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I WANT TO BE A GOD GAZER

Yearning for intimacy with the Saviour

Malcolm Duncan

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Rumours of God and Whispers of Hope

There are many of us who know that the rumours of God's death are greatly exaggerated. God just won't go away. Despite the best efforts of many, the idea of God lives on. Like a word whispered deep in the caverns of the human heart, the idea of God echoes around the chambers of our lives. God's continued vitality is seen in deep and intuitive yearnings placed within the psyches of all people to discover what it means to be authentically alive. Sometimes we call it a search for reality. Sometimes we describe it as finding our true meaning or discovering our genuine purpose. Sometimes we describe it as trying to understand why we are here. The words we use are not the most important thing. It is the sentiment behind them that matters, and that sentiment is the search for significance, for meaning; the quest for the purpose of life itself.

No matter how hard we try, we just don't seem to be able to rid ourselves of the niggling notion that God exists. Like an almost unnoticeable speck of sand placed in the shell of our experiences, the possibility of his existence seems to lie in patient anticipation within each one of us. Most often we know the yearning is present because of a simple grit-like thought in the oysters of our individual consciousness that goes something like this: "There has to be more to life than this."

I knew God was real long before I believed he was personal. As a young boy, growing up in a family that was largely irreligious but had a deep sense of right and wrong, I think the rumour of God was shaping me long before I realized its significance. I caught glimpses of him in my life, but did not understand him. Perhaps it was because I was too young, or too naive. Perhaps it was because his existence seemed so alien to me in the midst of my circumstances. Perhaps it was because I grew up in the culture of Northern Ireland where the religious notions of God had a profound and often negative impact on our culture. I can remember lying in bed at night and wondering what God was like. I don't think I ever thought there was no God, but I was not at all certain what "God" meant. My glimpses of him kept my searching alive, but they did not change my life. I may have glimpsed him many times as I grew up, but I rarely gave him my attention for very long. Perhaps you are like I was?

We occasionally catch a glimpse of what could be a beautiful pearl hidden within the recesses of our thinking. It may be sparked by a moment of family beauty, such as a birth or a wedding. Perhaps it is an important personal landmark in the life of someone we love? We watch a sunrise, or stand alone in the night and look up at the star-speckled sky, and something within us yearns to understand the purpose of it all. Intuitively, we know that the source of our wonder is God, but we have not been sure what God is like because we have not yet come into a personal relationship with him. The beauty we behold and the aliveness of the moment are invitations to wonder at life itself because they come from Life himself. We know it; we just don't always know what to do with such an existential moment.

We know that these encounters are gateways into the shadow of something imprinted within humanity itself. We have guessed that they are the whisper of a voice we have a memory of hearing, but we are not sure where or when. These moments of wonderment are part of a movement that fits into the symphony of life. We realize that God is the Conductor of the music, but we sometimes struggle to hear the notes. We can sometimes feel like we are standing on a stage, trying to remember our lines, and the Prompter is standing offstage with the script in his hands. He is speaking to us, trying to help us without removing our dignity and our humanity and our choice. We know it's God; we just can't always hear him very well. We are familiar enough with his voice to recognize it, but not so familiar with it that we can decipher clearly what he is saying. The impact is that we find ourselves asking the greatest questions imaginable: "How do I encounter God?", "How can I hear him?", and "What can I do to meet him?"

Whispers of hope

The yearning for a deeper encounter with him surfaces at startling moments in our lives. These moments are whispers of hope. They are pivots of destiny upon which the balance of our future lies. These are unmoving signposts that can set the direction of our journey amidst the storms of life – moments such as when we walk away from the funeral of a friend or a loved one. In the unexpected pauses of reflection that accompany such occasions we are confronted with our own mortality, somehow gripped again by this "yearning". Perhaps Jung was right when he

argued that the moments at which we are most profoundly confronted with both the inevitability of death and the deep questions of life occur as we watch the last breath leave the body of someone we love or as we see their earthly remains taken from us. Our latent belief in God becomes a desperation for his presence. We know we need him. We pray intuitively. It's funny that for so many people, the first thing they do in a moment of deep sadness and grief is pray. Why is that? The whisper in our souls is finding its own expression in our lives. We know we want God.

