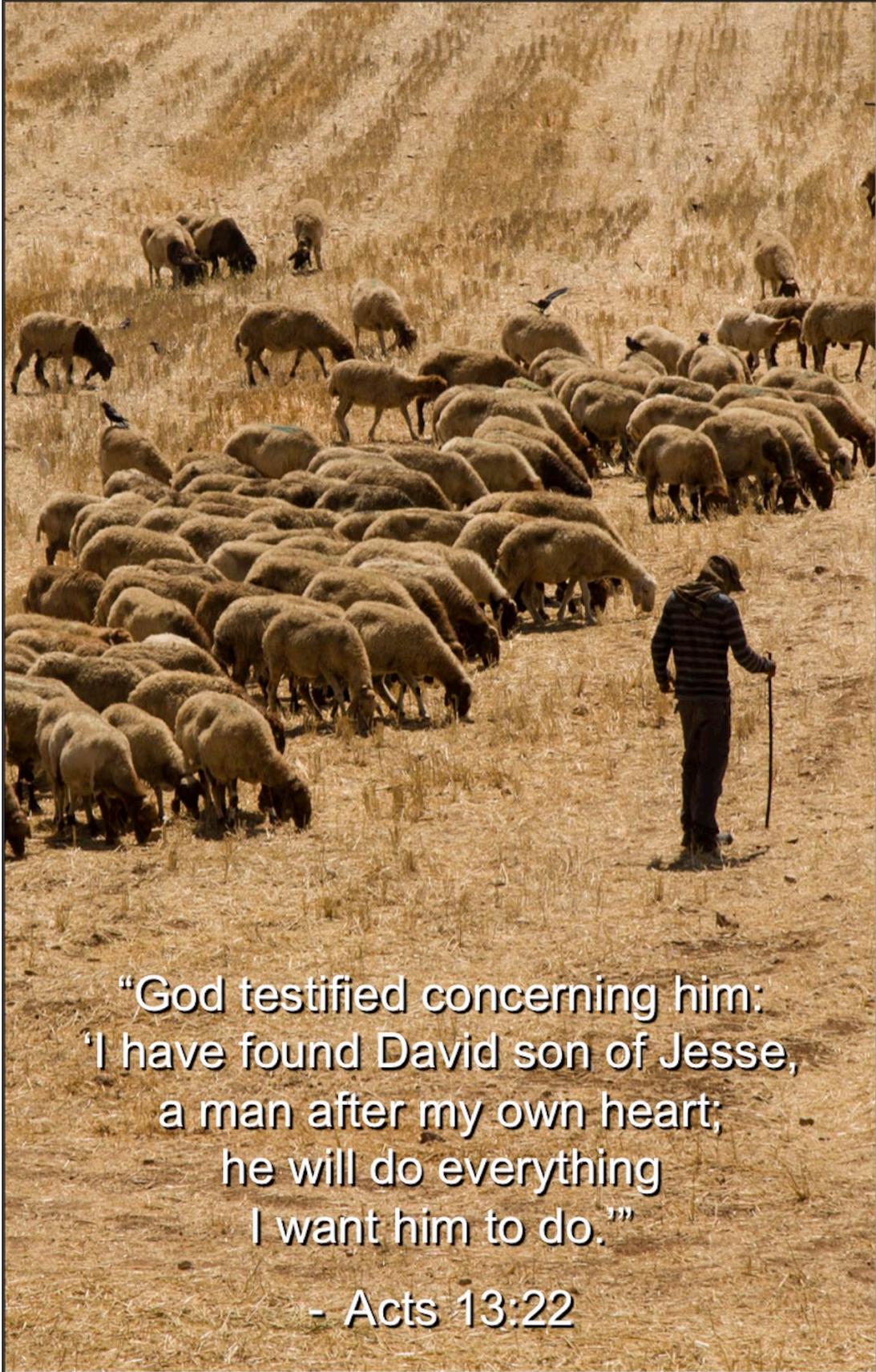


The
SEARCH
FOR GOD'S
OWN HEART

*How imperfect people can earn
the most treasured title of all*



“God testified concerning him:
‘I have found David son of Jesse,
a man after my own heart;
he will do everything
I want him to do.’”

- Acts 13:22

The Search for God's Own Heart, Second Edition
How Imperfect People Can Earn the Most Treasured Title of All!

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For Summer,
Melinda and
Courtney,
daughters after
God's own heart.

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BACK TO ELAH

The first time I saw the Valley of Elah, I pulled our excited guide over to the side and asked, "Level with me. Do you think this is really the place?"

Her name was Joni, and by and large, she's not an angry person. Animated? Always. Angry? Never.

We hadn't planned on stopping in the middle of nowhere and tromping into the edge of a massive valley. But Joni had picked up on the nature of our group, and she knew we'd like to touch some dirt that belonged to the Bible.

So the tour bus had come to a sudden stop. We piled out, crossed the busy highway, jumped a guardrail and walked a short distance to a stone-laced creek bed.

