

# Omnipresence - Where Is God When I Need Him?

## Psalm 139:7-12

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, May 12th 2024

### I. Introduction: What Is Meant By Omnipresence?

Last week we started a mini-series on the attributes of God that I have titled, "Lord, I want to know You." - not just knowing *about* God but knowing *God* himself. And today I want to focus on the attribute of omnipresence. We all believe that God is omnipresent, but has that impacted the way we live? That's what I want to encourage you with today.

Let me start by giving J. I Packer's definition of omnipresence. In another of his books, *Concise Theology*. He says,

"God is present... everywhere in the fullness of all that he is and all the powers that he has, and needy souls praying to him anywhere in the world receive the same fullness of his undivided attention. Because God is omnipresent he is able to give his entire attention to millions of individuals at the same time." (p. 35).

I love that definition. Let me amplify on it a bit by giving a couple of implications of what he just said.

#### A. God is distinct from creation

First, God is distinct from His creation. There are pantheists who respect a bird or a tree as if it were a manifestation of God. It is not. Years ago there was a famous actress who claimed that she was god and that you are god and, really, everything is god. That is wrong. Though God is present everywhere, including *in* a tree, He is *not* part of creation. Instead, He is the *maker* and *sustainer* of creation. Creation and God are different. Cornelius van Til liked to speak of the Creator-creature distinction. That is a super important distinction. The concept of God being like the Force in *Star Wars* is heresy.

#### B. God cannot be contained by creation

Second, God cannot be contained by creation. If you could travel enough light years to reach the edge of the universe and look out (if it were possible for us to look out of the universe) God would be there outside the universe as well. This is what makes God so transcendent and awesome. This is what humbles us and makes us sometimes weep when we experience His presence. We realize that God is so great - so other, that it is sometimes more than we can handle to experience His presence. Theologians call this God's transcendence.

#### C. God is extremely close to us

Third, God is extremely close to us. Not only is He far beyond us (what theologians call transcendence); He is also close to us (what theologians call immanence). We don't have to

travel anywhere in order to find God. Finding God is an attitude of heart, not a spatial thing. That was David's point in the Psalm we read. He couldn't escape from God's presence by traveling.

#### D. God is close to us with every part of His being

Fourth, God is close to us - not just with *part* of His being, but with all of His being. Because God does not fill space, God can be in the closest relationship with each of us with all of His power, all of His love, all of His holiness or whatever other attribute you might want to look at.

I think you will enter into a new richness of appreciation for who God is if you look at each attribute - such as His holiness, His love and other attributes, as a perspective on every other attribute - as a perspective on the whole of God. For example, when we experience God's presence (what we are going to be looking at today), He sometimes manifests His presence with an overwhelming sense of holiness that brings fear to our hearts. Sometimes He manifests His presence with an overwhelming sense of love or peace that gives comfort. Sometimes He does so by giving us wisdom or power. But *all* of God is present. So hopefully that gives you a good picture of what omnipresence means.

## II. If God is truly omnipresent, then why must we “seek Him” or how could He be “near” or “far” from us? What is meant by Exodus 33:12-23 or Psalm 51:11, etc.? What is the difference between knowing that God is present and experiencing His presence?

But that brings us to point number II. If God is truly omnipresent, then why does the Scripture command us to *seek* Him? Why does David groan because God *seems* so far off at times, and yet at other times David can speak of God's nearness to him? What's going on?

The only explanation that does not amount to a contradiction of Psalm 139 is that there is a difference between *knowing* that God is near, and *experiencing* the nearness of God. Let me just use an analogy that might help to understand this idea of distance. Occasionally over the past few years I have had wives tell me that they feel distant from their husband. We know what that means. It doesn't mean that they don't live in the same house. It means that there is a distance in their *relationship* - the main subject of this series.

Let me read two verses from Psalm 38 that describe this *sense* of distance from God. It's Psalm 38:21-22. David says, “Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!” Now think about this - if God was far away in a physical or spatial sense, then there would have been no point for David to even bother *trying* to pray to God because God would not have *heard* His prayer. David *knows theologically* that God is present in some sense when he prays or he would not have bothered to pray. *But David is not satisfied with that.* He wants to *experience* God's nearness.

Let me read from Psalm 22. This is the Psalm that describes the crucifixion of Jesus in vivid detail. It's a prophecy of the exact words that Jesus would say. It describes the physical pain

of the nails, the verbal abuse of others, and other details of the crucifixion that we find in the Gospels. It speaks of His being stripped naked, His thirst and other miseries He faced. But I believe the most painful thing that Jesus experienced was being forsaken by God. God was *spatially* present with Christ in this Psalm, but Jesus lacked the comforting fellowship that He had had with the Father throughout His life. That's why Jesus says in verse 1,

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? [In what sense had God forsaken Jesus? Well, He goes on to describe that] Why are you so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent.

