For now, we know the Bible exhorts us to seek God first of all. Through Christ, we have been brought into a covenant relationship with our Lord. In such a relationship, there are consequences for disobedience; yet, there are rich rewards for pursuing the Lord through the means He has given us. Three of the foremost ways of pursuing God are proper life priorities, prayer, and meditating on the person of God.

¹⁰ ?????? Charnock on The Divine Attributes: Scriptural Purity of Worship. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: November, 2019* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), 31.