

2022.05.22 - Presence - Growing Our Hunger

So What? God won't resist the collision of desire and obedience.

Feel What? Hunger

Now What? How might God be inviting me to open up my emotions to his Spirit? In what area(s) may I need to respond in surrender?

VISION CASTING

The purpose of Tallgrass at The Well is to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

We have been in a message series called Presence where we're learning about encountering God in our everyday lives. We've covered topics ranging from the awareness of God's manifest presence to practical steps to encountering God, such as Ben's message last week about the practice of retreat.

This week, I want to turn our attention inward a bit and focus on our heart's posture toward God. In other words, I want to talk about how we encounter God's presence in and through our emotions.

Now, when we begin to talk about feelings and emotions two views immediately confront us, as they have through human history. These views have wrestled with the question of how to respond to the desires of our heart? Are they to be trusted? Indulged in? Defended? Or, perhaps, we are to only trust our intellect and what we feel is of no matter? In fact, maybe our emotions are unreliable and to be treated with suspicion altogether?

The first school of thought can be represented by Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who taught in 300 BC. Epicureanism is a subset of hedonism and its adherents held that the goal of life was the pursuit and realization of pleasure. You were given desires to be indulged in, just as you were given urges to be satisfied. If you're hungry, eat. If you're thirsty, of course, drink. If you're aroused, seek pleasure, and be satiated.

You don't have to know about Epicurus to see his effects today. In an episode of *The Office* where Pam, Oscar, and Toby conduct meetings of "The Finer Things Club" where they listen to classical music, eat fancy pastries, and discuss refined literature, all while buffeting attempts by Jim to join the club because he won't do any of the reading. Modern day extrapolation of Epicurean living, though comical and mild.

Another way we've heard this perspective is through the common phrase, "the heart wants what the heart wants," as a sort of shrug and wink to unfettered expressions of desire. But the darker underbelly is exposed when we understand this phrase was uttered in an interview by Woody Allen when challenged to explain his relationship with his former adopted daughter.

I quoted C.S. Lewis a few weeks ago, and it's a statement that I think is quite appealing:

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*: "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."

The problem in the postmodern secular west is that we're so affluent that we haven't come to the end of our desires to know they things we're filling them with don't satisfy—it's a deep pit that where so many people are able to spend so much of their money and leisure time exploring the next new promise of fulfillment or enlightenment.

It's no wonder that with desire given to its extremes, some have sought refuge in an opposing worldview, that of minimizing our desires or seeking to eradicate them altogether.

Stoic philosophers a century earlier than Epicurus taught that the pursuit of ethics led to the most virtuous way of living. Logic and scientific study were valued, as well as overcoming all destructive emotions, in order to become a clear and unbiased thinker.

Greek philosophy isn't the only home to this kind of thought. Some Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, teach that complete detachment from feelings and desire are the path to fulfillment.

This mindset has also shown up in the church over time. You may have heard someone say, that our spirituality is about "faith, not feelings," resulting in a kind of tug-of-war competition between mental assent to truth and emotionally wellbeing.

Pete Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*: "Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality. Listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God. . . . Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry

that gives the heart a voice. . . . When we deny our pain, losses, and feelings year after year, we become less and less human. We transform slowly into empty shells with smiley faces painted on them. Sad to say, that is the fruit of much of our discipleship in our churches. But when I began to allow myself to feel a wider range of emotions, including sadness, depression, fear, and anger, a revolution in my spirituality was unleashed. I soon realized that a failure to appreciate the biblical place of feelings within our larger Christian lives has done extensive damage, keeping free people in Christ in slavery.”

Salvation isn't found in the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure, nor in the Stoic detachment from desire. Our salvation is in the Man who lived perfectly alive, full of feeling and restraint.

Transition: I hope this statement by Pastor Scazzero helps explain what understanding our emotions and desires have to do with God's presence.

SOLUTION

Because there is a great benefit in gaining perspective of our emotions and how we interact with God. In fact, I believe those with deeper understanding of their inner world are in the best possible posture to experience a greater awareness of God's presence. It seems those who are open to the full range of their emotions are also open to God's Spirit.

One of the reasons for this is that there's not a distinct delineation between head and heart from a biblical standpoint. In our Western world of thought we like to talk about how the rational, intellectual part of us is in our mind, and the feeling and emotional side of us is our heart. The Bible does use the word "heart," but to describe the seat of our consciousness where there's an overlap of what we have come to see as head and heart. Combined with this is the fact that we have a spirit where the Holy Spirit dwells and has quickened us to the reborn reality of God. All this to say, where spirit and head and heart are distinct and separate is quite a mystery, and all of those things are involved with discerning God's presence.

A second reason why we those attuned to their emotion are able to encounter God's presence is because they're able to see God as a Being with emotion just like them. Think about it: Where do you think you got your emotions? Are they just a byproduct of the Fall to complicate life? Or, perhaps, are they a part of our original design to enhance relationships? Corrupted and misaligned, for sure. But because we've been made in the

image and likeness of God himself, we've been given the gift of emotions, feelings, and desires to create the context for friendship with God and each other. Because God is love, he has made us to be objects of his love. And we have the capacity to receive it and respond to it as well.

Let's turn to a place in Scripture that will help us understand the reality of God's emotions, as well as some of the guidelines for how to respond to his love.

