

## 1:1 LONGING FOR GOD

**Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'**

*Galatians 4:6*

**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?**

*Psalms 42:2*

From quite a young age I have felt a longing for God. Looking at a sunset or a mountain view, I have had a sense of something or Someone behind and beyond the beauty and majesty of the physical scene, reassuring me and in an indefinable way calling me home.

One writer who has made a study of this phenomenon, which is not unusual, is C S Lewis. He calls it 'Sehnsucht', a German word meaning 'longing.' At first he was unwilling to connect this with the Christian God; but later he wrote in *Mere Christianity*, 'If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.'

It has been called 'a feeling of nostalgia that points us towards the future.' This 'forward-facing nostalgia' outcrops constantly in the Psalms, in a desire to meet with the living God. In Hebrews 11-12 the people of faith are said to be 'longing for a better country, a heavenly one, a city with foundations, a kingdom that cannot be shaken.'

Whatever the origin of this yearning, it is brought into sharper focus by the promise of the Holy Spirit, who is received by faith when a person puts their trust in Christ. The word 'Abba', used by Hebrew children for 'Father,' and by Jesus in his most intimate prayer, becomes a way of expressing our love and longing for the reality of God and our deep desire for a transcendent home.

*I may have feelings I can't express or understand, but others before me have felt the same, and I could do worse than turn some of the Psalms into prayers of my own. 'Lord and heavenly Father, I love you so much, because you have listened to my voice and heard my cry for mercy. Help me to call on you as long as I live' (based on Psalm 116:1-2).*

## 1:2 SOMETHING BETTER

**The Spirit he caused to dwell in us longs jealously. But he gives all the more grace. Therefore it says: 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'**

*James 4:5-6*

**Get up, go away! For this is not your resting-place.**

*Micah 2:10*

It is often referred to as 'divine discontent.' The sense that this world isn't everything, it isn't our true home, there is something far better to come (Hebrews 11:16). The Micah quotation was a favourite of the Antarctic explorer Edward Wilson, who went with Scott to the South Pole and died with him. Wilson was a scientist who keenly appreciated the beauty and order of the natural world, yet he was all too aware of its imperfection and transience.

Sometimes we find that a mountain panorama, a sunset, a movement in a Brahms symphony, or a song by Leonard Cohen, sets off indefinable longings in us. We feel a dissatisfaction, an unfulfilled yearning for something beyond the boundaries of this world's horizon. C S Lewis wisely wrote, 'There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven, but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have desired anything else.'

James attributes this longing, which has some of the characteristics of acute jealousy, to the Holy Spirit. He is talking about prayer, and how we don't get what we ask for because we secretly want the wrong things. Desire for the goods of this world, like success, fame, power, possessions, sex, people's good opinion, feeling comfortable with oneself, turns us away from the true love of God. So he has put his Spirit in us to remind us at our soul's core that we're his children, made for him alone, made for eternity.

*How to respond to this uncomfortable challenge? 'But he gives us all the more grace.' Grace is undeserved forgiveness and unreserved staying-power. It is given not to the proud or self-satisfied, but to the humble and those who realise they will never find satisfaction in anything besides God. Lord, give me more divine discontent!*

### 1:3 FOUND

**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?**  
*Psalm 139:7*

**I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go.**  
*Song 3:4 NRSV*

**Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?**  
*Luke 15:4*

In his famous (if lengthy) poem 'The Hound of Heaven' Francis Thompson describes how he fled from Christ 'Down the nights and down the days' and 'down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind' until in his exhaustion he had to let the great Lover catch up with him, and heard him say: 'I am He whom thou seekest. Thou dravest Love from thee who dravest Me.'

Do we seek God, or does he seek us? Do we find him, or does he find us? Whichever it is, and it may be both at once, the worst thing would be for God and the soul to miss each other in the night.

Adam and his wife hid from God among the trees in the garden. Jonah ran away from the Lord and sailed for Tarshish. Thomas said 'I will not believe' and was not with the other disciples when Jesus came. Demas, because he loved this world, deserted Paul. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way.

David put it to his son Solomon: 'The Lord searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you for ever' (1 Chronicles 28:9). The good shepherd responds to the feeblest bleat of the sheep trapped in a cleft or tangled in thorns. The Lord comes to find Thomas, Mary, Peter, Paul, whoever. Where can we go from his Spirit? But he respects our final choice not to be found.