Joni insisted this was where David had taken down Goliath.

Travel in Israel long enough, and you'll understand why I doubted her claim. Not every church marking "the place" is actually built over The Place, if you catch my meaning.

There wasn't even a church in this valley. There were no T-shirt vendors selling cheap souvenirs. There wasn't even an roadside sign marking the spot. If this was where the giant fell, shouldn't someone be selling ice cream?

So I asked her the question, out of earshot of all my travelers. I didn't want any of them to be disappointed if the rocks they were lugging back to the bus weren't really David-and-Goliath stones.

Instantly, a fire burned in Joni's eyes. In stark contrast to the quiet question I had asked, her answer echoed off the ancient hills.

"Of course it is!" she shouted. By this time, she was pointing in several directions at one time. Somehow she was also managing to simultaneously show me the words of 1 Samuel 17. "Look!" she shouted. "That's Azekah. That's Socoh. This is the Valley of Elah. This is Judah. We're at Ephes Dammim. Yes, this is the place!"

Obviously, Joni was a believer.

Secretly, I still wondered if it could be true.

However, in the years since I first wrote this book, the Valley of Elah has thrown its dust over my Bible, too. I've climbed the hills of Azekah, Socoh and the ruins of what is apparently Shaaraim, the double-gated city overlooking the valley.

Actually, when the first edition of this book was published, and when Joni first took me to Elah, Shaaraim was still hidden beneath the hard Israeli soil! It was apparently a thriving city when Saul and his troops cowered there in the face of Goliath. Now, for the first time in more than 2,500 years, you can walk the streets of

Shaaraim, too.¹

Just don't cower there. In this story, you want to be David. Not Saul.

From Shaaraim and Azekah, you can spot Tel Gath in the distance. That's where Goliath lived. Not all that far away is Bethlehem's Old City and plenty of nearby shepherd's fields. Watching young shepherds today, it's easy to picture David leading a flock 3,000 years ago.

When his father asked him to check on his brothers, David left the sheep and headed for the battlefield. The Valley of Elah lies in between Bethlehem and Gath, exactly where it should be, according to the Bible's record. Thanks to modern-day archeology, we're more sure that Goliath fell in this particular valley than ever before.

Joni was right. It's the place.

There's even a creek bed in the bottom of the valley, a rain-washed ditch stocked with baseball-sized stones. Centuries ago, one of those stones was just right for a shepherd's sling, flying toward Goliath like a well-placed fastball.

Of course, you don't have to stand in the Valley of Elah to know the fear David must have had as he searched for five stones in that creek bed. You don't have to travel anywhere to know the terror of going forward in faith when you've got no other armor.

All you really need in order to know David's fear is an enemy. No doubt, you've faced a few enemies already. No doubt, there are more enemies to come. Whether it's disease, depression, grief or an actual person, these "giants" can overwhelm us with fear. They use doubt as a weapon. They are loud and brash and insulting. They'll always have more weapons than we do.

But if you'll face your fear by trusting the God who cares for you, you'll learn incredible lessons about the search for God's heart.

These are lessons I'm still learning.

Why wouldn't that be the case? Shouldn't each year teach us something new about how to have a genuine relationship with God?

In this case, nearly 20 years have passed since the manuscript for the first publication of this book was written. The gray hair on my head at least gives me the appearance of being smarter than I was back then, so let's just let that illusion stand.

Maybe I am wiser. Since I last visited these lessons, our children have grown up, left home and begun returning with spouses and children of their own. Adding two more decades of marriage and family life has surely taught me something about

¹ Khirbet Qeiyafa, the "Elah Fortress" was uncovered in 2007. While archeologists are still debating what the find means, the six-acre city clearly has two gates, a rarity among cities of that era. Shaaraim means "two gates" and is mentioned in 1 Samuel 17:52 as landmarks from the David-and-Goliath story.

life! In addition, I've had the incredible privilege of walking with a group of committed Christ-followers through it all. This has expedited the things I've learned about loving God.

There's also the benefit of reading the Bible every day for another 20 or so years. When I first opened these pages, I had the vague idea that every major player in the text was something of a hero. Wouldn't all the kings of God's people be good guys? Wouldn't every priest leading worship be godly?

That's not the message of the Bible. That's not the reality of life, either. And that is the point of this book.

Anyone can claim to know God. Anyone can appear to be religious. Anyone can keep a fairly clean record with the local sheriff. At the very least, most people can take solace in not being quite as bad as the inmate one cell over.

In the Bible, only a few people qualify to be a person with a heart that searches for God's heart.

David did. Saul did not.

Jonathan was such a person. Hannah made the grade.

Samuel did, too, but his sons did not. Eli and his sons did not. Some of David's children did not.

By the end of our lives, there will be a blanket judgment on you and me, too. We will have either searched for and found God's own heart, or we will have missed the mark. Pull this off, and I think it might be the greatest thing that could ever be said of you. Isn't it amazing that such a title is still available for people as imperfect as us?

