

There You Are: What the Psalms Teach Us about Where to Find God
Part One: Your Face Shining Upon Us
Psalms 67.1 and Selected Verses from the Psalms

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This morning we begin a new summer sermon series that takes us into the psalms and what the Bible teaches us about how we can experience God's presence each day.

Different word pictures suggest different ways we can experience God within the circumstances of each day.

Next week we'll begin to walk through those different metaphors that describe God and where we can look for him, but I want to use our time this morning to open up for us one of the most emotionally charged images connected to God in all of the psalms.

It's the metaphor of God turning his face toward us and God turning his face away from us.

You find the image introduced for the first time in the Book of Numbers chapter 6, hundreds of years before most of the psalms were written. God gave Moses a blessing to give to Aaron and the other priests to give to the people of God:

Numbers 6.24-26

The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.

We walk through a world that is increasingly dominated by screens. But God made us as human beings to be drawn to faces.

A couple of weeks ago I was in the airport in Frankfurt, Germany, on my way from Poland to Romania.

There, in the midst of crowds of people absorbed in their phones and studiously avoiding eye contact with the people crowded in around them, I had this sudden encounter with a total stranger.



I don't know what language she spoke. We never spoke a word. But our eyes connected, and kept connecting. Then our hearts connected. Looking, looking away, looking back, trying to get each other's gaze, and then, just before she disappeared into the plane, a big smile from us both.

You and I, we were made for face to face relationship.

You are probably aware that newborn babies are designed by God to be drawn to faces. Even in the womb, babies are drawn to the shape of a human face more than to random shapes.



Newborns are drawn to faces. Even more, they are drawn to gazes.

Even brand new babies can tell if you are looking straight at them or looking at something else.

When you look straight at them, it holds their gaze, and they delight to gaze back.

No words. Nothing to say. No works. Nothing to impress. Just delighting in one another's being, finding and communicating a fondness and a joy in each other's company.

People love to say that babies don't do anything but eat and sleep. But that isn't true. Before they can accomplish anything – sit up or roll over or tie their shoes or spell their name or learn the addition table or say "I love you" – they can gaze. Seeking and then resting in the love and joy that another set of eyes communicate to them. When you stop and think about it, it is an amazing skill to be born with – and a telling one, that God would consider it so important.

As human beings, we have developed incredibly complex language capacities, and we can communicate a remarkable amount of information using our words.

But when it comes to how another person actually sees us, how they think about us and feel about us, what goes on in their heart when we come into their field of vision, the primary place that gets communicated is in that person's face, apart from any words.

We see it in the direction and steadiness of their gaze, the depth of their attentiveness to what we are saying, the engagement of their eyes, the warmth of their facial expression, the fondness we see in the smile lines around their eyes.

All of which informs the way we understand this metaphor of God's facing turning toward us and his face shining on us.

For God to turn his face toward us is for God to gaze on us in the fullness of his love and regard for us, seeing us, delighting in us, seeing our needs, taking in our circumstances, responding with interest and concern and care.

For God's face to shine on us is for God's face to light up when he sees us, for his face to reflect the joy and delight he feels in his heart as we come into his gaze.

It's interesting that for many of us as Christians we've kind of skipped past this crucial foundational part of our spiritual development, the life we live *with* God, and have moved straight to the second stage of development, the life we live *for* God.

We forget. Before we *do* anything, accomplish anything, impress anyone, God looks on us in love.

Before "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25.23) comes "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased" (Luke 3.22).

At the heart of the Christian faith is a *relationship* – a relationship of intimacy, a face to face relationship, that we were made to share with the King of the Universe.

Exodus 33.11 says

The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend.

While the relationship that God and Moses shared was somewhat unique in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, on this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is meant to be the norm – a face to face relationship with God.

So the psalmist, echoing Numbers 6, prays for us, that the loving gaze of God would be our experience of God.

Psalms 67.1

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us.

But that isn't always our experience of God, is it?

Sometimes we feel as though God has turned his face away from us.

As the psalmist captures it in Psalm 13:

Psalm 13.1

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

If turning our face toward someone is an expression of regard, interest, and concern, then turning our face away or hiding our face, whether passively losing interest and letting our eyes and our interest wander, or actively avoiding eye contact, is a rejection of them.

I still remember in my early years of ministry reaching out to shake hands with someone before worship began. She ignored my outstretched hand and turned away from me in a huff. A friend next to her said, "He wants to say hello to you!" And she said, loudly enough for people to hear five pews in every direction, "Well I don't want to say hello to *him*!" I said, to her back, "It sounds like it would be good for us to get together and work some things through."

