

Building a Relationship with God

Graham Jones

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To Linda, Kylie, and Oana,

Thank you for your friendship and your pursuit of God. It has been a joy and a privilege to have you in my life, and to walk through the adventures that God has planned for us. I am inspired, challenged, and grateful for the example of your relationship with God.

There is no greater joy for me than gathering with you, my friends, to worship the living God.

May we continue to do so in this life, and throughout eternity.

Graham Jones

Originally from England, Evangelist Graham Jones divides his time between ministry in Europe and the USA. Graham's heart is and passion is revival and seeing the presence and power of God released back into the church. Graham speaks in churches, conferences, universities, and businesses in many different countries each year. He brings a breath of fresh air and passion to God's people as he encourages them to come back to simple supernatural Christianity.

Graham is used particularly in the area of physical healing and has seen many people healed from all manner of sickness through simple faith in God's promises and the manifest presence of God. Graham is one of the only people ever invited to preach inside the United Nations in New York City resulting in many giving their lives to Jesus and people healed in the UN building.

In 2012 after 10 years of missionary work in France, Graham moved his ministry base to the New England area of the USA. Graham believes he has a mandate to stir revival in local churches and help bring another great awakening in the USA. He is currently working with local churches of many different denominations holding 1-3 day events aimed at releasing revival in the church and touching the surrounding communities.

Graham is involved in missions and church planting. He oversees churches in Europe, India, and North America. GJM works through relationships with local churches, seeking both to reach the world and equip the church with teaching seminars where believers are practically taught to move in the gifts of the Spirit and believe God to heal people. GJM works to see local churches moving in revival and the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

Graham and his wife Léa have a missions base in the town of St Etienne in the south of France. Graham has been an ordained minister with IGO (International Gospel Outreach) in the UK for many years.

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IN CHRIST SCRIPTURES

INTRODUCTION

The most glorious experience a human being can ever have is to come into a relationship and fellowship with the living God.

We were created by God. We were created for God.

For in Him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

It is only when we are connected to, and abiding in, that place of intimate fellowship that we will ever truly be satisfied. Jesus is the bread from heaven, and only He can satisfy us.

God has called us into the fellowship of His Son. (1 Corinthians 1:9)

How is your relationship with God?

Most of us live with a gnawing sense that there must be more than we are currently experiencing. We look back to a previous season when we walked in a high place with God, and often we look forward, in the vague hope, that a glorious and satisfying future awaits us.

God loves to take people on a journey. He loves to call them out of, and He loves to call them into. God will call us to walk off our map. A map is a known and defined territory. God beckons us to a place of circumstantial insecurity, but one of absolute relational security.

This book is an invitation to go on a journey out of a stale or unfulfilling relationship with God. God desires to call you out of

a manner of walking with Him that does not satisfy you, and into the only relationship He ever planned and designed for you—namely, the relationship He has with His Son.

Many believers live with a sense of hidden shame about their current relationship with God. We are clear about the glorious relationship we will occupy for all eternity, but we are not sure how to bring that into our daily lives, or even if that is possible. We are inspired by the example of others, and their relationships with God. We have looked at those who have walked closely with God as special people, with a particular calling of grace. The reality is that we are all invited into that very same fellowship. They are special people, but so are we.

The basic truth of this book is that there is only one measure for the relationship God wishes to have with you, and that is the relationship the Father has always had with His Son. You have been invited into the fellowship that exists between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You have been accepted in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:6)

In the following chapters, I will be exploring the glorious life that God offers us in this present life. I will be talking about the biblical truths, and practical habits we need to lay foundations to enjoy this life in the here and now. I encourage you to join me on the journey of this book, to be willing to be challenged to change your paradigm of thinking about what it means to walk with God. A promised land awaits you—a life in Christ Jesus.

He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness. (Psalm 107:9)

CHAPTER 1 - THE PROMISE OF LIFE IN CHRIST

We have been called. We have been called out of darkness, we have been called into light, and we have been called into a relationship with God.

God invites us to a face-to-face relationship with Him. He summons us to know Him. He bids us to walk with Him as Adam did in the cool of the day.

How do we do this on a practical level? What does it mean in the 21st century to live and walk with Jesus in a real and vital way in our daily lives? For many of us, this is both the greatest promise of our lives and the greatest frustration. What does it actually mean to have fellowship with God?

Much has been taught about how to begin a relationship with God. We have learned with ease how to assist someone in establishing that connection, how to guide them in returning from sin and repenting, how to lead them in calling upon Jesus in faith for salvation. We have taught how to begin a relationship with God; we have not taught how to maintain flourish in one.

For many of us, our only reference point is observing the Christian lives of others. We measure ourselves by our own standards. “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” (2 Corinthians 10:12)

Our true call is to live up to the standard of the high calling of

God in Christ Jesus. “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14)

Take the time to think this over. God is the happiest person in the universe. He is the most satisfied being in existence. His plan for every believer is that we would enter into the joy of the Lord. (Matthew 25:23)

God desires that you find satisfaction in Him. If we were honest, we would have to admit that this is not the testimony of the average Christian. Could something be missing? Is there a dimension of our relationship with Christ, a place in Him, that we have not learned to access?

I believe that we were created by God, and we were created for God. It is only when we abide in that relationship that we truly discover who we are, what our purpose in life is, and what it means to be fully satisfied.

In John chapter 4, Jesus met the woman at the well. Objectively, by every standard or measure of that day, her life was in disarray. She was moving from one relationship to another, searching for something to satisfy the emptiness within her soul. Jesus spoke to her about the living water that only He could provide.

“But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” (John 4:14)

Most of us are not truly satisfied with God. In many years of Christianity, I have never heard anyone stand up in a church and complain that God was not enough or that the Christian life did

not satisfy them. Yet, in spite of this, if we examine how we spend our time and where we direct our affections, it becomes clear that very few have ever had their thirst fully quenched by a relationship with Jesus.

Take a moment today and reflect. Who is the happiest Christian you know? Do you know any believers who are truly at peace and fully satisfied in their relationship with God? It may seem strange to phrase it this way, but I believe that every new believer occupies this place. In my experience, when a person first comes to Jesus and eats of the living bread that came down from heaven, they are gloriously saved and completely satisfied in Him. The problem is that all too often, they begin to take their understanding of the Christian life from those around them—the teachings of the church and the examples set before them.

Whether we have consciously thought this through or not, most of us are simply following the patterns set by others. This is not inherently wrong. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, saying:

“Follow me, just as I also follow Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1)

The challenge is that, far too often, we are not following those who are truly following Christ. Instead, we see the blind leading the blind.

Throughout all eternity, God has, and always will, live in a place of glorious unity, intimacy, and fellowship within the Godhead. It is beyond our ability to fully comprehend the glory that exists within the relationship that each member of the Trinity shares with the others. The glory of God is His love. The Father, Son, and Spirit are absolutely one in a relationship of perfect unity and

intimacy.

“At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.” (John 14:20)

The good news is not merely that we can be saved from something. The good news is not simply that we will avoid eternal punishment for our sins. As we will see later, the real and terrifying reality of hell is true and eternal separation from God. However, the good news is that our sins have been forgiven. We are not only saved from something, but we are also saved for something.

We are called out of darkness into light. “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” (Colossians 1:13)

The glory of salvation is not merely in what we have escaped, but in the relationship we have been called into. It is a beautiful sight to see a young couple deeply in love, committed to a lifelong relationship of affection, devotion, and intimacy. From that love, children are born. Does the arrival of a child diminish or divide the love that the father has for the mother and vice versa? On the contrary, it only deepens and expands that love. God’s true plan for every natural-born child is that they would step into an absolute place of love and fellowship that exists between husband and wife.

When we are born again, we are accepted in the Beloved. “To the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:6)

* * *

We are invited to step into the glorious intimacy that exists within the Godhead. In Christianity, we have scarcely begun to explore the depths of this reality. I believe that this book will take you on a journey—one of both knowledge and experience—and will help you to discover and explore that relationship. Selah.

How much time do you spend actually thinking about your relationship with God? I believe that most of us live and express our connection with God in an unconscious manner. It is often only when we feel unsure or insecure about our bond with God that we begin to contemplate the subject.

How often are we frustrated with our communion with God? As a pastor, in my experience, many believers simply accept their relationship with God as standard. They frequently live in a vague or undefined hope that their connection might one day change, and yet, by and large, they have accepted the reality of their current level of engagement with God as typical. I believe that many Christians hold the anticipation that, when we step into eternity, our fellowship with God will assume a completely different dimension. I believe that many of us live with the notion that, in heaven, our relationship with God will increase a thousandfold. While I completely agree with this notion, my question to you today is: Is it possible for us to step into such a connection with God in this “present evil world”? (Galatians 1:4)

The glorious truth that we will be exploring over the course of this book is that we do not need to build our own individual relationship with God. Building a relationship with God is not something that happens over many long years. Imagine if you had inherited a piece of real estate and you had the desire to build a wonderful home. It could potentially take you many months

and many years to think through the blueprints and plans, the architecture and construction, and finally to come to the place where you had built this wonderful new home.

This is how many of us view our relationship with God. Rather, I believe it is vital that we learn to look at our relationship with God through another lens. We are not establishing a relationship with God; instead, we have inherited a pre-existing relationship with Him. The glorious truth of the gospel is that I have Jesus's relationship with God. At the cross of Calvary, Jesus relinquished His relationship with the Father that I might receive it as a perfect gift. Relationship is received through inheritance. Our challenge is to receive a revelation of what we have received by inheritance and then to learn to live that out by faith in our daily lives. In fact, Paul addresses this in Ephesians when he says the following:

Ephesians 1:15-20

“Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and all things being subjected

to Him.”

When we seek to build a relationship with God based on our own efforts, we are destined to fail. By definition, we will resort and rely upon the things we can do to establish that bond with God. This is religion. The genesis of all religion basically comes down to self effort and self help. In fact, we are trying to climb a ladder from heaven to earth. We are attempting to please God based upon what we do, and what we do not do. We are resorting to eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and of evil, and seeking to please God based on our own actions.

The glorious truth revealed in this passage in Ephesians is simply that we have received everything by inheritance. Take the time to think that over. We are not receiving, and we will not receive in a future life; rather, we have already received this connection with God. Paul praises in this passage that the eyes of our understanding would be opened or enlightened so that we would know the glorious hope to which we have already been called, the inheritance that is already ours among the saints. As the Holy Spirit begins to show us the bond we have by inheritance, the power of God is released in our lives to enable us to live that Christian life. This is something which comes naturally and normally to a brand new baby Christian, and yet, all too easily, we lose sight of that gift and begin to try to earn it through our own efforts.

The challenge is that whenever we are constructing a relationship with God based on our own efforts, we are destined to fail. As we will explore in a future chapter, sin separates us from God. It is impossible to form a relationship with God based solely on our efforts because our efforts will always prove inadequate. Every

time we fail, we experience the separation caused by sin and its resulting consequence in our emotions, which is called shame.

I used to believe that shame, the emotional response we experience when we sin, would encourage us not to sin any further. I used to think that the shame would drive us back into the arms of God, into a pursuit of righteous living. The more I have worked with God and the more I have learned from His word, I have discovered that the opposite is true.

Sin initiates sin, and sin, in turn, produces shame.

When we sin, Satan comes and condemns us for that transgression and accuses us, as stated in Revelation 12:10. The resulting emotional response causes us to hide from God, exactly as Adam and Eve concealed themselves in the garden of Eden. We weave our own figurative leaves into garments and attempt to hide our nakedness and shame from God, ourselves, and others.

It is the declaration of righteousness and our right standing with God that brings us into fellowship and acceptance before the throne of God. We have been declared righteous by divine decree. We need to believe that righteousness is part of our inheritance. As we begin to learn these truths, embrace them, and practice them in our daily lives, a Christian life will flourish, blossom, and bloom. Those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through one Christ Jesus (Romans 5:17).

I began a relationship with God in 1984. I was brought up in a Christian home in the UK by parents who had a deep and sincere faith and walk with God. In spite of my upbringing, and the fact

that the things of God were always part of the background noise in my life, the reality was that they were never more than background noise. For whatever reason, I can only remember one occasion during my childhood when I actually considered that God might be real. I have a memory of being at Sunday school (children's church) around the age of eight to ten and hearing the teacher share her experience of conversion. She told us how, when she became a Christian, she had hardly slept for a week. She described spending long hours just laughing and crying with gratitude for all that God had done for her. I have a distinct memory of sitting in that Sunday school class, thinking to myself, why would someone spend hours laughing and crying unless something truly dramatic had happened to them?

My father deeply loved God and walked with Him in a profound way. One of the greatest desires of his heart was that his three sons would know God. Looking back from an adult perspective, I now see all the efforts he made to help us engage with the reality of God. At times, the depth of his commitment to God would embarrass my brothers and me. I distinctly remember a time in my childhood when, during a church meeting, my father fell to his knees and began sobbing. My brothers and I were embarrassed by the spectacle. Then my father began to shout out loud, "I cannot do this!" I only realized much later in life that what my father had been expressing that day was his own inability to bring his sons into a relationship with God, despite all his efforts. At that moment, God spoke by His Spirit into my father's heart and said, "All three of your sons will know Me and walk with Me."

From that moment forward, there was a distinct change in my father's approach. After this experience, he simply believed the

promises of God concerning his sons. He came to the realization that it was not his job to bring us into a saving knowledge of God; rather, that was the work of the Holy Spirit. As I look back on my early teenage years, I now recognize that my parents removed all of the obligation and pressure surrounding engaging my brothers and me with matters pertaining to God.

