

The Hound of Heaven: *Search and Rescue*

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

*Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

*But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat -- and a voice beat
More instant than the Feet --*

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

So writes Francis Thompson in his famous poem about God's pursuit of the human family. The life of John Newton (1725-1807), pastor and lyricist for the best-known hymn of all time, "Amazing Grace," serves as a great illustration of God's pursuing love. Born to a merchant mariner father and a spiritually devout mother, Newton fled from God with such determination that his journey away from God left him blind, lost, and enslaved to an African queen off the coast of Sierra Leone. Newton recounts the many ways that God intervened throughout his life while he avoided and resisted him. His conversion was the result of a horrible storm at sea. Afterward, he wrote in his journal how God finally got through to him in the midst of the storm and through a gracious deliverance. Newton forever praised God for his goodness and faithfulness in pursuing him.

Journey Together:

1. What are some of the steps that God has taken to get through to you?
2. In what ways have you creatively avoided him?
3. When did you first notice God's pursuit of you?

Note: *Our first glimpse in the Bible of God's persistent pursuit of us is in the Creation/Fall story, in which God comes searching for the first man and woman following their disobedience. When Adam and Eve do not come to meet him at their daily rendezvous, God calls out to them, "Where are you?" Our disobedience and rebellion from God precludes us from running after him.*

Fear, sense of inferiority, and self-absorption keep us locked away in a kind of spiritual prison. God is always the one taking the first step toward us.

Jesus illustrates God's persistent love even further in the three parables of grace in Luke 15: the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Son. The Pharisees and Scribes and their surprise about Jesus' acceptance of tax collectors and sinners who were drawing near to him serve as the backdrop for these three stories. Not only does Jesus not draw away from these outcasts, he goes even further to demonstrate God's persistent pursuit of them like we might search for lost money or a family pet. In the final story, Jesus portrays God as the running father eager to welcome home his recalcitrant son.

What do these stories tell us about God's deep love and faithfulness toward us? When did you first experience God's faithful persistence in your life?

Roadmap: John 6:22-70. This passage reminds us how God is pursuing all of us in Jesus, the Living Bread come down from God.

1. How is bread a good metaphor of God's sustaining life? What comparisons does Jesus make with himself and God's gift of manna in the wilderness? How is Jesus the "true" bread come down from God to feed the world?
2. It looks like the people are seeking Jesus, but in truth Jesus is approaching them with the real sustaining life (living bread) of God. Have you ever thought you were searching for God, only to find that it was really the other way around?
3. Describe God's pursuit of you. In what way is he pursuing you right now?
4. Jesus called for a decision from those who were following him. Many left when challenged by it. The disciples, however, sealed their commitment to Jesus. What about you? Do you see yourself moving toward God's pursuing love or away from it? Why?
5. Take some time to read again and meditate on the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The real message in this story is that both sons are lost or fail to understand the Father's love for them. What's keeping them from their father? One son rebelled and left home. The other lived in a kind of rebellion in spite of never leaving his father's side. Which son do you most identify with? Why? Is there anything keeping you from the Father right now? What more must God do to convince you of his love other than sending Jesus to live, die, and be raised again for you?
6. How can this group pray for you?

My Journey: For further study, check out Song of Songs 2:9-13; John 15:16 and John 6. These passages continue to illustrate God's patient pursuit.

1. How has God used *Journey* in your life and witness this week?
2. What do these additional Scripture references tell you about God's faithful persistence?
3. Do you see yourself moving toward God's pursuit of you or away from it, and why do you think that is so?
4. How can this group pray for you right now?

Backstory: So far we have seen that God knows us intimately, completely, and watching over us as a shepherd watches and cares for his sheep. This week, we see that it is God's deep and faithful love that moves him to search for us. The bring-it-home lesson in this week's study is that our lost state is so great that someone has to go in search of us. These stories correspond to both groups that God is searching for – (tax collectors and sinners) or (Scribes and Pharisees). Both groups are represented in the stories. The lost sheep wandered off (prodigal son). The missing coin is lost inside the house (older son). However, both are equally lost and in need of a caring God to search for them. The message of the Bible is that we are not finding God. God is making his way to us, and has found us in the person of his Son.

This is the same story in John 6, where Jesus feeds the Five Thousand. This miracle is reminiscent of the bread of heaven (manna) sent by God in feeding his people throughout their wilderness wandering. Just as God provided for the Israelites back then, so Jesus is the real Bread of Life come down from God out of heaven. The problem in John 6 is that the people are not seeing who Jesus really is. Just like the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 15, they do not understand their great need of Jesus. They want to use Jesus and accept him only on their terms. If he is the Messiah, then he should not be hanging out with these people. If he is the Messiah, then he should perform this miracle and provide bread every day. It's the same idea. We want God to be like this or to do this thing for us – but not to be our Lord and Savior. But God is who he is and will not be deterred from his mission of seeking and saving those who are lost. Both the feeding of the Five Thousand and hanging out with tax collectors and sinners are indicators of who Jesus really is, since the work of the Messiah was to bring good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, and proclaim freedom to the captives (Isa. 61: 1-4). He had not come to work miracles or to be a pawn of the religious establishment. Jesus was on a mission to seek and save lost boys (Luke 19:10).

God is pursuing us for salvation. The end of Chapter 6 is most compelling. After drawing a line in the sand between him and the miracle seekers who only

want him while he provided them with more bread, Jesus asks the disciples a hard question: "You don't want to leave too do you?" To which Peter replies, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67-69). This is the only appropriate response to God's loving pursuit of us: Where else can we go? Jesus is the only one who can provide life from above.