Then again, our longing for God lies heavy upon us as we welcome a life into the world. This little person, full of possibility and hope, looks at us with eyes like lasers that pierce the deepest chambers of our soul, searching out our significance, scouring our souls to see where we "fit". Once again Life is encountering us, but we do not know what to do with it.

There are many such pivots and whispers in our lives. Some of them are positive and some of them are negative, but they bring alive in us what we know is there – a hunger for God. They can be the realization that the great change we hoped for didn't deliver on its promises to transform us, or they can be the discovery that the great accomplishment that was supposed to sound the depths of "being alive" actually ended up as nothing more than a tinkling cymbal and didn't reverberate deeply within us at all. We have encountered God enough to accept that he exists, but we have not encountered him enough to change our lives. We have not yet found our fulfilment in him.

Perhaps it was the day we were married, or the day we were divorced? On the other hand, it may have been the day we were awarded our degree or the moment we

were appointed to our dream job, or the day we realized we weren't going to pass at all. For some of us, it was the moment we finally paid off the mortgage and we could say the house was really and truly ours – or the moment we lost it all and we wondered how it came to this.

You know better than anyone the moments in your life that have caused you to wonder at life itself. You know your own whispers. You have encountered your own pivotal moments. We all have. We wonder about God. We either don't know how he fits into our lives or we do not want him to fit into our lives because to believe in him would demand a change we are not willing to make, or a step we are not willing to take. He makes us uncomfortable so we would rather get rid of him than embrace him. We know we need him, but we don't want to need him.

God - the body that won't sink

The idea of God, the yearning for him, is like a dead body (or so we assume) that has been heavily weighted with our guilt and wrapped tightly in the brilliant bandages of our intellect then tossed into the deep lake of our memories, where we hope it will sink into the water of our memory and stay submerged forever. The problem is that the body eventually floats to the surface again. The yearning will not go away. Nothing, it appears, will keep it at the bottom of the lake. No weight of our own brilliance is weighty enough. No heavy stone of modern thinking is heavy enough to keep the idea of God out of sight and therefore out of mind. No hermetically sealed box of logic or tightly secured chains of reason will keep him sunken. Nothing, it appears, will keep him down.

The startling thing is this – the corpse is not a corpse at all! If we take the time to fish the body out from the water of our lives, we discover that this cold, lifeless notion is not cold; neither is it lifeless. On the contrary, he is very much alive. He has survived our attempts at drowning and has emerged from the bottom of our thoughts again, his very reappearance being evidence of his continued life. To our dismay, God is cleverer than we are. The bandages of our intellect are no longer shimmering with brilliance. They are tattered, gaping, and worn rags, eaten away by unanswerable questions and the powerful, deep currents of our conscience. What we knew all along is true – God is not dead. This “corpse” is not a corpse at all, and he wants to be untied. He wants us to free him. He has been holding his breath all the time and waiting for us to release him into our lives. If only he would leave us alone, all would be well, but it seems he just won’t stay down. He loves us too much to leave us on our own.

Our problem is that what we then tend to do is tie another weight to his body, wrap our reason a little tighter and throw him into the water again. We then watch him submerge again – for a while. We have fallen for the lie that as long as we can’t see him, he isn’t there. So we sink him again by trying to avoid situations where his body might arise. We rush through the very moments of mystery or questioning in our lives that most fully confront us with our yearnings. Such moments are actually gifts to us that would unwrap a new understanding of God’s nearness, but we reject the gifts like unwanted presents. We immerse ourselves in the humdrum rhythm of daily living in the vain hope that the beat of existing will drown out the rhythm of living, but it never does because it never can.

Our yearning for God will not go away.

When I was a little boy and someone I was either afraid of or felt shy around came into the room, I would lift my hands to my face and hide my eyes. My logic was simple: if I could not see them then they would not be able to see me. This common little practice is something that still makes me smile when I see children doing it today. I can remember my own children doing exactly the same thing. It is nonsense, of course, and as we get older we know it is silly and naive, yet many of us do exactly this with God. We cover our eyes before him, hoping that because we cannot see him, he cannot see us. This deeply flawed logic we cling to gives us the freedom of moral blindness and opens the door for us to do whatever we like, whenever we please, in whatever way we want, but it doesn't take the yearning away. The idea that if we cannot see him then he cannot see us just doesn't work because deep down within us we know that there is more. God can see us. God always sees us.