The Psalm then goes on to talk of *knowing* about God's presence, but He longed to have the *experience* of that presence which had been broken when the Father turned His back upon the Son. That was the first time He had *ever* experienced that. Throughout His life Jesus had the reality of God's presence ministering to Him, but that had now stopped while He was on the cross. In verses 9-11 He says,

Psa. 22:9 But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. 10 I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God. [But then in verse 11 He says that He had lost that sense of the Father's presence. He says,] 11 Be not far from Me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help.

Why did Christ go through that? The answer is that He was temporarily forsaken by God so that those who put their trust in Him for salvation would not have to be forsaken. Now remember that God is omnipresent, so it was not a spatial forsaking. God simply withheld the *comfort* of His presence so that Christians would not have to go through that. Here's the point: *It is not normal to feel forsaken by God.* And the second half of the Psalm speaks of the closeness that God's people can have with God *because* of what Christ went through. Again, that is not merely intellectual. It is the experience. Jesus purchased for you the privilege of experiencing His presence with you. Value it. It was purchased at great cost to Jesus.

So why do we sometimes lack the sense of His presence with us? Sin is one reason. In Psalm 51 we have David's prayer after Nathan confronted him over his adultery with Bathsheba. David recognized how his sins had alienated God and made him lose the sense of God's presence. The Puritans spoke of this as God's *desertions* of His saints. God deserts them so that they will begin to be uncomfortable in their sin and so that they will be motivated to run closer to the Lord. What one Puritan said is that God deserts us temporarily so that we will not desert Him. And of course the Lord promises, "Draw near to Me, and I *will* draw near to you." So hopefully I have explained adequately what it means to enjoy the attribute of God's omnipresence - not just knowing about it, but experiencing it.

### III. What is the benefit of experiencing God's presence?

But I've included the next point to try to motivate you that there are so many benefits to experiencing God's presence that it is worth the effort of learning how.

## A. It ministers to loneliness (Ps. 71:9,18; Childers)

The first benefit is that feeling God's presence with you can profoundly minister to your loneliness. And loneliness is everywhere. In a major American survey conducted back in 2020,<sup>1</sup> 3 out of 5 Americans considered themselves to be consistently and profoundly lonely. That is stunning - 3 out of 5 people in America. Keep this in mind when you engage in evangelism, because their loneliness could be one motivation for them to come to Christ. There are all kinds of other motivations that could move people to Christ, but this could be one of them.

And people give many reasons for their loneliness. Some say that they are lonely because of a divorce. On the other hand (interestingly), there are plenty of people who feel lonely *in* their marriages. There's a big difference between *feeling* alone and *being* alone. But there are a lot of people who *are* alone. The 2022 United States Census found that 29% of households are made up of one person living all alone. That's more than a quarter of the entire population. Another 29% of families have only one parent, with 80% of those single parent homes being single moms. There are a lot of lonely people out there.

But there is a kind of loneliness that is far more profound than being *physically* alone. There are people who live in a household, but they feel lonely in their household. The survey I referenced earlier speaks of loneliness at the workplace. There are plenty of people who work with them, but they still feel lonely. Some speak of being lonely in a crowd. Peter Tchaikovsky, one of my favorite classical music composers, was an extremely lonely man and said, "None but the lonely heart can feel my anguish." Well, here's the thing: Christ *has* felt your anguish because He was abandoned by the Father. And only *He* can minister adequately to anyone's loneliness.

The writer of Psalm 71 had experienced the comfort of God's presence throughout his life, but when he wrote that Psalm in his old age he once again ran to the Lord as the only solution to a new-found loneliness. He said, "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails... do not be far from me." And God answers his prayer in that Psalm, and the author speaks of how the reality of God's presence banished the feelings of emptiness and loneliness that he felt. Praise God! That is what I am hoping each one of you can know.

### 1. False solutions to loneliness

But we too often are content with substitutes to fill that gap of loneliness. (And I'm spending more time on this first issue of loneliness because it is so prevalent.) Let me quickly go through some substitutes for Christ that are not adequate solutions to loneliness.

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted by Cigna <https://newsroom.thecignagroup.com/loneliness-in-america>

### a) *Busyness*

Busyness is the first way that some people cope with loneliness. “If I just stay busy, I won’t have time to think about how lonely I am.”

### b) *Buying new things*

Others buy new things. And the good feelings that can come from owning a new TV or from riding in a new car can *temporarily* alleviate the feelings of loneliness. But you all know how that that eventually lets you down and actually *compounds* the problem.