In July 2018, I was 14 years old. On the very first day of my summer holiday vacation from high school, my father invited me to go and hear Billy Graham. I did not realize until later that my father had been crying over the moment to ask me and hoping against hope that I would say yes for many months. From my perspective, my father asked me a simple question, and I replied, “Sure, why not?” That evening, together with my father and mother, we went to the large football stadium to hear the Reverend Billy Graham. To this day, I still find it difficult to describe what happened in my life that day. Simply put, I had an encounter with God. This experience had little to do with Billy Graham, his message, or his preaching. As I look back now, I realize that this divine encounter began when people in the stadium were singing songs and worshiping God. It may sound strange to somebody who does not understand the spirit of God, but for the first time in my life, the reality of God invaded my being. I could literally feel the presence and power of the Holy Spirit moving around this vast football stadium. This was not mere power; this was not mere emotion; this was a person.

Despite having grown up in a context of Christianity and matters concerning God, and despite being taken to church nearly every week of my life, until this point it never truly occurred to me that any of this was actually real. During the entirety of Billy Graham’s message, I sat in my seat, dumbfounded by the reality

of God's existence and the desire to begin a relationship with Him. It may seem ridiculous to say, but I was actually delighted when Billy Graham gave the altar call to come forward onto the pitch and begin a relationship with Jesus. I remember a brief moment of hesitation or embarrassment at my parents seeing me do this, but I knew I had no choice. I ran from my seat, down through the various layers of seating in the stadium, and onto the football pitch.

From that moment forward, I began a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That night, my life was changed. That night altered the trajectory of my life. To this day, I still distinctly remember the journey home. It seemed to me as if I literally did not need my parents' car to travel. I felt as high as a kite. I had met God. I had encountered Him. I cherish many wonderful memories of that initial summer of 1984 and the joy of exploring my relationship with Jesus. I joined a good local church and began attending regularly. My parents gave me my very first Bible, and I began to try to read and understand God's word.

In spite of this wonderful beginning, like many Christians, I soon began to experience frustrations in my walk with God. Nobody ever sat me down in a simple and systematic way and explained how to maintain a relationship with God. Every week, the wonderful church I attended would preach the gospel and invite people to respond as I had during that initial Billy Graham Crusade. It seemed that we knew how to effectively help somebody begin a relationship with Jesus, and yet, so often, as in my case, we did not effectively teach people how to build that relationship with Him.

During my teenage years, I began to play the acoustic guitar. I

think, though I cannot be certain, that somebody taught me how to play two or three guitar chords. That was the full extent of my instruction, tuition, or lessons in guitar playing. Over the years, in an ad hoc manner, I bashed away at the guitar. I would occasionally learn a new chord and try to play along with some of the songs I knew. Over time, I am sure that I improved, and yet I am equally sure that my guitar playing was absolutely atrocious. I distinctly remember that, around ten years later, two separate friends lovingly suggested that I record myself when I played guitar. They encouraged me to listen to the recording later to determine what others could actually hear. Like many guitarists, I had never once thought about timing or rhythm. My focus and attention were always on my left hand making the chords. It was a real moment of breakthrough when a friend suggested that I spend a season concentrating on my right hand, the strumming hand, and learn about rhythm and timing. This absolutely transformed my guitar playing and objectively made me a good rhythm guitarist. My point in emphasizing this is simply the following: time does not necessarily improve us in any area of our life. Time simply makes us older. Time can, in fact, reinforce bad habits in our life. When I began to get serious about my guitar playing, I actually needed to learn to break some poor habits that I had formed over many years at the motor skill level.

In the same fashion, I believe that many of us have learned in a random, haphazard manner how to build a relationship with God. Sometimes we have learned more from our mistakes and the mistakes of others than we have learned from scripture and all good biblical teaching. It is a sad fact, but I would humbly suggest that the vast majority of Christians have never actually taken the time to think through how to build, maintain, and

flourish in a relationship with God. As I look back now over my Christian life, there are several key junctures and moments where I learned some of the principles I will be sharing with you in this book.

After many years of ministry, I have come to the conclusion that most Christians harbor a deep, underlying frustration regarding their relationship with God. Religion tends to encourage us to conceal or disguise the truth that everything is not wonderful. Most of our church structures are built around the service, communal gatherings, and a shared set of activities. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this format, and indeed there is much benefit in it; however, it is not the most effective model for teaching and training people to build a living and vibrant relationship with God.

We can address this underlying frustration by simply concealing it beneath the veneer of religion. We can also manage this frustration by lowering our expectations. Much of the evangelical world has essentially accepted a low-level, barely functional, theoretical relationship with Jesus. We address this frustration by believing that there is some special ministry, gift, deliverance, or anointing that we might receive that will solve this problem. Ultimately, as evangelicals, we tend to postpone the response until eternity, whether at the moment of our death or at the return of Jesus. In my experience, the average Christian lives out the Christian life in a dysfunctional manner, completely convinced that, in an eternal future, we will step into a glorious, satisfying, and unimaginably wonderful relationship with our Lord.

There is a fundamental problem with this line of thinking. Jesus lives in eternity now, and so do we. We have read—or misread—

John 3:16 to mean that those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. We have understood this to mean that one day, after our death, we will inherit eternal life. Rather, the clear teaching of Scripture indicates that we have eternal life right now. We are seated in Christ in heavenly places at this very moment. Of His fullness, we have all received “grace for grace” (John 1:16).

It is not that we will receive it one day, pie-in-the-sky when we die, but right now. Colossians 2:9-10 (Classical Amplified Bible) states, “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and in Him you have been made complete, who is the head of every principality and power.”

The relationship that you will have with Jesus Christ throughout all eternity is available to you here, now, and today. John 3:16 states that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God, but I would prayerfully suggest that He is no longer the only begotten Son of God. Rather, He is the “firstborn among many” (Romans 8:29).

As we will explore in the pages of this book, we are not called to build our own individualistic relationship with God. Instead, we are called to inherit and enjoy a pre-existing relationship with God that we already possess. To do this will require humility and will require God to break some of our paradigms and religious ways of thinking.

I love the story of the prodigal son. In one way or another, we have all been the prodigal son. We have all walked away from God and gone our own way. We have all indulged our selfish nature outside of God, in more or less religious ways. If you are in a relationship with God today, it is only because you have come to Him in repentance. Like the prodigal son, you have

fallen at the knees of Jesus and asked for forgiveness for your sins. The glorious news is that, like the prodigal son, you have been washed, cleansed, and accepted back into the family. God has put the robe of righteousness upon you, and you are a much-loved child within His house.

The story of the prodigal son speaks to us when we are outside of Christ and on a journey back into the Father's house. The story of the elder brother speaks to the relationship that most Christians have within the Father's house. The elder brother is fully integrated into the life of the house, and yet he sees himself as a servant rather than as a son. His relationship with his Father has been downgraded by his own mentality and his own sense of having to earn his Father's blessing.

When the elder brother grumbles and complains to his Father, his Father responds with three glorious promises that I believe God is speaking to each one of us today:

“Son, you were always with me, and all that I have is yours.”
(Luke 15:31)

1. Sonship is declared by the Father. Sonship is given as a standing or status by God. It has nothing to do with performance and everything to do with our position. Both sons of this Father have always been His children, regardless of their actions. Your relationship with the Father and your status as His child are determined by heaven's decree, not by your perception of your own good works.

2. You are always with Him. God wants you to know that you live in His presence. It is true that we are not always emotionally connected with God's presence and that we do not always feel His presence. And yet, we always live in the fullness of His

presence. In His presence is fullness of joy. (Psalm 16:11) We need to learn to believe that we are living in God's presence by faith and then learn, through our faith, to appropriate that into our lived experience.

3. All that I have is yours. What a glorious promise! Everything God has is at our disposal. Our Father is the King of the universe. Our Father is the Maker and the possessor of all things, and He freely gives these things to you. He gave His Son; will He not also freely give you all things? (Romans 8:32) It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Matthew 7:11)

As we embark on the journey of this book, I encourage you to do so thoughtfully, prayerfully, and with joyful anticipation. My goal is not to give you a set of ideas or theories, but rather practical things that can help you to unpack, explore, and enjoy the relationship with Jesus Christ that you already have. In a very real sense, you can never improve your relationship with God. You have received, by inheritance, Jesus's relationship with God. You are in Christ Jesus right now. There is nothing you can do to improve or upgrade that relationship. In spite of this, there are very real, practical things that you can do to explore and enjoy this relationship. The Apostle Paul wrote to Philemon in Philemon 1:6, saying, "that your fellowship may be made effective in the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you, in Christ."

I encourage you to take the time to read that verse several times and think through what it is really saying. The way we effectively enjoy the fellowship that is ours in Christ is by realizing what we already have in Him and by constantly acknowledging those things to ourselves and to others. In the coming pages, we will explore practical ways in which we can

practice these glorious habits and build them into the fabric of our daily lives.

We will be exploring the habits of heaven. Daily practices determine the course of our lives. Our relationships are built on routines and customs. The danger for the average Christian is that we allow life, schedules, work, and many other things to dictate the course of our existence, and then we simply attempt to fit a relationship with God into the remaining gaps.

Over the course of this book, I will propose a radical rewrite of that narrative.

Is it possible that we can give the whole of our life to Jesus in the same way He has already given all of His life to us?

Is it possible that we can enjoy an ongoing and constant fellowship with God that remains unbroken, even when we are asleep?

Is it possible that instead of trying to confine God to a small quiet time of ten minutes each morning, we walk, talk, and abide in Him all day long, embracing an ongoing vine-and-branches relationship with Him in every aspect of our lives?

The challenge is clear. I love the journey, and I invite you to join me in stepping into a new place in Christ Jesus.

CHAPTER 2 - THE RELATIONAL KINGDOM

We have been delivered from the power of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love. (Colossians 1:13)

What is the kingdom of God? What do we understand by that term? I must confess that for years I had very little understanding or revelation of what this term actually meant. I found it fascinating that we can read the Gospels for years and, to some degree, ignore certain keywords. Jesus mentions the word “church” only two times, yet He mentioned the kingdom of God 125 times.

The message Jesus came to proclaim was that of a new kingdom. As I look back on my earlier Christian years, I now realize that I primarily understood this term to refer to God’s eternal kingdom that would one day be established at the return of Jesus, the final judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and Earth. In fact, the kingdom of God, in my understanding, was always a future hope and never a present-tense reality. We would look forward to one day entering into the kingdom of God. I believe that everything I have stated is completely true, and yet it lacks the vital truth that God’s kingdom is both present and completely available here and now.

John the Baptist comes preaching the soon arrival of the kingdom of God. John’s basic sermon was simply, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near” (Matthew 3:2).

Jesus comes preaching not about a kingdom that will arrive soon, but rather a kingdom that has now arrived. The message of Jesus is, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is here.” Throughout the

ministry of Jesus, He proclaimed that the kingdom of God is both present and available. Every time Jesus healed a sick person or set somebody free from demonic oppression, He proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come upon that person.

“If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20).

When Jesus sent the disciples out on short preaching missions, He told them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to demonstrate the kingdom of God.

“Preach the gospel of the kingdom, heal the sick, cast out demons; for you have received freely, freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

It is vital that we grasp the kingdom of God both from God’s perspective and from our own. From the vantage point of heaven, the kingdom of God is fully established. Simply put, the kingdom of God is the place where God is king. The term “kingdom” means the area or sphere of influence that comes under the rule or reign of a king. Thus, the kingdom of God is the place where God is king. In God’s presence right now, that kingdom is fully and gloriously manifested. The lion lies down with the lamb; there is no sickness, disease, tears, or pain. There is a perfect and glorious dominion, and everything within that kingdom exists and subsists in that realm of glory.

There is another truth that we must both grasp and hold onto. The kingdom of God exists in all of its fullness in eternity (in heaven), and it will one day fully come and take over this world. It is also true that the kingdom of God is both a present and

partial reality here upon the Earth. Simply put, the kingdom of God exists here and now in any place where the rule and influence of King Jesus is felt. We are currently living between two kingdoms. For those of us who have surrendered our lives to King Jesus and live under His Lordship, we live in, and under, the kingdom of God. We can live in the presence of God, under the order of God, the provision of God, and the healing of God. Nevertheless, it is true that right next door someone can be living in a completely different kingdom. “The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that the glorious light of the gospel of Christ does not shine upon them” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Jesus never actually commissioned us to build a church; rather, we were called to proclaim a kingdom. As we proclaim the kingdom, Jesus builds His church. (Matthew 16:18)

In Daniel chapter 2, there is a glorious story that is foundational to understanding the kingdom of God. I encourage you to read the whole chapter, but I will briefly summarize it here. King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that he did not understand. He called all of his advisers and wizards together and asked them to interpret the dream. They agreed and asked what the dream was. Nebuchadnezzar, being a cunning ruler, decided he would not tell them the dream; instead, they had to divine both the dream and its interpretation. The only member of his court who took up this offer was the Jewish servant Daniel, a servant of the true and living God. Daniel described the dream that the king had, and then brought God’s interpretation of that dream.

Daniel explained that in the dream the king saw a large statue with a head of gold, a chest of silver, a midsection of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. Daniel continued to say that in

the dream a small pebble, which had not been cut by human hands, came out of heaven and struck the statue in the feet. Daniel then said that the statue was shattered, and as he watched, the small pebble grew and grew into a great mountain until it filled the whole earth.

Daniel explained the meaning of the statue and God's message to Nebuchadnezzar in the following way:

The Babylonian kingdom—the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar—was represented by the head of gold. This kingdom existed approximately from 626 BC to 539 BC.

The middle, silver portion represented the Persian kingdom, which dominated the world from around 550 BC to 330 BC.

The midsection of bronze represented the kingdom of Alexander the Great, who ruled for a brief season, approximately from 336 BC to 323 BC.

The legs of iron represented the kingdom of the Roman Empire, which reigned approximately from 27 BC to AD 476.