Fulcrums

Our lives are balanced on tiny fulcrums that tilt our destinies one way or another. I am pretty convinced that the most important of these fulcrums are the ones that we tend to brush aside or run away from the quickest. These are the moments when our "yearning" surfaces and we try to sink it again. Instead of allowing it to pierce our hearts, we push it under the water and rush to the next important thing. If we crowd God out, then he will go away. If we make our lives so full that there is no room for anything else, then there will not be any room for him. If our diaries

are full, then there won't be any time to think, to reflect, or to wonder. We try to drown God out with busyness. Please don't do that.

This little book is an appeal to you. It's a heartfelt plea, really. Instead of running from the moments in your life when the body surfaces, would you please stop and think about who you are, why you are here, and what your life is all about? Let God show himself to you. Instead of covering your eyes in infantile naivety, would you please look at God and let him look at you?

I would go further. Instead of looking *at* God, look *into* God and let him look *into* you. See what he is really like and feel his deep gaze into your own hidden heart. I think that if you do, you might find that something beautiful begins to happen. Those deep, yearning, aching questions might begin to be answered, and you will never be the same again. Instead of running away from him, just stop. Let him speak to you. Give him the chance to show you what he is really like. Let your yearning shape your living. Let your deep, intuitive conviction that there is a God cut away the weights that have tried to hold God down in your heart. Allow him to rise to the surface again. Let God reveal himself to you. Look at him as he looks at you.

My prayer is that *I Want to be a God Gazer: Yearning for intimacy with the Saviour* will help you to see God again, or see him more clearly. My hope is that you will read the book several times and that you will return to it again and again. You can dip into and out of it at various times. I want to make it as easy for you as possible. I've designed the book around a piece of my writing entitled *God Gazer* so it's worth taking the time to read it several times before you launch into the book itself. Each chapter

has a stanza of *God Gazer* at the beginning to help you think and perhaps to pray.

Please try to read this book deliberately and intentionally. Why not try journaling alongside your reading? Or maybe you could try encouraging your friends or members of your small group or church to each buy a copy of *I Want to be a God Gazer: Yearning for intimacy with the Saviour*. You could then read it and discuss it together. Maybe you are a churchgoer but you are yet to have a personal encounter with God. You fear God but you do not know him. If that is true then maybe *I Want to be a God Gazer: Yearning for intimacy with the Saviour* will help you move beyond a formal belief in God into a personal relationship with God. Perhaps the book can help you with your spiritual formation.

However you do it, my hope is that you will allow God to meet you. My prayer is that you will invite him to be the centre of your life. There is a world of difference between a discussion about God and a dialogue with him. Even if you are not used to praying, reading Scripture, or personal reflection, give some time to trying these things. Try reading it in the morning, or in the evening, or on the train, or in the first fifteen minutes of your lunch hour, or when you come back from dropping the children off at school. Just give yourself the luxury of a few moments of quiet and a little bit of space to listen to what God might say to you. Look for what he might show you. God is more eager to meet with you than you are to meet with him. Give him the opportunity to encounter you.

Stop and think. Look for him in the everyday situations and occurrences of your life.

Walk slowly through those moments with your eyes open.

Listen closely to what you might be hearing.

Give God some time.

Where did *God Gazer* come from?

I originally wrote *God Gazer* for a conference I was addressing in January 2010. I was one of the keynote speakers and had been asked to explore the dual themes of the power of God's Word and the importance of an encounter with God. (I capitalize "Word" because I was addressing not only the question of Scripture but also the question of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.)

