

A God's Eye View: Of You! Pt. 3
Sought Out
Isaiah 62: 2b, 12b; Ezekiel 34: 11-16

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Perhaps you've played a game like this at a party. If you could only choose one snack, would it be sweet or salty, sugar or grease? Or, which is your favorite on *Friends*: Monica, Rachel or Phoebe, and why? Or, if you're playing hide and seek, do you like to be the seeker or the hider? I don't think the answers to that one would be split very evenly. In my years of being a kid and having kids, hiding was clearly preferred. It's so fun to have people looking for you. And it's delicious when the seeker walks right by your hideaway and doesn't see you. When he looks in the closet where you're hiding but not under the blanket where you are. It's all you can do not to squeal with laughter. Later you'll trumpet your triumph: "Dude, you looked right at me!"

Of course all this assumes that the seeker is actually looking for you. I've told you often of my best neighborhood friend and frequent nemesis Dan Stewart. He was the oldest kid in our gang, so he called the shots. We used to have some massive hide and seek games across several yards. Dan almost never let me hide. But then, strangely, one evening he did. I'd been thinking about where I'd hide for quite a while. I ran to my secret place and tucked in. Minutes passed. Nobody found me. Man, this was great. But then I started wondering. Nobody's even been near me. It's starting to get dark. Wait a minute! They're not even looking for me. I went back to the home base where all the kids were waiting to laugh at me. "What took you so long to figure it out? Man, we fooled you!" Humiliating. I was so excited to be sought. So embarrassed to discover no one was looking for me. No one cared that I was not with the group. Their entertainment for the night.

The LORD's people in exile felt like that. Once they had been the apple of God's eye. His treasured possession. Called out of Egypt. Given the Law that was the envy of the nations. Led to the Promised Land. They built Jerusalem and thousands of pilgrims from around the world came every year to see the holy, beautiful city. They built the Temple where the LORD himself made his Name to dwell. The world sought out the LORD's people. God looked after them. And then it all went wrong. The Babylonians swooped in. They destroyed the Temple. Ransacked the city. Carried the people away to a life of servitude to vicious pagans. No one came to see their ruined city. No one cared about their God or their

Scriptures. They were exiled. A worldwide afterthought. A discardable people. Nothing attractive about them anymore.

For Israel in exile, the phone never rang. No invitation to parties. No suitors knocking on the door. They were damaged goods. Ugly ducklings. The last chosen for kick ball. Forgettable people. Invisible foreigners whose function was serving the privileged. Discardable when no longer useful.

We know the feeling. When we're no longer defined by our work. Because we got laid off. Or retired. Or switched to a job with no prestige. When we got dumped. Taken advantage of. Swindled. Divorced. Raped. Passed over. When we no longer look like we used to. We got sick. We got old. We lost our spark. When we did something or failed to do something and we just can't face people anymore. When we lost our faith and didn't know what to say to believers anymore. When we just took a wrong turn and got lost and we don't know how to get home, or even what home would look like anymore. In a million ways we can get exiled. And feel like no one is looking for us. And we're not sure we want them to. No one is seeking our company. And we've gotten used to staying lost. We have no appeal. And we're pretty sure this is exactly how God views us too.

The hope in Isaiah's prophecy, however is that though we may feel utterly lost, we have *not* been abandoned. No matter how far the town of our life seems to have fallen off the map, God seeks to renew us. He has for us a better place. This exile does not have the last word. The LORD our God desires to bring us, to bring the whole world, home to a joy and a glory we have scarcely imagined. To those in exile, who feel lost and unhomed, the word comes from God, "I am looking for you. I am seeking you. I know how to get you back home."

So it was that at the uttermost reaches of their exile in Babylon, a new name came to God's people on the winds of the Spirit: "...you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken" (62: 12). This was the thin thread of promise which tethered the people to a future that would lead them home. They were not forgotten. God would find his ruined children and bring them back to Jerusalem. Lostness need not be our permanent state. Loneliness will be filled with the arrival of the One who seeks us. They would rebuild the city, more glorious than before. They would restore the land to fertility and their children would flourish. Life would be renewed.

The word of the LORD to all of us in any form of exile is, "You shall be called Sought Out". Those who believe they are far from the life they envisioned may hear the news that actually God is looking for them.

Ezekiel, another prophet of Isaiah's time, said this through the picture of the LORD as the shepherd. "For thus says the LORD GOD: "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..." (Ez. 34: 11, 15). In other words, God promised to go on a search and rescue mission for his lost children. He would not stop until he found them and brought them safely home.

