

God's Face

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[0 : 00] Well, as I said, we're going to turn to Sam 27 for a short while this morning.

Now, a fortnight ago, we looked at the biblical image of God's hand, and we discussed how God's hand is used in the Bible as an image of God's strength.

God uses that strength to accomplish his purposes, and the wonderful thing is that he uses that strength for our benefit.

And imagery like God's hand is wonderful because it enables us to have a better understanding of God. We face the big battle in the fact that our own limitations are a handicapping factor in our understanding of God.

God is mind-blowingly big, and our minds are limited, and so we need help if we're going to understand more about God.

[1 : 12] Imagery like that of God's hand is great. It helps us to understand more. And God uses such imagery because he wants us to know more about him. He wants to teach us what he is like.

So today I want us to look at another of these images. This time we're going to think about God's face. And that's why what brings us to Psalm 27, and in particular the eighth verse where it says, the Psalmist says that you have said, as in God, you have said, seek my face.

The Psalmist responds, my heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek? You have said, seek my face. My heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek?

What does it mean when the Bible is talking about God's face? Well, when the Bible uses imagery like hand or face or whatever it may be, it is doing that because these are things that we are familiar with.

It's describing God in terms that we can understand and we can connect with the image that's being used. When it mentions a hand, we immediately can understand what has been spoken about.

[2 : 42] The same is true when it speaks of God's face. So we can start by thinking to ourselves, well, what comes to mind when you think about your own face? If you are to stop and think about our own faces, what's the significance of them?

Well, we can say four things briefly to begin with in regard to our own faces. The first thing is that our face is a key factor in identifying who we are.

And our face is unique in that sense. It is a wonderful means of identification. If I was to put a picture on the screen of somebody's right hand on the screen, say I picked somebody in here and I put a photo of your right hand on the screen, we wouldn't know who it was.

Maybe you could eventually work it out if it was somebody that you really knew. But the likelihood is none of us would recognize the right hand of anybody in here.

But if I put somebody in here's face on the screen, even for a tenth of a second, and you just flashed up and came down, you would all know who it was.

[3 : 51] And we often speak of putting a face to a name, because that's what happens when we really know who somebody is. You might know somebody's name, but if you don't know their face, then something is missing.

A face without a name is inadequate. So a face is a key expression of our identity. But not only does it reflect who we are, it also reflects how we are.

Because our face can express a huge range of emotions. Our joy is shown through a big smile. Our sorrow flows out with our tears.

Our anger or our frustration can tighten our faces. And when we're afraid of something, our face will drain away all its vitality, all its life.

And today, as we said, it's Valentine's Day. You can show somebody that you love them without even opening your mouth. So our faces reveal a huge amount of who we are.

[5 : 00] I don't know about you, but I'm one of these people who can't hide anything. I would be hopeless if I was a poker player or something like that, because I cannot conceal anything.

If I try to buy a present for Yuna, she knows before I've even wrapped it or anything that I've got something, and usually she's able to guess what it is, because I can't hide anything.

And I'm sure some of you are like that as well, and we all express ourselves through our faces.

That's why when something amazing happens, we all say you should have seen the look on their face, because that expresses how they are. And in exactly the same way, you can tell if somebody is broken, just by looking at their face. So our face, who we are, how we are.

But our face is also, thoroughly, a means of contact with other people. When you're separated from somebody, you can keep in touch in various ways. And today, we live in the wonderful modern age where we have lots of means of keeping in contact, by phone, by text, by writing, by Skype, all sorts of opportunities, and means whereby we can keep in touch with people from whom we are separated.

But I am sure every single one of you will agree that none of these compare with being face to face. If you're away from somebody, it's great if you can contact them, but there's nothing like being face to face.

[6 : 39] And Paul often speaks about this in his letters, here's an example from verse Thessalonians 2, verse 17. But since we were torn away from you brothers for a short time in person, not in heart, we endeavored more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you.

I, Paul, again and again, but Satan hindered us. So our faces are an expression of contact, of close contact with people, to be face to face with someone, is to be close to them, and that makes perfect sense, because if you are away from somebody you love for a long time, and you run in the door and you see them at long last, you don't look at their feet, you don't look at their hands, you look at their face. That's where we connect with people.

But it's not just a means of contact, it's, fourthly, a means of communication with other people as well, because our faces enable us to communicate.