Half of the psalms are an expression of lament, like this line in Psalm 13, lamenting a sense of God's absence, his disengagement from our lives.

The Bible affirms that God is always with us but that isn't always what we feel – at least not in the moment. Sometimes we can feel forgotten by God, or it can seem as though God is hidden from us, or even that he's turned his back on us. Then light breaks into the darkness, and, to our relief, we gain a glimpse of him again.

A few years ago in my devotional time I wrote a simple nine-word poem that captures the tension between what the Bible affirms about God's presence, which is unceasing, and how we actually experience his presence, which can be pretty come and go. This is how it goes:

You are there.
Are you there?
There you are.

The Bible tells us why that is sometimes the psalmist's experience and ours.

It isn't that God pulls back and turns away. It's that we do.

As it says in Isaiah 59

Isaiah 59.2

Your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you.

But even then, if his people seek him, if they turn back toward him and seek relationship with him, he is eager to meet them, to return their seeking gaze.

Psalm 22.24

For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

But between the psalms and today comes the pivot moment in history, when Jesus hangs on the cross in our place in order to reconcile us to God.

According to Paul in II Corinthians 4, in the face of Jesus we see the face of God.

II Corinthians 4.6

God, who said, “Let there be light in the darkness,” has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

Think about what this means. When Jesus dies on the cross, God hides his face from his own son – remember he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – in order that he might keep his face turned toward us regardless of our sin.

Philip, one of Jesus’ followers, says to Jesus, “Show us the Father.” Jesus says, “I have and I do and I am and I will. If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” (John 14.9)

For those who turn to Jesus in faith, Jesus responds by turning to us the loving face of God. He opens to us God’s loving gaze, bringing us into a love relationship with God for eternity.

But still, sometimes it can feel like God hides his face from us, doesn’t it? Have you experienced that? God promises to be near us, but he sometimes feels far from us.

Why is that?

Well, I think there are two reasons it feels that way.

1. The first is when we experience pain and suffering. It is so hard for us to understand why God would allow us to experience difficulties – especially when we are in the middle of them. Wouldn’t a loving God just want to take away our pain?

But the consistent teaching of Scripture is that God allows difficult and painful things to come into our lives so that he might fulfill his holy and loving purposes for us, eternal purposes that he values more highly than our being happy and comfortable in this life.

God uses difficult circumstances to deepen our faith, to grow our trust, to lead us to stop trusting ourselves and begin to trust him more fully, to form the likeness of Jesus in us, to make us vessels of love that he can use in the lives of others, and so on. All of which are beautiful. None of which are enjoyable. So God can feel far when we walk through difficulty.

2. The other situation in which we can feel as though God has hidden his face from us is when we experience unanswered prayer. We ask and we ask but God doesn't seem to be answering. When that's combined with painful or difficult circumstances, and when those painful circumstances persist no matter how much we pray, that can be especially difficult, and it can feel for us like God hasn't just turned his face from us – he's turned his back on us and forgotten us.

But the thing that we can forget is that sometimes God strips away everything else in order to give us himself. He withholds the things we usually look to for happiness and satisfaction so we can learn what it means to find our joy and life and satisfaction and peace in him alone. And what would we want more than to have more of God himself?

Kelsey Patton recently wrote a song in which she captures both sides of this imagery – a sense of God turning his face from her, and then a new perspective, followed by a sense of God turning his face toward her. I've asked if she would play that for us this morning.

“The Invitation”

I tried to shut you out turn off the lights
Wouldn't let my heart believe in wonder
It got so dark thought I'd see lightning strike
but all I heard was distant thunder

I'm waiting for a sign something anything
I'm reaching for a light breaking through the grey
I'm screaming at the deafening silence
as you turn your face away

But what if you never left
But you left the way back open
what if you can't bring me back till I accept your invitation
I longed to hear you speak
But you already called out to me
Said I don't need you
I just want you
How will you respond to love

I don't understand how you want me
 No strings attached, no catch, you never needed me
 Will you pick up my hand and show me the way?

If your love is the sunrise and I refuse to wake up at 5
 How could I hate what I never tried to see
 A love you painted in the sky
 All I did was close my eyes
 And ask for gifts catered to me
 But you'd still paint me a sunrise in the night

I'm looking for your hand now in everything
 I'm reaching out for the love that you give away
 Blinded by the radiance of light as you turn your face my way

Kelsey's song beautifully leads us into two invitations for us this morning in the light of this imagery of God turning his face toward us.