During the reign of this kingdom of iron, a pebble, not cut by human hands, came down from heaven and struck the statue's feet. The pebble is Jesus—born of a virgin and not created through human means. During the Roman Empire, this tiny and seemingly insignificant kingdom descended from heaven and struck the ten toes of the kingdom of iron. The ten toes represent the ten provinces of the Roman Empire, commonly understood to be Asia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, Galatia, Pamphylia, Cilicia, Syria, Judea, Egypt, and Libya.

* * *

What many of us have missed is the last part of this interpretation. Daniel said that the pebble would grow and grow until it became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. In fact, at the birth of Christ, the kingdom of God invaded the earth. But we are now living in a season where the kingdom is growing and growing, and will one day dominate and fill the whole earth. Selah.

We are living in a day when the kingdom of God is growing, expanding, and increasing its influence all over the world. Jesus compared the kingdom of God to yeast that is put within dough. He said that the yeast would expand and fill the entire dough (Luke 13:20-21).

Theologians can debate and argue whether the kingdom of God will increase and fill the whole earth before the return of Jesus (postmillennialism), or whether we will see only a measure of the expansion of the kingdom of God before the return of Jesus, at which time the kingdom will fill the whole earth. My point is not to debate that subject here, but rather to give you a vision of this increasing and expanding kingdom of which we are now fully a part. We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20).

The kingdom of God is a relational realm. God is not solely rational; rather, He is not logical, He is wise. One of the greatest truths we can ever embrace is the fact that everything in the kingdom of God functions in and through relationships. Whenever we believe that we have understood something about the kingdom of God, yet separate it from a relationship with Him or with others, we have simply reduced the kingdom of God to facts that can be learned, but which lack truth. The truth is a

person named Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6)

When Jesus addressed the Pharisees in John 6, He declared, “You think that you have eternal life, but these words testify concerning Me.” (John 6:68)

In fact, Jesus was telling the Pharisees that you cannot simply know truth at a propositional level. It is not enough to read a scroll, a book, or a computer data file and learn a fact about the kingdom of God. Instead, the information contained in that document speaks about a greater and substantive reality.

I am sure that we have all had the experience of going into a restaurant when we are hungry and ravenous. We pick up the menu and read about the dishes that are offered or proposed as part of that restaurant’s repertoire. Perhaps we read about delicious-sounding ingredients, or we may look at a photo of a beautifully prepared plate. Imagine if, after reading the menu, we departed from the restaurant saying, “I know all about the food they offer.” What if somebody entered a restaurant every day, read the menu, and then exited without eating anything?

The menu speaks about a greater reality that is contained in the kitchen. When you act on the information described in the menu, you can experience the meal.

In the same manner, the Bible is truly God’s word. It is infallible and inspired by God from Genesis to Revelation. Yet the purpose of the propositional truth that we read within the Bible is not for us merely to acquire theoretical or theological head knowledge. Instead, the goal of biblical knowledge is to produce biblical

experience.

We enter the kingdom of God through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the door.” (John 10:9) We sustain our life in the kingdom of God, both with God and with our fellow believers, through genuine and vital relationships.

One of the reasons I am passionate about the subject of building a thriving relationship with God is that it is so woven into my own story and testimony. As I shared in the previous chapter, I came to know Jesus in a real and saving way on Wednesday, July 14, 1984. I was 14 years of age at the time and had a paper route, delivering newspapers each morning at around 6 AM in my local town. After accepting Christ into my life the night before, I remember distinctly my first full day as a Christian. I was cycling around my town on my bicycle with the new life of God within me. I distinctly recall that first day, when God spoke to me and gave me clear and vivid dreams and visions—though I did not recognize what these were at the time—of my future ministry. On my first day as a Christian, I began daydreaming about preaching the gospel to many people, about praying for the sick and witnessing God perform miracles, and about sharing with others for the rest of my life this glorious new life that I had inherited. From the earliest days of my Christian life, I knew that I was called into ministry, and from that moment forward, I viewed my relationship with God through the lens of that calling.

As I look back now, this was both a glorious blessing and a dangerous reality. It was a blessing to know the clear purpose and destiny of my life, but it also became problematic because, as I grew as a Christian, I often mixed the concept of building a ministry with building a relationship with God.

* * *

From the beginning of my Christian life, I was passionate about seeing God move, winning the lost for Christ, and sharing this glorious new life with others. For the last two years of my high school experience in the United Kingdom, my academic work suffered because I could see no value in scholastic learning. I was convinced that Jesus was returning, that there was a call of God on my life to minister to a lost and dying world, and that the only thing of true meaning and value in life was that calling to share Jesus with others. In retrospect, I think that there is much validity in that point of view, but not much wisdom.

At the age of 17, I entered full-time ministry and went to work for the Assemblies of God in the United Kingdom. I worked as part of a church planting team (home mission team) and was involved in full-time evangelism and in helping plant new churches throughout the United Kingdom. During this time, I had an encounter with God which completely changed and revolutionized my understanding of ministry and how to receive from God. After coming to Christ, I joined a wonderful church that taught the preaching of the gospel and believed passionately that God wanted to, and would, heal the sick. Every week, as a normal part of church life, the sick would be called forward, hands would be laid upon them, and prayer would be made for healing. The problem was, at least from my vantage point, that healing did not really occur. I sometimes joke that people went bald in my church because hands had been laid on them so many times. At this young age, I was entering ministry with a theological belief that God would heal the sick, but with very little experiential evidence that this ever really happened.

Occasionally, with other believers, we would attend a large

convention and see wonderful men of God, such as the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. I have vivid memories of seeing a paralyzed lady jump out of a wheelchair and run around the stadium. My problem was that, although I knew that God healed the sick, I did not deeply believe it, and I simply did not know how to see this happen in my life or ministry.

During my first year of ministry, I began to seek the Lord about the subject, and at one point I spent several days fasting and praying about this matter. At the end of that season of prayer, God spoke to me and gave me a key which immediately transformed my understanding and the results I was getting in this area. This key is still precious to me and works today.

God showed me at that juncture that, while I and many other Christians had an intellectual belief in healing, the problem was that we were simply praying and asking God to come and heal the sick. It came to me as a revelation, and I remember frantically searching through my Bible to verify this truth, that Jesus never once operated in this manner. Jesus never prayed for the sick. As I began to explore further, I discovered that the apostles never actually prayed for the sick. In fact, to my knowledge, there is only one reference to prayer for the sick in the entire New Testament (James 5:14-15).

What I came to realize as part of this encounter is that the key to seeing the sick healed—and indeed the key to receiving any of the things that Jesus provided through His death and atoning work on the cross—actually lay in the power of God’s word.

I came to understand that we simply received whatever message we proclaimed. When Billy Graham had preached that Jesus

saves, the power of the Holy Spirit manifested as saving power and brought people into the experience of salvation. I had thought that we believed in healing, but then we prayed in a non-biblical way and received non-biblical results. I discovered that when I proclaimed God's word and simply declared that Jesus was and is the healer, that he loves people and desires to heal them, the Holy Spirit would appear and cause healing to occur. What a glorious revelation that was.

At the age of 17, I began to travel all over the United Kingdom preaching the gospel. I observed wonderful healings taking place. I became renowned in my native country and spoke at large churches and conferences. The truth was that everyone appreciated me because I was witnessing biblical outcomes. Although, at the surface level, all of this appeared wonderful, I had a deep and ongoing emptiness in my soul. I was a Christian. I was born again. I loved God. I was filled with the Holy Spirit, and I could move in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and witness glorious events. And yet, despite all of this, I had a barely functional personal relationship with God. My relationship with God had become merely a business arrangement. Jesus spoke about the many who will come to Him in the last day and claim that they healed the sick and performed many great miracles. His remark was, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:23)

I do not believe that I was in that situation, for I was sincere in my love for God and my faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. This was not a salvation issue; rather, it was a fellowship issue. I knew at a theological level that God loved me, but I had no experience of that love. I had developed an expectation to see biblical outcomes in the arena of ministry and

was enjoying the reality of those outcomes. Yet, in my heart, I was empty.

I have many memories of this period in the late 1980s, when I would travel to a church, see glorious things happen, and then return to my parents' home, where I was living at the time. I developed the habit of staying awake all night long, often watching television, in an attempt to fill the emptiness that existed in my soul. I loved to attend church meetings and conferences, and I could feel the presence and the anointing of the Holy Spirit in those settings. However, when I was at home alone, I felt absolutely nothing. I possessed a theological Christianity, and yet I had an empty soul.

This situation reached a crisis in the fall of 1989. One Sunday morning, I was speaking in a church in Yorkshire, preaching about Jesus the healer. As I taught, I could feel the faith in the room rising (Romans 10:17: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."). In the middle of my sermon, I pointed to a young teenage girl on crutches and asked her to come forward. I took the crutches away from her and commanded her to walk in the name of Jesus, and she began to run around the church. The church erupted with joy and praise as a girl danced at the front. As I stood on the platform of the church, I came to a terrible realization. I realized that I was delighted for the girl and her family. I was happy for the church, yet the only reason I had really come to that church was to pay my rent. I literally felt like a prostitute. I felt that I would come, perform my duty, and then I would be paid. As I drove home that day, I had an envelope containing an honorarium sitting on the empty passenger seat of my car, unopened. I knew it would be a generous contribution toward my ministry, and yet, as I drove

away that day, I made the decision to step out of ministry and withdraw from the things of God.

The church in which I grew up in the United Kingdom had a scripture in large letters at the front of the church: “He satisfies the longing soul” (Psalm 107:9). That day, I came to the sorrowful realization that Jesus did not satisfy my soul; instead, I had a career. I had results and popularity, but an empty soul.

In the following weeks, I canceled my meetings and began to withdraw from ministry. For a time, I took a secular job and even concealed the fact that I was a Christian from this new world. Around a year later, I made the decision to live in the nation of France for a few months, just to distance myself from my familiar background and ideas. I traveled to France and began working in a restaurant there, as this was the only job I could find. I was soon promoted by the owner of the restaurant to the position of manager. For approximately five years, I lived in the nation of France, learned French, and pushed away the knowledge of God. I did not want to think about the things of God, as I felt like a hypocrite. I did not know how to satisfy this need within my soul.

In the fall of 1998, I was living in the city of Lyon, France, believing that I had a wonderful life. I had a beautiful apartment on the river in this incredible, ancient city. I spoke fluent French and had a wonderful group of both local and international friends. By every human measure, my life was fulfilling in every way I could imagine, and yet, in the depths of my soul, there lingered an ongoing longing for true fellowship and relationship with God.

* * *

“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (John 17:3)

One evening, as I sat alone in my apartment, Jesus walked into the room. All I saw physically was a blinding light, but I was immediately overwhelmed by His presence and His absolute holiness. I had not thought about the concept of sin for a long time, and yet, in the presence of a truly holy God, I felt my own sin, depravity, and need for Him. My first reaction was to believe that He would kill me because of His absolute holiness, and I knew that I deserved nothing less than this.

That evening, Jesus spoke to me three words that absolutely revolutionized my life. He simply said, “I love you.” As He spoke, I experienced for the first time in my life the utter, glorious love that He had toward me—not merely the theological concept of His love, but the tangible experience of it.

I experienced its height, depth, length, and breadth. “That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17-19)

I knew that I was loved by the God of heaven. I knew that His love for me was not based on anything I had done or any performance on my part. That day, I saw and experienced a love that would absolutely satisfy me. The Lord spoke into my heart through one of the shortest parables in the New Testament. Jesus told the parable of a man who found a pearl of great price and then went and sold everything he had so that he might purchase

the field containing the pearl.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:45-46)

That day, I came to realize that ministry was not the pearl of great price. Witnessing glorious miracles was not the pearl of great price. Knowing Jesus relationally and living in the experience of His love—that was the pearl of great price.

The Lord challenged me: Would I be willing to pay any price to obtain the pearl? My immediate response was an absolute yes. The Lord continued to speak to me, saying that I must be willing to give up my apartment, my job, and my friends, and go wherever He instructed. Without hesitation and with all my heart, I agreed.

Within the space of one week, I had submitted my resignation, given notice on my apartment, and committed to attend a Bible school in Paris, leaving everything behind. And yet, from that moment forward, I lived in the reality of the experience of God’s love. I had received a divine visitation and encounter with the love of God, but I then needed to learn to practice living in the kingdom of His love. (Colossians 1:13)

I believe the greatest challenge in our day is to move Christianity from a theoretical and theological level into a relational, heart-centered lived experience. I believe that in the last days, ministry will flow from relationship; that is to say, the depth of a ministry will be determined by the depth of our communion with God, not

by our stored knowledge. Rather, we will learn to draw water from the well of our relational salvation.

In Acts chapter 13, we see the church coming together with an agenda that is very different from that which we observe in most 21st-century churches. The church gathered with the aim of "ministering to the Lord." They came to fast, pray, and meet with God relationally in the corporate secret place of their walk with Him. As a result of this time of serving the Lord, the Holy Spirit spoke and released Barnabas and Saul (Paul) into the ministry that is still having a glorious impact in the church today.

The principle behind this truth is simple: when we serve God relationally in the secret place, it releases us to proclaim His word in the public square.

I believe we are moving into a place in the church where whenever anybody ministers, they will be displaying to all the depth, or shallowness, of their own personal journey with Jesus. In the relational kingdom of God, it is much less about what we say and more about where we stand in God when we speak that will determine the outcomes. Two people can proclaim the same words as they pray for somebody; they can echo the same phrases. However, the key is where they are in their intimacy with God when they speak.

In the late 19th century, there was a missionary called John Nelson Hyde, also known as Praying Hyde. This man would enter into such a deep place of prayer that revival would break out wherever God sent him. At times, the Lord would direct him to a town or village, and he would simply rent a hotel room and pray. Once, he was invited to speak at the famous Keswick Convention in the UK. Although he attended the convention, he

did not leave his room and spent the whole week praying. On the last evening of the convention, the organizers begged him to come down and say a few words to the gathered congregation. Praying Hyde entered the room, looked at the thousands assembled, and simply exclaimed, "Oh God!" Suddenly, revival broke out, and the power and holiness of God consumed the room. The key was not the words he uttered; anybody else could have said the same words. Anybody else could have written those words down and sent them as information to somebody else. The key was where he stood in his communion with God at the moment he spoke.

