

THE GOSPEL IN STEP 11

Step 11 says this: “We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for the knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry it out.” This is an action step; it is a lifestyle step. Even though this is Step 11, I believe this is something every Christian should do. If we all actually did this, victory over sin would be much more universal.

But Step 11 is not the Gospel. The Gospel is not about what we should do as Christians. The Gospel is about what God has done for Christians – always. Yes, we are called to do some stuff, but we do it in response to what God has done for us. We do it out of worship, and adoration, and gratitude. Nothing we do earns our salvation. And even as we tell ourselves that we really should seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, we have to understand that without God working for us and in us, we can’t accomplish what this step tells us to do.

So the Gospel in step 11 sounds more like this: “God seeks to improve our conscious contact with Him, through His Spirit and by His word.” **God is seeking you.** That is the Gospel in step 11. God is always seeking you. As John says, “we love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19),” so it is also true that we seek God because He seeks us first. We seek to improve our conscious contact with God because God is seeking us.

This is stunning. The Creator of the universe pursues his rebellious, ungrateful, sinful and dysfunctional creatures. “Who are we, that you should be mindful of us? What do you see in us?” It does not matter that you have maybe not

sought God or his will for your life for a long time. What matters is knowing that no matter what you've done to God, or how you've turned your back on him, **He still seeks you.** Believe this – understand that God is seeking you (you!), and it will become your habit, your lifestyle to seek “to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for the knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry it out.”

So, a really important verse for us tonight is Jeremiah 29:13: ***¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD.*** What is God's will for you tonight? There are some specifics that I cannot know, but I know this: His will for you is that you seek him and that you find him.

We need some context to fully appreciate what Jeremiah says here.

The whole passage in front of us is:

¹⁰ “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ***¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD,*** and I will restore your fortunes.

Jeremiah gives this word from the Lord to exiles in Babylon. They are in Babylon because of a repeated pattern of not trusting God and chasing after false idols. Instead of seeking to improve their conscious contact with God and understand His will for them, they chose to ignore Him and trust their own will for their lives. They don't want the Lord – they want power, security, comfort, prosperity – anything but the Lord, and He gives them what they want. Eventually they are enslaved by the conquering nation of Babylon and sent into exile.

These are God's people in exile. They claim to know God, but they have avoided His claim on their lives. They have avoided seeking his will and the power to carry it out. And now they find themselves without hope, a long way from Jerusalem, which meant to them a long way from the presence of God, because God was worshipped in His temple in Jerusalem.

Don't some of you feel like these exiles tonight? Your plan for your life has led you into an apparently hopeless situation. You've run from God and His plan for you, certain that you knew what you were doing, and now you find yourself experiencing the consequences of choices you've made. In our sin nature, we are all like these exiles – ungrateful, rebellious children who now find themselves lost and alone.

And yet, God seeks out these exiles, just as he seeks out you. He says, "After a time (seventy years – a really long time), I will visit you. You can't visit me, so I will visit you. Yes, you've been rebellious and ungrateful, but I still love you and I will still seek you. I will visit you and begin a new relationship with you." This is verse 10, and eventually this prophecy of Jeremiah would come true. The exiles would return to Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt – God is always true to His word. This was part of God's plan for His people. But this passage points to much more than a physical return to our home. For us, exiles here tonight, God's plan is for our welfare, not for evil. His plan is to give us a future, and to give us hope.

God's Plan is Better Than Your Plan

Enough about your plan – let’s agree that your plan has not exactly been working for you. God’s plan, from this passage, is a three-part plan: restoration, deliverance and peace.

Restoration: God takes the initiative to restore a right relationship with him. God seeks us, so that we can seek him. It starts with God. “I will visit you, and I will bring you back from this place of captivity, Babylon.” Good news for the Israelites – even better news for us, because God has visited us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is Emmanuel, God with us. He seeks us – he visits us. God has sought us so earnestly that he became a man to find us. God’s plan is to restore a right relationship with us.

