

# Seek the Lord

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Date: 06 December 2015

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[ 0 : 01 ] Well, welcome again to those of you who are returning, especially those of you who are visiting. I said a little while ago that we're in the season of Advent, that one of the themes that we speak about a lot is the theme of waiting, anticipating someone's return.

My wife left on Thursday. We have a three-year-old and a five-year-old. I had parents who were supposed to come and help, but they got the flu, and so they were unable to come, and so it's been a full weekend.

And we have all, my five-year-old, my three-year-old, and myself said to one another, I really can't wait until Mama comes home. Many times, actually, if I'm totally honest.

But as much as we have anticipated Mommy's return, it is nothing like the kind of anticipation we talk about at Advent, the anticipation of this world for the coming of Jesus.

And so that's what we've been talking about. We've been talking about what it means that Jesus has come, that he will come again, and what that means for us. And in order to understand this better, we've been spending this season looking at Isaiah.

[ 1 : 23 ] Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah was a prophet who lived in the 8th century B.C., so a long time ago. And it may lead you to ask, how could we possibly learn anything about the coming of Jesus from somebody who wrote so long before Jesus ever came, before anybody had any idea that there was such a person as Jesus?

And yet, when we look at the New Testament writers whose central goal was to teach us about Jesus and help us understand about Jesus, all throughout the New Testament, you see Isaiah, the prophet, quoted.

In fact, Isaiah is quoted some 85 times in the New Testament. 85 different quotations. In virtually every book of the New Testament, virtually every chapter of Isaiah is showing up somewhere.

And the reason is very simple. It's because Isaiah was writing all about the day when God's Messiah or God's anointed Savior would come. And so the New Testament writers, they had met Jesus and interacted with him and seen who he was and what he did.

And to them, the connection was clear. This is the person Isaiah was talking about. And so all throughout the New Testament, you have, it is literally infused with Isaiah.

[ 2 : 44 ] So we've come to chapter 55 in Isaiah, and Isaiah has basically just laid out this picture of this Messiah as not a conquering king.

Later he talks about that, but rather as this suffering servant. Like a lamb led to the slaughter. And this is the place in Isaiah where the Ethiopian eunuch is reading in the lesson from the book of Acts that Megan read a little while ago, where he's reading and he says, who is this person?

He asks Philip, who is this? I want to know who this is. So we've just heard about this suffering servant who's going to reconcile the world to God through his suffering and through his death.

And now we've come to Isaiah chapter 55, and Isaiah is talking about the implications of this. Well, now that we know about the suffering servant, once he comes, then what?

And the major implication is this. When you see that person, it's time to seek the Lord. Seek the Lord. And so that's where we are in Isaiah 55, beginning in verse 6, with this call to seek the Lord.

[ 3 : 52 ] And, you know, the word seek is pretty loaded. It's a word that I hear fairly common. Maybe it's because of what I do for a living. But I talk to a lot of people in D.C. who talk about being spiritual seekers.

You know, this is a very spiritually curious city. Most people I talk to are curious. They're asking questions.

They're interested. Even if they're not Christian or nowhere close, they're thinking. They're wondering. Most people have pretty strong opinions about these things. The coming of Jesus

completely transforms what it means to be a spiritual seeker.

It completely redefines what it means to be a spiritual seeker. In light of Jesus' coming, Isaiah tells us that seeking the Lord entails four things.

It entails responding to God's call, embracing God's thoughts and ways, trusting God's word, and then finally hoping for God's renewal. So that's our outline.

[ 4 : 57 ] We're going to look at this piece by piece. Let's take a moment to pray for God's help. Heavenly Father, we've said already tonight that you promise to speak. And you do that through your word.

So we pray that these spoken words would be faithful to your written word.

And that your written word would reveal to us your living word, your son Jesus. And we pray in his name. Amen. So first of all, responding to God's call.

