

My favorite sport is wrestling. I absolutely love it. When I say wrestling I don't mean Hulk Hogan smashing a chair over Andre the Giant's head. I mean real wrestling. The kind you see in the Olympics. One of the reasons why I love wrestling so much is because nothing has transcended time and culture the way wrestling has. Humans have been wrestling since we figured out we have the ability to wrap our arms around each other.

From the stone age, to ancient Egypt, to the Mongol Empire, to Victorian London, to southern Indiana in 2019, every single group of people who has ever existed has wrestled. We may have different rules and call it different things; freestyle, folkstyle, catch as catch can, lute livre, majapahit, sambo, judo, jiu-jitsu, dombinga, the list goes on and on. As humans, wrestling is in our DNA.

Another reason why I love wrestling is because wrestlers are just a different kind of human being. They love being the most miserable person in the room. When a wrestler shows up to competition he wants to be the hungriest guy on the mats. When a wrestler leaves practice he wants to be the sorest guy stepping off the mat. When other athletes go home to relax, a wrestler knows his work isn't finished. He monitors every piece of food that goes into his mouth, he day dreams about headlocks, he beats himself up over mistakes he made years ago that no one noticed other than him.

Wrestlers embrace the grind. They take pride in their sacrifices and they wear their suffering as a badge of honor. One wrestler who did this better than anyone was a man from Waterloo Iowa. Dan Gable. Dan Gable competed during the 60's and 70's and won everything there is to win in wrestling. NCAA championships, world championships, Olympic gold medals. He was so special that even people who didn't know wrestling could see it. He just had this vibrato about him and an unblemished record to back it up. One time a reporter asked him what the secret to his success was. He replied "I only do one thing, and I don't let anything distract me from it".

I have no doubt that it was this sense of focus that took him to the top of his game and made him one of the greatest to ever do it. But I can't help wondering what it did to the rest of his life. How did his family and friends feel about being relegated to second place? What about his values, his health, and all the other areas of his life? It's good to have a sense of focus, but surely it's even better to focus on the *right things*.

I wonder what *your* focus is? What's the main thing in your life? What's the thing you're prepared to make sacrifices for, the thing you wake up in the night thinking about? One of my favorite writers Charles Bukowski once asked "Do you wonder what your personal ideal is? Ask yourself, where your money, your thoughts, and spare time go. That you schmuck, is your ideal."

Here's another way of looking at it. If you could ask God for one thing, with the sure and certain knowledge that you would get it, what would it would be? Health for you and your family members? A million dollars? Long life?

Our psalm for today was Psalm 27. In this psalm the writer tells us what he asked of the Lord. Listen to these words from verse 4:

*“ One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple. ”*

To the people of Israel, the temple, or ‘house of the Lord’, was the place above all where the Lord was present. If you wanted to be absolutely sure that you would meet God, the temple was the place to go. So we could translate the psalmist’s prayer as a request that he would always live in God’s presence and under his guidance.

I want to suggest to you this morning that this should be our greatest desire as Christians, to seek God’s presence, and to submit to his guidance.

But why? Why should this be our greatest desire? What's in it for us? And how would we go about achieving it?" Let's think about each of these questions in turn.

First, **why should this be our greatest desire?**

A few years ago in South America a small aircraft carrying a young American missionary couple was shot down by a fighter plane. It was a communication error, and the pilot of the plane and the young couple paid for the error with their lives. This is the kind of world we live in; our lives are shot through with grief and trouble. And that's one of the main reasons for us to seek the presence of God. In verse 5 the psalmist says 'For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble'.

But we have to be careful about this. It seems clear to me as I read Psalm 27 that the writer expected God to *rescue* him from the day of trouble. I think it was some sort of military trouble; perhaps he was facing an enemy army and the odds were stacked against him. Look at verses 5-6:

"For in the day of trouble

he will keep me safe in his dwelling;

he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent

and set me high upon a rock.

Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the LORD”

It seems pretty clear to me that the psalmist had prayed to God to rescue him from his enemies, and his prayer had been answered exactly as he had asked: he had won the battle, and his head had been lifted up above his enemies all around him. And isn't it wonderful when that kind of thing happens? You're facing major surgery and you ask God to bring you through it, and he does! You're facing a family difficulty, and you ask God to help you sort it out, and pretty soon everyone's happy again! You're facing a financial crisis and the crisis is averted, and everything's okay.

Those are wonderful times, and we thank God for them. But of course, we're also painfully aware that God doesn't always seem to give the answer we desire, and often we don't know why that is. In the New Testament we read that Paul prayed for sick people to be healed, and many times they were! And yet he himself had some sort of illness. He calls it 'his thorn in the flesh' and even though he prayed three

times to be delivered from it, he never was. 'My grace is sufficient for you', God said to him, 'for power is made perfect in weakness' And Paul goes on to say,

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong".

So yes, God will hide us in his shelter in the day of trouble. Sometimes that 'hiding' will take the form of rescuing us from the trouble. Sometimes it will take the form of giving us the courage and strength we need to go through the trouble in the knowledge that God is by our side. We don't always feel this in an obvious way; sometimes what happens is that after the trouble has passed we look back and think, "Wow, I never thought I'd make it through that! I guess Someone must have been looking out for me!"

I wonder what your 'Day of Trouble' is this morning? A debilitating disease that has unexpectedly invaded your life? The loss of a loved one? Disappointments and worries about your children? Loneliness? The fear of one thing or another?

Grief and difficulty, you see, aren't interruptions of normal life; they *are* normal life. And we are not adequate to deal with these difficulties by ourselves. Only with God

at the center of our lives can we face these storms. And this is one of the main reasons why we seek God's presence: without God, we have no chance.

