

Meeting God (for Real)

I encountered my first “stalker” at the age of six.

The culprit? Another first grader named Rob Cherry.

Rob, a shy, freckled-faced kid with hair as bright as his last name, followed me *everywhere*. Mrs. Lewis, our teacher, began each day with the same routine. One shrill screech of her whistle beckoned us into our single-file line outside Creeve Hall, elementary classroom number three.

As I raced across the blacktop wearing my super-cool Ked tennis shoes, I would find a spot in line only to discover Rob Cherry right behind me. Silently, we’d file into our cheery room, each child taking a seat on one of the dozens of little multicolored carpet squares placed in front of Mrs. Lewis’s old wooden rocker. No matter which square I picked, Rob Cherry’s carpet square mysteriously made its way next to mine. When Mrs. Lewis excused us to our desks, Rob Cherry shadowed my path. Sometimes I’d glance up from working on a class assignment, only to find Rob Cherry staring at me adoringly. When he caught my eye, his smile would broaden into a wide grin, revealing two missing front teeth. At recess, when I chose the swing set, Rob did too. If I moved on to the monkey bars, so did Rob. And don’t even get me started about what happened at the school cafeteria!

It didn’t take long to figure out that, although Rob was too shy to say more than two sentences to me, he was more than just a little curious about getting to know me. In truth, his pursuit didn’t bother me at all. Sometimes, I even found it a bit endearing—especially on one memorable occasion.

I had gone to the restroom. Because we were only six years old, our “potty” was located inside our classroom. As I sat with my scrawny little legs dangling over the toilet, too short to touch the floor, I turned to grab the toilet paper only to find an empty roll. *Uh oh*. But then I had a thought. *What if . . . ?*

“Rob?” I whispered, loud enough for someone standing outside the door to hear.

“Yes?” he replied weakly.

Rob was there! The kid even followed me to the toilet! At that moment, I loved him for it.

Perhaps you're wondering what this story has to do with meeting God. Oddly enough, a lot more than you might think.

Jesus had a Rob Cherry moment too.

The story, recorded for us in the Bible, is found in John 1 and is one of several recorded "first meetings" with God mentioned in the Bible. Every relationship with God starts somewhere—even for men and women who lived in biblical times.

Curious People Seek

Three friends chat idly when, unexpectedly, Jesus walks by. One man—John the Baptist—knows Him. The others don't. Not yet. John can't contain his enthusiasm. Though he doesn't introduce his two friends to Jesus, he does tell them Jesus' credentials—He is the Messiah the Jews have waited for. On hearing this their eyebrows lift as they give one another a knowing glance. Curiosity piqued, they're eager for a closer look. So what do they do? They follow Jesus.

The two trail from a distance, hoping to see while not being seen. I can almost hear their conversation.

"Don't get too close, He'll realize we're following Him."

"Shhh . . . I'm trying to hear what He's saying. Can you make it out?"

"Do you think John could be right about Him? Could He really be the Messiah?"

"Do you think He knows we're watching Him? I hope He doesn't think we're stalkers."

The whole scene must have made Jesus grin. But instead of privately laughing at their feeble attempt to be inconspicuous, or becoming annoyed at two strangers who refuse to leave Him alone, Jesus stops. He turns, meets their gaze and asks only one question. "What do you want?" The men fumble for words, shuffle their feet and boldly blurt out, "Where are you staying?" I'm sure the moment the words left their lips they regretted them. *We have the Son of God standing in front of us and this is the best we could do?*

But for Jesus, it's enough.

"Come and you will see," He replies.

It was an intimate invitation. Inviting someone to come see where you live means offering a glimpse of the real you. An invitation to your home is an invitation to friendship. Jesus invited these two curious men to get to know Him personally, which is kind of mind-boggling when you think about it. Picture yourself running into a famous

celebrity—one whose work you admire and whose stories you’ve read about in *People* magazine. How likely would it be for that person to ask you to spend the day with him or her? What are the odds that he/she would notice you following and say, “Hey, why don’t you come over to my mansion in Beverly Hills and we’ll hang out?”

