

“My Soul Longs for You, O God” 2016

Psalm 42:1-5, 11 Galatians 3:21-29

According to the greeting-card-calendar, today is Father’s Day, and we want to acknowledge and recognize fathers, **and the uniquely significant role and influence a man can choose to have in the life of a child.**

I didn’t appreciate or recognize this so much as a young boy, but as I grew older, I realized that the way I observed my father treating and respecting my mother, his wife, that became the model on which I based my treatment and the way I behaved toward women in general, and my attitude toward my wife in particular... **and I am very grateful for the legacy of that good influence.** But perhaps, the most important example or lesson learned from my dad was the eternally significant authenticity of his faith that derived from his genuine **longing to know God.** I remember a change in his life when he moved away from a typically lukewarm and passive Christian commitment to a dedicated desire and **longing to grow deeper in faith.** At that point, I would see him regularly reading and studying his Bible and more active in the life and ministry of the Church. He was intentional about making Christianity a part of our lives, and was always my go-to-guy for any questions I had about faith.

But I recall a year or two into my studies preparing for ministry, when, during a visit home one time, I realized that I had learned and now knew a lot more facts about the Bible and theology than my father... **but that he had a spiritual depth and understanding,** that went way beyond anything I was learning in school, which I realized, came from a lifetime experience of longing to know & love the Lord God more fully.

Not long after that I traveled to East Africa for a seminary course and had an experience that demonstrated to me just how powerful and how important a desire and longing to know the Lord more deeply and fully can be. Abetifi is a small village high in the mountains of Ghana. One Sunday when our group was worshipping with the Africans, that faith-community was saying goodbye to a local family. A woman of that community and congregation had died recently. She had been in charge of the schools in that district, and it had been her salary that had provided for their family, which included 6 children. Without that income, the family couldn’t afford to stay together in Abetifi. Her widowed husband was leaving shortly to look for work in Accra, and the children were to be split up among their relatives who lived in different and distant regions of the country. The children were about to leave the only home they had ever known, away from all their friends, their church and their school, away from the comforts of their family and the familiar, in addition to grieving the tragic loss of their mother. It was very difficult and a crushing reality for the family, and hard for the church who loved them, and would miss them. All of their lives were going to be very different, as they faced an unknown and fearfully uncertain future. On this their last Sunday worship service together, the father asked his 14 year old daughter to sing Psalm 42. It was one of the most moving and most powerful and

inspiring moments of worship that I have ever been blessed to experience. In an amazingly clear and sweet, beautiful and courageous voice, she stood all alone, singing a cappella and looking to God. Her music echoed the poignant and piercing words of

Psalm 42:1-2.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

I can still hear her voice, tight with the emotional struggle, as with great feeling, with astonishing grace and poise she declared her faith, her trust, her hope:

Psalm 42:5

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

That remarkable young African girl made this psalm soar for me. Despite losing almost everything in life that she ever valued, upheld by her faith, with astonishing courage and trust, she found voice and strength to cry out, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Her faith, her courage that day, singing to God amid so much heartbreak, hurt and suffering, demonstrated her **living relationship with her Lord...** even as she faced ultimate upheaval and absolute uncertainty... **and what an inspiring declaration of her faith.** For me, something clicked that day in Abetifi. She demonstrated a truth, the same that my father had... **that though we may intellectually know something about God, it is definitely not the same thing as having a personal relationship with the Lord, a living and intimate deepening of our faith...**

which gets to the heart of the text we read from Galatians 3. **So what is going on in this passage?** The Apostle Paul was the one who began the church in Galatia, and once he felt they were ready, he moved on to spread the Gospel message to other places. But sometime after Paul left some very impressive Jewish Christians came along who convinced these new Christians in Galatia, that Paul's teaching had been incomplete. They preached that beyond just receiving God's grace in Jesus, it was also necessary to follow the Law, rituals and traditions of Judaism. Paul was absolutely opposed to that spiritual corruption. It all went back to Paul's experience of becoming a Christian. He was raised as a meticulous Law and ritual abiding Jew, and he began his faith journey by 'doing religion well' as a very strict, a law and ritual driven Pharisee.