If you are frustrated or dissatisfied with parts of your Christian life, I want to suggest to you that the key is not informational, but relational. Everything in Christianity works in the context of, and flows out of, a personal relationship with Jesus. Rather than simply learning intellectual concepts, we need to learn to allow the Spirit of God to reveal them in our hearts.

"A man can receive nothing, except it be revealed to him from heaven" (John 3:27).

Look back to the beginning of your relationship with the Lord. Jesus stood at the door of your heart and knocked, and beckoned you to allow Him in and begin a relationship with you. Our struggle is that we have seen this as a one-time event. Instead, we need to come each and every day, open the doors of our hearts, enter, and commune and fellowship with our living Lord.

We need to learn to take the precious and important truths that we read in the Bible, in books, or at conferences and bring them into the secret place of our relationship. We cannot simply satisfy ourselves with knowledge; we need to take the knowledge as the invitation (as the menu) and meet the God who actually speaks

these words.

Scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Timothy 3:16), and the word "inspiration" could be equally, or perhaps better, translated as "God-breathed." All scripture is God-breathed. All scripture carries within it the life and breath of the Spirit of God.

"The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63).

The key, as we will discover in subsequent chapters, is not simply in reading the Bible, but in reading the Bible and allowing the breath of God to flow through those words into our minds and hearts. Selah.

CHAPTER 3 - THE RELATIONSHIP OF JESUS WITH HIS FATHER

John 10:30 - "I and the Father are one."

As we embark on the journey of building an ongoing and flourishing relationship with God in our daily lives, it is vital that we learn to understand and grasp the following principle. God does not call us to build our own individual relationship with God. Rather, God invites us into the pre-existing relationship He has had for all eternity with His son, Jesus. I do not have my own relationship with God; rather, I am "in Christ Jesus." When we realize this glorious truth, we step into a place of rest and peace that can absolutely transform us. All our striving and searching will cease, and instead of working for a relationship, we will work out the connection that we have received by inheritance, as we are instructed to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

One of the greatest keys to understanding the New Testament is to learn to recognize and discover the phrase "in Christ." This is particularly true in the epistles of the Apostle Paul. You will see phrases like "in Him," "in whom," "of whom," "in Christ," "in Christ Jesus," and so on. I encourage you to study these verses extensively and to understand what each verse is saying about the things you already possess as a result of being in Christ Jesus. At the end of this book, I have included a list of many such verses from the New Testament.

If this is true, that we have inherited a pre-existing relationship with God, in Christ Jesus, then it is also vital that we take the

time to search, examine, and meditate upon what Jesus's relationship with the Father was actually like.

The only true metric and standard we have for the relationship we are called into is the relationship that Jesus occupied with His Father. Throughout all eternity, Jesus was in perfect relationship with His Father. Right now, as He is seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus is in the same relationship, and throughout all eternity future (from our perspective), Jesus will occupy that same bond. I invite you to embark upon a journey and take the time to think, and examine, how Jesus truly lived.

The challenge for the average Christian is that we base our Christian life and our concept of what it means to be in relationship with God upon the lives and examples of others. The reality is, we never clearly see what is actually going on in the lives of others; at best, we see pieces of this, or what they choose to present to the world. At a practical level, we are all guilty of copying somebody's walk with God, who is simply imitating somebody else.

Have you ever had the experience of copying a copy? Perhaps taking a document that had been beautifully printed, and then photocopying it, and then duplicating that copy, and then reproducing that duplicate. To one degree, the original document is still visible; to another, the faults and imperfections of each preceding generation are amplified, and after a time, we can reach such a place of distortion that it is barely possible to connect with the initial manuscript. Over 2000 years of Christianity, we have, by and large, ceased to be followers of Jesus. This is the original call of Jesus to His disciples: "Follow Me" (Matthew 4:19).

* * *

Instead, to a significant extent, we have become followers of our pastors, bishops, Christian writers, and our denominations. I do not mean to imply malice or criticism in the examples that have been set before us; rather, so often, we have altered and transformed the image of Jesus into something else.

Enter in by the narrow Way and the narrow Path (Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.").

To become the people that God truly calls us to be, to step into the relationship that He has called us to, will require us to walk through the narrow gate of humility. It takes humility to ask God to show us truly where we are in our own relationship with Him. It can take a humble heart to acknowledge that the life we are living is so much lower than the life we are called to. It can take a spirit of humility to look with honesty at the example set by a church, leader, denomination, or stream of Christianity. It can be far easier to defend where we are. One of the hallmarks of most streams of Christianity is that we find other streams who we perceive to be in a lower place in their walk with God and critique or look down upon them because they have not grasped some of the truth that we think we have. By definition, most of us tend to think that our version, or our image of Christianity, is a little more accurate, or nearer to the truth than that of others.

Most Protestants will grudgingly accept that it is at least potentially possible for a Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian to be born again, but they will do so reluctantly. The same thing

is true for each of those groups. God calls us to a life of humility. I have often heard it said that God desires to humble us. I do not accept this as biblical. Rather, God desires that we will humble ourselves. The Bible uses the imperative form of the verb when speaking of humility: "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

God's desire is that He will elevate us, and in this context, He will elevate us into a new walk in relationship with Him. The price tag for this relationship is our ability to embrace humility and say, "Lord, where are we truly missing it?"

I encourage you, as you continue on this journey, to allow God to open your eyes and truly see how Jesus walked in fellowship with the Father during His time on the Earth, and then how we are actually relating to Him in the here and now. The measure of your Christian life is how you have actually lived today. So often, we look back to a previous season, where we felt that we walked with God in high places; we can equally live with good intentions that tomorrow, or possibly next week, we will really embrace a new place in our walk with God. It is a hard truth to embrace, and yet a useful one, to realize that the true measure of our walk with God, is how we are actually walking with Him in the present.

One of my heroes of the faith is the British missionary Hudson Taylor. Taylor was born in the UK in 1832, and he was born again at the age of 17 in 1849. Hudson Taylor had a passionate and ardent desire to reach the people of China with the good news of the gospel. At the time, China was not the focus of much missionary work within the United Kingdom, and most, if not all, missionaries were sent exclusively to the coastal ports of China,

such as Hong Kong or Shanghai, where the British had colonies or bases. Taylor felt the call of God to reach further inland and see the gospel penetrate every province of China.

Hudson Taylor came under the teaching of George Mueller, the German gentleman who had opened several orphanages in the Bristol area, ministering to the poor and homeless children. Mueller had proven and taught that one did not need to raise money through gimmicks and methods. He had discovered that one could simply take God at His word. Every day, Mueller would trust the promises of the Bible, the word of God, to supply every need to feed thousands of orphans.

Hudson Taylor believed that if George Mueller could feed orphans by simply believing the promises of God, then he could take hundreds of missionaries to China with no financial guarantees or support whatsoever, other than the assurances of the Bible that God would supply every need. In 1854, Taylor arrived in China and began his lifelong missionary work. Repeatedly, he proved the truthfulness of God's promises, and God supplied every single need. Taylor was absolutely convinced that God would never break or fail His word.

In spite of this success and a growing ministry within China and influence within the western world, Hudson Taylor's personal life was filled with failure and despondency. Taylor was keenly aware of his own sin, his own personal shortcomings in walking in holiness, and all the many ways in which he knew his life did not please God. He would strive through efforts and self-discipline to improve his Christian walk and fellowship with God, yet as the years moved forward, Taylor only felt more and more defeat. Taylor later testified that his entire life was changed

on one day in September 1869. This transformation came from reading a letter from a fellow missionary. This missionary simply shared with Taylor some of the teaching that would later become known as the higher life teaching or Keswick teaching (named after a market town in the Lake District, UK, which would host a Christian convention that continues to this day).

To understand this transformation simply, Hudson Taylor came to the realization that in the same manner he had used his faith to believe for his financial needs and the needs of others, he could apply that same faith to believe in God to live free from sin and in a place of complete satisfaction in his walk with God.

Taylor stepped into the reality of the truth that Jesus outlined in John 15:5: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

Taylor realized that the only thing we are called to do is to simply abide in that place in Christ Jesus. By resting and believing, the very life of Jesus would flow in and through us in a glorious and unconscious way. Taylor would teach and testify from his own experience that we are not called to wrestle with sin. When we are wrestling with sin, by definition, we are the ones who are striving. If we were to wrestle with sin and overcome it, then by definition, we ourselves would be the ones who have achieved this victory. Rather, our call is to simply rest and abide in Him and let His victory flow in and through us.

For the rest of Hudson Taylor's life, he walked through incredibly difficult seasons and tests. Many times, he would lose fellow missionaries to disease and riots. (At the time, Taylor had not grasped the revelation of Jesus as healer.) Yet, through every trial and temptation, Taylor would live in this wonderful place of rest

and peace.

Many years later, towards the end of his life, Hudson Taylor testified that he still lived in that exact place of intimacy, rest, and absolute peace in his relationship with God. He had remained in this place of abiding, which he had stepped into in one instant, throughout the course of his whole life.

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." (John 15:4)

Let us take a moment and look at the relationship Jesus had with His Father. One of the challenges we face when examining anything is that we all perceive it through a lens. A lens can distort what we see and alter our perception of it. Have you ever been to a hall of mirrors that can change your appearance? In one mirror, you may look incredibly thin, and in another, incredibly fat. I regularly use a camera to record videos. Consequently, I have learned about the different lenses I can use and the various effects they produce in the finished product.

We see with our eyes, but we perceive with our heart. It is true that unconscious beliefs and scripts are inscribed on the tablet of our heart, influencing how we perceive and interpret everything we observe.

In Numbers chapter 13, we see the story of the 12 spies entering the land of Canaan to evaluate and assess the situation there. Ten of the spies returned with a report that the land was too difficult to conquer; the inhabitants were like giants in their own eyes, and the cities were heavily fortified, etc. Interestingly, everything they said was factually accurate, yet God deemed it an evil report

filled with unbelief. In contrast, Joshua and Caleb returned with a completely different report.

Both groups of spies observed the same facts, but their reports reflected different interpretations based on their hearts' perspectives. Similarly, when we examine the life of Jesus, it is crucial that we allow God to cleanse the religious lens of our hearts so that we can truly see who Jesus was and how He functioned in His fellowship with the Father.

We are accustomed to viewing Jesus through the lens of our Savior and Lord, the One who was sent by God to die on the cross and accomplish a complete and thorough work of redemption. "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) This is a glorious and vital truth, but it is not the only way through which we can look at Jesus. We can view Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises. We can observe Him through the lens of His ministry, seeing how He healed the sick and performed miracles. We can see Jesus as a teacher who revealed more about God and the kingdom of God than anyone else in history.

One of the greatest obstacles in our understanding can be our perception of Jesus solely as God. To be absolutely clear: Jesus is God. He is the second person of the Trinity, God made flesh, born of a virgin, and the Son of God. Sometimes, we can focus so much on this vital and glorious truth that we overlook the fact that Jesus also lived and functioned as the Son of Man. He lived His life on earth as a man, subject to the same limitations as every other human being. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and anointed for His ministry, but in His daily life, Jesus was natural and normal, just like any other man. Jesus's identity was the Son

of God, but He lived as the Son of Man. This is not to diminish Jesus in any way; rather, it highlights a glorious truth: everything that Jesus experienced and functioned in His relationship with the Father is accessible and available to every believer living on Earth today.

"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:21)

"As He is, so are we in this world." (1 John 4:17)

I encourage you to take some time today to examine the image of Jesus presented in the Gospels as a man in perfect and glorious fellowship with His Father. As we will explore in a subsequent chapter, our perception of this relationship is crucial to how we function in our own relationship with God.

Throughout his entire life, Jesus lived in a perfect state of unity and absolute fellowship with his Father. This continued until the moment of his separation from the Father on the cross.

"I and My Father are one." (John 10:30)

Jesus knew nothing of separation. He knew nothing of distance. Jesus would never strive to come into union or communion with his Father. As we see Jesus walk through his life and ministry in a condition of absolute unity and fellowship with his Father, Jesus made no conscious effort and never strained to come into that condition of fellowship with the Father. He remained there at all times.

In John chapter 3, we see Jesus talking and interacting with Nicodemus, one of the Jewish rulers of that day. As Jesus talks

with Nicodemus, he casually reveals that he is the Son of Man who came down from heaven and is currently in heaven (John 3:13). Can you imagine the reaction of Nicodemus upon hearing this? He is talking to a man who claims to be currently in heaven. All the way through the life and ministry of Jesus, we see Jesus both interacting with the people present and yet simultaneously maintaining an ongoing dialogue with his Father in heaven. In John chapter 11, at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus prays, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." (John 11:41-42)

Jesus knew nothing of separation, distance, or disconnection with the Father. He needed no intermediary to connect him. He had no need of going to a special place or location. There were many times that Jesus would go alone and spend time exclusively with the Father. The key is to understand that he did not do this to connect with the Father; rather, he did this to completely remove himself from the distractions and noise of the world around him.

There are so many glorious passages in the Gospel of John, where Jesus describes the relationship we as believers will step into and inherit. It is vital that we understand that as Jesus is describing the relationship we will have with him, in that same manner Jesus related to his Father.

"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love." (John 15:9)

"In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you." (John 14:20)

* * *

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we see Him calling men to follow Him. Toward the end of His ministry, before He went to the Cross, we see this call change from "follow Me" to "abide in Me." In John 15, Jesus teaches about the vine and the branches. He gives an example familiar to His Jewish followers to show that the relationship they will have with Him will be one of absolute unity. The vine abides in the branch. The same life that is in the vine is in the branch. The branch needs to do nothing except abide, and that life will flow in and through it. Jesus was, in fact, describing the life He had always maintained with His Father and then inviting us to step into that pre-existing relationship with Him. What a glorious garden, what a glorious salvation!

