

God Lost.

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I. In all the Bible I know of no statement more startling than that implied in this apparently simple exhortation of the inspired Isaiah, "Seek ye the Lord, while He may be found." (ch. 55:6). We seek for that which we have lost. Has the human race indeed lost God? What other meaning can we attach to this alarming prophetic exhortation, "Seek ye the Lord?"

Yes, mankind have lost the Lord! Once, man bore God's image—God's natural moral and spiritual likeness, but he has lost it; once, man had God's personal friendship and fellowship, but he has utterly lost them; once, man possessed consciously the sweet enjoyment of God's paternal love, and the certain prospect of dwelling as a child with Him in His glorious palatial home, but this enjoyment and this prospect have been lost. In our paternal Adamic constitution we are fallen away from God. By natural disposition, taste and habit we are "alienated from the life of God." In respect for His holy law and the supremacy of His justice—in respect for His regal rights and divine reputation God has withdrawn from us. *We have lost God!*

This is the radical meaning of the Scriptural doctrine of man's original fall and present condition of sin. We are thus lost. Not lost to God, because it is simply impossible for any creature, whether good or bad, to wander away beyond the reach of His almighty hand, and the observation of His sleepless eye—for "in Him we live and move and have our being"—but *He is lost to us*; our nature has been so utterly blinded by sin that we cannot perceive Him, and so debased by sinfulness that intimate fellowship with His is no longer possible, we are "alienated from the life of God."

This loss of God—this alienation from God is necessarily spiritual death and debasement, is steady progressive downward moral deterioration and degradation. As a planet that has somehow wandered beyond the controlling influence, the light and heat of its central sun must stray helplessly and fall forever away into deepening darkness, coldness and death, even so those souls that have been by sin cut loose from the presence and living fellowship of God must forever stray further and further away from the light into deepening darkness—away from all those beauties of form and color, and from all that delicious nourishment that spring from the creative action of divine living light, into all those dismal deformities and moral starvation that curse the barren regions of deathly night—away from that pure love, which holy, divine beauty awakens, to that awful hatred which the perpetual presence of the loathsomeness of sin breeds in the human soul.

In spite of all the theories which the ingenuity of advanced science has invented, let you and me be sure of this, that everything positive and living comes from the living God—everything noble in form and fair in appearance, everything grand in sentiment and aspiration, and blessed in experience, and that just in so far as we wander from Him—just in so far as we lose Him we drift away further into the gloomy region of agnition negation and death, into the cold chaos of moral disorder and hopeless misery.

When we accept the Biblical doctrine that we are fallen by our necessary relation to fallen progenitors by birth, by natural taste and disposition, what do we mean? We simply mean, *WE HAVE LOST GOD*. Between us and God sin has opened a great gulf, and so far as we are concerned that gulf is fixed and forever impassable.

Now, are we not concerned and alarmed at the contemplation of this greatest of all possible calamities? If we are not, surely this very indifference is unquestionable proof that we are already wrapt in very dense spiritual darkness and stupor. Had we lost a fortune by sheer folly or by gross mismanagement, should we not be distressed? Had we lost our character by reckless sin, should we not now be wretched? Had we lost an only child or an affectionate mother, should we not be in agony? Oh, how much more deeply moved ought we to be for having lost God!

The very fact that many of us are so unconcerned about this awful loss, so well satisfied notwithstanding this stupendous loss is surely demonstrative evidence that we are already far, far away in the darkness of alienation, and very far gone in spiritual paralysis.

Total ignorance of any better condition than that in which we have from infancy been living makes us, of course, fairly content with the condition in which we are. Those rough and illiterate barbarians, who long ago luxuriated in the baths of Alexandria, regretted not the priceless value of that fuel—the manuscripts of the incomparable library—with which their savage general Amron had commanded the water to be heated. Only those who from intellectual enlightenment are competent to know the value of such a treasure as those four hundred thousand volumes the Alexandrian library once contained

can bitterly regret and deplore such reckless destruction as that in which the Gothic savages indulged.

The Esquimaux who pass four months of every year in sunless darkness, gorging themselves with whale blubber and quaffing seal's blood are doubtless fairly contented with their lot, simply because they have become habituated to it, and never knew anything of the superior circumstances of those who live in the temperate zone. And it is only those who have wandered from the numberless comforts of European or American civilization into the dismal regions of the north who can sadly remember the comforts far, far away beyond those sunless fields of ice and snow. Even so, if you and I can hear with indifference that we have lost God, that we and our ancestors have wandered away from the love of His heart and the sunshine of His face,—if we can feel easy, contented and even happy, eating, drinking and sleeping with unregenerate hearts in our bosoms and a sin-ridden world all around us, is not this state of ours sad and conclusive evidence that we have never known a holier and happier condition of things—that we never have experienced the favor and fellowship of God—indeed, that we have no experimental idea of the value and the blessedness of what our father Adam lost by his fall?