Deliverance: In pursuing a right relationship with us, seeking us, Jesus died to free us from the captivity of our sin. Ultimately, we cannot have a right relationship with God unless our offenses against him have been dealt with. So God, Christ, has dealt with our sin by dying for it.

Jeremiah is speaking to captives in this passage, and giving them hope that they would someday be captives no longer. As I studied this passage, I found the last phrase interesting: “I will restore your fortunes.” It’s easy to read this and think that God will bless me with a job, or a marriage, or deliverance from bankruptcy or a guilty court verdict. But really, this verse should be translated as the King James Version does it: “I will turn away your captivity.” “Restore” really means “turn away,” or “turn back,” and fortune really means “captivity.”

Jesus Christ has delivered us from captivity. He has turned us away from it. He has delivered us from slavery to sin and restored our relationship with God.

Peace: The key to God's plan is peace. "Peace" is nowhere in this passage, but the word translated "welfare" here ("to prosper you" in the NIV) is the Hebrew word "shalom." It's a huge word, with much depth of meaning – peace, or welfare, or prosperity really doesn't convey all that the Bible intends. One writer has described shalom as "the way it should be." Shalom was the way God designed his creation to look like and act like – perfect harmony, beauty, joy, community and worship. There was shalom in the Garden of Eden.

And then this same writer describes sin as "culpable shalom breaking." It is the willful injury or destruction of what God considers right and good.

But God's plan is for our "shalom" and not for evil. He is saying here that our future is a life as it should be, a life of shalom. He is not saying here that this means prosperity now – it means that we can have the peace that comes with a restored relationship with him and freedom from the captivity of sin.

This is God's plan: He seeks a restored relationship with us, he dies to free us from captivity to sin, making this relationship possible, and he gives us peace as we were intended to experience it.

This is a good plan – it is much better than any plan I can come up with for my life. And I need to remind myself of this on a regular basis, even now.

I've had to preach this to myself lately. I have been consumed with plans for my business, trying to close a very big deal for our company. There is a lot riding on this – some risk, but it is what I do for a living.

And then, I heard of a competitor of ours buying another company, and I became somewhat envious. He has made more acquisitions than me. His company is growing much faster (at least I think so – may not even be true). But, by God's grace, I do (imperfectly) seek to know God and His will for my life, and so he reminded me again that my plans are so inconsequential to him. No amount of material success compares to being in a restored relationship with my Lord and Savior; to be free from sin and serve him in all the ways I've been privileged to serve him. God has sought me out and by his Spirit within me has given me a desire to seek him. That's a good plan.

Now after God reveals his plan to his captive people, he says, "**Then** you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you." I think "then" is very important. After you **believe** my plan for you (to restore, to deliver and to give you peace) **then** you will call upon me, and come and pray to me.

In step 11 terms, you will seek to improve your conscious contact with God, praying only for the knowledge of his will for you and the power to carry it out only when you believe that He has a plan for you which is much better than any plan you can come up with.

Are you trusting in God's plan for your life, or are you still hoping that your plan may yet work out? Or are you hoping that God will adopt your plan for your life? Be honest with your answer, because if you want to find God when you

seek him, and if you want him to hear you when you call out to him, you have to believe his plan is better than yours.

God Wants To Hear You

I read this in a commentary on this passage: “Promises are given, not to supersede, but to quicken and encourage prayer.” God gives us his promise that he has a plan for our welfare, not for evil, to give us a future and to give us hope, so that we will be motivated to pray – not, well, I can stop calling on Him now, because He’s given me this awesome plan. “This is my plan for you,” says your father, “so that you will call upon me; come to me and pray to me.”

God has visited us, died for us and given us his Spirit because he wants to hear from us. It’s part of the relationship. It’s communication. He wants to hear from us, as a father wants to hear from his children. He longs for us to call upon him, and come (move) and pray to him. But, just like children, we pray, “give me, give me, give me,” because we know that He can deliver. I think he might prefer to hear, at least occasionally that we love him; that we’re grateful for him; that we have missed him and enjoy being with him. Any parent wants this, right?

