

Isaiah 51 • How to Pursue God

Introduction

From time to time I've heard people testify that they "tried" Jesus but it didn't work; something else eventually filled that gap for them. Why is it that there are people who seem devoted to pursuing God but never find Him? How is it possible for someone to read so many books, attend so many conferences, indulge so many discussions, yet never arrive at the right place with the Son of God? As with most things in life, **WHY** we engage in an activity often dictates the outcome. In other words, can you pursue God on your own terms, or do you need to do so according to His?

¹“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
Who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were hewn
And to the quarry from which you were dug.
²Look to Abraham your father
And to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain;
When he was but one I called him,
Then I blessed him and multiplied him.”
³Indeed, the LORD will comfort Zion;
He will comfort all her waste places.
And her wilderness He will make like Eden,
And her desert like the garden of the LORD;
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What is the goal of those who pursue God, of those who seek the Lord?

A: Righteousness. (v.1)

Point: *The pursuit of God is not merely to find Him, but to seek how to become like Him, changed according to His standards. In biblical terms this is actually the pursuit of righteousness, to acquire His characteristics so that we might stand firmly in His presence. People can seek God for other reasons and largely experience failure because they're wanting God to conform to their own image instead of conformed to His.*

Q: Why is Abraham given as the example of the kind of righteousness which should be pursued?

A: Abraham was not justified by works or even the Law (since the Law through Moses had obviously not been given yet), but was declared righteous by his faith.

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:6

This is a teaching about how God is gained by obedience from the heart.

Q: Why is Abraham and Sarah called “the rock” and “the quarry”?

A: They were the basis from which all others followed. Just as a quarry is the source of a consistent type and quality of material, so we are to be of the same nature.

Q: What is the definition of “comfort” as given by God’s examples in v.3?

A: It's not merely reassurance or emotional support, but complete physical and spiritual restoration, even to the point of blessings over and above the expected.

Q: How does this definition of “comfort” relate to the previous example of Abraham and Sarah?

A: In the manner of God's blessings which multiplied Abraham from a lone, single individual to entire, countless nations. It reinforces the definition of God's "comfort" as connected to restoration and blessings.

Application: *Why do you pursue God? Like most things in life, you're most likely to get in return what you put into it. Why do those that pursue Him for alternative reasons to righteousness often fail? How well do seek Him on **HIS** terms rather than our own?*

⁴“Pay attention to Me, O My people,
And give ear to Me, O My nation;
For a law will go forth from Me,
And I will set My justice for a light of the
peoples.

⁵My righteousness is near, My salvation
has gone forth,
And My arms will judge the peoples;
The coastlands will wait for Me,
And for My arm they will wait
expectantly.

⁶Lift up your eyes to the sky,
Then look to the earth beneath;
For the sky will vanish like smoke,
And the earth will wear out like a
garment

And its inhabitants will die in like
manner;
But My salvation will be forever,
And My righteousness will not wane.

⁷Listen to Me, you who know
righteousness,
A people in whose heart is My law;
Do not fear the reproach of man,
Nor be dismayed at their revilings.

⁸For the moth will eat them like a
garment,
And the grub will eat them like wool.
But My righteousness will be forever,
And My salvation to all generations.”

⁹Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of
the LORD;

Awake as in the days of old, the
generations of long ago.
Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces,
Who pierced the dragon?

¹⁰Was it not You who dried up the sea,
The waters of the great deep;
Who made the depths of the sea a
pathway

For the redeemed to cross over?
¹¹So the ransomed of the LORD will return
And come with joyful shouting to Zion,
And everlasting joy will be on their
heads.

They will obtain gladness and joy,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

[Read v.4-8]

Q: What is the dual meaning of “the arm of the LORD”?

A: On one level it is the strength and authority of God which He promises to use to bring about salvation from earthly circumstances. But it has a dual meaning as also representing Christ, the one through whom salvation will come to all mankind. So for the people of Isaiah’s time, there would be hope in God’s deliverance from their current circumstances, but Isaiah’s words would also apply to the coming work of the Messiah in a much larger and final sense.