We go on to ask, **"What do we hope to gain from this? What's in it for me?"** On the face of it this seems like an irreverent question. It sounds as if we're evaluating God as consumers rather than approaching him as loving children! And yet David isn't shy about mentioning the benefits of living in God's presence in this passage. Let me point out two of them for you.

The first is **salvation**. In verse 1 we read *'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?'* To the Old Testament people, 'salvation' meant primarily being *saved from your enemies*. One reason why they were so afraid when they lost battles was that they thought it was a sign that God was angry with them! But for us Christians, salvation has a different focus: it means being saved from our greatest enemies: the power of sin and evil, especially the sin and evil in our own hearts.

Years ago when I first became the youth director I came across a book by a man named Francis Spufford; it's called *Unapologetic*, and the subtitle is *Why, despite everything, Christianity still makes surprising emotional sense*. The first chapter is about sin, but he makes the point that the word 'sin' has lost a lot of its meaning for us today: we associate it primarily with things like fornication and over indulgence in chocolate! So he suggested a substitute phrase to make clear what we're talking

about. His substitute phrase includes a swear word that I'm not going to use but I'm sure you can guess what it is if I call it 'the Human Propensity to Mess Things Up!' or to "goof up" that's as close to the swear word as I'm going to go!

We all recognize this, don't we? We have this uncanny ability to do the stupid thing, the selfish thing, the hurtful thing, over and over again! Most of us can look back on the path of our lives and see all the people we've managed to hurt along the way, and all the situations we've made worse, not better. This is what we need help with! This is what we need 'salvation' from.

A Christian man whose family life was in a shambles once went away for a weekend retreat at which he discovered the presence of God in a new way, and committed his life to Jesus. A few weeks after he returned from the retreat his son came into his room one evening and asked, "Dad, what happened to you? You're completely different!" The man said "Well, I realized that I wasn't doing a very good job in my life, and someone told me that if I gave my life to Jesus he would help me to make a better job of it, so I did". After a moment's silence the boy said "Do you think I could give my life to Jesus too?" That's the kind of thing we mean when we use the word 'salvation'.

The second benefit the psalmist mentions is **guidance in living**. In verse 11 we read 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path'. We seek God, in other

words, because we want to know the best way to live our lives. There are so many different theories and philosophies of life, but surely it's wise to assume that God the Creator knows the best ones! And so seeking his face involves seeking his will and submitting to his guidance. This is not a sad and solemn thing. Rather, it means learning the way of life which will bring the greatest peace and contentment in our Creator's world.

And really, why wouldn't we want to do that? One of the phrases we've learned from the business world is "Your current system is perfectly designed to produce the results you're getting!" That hurts! Of course, it hides the fact that in many cases we haven't intentionally designed our current system; we've arrived at it by accident, by a series of passive choices that we didn't really think about. But now it's our system, and it's producing the results we're getting.

So how's our life system working? How's our plan for daily living working for us? Is it producing positive, life-giving results, or is it only contributing to our Human Propensity to Goof Things Up? If we're not satisfied with this, surely it makes sense to go to God and ask for wisdom to learn a better way. 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path'. And this is exactly what we're promised in Scripture. Psalm 119 says 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path'; in other words, God's word will illuminate our life's journey, guiding us about the direction

we should take. And we Christians hear that word of God most clearly in Jesus. He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”.

So we’ve seen the benefits of seeking God’s presence. There is the sheer joy of knowing and being connected with the Creator of the universe. Then there is the experience of salvation from sin, of having someone to turn to in times of trouble, and of being guided and taught the best way to live.

One last question: **How do we achieve this desire of ours?** Well, we can say for sure that it isn’t a matter of techniques or theories; it’s about our love for our Creator God. And again, as Christians we know that seeking God involves seeking Jesus. As Jesus himself said: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”

At the end of Psalm 27 the writer says ‘Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord’. This is the heart of the matter. Be prepared to *wait patiently* until you get what you desire above all else. Don’t be in a hurry. Don’t be satisfied with cheap thrills and quick fixes. Go to God in prayer day by day; tell him that you want him above all else, that you’re willing to do anything he asks and go to any length so you can have this blessing. That is the kind of focus that will delight the heart of God, and in time you will begin to notice his answer to that

prayer. When that begins to happen, you won't need a goof up like me to give you techniques for getting closer to God. More and more, you will find yourself experiencing God's presence in your own life, and all the blessings the psalmist speaks about here will be your blessings too.

Does that sound like one of those unrealistic easy answers? It isn't meant to sound like that. My aunt was a birdwatcher, and I spent a lot of time with her growing up, so unassumingly I picked up a few things. Prayer is a bit like birdwatching. Birdwatching requires masses of patience. Sometimes birdwatchers sit for hours and see nothing. A lot of people give up early, and so they don't see anything interesting. I have to confess that I've often been one of those people; I'm not a patient birdwatcher. But those who are patient tell me that, if you're in the right place and if you wait long enough, sooner or later something interesting will happen. There will be the hint of a song or the flash of color, and suddenly you'll find yourself looking at something beautiful.

Prayer is like that too. We may go for long periods of time without much sense of God's presence. We may only be praying out of obedience, nothing more; we're not experiencing much else. We may feel like birdwatchers, sitting in the rain seeing nothing!

Well, carry on sitting, and carry on waiting! The psalmist says again, ‘Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord’. The one who quits early will not see the flash of color. They won’t catch that hint of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It’s the one who *continues* to pray, continues to wait quietly in God’s presence, and *keeps on* doing that, day after day, year after year – that’s the person who will find the sense of God’s presence growing on them, slowly, almost imperceptibly, until one day they wake up and realize that it’s become the permanent backdrop of their lives.

May that be true for all of us.

Amen.