I am not sure whether I would describe *God Gazer* as a poem, a prayer, a confession, a liturgy, or a reflection. I don't think it really matters. Somehow, it has touched people around the world. It has been published, shared, spoken, learned, referred to, and quoted on every continent of the globe. For a long time I wasn't really sure why that was happening, but now I think I know why it has touched people. It's the yearning thing. *God Gazer* captures something of the longing of our hearts for God in simple words. It "says" something that is really important. If we want to really live, then we need to be rooted in Life. If we want to know what life is about, then *our* reason must be immersed in the Great Reason, the Logos, and the Water of Life. If we want our lives to be strong and stormproof structures, then we must be built upon the Unshakeable Foundation.

I have changed the order of the stanzas from the original piece to avoid repeating some of my reflections. When

you are writing poetry/prose like the original *God Gazer*, repetition is part of the shape and form of what you are trying to say, but when it comes to writing reflections on those stanzas, repetition would become tedious. None of the stanzas have been removed; they have just been moved around a little, and the flow of *God Gazer* as a poem still works very well.

As you read *I Want to be a God Gazer: Yearning for intimacy with the Saviour*, may God draw you more closely into his Story and his Purpose, and may you discover a clearer, more compelling vision for life than you ever thought possible. Why? That's easy to answer: because life can't spring from any other thing. My prayer for you is simple:

May you be captured by the brilliance that springs from the radiance of him.

Malcolm Duncan

Buckinghamshire, Summer 2014

God Gazer

I want to be a God gazer!
Captured by the brilliance
that springs from the radiance
of you.

I want to be a God gazer!
Not a cheap food grazer
or an easy option lazer.
I want to be a trailblazer
for the ordinary, everyday life.

I want to be a God gazer!
Not just copying the halcyon ways
that shimmer brighter in the haze
of bygone rays and the good old days.

I want to be a God gazer!
Looking beyond the trappings of success,
cutting through the stucco of respectability
like a laser piercing darkness.

I want to be a God gazer!
Reaching for the stars and
seeing beauty in the moment by
becoming fluent in the language
of the God who is here, who is now.

I want to be a God gazer!
Until my imagination is saturated;
until my thirst is sated;
until my passion is stirred;
until my intellect is stretched
as far as it can be;
until my yearning yearns
for others to be free.

I want to be a God gazer!
Not a meetings manager
or a people pleaser
or a “tea and sympathy” vicar.
Not a leadership trainer.
Not just a speaker
but a seeker.

I want to be a God gazer...
and for a moment I want God
to gaze through me.
I want others to see
his Eyes,
Heart,
Mind,
and Love
above everything else in me.

I want to be a God gazer!
Captured by the brilliance
that springs from the radiance
of you.

I want to be a Life giver
not a life sucker.
I want my life to be releasing,
not appeasing or placating.

I want to be a Life giver!
A “you can do it” releaser,
a “have a go” preacher,
a “you were born to do this” pastor.

I want to be a Life giver!
Seeing rivers flow, not die,
seeing others rise and fly,
helping friends reach for the stars
even if they sometimes miss,
at least they can say they tried.

I want to be a Life giver!
A drainpipe without blockages,
a circuit without stoppages,
a connector without breakages.

I want to be a Life giver!
Generous in spirit and in heart,
letting the forgotten make a start
at being Life givers, too.

I want to be a Life giver!
Connected to the Source
and pointing to the Son.
Standing in the shadow of the Light,
celebrating him.

I want to be a Life giver
because I am a God gazer.
Not because it's about me
but because it's about him.
Because life can't spring
from any other "thing".

I want to be a World changer
not just a furniture rearranger
or an "it could be better" whinger
or a "have the leftovers" stinger.

I want to be a World changer!
A doer, not just a talker.
I want to spread the clothes of heaven,
no more or less than a poor man's dreams,
beneath the feet of Jesus.

I want to be a World changer
'cos on a morning many winters ago
the tomb was open
and the curse was broken.
Death had to let go
and Recreation burst out
of an old wineskin
like water from a geyser,
like the cry of a Child
pushed into the world,
and nothing
would shut him up.

I want to be a World changer
because it's started...
because the vanguard's on the move...
and Love is pushing out hate
and Light is shining out
and darkness can't understand It,
beat It,
change It,
hide It,
kill It,
stop It,
win.

I want to be a World changer
because there's safety in this danger.
There's meaning in this purpose.
There's joy in this mission
and too many others are missing
the power of life in all its fullness.