Jesus lived a perfect life. Jesus lived a sinless life, and Jesus lived a completely holy life. No true believer would doubt these truths. He is the spotless lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Yet, in spite of that glorious truth, many of us have never taken the time to think through how Jesus experienced temptation and how it was possible for him to live such a life. Our default position is always to make the argument that things were different for Jesus. Jesus was God. It was easy for Jesus not to sin. I completely agree with these statements, and yet I want to challenge you to think through the relationship that Jesus had to sin, righteousness, and judgment.

I believe it was easy for Jesus to live a sinless life. I do not believe this was a strain or a struggle for him each day. In one sense, I do not think that Jesus ever really battled sin. Jesus rested securely in the arms of his father, and that life of righteousness and victory flowed in and through him at all times. At its base level, sin is a problem to us when we disconnect from

the all-consuming place of abiding with God. For us to sin, we literally need to disconnect from God and begin to engage with or entertain a thought or suggestion that does not come from God, and that will contradict the word of God.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they were not at that moment in communion with God. Satan came to them and suggested a thought that contradicted what God had said: "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1). As they began to entertain this thought or suggestion, it became a real and abiding possibility.

In the exact same manner, Satan came to Jesus and suggested thoughts that contradicted God's word to Jesus. The Father had said to Jesus, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Satan's temptation to Jesus came in different ways but always had the same basic thought: "If You are the Son of God" (Matthew 4:3, 6).

The temptation was to doubt God's word. The temptation was to believe that he was not the Son of God.

Jesus knew he was righteous. He had an identity as a righteous one that he never questioned. Everything he did was the simple outflow of that identity as one in right standing with God. Again and again, Jesus upset religious people by not keeping what they had perceived to be the letter of the law. Of course, he did fulfill the law, but that law was written upon his heart. Everything he did or did not do flowed from the identity he was established in.

Jesus never tried to be holy. Jesus never tried to be separate from the world. The Pharisees and Sadducees, who judged holiness by

external interactions, were confused by Jesus. He would spend time eating and drinking with drunkards, prostitutes, and tax collectors. Jesus was not concerned that his holiness could ever be contaminated by spending time with people, any more than he could be persuaded that his health would be contaminated by touching a leper.

In the old covenant, if you touched a leper, you became unclean. In the kingdom of God, when Jesus touched the leper, the leper became clean (Matthew 8:3).

It is vital that we understand that it was sin which brought mankind's initial separation from God. Sin separates us from God. Righteousness brings us back into fellowship with God. Jesus had no consciousness of sin. Jesus had no consciousness of shame. Jesus was bold in his interactions with heaven and earth because the righteous are as bold as a lion (Proverbs 28:1).

Jesus walked in perfect communion and fellowship with His Father. Jesus enjoyed His relationship with His Father. The time Jesus spent in communion with His Father was not one of religious duty or observance. Jesus knew no higher joy than fellowship with the Father. Jesus lived in the absolute presence of His Father. I do not believe that means He constantly emotionally felt the presence of heaven, but I believe the presence of His Father was always available to Him. Jesus was absolutely one in the spirit with His Father. In the same way, we are now absolutely one with Jesus. "But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him." (1 Corinthians 6:17)

Jesus saw every earthly pleasure, whether something wholesome or something sinful, as a lower reality than that of living in the

presence of His Father. Jesus realized the ultimate joy was available in the presence of His Father. "You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:11)

The only time that this sense of God's presence and joy was taken from Jesus was at His temptation and as He walked through the cross experience. The writer of Hebrews says that it was for the joy that was set before Him that Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the majesty on high. (Hebrews 12:2)

In the same way, we are now seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

"And raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:6)

And we can walk in that same glorious communion and joy. We may not always have happiness in our external circumstances, but we always have the joy of heaven available to us in Christ Jesus.

Jesus lived as a citizen of heaven here on the Earth. He was fully engaged with mankind and the external circumstances around him, but at the same time, his spirit was fully occupied in the things of God. Jesus lived in such a way that, while he acknowledged every reality around him, he never acknowledged its authority to overrule the kingdom of God or its permanence. Jesus saw every external circumstance as something that could be changed by his relationship with God.

* * *

Jesus was in perfect communication with his Father at all times. He was never weird or strange about hearing God's voice. He would never need to hush the crowd, or strive or strain to hear God's voice. Jesus was not led by dreams, strange enigmas, or puzzles. Jesus enjoyed the face-to-face relationship with the Father and he calls us into that same relationship. It is vital that we do not downgrade our relationship with God into an Old Testament paradigm.

Religion thrives on the concept of distance and delay. For religion, God is always far off. For religion, God is always in the past and always in the future, but never in the now. Jesus lived in the now of heaven. He said, "I can do nothing except I see my Father do it, and I can say nothing except I hear my Father say it." (John 5:19)

We have inherited that exact same relationship. Not a mini version of this relationship, but we have entered into Jesus's relationship with his Father. Selah.

CHAPTER 4 - THE GREAT EXCHANGE

Everything we will ever receive in our relationship with God comes to us through the finished works of Christ on the cross. I do not believe it is actually possible for us to comprehend, in our humanity, what Jesus actually walked through and suffered at the cross. As fallen people who have already lived separate from God, our tendency is to look at the suffering of the cross purely in physical terms. We think of the nails in Jesus's feet and wrists, his mangled back, and the crown of thorns. We are all familiar, at one level or another, with the image of his tortured frame, struggling for breath as life seeped away from his body. I believe that the horrors Jesus suffered in his physical body at the cross were nothing compared with the horror he suffered in his soul (his soul was made an offering for sin—Isaiah 53:10); we have no framework for even understanding the separation Jesus went through in his spirit.

I believe that one day, when we step into eternity, we will begin to fully grasp the price he has paid because of his great love for reaching every one of us.

Sin caused mankind to be utterly separated from God, and it was Christ's sacrifice, and that alone, which brings us back into fellowship with him. At the cross, the greatest exchange in the history of the world took place. Jesus took upon him every sin that would ever be committed in human history and all of the terrible consequences of sin (sickness, disease, poverty, depression, torment, addiction, etc.), and in its place, we are offered his righteousness, divine nature, joy, health, provision, etc.

* * *

I passionately believe that the greatest price Jesus paid was separation and the breaking of his fellowship with the Father. I equally believe that the greatest benefit and gift we will ever receive from the crucifixion is the ongoing eternal relationship that we now have received as an inheritance.

There is much to recommend the evangelical movement, and there are many strengths within its teaching, but the baseline truth of evangelicalism is that Jesus died to forgive us sins. This is often presented as a ticket to go to heaven. We believe that by accepting Jesus, by praying a prayer, etc., we receive a divine insurance policy and will one day step into a relationship with God. This is true from an eternal perspective. It is a travesty compared with the glories of the salvation that God has made available to each and every one of us.

God wants you to enjoy eternal life now. God wants you to be in relationship with him now. God wants you to enjoy the glories of the fellowship of his presence in the here and the now. Selah.

Most Christians have never done any deep thinking about the concept of hell. Much of our thinking about an eternity without God owes more to medieval literature, like Dante's *Inferno*, than it does to the Bible. There are many Christians who no longer believe in hell, and there is a range of ideas and opinions that are bandied around the Christian world.

I do not believe hell is the place where God punishes people for their sins.

I believe Calvary is the place where the Son of God took upon Himself the sins of the world.

* * *

God's justice is completely satisfied by the work of Christ. Jesus drank the dregs of the cup of the wrath of God, and there is no more to drink. Heaven is open. Heaven is available. The whole world, from God's perspective, has already been redeemed from the hands of the enemy and can come into fellowship with Him. All of humanity may be redeemed, but not everyone has yet been reconciled to God. This is why the Apostle Paul talks about the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us, the church.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19: "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation."

We should implore people to be reconciled to God. We do this by announcing the good news that the sin problem has been bought and paid for by the death and resurrection of Christ. The point I want you to understand is that hell is a choice.

This may be controversial, but I sincerely believe that the main torture and horror of hell is eternal separation from God. What would happen if you lived eternally, separated from God, from God's people, from God's beautiful creation, in an ongoing eternity of selfishness? I believe that we cannot truly conceive of the horrors of being separated from God. We are currently separated from God outside of Christ, and yet we are still living under the benefits and residual grace of God in this fallen world. In a very real sense, everybody outside of Christ is living in hell right now. This will not start at death; rather, this will accelerate

and continue throughout eternity.

In the same manner, because of the life of the cross, we can experience the fullness of heaven's life here now. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates God has drawn an arbitrary line and said that we are limited to experiencing only a certain portion of heaven's life on this earth. I believe that there is indeed a line of demarcation and a limit; however, the good news is that we set that limit by our own desire and hunger for the things of God.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled (Matthew 5:6).

The cross opens the doorway to heaven. When Jesus had finished his work on the cross, he declared, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). At that precise moment, the thick veil that separated the presence of God in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The writer to the Hebrews says that the way into the holy place was closed off to all except the high priest, who could enter only once a year with blood and incense. Thanks to the death of Christ on the cross, the path into the glory of God is now open and available to all who desire to become citizens of heaven.

"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

This may be one of the saddest cries ever uttered on planet Earth, yet simultaneously one of the most glorious. At the Cross, Jesus' eternal fellowship with His Father was broken. When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up onto the mountain of transfiguration, they briefly encountered the reality of the spirit world. The Jesus

they thought they knew, the Carpenter, the Rabbi, the Prophet, the Teacher, suddenly started glowing with the glory of God, which would have blinded them. Moses and Elijah appeared, and then God the Father spoke audibly. Eternity had broken into time for a brief moment.

Just as Peter, James, and John were unable to comprehend what was really happening in that moment, so too are we incapable of grasping the depths of the agony Jesus endured when His fellowship and relationship with the Father were broken. We know that Jesus believed His fellowship with the Father would be restored after three days. Yet, the agony of enduring three days without it was possibly the greatest price He ever paid.

Think with me for a moment: have you ever had your fellowship with somebody you deeply love broken, even for a short period of time? For those of you who are married, have you ever experienced a time when your fellowship was broken, when you were no longer speaking to each other? You were still legally and covenantally married, but your experiential fellowship had ceased for a moment. Perhaps you have had a similar experience with a child, where after a deep argument, there was a break and schism in that relationship for a season.

The truth of the cross is simply this: Jesus had the greatest, most glorious, intimate, joyful, and fulfilling relationship with God the Father that any man has ever had or ever will have in the history of the world. At the Cross, the great exchange took place. At the Cross, Jesus gave up that relationship with the Father so that we might have it back. What a glorious exchange, what a glorious gospel.

* * *

I cherish the transformative power of forgiveness and how it reflects unconditional love and deepens relationships.

As a young man, I entered a period when I drifted from my faith, causing my life to unravel. During that time, several companies in the UK eagerly offered me credit cards. I embraced the thrill of using them, relishing the ability to buy now and pay later. With a substantial income at the time, I overlooked the dangers this habit concealed. Months later, I lost my job and abruptly realized I owed nearly 4000 pounds. Though not an immense sum, I found myself wholly unable to repay it.

Soon, the credit card companies sent letters, threatening action if I failed to submit payments. Unlike others who might have confronted such demands, I ignored them, quietly hoping the problem would fade away. Astonishingly, after several weeks, it did. The letters stopped arriving, demands for payment ceased, and I moved forward with my life. During this period, I relocated to France, and within a year, the ordeal slipped from my memory. A year after settling in France, I learned through a brother that my father had discovered my debt. Rather than scolding me, he discreetly collected the letters, reached out to the creditors, and paid each debt in full.

I still vividly recall phoning my father upon learning what he had done. Overwhelmed by shame and embarrassment, I vowed to repay him as soon as I could. During our call, he laughed and wept, replying only, "Graham, you are my son, and I love you. There is nothing I would not do for you; there is nothing I would not give you. I would surrender all I own for you." He hoped I would learn wise stewardship, prudence, and financial responsibility—lessons I indeed absorbed. Yet his sacrifice

stemmed not from those aims but from my place as his son and his boundless love for me. Selah.

It takes the Holy Spirit to reveal to us our inheritance. We are not able to simply grasp this at an intellectual level. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians chapter 2:

"But as it is written:

'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,

Nor have entered into the heart of man

The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.'

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For 'who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?' But we have the mind of Christ.'" (1 Corinthians 2:9-16)

One of the main roles of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to show us the things which have already been given to us by God (1 Corinthians 2:12). We have received an inheritance that is beyond comprehension. We have not comprehended the things that God has prepared for us, but the Spirit of God has come to

lead and guide us into our inheritance (1 Corinthians 2:10). In the spirit, we are blind. We need to be led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14). It is vital that we allow the Holy Spirit to direct us into the finished work of the cross. He is the one who takes the things of heaven and makes them real to us.

Legend goes, there was once a very rich man with lands and possessions, but his most valuable treasure was his one son. This man's wife had died many years ago, and he treasured his relationship with his son above all things. As his son came into manhood, he was called to do military service for his nation. His father wept as he thought of saying goodbye to his son.

Before the son went away to do his military service, his father commissioned a portrait of his son to be painted, and it was hung in his home. This man had many priceless pieces of art, but he valued the picture of his son above all things. He entitled this painting "My Beloved Son."

Unfortunately, the young man was killed during his military service. The father was consumed with grief, and soon after, he himself died. The time came when the lawyers, who were managing the father's estate, called for an auction to take place for the many priceless antiques and paintings that were contained within the house. Many famous art collectors came from all over the world to bid on some of the priceless treasures there in the estate. The steward, who had served this father as a servant for many years, also attended the auction.