For example, a parent can warn their children just with a look, maybe even a wife can warn her husband with just a look.

A guest can be warmly welcomed with a look, with a smile, and even a baby who can't speak can tell their mother that they need something just by looking at them.

[8 : 11] So our faces are incredibly powerful, incredibly effective, and they are a huge part of what we are and of how we interact with other people.

And these four things that we've said can be summed up with two big principles regarding our face. Our faces reflect openness, and they reflect closeness.

These two big headings, openness in the sense that we show who we are through our faces, and closeness in the sense that we interact and have relationships with other people through our faces, through our facial contact and behaviour.

So these two things are going to come up again and again as we consider this image of face, openness and closeness. So this is really interesting because openness and closeness are two things that we are quite often very afraid of.

People can very often be afraid of openness, people can very often be afraid of closeness. We can look back and manifest itself in many, many ways, but people don't like other people to know too much about them.

[9 : 40] A lot of people tend to keep their distance. A lot of us won't share our deepest thoughts or worries or concerns with one another.

We tend to be closed, we tend to step back, and we tend to filter how we present ourselves to other people. This is something that is very, very, very prominent in Facebook.

Because you see that on Facebook a lot of people are able to control how they present their lives.

And I don't know about some of you, but sometimes going to Facebook can be quite depressing because you go and you see somebody else's life and their house is always tidy, their car is always washed and everything always looks perfect.

And you think, oh, what am I? Where am I going wrong in my life? But that's because people are very careful about how they present themselves. They are showing themselves on Facebook or in any other way, in a means that's controlled.

They're not being completely open. They're being open in a sort of restricted sense because we're scared of openness. We're scared of people knowing what we're really like. We're scared of people criticising us or looking down on us when they see the faults and feelings that we might have.

[11 : 04] So we're scared of openness and for the same reason we are scared of closeness. Very often you see that people are scared of being close to other people, scared of friendships, scared of relationships because there's always the threat of being hurt.

And for that reason people avoid it. People keep others at a distance and we are careful that we don't become too close to people.

So it's very interesting because the two things that our faces are almost built for, openness and closeness, are the two things that we're very scared of and that we push away.

And this means that the image of a face is a fascinating topic to look at. And it's remarkable that the Bible, that God in His sovereignty, uses this image in the Bible to describe how we interact with Him.

So what does all this teach us about our relationship with God? Why does the Bible give us the image of God's face? Well these two headings that we've said are our guide, openness and closeness.

[12 : 18] And so we can think about the first one of these for a wee while together. As we said, our faces are an open indicator of who we are and of how we are. Therefore if you imagine standing face to face before God, which we are all doing right now, you stand face to face before God, you are open before Him.

We are open and exposed before God. When He looks into our faces, and as He looks into your faces just now, you are open before Him.

Now there's two things I want to say in regard to that. The first is this, that reminds us of the wonderful fact that God has got the deepest personal interest in you.

God does not want to keep you at a distance. God does not want some sort of vague acquaintance with you.

God isn't thinking, oh I wonder who's in church in Carlyway this morning. God has got the deepest interest in you. Your face reflects you, what is personal to you, and that is what God is interested in today.

[13 : 53] God knows you, God knows every detail of you, every thought, every dream, every desire, every fear, everything that is deeply personal to you, God is interested in that.

God has the deepest, deepest personal interest in you. And we stand before Him, open, our faces are showing Him who we are.

And we can't hide, as I said I'm the kind of person who can't hide anything. Maybe some of you are good at hiding things. Maybe you can put on a good presentation in your face where behind things are very, very different.

But I'm not one of those people, I'm not very good at that. The hardness of that, no matter how good at hiding you are from other people, none of us can hide from God. God sees us face to face.

And our faces show him things, our faces show him our struggles. Sometimes I can look at people, sometimes I meet people and I can tell that they are struggling.

[15 : 03] And I'm sure you are the same, well God can see all the stresses, all the strains, all the burdens in your life.

Everything that makes your face tense, everything that burdens you, God can see that and He knows it.

Our face shows us, shows God our fear. Again, when somebody is scared you can see it in their face. We talk about you saw the fear in their eyes.

God can see in our faces everything that worries us, everything that worries you. Whatever it is that you're scared of, whatever it is that makes you pale, whatever it is that makes your face well up, God can see that and He knows what that is and He cares about what that is.