World changer? Life giver? God gazer?
God, break in – then break out.
Fill me – then make me leak.
Plug me in and push me out.
In me, through me, around me.
Make me a Patrick!
Make me a Brendan!
God gazing, Life giving, World changing!
Captured by the brilliance
that springs from the radiance
of you!

SECTION ONE

“God Gazers”

A fresh vision of God and a better
imagination

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably
more than all we ask or imagine, according to his
power that is at work within us, to him be glory
in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all
generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, verses 20–21 (NIV)

*Imagination is the voice of daring. If there is
anything godlike about God, it is that. He dared to
imagine everything.*

Henry Miller, *Sexus*¹

1. Henry Miller, *Sexus: The Rosy Crucifixion*, New York: Grove Press, 1965, Chapter 14.

CHAPTER ONE

I Want to be a God Gazer

*I want to be a God gazer!
Captured by the brilliance
that springs from the radiance
of you.*

“We would like to see Jesus.”

John 12:21 (NIV)

The universe does not revolve around you. The universe revolves around its Creator. It hangs on his every word. When he speaks, worlds come into being. With every “breath” he holds the planets in their place, and in every second he holds your life in his hands. Without him, you would not be. With him, you are an explosion of life, a part of the Great Story, a person of beauty, significance, and worth. You find your ultimate destiny and purpose and meaning by stepping out of the centre of your own life and giving him the centre stage.

Who’s at the centre?

We kid ourselves into thinking that it is all about us, but that is a lie that gets us nowhere.

One day, someone else will do the job you do, or something like it. It doesn't matter whether you are the director of a company, the pastor of a church, the chief executive of a charity, a shopkeeper, a nurse, or a doctor. Perhaps the only role we play where that is not true is in our parenting – for those of us who are blessed with children – and in our relationships as children, siblings, and partners. I am challenged by the fact that there are many people who call me “pastor”, but only four who can ever call me their dad, two who could call me their son, and four who could call me their sibling.

A generation from now, other bright young things will be taking our place. They will have glittering new ideas and new ways of doing things, they will succeed where we have failed, and they will be the inspiration for their generation. So they should be. They will shine and shimmer in the light of their greatness. They will lead further than you and I have. They will achieve more than you or I thought possible. With guts, determination, and commitment, they will change the world – and so they should. I want to be part of a generation that gives them the chance to be great and to do better than we are doing.

The reality is, though, that with all that they might achieve, they will not be the centres of the world either. That place is reserved for One alone – Almighty God himself. He will not share his centrality with anyone. That decision is not based on selfishness and arrogance; it is based on knowing that with him at the centre of all things, life will be at its most precious and beautiful. The minute we take him out of the centre, things go wrong.

Centrality and discipleship

At the centre of any ideas of Christian discipleship that claim to be biblical in even the remotest sense lies the absolute conviction that our lives revolve around Someone Else.

We are not in the middle of the circle: God is.

There is room at the core of our lives for only one person. Such a space in my life can be occupied by me or by another. God has entrusted to me the decision about who takes that place and whom I invite to sit on that throne. It's my call.

To be a follower of Christ is to give him the throne of our hearts and to follow wherever he leads. When he says jump, we say, "How high?"

Simple.

How big is God?

It was one of our Sunday morning services at Gold Hill and the building was packed. There was hardly room to breathe, let alone move around, and we were about to pray for the children and young people before they left for their own age-specific teaching. I was trying to help the congregation understand the greatness of God.

Looking around at the church family that I love, I asked, "Can anyone tell me how big God is?"

There was the normal laughter and lightness that accompanies our meetings as people responded to one another and a choir of voices answered me in various ways. "Enormous," one child shouted out. "What do you mean?" another child asked.

Then a little boy (I will call him "Josh Hargreaves" to

protect his identity), who I think was about four or five years old at the time, leaned over the balcony and shouted down to me, “He’s really big!” There was another roll of laughter and some applause. The congregation was enjoying this dialogue, so I continued with it.

“Is he bigger than me, Josh?” I asked him.

“Of course he is!” Josh shouted down and laughed.

“Is God bigger than your house, Josh?” I continued.