That's the first thing. And you say, well, that's kind of interesting. We're talking about seeking God, and the first thing we say is that seeking God is actually responding to God. And I would say, yeah, that's exactly right. We're dipping into verse 6, but if you look at the first five verses of chapter 55, verses 1 through 5, what we see is that our passage begins with the word seek, but if you go back to the beginning of the chapter, the beginning of the chapter begins with the word come.

And it's actually God's invitation. God's invitation to not just the Israelites, but at this point we're talking about the whole world.

[ 6 : 10 ] So God is inviting the world, come. Come to me. And then the response in verse 6 is that we respond by seeking. But I want to spend a little time talking about this, talking about God's call or God's invitation to the world.

Because the first thing we see about spiritual seeking is this. Our search for God begins with God, not us. Which is an important point to make. I think many people today, at least a lot of the people that I talk to, we think of spiritual seeking as something that we initiate.

You know, so you think about, well, I've got a pretty good professional thing going on. Pretty happy with that. I've got good friendships. My social sphere is doing well. I'm getting plenty of exercise. I'm eating right. That's good. That's good. I'm not, but maybe you are. I'm doing all of that. And you say, you know, all that's kind of good. You know what I need? You know what would make for a really well-rounded life?

Is some spirituality. And I talk to a lot of people who say, you know, I'm really just, you know, maybe they visit here and maybe this describes you and why you're here tonight. And they say, well, I kind of want to dip in.

[ 7 : 19 ] And I just feel like that's something that's missing. And, you know, now that we're having kids, we want to raise our kids with some spirituality. And so we're just kind of looking for something that's a good fit. But all part of having a well-rounded life.

This would say something completely different. In Isaiah 55, verses 1 through 5, Isaiah is painting this very different picture. And he's saying this.

And I want you to think about this and see if it resonates with you. He's saying that under the surface, on a spiritual level, we are all desperately hungry. That we're desperately hungry.

Our souls are starving to death. And you say, well, I don't really feel that. That could mean a number of different things. But I would say, you know, if you know anything about physical hunger, in the latter stages of hunger, you actually lose your appetite.

You actually no longer even experience hunger. And that means that you're pretty far along. And I've seen the same to be true, even in my own life, spiritually.

[ 8 : 21 ] That the latter stages of spiritual starvation, you feel less and less the appetite. So Isaiah is saying we have this soul-level hunger.

This soul hunger. He says in verse 2, Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? And what he's saying here is that our lives, whether we know it or not, are basically spent in constant lookout for things that will satisfy our soul hunger. So whether we're buying stuff, you know, this time of year, that kicks into overdrive. You know, whether we're buying stuff, or whether we're looking for it in our jobs, or doing things that make us feel important, or whether we're looking to our relationships, we're driven to satisfy this soul hunger. You know, this is what C.S. Lewis called that inconsolable longing. I've always been haunted by that phrase. That inconsolable longing.

It's inconsolable because even the best things in this life, even the best things, even the best things can't satisfy it. You're friends. Even the best friendships.

[ 9 : 34 ] You know, some of you are lonely, and you think, if I could just make a few friends, and don't get me wrong, we all need good, deep friendships. Absolutely. But that's not enough. You know, you think, well, maybe this, maybe I'm lacking a sense of purpose and meaning, and so you find something to really devote yourself to.

A lot of causes in D.C. Different cause, different nonprofit on every corner, right? You devote yourself fully to that, it's not enough. And you think, well, maybe if I get married, maybe just having somebody to share my life with, that's really going to do it.

And don't get me wrong. I have a great marriage, like many of you. But Laura and I will both readily admit that we're not enough for one another.

You look to your spouse to be that for you, to be everything, you'll crush your spouse under the weight of expectations they're not designed to bear. We're not enough for one another. You think, well, maybe we'll have kids, and that'll do it.

And again, kids are amazing. For those of you called to have children, I encourage you to do it, but not enough. So we search and search and search.

[ 10 : 43 ] This is what Augustine meant when he said, oh God, you've made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Restless hearts. What do restless hearts do? Well, restless hearts drive us to eat too much.