We are face to face before Him, you are face to face before Him just now and He knows everything and cares about everything that is being shown in your face.

[16 : 19] And our faces can show our regrets. Sometimes our faces are a giveaway in terms of our regrets and when we stand before God we are open before Him.

And He can see our mistakes, He can see our failings, He can see the things that we deeply regret. The things that we don't want anyone else to ever see or to ever know.

God can see everything when He looks into your face. And so on the one hand it reminds us of the wonderful personal interest that God has in you, the second thing that arises from this is that all of this exposure before God can make us want to hide our face.

Because we often use that language don't we? If we are afraid of something or if we are weak, what do we say? I can't face it in the sense that we want to hide our face from it.

And most of all when we are hit with a sense of shame we want to hide our faces. You look at a football match, somebody is through on goal, fantastic opportunity, they take a shot and they miss.

[17:56] What do they do? They hide their face, they cover their faces. And when we have that sense of shame all we want to do is hide our face.

And so when we are standing before God and when you are standing before God today, which you are, God looks into your life today and looks into your face, you are probably thinking he can see so much that's wrong.

And openness can make us feel uncomfortable. Remember what we said? We are all afraid of openness. There's so many parts of my life I would never want anybody here to know because we are all terrified of openness.

We are open before God and we know that as he looks at us we cannot hide anything and we can be confronted by a profound sense of shame.

And we see that expressed very clearly in Esther chapter 9 verse 6. Maybe this sums up what we're trying to say. God is, we are open before God, he sees us and the result of that can be that we feel like this.

[19:15] Oh my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God. For I order in equities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.

Maybe you feel like this today. Maybe there's part of you that wants to hide from God.

Now that might be for any number of reasons. Maybe it's out of a sense of weakness or unworthiness. Lots of people feel like that. They think I'm not worthy. I'm not adequate before God and you feel almost like hiding.

Maybe it's out of a fear of the unknown. That can be a huge reason for me to hide. We're worried about what might happen if we get too close to God or if we follow him in our lives.

Or maybe it's a fear of man, of what other people will say. Again, tying in with what we're saying about being scared of openness. Maybe you want to hide your face from God today because you know that you're a sinner.

[20:31] And you know that you need to become a Christian. And maybe that's scaring you. And maybe it's making you want to hide.

Well, if you feel like that, what we are about to say is the most important thing you will ever hear. Because the image of God's face does not just tell us about the fact that we are open before him. It also tells us about closeness that God wants us close.

And we see that in Psalm 27. And I'm going to read through the Psalm quickly. It's a short Psalm, but we'll read through it. And as we're reading through it, I want you to note all the threatening situations that are described.

The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? When evil doers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.

[21:43] Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I've asked of the Lord, that this, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple, for he will hide me in his shelter.

In the days of trouble, he will conceal me under the cover of his tent. He will lift me high upon a rock, and now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me. And I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy.

I will sing and make melody to the Lord. Here, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me. You have said, seek my face. My heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek?

Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger. O you who have been my help, cast me not off. Forsake me not, O God of my salvation, for my father and my mother have forsaken me.

But the Lord will take me in. Teach me your ways, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Give me notch to the will of my adversaries. For false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence.

[22 : 52] I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord.

Now, this Psalm is fascinating because it is full, full of threatening and dangerous situations. David speaks of evildoers. He speaks of enemies. He speaks of an encroaching army of war, even of being abandoned by those closest to him. And all of these are situations that would make every single one of us want to run and hide. But the emphasis of the Psalm is that in all of these awful situations, God is there for David. And that's why, although the Psalm describes all sorts of difficult scenarios, it's a Psalm of triumph, which is summed up by the words of verse 1, The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life.

Of whom shall I be afraid? Now, that verse is not saying nothing is ever hard in my life. It is saying, even though things are very often hard, I can lean on God and take comfort and help from him.

David's struggles in this Psalm are incredibly real, but in all of them, God is there to help.

And it's summed up by the wonderful words of verse 8. You have said, seek my face. My heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek. And all the chaos and all the struggles that this Psalm describes in David's life, God is saying to you, seek my face. And you can almost imagine it in your mind.