When the auctioneer commenced the auction, he announced to the gathered crowd that he had received instructions that the first work of art to be auctioned off would be the painting of the son,

entitled "My Beloved Son." The painting was displayed before the art collectors and dealers of the world. Many people mocked and scoffed at this painting. There appeared to be nothing special or of worth about it, and none of the dealers were interested in bidding. Eventually, the auctioneer asked if anybody was willing to bid for the painting. The man's trusted servant raised his hand and said, "I would like to bid 10 pounds." As nobody else was interested in the painting, the auctioneer struck his gavel and announced that the painting was now sold.

The auctioneer went on to announce that the auction was now closed. He announced that he had received instructions that whoever purchased "My Beloved Son" would inherit all of the treasures in the house.

Whenever we inherit God's beloved Son, all the treasures of heaven become ours.

"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

We have a tendency to think about our relationship with God in terms of measure or degree. It is natural and normal for us to compare ourselves with others, to measure where we are in our relationship with God compared to past seasons in our life. To some extent, we are always grading ourselves on a scale and evaluating how we are doing. Sometimes, we feel we are in a great place with God, and other times, we feel we have let Him down and are further away in that relationship. Most of us live with hope and great expectations of a future time when our walk will be closer to God than at this present time.

* * *

Although this seems counterintuitive, I want you to embrace the concept that there is only one level of relationship with God. This is a binary proposition: either we are in Christ Jesus, or we are not. God only has one relationship available to mankind, and that is the relationship of His Son, Christ.

"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (John 17:3)

There is something glorious that will happen in our experience when we realize we have arrived in our relationship with God. We are no longer striving or straining to attain something, to climb an invisible ladder, or to progress through interior castles on our journey with God. We have arrived in Christ Jesus; we are seated in heavenly places in Christ.

I was born in the UK; I have lived in the nation of France for 20 years and still own property there, but I am now a US citizen. I was not born a US citizen; in a sense, I was born again as a US citizen. I became a US citizen at a point in my life. If you were to spend time with me, I may not necessarily sound American, as my British accent still makes itself known. I still love drinking tea, driving on the left, singing "God Save the Queen" (or King), and eating fish and chips from a newspaper filled with salt and vinegar. The point I want you to grasp is that I am legally American. Before the eyes of US law, I am just as American as any US citizen who has ever lived. There is no half citizenship; when you are a US citizen, you are a US citizen.

In the same manner, you are a citizen of heaven; you are a son of God. At the risk of upsetting some of my female readers, I would

humbly suggest to you that God has no daughters. Of course, we are male and female in our natural roles here on Earth, and both are wonderful and God-given, but in Christ, there is no male or female; we are all one. In Jewish culture, only the firstborn son would receive the father's inheritance. Jesus is the firstborn among many brethren; He is the firstborn, and we are the brethren.

Every blockage, every obstacle, and every hindrance in our relationship with God was nailed to the cross of Calvary. We have been brought near by the blood of the Lamb (Ephesians 2:13).

When we refer to the blood of Jesus, we are speaking of the price that was paid by His life, from the very moment He shed blood in the garden of Gethsemane to the instant of His death. That atoning blood removes every barrier.

I have seen the most amazing miracles performed when I have preached on the blood of Jesus. Many years ago, I heard a sermon about the blood that Jesus shed in the garden. Scripture says that He sweated drops of blood. There is actually a medical condition where a person is under so much stress and strain that the blood capillaries in the forehead burst, and blood will leak out. The brother preaching this message explained that the blood Jesus shed in the garden will heal anybody of any mental condition, such as dyslexia, ADHD, and similar disorders. I have prayed hundreds of times on the basis of that shed blood and seen God do wonderful miracles.

There is power in understanding the reality of the blood of Jesus and how it represents the finished works of the cross. There was

a period in my life around 20 years ago when the Lord told me to take all of the main scriptures in the Bible that speak of the blood of Jesus, write them down, and daily pray them and declare them out loud.

We overcame Satan by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony (Revelation 12:11).

During a ministry trip to the United States, I had been doing this for several weeks. One day, while preaching in a large church in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, a young lady approached me at the end of the service as I sat at the front recovering with a glass of water. She announced that she had a prophetic word for me. Generally, I do not allow people I do not know or have not invited to speak prophetic words over me, but at that time, my guard was down, and I was tired and vulnerable. I simply replied, "OK, what was the word God gave you?"

This young lady looked at me and then pronounced with a strange, garbled voice, "I see death." She continued prophesying in a confused mixture of King James English, filled with words like death, gloom, and destruction. During my message, I had explained that my wife back in France was expecting our second child and was due to give birth in around three weeks' time. I mentioned that I was on my way home to be there in time for the birth of this child. As this young lady spoke, she said that she saw a vision of my wife lying on a slab with a sheet covering her and also covering a baby. This was not a word of edification, exhortation, or comfort! She ended her "prophetic word" with the words "thus saith the Lord," and then began walking away. As she walked away, I reached out and grabbed the hem of her garment and pulled her back towards me. I was about to pray and

break down this terrible word she had spoken when suddenly, from my being, I began pronouncing all of these Bible verses I had been confessing concerning the blood of Jesus. If we put the Word in our heart, it will be there when we need it. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

That evening, I returned to the motel I was staying in on the beachfront. I had an early flight to Atlanta, Georgia. Just as I was going to sleep, thoughts came to me: maybe I should call my wife just to check that everything is okay. It was around 1 AM Eastern time in the United States, which would be 8 AM in France. As I took the telephone and began to dial the French dialing code, I suddenly realized what was happening. I put the phone down, got out of bed, and once more declared that the power of the blood of Jesus was active and at work in my life. There is power in the cross to redeem and change every circumstance in your life.

We have a relationship with the Father that is purchased by the blood of Jesus. Every time we try to base our relationship with God on anything but that, we return to performance, which is another form of the law. It is vital that we learn to look at our relationship with God through the lens of the cross and the finished works of Jesus.

The key concept in the Old Testament is obedience. The law of Moses set out God's requirements and standards in many areas of life. The only appropriate response God looked for from the people of Israel was obedience. In passages like Deuteronomy 28, the Lord gave Moses the blessings that would follow the people of Israel when they obeyed the law and the curses that would ensue if they broke the law. The law serves to show us our

sin, but it is completely incapable of removing that sin. The law serves to show us the separation that exists between God and mankind, but it has no power to bridge that separation.

The key concept in the New Testament is not obedience, but rather identity. We do not relate to God on the basis of our obedience, but rather on the basis of our identity and our placement in Jesus Christ.

I am not a righteous man because I do righteous things. I do righteous things because I am a righteous man. So, the challenge, as we will see in the following chapters, is to learn to step into that identity. In spirit, we are already a new creation, righteous before God, flourishing in Christ Jesus. Our challenge is in the soul realm to renew our mind to this reality and clothe ourselves daily with this identity.

"Awake to righteousness, and do not sin" (1 Corinthians 15:34).

I believe the phrase "do not sin" is an admonishment, i.e., do not sin, and yet it is also a glorious promise. When we awake to righteousness and clothe ourselves in that robe of righteousness, we will sin no more.

One of the primary truths we can learn in this area is that we do not need to do anything. We do not need God to release anything new to answer a prayer or accomplish something because everything has already been provided. The truth is, God has already accomplished everything. Everything we will ever need for life and godliness has been provided through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why, you may ask, are we not living in that reality now? For years, this question troubled me. I tried

through various ministries and methods to step into the glorious and abundant life that I knew was mine in Christ.

My life was revolutionized when I realized that I already had everything. The only thing I lacked was the knowledge and belief in what I already possessed.

I encourage you to read again and again the prayer of Paul in Ephesians 1:15-20:

"Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places."

Paul's prayer is not asking God to give us something new. Instead, he acknowledges that God has already given us everything and prays for us to have revelation and wisdom in what we already possess.

Paul does not pray for God to release something new from heaven; rather, he prays that the eyes of our inner man would be enlightened, so that our understanding and spiritual eyesight would be open to what we already have.

* * *

Our goal and mission are to establish our hearts in these truths and to reach a place where the realities of heaven become the realities of our hearts.

CHAPTER 5 - THE LEGAL & EXPERIENTIAL RELATIONSHIP

There is a point in the life of every Christian when they will encounter conflict or tension between the things they see in the Bible and their own personal experience. I have never met any Christian who has not, at some time, encountered this tension.

We read in the Bible that we are the righteousness of God in Christ. Yet, when we look at our lives, we see how so often we fall short of the glory of God, even as believers. We read verses in the Bible which state that he who is born of God does not sin (1 John 3:9), and then we look at our personal experience and try to reconcile the two. Are we truly born of God? Could the Bible be incorrect? The same principle is repeated again and again in the text of scripture. The Bible declares that God is a healer, and by the stripes of Jesus we are healed (1 Peter 2:24). Yet, we often experience pain in our bodies. The Bible declares that we have been given the peace of Jesus (John 14:27), and yet we often experience anxiety and fear. How do we learn to reconcile these differences? I believe that by understanding the truth contained in this chapter, we will not only see how these truths fit together perfectly, but also discover the key to a glorious and transformed life.

Over many years, the church has tried and failed in various ways to resolve these conflicts. One primary way is by simply ignoring the problem and adopting a religious façade. In many cultures throughout the history of Christianity, people have come to church dressed in their finest clothes and presented a mask to others that hides the reality of their inner life. This is the very fault and failing that Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for (Matthew

23:27).

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."

For other movements within Christianity, the solution to this problem has been self-discipline, rigor, and legalism. All over the world, Christian group movements try to change the behavior of men and women through restrictions. The Pilgrims and many of the reformed churches today teach that we receive righteousness by faith in Jesus, yet so quickly these movements slip into a life of struggling and striving to achieve sanctification through our own efforts. The Apostle Paul warned us about such legalism in Colossians, where he said, "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:20-23).

Many people within my own stream of Christianity—churches that embrace the fullness of what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit—have often resorted to some form of ministry or experience that they believe will give them victory. People have taught about deliverance from demonic oppression, healing of the inner man, some special anointing or breakthrough that will lead to a transformed experience. Every era contains pieces of the truth within it, and there is a measure of validity in some of

these ministries. Yet, in over 40 years of church leadership, I have never seen them produce conclusive results in the lives of believers.

Many within Christianity have taught that sanctification is a work which will take much time. Over years of teaching and sometimes years of suffering, we will gradually improve until we resolve this tension in our lives and meet the standard of the Bible. This is a wonderful theory, despite the fact that it is never mentioned in the Bible and simply does not work. We cannot replace the cross with the clock. The only guarantee of time is that it will make us older. My honest observation is that as we grow older, we become more embedded in our patterns and habits. As we enter our senior years, we literally become clichés of ourselves. Just as a man who has trodden the same pathway for many years creates deep ruts, so too do we become deeply entrenched in our patterns of thinking and behavior.

Many in the church will simply resolve this tension by displacing the solution into eternity. When we die or when Jesus returns, we will be set free from this fallen world and our nature. The thing is, this is clearly true at one level, and yet I believe it tragically misses a glorious truth that is available to each and every believer here and now. The danger of this teaching is that it replaces the finished work of the Cross with death or the second coming. The axis of our transformation does not lie in the second coming, but rather in the first coming and the finished work. Selah.

While it can be interesting or informative for church leaders and theologians to debate these various points of view, there is a sad truth that the lack of clarity on this issue will usually lead to a

life of misery and frustration. Many have walked away from faith in Christ because of this frustration, and all too often, those within the church lead lives of defeat and desperation.

I passionately believe that the salvation Jesus wrought on the cross of Calvary is real, and it actually works. I believe that we can step into a transformed life today. We do not need to earn or work at this for many years. Can we learn to practice this and develop the habits that remind us of the victorious life we have? Absolutely. In the same manner as I have become an American citizen and I am now practicing and learning to live an American life, I have become a citizen of heaven in an instant. My identity is as a new creation. God calls me holy in Christ Jesus, and what God has cleansed, let no man call unclean (Acts 10:15).

The key I want to explore in this chapter is the concept of a legal or positional relationship in contrast to an experiential or lived out relationship. When we begin to grasp and understand these truths and apply them to our Christian life, victory is within our reach.

Let me illustrate this principle with the example of marriage. At the time of writing, I have been married for 25 years. In the summer of the year 2000, in Paris, France, I was married to my wife, Léa. At the very moment the minister said (in French), "I pronounce you man and wife," we were legally married in the eyes of the French legal system. We were also covenantally married one with another as a couple before God and also in the eyes of our community and wider society. Twenty-five years later, I am not more married than I was one second after I entered into this union. There are several couples in the churches I have pastored who have been married over fifty years. They are not

more married than I was in the instant I stepped into that bond.

There is a positional status of being married. There is also a legal aspect of being married. It is a binary state: either you are married, or you are not married. Your status as a married person has nothing to do with your feelings or your emotions. Your marital status has nothing to do with your evaluation of how well or poorly your marriage is flourishing. In fact, by definition, when you do not feel married, that is precisely the moment to recall that you are indeed married! You have made a serious and weighty commitment before the judicial system of the country in which you live and, at least in its original intent, a commitment binding upon you until death parts you.

Marriage has two aspects: the legal status and the vital or lived-out part. One side of marriage is the status as defined by the law. The other is your experience of married life. While the couple who have been married for 50 years are no more married than the young couple who have just entered into that blissful state, it is certain that those who have been and remained married for 50 years have deepened their experience of this relationship.

As a pastor, I regularly have the privilege of officiating the marriage of a young or not so young couple. It is a delight to conduct a marriage ceremony and celebrate this new couple joining themselves together. Another aspect of being a local church pastor is that I am regularly called upon to counsel and advise couples who are struggling in their marriage. One of the first things I do in marriage counseling is to help the couple shift their focus from their list of perceived grievances against each other and back to their original commitment. I would venture to say that nearly all couples who get married are sincere in their

desire to love, honor, and cleave unto one another, to walk in marital faithfulness, and to uphold all of the wonderful promises that are made during that ceremony. What will usually happen over time is that those minor differences that we all have will begin to grate upon one another, and they will come to a place where their daily experience is based on their perceived or actual list of grievances.