Josh thought for a moment or two, then a huge smile broke across his face, illuminating his eyes and shining out of his heart. “Yup! He’s bigger than our house,” Josh replied. “He’s really, really big!”

“Wow!” I said, as the congregation applauded the little boy’s tenacity and precociousness. “Is God bigger than this church, Josh?”

By now Josh was on a roll and he knew exactly what he thought about God. “Yeaahhhhh!” he announced. “He’s bigger than EVERYTHING!” and with that he flung his arms wide, as if he were encompassing the entire universe. “God’s the biggest that can be!” he yelled, and then he sat down triumphantly.

The congregation cheered, then a strange thing happened. I said, “Exactly, Josh,” and I turned to the church family and guests who were present that day and I said, “So why do we worry so much? Why do we make him so small? Why do we keep Him at the edge of our lives so often?”

There was a holy silence.

You could have heard a pin drop.

In just a few simple sentences, that little boy taught us something of the greatness of God that we so often forget.

God is bigger than everything.

God is bigger than we think

We need a fresh vision of God. We need to see his greatness again. We need to be captured by his utter vastness, his immeasurable beauty and power. It is only as we catch a fresh vision of him that we can capture a better vision of our own lives.

So often we get tired in our living. For all the right reasons we end up with all the wrong priorities. Life happens and we get on with it. Bringing up children, getting to the office on time, paying the bills, sorting out ageing parents, planning for our retirement, trying to do our best in work. Without realizing it, the lens through which we view our lives becomes smeared with the reality of actually living. Without us ever meaning it to happen, and almost certainly without any of us doing it deliberately, we allow our vision of God to be reduced according to our lives. We limit his greatness and beauty in direct correlation to the extent of our experiences in life. With the grime of disappointment dirtying the lenses of our faith, we reduce God to a more measurable concept and size and we make him no more than a bigger version of ourselves. We allow our hope for the future to be shaped by the disappointments of the past.

That's a big mistake. God is far bigger than we think.

Lessons in our vision of God from Isaiah

Sometime between 742 BC and 739 BC, King Uzziah of Israel died. Having come to the throne as a young man at the age of sixteen (see 2 Kings 15:2), he reigned for about 52 years before contracting leprosy and dying about a

year later. In the year that he died, the prophet Isaiah records this:

It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord.

Isaiah 6:1a (NLT)

What follows in the rest of Isaiah 6 is an account in which the prophet is changed and transformed by his vision of God. Isaiah's encounter with the Creator leads to a fresh understanding of God's greatness, power, and holiness:

It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven’s Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!”

Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke.

Isaiah 6:1-4 (NLT)

This leads to Isaiah becoming acutely aware of his own shortcomings and failures and sin:

Then I said, “It’s all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.”

Isaiah 6:5 (NLT)

As the prophet acknowledges his own weakness, Isaiah receives a fresh touch of cleansing and empowering from God when one of the angels in the vision flies to the prophet from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips with burning coal, cleansing him:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven."

Isaiah 6:6-7 (NLT)

There then follows a call to "go" and to "speak", to which Isaiah responds:

Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?"

I said, "Here I am. Send me."

And he said, "Yes, go, and say to this people..."

Isaiah 6:8-9

In short, Isaiah has a fresh vision of God that leads to a fresh mission for God. In fact, the mission that Isaiah receives is an extremely difficult one. It is outlined in the remainder of Isaiah 6. God tells Isaiah that the people to whom God is sending him will not listen to the prophet. They will not understand what he is saying and they will not obey God's voice through Isaiah.

There is much I could say about the nature of what Isaiah is called to do, but I want to focus on how Isaiah

receives this fresh mission from God. Isaiah encounters God afresh before he serves God afresh. He has a fresh glimpse of the greatness, the glory, the holiness, and the beauty of God before he takes up a fresh mission for God.

We need a fresh vision of God before we attempt fresh things for him too. We need to see him as he is before we do what he asks us to do. So often we allow our vision of God to be domesticated, reduced, and limited by our circumstances and the voices around us. Yet God is so much bigger than we think.