### c) *Affairs*

Some have tried to fill the void in their hearts through adultery. The thrill of a temporary relationship where you are accepted without questions is too strong for some to resist. Why? Because they are so lonely. And yet as they get to know the new person, disillusionment sets in and they are on to another search. If you are lonely in your marriage, a change in your spouse will not help. Only the Lord can supply the help you need. And as we will see later, experiencing the presence of the Lord ministering to you will so strengthen you that it will improve your relationships with others.

### d) *Drugs*

Drugs is the fourth substitute. In poll after poll, one of the frequent reasons given for drug abuse is that the people feel lonely, and the drugs mask or sublimate the feelings of loneliness for a time. But when the emotional high wears off, they are lonelier than ever.

### e) *Marriage*

Single people will seek to answer loneliness with marriage, but if you have not solved your problem of loneliness as a single person, you will probably carry your loneliness into your marriage.

### f) *Wealth*

Yet another substitute is wealth - or at least accumulating more money and more possessions. Solomon can tell you how lonely you can feel when you find your satisfaction in *anything* but God Himself. Solomon was one of the richest people alive, yet he said, “Emptiness of emptiness; all is empty.” Or as our version renders it, “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” Howard Hughes (an incredibly wealthy man) said, “It’s lonely at the top.”

## 2. **The true solution to loneliness**

If you find yourself described in any of those ways, then you need to run to the true solution. David prayed this prayer to God: “Turn yourself to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” He wanted the reality of God’s presence. And Psalm 139 promises us that God’s presence is always waiting and ready for us even when we are on the run from God. David said,

...where can I go from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, you are there.

In effect he was reminding himself to stop running from God by going to any substitute for God's presence. Amy Grant has a song that says, "I love a lonely day, because it forces me to focus on God." View your loneliness as a positive that forces you to run to God. In God's presence is fullness of joy.

### **B. It settles fear, calms anxiety and gives boldness (Josh. 1:9; Psalm 31:20; Phil 4:4-9; Heb. 13:5-6)**

Let's quickly look at a few more benefits of an experiential theology of God's presence. Joshua 1:9 says, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua knew that God's presence could settle fear, calm anxiety, and give boldness. Notice I didn't say the *knowledge* of His presence.

You may have a hard time believing this, but let me confess that I used to have incredible stage fright; paralyzing stage fright. I had great theology, but it was God's *presence with me* that took me through my stage fright, not just the doctrine. Obviously there were other things that I needed to do to handle my anxieties, but learning to walk in His presence and to depend upon Him helped me hugely.

### **C. It gives great joy (Psalm 16:11)**

A second benefit is that it gives us great joy. You may wonder how Paul and Silas could have such joy after being beaten with many lashes and then being thrown into prison. That's not a situation that ordinarily would produce joy. But Acts 16 shows that God's presence with them produce a supernatural joy that doesn't make sense from a horizontal perspective. You might wonder how Richard Wurmbrand could be overwhelmed with joy and love in the midst of being tortured by the communists. His joy was a supernatural joy and his love for his enemies was a supernatural love. The only way he could explain it was that God's powerful presence with Him *produced* that joy and love. Psalm 16:11 says, "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Are you lacking in the joy of the Lord? It may be an indication that you are failing to experience His presence in its fullness with you.

### **D. It helps us face death (Psalm 23:4)**

A fourth benefit is that it helps us to face death calmly. Psalm 23:4 tells us "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and staff, they comfort me." The experience of His presence with him ushered him into the comfort of God's attributes ministering to him.

### E. It helps us face betrayal or abandonment (Psalm 27:10; 2 Tim 4:17 with vv. 9,10,16)

A fifth benefit is that it helps us to face betrayal. Paul describes a betrayal that he had recently experienced in 2 Timothy chapter 4. In verses 9-10 of that chapter he said, “Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me...” And I bring this example up because God *Himself* says that He made us to need human companionship. It hurts when your friends betray you. Even unfallen man was made to need human companionship. In Genesis 2:18 God said, “It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him.” God made us to *need* human fellowship. That’s not a bad thing. But that need for human fellowship means that it *hurts* when we *lose* our friends, right? It hurts when we feel humanly alone. God does not deny that. So in this case Paul was genuinely hurt when Demas forsook him, yet God helped to replace that hurt by making His divine presence felt. In verse 16 he said, “At my first defense no one stood by me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. [now here comes the solution] *But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me...*” Don’t just intellectualize that. This is something we too need to experience. He said, “*But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me...*” Psalm 27:10 says, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me.” Those are just some samples of how God’s presence helps us to face abandonment and/or betrayal by family or friends. The experience of God’s omnipresence is a very *practical* doctrine.

