

Strengthen Your Core: God

Lesson: **Isaiah 46, excerpted; Deuteronomy 6:4-5**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2046;%20Deuteronomy%206:4-5>

A man leaves work for the day and stops by his local pub for a beer. He enters and sits down. His mind is full, but his soul is hungry. He's been around people all day, and he wants some rest and peace, but he's also hungry for contact — for companionship, maybe. He looks up, and just on the other side of his table he sees that the most beautiful, open, loving face he's ever seen is looking at him, and smiling. He's startled, and looks away. He feels a little shy. He's a little embarrassed, maybe. The person he glimpsed was wonderful.

He can't believe this has happened: that someone so extraordinary has noticed him. The man doesn't know what to do: he's had some bad experiences with people. He's been hurt. He's a little afraid. And, at bottom, he really can't quite believe that someone so extraordinary is looking at him and smiling.

Then! He gets a great idea. He pulls out a piece of paper and a pen, and starts writing down all the things he knows about this person who is looking at him. He says to himself: I need to make sense of this. I'll observe this person for awhile, and see if what he makes sense to me, if I can fully understand him.

So the man starts making a list of all the qualities, motivations, and activities of this near-stranger sitting across from him. For a while he is so intently concentrated on discerning everything he can about this amazing person that his gaze is fixed on the paper. From time to time he looks up, sits back and observes the other people, the sky, the traffic, and then writes down what he sees. He even goes so far as to walk up to the bartender, and to some of the other patrons, and to ask them what they know about the person he has seen, this wonderful, open, loving person who smiled at him. When something they tell him fits with what he has already written down, he writes that down too. When it doesn't, he forgets about it.

His pursuit of knowledge of this wonderful person, sitting across him, looking at him, and smiling, continues the rest of his life. And never once does he consider getting up from his chair, walking over, sitting down, and saying, "hello".

PAUSE

How many of us believe that a deep and longlasting relationship is begun or sustained by pure observation? Suppose you just watched your partner all day long, and never actually spoke to her or engaged with her. How well would that go? Let's say you just looked at her from time to time in order to make sense of her. Would you call that a relationship? And if it's a relationship, with whom would you be relating? Her? Or would your relationship simply be with your image of her?

We have a word in our language for when someone has a relationship with another person that consists completely of watching the other person, following him around, figuring out the patterns of his behavior, and trying to make sense of what he does. We call that kind of relationship "Stalking".

My friends, there are a whole lot of people who are stalking God. We call some of them agnostics and some of them seekers. Some of them have been hurt and blame God. Some of them can't imagine what God could see in them. And some God-stalkers don't even know they're stalking: they've convinced themselves that they're well-hitched and living happily ever after with God! (If you'll forgive the metaphor.) But they're all following God around, asking questions about God, reading about God, in order to make sense of God and understand God before they say hello to God.

If I know anything about God, it's that God is not looking for stalkers. God is looking for deep, life-giving, strengthening relationships with each and every one of God's people. God wants a relationship with you. Christianity is not simply a religion; it's a relationship. And God wants a relationship with you.

Some folks think that the critical question is whether you believe in God — that is, whether you believe God exists. If that's the question we get stuck on, we're avoiding the real issue. If we're asking ourselves whether God exists, we're avoiding the deeper issue.

Anyone can prove the existence of God, or disprove the existence of God — that's philosophical small potatoes. Sara Maitland put it this way: "Of course you can prove the existence of God; it is quite an amusing thing to do any afternoon between lunch and mowing the lawn. And at the end of it, what sort of God have you proved the existence of? The sort of God that you can prove the existence of."¹

So the big question for seekers and stalkers is not about believing in God, that is, whether God exists. The big theological question is whether you believe in God — whether you trust God. The real issue for seekers and stalkers, and maybe for some of us in this room, at least sometimes, is whether we trust God.

So let us agree to stop pretending that the world is concerned with proofs of God's existence. If you are interested in a God that can be summed up in a proof or disproof, or one that can be examined from afar, or one that can be written down on a piece of paper based on the thinking of others, you're not actually looking for God. You're looking for an easy way to kill off the hunger in your soul. You're looking for a way to avoid a relationship that will change your life.

If God is looking for relationship, and believing in God is all about having a relationship of trust with God, then how you understand God matters. And you don't gain understanding of God just by observing God from afar, just like you don't really understand a potential mate by watching her from a distance. You gain understanding and trust of God by saying hello, by engaging in conversation, by listening to what God has to say, by reading what God has written, by living with God, by loving God.

To believe in God is to trust in God, so your understanding of God is everything, because you can't trust an untrustworthy God. You cannot trust an untrustworthy God. If we are really honest with ourselves, what stands between us and a deep, passionate, strengthening relationship with God is this: we think God is untrustworthy, and we are lousy at trusting anyone, anyway. So many of us have been hurt by human beings, or by the demon voices in our own souls, that we do not trust God. We cannot imagine a God worthy of trust. We cannot imagine a relationship where we can fully let go, be honest, and be whole.

Yet... when we read scripture, and speak with those whose loving and light-filled lives reflect their faith and trust in God, a consistent picture of God emerges. When you draw in the lives of the saints, the testimony of the truly devoted, a picture of God emerges. God's picture is of a mighty, faithful, persistent, compassionate, creative Being who loves you beyond all reason.

Our God is a God who speaks the worlds into being and yet manages to be seen in the tiniest eyelash of a newborn child.

Our God is a God who, despite the 225 names and descriptions used for her in the Bible, manages to exist undescribed.

¹ Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995)

Our God is a God who, despite being rejected constantly and continuously by the people she designed and created, keeps showing up and inviting them back.

Our God is a God who, despite the pain and mistrust we inflict upon ourselves and each other, is willing to bear our anger and our defeat, and to carry us when we cannot carry ourselves any longer.

Our God is a God who, despite our capacity for cynicism and grief, made in us the ability to find and remember joy.

Our God is a God who is expansive beyond the universe, yet who longs so for relationship with us that he was willing to squinch back – to take up less cosmic room so as to make room for creatures entirely different than himself. And then, when after so many years of living with God we simply could no longer remember why we had been attracted to God in the first place, God sent God's self to live among us. And because we human beings are incapable of truly loving creatures that are much greater than ourselves, God made himself into a tiny child, so that we might remember the face of love.

Our God is a God who, despite our lack of trust in ourselves or in anyone else, wanted us to trust him so much that he let himself be crucified, to die in a horrible way, so that we would know that he was willing to give everything for us. Everything, except his trustworthiness.

Is your soul hungry for such a love, for such a joy, for such relief, for such a faithfulness? Is your soul hungry for God? Then stop observing God from afar. Get up from your chair, walk over, sit down and say hello to God.

Don't know how to start saying hello to God? Let's start now, together, and you can pray this any time to start the conversation with God again:

God, we don't want to look back on our lives to see we've missed you. We've been told over and over that you are an awesome God, loving and faithful, but we don't really trust that. But we need all need that in our lives. We need to be loved. We need to be cared for. We need to honor and serve someone greater than ourselves, someone worthy of us. We need you, Lord. I need you. So help me into relationship with you. Help me see you for who you are; help me find my rest and strength in you. Amen.