1. First, I think we need to recognize that, as the body of Christ, our faces are now his face in this world.

Our faces are the face of the invisible God in this world. What do those who are outside of the Christian faith see in our faces? Do we express acceptance and respect and interest? Or do they express disinterest, or dismissal, or disdain?

Paul tells us that the work of God's Spirit is to transform each one of us more and more into the likeness of Christ. And the more we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus, the more our faces, like his face, will reflect the face of God.

II Corinthians 3.18 (JBP)

But all of us who are Christians have no veils on our faces, but reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord. We are transfigured by the Spirit of the Lord in ever-increasing splendor into his own image.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it in his poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limb, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Look at this wonderful passage.

Genesis 33.10 Jacob to Esau

To see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.

I'm more and more struck by the simple power of looking someone in the eye and smiling and greeting them warmly, leaving them feeling seen and valued as a person in a culture in which we so often look right past each other.

When Dylan and I were in Munich, heading for our flight home, an airline worker was directing a non-stop flow of passengers into the proper line for their flight. I looked her in the eye and smiled and asked her how her day was going and she stopped and looked at us with surprise and said, "Thank you for asking! I've been here for four hours and you're the first person who has asked me how I'm doing."

The more you and I cooperate with the transforming work of Jesus in our lives, and allow his love to shape the warmth of our welcome for others, the more this will be people's experience of us – seeing our faces will be like seeing the face of God. They will experience his love and interest and care and delight in what they see written on our faces.

May God make that true of us as we come face to face with our neighbors and with the world that God has placed around us.

2. Here's the second invitation that comes from these passages. It is an invitation into what for some of you may be a new prayer practice, though it's hardly new.

David describes it in **Psalm 27.8** when he says

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"

Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Strahan Coleman, a musician and spiritual director from New Zealand, recently came out with a book called *Beholding*. In which he explains this ancient prayer practice.

Beholding is the practice of gazing into God, [God] gazing into us, [us] gazing back into Him. . . . David expressed this as his soul's singular ambition in Psalm 27:4: "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." 16

Beholding is a life founded on the truth that no other offer on earth or in heaven is greater than that of simply staring into the eternal eyes of God, then seeing our world through them. 16

Often prayer is taught only in the context of praying *for* things. . . . I can't help but feel our inability to see prayer as a place of abiding rather than achievement has driven a performance culture in the church and robbed many of us [of] the spiritual fruits Christ promised us. 17

Prayer isn't meant to be just another transaction in the busy and consumer-saturated world we live in, but a place of deeply satisfying communion, of receiving and returning the gaze of our Maker. *back cover*

What would beholding prayer look like? Some of you know that one of the men in our covenant group died of cancer a couple of years ago. The last time I was with him, about six months before he died, we were talking about his health struggles and his chemo regimen. Then I asked him how his soul was. "Wonderful," he said.

He reminded me of a story that Jean Vianney, a parish priest in France in the 1800s, wrote in his book *Meditations*. Vianney writes:

"When I first came to Ars, there was a man who never passed the church without going in. In the morning on his way to work, and in the evening on his way home, he left his spade and pick-axe in the porch, and he spent a long time in adoration before the [Lord]. . . . I asked him once what he said to Our Lord during the long visits he made Him. Do you know what he told me? 'Eh, Monsieur le Curé I say nothing to Him, I look at Him and He looks at me!'" (Jean-Baptiste Marie Vianney, *The Meditations of the Curé D'Ars*)

And then David said to me, "That's what my life is about right now as I wait to go home. I gaze at God. God gazes at me. And I am at peace." Six months later he was seeing God face to face.

This is what the prayer of gazing on God might look like. A brief exchange like this:

Us: I love you, Lord. (Psalm 18.1)

God: You are precious and honored in my sight and I love you. (Isaiah 43.4)

Looking on God in love, only to discover that God is already looking on us in love.

Here's a picture of my son Brandon with his beautiful daughter Melody.



You can't help seeing the joy and peace on Melody's face. She looks so content. But look at the joy and delight on her father's face!

What would happen if this is how you began each morning, held in God's arms and gazing into his face, experiencing his delight in you. Not scrambling to earn God's pleasure. Just dwelling between his shoulders and resting secure in his love for you. (see Deuteronomy 33.12)

A couple of nights ago Sharon and I were Facetiming with Brandon. He was holding Melody on his lap while we talked. At one point Melody was looking at her dad while we talked. Look at the joy on her face.



God looks upon us with joy and love. And he invites us to return his gaze.

As the psalmist says, and as Melody reminds us:

Psalm 34.5

Those who look to him are radiant.

Closing prayer: May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us.