And to drink too much. To work too much. To spend too much. To leave perfectly good jobs thinking, that's the problem, if I could just get a better job.

Or to have affairs. Or to end marriages. All of this is the drive of a restless heart.

And the only thing that can satisfy our soul hunger is God. That's the point here. So what does God do? God calls to us through the dissatisfaction in our lives.

Every time something falls short, every time something doesn't live up to the hype, or doesn't live up to the expectations, that can either simply be a source of profound disappointment, or if you listen, you hear God whispering in that, you weren't made for this.

[ 12 : 02 ] You're made for so much more. You're made for me. God whispers to us through our experiences of dissatisfaction, through our experiences of unmet longing.

There is constantly the whisper of God in those experiences saying, come a little further. So that's why there's such urgency in verse 6, where he says, seek the Lord while he may be found.

Call upon him while he's near. He's saying, now's your chance. This is it. You know, in Jesus, the God who made you for himself, the one God who can satisfy you, has actually come near.

And you know the amazing thing about that word? I didn't know that until a few days ago. But this word near actually doesn't just talk about proximity. Not just kind of like I'm standing near the drum set.

This is actually a familial word. It's a word of relationship. In other words, it's a word that describes, when you're talking about your extended family, it's the word that you would use to describe your near relatives, the ones who are more intimately related to you, as opposed to the distant relatives.

[ 13 : 11 ] So do you hear what he's saying here? He's saying now is the time when the unknowable, transcendent, otherworldly, beyond all human reckoning God, this other being, has drawn near in the sense that he's made it possible to know him like an intimate family member.

It's possible now. But it won't be for always. And so he's saying, respond. He's calling you. So call back to him. So the point I want to make about this, we could go in several directions, but before we move on, I just want to make a point about this.

Quite simply, the purpose of seeking is finding. Now, that may seem obvious. But the purpose of seeking is finding.

I talk to a lot of people, some here, who really love the idea of perpetual seeking. You know, to be truly open-minded, to be truly humble, to be truly intellectual, to be truly authentic, you have to constantly be seeking.

And if you're seeking, the world applauds you. But when you say, I think I found something. I think I found what I was looking for. People say, oh, you've sold out.

[ 14 : 27 ] Oh, you're so arrogant to possibly think that you could find. And, you know, I had a conversation this week, actually, where somebody said, you know, my focus really is on the experience of seeking.