In losing Eden, we lost God! the central Sun of all creation, the divine Soul of pure love, the Source of immortal beauty and joy, the Fountain of happy, boundless, endless life, the infinite Treasure of the human soul—*we have lost God!*

Is it not very plain that all mankind everywhere instinctively feel that they have lost something which they are all eagerly seeking to recover? Some are searching for it in business, and others in politics, some in fashionable ostentation in the ball-room, the theatre and the aristocratic church, some in gambling, dissipation and debauchery, and others in intellectual and scientific pursuits, some in military parades and dangers, and others foreign travel. Here, there, everywhere, human souls are rushing and seeking—what? *THEY HAVE LOST GOD!*

II. That remarkable passage I have quoted in the first paragraph of this article tells us that by *SEEKING WE MAY FIND THE GOD WE HAVE LOST*. "Seek ye the Lord, while He may be found." Just think of it: that great God who dwells in the highest heavens, far beyond the stars, we may find simply by honest seeking!

We honestly and earnestly seek for anything that we feel the need of, such as good health and sound education; beauty, wealth, pleasure and honor we seek, because we believe these things in our possession will add much to the value, the importance, and the enjoyment of our lives; and all this kind of seeking consists of our giving thought and attention, skill, energy and persistent perseverance to these desirable objects. Seeking—I mean successful seeking, consists of earnestly bending our mental and physical powers in the direction of those things we value and desire to obtain with the fixed determination to overtake and secure them.

Now, this is just the moral, mental and physical attitude and action of those who are honestly seeking God. What else can mean this language of David, "My soul thirsteth for God: for the living God." "As the hart panteth after the water brook, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God." Such is the graphic style in which the Old Testament describes God-seeking. And how does the New Testament illustrate seeking? Can you see you woman in her little dark cottage with the lighted candle in one hand and a broom in the other, sweeping every corner of the room? What is she hunting for? She has lost a piece of money, and she has resolved to find it. Far away over the rough hillside can you see you man pushing his way through brush and thorns—aye, and the sun is already sinking in the west, too? What can he be after? He is seeking for a strayed sheep which he now sees in the distance caught in a thick thorn-bush; and he is determined to put it safely within his fold to-night. Thus the Great Teacher fixes the meaning of the word "Seek." And thus we must seek God, if we seek successfully.

To pursue this earnest search for the God we have lost with the hope of certain success, the holy Scriptures give us the greatest encouragement. For example this very passage that tells us of our loss, tells us further, "*HE MAY BE FOUND*." Just add to this such strong statements as these, "I said unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me, in vain." "Those that seek me early shall find me." "Ye shall seek me and shall find me, when ye search for me with all your hearts." Reading such words as these, surely we are constrained to confess that the God of infinite holiness and justice, who withdrew from Eden because of human ingratitude and disobedience, is still the God of infinite love and grace, most patient and tender.

III. But there is another solemn thought such quotations from the page of inspiration press home upon us, *viz.*, Are not many of us who have been leading what are regarded as respectable lives of religious habits deeply conscious that we have never yet really sought the Lord? Were we ever yet painfully conscious that we had lost Him? In all our religious history when did we exercise such intensity of soul, such earnestness of aim, such singleness of eye, such concentration of purpose, such solemn energy of soul and heart which words like these, "*SEEK YE THE LORD*," plainly indicate? Easy-going and respectful acceptance of the creed of our parents, polite and meek conformity to those decent ecclesiastical conditions and customs in which we have been born and reared—why, such religious respectability and pliability can never be called seeking the Lord,—*searching for Him with all the heart*. Never.

Oh, is it not sadly true regarding very many of us that, while the desires of our hearts and the purposes and plans of our minds and the energies of our bodies have been

persistently and assiduously bent upon acquiring the possession of created things, our seeking for the Creator Himself has amounted to little more than our occasional pious wish, a cold, short formal morning and evening prayer, and regular attendance on church services?