The longer I live, the more I've realized that I've got a long way to go in this spiritual journey. But even as we struggle on, there is a rich reward simply for trying to reach our destination.

By God's grace, we've been invited to search for His heart despite the very imperfect nature of our own searching hearts. Jeremiah once offered this word from the Lord: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."²

It's a 24/7 invitation. It's always there. It's waiting, even now, as a promise waiting to be fulfilled. The only thing more amazing than the invitation from God for us to find Him is the reality that so few of us ever get on with the search.

David was one who searched. But don't think for a minute that he was perfect. David's heart could wander away from his purpose almost as fast as my heart can. And yet he stands as an unforgettable example of righteousness. So imperfect, so passionate, so flawed ... and so committed to finding the heart of God.

This is the kind of person I want to be. Like David, I've done a lot of things I wish I'd never done. Because of God's amazing grace, I'm still invited to search for

² Jeremiah 29:13, emphasis added.

God's heart despite the flaws.

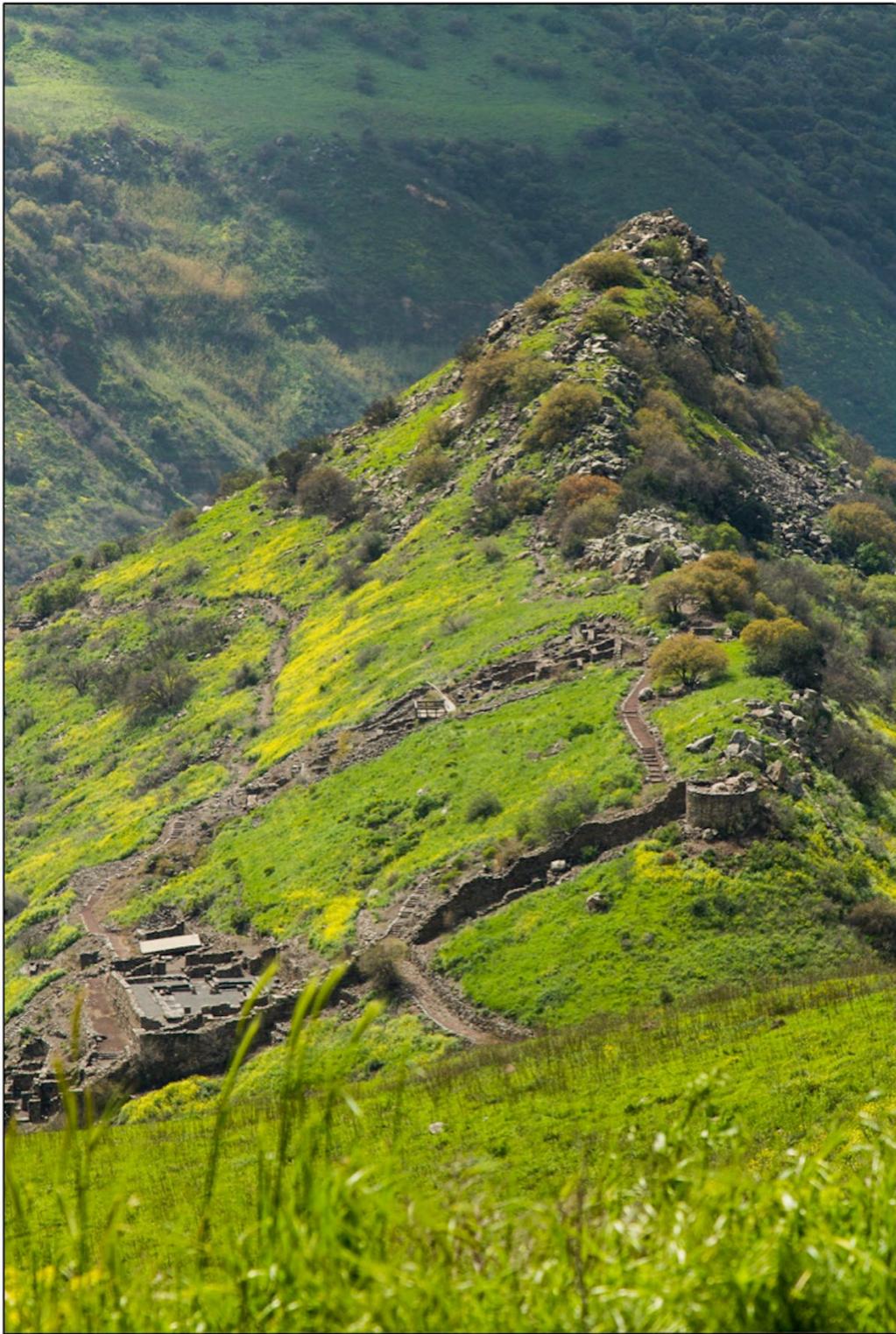
You are, too, of course.