If we can take the time to lay the foundations for our relationship with God, both in its legal and vital (experiential) aspects, we can then see how the promises of God work and can be applied to our lives.

In a previous chapter, I have shared how, as a teenager, I was a true Christian and was involved in full-time ministry. However, I never really knew, at an experiential level, the depths of God's love for me. During that season in the 1980s, if somebody had asked me the question, "Does God love you?" my response would have been, "Of course, He does." My basis for that response would have been the Bible. I grew up hearing the Christian refrain, "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so." In spite of this good biblical knowledge, I was empty inside and bereft of any real sense of God's love. I was filled with rejection and shame and did not know how to solve that problem. I have recounted how I walked away from the ministry, went to live in France, and several years later, Jesus visited me and spoke through words that changed my life. Jesus said to me, "I love you."

When Jesus spoke this to me, He was not merely conveying information. At that moment, I was literally baptized in the experience of His love. It felt like the Atlantic and Pacific

Oceans combined were being poured on me. I felt literally crushed with the overwhelming love of God.

In the weeks following this incident, that experience of God's love was constant and remained with me every day. I would often wake up in the middle of the night, and my very first thought was, "My Father loves me." For several weeks after this experience, I went around the city where I lived with a permanent smile etched upon my face. I am sure I looked like the Joker! At one point, a close friend approached me and asked what was happening in my life.

He said to me, "You are always smiling. Have you fallen in love?"

My response was emphatic. "Yes," I replied, "I am in love with a man!"

During this season of my life, it felt like my faith was soaring high. I had many experiences where I prayed for something and would see the answer happen instantly or very quickly. I found it incredibly easy to believe that God would do anything He had promised to do. I now understand that faith works by love (Galatians 5:6). I was experiencing what Paul said, that "love believes all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

When you are filled with the love of God, it will dispel any doubt that the world gives. If a child came to his parents in the middle of the night, having had a nightmare, perhaps shaking with fear and terrified, the child does not need an intellectual argument to dispel his fears. Rather, what we would do is take the child in our arms and hold him tightly. In that place of love and security,

every fear will vanish. Perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18).

During the initial period after this encounter with the love of God, many things changed in my life. I left the city of Lyon where I was living and moved to Paris to attend the Bible school. I no longer had an apartment, an income, or my circle of friends. Yet, I found this transition easy as the love of God was so real and present in each and every moment of my life.

Around three months after this encounter, I came to the terrible realization that my experience of God's love had begun to diminish. I became painfully aware that I was not living in that same reality. Again, I knew that God loved me and could still at times connect with His love. But I discovered this was more of a memory of what had been happening in previous weeks. It was not an ongoing reality. In a place of desperation, I began to seek God and pray, asking Him to visit me again. I remember fasting for several days and asking Jesus to come to me again and pour His love out upon me. Having tasted such a glorious experience, I was not sure I wanted to carry on living without that. I was acutely conscious of the life I had lived several years earlier without the reality of God's love and never wanted to slip back into that place.

During that season, God answered my prayers, but not in the way I was expecting or wanted. I was initially disappointed in God's response to me, and yet over the years, it has become one of the greatest blessings of my life.

As I sought God for another encounter, another experience, another visitation, He replied to me simply, "No." He said to me, "Instead of seeking an experience, I want you to write every

verse in the New Testament that speaks about My love for you."

The Lord instructed me to make a list of every verse concerning the love of God and then each day to pray and confess these verses out loud in the present tense and the first person. For example, I would take a verse such as Romans 5:5: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Each day, I would declare, "God's love is continually being poured into my heart by the Holy Spirit right now."

I learned the power of 1 John 2:5: "But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him." Jesus said, "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" (John 14:23).

Over a period of several weeks, I embedded God's word in my heart. We will explore in a later chapter how to take the word of God from our heads to our hearts, but I came to the place where my heart was overflowing with truth about God's love for me. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). Faith to experience God's love comes by having the word of God concerning God's love embedded within your heart.

I came to the place where I was quickly able to access that very same glorious experience of God's love at any time or any place in my life. Instead of this experience being based upon a special visitation by Jesus, rather, this experience was based upon the word of God embedded on the tablets of my heart.

* * *

I now realize that if Jesus had answered my prayer and appeared to me again, I would have probably had another season of several weeks of living off the aftereffects of that experience, but eventually that experience would have faded. Every experience in our life can fade if it is based upon our emotions. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8). Any revelation must be anchored on God's word in our hearts for it to be truly eternal.

I learned during that season that there are times when we can encounter something and then, from that encounter, go to the Bible and discover a biblical truth concerning that event. Similarly, there are times when we can go to the Bible and learn about aspects of our inheritance that we have yet to experience. We can then, by faith, receive that reality, and the Holy Spirit will produce that very thing in our lives.

There are times when the experience leads to understanding, and other times when understanding leads to the experience.

I discovered that the principles I had walked through concerning God's love were the same principles that would work for victory over sin, for receiving healing from the Lord, for walking in God's joy, for hearing God's voice, and indeed, for all the benefits of salvation.

On the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, the church was born in a glorious and dramatic event. For the first time in history, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh. People experienced speaking in tongues; they saw visible tongues of fire descend in the upper room. The people in Jerusalem perceived that the men were drunk, so they must have shown laughter or strange

behavior. Peter stood up in the midst of this glorious occurrence and preached the first sermon in the Church age by declaring, 'This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy"' (Acts 2:16-18).

Peter said, 'This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.' It was as if with one hand he was pointing to the experience and saying 'this,' and with the other hand, pointing to a scroll containing the prophecies of the prophet Joel and saying 'that.' This experience is that which was spoken in the word of God.

If we are going to walk in a flourishing relationship with God, we need to learn to embrace the truth of scripture and put a demand upon it to produce an experience within our lives.

God is a person, yet He is unlike anyone we have ever encountered. The Creator of the universe, our Father God, operates in both a legal, covenantal manner and an experiential, relational way. God is the most relational person in the universe. He is the most emotional person in the universe. Every human emotion we have ever felt is but a drop in the ocean compared to the vast emotions God experiences. Throughout all eternity, we will explore with God the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of His love, and the wonder and fellowship of His presence. We will never be bored. Fellowship with God will never grow old. Throughout eternity, we will discover new and glorious facets of our God and enjoy the communion and

fellowship that He offers to us. Most of us do not struggle with this aspect of God; rather, our struggle comes from the following: God is a person who never breaks His word. God thinks in terms of covenant. God is emotional, but He can be relied upon completely and absolutely. God and His word are one. When God has said something, it will never change, never adapt, never grow old. Every word that God speaks in the Bible will be true 100 million years from now.

To enter into and enjoy the relationship that God desires with us, we need to learn to relate to Him both covenantally and experientially. In the same way, within a marriage, the couple needs to learn to relate to each other based on the promises they made, not on how they might feel on any particular day. Similarly, God has established a relationship through Christ Jesus that we can rely upon, and then we can enjoy it.

In the Old Testament, God established a relationship with Abraham and all of the children that would follow from Abraham. The reality was, and still is, that Abraham and his descendants kept breaking their side of the covenant. God was always faithful to his covenant with Israel, and indeed, God keeps his promises to national Israel to this day. For most of the history of Israel, we see a faithful God and an unfaithful Israel.

The Lord spoke to the prophet Hosea and told him to marry a prostitute. God was literally proclaiming through Hosea's life what it was like to be married to someone who was consistently unfaithful.

If the Old Testament was the story of a covenant between God and the nation of Israel, what is the new covenant? We

sometimes fall into the error of thinking that the New Testament is the story of a covenant between God and ourselves. This is not true. I do not have my own covenant with God. If God had set up a covenant with us, the reality is, just as with the seed of Abraham, we would keep breaking that covenant. The glorious truth of the New Testament is that God has set up a covenant with his son Jesus. Thus, this is an eternal covenant, one that will never be broken because it is not based on our participation. I do not have my own covenant with God; rather, I get to step into the covenant that God has made with his son Jesus. As it is written: "I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You'" (Psalm 2:7).

From God's perspective, He has established a relationship with His Son by decree. He has invited us to step into that relationship. This is the closest, most intimate, and most glorious relationship that has ever existed in all eternity. God created Adam in His image and likeness. Adam and Eve were able to relate with God, to walk with Him in the cool of the day, and so on. Yet, Adam and Eve were separate from God. In Christ Jesus, we have been joined as one with Christ. We are the bride of Christ. But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him (1 Corinthians 6:17).

This relationship already exists. If you have accepted Christ, you have already entered into it. From God's perspective, there is nothing else you need to do. You simply need to discover the promises and benefits of that relationship, learn to embed these truths into your heart, and enjoy them.

God will never relate to you based on an emotion. In terms of His relationship with you, He is never angry or sad. He does not

sulk. You never need to talk Him into a good mood. He is absolutely constant in His love and His commitment toward you. He will never turn His back on you. He will never walk away from you. You can walk away from God, but He is utterly committed to you. God does not want you to have confidence in your own ability to maintain this relationship. Anytime we try to strive to keep ourselves in Christ Jesus, we are destined to fail. It is God who called us, and it is God who keeps us as long as we abide in Him and cease from our own labors.

For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His (Hebrews 4:10).

From our perspective here on earth, God desires that we build and grow in this relationship that is already preexisting in heaven. We do not need to build this relationship. Rather, we need to discover the glories of this relationship and bring it into our lived-out experience by faith. In the coming chapters, we will explain in detail how to do this. Our mission is to discover what is actually happening in our relationship in heaven, and then to pray that His kingdom would come, His will would be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

God desires that you would live out this relationship on the earth in perfect unbroken fellowship with Him. He never promises that our lives will be excluded from persecution, affliction, or suffering. Rather, He assures us that in every circumstance, we will have constant access to the glories of this unbroken relationship with Him. The Apostle Paul in Romans 8 talks about all of the persecution, shipwrecks, physical attacks, and more that he has been through, and yet Paul's conclusion is that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who

loved us" (Romans 8:37). He also declares, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Paul goes on to say that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

One of the greatest keys to navigate life is to learn not to ask the question "why," but rather to ask a different question. We are all tempted at times, as we go through a trial or tribulation, to wonder why we are going through this. What have we done wrong? Is God not noticing? If instead of playing the "why" game, we would ask the question, "Lord, who do You desire to be to me in this context and circumstance? What aspect of our relationship do You want me to know and experience here? What part of the glory of this relationship I have with You do You want to develop in me in the midst of this circumstance?"

"You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance" (Psalm 32:7).

I have discovered that one of the greatest tools of Satan is to get the believer into a place where we are praying or asking God to give us what He has already given. Why do we ask God to grant what is already granted? In doing so, we are in fact praying a prayer that can never actually be answered. When we pray such a prayer, we are denying both ourselves and God the joy of experiencing a breakthrough. Prayer is meant to bring answers and breakthroughs, which in turn should lead to joy.

"Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

Satan loves it when Christians spend their time asking God to

reveal Himself or seeking a new level of relationship, instead of enjoying the relationship they already have. However, this does not mean we should simply content ourselves with our current experience.

Our mission here on Earth, as regards our relationship with God, is threefold:

- Firstly, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the things that have already been given to us by God. "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come" (John 16:13). "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12).

- Secondly, we need to take these truths and embed them in our hearts. We will explain in a later chapter how to do this, but simply put, we need to learn to meditate on God's word with our mind, speak God's word with our mouth, and that word will eventually sink into and be established in our hearts.

- Thirdly, we need to embrace a lifestyle of glorious joy and fellowship. We need to practice reminding ourselves of God's existence and enjoying the pleasure of spending time with Him.

"In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:6).

There is a wonderful practice that I learned many years ago that I still follow to this day. I have learned that in my experience, I can

get so busy or distracted that for periods of time, I actually live as if God were not real. In my experience, this is true of everybody. This does not mean I am not a believer or do not love God. Rather, when I am engaged in some intellectual endeavor, interacting with people, arranging a business deal, or similar activities, I can often allow my thoughts to wander from the things of God. Many years ago, the Lord challenged me to never let more than 15 minutes pass without thinking of Him. In recent years, I have used an Apple Watch, which I program to vibrate silently every 15 minutes. Nobody else knows this is happening. Whenever I feel that indicator on my left wrist, I take a brief moment—sometimes just two or three seconds—to enter into worship. For a short window of time, I reconnect with the Lord, remembering the Vine and branches analogy. I will often say something like, "Father, I love you," and as I listen, I feel Him saying, "My son, I love you too." As I believe His word to me, I enter into the experience of that wonderful love.

Learn to practice the relationship that you already have, learn to enjoy this relationship, learn to bring both the legal and the vital part of this relationship into every part of your daily life. Selah.

CHAPTER 6 - VISION & RELATIONSHIP PART I

Come on a journey with me. Imagine I gave you a pen and paper and asked you to write a detailed description of your current relationship with God. Let us assume that you have all the time you need to complete this exercise.

You sit down and reflect on how you are currently living in your relationship with God. Perhaps you feel you are doing really well in this relationship, perhaps you feel you are doing really poorly. I believe that most of us, if we applied ourselves to the task, could describe a vision or picture of where we are in our relationship with God right now.

I believe that God has a vision for your relationship with him. God is a visionary, God is a planner, God sees through the eye of faith. I believe that God has an image of your relationship with him that exists at the intersection of the legal and vital relationship that we have explored in the previous chapter.

God has a glorious vision of how he wants you to live, throughout all eternity, but also in your life on this earth. God sees you flourishing and blossoming in your relationship with Christ Jesus, just as he sees every believer doing so. I also believe that he has an individual plan, vision, and dream for you specifically that is different from that of every other believer who has ever lived.