### F. It promotes godliness (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1)

Point F says that the experience of God’s presence can promote godliness. I will comment more on that concept when we look at His attribute of holiness. But just as a hint of where we might go in that sermon, think of this scenario: if you wouldn’t watch a movie with Jesus physically in the chair beside you, you probably wouldn’t watch that movie when you experience the spiritual presence of Jesus. In other words, the sense of His presence helps us to make godly decisions.

And I won’t go through all of the rest of the benefits, but if you read the Scriptures tied with them, you will see that experiencing this attribute of God is very beneficial. Several verses in Hebrews 12 show that the experience of God’s presence helps us to persevere. Psalm 9:10 says that those who come to God as their refuge find their faith strengthened. Hebrews 13:5-6 says that God’s presence with us gives contentment and removes fear. These are all *huge* benefits.

**G. It helps us to persevere (Heb. 12)**

**H. It strengthens our faith (Psalm 9:9-10)**

**I. It gives contentment (Heb. 13:5)**

**J. It removes fear (Heb. 13:5-6)**

**K. It gives confidence in evangelism (Matt. 28:20)**

I'll just spend a bit of time on the last benefit - that it gives us confidence in evangelism. The encouragement that Christ gave that the Great Commission *could* be accomplished was, "Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age." In other words, when we witness to an unbeliever, Christ is right there with us accompanying our witness. David Livingston, one of the first missionaries to Africa, was surrounded by natives who were planning to kill him the next day. He wanted to flee in the night, but something happened that changed his mind. He recorded this in his diary:

January 14, 1856: Felt much turmoil of spirit in prospect of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region and this teeming population knocked on the head by savages tomorrow. But I read that Jesus said: "All power is given unto Me in Heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honour, so there's an end to it! I will not cross furtively tonight as I intended. Should such a man as I flee? Nay, verily, I shall take observations for latitude and longitude tonight, though they may be the last. I feel quite calm now, thank God!

And you know the incredible impact that David Livingstone had on Africa and on other missionaries. Sensing God's presence with him gave him a boldness that was so remarkable that it impacted all who were around him. It empowered Livingston to lead many to Christ. But sharing his insights on practicing the presence of God encouraged *others* to press into God. His simple testimony has brought courage and faith to countless missionaries that has enabled them to lead multitudes to a saving knowledge of Christ. The point is, even though it takes discipline to learn how to experience God's presence in a practical way, it is worth the effort. It really is. So I want to spend the remainder of the sermon looking at how we can learn to experience His abiding presence - what John Calvin called living *Coram Deo* - or living in God's presence.

#### **IV. How do we enter into the experience of God's abiding presence? (What Calvin called *corem deo*)**

And by the way, the list in your outline is not an exhaustive list of tips. I'll be giving you other tips in other sermons. But I think these steps should give you a great jump start.

### A. You must first come to know Jesus as Savior

I've added a point that is not in your outline. It is that you must first come to know Jesus as Savior. A lot of people think they are Christians because they go to church, read Scripture, pray, and live like Christians. But they have never personally put their trust in Jesus alone for salvation. J. H. Jowett told the story of how a minister friend of His first came to be saved. And believe it or not, he had been a minister for years before actually getting saved. The minister's name was Dr. Charles Berry. The article says,

Late one night a Lancashire girl with a shawl over her head, and clogs on her feet, called at Dr. Berry's home. "Are you a minister?" she asked. "Then I want you to come and get my mother in." Thinking she referred to some drunken brawl, Dr. Berry said, "You had better call a policeman to get your mother in." "No, no, sir; my mother is dying, and I want you to get her into salvation." Dr. Berry then enquired where she lived, and suggested that there might be another minister who lived nearer; but it was no use; she clung on determinedly. He wondered what the members of his fashionable church would say if they should see their minister out late at night with a girl of her appearance; but he just had to go. The house where she took him was one of ill-fame. In the lower rooms they were drinking and indulging in lewd conversation, but upstairs was the poor dying woman. Dr. Berry sat down and knew he must somehow talk about Jesus; so he told about His beautiful life and teachings, until, with an awful look in her deathly eyes, the dying woman interrupted, "Mister, that's no good for the likes o' me. I'm a sinner." Dr. Berry was dumb-struck, suddenly realising that he had no message for that poor, dying sinner. Then he recalled what his mother had taught him years before; and he began to tell the old, old story of God's love in Christ who died to be the Saviour of sinners. Soon the dying woman spoke again: "Now you're getting at it. That's what I want." In relating the incident afterward, Dr. Berry added, "And so I 'got her in' – and at the same time I got in myself."<sup>2</sup>

Brothers and sisters - too many Christians are only Christians outwardly. They have never come to *know* Jesus as Lord and Savior. And that is the first step. 1 Timothy 1:15 says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." Cast your sins on Jesus and by faith receive His salvation. And when you do, Jesus says, "the one who comes to Me I will be no means cast out" (John 6:37).