Before Paul's road to Damascus experience of coming to faith, he was a brilliant scholar, a Pharisee and theologian, and he knew the facts of Scripture, he know all about God. * But on the road to Damascus, he came to truly know God through a personal experience with Jesus Christ, **and that was something totally different.** For Paul, the Damascus road was **a life-redefining experience.** His background and his education had once assured him that faithfulness to God meant carefully following all the rules and rituals of his Jewish traditions. But his encounter with Jesus on the road showed him that instead, salvation is a gracious gift from God, accomplished entirely through Jesus Christ, and our best efforts don't and can't earn any of it... **and there is no greater or more profound life-changing truth that we can ever know. Paul's whole life and his understanding of God were forever changed when he experienced God's mercy, which changed the way he read and understood the Law, and his whole sense of how God relates to humankind.** In our text Paul describes this,

Galatians 3:23-25

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

In the Greek, the word translated, "disciplinarian" refers to a specific household slave who, like a nanny accompanied a child wherever they went. The Law was like a nanny, serving to guide, protect and discipline, and charged to keep a young child from getting into trouble. **But that's all the Law could accomplish, setting standards and guidance for behavior.** The Law could expose human and sin, but could offer no cure. Like training wheels on a child's first bicycle, useful at first, but then no longer helpful or needed... **so too the Law was superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ.**

Christian life isn't about living under requirements of the Law, but it is a relationship of ever growing to know God better, the blessing of experiencing God's presence continually. Our goal as Christians is to know Jesus better and more deeply, and to share a more open and intimate relationship with God. It's a call to discover the delight & wonder of our journey with God, and bask in the amazing comfort & promises of Jesus who loves us, and enjoy simply being & serving together as the people of God. This is a call to trust in God's grace, to relax and enjoy our lives, our God, each other and our faith **a lot more.** Which also means that our life in Christ is so different & powerful, that basic issues and barriers which often divide humankind such as ethnic, economic and gender differences no longer apply or separate one from another.

Galatians 3:27-28

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

In Christ, God only sees sinners who have been forgiven. No Jews or Greeks, no slaves or free, no male or female, but all uniquely loved, adopted as the Children of God... **and those who focus on Law and divisions are failing to grasp the radical nature of what it means to be one, clothed in Christ.** The call is to a longing to go deeper in our walk with the Lord, not as an achievement or something or a task we have to do, but a grace-filled offer, a gift we can have – **to enjoy!** It's **allowing ourselves to be blessed, to be loved, and to be graced by God.** And it's that longing for God that will lead to a change of heart, and with a change of heart, external behavior will follow, so those living out that change, have no further need for Law. When hurricanes hit our community in North Carolina, our electricity and water would be cut-off for several days, so we'd need to conserve and not open our refrigerator. But once the utilities were restored to our neighborhood, those efforts to conserve were irrelevant, and we didn't have to live that way anymore ... **so it is with the Law and the coming of Jesus Christ.**

We don't have to live to please God by trying to be good people, but rather, through Christ, we can actually know and love God, and we can live out a real relationship with God... which increasingly permeates our every decision and choice, over every aspect of our lives, especially how we perceive and live in the world around us. Our ethic, our moral standards are not based upon external Law, but are guided by grace and the Holy Spirit present within us, basing our decisions and choices on relational questions: - **does it bring me closer to God, or does it hinder my walk? - does it serve to further love of God and neighbor, or not?** If our focus is on relationship with God and neighbor, then doing the right thing, will surely follow on its own. The Christian life is never about simply obeying the rules.

It's not about believing all the right doctrines, or even understanding Scripture and theology... **but it's seeking to know and love and serve God, by walking in a faithful and personal relationship with Christ, and it is from that relationship that we can live out our lives in faithful obedience.** The Christian life begins and ends with the difference between **knowing information about God**, and **truly knowing** the Lord our God who loves us.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. You are my strength and shield, to you alone may my spirit yield.