Finding God When Life Seems Empty

First in a January 2017 series called “Finding God”

# Scripture: Psalm 63:1-5

# Key thought: When we seek God in life’s difficult times, it leads to new encounters with God.

# Intro:

Preschoolers say the funniest things. But sometimes they are way wiser than they know. One Mom reported this conversation. She wrote: We had a beautiful evening rain. "God is watering the flowers and grass," I reminded our toddlers. A few days later we had a strong wind that prompted my three-year-old to complain, "Why is God making it windy?"

"The wind is good for us, Chris," I responded. "It makes the seeds fly around and land in places where God wants to put a new flower or tree. We need wind to help things grow."

Later that week, as we were walking on a warm and breezy day, Chris looked up at me and happily said, "I'm growing! It's windy today!"

Well how’s that for a philosophy for tough times?

How do we look at the difficult times in our lives? We might describe them as seasons when the winds of circumstances are adverse, when times of trouble come. Perhaps we would describe hard times as times when life seems empty. Or maybe they’re described as desert times, dry times, times when fruitfulness seems to elude us. However we describe them, often these kinds of times get us down. They are discouraging. And what is worse, they are hard to recover from. If we’re not careful they lead us into a downward spiral.

# Desert times can be a spiritual opportunity.

How can we counter? I believe it begins with the perspective of this little preschooler. However naïve it was on the physical realm, in the spiritual realm times when things seem adverse, desert times, these can be great times of spiritual opportunity.

## David sought spiritual renewal in his desert time

I’ve chosen Psalm 63 for this morning’s message text partly because scholars feel it was written during just such a difficult time in David’s life, the time when he was fleeing from his son Absalom who was leading a coup against his own father, King David. If you remember the biblical story found in 2nd Samuel chapter 15 and 16, David had to flee from Jerusalem for his life. He felt so humiliated that he did not even stop to defend himself as he was pelted with stones and dirt and cursed by Shimei as he fled. Some of the country through which he fled was literally very dry giving double meaning to the verse, “I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1). David was tired. Second Samuel 17:22 tells us that he crossed the Jordan at night to escape. Certainly “The lie-speakers and those who seek the speaker's life . . . make an arid spiritual climate" (Marvin Tate in Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 20 p. 129).

But in this low time, David sought God’s aid and spiritual renewal. As he looked to God, David first of all felt renewed spiritually. This is indicated in verse 5. “I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.” And then David became increasingly confident that he would be returned to office. For example, in verse 9 we read David’s renewed faith that God’s help would result in his retaining his position, “Those who want to kill me will be destroyed they will go down to the depths of the earth.”

David is far from the only hero of the Bible who found God close in their lowest times, in their desert times, in their times when life seemed hopeless and empty.

## Elijah heard God’s still small voice during a time of emptiness in his life

I think of Elijah’s experience recorded in 1st Kings 19. In the previous chapter, the great victory that Elijah had led over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel is recorded. But in the very next chapter Elijah has to flee for his life from Queen Jezebel and is so dejected that he prayed that he would die. Yet it was at this time that he experienced God tenderly feeding him and strengthening him by an angel messenger. Later the Lord appeared to him at Mount Horeb via the ‘still small voice.’ The desert time in Elijah’s life became a time of spiritual strength and renewal.

## Moses met God in the desert

What about Moses? Moses had his burning bush experience out in the desert also. Essentially, he was in exile for his crime of murdering an Egyptian official. The Bible describes the place as the “far side of the desert” (Ex. 3:1-4). That was where God met Moses and his journey to recovery and growth as leader of Israel began. That is where his walk with God took off into a new dimension—in the desert place.

## Jacob’s name was changed to Israel at a low ebb in his life

In my project for this year beginning to read through the Bible again, I recently finished reading the story of Jacob. Think about the time when Jacob fled from his father-in-law Laban. Though his goods and family had greatly increased, it was a very vulnerable time. He had barely gotten over the tense meeting with his father-in-law when he learned that his estranged brother Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Life seemed pretty tenuous for Jacob right about then. But to Jacob’s credit, he used this difficult time as a spiritual opportunity. It was that night, all alone, that Jacob wrestled with God. Before the night was over, God had changed his name from Jacob which means “He grasps the heel” or “supplanter,” to Israel which means “He struggles with God.”

I can think of others. In the Old Testament consider Job, Jonah, Daniel, and Habakkuk. In the New Testament remember Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail. All of these found huge moments of spiritual opportunity in the midst of grave difficulty.

## What do you do in life’s low times?

How do you look at the empty times of your life? How do you look at the difficult times? If we look for spiritual opportunity in our difficult times they might become times of blessing.

"When comfort is gone, and the [bed] is hard, if we rise earlier to seek the Lord, we have much for which to thank the wilderness."Spurgeon Vol 2 p. 65

Particularly difficult for us are times of sorrow. Yet even these can be times when God is very close. One saint wrote:

 "Sorrow is our John the Baptist, clad in grim garments with rough arms, a son of the wilderness, baptizing us with bitter tears, preaching repentance; and behind him comes the gracious, affectionate, healing Lord, speaking peace and joy to the soul." Frederic D. Huntington Confession of Christ p. 813-814

# Recalling God’s past inspiration helps encourage us.

## David remembered to get perspective

The second example that David gives us in Psalm 63 that is a very helpful one when life seems empty is this. In his low times, in times of great difficulty, he looked back and reviewed the blessings and inspiration that he had received from God in the past. By so doing he gained a better perspective on his present situation.