### B. Be willing to be broken before the Lord (James 4:6-10; Is. 57:15; Psalm 34:18; 5:5; John 14:21; Heb. 10:22)

But even true believers need to repeatedly come to him - not for salvation in their case, but to experience His ministry. What are some prerequisites for believers?

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from *Sola Scriptura Journal* Issue 1, Winter 1999. Published by Sola Scriptura Ministries, 1041 Cleveland, Meeker, CO 81641.

Let's start with Psalm 34:18. This Psalm says, "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart..." He's not near to the proud; instead, He is near to those who have a broken heart. A broken heart is the exact opposite of a prideful and self-sufficient heart. If you feel hopeless on your own, then cheer up because you are the best candidate to experience God's nearness. He loves to be near to the humble and the brokenhearted. The irony is that the better off we think we are in ourselves, and the more self-sufficient that we are, the *less likely* we will experience God's presence. So cheer up. If you have a broken heart, God promises to be near to you. Isn't that encouraging?

Now remember, since God is omnipresent, we are not talking about a change in God's location. Instead, we are talking about entering into the *experience* of God's presence. If we are unbroken before God, we cannot experience the sweetness of His closeness and His companionship. James tells us that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble and he tells us that the only way we can draw near to God is through humility. James 4 says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." That is the promise of a gentleman who has never broken His word. You can bank on that promise. When we are humbled before God, we enter into a sweet communion with the Lord. Don't neglect this point. Verse 10 says, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." 1 Peter 5:6 says, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care on Him, for He cares for you."

### **C. Claim the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:9-13; Gal. 3:5; Eph. 1:17; 2 Tim. 1:7)**

A second step that may be lacking in our lives is that we may never have *claimed* the gift of the Holy Spirit in faith. Turn with me to Luke 11. We often ask for the Spirit without faith that He will really follow through on what we ask. Our flesh tempts us to think that God wants to hold out on us. But that is a lie. He doesn't. He loves us, and He delights to give His Spirit to those who are of a humble heart. Luke 11:9-13.

And I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

How much more! God doesn't expect us to *earn* the Spirit's presence. He *delights* in causing us to enter into the enjoyment of the Spirit. Remember that "how much more." In Galatians 3:5 Paul says, "Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" Paul's point is that the Spirit's presence is there for the asking. You don't earn the Spirit's presence - even as a believer. Again, that is a great reason for encouragement. He gives Himself to all who ask in faith. And the moment you are filled with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit connects you to God's heart and *to the experience of all God's attributes*. The Holy Spirit connects you to God's love, His holiness, His patience, His comfort, His joy; His power.

### D. Claim His promised manifestation (John 14:21,23; Rev. 3:20)

Third, Scripture indicates that when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will automatically be drawn close to the heart of the Son and the Father so that we experience the attribute of His fellowship. God is not a unitary being; He is a God of fellowship because for all eternity He has existed as three Persons who delight in fellowship with each other. And because fellowship is an essential attribute of God, practicing the presence ushers us into this remarkable fellowship.

Let me read some Scriptures. John 14:23 says, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." That's a stunning verse. He is promising such close fellowship with Him that it is as if He has made His home with us. Claim that.

Last week we looked at Revelation 3:20 and how the church was invited to take Christ at His word as He knocks on the door of the church and desires to come in and to fellowship with us. I hope these verses are creating a longing in your heart to know His presence in a personal way; a relational way. Where one member of the Trinity is present, all three members of the Trinity are present sharing their deep fellowship with us.

### E. Wait upon the Lord; Behold the Lord in the stillness & silence of solitude (. 80ff Luke 5:16; Psalm 46:10; 27:14; 37:7; 130:5,6; Is. 40:31; 30:21)

The fourth thing that may be lacking in our lives is *waiting* upon the Lord. I want to spend a bit more time on this point because we tend to have a hard time waiting. (Or maybe I should speak for myself - *I* have had a hard time waiting on Him.) Let me read Luke 5:16. This passage summarizes a habit of life for the Lord. It says, "So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed." And there are other Gospel passages which speak of Him going to a quiet place or a deserted place to pray.