How can we imagine that the living God is to be successfully sought and found in this fashion? While we are seeking and cultivating human friendship and patronage with diligent, hearty perseverance, while we are seeking association with the learned and the wealthy with so much assiduity, while we seek human love with eagerness, patient earnestness and great self-sacrifice, while we hunt after earthly treasures and pleasures with all the soul and mind and strength we can press into the chase, can we imagine—can we possibly believe that the Great God is to be sought successfully by such half-hearted listlessness as characterizes our devotions! By prayers so heartless, short and meaningless, by mere spasmodic, sentimental wishes, so vague, so shallow and evanescent, by work and gifts that never once amount to honest self-denial or self-sacrifice! Never! The God we seek is the heart-searching God, and He must see that our whole hearts are bent upon securing the possession of Him, because we value Him infinitely above and beyond everything else and everyone else.

"Seek ye the Lord while He may be found."
He may be found, but by whom? "*Ye shall seek me and shall find me when ye search for me WITH ALL YOUR HEART.*"

IV. Now comes the intensely practical question, *HOW AND WHERE CAN WE FIND GOD?*

God the Father, the personification of essential deity, is invisible and unapproachable. Neither angel nor man can come near to Him and live. "Who can by searching find out God?" "No man hath seen God at any time." It was God the Son who created all things, who met with Adam and Eve, who walked with Enoch, who appeared and spake to Abraham and Moses. The ancient Jews to whom this exhortation, "*SEEK YE THE LORD WHILE HE MAY BE FOUND*," was originally addressed, had really to seek God through their long-promised Messiah, and very laborious seeking this was. Their Messiah had not yet come; they knew Him but vaguely through prophetic prediction and promise, and through types, which were so very apt to be erroneously interpreted and imperfectly understood, such as the tabernacle and the priesthood and sacrifices furnished. They had to seek Him by looking forward and waiting for His appearance. For centuries these words of their last prophet Malachi rang in their ears, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple." And when He did come, oh, how utterly unlike He was to that magnificent King and triumphant hero they had so long expected!

As to *HOW* only way of seeking God we must seek Him—we can only seek Him through the same medium, the Messiah. "I am the way; no one cometh unto the Father, but by me," declared Jesus Christ. In our seeking we have these immense advantages over the ancient Jew. We know who this Messiah is. To us Messiah is no longer an imperfect and distant prophetic vision, but a substantial historical verity—a living Person whom human eyes have seen, and hands have touched, and ears have heard, a man walking on the highway of common humanity. We can come to Him directly, without the bloody smoky bewildering intervention of sacrifice, without passing through the maze of mysterious ceremonies, without the interposition and the guidance of imperfect priests; and when we have come to Him we know that we have *FOUND GOD*; for God is in Christ. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." "I and the Father are one."

And thus we come to Christ—by *faith*. Were Jesus, the man of Nazareth, here within reach of our voice and within touch of our fingers, we could come into contact with *THE CHRIST* within Him only by faith. In the days when Jesus dwelt on earth multitudes saw Him and heard Him, came into such close contact with His person as to feel His very breath on their faces, nay, many of them even beheld the agonies of His atoning sacrifice and even touched the blood that fell from His head and His heart, who were none the better for all that. No mere physical contact with Jesus had any blessing in it. Spiritual contact alone could ever draw divine virtue out of Him, by touching the Deity—the Christhood within Him. And even so is it still. We may come closer to ministers and sermons, to ceremonies and sacraments, to feast days and fast days, to priests and altars, even to the holy coat of Treves and the holy sepulchre in Jerusalem, but none of these things will bring us one inch nearer to God. Until by *living faith* we touch *THE CHRIST* we never can find God.

V. In seeking God by faith we have not to go any distance or to any particular spot. Pilgrimages may help superstitious piety, but true faith operates effectively in spite of geographical and even astronomical distances. Away to far distant Mecca, across the dry and dreary Arabian desert the devout Mohammedan toils in order to get nearer his divine Allah; away to Benares, situated on the sacred river Ganges, the pious Hindoo trudges along a thousand miles to get nearer his divinities; away to the consecrated cathedral at Rome the pious Papist journeys to get nearer the bones of Peter in the hope that that will bring him nearer Peter's Master. But these are not the ways to seek and to find God. The true and living God is personally no more resident in the precious relic in the consecrated cathedral, or in the lonely monastic cell than He is anywhere else. "If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

Long ago Jesus assured the Samaritan woman, "Believe me, the hour cometh when neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem ye shall worship the Father. * * * God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Long ago the guardian angel at the entrance to Joseph of Arimathea's sepulchre assured the women, "He is not here, He is risen." No wearisome pilgrimage on naked feet to some far distant shrine have we to perform like those deluded souls who, in the dark

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