[24 : 39] Imagine David standing with all the chaos that is going on in his life, the threat of war and enemies attacking and unrest near and far. And yet in that, his eyes are on God. He is looking at God and God is looking at him. And of course, although the details of the situations in this Psalm may be different from our own lives, the message is the same. Our struggles might be different from David's.

Our mistakes might be different from David's. Our fears might be different from David's. We might have very different reasons why we want to hide our face, but God's message to you is exactly the same as it was to David. Seek my face. And this is where we see everything coming together in an amazing way, because as we said, our faces leave us open and exposed before God. God looks at us and he sees everything. Imagine I could put onto that screen every thought that has gone through your head since you came into this building. We would hate that. And we are exposed before God in that sense. And that makes us want to hide.

It makes us uncomfortable. It makes us feel ashamed. And we think God would just want to turn his back on us. God would just want to keep us as far away as possible. But the amazing thing about God is that he is not keeping his distance and he is not turning his back. He is doing the exact opposite. He is saying, seek my face. And when God says that, he is telling us that he wants us to know him and that he wants us to be close to him. And he is doing two amazing things. God is opening himself to us. Remember what we said?

Faces are all about openness and he is drawing us close to him. Remember, they're also about closeness, openness, closeness. God opens himself up to us and God draws us close to him. And I want us to develop these two things in a little bit more detail in the last few minutes. God opens himself up to us. And that's the message that has been given to us when he says that he wants us to seek his face. And we sang about that in Psalm 67 about God shining his face upon us and it runs right through scripture. This theme that God is opening himself up to us. And all of that culminates in the ultimate revelation of God himself, which is Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God is showing us what he's like, showing us God's character, showing us God's priorities, showing us God's goodness. All of these are revealed to us when we look at Jesus. And this is where we come to the passage that we read in 2 Corinthians because this is why Paul said, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness has shone into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 15] If you want the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in other words, if you want to know what God is like, you look at the face of Jesus Christ. And that's where the gospel narratives are so wonderful because they can give us an insight into what Jesus was like. And we can imagine all the situations that we read about in the life of Jesus.

Think about how compassionately Jesus looked at people who were sick. Think about all the people that he healed, people who nobody else wanted anything to do with, and Jesus looked at them with compassion. Think of the compassion in his face.

Think of the time when Jesus looked at Jerusalem and saw the hardness of people's hearts there. And think of the anguish on Jesus' face as he did that. Think of Jesus standing at Lazarus's grave when he saw the effect that death has on us and on families and on life and that tear came from Jesus' eye.

Think of the sorrow in his face when he stood there. Think of Jesus being accused and mocked at his trial at the hands of the Jewish leaders. Think of what his face would have been like then. Think of the seriousness on his face as he stood and faced all their persecution.

Think of his face as he hung on the cross. Don't think for a moment that Jesus was on the cross and he was able to hide everything. Think of the absolute agony in his face as he hung there on the cross. Think of his face. Think of how he would have looked.

[30 : 10] Think of the joy on his face when he appeared to the disciples on the day of the resurrection and said, Peace be with you. You think of all these disciples in fear, in anguish. They got the door locked because they're so worried about what's going to happen.

And Jesus comes amongst them and he says, Peace be with you. Think of the joy that there must have been in his face. And think of the love that his face would have shown when he called people to himself and made the wonderful promises like what we read in John 6.37.

That whoever comes to me, I will never cast out. As you think of Jesus' face, you are seeing the glory of God. The glory of the Father is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. God is opening himself up to you.

And this is wonderful because remember what we said, how we feel uncomfortable before God. We think God can see into us. We're exposed before him and that can make us feel very, very uncomfortable. But God doesn't just come and sort of examine us and then walk away. We're keeping himself hidden.

God opens himself up to us as well. This is what Paul was speaking about in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 that we read.

[31 : 29] I'll just pick up some of the key points in this passage. Paul was making a comparison between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And he was saying how in the Old Testament, there was always a restriction on how much access people had to God.

He refers to Moses, that Sinai. Moses came down, but as he came down, he had to veil himself. Because verse 13, not like Moses, he would put a veil over his face so the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what had been brought to an end.

But their minds were hardened for to this day when they read the Old Covenant, that same veil remains unlifted. Because only through Jesus Christ is it taken away. All through the Old Testament, whether it was at Sinai, whether it was when the Tabernacle was built, whether it was the temple, the curtain in the temple, there was this limit on how much access people had to God. Paul is saying now that has changed because in Jesus Christ, we have open access to God. That's what he's talking about in verse 14. Through Christ, the veil is taken away.