Why this need for a prayer closet or a quiet place? I believe it is because we are so busy and so interrupted by text messages, emails, phone calls, crying babies, and other interruptions that we have lost the ability to listen to God and focus upon Him. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." Do you have a hard time being still? It is one of the prerequisites to never losing the sense of His presence. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word for "be still" is to cease striving. So He is saying, "Cease striving and know that I am God." Even in our prayers we are often too busy - too striving. God wants us to begin to fill our thoughts and our soul with *Him*. One person commenting on this passage said,

"Get alone, get still, and get quiet before God. Don't ask God for anything; don't work on problems; think on his presence being with you and offer yourselves to him to be his temple. We have focused on ourselves, our needs, and our problems for so long that we have lost the reality of God. We need to learn to focus on him. God is a person who can be known in increasing degrees of intimate acquaintance as we take time to behold him." (pp. 81-82).

We need to remember that God wants our heart, not just our busyness. And as He sees us *desiring Him more than we desire His gifts*, He comes close. Some of these steps are so simple that we miss them. Psalm 130 is one of many passages that call us to wait for the Lord to come. It says, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits. And in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning - I say, more than those who watch for the morning." When you have that desire, God *will* reward it with Himself. He *will*.

## F. Renew your mind

The fifth thing that *may* be lacking in our lives is renewing our minds. Lord willing, we will look at this when we study God's omniscience or wisdom. And we will see at that time that transformation is not possible without the mind being engaged, and you will reap what you sow in your mind. So we are not talking about turning *off* our minds like Buddhists do. No, our mind is actively focused on expressing our love to God, our desire for God, our yearning for God, our desire to see Him glorified, etc. Let me amplify with some sub-points.

### 1. You will reap what you sow in your mind (Gal. 6:7-8)

Galatians 6:7-8 says, "...whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." You reap what you sow. If you are lazy in sowing fellowship with God you will not reap as much fellowship. That's pretty obvious, right?

### 2. Transformation is not possible without the mind (Rom. 12:1-2)

The next sub-point is that our minds are often too cluttered with things that don't count for eternity. Galatians indicates that every thought you put into your minds is a seed that will later be harvested as an increase. I don't want to be legalistic about watching TV, but you need to evaluate what kind of harvest you want to produce in your thought life. Kathy and I are systematically throwing away DVD videos that are marginal and not very edifying. We are trying to evaluate whether it has some content that is beneficial. Every thought we take *in* is a seed that is going to produce something. And God calls us to renew our minds.

## G. Begin practicing His presence

### 1. Relate even the most mundane things in your day to the Lord (1 Cor. 10:31)

But I think point F is the most important step. Begin throughout the day to practice the presence of the Lord. What do I mean by that? Well, get in the habit of relating even the most mundane things of your day to the Lord - things like taking a shower, and shampooing your hair, and running the vacuum. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." And by the way, don't think of being "spiritual" as escaping from life. No. It is the exact opposite. It is doing everything in your life before the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Include God in your marital intimacy. That is exactly what 1 Corinthians 10:31 is saying. Include God in the way you groom yourself. God made your body, increases your finances, cares about how you clean your house. Since He is the God of administration, He cares about how you budget and do

your finances. To be spiritual means relating the Holy Spirit to even the mundane things of life.

Now, I will acknowledge that this is easier said than done. It took me close to a year in my early twenties before this became natural to me. So let me recommend a book that has helped me to more consistently do that and at least on most days to never have a moment when I am not consciously operating before the presence of the Lord. The book is called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, and it was written by brother Lawrence back in the 1600s. He was a simple kitchen worker near Paris who learned what it meant to experience God's presence in the most mundane tasks that he did. He said that he didn't want to so much as lift a straw from the ground without doing it out of love for God and with a consciousness of God's presence.

## 2. in your prayer life (Eph. 6:18; 1 Thes. 5:17)

Let me read you a short excerpt from that book that illustrates what it means to pray without ceasing. Brother Lawrence said,

“On a normal, working day, I would try to fill my waking mind with thoughts of God... The Bible often began my thinking, and prayer always filled this out and made it personal to me. So, by the time I set off to work, I had already been in God's presence for an hour or so - not just on my knees, you must understand, but while I had been shaving and eating my breakfast too. When I got to work I would check on all the day's responsibilities. Then... I would briefly but deliberately commit it to God. I often used the same prayer, “O my God, you are always with me. Since I must now, in obedience to your will for me, apply my mind to my day's work, grant me the grace I shall need to continue through it in your presence. Help me to do this work to your glory. Receive it as a spiritual offering. And let my desire be only to please you.”