Love the Giver more than the gift. Our God is a jealous God – this means he craves your affection. God is in need of nothing – self sufficient since before creation – and yet he seeks us out, because he longs for a relationship with us. He’s shown you his love – he just wants to hear you express your love for him. God wants to hear you.

God Wants To Be Found By You

And God wants to be found by you. We seek God in step 11, and God's promise in this passage is that we will find him. Here's my visual for this – it's the game of Marco Polo, played in the pool. It's a version of "Tag, you're it," but in this version, the one seeking closes his eyes and says, "Marco!" to which all the other players are required to respond with, "Polo!" When she hears this, she lunges or dips under the water to tag someone. Now it's no fun to be halfway across the pool when you respond, "Polo." The person's eyes are closed and they have no chance of getting to you. It's much more fun to be as close to the person as possible – perhaps dipping under water just as you say, "Polo!"

God is as close to you as the Marco Polo player. He may not be easy to find, but he wants to be found by you. You call out, "Jesus!" and he responds, "Messiah!" You keep calling out, he keeps reminding you he's there, even if you haven't touched him yet and eventually you make conscious contact with him – "Tag, you're it, God."

"You will seek me and you will find me, when you seek me with all of your heart." No half-hearted seeking – no just looking around. You can't just stand in the pool and never say, "Jesus!" Yes, your eyes are closed, but we walk by faith, and not by sight anyway. Move, cry out to Jesus, and eventually you'll contact him, to both your delight, just as we laugh together when someone gets tagged playing Marco Polo.

Seek him with all your heart. Matthew 6:33: ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

I haven't always done that. As we struggled with our son in high school, what I was really seeking was to keep the image of the perfect family intact.

And I was seeking for Eric to be happy; to give up his destructive habits; to feel better about himself; to be obedient, the perfect son.

As I lost control, or in the context of this passage, as I realized my plan for my life and my family's life was not working, I began to believe again in the God who was there, but whom I had functionally ignored for a while. And as I sought God, and his will for my life, I found him. I was in the pool, walking by faith with my eyes closed, calling out, "Jesus," and then I heard him.

I've shared this before, but I'm sitting in church, listening to the testimony of two inner city kids, sharing how Jesus was keeping them off the street, giving them hope, etc. and I found myself thinking, "I just want Eric to know Jesus like these kids," and in an instant I realized that my heart had been changing. My desire was now first for God's will in my life, and in Eric's, and I really felt God say to me, "I've been trying to get your attention for a while now." "Seek me," he said. "This has never been about Eric, as much as it's been me being found by you." It was the deepest emotional connection I've ever had with God. God was found by me. The crisis of the moment did not subside, but I had a sense of shalom like never before.

God wants to be found by you. Seek him with all your heart, and he will be found by you.

God Wants To Free You

Finally, God wants to free you. Remember, v. 14 has the sense of being removed from captivity – "I will turn back your captivity." Jesus has freed us from the penalty of sin – we're justified by the Cross but we struggle with the power

of sin. We win battles, but the war is always on. We will also fail – we will not always seek God with **all** our heart. So how do we draw near to God then?

James 4:8: ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

We seek God, and find God when we are honest about our sin. As I said, just this week I had to confess my pride and envy with this business deal. And when I did, the encouragement and hope that is all over this passage spoke to me. The best way to seek God is to humble yourself before him. “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

Larry has suggested that we could call this program *Celebrate Repentance*. The joy of confession and repentance is that God hears us. We talk, He listens, and the relationship is restored all over again. Not just a program of repentance, but a lifestyle of repentance – it’s how we improve our conscious contact with God, and it’s how we understand his will for us and receive the power to carry it out.

So, yes, step 11 is about us doing some stuff, in response to God’s call on our lives. It really is a step for all Christians at all times. But the gospel is that God seeks you. Seek him and find him. Run from him, and he seeks you still. Believe his plan for you is far better than yours, and experience the peace, the shalom that is yours in Jesus Christ.