*'To every one there opens a high way and a low, and every one determines the way their soul shall go' (from John Oxenham). Thank you, Lord, that you are there to be found. 'Halts by me that footfall.' You are the One my soul loves. I will not let you go.*

### 1:4 CHILDREN OF GOD

**To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.**

*John 1:12*

**The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.**  
*Romans 8:15*

How do I become a child of God? By receiving Jesus as God's Word. John calls this 'believing in (or into) his name,' and the way he puts it lays emphasis not on the strength of the belief but on the efficacy of the name. It is as I trust Jesus to be the way God comes to me, that I put my full weight upon him, like a rock-climber depending absolutely on a single handhold to reach safety. That handhold isn't going to break off and send me plummeting into freefall.

Paul describes the same process in a different but equally valid way. When I believe in (or 'into') Christ, upon hearing the good news of his cross and resurrection, I receive the Holy Spirit. This is the way God marks me definitively as belonging to him and confirms me as a full and permanent member of his heavenly family (Ephesians 1:13).

Paul is writing within the conventions of his time. Roman law provided for a man to adopt a male heir from outside his direct family, so that the heir receives the full status of a true-born son. In theological terms 'son' includes 'daughter', since there is no distinction of gender in Christ's kingdom (Galatians 3:26-29).

What if, like the Prodigal Son in the parable, I reject my new home and withdraw my allegiance to Christ as my Lord? The point made in Jesus' story is that my status hasn't changed. However far I stray, I am still God's true child. When I come to my senses and return home, I am treated not as a servant but with the robe and sandals and (yes!) slap-up banquet that befit a full member of the family.

*I don't have to prove that I'm fit to be a child of God, or produce qualifications that demonstrate my right to family status. God made me his child when I received Christ and was given the Spirit. Now I need to keep trusting him and walking in step with him. What a relief!*

## 1:5 UNSATISFIED LONGING

**We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.**

*Romans 8:23*

**We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling.**

*2 Corinthians 5:1-2*

Olives, grapes and wheat are all harvest gifts of God designed to bring us joy and thankfulness. In the Old Testament the initial crop to be harvested (the 'firstfruits') was offered to the Lord in full expectation that there would be more to come. It is a foretaste of more good things just around the corner.

So are we given only part of the Spirit when we put our trust in Christ? Are we only partly God's children, only a tiny bit redeemed? Do we have to wait until after death to enjoy God's gifts in full? In the meantime, do our bodies get in the way?

Yes, and no. Paul likens our present mortal bodies to living in a tent, a temporary home which will be taken down and packed away once our permanent building is ready for us. That's good news, because my tent is getting a bit threadbare and letting the rain in – so I'm longing for the day when I can move into a structure that will last eternally.

But this doesn't mean that Christ has given me only a fraction of his Spirit, or that I'm not a full member of his kingdom family. It's just that while I'm in this earthly body, I'm in tension with the demands of the flesh and the antipathy of the unbelieving world. Life isn't as good as I know it could be, and that includes my experience of God which ebbs and flows. There must be something much better to come. The wine-tasting is all very well, but roll on the full banquet!

*The prophets used to ask, 'How long, O Lord?' I'm asking that too. I want Christ to reappear as he has promised. I want a world where there is no evil, pain, suffering, groaning. Lord, please bring it on!*

## 1:6 CONTENTMENT

**The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.**

*Romans 14:17*

**I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.**

*Philippians 4:12*

'You'll have to learn a few secrets of the trade,' said the man in charge of the rookie mechanics. 'Some things require a certain knack that isn't obvious to the uninitiated.'

Paul is thanking his Philippian friends for a gift he has received in prison. He's going to be able to have a square meal for the first time in weeks! Now it might seem obvious that we can't be truly content if we're feeling acutely hungry or thirsty. First satisfy someone's material needs, it is often said, then they'll be ready to listen to what we have to say about more spiritual things.

But, Paul explains tactfully, the true source of his joy and contentment isn't an abundance of material things – it's the presence of the Lord in his life, no matter what the outward situation. The 'secret of the trade' for a disciple of Christ is the Holy Spirit's unfailing supply of the things that really matter.

Righteousness, peace, joy. The secrets of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6). Being right with God. Trusting him to supply all we need. Satisfying our deepest yearnings. This isn't a matter of bodily comfort or emotional wellbeing: there may be times when we feel anxious, or drained of strength, or frankly at the end of our tether. But, say Paul and Jesus, we can still develop the knack of complete contentment.

*Lord, I need to be trained in this kingdom secret. I am so easily thrown by outward circumstances. I tend to blame you for things not being as they should be. Yet all the time you are saying, 'Peace, be still. I am everything you need. Learn from me.'*