Then, as the day's routine began, I would know that I was as near God, and he as near me, as if I could have seen him there with my physical eyes. At the end of the day I would stop to think about how it had gone. If things had gone well, both in my work and in my consciousness of God, I would give him thanks. If it had not gone well, I would ask his forgiveness and, without allowing myself to become discouraged by my failure, I would set my mind right again and turn once more to thinking of God as if I had never stopped. So I can honestly say that, through the years of practice, I have now come to a condition where it would be as difficult for me not to think of God, as it used to be to get into the habit of doing so.”

He was simply obeying the command to pray without ceasing. We can't utter words all day or we wouldn't be able to talk to others. But if prayer is also an attitude and a constant awareness of God, and an offering up of all we do before God, our very attitude will continually be a kind of attitude of prayer and dependence.

## 3. in your Scripture reading (Psalm 119:18; Rom. 10:6-8)

Third, interact with God when you read the Scriptures. Respond to the Bible just as you would if a Person was audibly telling you these things face to face. If you don't understand

the Scripture, tell Him that. If you still don't understand what the passage means, rejoice that God's thoughts are above your thoughts and move on to another verse. When God promises peace, say in your head or even out loud. "Lord, I want that. It is missing in my life and I thank you for this promise. I claim that peace." When he confronts you with a sin, respond. And actually, before you even start reading the Bible, ask God to open your eyes to see *Him* in the Scripture. Psalm 119:18 says, "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Your law."

#### 4. in your worship (John. 4:23; Matt. 18:20)

Do the same in the worship services. Talk to God. Interact with God during my sermon. Respond to the Scripture reading. As you are singing, Colossians says that you must sing with grace in your heart unto the Lord. Don't just sing the words to yourself. Sing them to God. Practice a consciousness that God is always right beside you, and converse with Him.

#### 5. in your pursuit of holiness (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1)

As you seek to be more holy, see yourself as the temple of the Holy Spirit and determine that you not only want to keep outward sins at bay, but that you want the inside of the temple to be cleaned up as well. Daily give God your motives, your thoughts, your goals, and ask Him to tame your wandering thoughts. I'll read you what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 16:

16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." 17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty." 1 Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

The more you see yourself as being the temple or dwelling-place of God, the more you will want the inside of the temple that God *dwells* in to be holy. This will more and more cleanse you of Pharisaism and give you a *heart* that is in tune with God.

#### 6. in your relations to believers (Matt. 25:31-46)

When you talk to fellow believers, keep before your mind's eye that Jesus is also in them, and how you treat other believers is seen by Christ as how you treat Him. Practicing the presence will transform how you treat others. It will make you desire for them what you yourself are experiencing. Which might mean that you will confront them sometimes, and comfort them other times, and give them nudges to the Lord other times. In Matthew 25 Christ says that when you feed a Christian, you are feeding Christ. When Kate made that birthday cake for me last Sunday, she was making that cake in a sense for Christ as well as for me. When you visit a Christian in prison, you are visiting Christ because of Christ's close union with that believer.

Now, if you can lay hold of that truth and consciously serve Christ as you serve your brothers and sisters; consciously speak to Christ just as you would speak to them, it will revolutionize your relationships with others.

### 7. in your reactions to Providence (Job 1:20-22)

Let me give a couple examples of how to practice God's presence in your reactions to Providence. First, pray the news. I'm still old fashioned and like to get a physical newspaper or two, one of which is the Epic Times. It's not a perfect newspaper, but it gives me plenty of things that I can pray. But whether you read the news in print or online, interact with God about what you are reading.

When you read that the government is promoting yet another form of immorality, rather than just getting frustrated over it, share your thoughts with God. Acknowledge to God that you are sure that He is more displeased with the political situation than you are, and for His own glory you want these political situations to be changed. Offer up your sorrow to the Lord at how these things grieve the Holy Spirit and tell Him that you are amazed at His patience, that you do not doubt His wisdom, or power. Ask Him to intervene and change things. You may put down the paper to do this (in what we consider formal prayer), but more often than not you will just be reading silently to the Lord, knowing His care for the situation. You don't need to stop reading. Read it to the Lord who cares, just as you might read it to your spouse to get their reaction.

When you read about a shooting of a teenager in Omaha, ask God to be with the family. All it takes is a second or two to offer that up to the Lord. It doesn't have to be a long prayer. I had a brother who would laugh over something funny in a book and then be excited enough to read me what he was laughing over, or he would shake his head over something and tell me the gist of what he had just read. We can do the same with God. Interacting with everything that we come in contact with is a part of practicing the presence of God.