And I want to spend my whole life experiencing what it's like to seek. And, you know, that sounds great. But if someone came to you and they said, I'm dying of thirst. If I don't have something to drink, I'm going to die. Would you say to them, well, you know, it's really about the experience. It's really about enjoying this time of dying of thirst. And I'm not going to give you the water because I really think that you should recognize it's about the thirst and not about the water. That would be absurd. Right? As Chesterton said, thirst was made for water and inquiry was made for truth. The reason you have it is because you're made for something that you don't have. So Isaiah is saying, Jesus is the one who can quench that thirst. Come to him while he's here. [15:30] So being a spiritual seeker begins with recognizing that God is calling to us. He's using the disappointments and unfulfilled longings of this life to call us to himself. That's the first thing. The second aspect of true spiritual seeking in light of Jesus is this. It means embracing God's thoughts and ways. Embracing God's thoughts and ways. So say that you're here and say that at some point in your life, if you're not a Christian, you become open to the idea that there is a God and that this God has made himself knowable in Jesus Christ. Well, what then? Here's what Isaiah says. Let the wicked forsake his way, the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. [16:34] You understand that Jesus said the very same thing only with fewer words. In Matthew chapter 4, verse 17, Jesus begins his public ministry and he begins traveling all over the region preaching. And it's probably many, many, many different sermons, but every sermon has the same main idea. You know, there's a joke that after a while, most preachers only have about 10 or 15 sermons and they just kind of repackage them in different ways. Jesus only had really one sermon. So I don't feel that bad. And his sermon was this, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent for the kingdom. It's drawn near to you. It's possible to know God now. And the word repent means, in essence, what Isaiah is saying, turning from our thoughts and ways and embracing God's thoughts and ways. So listen, there's a place to ask all of our questions. No question is stupid, especially in this church. Questions are welcome. Doubt is welcome. [17:36] You can't believe without doubt. Doubt is a part of belief. There's a time for every question. There's a time to explore. But at some point, Isaiah is saying, there needs to be a shift. There needs to be a change of posture. And you might think of it this way. There needs to be a shift at some point when we stop calling God into question and we begin to allow God to call us into question. Right? There needs to be a shift where we stop demanding God do what we want and we begin to ask what God wants of us. There needs to be a shift where we stop trying to have God on our terms and we begin to try to relate to God on his terms. For those of us who are here and we're spiritual seekers, one of the best ways to know, here's, you want a diagnostic? You want a litmus test? If you're seeking right now, whether you're an unbeliever or you're a Christian, but maybe you're not sure you believe anymore, maybe you're dry, maybe it's been a long time since you really felt in connection to God, here's how you know that you're moving closer to the real God in your seeking. It's because the closer you get to the true God, the more your estimation of yourself shrinks and the more your estimation of God increases. [19:02] That's the litmus test. That's how you know. This is exactly what happens when you look at Jesus. You know, I think I'm compassionate, right? Because every now and then I'm able to muster up some genuine empathy for somebody other than myself. And then I look at Jesus. And I look at Jesus reaching out and wholly unnecessarily touching the leper when he heals him, violating every health and religious taboo, simply because he knows that man needed to be touched.

Yeah, I think that I'm forgiving because every now and then I'm in the moment instead of exploding with defensive anger, I will say, you know, or self-righteous indignation, I'll say, you know what, I'm a sinner too and I forgive you.

Every now and then I do that. Jesus prays for the people who nailed him to a cross while he's hanging there. Please, God, forgive them. You know, I think of myself as a pretty generous person because we have different things that we give our money to, especially this time of year.

And then I see Jesus giving his life for people who hate him and mock him. And I think I haven't the first clue what generosity is. And the more you look at Jesus, the more your own estimation of yourself shrinks. It's painful, but it's so good.

[ 20 : 20 ] And the more your sense of God begins to expand. I can't believe God is that great. I can't believe he's that generous. I can't believe he's that loving. And the more this happens, the more the gospel begins to make sense.

The gospel which says God's standards are so high that we can't possibly live lives that please him. And this is why Jesus came, to live the life we should have lived. For us, to die the death that we deserve to die because we didn't.

And then to give us new life, reconciling us to God. That begins to make sense. It doesn't make sense when your view of yourself is like this and God is like this, fitting into your well-rounded life. But it does make sense when you realize that compared to God, we're very, very, very small. And he owes us nothing. So this is why Jesus said not, hey, I know the way, let me show you.

But he said, I am the way. So repentance means turning from our own thoughts and ways and embracing Jesus as the way to know God.

[ 21 : 30 ] And as we come, and here's the funny thing, as the more we come to trust God over ourselves, the more we come to realize actually he is much more capable and competent than we are to know what a human life is, the easier it becomes to yield our lives to him, to allow him to take charge.

But if your view of yourself is this big, never gonna happen. So spiritual seeking is, first of all, it's our response to God's call. Second of all, it's turning our own thoughts and turning from our own thoughts and ways and embracing God's thoughts and ways.

And then thirdly, none of this is possible, none of the turning, none of the embracing, none of the responding, none of this is possible without God's word. It's not possible without God's word.

We have to be able to trust God's word. But verses 10 and 11 are lovely because Isaiah is making this beautiful metaphor here.

I don't know if we can pull it up on the screen, Diana, but Isaiah makes this beautiful metaphor where he compares God's word to the rain that falls from the heavens and waters the earth.