So join me. The search for God's own heart can start for anyone, in any place, at any time. This is as good a time and place as you'll ever get. You can't go back and start in your past, and if you put this off until tomorrow, you might very well never get there.

"Seek," Jesus once said, "and you will find. ... For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."³

Search ... and I think you'll be surprised.

³ Matthew 7:7-8.



THE SEARCH BEGINS

With only a little trouble, I could take you to some of the places where my search for God's own heart began. We would take a scenic drive to the other side of Asheville, North Carolina, where thick rows of mountains lean upon each other as they fill the Appalachian sky. Many, many summers ago, it was a majestic scene for a boy from the flatlands of Middle Georgia, and it looked like a place where someone might find a few answers to life's questions.

I had several questions for God. Life was changing fast and I needed answers.

The old Bible stories indicated God liked the mountains. Moses and Elijah searched for God on the peaks ... and there they found Him! Come to think about it, it was Moses and Elijah who would later meet Jesus in what we call the "Transfiguration." Where did they meet Jesus? Sure enough ... the tallest mountain in Israel.

So maybe that's why I instinctively sought God by climbing the mountains around me.

I was 18, and there was a lot going on down in the valley. College was already in progress. An unfocused career was three years away. Eight hours away from the mountains was a young woman who might be my wife.

Was she the right one? Was my career direction on the right path? Would I ever be able to overcome the temptations that kept setting up roadblocks on the path I knew I should be taking?

These were important issues. Maybe the world wasn't holding its breath waiting on God to give direction to a skinny kid on top of an Appalachian ridge, but I was. I desperately wanted to know what God wanted me to do.

I'll bet you've had some questions for God, too. It wouldn't surprise me if you have some questions now. Whatever the case, when the questions belong to you, the answers are extremely important.

You'll do whatever it takes to find those answers.

This is the search for God's heart.

I went to the top of the mountains around me, over and over again. I climbed the peaks during the morning, the afternoon, and at night. If I had the time, I'd climb. God didn't post office hours, so I looked for Him every hour of the day. How I hoped God would break His tradition and His silence and lay out a plan for me. I wanted a blueprint I could read, a road map I could understand, or a Voice I could hear.

Like generations before me, I was disappointed. On top of each mountain I climbed, the clouds by day and the stars by night proclaimed God's majesty with unceasing praise.

God, on the other hand, didn't breathe a word to me.

As frustrating as it was, I was learning some difficult truths about my Maker. God can be found, but the search takes an entire lifetime. God can be heard, but His voice is so quiet, silence and stillness are the only entrances into His chamber. You

can find direction for life, but the journey is difficult.

This frustrating search is nothing new. Centuries ago, another young man asked God for direction in his life. Because his story is recorded in the Bible, his search has inspired us for the past 3,000 years. I like to remind myself that David was once a teen-ager trapped in a going-nowhere job and climbing hills on a mountain range of his own. Eventually, David's life would be the stuff of great drama. In just a few years, he would be recognized as a national hero and a world leader. He would marry well, find wealth, and become the most admired man of his generation. Centuries after his death, David is still one of the most admired men in history.

But at the very beginning, long before he was famous, David was learning the same lesson of faith I had to learn. Maybe you're learning it now. Ready for a quick summary of Faith 101?

God doesn't give step-by-step plans for anyone's life.

It doesn't matter if you're David the Future King, or You the Future You. The journey will be marked with difficulties, surprises, and uncertainties. If you're fortunate, you'll get a few instructions from God that are crystal clear and unmistakable.

But brace yourself. If you get such an instruction, it will probably terrify you.

To make matters worse, David made a world of mistakes. Unless I miss my guess, you've made a few mistakes along the way, too.

Up there on the mountains of North Carolina? I was already starting out most of my prayers with an apology, and a meek prayer of repentance for what I'd done wrong. Hate to admit it, but I'm an expert in sin.

Been there. Regretted that.

This, too, is a reason to read David's story. Maybe you need to discover that David the Sinner was also David the Forgiven. His sin was great. His pain was great. His shame was great, and his plea for another chance is a model for how to come back into fellowship with the God who desperately wants that fellowship.

Oh, what a great man David turned out to be! Centuries have passed, and we're still talking about Israel's greatest king. Why? The most prolific writer in the New Testament said it was because David was a man who searched for God's heart.⁴

But never forget the faith in the beginning of this process. David wasn't rewarded with a great relationship with God after he'd beaten Goliath and become the king ... he was inside a vibrant faith relationship before all that happened!

It's almost too simple. When answers to his questions were still a lifetime

⁴ About 1,000 years after David lived, Paul said this: "After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'" (Acts 13:22)

away, David was simply a teen-ager searching for God's will. Ironically, this search for God made David a rare find. Even today, people who honestly and desperately seek God's direction are few and far between. Maybe it's the need for repentance that holds them back. They can't face the embarrassment. They can't walk away from the addiction. Or maybe it's the fear factor of faith. It's amazingly difficult to walk forward when you're not sure what's ahead.