Another way we can do this is offering in our heads praise to God when the tire goes flat and telling God that you know that all things work together for good and that you are convinced that He has a good purpose for you in this slow down, and that you can hardly wait until He opens the wrapping paper of the present (as it were) and shows you His reason for being stranded on the road. Or as you watch your child play piano, be beaming inside not just to yourself, but beam inside *to the Lord* who *also* delights in the music of our children. Do you see where I am going? You need to learn to see every providence, including the death of a squirrel on the road, as something from God's hand for our good.

Now at first, the practice of this discipline may just make you more and more *conscious* of God's presence - in other words it will give you an increased *knowledge*. But as your faith grows, the overwhelming *experience* of God's presence will begin to perceptibly grow. And it is the *experience* of His presence that I want you to achieve in this brief sermon series.

### H. Be open to disturbing encounters with God (Psalm 115:3; 135:6; etc.)

The final thing I want to challenge you with is that if you really want His presence, then you really need to be open to God sometimes bringing disturbing encounters into your life. You

look through the Bible and you will see that God is not tame, as C.S. Lewis worded it in the Narnia tales. God is not tame; He is awesome. In one chapter of the book, Susan asked if Aslan (who represents Jesus) was safe. And Mr. Beaver answered,

“Safe?” ... Who said anything about safe? “Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

We have to receive God as He is, not a god of our own imagination who fits nicely into *our* system. And the reason I bring this up is that sometimes people are afraid that if they begin to open themselves up to experience the kind of intimacy and experience of His presence that they *want*, God might make them do something uncomfortable. We feel safe and comfortable in our theological bubble, and want God to restrict Himself to what we can understand and what we can feel comfortable with. Well, I’m sorry, it doesn’t work that way. God is bigger than our wildest imaginations. When we look at His power next week, we will see that with a word, he created our solar system, which is a tiny part of our Milky Way Galaxy - a Galaxy that is estimated to have somewhere between 100 billion and 400 billion stars, and our gigantic Milky Way Galaxy is only one of many Galaxies (some scientists estimate somewhere between 100 billion and 200 billion Galaxies. He created those with a Word.

The point is that God is bigger than us and when we enter into fellowship with Him, He not only brings comfort, but He sometimes overwhelms us with His transcendent power. He knocked Saul of Tarsus off His horse. God is God, and we receive Him as He is. But those who come close to God always say that they want to return to His presence time and time again - despite the fact that God is uncomfortable and sometimes unpredictable.

I think of the Narnia tale that had Jill first meeting Aslan. She wanted to drink of the brook, but was afraid to get close to Aslan. Let me read you that section because I think it is a parable of some of our hangups that keep us from entering into the joy of God’s presence.

“Are you thirsty?” said the Lion. “I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill. “Then drink,” said the Lion. “May I - could I - would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realize that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic. “Will you promise not to - do anything to me, if I do come?” asked Jill. “I make no promise,” said the Lion. Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. “Do you eat girls?” she said. “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it. “I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill. “Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion. “Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.” “There is no other stream,” said the Lion.

And that’s what I want to say to you. There is no other stream. All of the substitutes that we looked at last week and this week (like busyness, knowledge, service, success) can leave us worn out and joyless if they do not flow from a sense of God’s presence.

Certainly the journey to knowing God that we began last week can be scary and seem unsafe, but all of Aslan's citizens know that there is no other stream. As one man said in Lewis's book, *The Last Battle*, "It is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him." God has put into our hearts a yearning that cannot be satisfied by mere knowledge of God's presence.

### I. Keep yourself in the love of God (Jude 20-21)

And once you have experienced the reality of *that*, Jude (and many other Scriptures) say that we must build on the past and keep pressing into God. Jude 20-21 says, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

I pray that none of you would settle for anything less than the full enjoyment of experiencing God's *presence* on a daily basis. Amen. Let's pray.

#### PRAYER

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we want to know Your presence in our lives every day of our lives. Forgive us for those times that we wander away from You and when none of our thoughts include You. We do not want to so much as lift a straw from the ground without a deep appreciation for You and Your presence with us. Help us to practice entering into a consciousness of Your presence so richly that we pray without ceasing and serve You without ceasing. We acknowledge that You are everywhere, but we want to live our lives consistent with that fact. Thank you for your kindness and patience with us, and may Your grace draw us ever nearer to Your heart. We pray this in Jesus name, Amen.

#### CHARGE

Some of you may wonder whether the work involved in practicing the presence is worth it. But let me end this service with a quote that I couldn't find the author to. He said, "The wings of the dove do not weigh it down, they carry and support it." That is the way it is when we practice the presence of God by thinking about Him all the time. It is never a burden. It supports us and strengthens us in all we do.

And so I charge you to seek the Lord with all your heart; to practice His presence. Amen.