Isaiah's fresh vision of God came at a time of sadness, mourning, and national uncertainty for Israel. Just at the moment when circumstances looked darkest, God shone brightest. Isaiah saw God and then saw his circumstances differently. That is the right way round. God met Isaiah right in the middle of life, and God will do the same with us. Our vision of him will shape our vision of ourselves and of our purpose if we let it. Our society needs a fresh hope, a fresh vision, and a fresh purpose, but our society will only have that vision when the people who make up society have a fresh vision out of which they can live.

The Russian Christian and political dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spent many years in prison during the years of the Soviet Union. In his Templeton Address in 1983, he commented on what had happened to Russia during the time of Communist rule:

More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: **Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.**

Since then I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our Revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: **Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.**

What is more, the events of the Russian Revolution can only be understood now, at the end of the century, against the background of what has since occurred in the rest of the world. What emerges here is a process of universal significance. And if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century, here too, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: **Men have forgotten God.**²

There is the great challenge – people forgot God. For our lives to have fresh vision and purpose, we need to see God again. Put bluntly, there is no other way. We need to see God again – the real God, not just some blown-up version of us who approves of our choices and baptizes our prejudices. We need a fresh vision of the great, powerful, life-giving, and holy God who met Isaiah. He is our only hope.

² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Templeton Address, 1983 (emphasis added). Used with the permission of Editions Fayard.

Captured by the brilliance

Something happens in a human being's life when God meets them. We are changed. I do not mean we have a brief external renaissance of hope. I mean we are changed. Deep within, something is changed when we truly meet God. A brief glimpse at the stories of the central figures of the Bible show us what happens when we encounter God. Abram and Sarai's encounters with God in Genesis 12–25 led to a change of name, a change of identity, and a change of purpose. As Jacob met and wrestled with God at Peniel, his walk was permanently changed (Genesis 32) and he became "Israel". In Exodus 3, Moses encountered God in a bush that burned but was never consumed. He was fundamentally changed, and he left the safety of his obscurity to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. As he wandered through the wilderness, Moses needed to know that God was with him and leading him. Moses refused to go any further until he had a personal encounter with God. To serve God, he needed to encounter God (Exodus 33–34). In the story of Job, this man who suffered a great deal and had heard of God was transformed not only through his suffering but also through his encounter with God. At the end of his great trial, Job declared to God:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.

Job 42:5–6

The apostle Paul was utterly transformed by his personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. Once a Pharisee, a legalist, and a persecutor of Christians, he had held the coats of those who had stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 8:1), yet he was soon completely changed by a direct and personal encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9). This encounter utterly transformed him, and he referred to it several times during his life and ministry (Acts 22, 26). He was so transformed that he considered everything in his life rubbish compared to the richness of knowing Christ (Philippians 3).

John, the companion and friend of Jesus, spoke movingly of his own encounter with God through Jesus. We cannot read the opening words of his general epistle without realizing just how much Christ changed this man:

We declare to you what was from the beginning,
what we have heard, what we have seen with our
eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our
hands, concerning the word of life.

1 John 1:1

When the rest of the disciples had met the risen Christ and were trying to help Thomas to understand what had taken place, their exclamation demonstrates the importance of their encounter. “We have seen the Lord!” they cried (John 20:25), but Thomas was clear that he could not believe until he saw the Lord for himself.

Be careful not to settle for knowing facts *about* Jesus Christ and *about* his Father and *about* the Holy Spirit at the expense of actually encountering God *for himself*. Much of the lifelessness of modern Christianity around the world

can be explained by the fact that many Christians have lost sight of the importance of a personal relationship *with* God the Father *through* the Lord Jesus Christ *by the power of* the Holy Spirit. No amount of knowledge will ever be enough to replace a direct encounter with God himself, who comes to us that we might know him. After all, he told his people that they would seek him and they would find him, if they sought him with all of their hearts, (Jeremiah 29:13). As they were being dragged into exile, torn away from their homeland and the security of their Temple and their surroundings, God told them that they would still find him if they sought him. Circumstances cannot keep God away from us; only our lack of desire does that.

God is ready, willing, and able to shine the brilliance of his grace into your life. That is not the question.

The question is whether or not you are ready to let him.