Whatever the excuse, it's just incredibly difficult to find someone like David in any generation.

Nevertheless, there are still searchers out there. Maybe you are one of the few who will search. Maybe that's why you started reading this book.

So look closely at what happened to the future king. As young David searched, his heart was changed. Before the boy knew what had happened, God had formed a king amidst all the sheep.

The reason he'd been chosen for such an honor? David's heart had been looking for God.

That's it.

That's all.

On the application for king, God hadn't been looking for pedigree, education or money. God had not been looking for a career politician or someone who had at least run for class president. David brought almost nothing to the table except the desire to be very close to God.

And with that, God had His man.

Isn't it strange? God had been looking for someone who would simply search intensely for Him!

"The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart," said the nation's preacher to an unrepentant king, a king named Saul.⁵ The "man" after God's heart was still just a boy. But sure enough, within a few years, David was a world-famous king.

It was a rags-to-riches, shepherd-boy-to-king story. Reading the history, it seems to have happened so very, very quickly.

But let me tell you something you already know. When it's your life, the process seems a lot slower.

It ... is ... a ... lot slower!

When you're on the side of a mountain that only has questions, listening to a silent God can be agonizingly difficult. It'll take a lot of faith to return to the valley trusting that God will provide the answers in His time and in His way.

So here we are, 3,000 years later, on the same quest that David had.

⁵ 1 Samuel 13:14.

You search.

I search.

Is it difficult? Of course it is! At best, like David, you and I may get to glimpse part of the road map for short periods of time. But never will we see the whole plan. Perhaps, at the end of your life, you will look back on your journey and see how God mapped it all out. But today, at this very moment, the future won't come into complete focus. By God's deliberate design, all you can really do at the beginning is find the faith to start traveling down an uncertain path.

Frankly, that's the beauty of looking back at another life, of learning from another time in history. The ancient lessons of David, Saul, Samuel and all their supporting cast can give us clues and truths for our own journeys.

If you're longing for a genuine relationship with God, read on. If you're approaching an important crossroads of life, read on. If you long for God to break His silence and show you part of the road map for your life, read on.

I'm glad we can travel this journey together. You see, I'm still on the search myself. I still have questions about the future. I am still learning lessons about faith. Thankfully, I've also lived long enough to know a lot more about this search for God's heart than I did in the beginning of the search.

That young woman I was asking God about on the mountain peaks of my youth? She's right by my side, searching for God's heart, too. The career? It became as focused as a time clock. My purpose? I guess you could say part of my purpose is in your hands, right now.

Let's get this journey started. Imagine, if you will, a road in front of us that can lead to God's heart. This is where we want to be. Follow the right road and you'll end up in the right place.

Of course, it won't take long before something happens to take us off the right path. It might be a detour. Could be a missed turn. It might be an accident someone else causes.

It might even be that embarrassing other option, when you drop a pitchfork right in the middle of your search.



THE ROAD OF REPENTANCE

It was a borrowed truck, and a borrowed pitchfork. The turn was made a bit too quickly, causing the pitchfork to slide silently across the open tailgate and fall squarely in the middle of traffic.

From the rear-view mirror, I could see the cars swerving into the oncoming lane of traffic. From the side mirror, I could see the string of brake lights behind me marking the state of emergency. It was another few seconds before the truth hit me. Some idiot had dropped a pitchfork on the road ... and that idiot was me!

I almost kept driving, pretending the dangerous-looking tool had come from some other careless cowboy. Had it not been a borrowed pitchfork, there's a good chance I would have left it there, a price paid for a stupid mistake.

But I couldn't just leave it there, so I returned to the scene of the crime.

By the time I circled the block, traffic on the busy road was back to normal. There was no carnage visible. No cars had slammed into other cars. No tires had been punctured by my spiked mistake.

The pitchfork, however, was broken. It didn't take a detective to figure things out. At least one driver had run over my pitchfork, snapping it in two and throwing the metal end of things into the air like the devil's personal weapon. In the twilight of the day, it had probably been something of a frightful moment.

A well-dressed man and a kind-faced woman were on the side of the road. They had been eyewitnesses to The Fall and pulled over quickly to save the day. The man had the broken-handled pitchfork by the throat. He looked like a reasonable person, but he was obviously an unhappy driver. He stabbed the broken tool in the dirt as if the whole thing was the ground's fault.

The two good drivers were talking about the close call on the busy street, shaking their heads at careless drivers like me. They would only need a few moments before returning to their evening commute.

In the meantime, I was only 30 feet away from the borrowed trouble. Should I borrow any more?

"If they'd only leave," I thought. "If they'd only walk away, I'd grab that fork and run. No one would know ..."