But that’s exactly what Jesus Christ did, though His accommodations were far from luxurious. In essence, Jesus said, “You’ve heard what others have to say about Me. Now I’m inviting you to come see for yourself.”

Jesus doesn’t offer a high-pressure sales pitch. He doesn’t tell them to “get religion.” He doesn’t wave the guilt and shame card. He doesn’t twist their arms. He simply asks a question—“What do you want?” and offers an invitation—“Come and see.” Jesus welcomes people—all people—to explore the possibility of knowing Him.

*Every relationship starts
somewhere, even a relationship
with God.*

The invitation Jesus offered to these two curious seekers remains as valid today as it was then. God *wants* you to know Him. Intimately. Personally. His invitation to “come and see” still stands. Let Jesus’ words take the pressure off, but let them also motivate you to pursue Him further. Don’t rely on secondhand knowledge of God. Some things in life are simply too important to sideline or delegate to others. You wouldn’t ask someone else to be your stand-in at your wedding; you wouldn’t hire someone to take your vacation; you wouldn’t want someone to replace you at the birth of your baby. And you can’t ask someone else to know God for you. We all must explore the possibility of meeting God for ourselves.

So start following even if only from a distance at first. Every relationship has a starting point, even a relationship with God.

But here’s the mind-blowing part: Just when you think you’re the one in pursuit of God, you begin to realize *He’s* the one who’s pursuing *you*.

Let’s go back to the Rob Cherry story.

At first glance, the takeaway of this little incident—spiritually speaking—is that we should be more like Rob Cherry; we should be the ones who are so enamored with God that we pursue knowing Him. And that’s correct. But there’s more. God is like Rob Cherry too. Enamored with knowing us, He follows us everywhere. Consider what King David, the second king of Israel, wrote in Psalm 139. Read it slowly, thinking about the words and how they apply to you:

O LORD, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me.
You know when I sit down or stand up.
You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.
You see me when I travel
and when I rest at home.
You know everything I do.
You know what I am going to say
even before I say it, LORD.
You go before me and follow me.
You place your hand of blessing on my head.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too great for me to understand!

I can never escape from your Spirit!
I can never get away from your presence!
If I go up to heaven, you are there;
if I go down to the grave, you are there.
If I ride the wings of the morning,
if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
even there your hand will guide me,
and your strength will support me.
I could ask the darkness to hide me
and the light around me to become night—
but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
To you the night shines as bright as day.
Darkness and light are the same to you.

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body
and knit me together in my mother's womb.
Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.
You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion,
as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.
You saw me before I was born.
Every day of my life was recorded in your book.

Every moment was laid out
before a single day had passed.

How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.

They cannot be numbered!

I can't even count them;

they outnumber the grains of sand!

And when I wake up,

you are still with me! (Ps. 139:1-18, *NLT*)

Now that's a God who pursues! God is always with you, no matter how far away you roam. God knows every detail about you. He knows when you sit down. He knows when you stand up. He knows your private thoughts, your secret longings, your deepest hurts and your biggest fears. He's seen you laugh until you cry, and He's seen you cry from a heart so broken it seemed your tears would never stop. He was there when you were formed in secret. He knows about every day you have lived so far and every day you will live from this day on. He thinks about you all day. Every day. Talk about a God who is crazy about you!

But maybe you're thinking, *I wish I had the confidence in God the psalmist seemed to possess. If God would just make Himself obvious, I could find Him; I could believe in Him.* The thing is, God reveals Himself today just as surely as He did then. We just have to be able to recognize His presence in our lives.