That's why the veil of the temple was torn in two when Jesus died. Because God has opened the door for us to come to Him.

[32 : 49] And the Gospel is a wonderful message of openness. We can come to God. That's why we can pray in Jesus' name. That's why Jesus is the door. That's why he is the light of the world. He is there for all to see.

And in Christ Jesus, God is opening Himself up to every one of us. God is opening Himself up to you.

And please don't ever, ever think that because God knows what you are like, He wants to push you away. Please don't ever think that because God can see into your heart that He wants to turn His back.

Please don't ever, ever think like that. Never think that Christianity is a sort of closed off, exclusive club for the good ones.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Gospel, God is opening Himself up to us. That's why we read from John chapter 1 at the beginning. No one has ever seen God. It's restricted.

[33 : 51] But the only God who is at the Father's side, that's God the Son, that's Jesus. He has made Him known. God is opening Himself up to us.

But not only does God open Himself up to us and that He shows us Himself through the face of Jesus Christ. He also shows us His face so that we would be close to Him.

Remember what we said? The image of the face is speaking to us about openness and closeness. To see someone's face, to be face to face with them, is to be as close to them as possible.

So when God says, seek my face in Psalm 27 and in all the other parts of the Bible where it talks about God's face, it is telling us that God wants you to be close to Him.

God wants to be with you, to be really with you. God wants to be permanently alongside you. God wants to be constantly upholding you. God wants to be continuously leading and guiding you.

[34 : 59] God wants to be with you face to face. That means He'll know everything. He'll know every struggle. He'll know every mistake. He'll know every circumstance in your life that makes you feel ashamed. He knows that anyway. But despite all that, and because of all that, He wants us to be as close to Him as possible.

Now, this is amazing because God wants us to be so close to Him that He even wants us to come and to use Him as a hiding place.

We see that if we go back to Psalm 27 because verse 5 says, He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble. He will conceal me under the cover of His tent.

Remember what we said at the start? The things that we do wrong, the mistakes that we make in our lives, the insecurities that we have, the failings that we all struggle with, all of these make us want to hide our faces.

And God is saying, you can hide in my arms. And this is incredibly important because our instincts might be telling us to hide from God.

[36 : 23] Our instincts might be telling us that Christianity is something that we don't really need or it's just not for me just now. Our instincts can tell us that I don't want to be too close to the church, I don't want to be too close to other people, and I don't want to be too close to God.

And yet God is saying, the very opposite, God is saying, I want you to hide in my arms. God does not want you to hide from Him, God wants you to seek His face and to hide in His arms.

And I think that is the most comforting thing that we can ever, ever hear.

Because if you feel exposed, if you feel isolated, if you feel threatened, if you feel worried, if you feel ashamed of yourself, God is saying, seek my face, come and hide in my arms.

Now that is such an incredible comfort. That's why Sam34 says, those who look to Him are radiant, their faces shall never be ashamed.

[37 : 57] So God is saying to you and to me today, seek my face and that involves openness and closeness. You can't see anybody's face from a distance, we know that, that's obvious.

So please, please don't be afraid of being open with God. Sometimes we use the word hypocrite, the word hypocrite originally comes from a word used to describe actors in the Greek world who used to put on a mask.

And they were basically put on a mask, which meant that the way they appeared to other people were not the way they really were. And we can be so tempted to be like that with God, to think I need to kind of put on some kind of mask before God.

Either a mask of being good enough, or a mask of being knowledgeable, or a mask of being better than I know that I really am. God is saying I don't want any mask, I don't want any hypocrites, I want you as you are.

So don't be afraid about being open with God. And don't, don't ever be afraid of being close to God.

[39 : 13] We are afraid of openness because we think people will see all our faults and failings. We are afraid of closeness because we're scared of being hurt and we're scared of being let down.

God loves us even though he knows everything about us, so therefore we don't need to be afraid of being open before him. And we don't need to be afraid of being close to him because God never lets his people down.

He never, ever lets his people down. So God is saying to us all, seek my face.

And I hope that we are all like David and we'll say, your face Lord, do you guys see? Amen. Let us pray.