Q: How is the work of the Messiah articulated in these verses?

A: On the one hand as a Judge of those who reject God, and on the other hand as the Savior and Deliverer of those who accept Him.

Q: What are the two main characteristics which describe God’s working according to v.4?

A: “Law” (the Word) and “light”. (Does this sound familiar?)

Q: According to v.7, what are the main characteristics of those who actually listen to God, who are living according to His righteousness?

- God’s Law (the Word) is in their heart.
- They don’t fear what man can do.

Q: What perspective enables someone to embrace God’s righteousness while rejecting the world’s?

A: They know that man’s ways are temporary (v.8), but that God’s are forever. The things of God they pursue in this life will last into the next.

Point: *Those who pursue God embrace His Word and ways while shrinking from those of man’s. They see the reality of the godly pursuit, which is permanent, versus the earthly pursuit which is temporary.*

Application: *Are your spiritual pursuits rooted more in trying to get something here and now or to establish your eternal future beyond this life? If God seems unresponsive, is it possible that it’s actually **WE** who are unresponsive to seeking **HIS** ways rather than our own?*

[Read v.9-11]

Q: What is different about the calling in v.9 compared to how it is used to open each of the preceding sections?

A: The first two calls are to God’s people to listen to Him: “Listen to Me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the LORD” (v.1) and “Pay attention to Me, O My people” (v.4). This time it’s a call to God.

Q: Who is “Rahab” and when did God engage a dragon?

A: These are names for Satan as symbolized by “Rahab”, a mythical monster of the deep, and by the dragon, a common biblical symbol of Satan’s use of persecution. The point is that God has already defeated Satan.

Q: To what is v.10 referring?

A: To God’s miraculous salvation of Israel out of Egypt, the apex of which was the crossing of the Red Sea.

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Q: What do these two references combine to communicate?

A: That God has overcome not just the most powerful earthly powers (Egypt), but spiritual as well. He is the Redeemer that can save both physically and spiritually, both in this life and the one to come. He will therefore be able to easily effect what is promised in v.11.

Q: What is the difference in God's people being called "the redeemed" in v.10 and "the ransomed" in v.11?

A: Actually there is no difference. The definition of "to redeem" is to purchase freedom at a costly price. This is illustrated in both His victory over the spiritual realm (Satan) and the earthly realm (Egypt).

Point: *Those who pursue God may not immediately be freed from the enslavement of earthly circumstances, but they have the assurance of God – which is a future as sure as if it already happened in the past – that they will be. They know to Whom they actually belong.*

Application: *Do you struggle with the fact that earthly circumstances are less than ideal? To what degree does the fact that God will eventually effect restoration comfort and sooth you? How well does your faith rise above the current surroundings to focus instead on the future as it will come through God?*

[Read v.12-16]

¹²"I, even I, am He who comforts you.
Who are you that you are afraid of man
who dies
And of the son of man who is made like
grass,
¹³That you have forgotten the LORD your
Maker,
Who stretched out the heavens
And laid the foundations of the earth,
That you fear continually all day long
because of the fury of the oppressor,
As he makes ready to destroy?
But where is the fury of the oppressor?

¹⁴"The exile will soon be set free, and
will not die in the dungeon, nor will his
bread be lacking. ¹⁵For I am the LORD
your God, who stirs up the sea and its
waves roar (the LORD of hosts is His
name). ¹⁶I have put My words in your
mouth and have covered you with the
shadow of My hand, to establish the
heavens, to found the earth, and to say to
Zion, "You are My people."

Q: What are the key issues highlighted in v.12-13?

- We sometimes fear man more than God.
- We sometimes fail to fear and have regard for the Creator.

Q: What is the reality as revealed by God in v.14-15?

A: His people may be in exile at the moment, but He will change that situation forever.