They didn't leave quickly enough, and the traffic behind me was pushing me to make a decision. Turn right, and I could go right past Mr. and Ms. Safety, and they'd spot me. Turn right, and I'd have to pull over, park and apologize. I would sheepishly reclaim the instrument of my wrongdoing and promise never to leave a truck tailgate down again. Turn right, and I might have to pay for damage done, though I could see no evidence that anything was broken except the pitchfork. Turn right, and I'd certainly have to endure a lecture, a scornful look ... or God forbid! ... recognition that I was a pastor in their town!

The car behind me demanded a decision.

I turned left.

I took the long way across town, and hoped the pitchfork would be there later, when no one would realize that a coward lived in the neighborhood.

Sure enough, hours later and under the cover of darkness, I reclaimed my forked failure.

This left me with some questions I didn't want to answer. What in the world made a usually reasonable man turn away from an opportunity to be corrected? What could have brought me back under the cover of darkness to undo any sign of daylight weakness?

More than likely, you know what made me act irrationally. It's something deep inside us that tells us to take any road – any road – other than the Road of Repentance.

This is human nature. We openly proclaim our innocence when we know full well the extent of our guilt. We have our excuses ready for the day we're finally caught. We enthusiastically agree that the whole world has "sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,"⁶ but our first response when our own yard tools bounce around in traffic is to disown any personal responsibility. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the snake, and I'm not all that happy with pitchforks that won't stay put.

This creates a dilemma. Human nature and God's nature are squared off in battle at this point, and God hasn't lost a fight yet.

If you're reading these words, you're at least a little intrigued by this search for "God's own heart."

No need to waste time, then. Rule No. 1 is never going to change. That "sin" thing? The person searching for God's heart has got to admit that he or she is among the guilty.

You will never, ever find God apart from the Road of Repentance. Study the pavement, find the dividing lines, and read the map well. The only way to finish this journey is to get on the right highway in the first place. From a spiritual standpoint, this first leg of the journey is called "repentance."

Without repentance, the search for God's heart is over before it can even begin.

The story of David is found in the Bible's section of history we call 1 and 2 Samuel. These pages contain the story of two kings.

David was the second king in this story.

The first king was Saul.

The personalities of Saul and David stand in stark contrast to one another.

⁶ See Romans 3:23.

Not surprisingly, the choices they made throughout their lives were very different. One never repented. He liked to bend the rules, ignore the rules, break the rules and even write a few new rules that better suited him. That was Saul. If he dropped a pitchfork, he moved on as if nothing had happened. David? He made plenty of mistakes, too. He broke plenty of rules. But David knew how to repent.

Don't miss this truth. Right off the bat, this Road of Repentance is as real, as important, as vital, to your search for God as any other factor. There is no other road that will take you to God's heart. Miss this truth, and you'll miss God.

On the other hand, "If we confess our sins," writes one of the disciples of Jesus when he was an old man, "He is faithful and just and will forgive us ..." ⁷

This is grace. We like grace. We love being forgiven. But no kidding ... we're not so crazy about the pain of repentance. But until we admit that we need it, there can be no refreshment of God's amazing grace.

Sadly, Saul missed his opportunity to find the very God who'd chosen him as Israel's first king. The longer he stayed on the throne, the further he seemed to get from God.

From a physical standpoint, Saul looked like he had it all together. The Bible described him as "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites - a head taller than any of the others."

If he'd run for office, he'd have been a front-runner on looks alone. Nice hair. Tanned skin. Big, bright smile. Winsome looks. Strong voice. You know the kind.

In a short time, Saul was king. He was tabbed by Samuel, approved by the people, and most importantly, he was chosen by God.

"Do whatever your hands find to do," Samuel told the young man, "for God is with you." ⁸

Think about it. A blank check from God!

Despite Saul's fear and insecurities, he became his nation's leader. A battle was quickly held and quickly won. And at his inauguration celebration, some internal enemies were found, arrested, and lined up for execution.

The people then said to Samuel, "Who was it that asked, 'Shall Saul reign over us?' Bring these men to us and we will put them to death."

But Saul said, "No one shall be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel."

Then Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go

⁷ 1 John 1:9.

⁸ 1 Samuel 10:7, emphasis added.

to Gilgal and there reaffirm the kingship.” So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.⁹

Unfortunately, Saul’s first day in office was also his finest day. It wouldn’t be long before the pitchfork would fall out of the truck. Then there was another, and another, and another. Saul became an expert in sin. He also made a life-long habit of avoiding the Road of Repentance.

Early in his 42-year-reign as king, Saul faced another battle. The Philistines had an army that couldn’t be numbered, and Saul’s troops were shaking so violently, they had trouble holding their weapons! Saul didn’t act like God’s leader, and his troops didn’t act like God’s army.

Standard procedure for God’s army included worship. The soldiers had heard stories of God’s provision, of battlefield miracles, of a fighting God. Because of this, they built an altar, held a lamb, and waited on the prophet.

Perhaps Samuel, who was on call as the Prophet of the Day, was delayed. Perhaps some of the roads were closed because of the battle. Perhaps the prophet waited on purpose. Perhaps God detained Samuel, waiting to see what kind of heart his new king had. God is like that, you know. He will test a heart to see what kind of heart a person has.