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Generally, God reveals Himself to seekers in one of two ways; the more obvious of the two is a dramatic, life-altering event. The sweet gal I mentioned in the introduction, who called asking, "How can I be God's friend?" experienced this type of event. Completely healthy her entire life, she woke up in the middle of the night to find she couldn't speak for a full 10 minutes. Doctors diagnosed her with a brain tumor. Within a matter of days she went from a vital picture of health to a patient in need of

brain surgery. Life as she'd always known it had forever changed, and the experience grabbed her attention. Suddenly, eternity became a concrete reality rather than a theoretical "what if?" As a result, she met God.

More commonly, however, God reveals His presence and pursuit through events that some people like to call "coincidence," but in reality they are circumstances God orchestrates to draw your attention to Him. It's the conversation about God you overhear at Starbucks that somehow seems meant just for you. It's the coworker who reads her Bible and isn't (totally) weird, but whose joy and sense of purpose you envy. It's the loving Christian family who moves in across the street just as your marriage and family are in need of repair. It's the believer who is enduring intense suffering but is filled with grace and peace. It's the teenager who decides to spend spring break serving the poor instead of partying with his friends. It's the unsolicited act of kindness you receive when life has gone from bad to worse. It's the seemingly random invitation to go to church or read a book—maybe even this one.

These ordinary yet uniquely orchestrated occurrences are meant for one purpose—to pique your curiosity just enough to explore the possibility of meeting God. When you tune into the circumstances of your life, you'll become aware of God's presence with you and His pursuit of you. As you sense God working in your life, take note. Don't chalk it up to "coincidence." Realize it for what it is—a circumstance in which the God of the universe has reached out to you.

Yes, indeed, God is a God who pursues.

Many women, however, struggle with believing God's relentless love could be true, largely due to a barrier of guilt and shame. *How could God love and accept me after all I've done?* We try to hide from God as a defense mechanism to cover our past mistakes and secret sins, resulting in one of two polar responses: We either avoid God completely or we set out to clean ourselves up before meeting Him. Women who choose the first response are thinking, *God demands too much, so I want nothing to do with Him.* Women who lean toward the second response reason, *If I can just get my act together, then I can meet God.* The trouble is, if we perceive God as a demanding tyrant or an uncaring sovereign, we will never seek Him. On the other hand, if we try to clean up our act before approaching God, we become burdened by religious do's and don'ts, which we can never quite achieve, so we continue to hide from God.

Often we harbor secret and not-so-secret choices that weigh down our burdened souls, leaving us to question, *How could God possibly want a friendship with someone like me?* If you've ever wrestled with thoughts like this, you're not the first. The woman

known simply as “The Samaritan Woman” struggled with these issues too. Her story, found in John 4, gives us a peek into another “first meeting” with God.

The Divorcée and the Divine

It had been a long day. Jesus was tired, worn-out and thirsty. All He really wanted was a place to rest His weary body. He spied a well in the distance, sat down beside the cool brick and shut His eyes for the briefest of moments. A woman approached—alone. It was an odd time to come to the well and even odder still for a woman to come by herself, but Jesus was glad that she was there. He asked her for a drink. Seems like a simple enough request to us, but not to her. She understood the implication of His question. In the ancient Middle East, men did not speak to women, since women were viewed as inferior, second-class citizens. Further, Jews never associated with Samaritans, who were considered despicable half-breeds. For Jesus to initiate a conversation with a Samaritan was shocking enough; but for Jesus to speak to a Samaritan woman? Unheard of.

But God is never bound by the prejudices of race or gender.

Warily, she gave Him a drink of water, and their conversation continued. He was unlike the other men she knew. He was kind and wise. He didn’t seem to have an ulterior motive. As they chatted, it became apparent that Jesus knew every detail of her life though she had never seen Him before this moment. She was surprised to learn that He knew she was not married, but she had been. Five times. And if five shattered marriages weren’t enough drama for one lifetime, the man she now lived with wasn’t her husband.