In the New Testament, we see clearly revealed in Jesus this essential seeking quality of God. John writes, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (I John 4: 9). As we consider the life of Jesus, we see how he continually viewed people as Sought Out.

After his loving invitation converted the dishonest tax collector Zacchaeus, Jesus explained, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19: 10). Jesus came to bring us home from exile. He came to find us when we thought we were forsaken, and restore us to a flourishing life. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus compared his Father to a shepherd who will leave ninety-nine sheep exposed in the wilderness while he goes off to seek one that is lost. "And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing" (Lk. 15: 5). God's seeking love knows no bounds.

Then in John 10, Jesus identified himself with the good shepherd of Ezekiel's prophecy. He described how the activity of naming which goes with seeking. He said, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10: 3, 11, 27-8). The shepherd calls us by name. His voice reaches us in a deep place. We feel that he knows our essential identity. As he calls each of us by a name that echoes in us as who we really are and were meant to be, we realize that he is constantly naming us Sought Out.

The tenderness of this shepherding love is evoked in Henry Williams Baker's famous hymn "The King of Love My Shepherd Is". He writes:

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,

And home, rejoicing, brought me.

The news that we are sought ends the fear that we are abandoned, and the worry that God's anger will strike us. When we know ourselves as sought and found, we learn the comfort of riding home on the shepherd's shoulders. We feel the joy God has in being with us.

I can remember going to a boat show with my father as a young child. There was a huge crowd of people looking at all the displays. I remember turning around and seeing what I thought was my father's pants leg. I walked over and grabbed the trousers. But when I looked up to the face attached to those pants, I saw only a stranger. The whole world changed. I didn't know what to do. The room seemed so much bigger than it had only a moment ago. I was lost.

Then I heard my name called, and my father came out of the crowd to take my hand. He hadn't forgotten me for a second. He was seeking me as soon as we were separated. What seemed like hours of lostness to me was actually less than a minute. I felt such relief at being found. I had not realized before how contented I was to be with my father in that large convention center. It was his presence, in fact, which made the difference between a dangerous, disconcerting hour and an afternoon of shared adventure and excitement.

The hope in God's calling us Sought Out is that we are never separated from his providential care and love. As long as we draw breath, we are not ever completely lost, because God always knows where we are. Our Lord is always looking for us, always calling us home. In reply, he wants us to come out of exile and come home to him.

When I was a youth and young adult's pastor, the game Sardines was always popular. It's a variation of hide and seek. One person hides and all the others seek. If you find the hider, the game is not over. In Sardines, you join the hider in the hiding place. And so does everyone else who finds you, until there is only one seeker who comes upon the whole group sandwiched together with no social distancing in a tiny place.

Once on a young adults retreat, I got to be the first hider in Sardines. I found a great place. So great that 30 minutes later, no one had found me. They were seeking me, but I wasn't letting them find me. So the game could not continue. They finally got frustrated and had to quit. We had a big discussion later about how I, as the

leader, had totally messed up the game. Several years later at my farewell party, the group gave me a plaque that said, "The goal of the game is to get found!"

That's a strong word to those of us in exile. God seeks your company. He knows where you are. And he wants to bring you home. But you've got to be willing to let him find you. We can be exiled so long that we don't even want to be found. We just want to stay diminished and alone. It's going to be hard for some of us to come out of lockdown. That's a spiritual hazard. God's view of you is this: You are Sought Out. I came to seek and save the lost. So get the point of why I came to you as Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior. The goal of life is to get found! I seek you and I see you. Won't you come to me?

Prayer: Can you feel God seeking you now? Can you hear the Lord calling? I hear God's voice like this:

"I have not abandoned you. Though your good health may have forsaken you, I have not. Those whom you love may have left you, but I did not. Your plans may have been thwarted, your vision marred, your dreams dashed. But I am still here, and I have a vision for your life greater than you can yet imagine. Your faith may have left you, but I have not. Your belief in me may have withered, but my love for you still flourishes. I am seeking you, calling you by name. You are desirable to me. I want you to be with me. Your presence matters to me; your life affects mine. I am seeking you because I want you. You are as precious to me as my own life. You are Sought Out."

Portions of this sermon originally appeared in my book: *Called by a New Name: Becoming What God Has Promised* (Lenoir, NC: Reformation Press, 2007).