[ 22 : 44 ] And because rain, you know, in an agrarian society, rain was all important. You would pray for and hope for and wait for rain and when it came, the ground would drink it in and then your crops would grow and then you would flourish.

And without the rain, no growth and you would perish. And so he's saying, just like that rain, so is the word of God when it comes into the human heart. And God says that he sends his word out into the world and that it accomplishes all that he purposes for it to accomplish.

It never returns to him. And the word never comes back and says, well, I really tried, but it just wasn't happening this time. The word goes out and it always comes back and says, mission complete.

So seeking has to involve God's word. It has to involve the scripture. And I know, I mean, I've talked to a number of you who say, well, I believe in Jesus, but I'm not sure what I think about the Bible. But my faith is primarily about Jesus and I follow Jesus, but I'm not really sure what I think about scripture. And if that speaks to you, if that's where you are, then I would actually encourage you to spend some time looking at how Jesus approaches scripture and what Jesus believed about scripture.

[ 23 : 58 ] If you follow him, I would encourage you to consider sharing his doctrine of scripture. I mean, Jesus himself referred to scripture as the word of God in places like Matthew 10 and Mark 7 and John 10.

He's continually quoting from the Old Testament. Virtually everything Jesus does, he says, or the gospel writers tell us, he did this to fulfill this prophecy. Or when Jesus responds to people, he responds by quoting scripture.

When Satan tempts him in the wilderness, he responds by quoting scripture. He's continually doing that. In Luke 24, he actually sits down with some of his disciples and shows them how the scriptures are all about him and they all point to him.

And in places like 2 Peter 3, we see that the writings of Paul and the New Testament writers were considered just as much scripture as the Old Testament writings, that they were treated with the same level of authority.

So the thing is, we don't believe in Jesus because of the Bible, we believe in the Bible because of Jesus. So if you believe in Jesus, should you not have the same doctrine of scripture that he does? [ 25 : 07 ] You know, and I would say to those of you who do, who say, yeah, I believe this, but I find reading the Bible really hard, it's really challenging and often I don't understand it, I would say, right, it is.

You're not dealing with a book from the Christian inspiration section written over the course of a weekend with a lot of caffeine. You're dealing with what is more like a library that spans thousands of years.

The best way I've, the best way I think to begin to learn how to read the Bible is to ask somebody who's a mature Christian who's been doing this in their life.

You gotta begin to learn what different genres are represented and how our interpretation is affected by the genre. You have to learn things like context, who wrote it, who were they writing to, what was the cultural climate in which they were writing.

you need to learn how to use tools and resources like commentaries. It takes time, it takes effort, but that's because the goal isn't just to read it or to memorize it.

[ 26 : 17 ] I met somebody recently who went on and on about how much scripture they had memorized, but I don't think it was clear that they understood any of it. All of this, well, the best description I've ever seen of how we engage scripture actually comes from the prayer book.

It comes from a prayer that Thomas Cranmer wrote back in the 1500s. We actually prayed it a few weeks ago in the service. It starts this way, it says, blessed Lord who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. Isn't that fantastic? Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. That's how we're called to interact with scripture. That's how scripture becomes like the rain that nourishes the growth in our hearts.

But all of this has to be grounded in a fundamental trust and openness to God's word doing God's work in your life. If you're not open to that, it's not going to happen. So seeking the Lord means what?

It means three things. It means responding to God's call. It means turning from our thoughts and ways and embracing God's thoughts and ways. Thirdly, it means trusting God's work to do God's work to do God's work in your life.

[ 27 : 34 ] Approaching it and saying, I want you to change me. I want you to speak into my life. I want you to call me into question. I want you to illuminate ways that I need to experience your grace.

Putting yourself under the word. Living under it. Taking it off the dissection table. And then lastly, all of this points us to the hope that we have in God's renewal.

This is Christian hope. Hoping for God's renewal. The first time Jesus came, it was Christmas, right? The first Christmas. Total obscurity.

We've heard the story every year, right? Manger, you know, stable, backwater part of the world.