Imagine the stigma of being a five-time divorcée and a live-in lover in a Middle Eastern culture, 2,000 years ago. Envision the sting of betrayal and rejection this woman endured in a society where marriage and motherhood were a woman’s primary source of value and self-esteem. No wonder she traveled to the well alone. The women she once laughed with while dipping the day’s water now laughed at her. Better to live in isolation than endure their whispers and gossip. But the women had nothing on the men. Her heart had been shattered into a million tiny pieces, not once, but five times over, and the man she currently lived with didn’t even consider her worthy enough to put a ring on her finger. Truth be told, she didn’t consider herself worthy enough, either. After all that she had endured, she wasn’t a woman given to false illusion. Or

hope. She was a woman with a reputation and a past that could make a truck driver blush.

But a broken life and a tainted history never dissuade Christ.

He offered her living water, the kind that springs up from inside a human soul. She wondered what He could possibly mean. *Who is this man who breaks social boundaries and cares more about my heart than my body? I'm a nobody. My life's a mess.* But she didn't want to appear ignorant, so she added her one piece of religious knowledge. "I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us'" (John 4:25). Then Jesus declares, "'I, the one speaking to you—I am he'" (v. 26)

The woman who left her home to run an errand returned home having met God.

Just as Christ reached out to meet the woman at the well, God reaches out to you. Your background is irrelevant. Your past is unimportant. Your credentials—or lack of them—mean nothing. The compelling story of God is this: He bends low to be with us.

How? Sometimes God shows up in the most common ways. Far too many women assume that meeting God will be some sort of lightning bolt experience. Although God manifests Himself in a variety of ways, according to the needs of a variety of people, most people meet God in the midst of commonplace, everyday life. They're invited to church, so they go and learn of God's love and forgiveness. The message is living water for their soul. They buy a Bible and start reading about the life of Christ. His words are living water for their soul. They have a conversation with a Christian friend and the chat is living water for their soul. Simple. Uncomplicated. Ordinary. But with a most extraordinary result.

What God Wants

God wants a relationship with all people—those who seem to have life all figured out and those who don't. Those whose lives are going according to plan and those whose lives are falling apart; those whose lives are full of hope and those whose lives are filled with hopelessness. God wants to meet us all.

The question is not "Does God want to meet me?" The question you must ask is "Do I want to meet Him?" Whether or not you meet God depends on your response to Him.

When I was in college, I had a poster on my dorm room wall that read, "If you don't feel close to God, guess who moved?" The only reason any of us fail to know God is because we haven't taken the time to know Him. Maybe we haven't believed in His

existence. Maybe we have been busy with other issues in life. Maybe we haven't wanted to know Him. Maybe we've thought that meeting God would make our lives a bore. Maybe we've felt guilty and ashamed. Maybe we've felt like He doesn't care. Or maybe we just haven't known how.

God wants you to know that a relationship with Him is possible. There's only one requirement: You have to want it.

God speaks these words through the prophet Jeremiah: "I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:11-13).

The key to finding God is to seek Him.

*If you don't feel close to God,
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God isn't playing a cosmic hide and seek game with you. You don't have to seek a God that doesn't want to be found. On the contrary, you seek a God who wants you to know Him and love Him. That's why Jesus came to earth. That's why God gave us His Word, the Bible. That's why God orchestrates circumstances, people and events to draw you to Him. Your background, your life experiences, your age, education, marital status, family history, health and circumstances—both good and bad—are not accidental. They are meant for a greater purpose. These things—and so many others—serve as catalysts for you to meet God.

You may have been running from God for years. You may have been ignoring God for decades. You may have been seeking God in a variety of unsatisfactory methods, rituals and religions. Whatever your past, this much is true: When you seek God, you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart.

"What do you want?" Jesus asked the two curious followers. "Come and see," He offered. He's still asking the same question, and He's still offering the same invitation today.

Do you want to meet God? If so, perhaps it's time to start following God, even if only from a distance at first. He's already pursuing you.

When it comes to seeking a relationship with God, maybe we could all learn a thing or two from Rob Cherry.