Q: What does God say will be accomplished by His Word within us in v.16?

- "To establish the heavens"
- "To found the earth"
- "To say to Zion, 'You are My people'"

Point: *The pursuit of God is not strictly limited to the things and events we see here on earth; they have corresponding effects and connections to things in the heavenly realm as well. This is why they replace their fear of men with a fear of the Lord.*

Application: *Do you ever allow your fear of others to overcome your fear of God? How well do you recognize that there is more going on that meets the eye? Do you see the need for patient endurance as the things working themselves out in the heavenly realm eventually become evident in the earthly?*

¹⁷Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise,
O Jerusalem,
You who have drunk from the LORD'S
hand the cup of His anger;
The chalice of reeling you have drained to
the dregs.
¹⁸There is none to guide her among all the
sons she has borne,
Nor is there one to take her by the hand
among all the sons she has reared.
¹⁹These two things have befallen you;
Who will mourn for you?
The devastation and destruction, famine
and sword;
How shall I comfort you?
²⁰Your sons have fainted,
They lie helpless at the head of every
street,
Like an antelope in a net,
Full of the wrath of the LORD,
The rebuke of your God.

[Read v.17-20]

Q: This is the 4th calling out to take action in this chapter. How is this one yet again different from the previous three?

A: The first two were directed to those pursuing God and His righteousness, and the third was a call to God Himself. This time it's a call to those who are spiritually "drunk", a description of those so disobedient to God that they are completely distracted by His discipline. They haven't yet responded correctly to His discipline so as to move on towards spiritual reconciliation with Him.

Q: What is the inferred difference between those who are seeking God and those who've allowed themselves to become spiritually drunk and unaware of Him and His ways?

A: The spiritually drunk are unaware of the lesson they were supposed to learn at the hand of God's discipline, whereas the spiritually awake pursue God and come to experience His restoration. The one is still experiencing God's judgment, the other already having submitted and moved on spiritually, even though **BOTH** parties may be in the same place geographically.

Point: *Those who pursue God don't have to learn things the hard way by God's discipline.*

Application: *Have you ever battled or "argued" with God over the consequences of your sin so that you haven't been able to "move on"? Have you ever considered that the "other side" of judgment has been delayed in coming because you yourself have been slow to accept and learn from it?*

[Read v.21-23]

²¹Therefore, please hear this, you
afflicted,
Who are drunk, but not with wine:
²²Thus says your LORD, the LORD, even
your God
Who contends for His people,
"Behold, I have taken out of your hand
the cup of reeling,
The chalice of My anger;
You will never drink it again.
²³I will put it into the hand of your
tormentors,
Who have said to you, 'Lie down that we
may walk over you.'
You have even made your back like the
ground
And like the street for those who walk
over it."

Q: What is the greater work to which God is speaking here?

A: The final division between those that absolutely reject Him and those that absolutely accept Him. For His people there will come the final, ultimate reconciliation to Him at which time everyone else will bear the full weight of sin and judgment.

Q: What does the reference in v.23 mean, "Lie down that we may walk over you"?

A: This was actually a literal practice of the ancient world, to humiliate one's enemies by having them lie down as the victors walked over them, as Sapor of Persia literally did to the Roman emperor Valerian. In the case of God's people, it represents how everything will be ultimately and permanently reversed, the former captives coming to rule over their former rulers.

Point: *Those who pursue God will not continue forever in being oppressed by the people and institutions of this present world.*

Epilogue

The proper pursuit of God is a pursuit of His righteousness, to give up one's own ways and desires for those of God's. It's a process that may not take us to the places our flesh desires, nor effect changes according to a schedule most pleasing to our self, but it fully completes God's work within us, according to His timing, and for all the benefits of His kingdom. The reason some people "pursue" God but are ultimately unsuccessful is that they refuse to embrace the notion that the biblical definition of "pursue" involves forsaking one's own ways for God's.