Saul flunked the test.

Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul’s men began to scatter. So he said, “Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings. “ And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him.

“What have you done?” asked Samuel.

Saul replied, “When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD’s favor.’ So I

⁹ 1 Samuel 11:12-15.

felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.”

“You acted foolishly,” Samuel said. “You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command.”

Then Samuel left Gilgal and went up to Gibeah in Benjamin, and Saul counted the men who were with him. They numbered about six hundred.¹⁰

What went wrong? Only a priest was allowed to offer a sacrifice. Saul had run out of patience and done what only Samuel should have done.

Sound like no big deal? Pay attention to a fundamental truth.

God had made the rule.

Once God makes a rule, it doesn’t matter if you or I see the logic in the decree. It only matters that we obey. Obedience is the dividing line between success or failure. If God wants you to write a new rule, He’ll let you know. In the meantime, we’re given the existing rules and expected to follow them.

When we break such a rule? For starters – literally – we apologize. Then we change our actions. We agree that we will not break the rule again. This process is called “repentance.”

Now look for Saul’s apology. See one? I don’t. In fact, I’m going to suggest that if you read the rest of the Bible for the rest of your life, you will never find Saul repenting for things he had done wrong. He rationalized his sin. He redefined his crime. His embarrassment often turned into anger against anyone who could correct him.

The excuse for the premature offering was a good one. The prophet had been late! Didn’t Samuel know that the nation’s security was at stake?

By God’s order, priests don’t lead armies, and kings don’t lead worship. In retrospect, this was especially true for Saul, for his heart did not belong to the God he purported to worship.

You’ve seen lots of people like this, I’m sure. They use God’s name and quote scripture if it’ll get the votes of religious conservatives. They show up in church hoping to impress their neighbors. Some of them are trying to make up for what they did on Friday night and perhaps earn a few grace points toward next weekend’s parties. They sing all the right songs, endure all the right sermons, but

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 13:7b-15.

keep doing their own thing, as if they never intended to obey God.

This is the kind of life Saul lived. He took his own path. He ignored the decrees of God. He held the right title, he dressed the right way, and he went through the right motions. But his heart was growing increasingly hollow. He was having more and more trouble hearing God's correction. He practiced spiritual deafness and one day found that he couldn't hear God at all.

Nevertheless, God gave Saul many, many second chances. Like a lot of us, Saul had years of second chances. The man ruled Israel for more than four decades!

Eventually, God ran out of patience and Saul ran out of opportunities to repent.

Years later, in another battle, with a better army, Saul faced another enemy. Through the voice of Samuel, God had assured Saul that the battle was his. All he had to do was go forward, win the fight, and take care to follow one very important instruction.

In this battle, Saul's main instruction from God was to completely destroy every living man, woman, child, cow, horse, chicken, and donkey. Every roach was to be squashed and every mouse decapitated. There was no mistaking the message. Saul was to destroy every creature in that city. There was no doubting the instruction. It was as clear as the instructions you've read in your Bible.

Saul went into battle. His men put every person in that city to death except one. In that little part of the test, Saul scored a 99 and felt pretty good about the grade he'd gotten.

The only person kept alive was the enemy king. He would be kept as a trophy, until Saul got tired of keeping the man alive.

In addition, Saul's soldiers took the animals of the city as their payment. They were valuable. They were spoils of victory. Didn't his soldiers deserve to be paid?

Saul decreed it so and the best animals were kept alive. It was a great move for Saul, the politician. With a chicken in every pot and a heifer in every barn, his popularity must have been sky high.

In the thrill of victory Saul even allowed some of the men to erect a monument to him, the victorious king.¹¹

Were it not so serious a matter, the scene that followed would be comical.

Picture, for a moment, the great caravan of animals and soldiers, returning home in triumph. Coming over the opposite horizon is a prophet, the man with the original word from God. Samuel had told Saul exactly what God wanted: He was to kill every living creature in the city.

Samuel is alone. Saul is with a victorious and rowdy army. He has hundreds of men with him. The army and the prophet are on a collision course. Saul's men are

¹¹ 1 Samuel 15:12.

drunk with victory, herding livestock won in the lottery of life and showing off a king defeated by their skill. It is a noisy group, Saul's band of winners.

When Saul sees the prophet, he knows Samuel will not be happy.

Have you ever seen a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar? If he's a charmer, he smiles at his mother and says, "Hey mom, great cookies! Wouldn't you like one?"

Samuel didn't return the smile. Instead, he confronts the disobedient king.

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions."

But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"

Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."¹²

What a liar.

Saul said he had carried out the Lord's instructions. He hadn't.

Saul said it was the soldiers who had done the wrong thing. Perhaps they had, but they had done so with Saul's permission. It was his responsibility to make sure God's instructions were followed.