“I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and glory…. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night” (VV. 2, 6)

A well balanced perspective is one thing we desperately need and usually don’t have when we are suffering depression. So a simple practice like this that can help us get it is invaluable.

## David thought about spiritual high points

Perhaps he remembered when Samuel had anointed him as King (1 Sam. 16:13). Maybe he thought about when he had brought the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). Perhaps he remembered times when those he had appointed to lead worship had seemed especially to invite God’s presence and inspiration.

## David probably remembered notable past victories

Maybe David remembered the victory over Goliath. Maybe he remembered other times he had subdued enemies of Israel, for example the Aramaeans (2 Sam 10).

Whatever it was that came to mind, the work of God in David’s life previously gave him faith to believe that God would also come to his aid in the current desperate situation.

## Our need is the same; our strategy the same

In our times of discouragement, we have the same need. We will benefit so much from a more balanced perspective to expand our thoughts. We need to receive some vital encouragement for our faith. David’s method will help us as well. We can dig into our own memories. Look for spiritual milestones and inspirational highpoints from our own lives. Remember testimonies of such we have heard from those we love as well. Together, these will have the same effect upon us that David’s memories did upon him. We will be encouraged in faith and have new confidence in God in the midst of our current circumstances.

# God promises spiritual refreshing when we seek Him.

## David is confident that God will give spiritual refreshment

There is a very interesting contrast in this Psalm. It is a contrast between bodily deprivation and bodily satisfaction. The contrast is a little hidden because two different bodily appetites are used in the contrast. In verse one, David talks about thirst and then mentions a dry and parched land without water. It is an image of scarcity with which people living in desert climate were way too familiar. This image would’ve resonated with them like an image of lack of heat in a room resonates with us in January.

But then in verse five, after David has thought about the house of God; after David has specifically remembered the services of the sanctuary and lifting up his hands and praise to God, he speaks of being fully satisfied as with rich food. He’s talking about the satisfaction of the appetite for food with a good and satisfying meal. Most of us would think of the end of a Thanksgiving meal after we had our dessert, usually part way through the afternoon after the pie is served. By that time, we are quite satiated, very happy and a little sleepy from all the tryptophan. We are quite satisfied and content. Well that’s being compared to the satisfaction feeling that David was feeling spiritually because of God’s renewal of his soul. What a huge contrast between the emptiness of his heart at the beginning of the Psalm and the fullness of his soul at this point in the Psalm.

I think of Jesus’ promise,

“I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. (John 10:10 NIV).

## God’s promises of spiritual renewal

There are many promises that God is given that he will indeed renew our souls as we come to him in our times of need.

Think of Psalm twenty-three. The primary imagery there is that of a shepherd caring for his flock. In the Psalm there are multiple images of God refreshing his people, his sheep. To choose just one look at verse two and three.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul. Ps 23:2-3

Isaiah the prophet predicted,

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." (Isa. 12:3)

Jesus was even more pointed in his promise of God renewing our spirits in our times of greatest need. All we needed to do was to look for God’s help.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Matt 5:6

Here’s a list of 6 ways God renews our soul (paraphrased from John Fraser (1745-1818) as quoted by Spurgeon Vol 2 p. 75) I’ve added the verses.

* Through the sacrament of communion (1 Cor 11:23-32; John 6:47-51\*\*)
* by showing us his glory in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18)
* by putting his love in our hearts (Rom 5:5)
* new covenant promises (2 Peter 1:4)
* by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us (Eph. 4:16-19
* in reminders of former experiences of his kindness (Psalm 63:7)

(\*\* Though the John 6 passage is placed earlier in Jesus’ ministry, it is very hard to conclude other than that one big purpose for the inclusion of this passage in John’s record is its relevance to the sacrament. The John 6 passage needs to be understood as not referring to the physical ingesting of the bread and wine (grape juice) in itself. Rather it refers to the act of obedience in remembering Jesus, his words, his sacrifice and his resurrection and in humbling ourselves once again to be in need of God’s gracious favor. We are not strengthened by simply going through the motions of ritual but by having a heart that resonates with the meaning of the liturgy. This interpretation parallels Peter’s instructions concerning baptism in 1 Peter 3:21.)

Here’s a way to visualize these building blocks of God strengthening us in grace.

## The role of the Holy Spirit emphasizes the need to stay close to God

Psalm sixty-three verse eight is a resounding affirmation of David’s confidence in God.

I cling to you; your right hand upholds me. Ps 63:8

The word translated to “cling to” means to stay close to like a husband and wife with many years of marriage together stay close with loyalty and affection.

Jesus taught us that to stay strong, we would need to stay close to him.

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. John 15:4

# Conclusion

Today we celebrate communion. This is a perfect time to draw near to God, to remember all he has done for us and receive from him the renewal that we need for each day whether it is a difficult day or a joyful one.