James 4:4-6 (NIV): Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

The author, James, is brother of Jesus, and this section of his letter is a stern rebuke towards teachers in the church who are tolerating sin in their midst. So, as we jump in, it may seem a bit harsh, but we have to remember that he is addressing deep divisions that threaten relational stability. He begins by telling them that aligning themselves with the world's value systems will take them out of fellowship with God and set them up for being correction. So James says they shouldn't be rejoicing, but should be grieving and mourning so they return fully in their hearts to God. We immediately see how an Epicurean hedonism that says indulge in all your desires is not the way of the kingdom.

The part I want to highlight is where James says God jealously longs for the spirit in us. It's a bit confusing, as well as it is intriguing: God jealously longs for us. As I stated earlier, God has deep, deep emotions. Our God is a God of emotions. His longing for connection and relationship for us is expressed throughout Scripture as jealously. He revealed himself to Moses and the Israelites the jealous God who commanded them to have no idols taken a primary place before him. His jealousy, though, is not to be confused with the kind of selfish narcissism that a jealous boyfriend has. "Jealousy" could also be better described by the word "zeal": God has a holy, loving zeal to see that you always get the best. And because God is love, goodness, beauty, and truth, he is the best that he has to offer. His zeal is committed to you so that you always experience his

best, his love. And anything that threatens overtaking you and removing love from your life, he has a commitment to challenge that and restore the relationship with you.

So, as we removed these obstacles to the relationship, God will share more of himself. It's not earning love, but it's love being expressed within proper boundaries. This has simply been known through Scripture and the history of God's people as holiness: Being like God more and more.

The next part of these verses is something of a promise: Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. This can also be taken as, Come close to God and he will share more of his presence with you. God has loved you first the letter of 1 John tells us, so that if you respond to that love by focusing your hearts affections toward him, that is irresistible. It's not that he can possibly love you more in doing this, but that he responds to you by sharing more of himself. It could be said that you can have as much of God as you want—his promise is to meet you as you reach out for him.

This is the case in any kind of relationship. If it's a friendship, you get to know someone more by exchanging vulnerabilities. You share a story, they share a story. You share a fear, they share a fear. You share a hope, they share a hope, and so on. To give away too much of yourself too soon is called oversharing. Part of the adventure of friendship is that there is a discovery in the back and forth of conversation, growing in trust and spending time together. God is just like that.

We see this longing and desire manifested in the life of Jesus. In John 17, we overhear Jesus praying for us just before he goes to the cross:

John 17:24-26 (NIV): “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Deep emotion, deep desire being poured out to his Father. Jesus is asking to be close to his followers and that all the dimensions of love the Father has for the Son would also dwell in us. That we would not just have an understanding of God's love for us, but that we would experience it for ourselves as well.

Transition: Two questions arise, then, about experiencing God's presence and love for ourselves:

APPLICATION

First, if it's true that God will draw near to us as we draw near to him, **how do we grow in our desire for God?** How do we take those steps toward him? Basically, my answer to this is that same as it's been in weeks past: Ask him. Turn your desire into a prayer and make it a conversation. Ask God to share more of his presence. Ask him to increase your love for him. And, as you do so, you'll realize over time how much hotter and brighter your love for God is.

Gerald Sittser, *Water From A Deep Well*: “Our best prayers are simply extended conversations with God about life as we live it from day to day in all of its sublime ordinariness. The routine of life presents us with a grand opportunity to learn how to pray, the world a laboratory to teach us to pray.”

To this, I would add, if you want to grow in desire for God, study his desire for you. There are numerous times in Scripture where God's holy desire is described, some of which we've covered here, and they exist as a breadcrumb trail to enflame our hearts in love. If you want to love God more, internalize the descriptions of his love for you.

The second question that arises is this: **How do we walk in greater submission to the Spirit?** As we've covered, God will share more of himself with someone who is responding to his love by removing every obstacle to it. Any true encounter with God that grows our desire for him will always result in us embracing greater surrender. Augustine of Hippo noted that the effect of sin in our lives is not that we have desires, but that our desires are disordered. The work of the Spirit in our lives is to reorient and right-size our desires so that love for God may be established in its proper place.

Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*: “Augustine...observed that the heart's loves have an order to them, and that we often love less important things more and the more important things less. Therefore, the unhappiness and disorder of our lives are caused by the disorder of our loves. A just and good person ‘is also a person who has [rightly] ordered his love, so that he does not love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, or love too much what should be loved less (or love too little what should be loved more).”

Here's how Pastor Bill Johnson explains it:

Bill Johnson, *Face To Face With God*: “We steward the presence of God by learning to obey the commands “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:30) and “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). We grieve Him when we

do something wrong; we quench Him when we fail to do what is right, stopping the flow of His love and power that comes from the Father. Jesus modeled what life could be like when a person neither grieves nor quenches the Holy Spirit.”

In order to yield to the work of the Spirit to bring about this work, we must like with a constant and persistent “Yes” to him in all that he reveals. And whatever nudge he gives us—some kind of forgiveness offered towards someone, a check on our behavior or attitude, whatever it is—we want our response to be quick. Just like parents want their own children to respond quickly to a request because we want what’s best for them, the Spirit desires quick and full obedience as he realigns our hearts to God’s love.

When these two things collide—deep desire and quick obedience—God’s presence is sure to follow.

CONCLUSION

Next Step:

- How might God be inviting me to open up my emotions to his Spirit? In what area(s) may I need to respond in surrender?

Prayer:

Numbers 6:24-26 (NIV): 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.