And what gall this man had! "We're saving these animals to sacrifice them. They're an offering to God, Samuel!" This wasn't an offering to God. The animals were an offering to individual checkbooks, a reward given for fighting well!

Finally, there was this telling comment: "Samuel, we're going to give them to the Lord your God." Isn't that something? Saul cannot speak of "the Lord my God." Disobedience had led to lying, and a lifetime of non-repentance had killed Saul's personal relationship with a loving God. There was nothing genuine about Saul's walk with God. Now he would pay the consequences of his choices.

"Stop!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night."

"Tell me," Saul replied.

¹² 1 Samuel 15:13-15.

Samuel said, “Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.’ Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?”

“But I did obey the LORD,” Saul said. “I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal.”

But Samuel replied:

“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.”¹³

Even then, Saul would not repent. He was sorry for getting caught, of course, but that’s different from repentance. He lied about it, gave excuses and tried to dress up what he’d done wrong as if it were actually something right.

And still, there is no prayer to God. Forget apologizing to Samuel. Saul should have dropped to his knees then and there and come clean with the One who gave the command in the first place.

Saul knew how to talk about God, but he would not talk to God.

To his credit, Saul returned with Samuel and worshiped the Lord. After the worship, Saul still couldn’t complete his God-given task, for it was Samuel who had to have the enemy king put to death.

At the heart of the matter, the king had a heart problem. Saul had suffered from this heart defect in his youth, and it followed him into adulthood. By his own choosing, Saul had never been a man after God’s own heart. He never changed. He never repented. Not surprisingly, we do not think of Saul as a “man after God’s own heart.”

¹³ 1 Samuel 15:16-23.

From that day forward, Samuel, the mentor, the pastor, grieved for Saul, the disobedient king. He would never see Saul again. Saul's failure hurt the old prophet deeply. As a young man, Saul had started with so much promise. But soon it became obvious. Saul simply could not force himself to travel the Road of Repentance.

Saul lived out the rest of his life in a pathetic, downward spiral. In the last few days of his life, he would seek help from a \$5 palm-reader and beg his assistant to take his life. When his armor bearer wouldn't obey, Saul fell on his sword, and his life was over.

Repentance is the first step toward finding God's heart.

There is, of course, another king in this story. With one well-placed stone in Goliath's forehead, David became a national hero even as a teen-ager. His courage and his swagger led Israel to its greatest military victories.

No, he wasn't as handsome as Saul. If Saul was the all-star quarterback, David was the hidden left guard, the one lost in the scrum. Not even Samuel was able to pick him out of the crowd as a future leader.

God, on the other hand, had spotted David even in his childhood. This is what God told Samuel: "Do not consider his appearance or his height ... The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."¹⁴

The heart God wanted was out in the fields, watching the family flock.

It took a few years before the rest of the people saw the potential in young David.

Again, that's the advantage of studying a story like this. We can fast forward through David's life and see an amazing contrast between the two kings. It's not that David was perfect. Far from it! His sins were every bit as serious as the ones Saul had committed. How serious? Try adultery, and then add murder. There was a cover-up and a bed made of lies. There was a drawing away from God. Ironically, those closest to David knew of his misdeeds. Quite possibly, most of the kingdom knew of David's sins. But no one was willing to confront the king.

Samuel was dead, so it was a preacher named Nathan who came into David's throne room with "news" from the countryside. Actually, the preacher only had a story. As he told the parable of a rich man who'd stolen a poor man's treasured lamb, David became infuriated. How could a rich man steal something so precious from his neighbor?

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 16:7.

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

... Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”¹⁵

There it is.

There’s no hesitation. There’s no excuse. There’s no denying it.

Instead, David looks his sin squarely in the face, and says, “I’m sorry ... I’m wrong.”

His actions confirmed what we could have never seen with our eyes. Now we can see what was in his heart. Unlike Saul, David took action. His broken, repentant heart forced some real-life decisions. David began a fast that lasted seven days. David prayed for his child’s life, the child born to Uriah’s wife, the child of David’s wrongdoing. He spent his nights not in the feathered bed of seduction, but on the ground, on the dirt road of repentance. The entire kingdom knew of David’s change of heart.

When the baby died, David got up, washed, put on fresh clothes, and headed for the Temple. Before he would feed his body, he would feed his soul. He would worship God.

Can you see the contrast with Saul’s life? While Saul could not bring himself to say, “I was wrong,” David could not delay repentance for another moment.

If you’re searching for God, you’ll have to start with the same attitude. If repentance is a road, trust me. There is no other path to take. This is the only starting point if you are to ever find the heart of God.

A person after God’s own heart is the person willing to face his own sin and say, to God: “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. Please forgive me.”

Start here, and you’ll find the grace of God. Miss this road of repentance and you’ll miss it all. You might even wind up as out of touch with God as Eli and his sons. They met their end in a place called Ebenezer.

Too bad. They could have had a different kind of “Ebenezer.” But like Saul, they would not travel the road of repentance.

¹⁵ 2 Samuel 12:5-7, 13.

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