The second time Jesus comes, the second time Jesus comes, there will be no mistaking it.

The Bible says the entire world will, like that, recognize that the King has come. And Isaiah gives us this brief but staggering image that the very mountains, the very mountains will break out and sing.

[ 28 : 42 ] The very trees will clap their hands with joy. That the entire world, that creation itself, the stones and the rocks, in another place we heard quoted earlier, Isaiah says that the valleys will be lifted up, the mountains will be brought low.

Right? So in the ancient Near East when a king would come, they would go ahead of the king and they would prepare a road so that the king could travel safely from place to place when the king would go to see his people and to announce his kingship.

Right? Well, this is saying the very creation will do that. The valleys will rise up to meet him. The mountains will bow low before him. all of creation will be united, turned in praise of her king.

And the reason for such rejoicing is this. It's because when that king comes, he comes to heal the world. He comes to heal what's been broken. Isaiah says, instead of thorns, cypress trees. Instead of briars, myrtles will bloom. What's he saying? No more curse. No more thorns and thistles. Instead of sadness, there will be celebration.

[ 29 : 58 ] Instead of weeping, as we sang earlier, there will be joy. Instead of death, there will be life. You know, we live in a world where death is one of the only things you can count on. They say, no matter how healthy you are, no matter how well you eat, no matter how much you exercise, no matter how careful you are, at some point you will die because in this world, at some point, life always gives way to death and this is saying, no, Jesus reverses that.

When Jesus comes, that will all change and all death will give way to life and life will be the final word. So this is the Christian hope.

This is the hope shared by those people who respond to Isaiah's call, respond to God's invitation to come, to seek, and to find.

And you'll find that Christians who have this hope, what they themselves find is that they become incredibly resilient in the face of whatever comes. They become incredibly resilient both in the best of times and the worst of times.

Because Christians who have this hope, of this vision for their future who know that it's secure, no matter how good things get, they're never taken away by it. You know, they never get carried away.

[ 31 : 20 ] You know, one of the big problems a lot of people moving to this country is they thought that the founding of the new world, this country, was going to become the kind of realization of all of these visions of what God was going to do in the world.

This is God's kind of promised land. But Christians who understand this promise in Isaiah recognize, no, no, no, no. That falls well short. Because the trees aren't clapping, the mountains aren't singing.

We're waiting for something far greater. So you never get carried away when you have this kind of hope. You can enjoy the goodness of this life, but you never get swept away by it. You never get unrooted by it.

Likewise, when you share this kind of hope, when you know that your future is secure, no matter how bad things get, no matter how dismal they get, no matter how many tears you're shedding. You're never crushed.

You're never totally undone. Because you know that no matter how bad things get, we do know how the story ends. So Christians who have this hope are incredibly resilient.

[ 32 : 25 ] So the invitation from Isaiah is this. Do you want a hope like this in your life? Here's the deal. I know that there are some of you here who have been feeling this stirring, who know that there's something out there.

You're not sure what it is. Maybe you're not convinced of any of this, but there's something tugging at the edges of your heart. And you're here and you're wondering. You know who you are.

I would encourage you, I would encourage you to open yourself, to ask God if that is you, if you're real, if you exist, make yourself known to me. Please reveal yourself to me.

The God who invites you to come to him will answer that prayer. And that means responding to God's call, opening ourselves to Jesus. It means embracing God's thoughts and ways, looking at Jesus on the cross, recognizing that that is God's way of salvation, and lastly, trusting God's word, letting it be like rain to your thirsty soul.

Let's pray. Our Father, we do recognize that all of us need to hear this because all of us, whether we know it or not, whether we admit it or not, are longing for you, longing to know our Father, longing to know the God for whom we were made.

[ 33 : 49 ] Lord, in our restlessness and in even the bitter disappointments of life, we pray that you would speak to us and remind us of the promise that we have in you and the hope that we share because of you, especially this Advent season as we wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray.

Amen.