God is never in denial, God is never disillusioned with you, he does not live under any illusions concerning your relationship with him. He sees everything, and yet he still believes in the promise that he holds over your life. If we want to become the

people that God desires for us to be, I believe it is vital that we also grasp God's vision for our lives.

It is quite probable that you have never done an exercise like this before, taking the time to come to a vision image of how you are currently walking with the Lord. I want to suggest to you that, though in all likelihood, you have already done this at an unconscious level. If you would think through all of the different relationships that comprise your life, you live with a concept, image, or vision of how those relationships actually are. You probably have an internal visional sense of how your marriage is in this season (assuming you are married), and the same is true for parents, siblings, children, grandchildren, and in fact every relationship we have in our lives.

The challenge we face is that for most of us, our sense of how we will live with God today, how we will interact and walk with him, is not actually defined by God's vision in heaven, nor is it usually defined by a vision we have carefully constructed with the Lord. In general, we are running on autopilot and simply replicating today the collective average of our yesterdays. Without ever taking the time to think it through, we are usually living today, in our walk with God, in the same way we have done for many days past. We have allowed the floors and the ceilings of the possibilities of what it really means to walk with God to be defined by the flaws and ceilings of our past. Often, we live with invisible barriers and low expectations.

Have you ever seen a flea circus? I confess I never have, and I never want to. I would be quite happy to never meet another flea during my time on planet Earth. In spite of this, I have often heard it said that if somebody were to hatch a group of fleas in a

container, a strange thing will happen. Fleas cannot fly, but they have incredible powers to jump very high. As these fleas are coming to maturity, they will jump and hit the ceiling of that shallow container. After several attempts, they will learn very quickly that that is a painful experience, and not one to be readily engaged. Very quickly, the fleas, who were capable of jumping several feet in height, will learn to only jump to the height of that container, for example, one inch. For the rest of their lives, they will be limited and stunted by the experience of that container.

I have a friend in Connecticut who has a beautiful dog. This dog is an attractive, well-groomed, and always affectionate. When the dog was a young puppy, they purchased an invisible fence system. This is basically a wire that runs around the perimeter of their property, and when the young dog approaches the wire, a small, harmless, and yet quite annoying electric shock is given by a collar the dog is wearing. Very soon, the dog will learn not to approach the perimeter of the property. My friends live on a busy and potentially dangerous road for a dog. Several years later, the dog can roam freely around the property, but as soon as it approaches the open gate, it hesitates and draws back. I am sure if we were able to communicate with the dog, it could not even understand or remember why it does this, and yet it has learned not to do so.

I want to suggest to you that we have done the same thing in our walk with God. Religion has placed us in a container, or placed a collar around us, and told us that we can go so far in God and no further. I believe that if we are to step up to the stature of the fullness of the measure of Christ (Ephesians 4:13), it is vital that we allow the Holy Spirit to remove these barriers and show us God's vision for our life and the possibilities that lie before us.

* * *

Joshua 1:1-8

Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, it came to pass that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success."

When God called Joshua to lead the children of Israel into the promised land, his first command was to look and see all of the land that God had given to them.

God wanted to fill Joshua's heart with courage. I love the way God sees things; I love the way God perceives things. God does not see in the way we see, nor perceive in the way we perceive.

God is a God of inheritance; God is a God of promise. I believe that God wants to teach the children of God to walk, not necessarily into a promised land, but into a promise-filled life. The greatest promise we will ever have in this life is our relationship with God. The first step in beginning this journey of possession and inheritance is to see the land that God has called you to.

Something happens when we allow God to write an image upon the tablet of our heart. I love to have my heart filled with God's vision. I love to look beyond the natural and see what God is seeing. Faith is the evidence of things not seen. Faith does not mean that we do not see; rather, it means we see the realities of heaven more than the realities of earth.

By faith, Moses triumphed because he saw Him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27).

Many years ago, in the late 1980s, I was traveling all over the UK conducting gospel and healing meetings in churches and conferences. During the summer of 1988, I spent several weeks ministering at a church in the county of Yorkshire. Each evening, I would be preaching and ministering to people, but I would have the daytime free. Many of the folks in the church explained that there was a beautiful castle that dated back to medieval times in the local village, and suggested that if I had the time, I should visit the castle. One day, I drove my car to the local village where the castle was. I parked my car and visited the castle. Having grown up in the UK, I am used to seeing and visiting ancient castles. As I left the castle and made my way back to my car, I noticed a very small, strange-looking church or chapel by the side of the castle. Because I love the things of God, every time I

see a church, I am always interested to know if there are true believers in that church, and I decided to take a look inside.

During this season of my life in the late 1980s, I went everywhere with two books. One was an enormous black Bible. I think I assumed that the bigger the Bible was, the more anointing I would have. I also carried with me a book that was very precious to me (and still is), which was called "Healing the Sick" by the evangelist T.L. Osborn. This is a wonderful book, and I have learned many truths about healing from it.

As I entered the chapel, I was startled to see that there was virtually no light inside. At first glance, it appeared to be pitch black. Gradually, as my eyes accustomed to the room, I realized that there was a small, dim candle at one end of the church, illuminating it. I walked around the church, which was built of wood and smelled strongly of incense. All around the walls of the church were icons, as one might find in a Greek or Eastern Orthodox church. Coming from an evangelical background, I had never before seen an icon, and I was very put off by the religiosity of this building. As I walked around the church, I was suddenly startled to realize that there was another person in the church. Towards the back of the church was a small, lone monk wearing a monk's habit. This was an older gentleman, around 5 foot 2, dressed in a brown robe with a rope around his waist and a bald head.

As the monk saw me, he greeted me and beckoned me over to him. I have to confess that everything within me was defensive, and I could not possibly imagine that this could be a genuine Christian.

* * *

As the monk approached me, he smiled and asked if I was a Christian. I have to confess, I was startled by the question, as I had been asking myself the same question about him. I replied that I was indeed a Christian. He then proceeded to inquire if I was truly born again. With a sense of indignation, I responded that yes, I was born again. He further asked me if I had ever been baptized in the Holy Spirit. I answered yes, I had, and before I could elaborate, I questioned whether he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. He smiled at me, and instead of saying yes, raised his hands to heaven and began to praise God in other tongues. I realized that, in spite of all my prejudices, I had met a brother in the Lord, and we both began to laugh and embrace each other.

The monk inquired about the book I held in my hand. I responded, perhaps sarcastically, that it was a Bible. The monk smiled and simply said, "No, I mean the other book." I handed the additional book to the monk and explained it was a book about healing by the evangelist T.L. Osborn.

When I did this, the monk began to laugh a deep belly laugh. He reached his hand deep inside his robe and pulled out an old, tattered hardcover book with no image on it. When I examined the worn dust jacket of the book, I read the title: **Healing the Sick and Casting Out Devils** by evangelist T.L. Osborn. The monk went on to share with me that it was his favorite book, and he carried it everywhere he went. I suddenly understood that this man was a genuine believer, and we both started to chuckle and embrace each other in the Lord.

The monk invited me to join him on a walk around the town, and we did so. I will never forget strolling through this town with this elderly gentleman, who is around one foot shorter than me. He

was a remarkable man who truly loved God and the things of the Holy Spirit. As we walked, I posed a question to him about the icons that were hanging on the wall of the church. Coming from my background, I have always been taught that icons were idols, and that it was wrong to pray to a picture, among other things. I do not mean to be rude or insulting by stating this; I am merely explaining my background and church tradition. The monk smiled and said he respected my perspective, but he proceeded to pose a question to me. He asked, "Do you know where the word 'icon' comes from?" I replied that I did not. My new companion then informed me that the English word "icon" came from the Greek word *εἰκών* (eikōn), which means "image," "likeness," or "representation."

He then asked me another question: "Do you know Romans 8:28?" Nearly every Christian I have ever met knows Romans 8:28.

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28)

He then smiled and inquired if I knew the very next verse. I had to admit that I did not. He went on to recite the verse:

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Romans 8:29)

As we continued our walk around the town, the monk began to instruct me about God's call on my life. Until that moment, if someone had asked me what God's call was upon my life, I

would have replied that I was called to be a preacher, called to travel the nations, called to share the gospel and heal the sick, among other things.

That day, my new friend taught me that the primary will of God for my life was that I would be conformed to the image of His Son. He clarified that he was not interested in defending the practice of having icons in the church, but that there was a spiritual lesson behind it that he wished me to understand. He questioned me, "If you have to be conformed to the image of Jesus, what is your image of Jesus? What is your vision, or picture, of the relationship that God has called you to?" This precious monk challenged me that day and said, "If you are not allowing the Holy Spirit to paint the picture of your relationship with God upon the canvas of your heart, then you are permitting various traditions, even though they may be sincere, to create that image for you." This man encouraged me to possess a vision, picture, or icon of the relationship God desired to have with me. My encouragement to you, is to do precisely the same.

One of the most important words in the New Testament is the word hope. Hope is a powerful word. Hope is a biblical word. For most of us, we have allowed religion to warp and minimize this term and strip away most of its power. I believe that if you ask the average Christian to define the word hope, you would hear something about a vague, unsubstantiated wish that might possibly happen sometime in the undefined future.

The word "hope" in the Bible is a potent term. It has no sense of a vague, unsubstantiated wish. Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is the substance of things hoped for. If we do not have hope, we will never have faith. Hope is a process with God that inflames our

hearts with a vision for something he wishes to do in and through us. When God fills our hearts with hope, he also communicates to us his emotions concerning this matter. God is passionate about the things he desires and the things he sees. I believe that the body of Christ should be baptized in hope. I believe that the body of Christ should be possessed by hope. When our memories are greater than our hopes, then we are reaching the end of our course and the end of our life. Bill Johnson of Bethel Church in California once said, "The person with the most hope is the person with the most influence."

What is the image that is painted upon the canvas of our hearts? When we are filled with hope, we can see the thing that God wishes to produce in our experience. There is a place where we can be more influenced by God's hope than by the things we perceive with our natural five senses.

May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing (Romans 15:13).

We all have the capacity to hope within our hearts, and yet all of us have two influences acting as a gravitational pull upon our heart:

Firstly, our hopes are often diminished and lowered by our past experiences. The Bible says that hope deferred (hope which does not come to pass) makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12).

Secondly, our hopes can come under the influence of the promises of God. When our hearts hear a promise that truly comes from God, hope will take that promise and paint it into a glorious picture of vision, which will change how we see

ourselves and the world around us.

God wants to give you hope concerning your relationship with him. God wants to provide you with a vision regarding your relationship with him that does not relate to your past, but relates to the present and to the future.

Hope relates to the mind, and hope relates to the heart. For some reason, Western Christians have always been nervous whenever we talk about the power of our imagination. When one hears words like meditation or visualization, the average Western evangelical's thoughts will immediately tend towards mysticism or some Eastern religion. While it can be true that false religions can borrow biblical principles, it is vital that we understand that God made us with an imagination. If we do not allow the kingdom of God to fill and dominate our imagination, then Satan will use that same power against us.

Our imagination is a powerful tool. Our body and nervous system cannot tell the difference between something that is real and something that is imagined. This is one of the reasons that things like pornography or sexual fantasy are also dangerous. Again, it is clear that Satan will say things to us in an attempt to fill our imaginations and dominate our hearts and then our lives. God has things He wants to say to us. If we allow them to fill our imagination, they will dominate our hearts and then change our lives.

Have you ever worried or been anxious about anything? I am sure the answer is yes. And yet I want to propose to you that most of us have never taken the time to think through the process that we go through when we worry. Let us go through it step by

step. What actually happens to us when we are fretful, fearful, or worried?

The first step is when a thought or an idea comes to us, usually concerning something bad that might happen to us or to somebody we care about. You might have a car accident. You might lose your job. You might catch an illness and die. Your child might start taking drugs, etc.

Secondly, if we immediately dismiss this small initial thought, it has absolutely no power, and we can go on with our lives. However, if instead of doing this, we allow this one tiny grain of a thought to enter our imagination, then our imagination will suddenly turn this thought into a movie that plays on the screen of our mind.

Thirdly, when we engage our imagination, we do not simply think in a sentence: "I might have an accident." Rather, we begin to see and imagine a visual image or a visual movie of this scenario playing out. As this happens, our emotions immediately begin to kick in and produce sensations that correspond with the imagination or movie we are playing out.

Fourthly, even at a physical level, our body and nervous system begin to engage with and feel the fear and anxiety that is associated with this. Our heart rate will rise, and our body prepares itself for imminent danger.

Lastly, once we have entered into all these stages, it becomes very easy to repeat the process. The very fact that our body, our nervous system, our emotions, and our imagination are engaged with this one simple thought (which may not have any basis

whatsoever in reality) makes it easier for us to repeat the process. After a time, the tail will wag the dog; that is to say, we will not even be sure if our imagination is causing this emotional and physical reaction, or if our emotional and physical reaction is causing our imagination to see the scenario play out.

We need to learn to do the same thing and harness the same God-given capacities, but in the right direction. I have discovered that we can learn to practice the same procedure that will embed the thoughts and purposes of God upon our hearts.

Firstly, we need to begin with the thoughts of God. God says, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord (Isaiah 55:8). And yet, in the very next verse, God says that His word contains His thoughts. In the same manner, a fearful idea has very little substance when it hits your mind. It can seem that God's word has little power, but if we will take the seed of the word of God planted in our hearts, we are on the road to transformation.

Secondly, we need to allow our imagination to engage with God's thoughts (God's word). We need to think, imagine, and allow God's word to create a movie on the screen of our mind. This is biblical hope. This is biblical vision. I truly believe this is the stage at which most Christians miss what God has for them. They engage with God's word with the mind, but never allow it to sink into the heart.

Thirdly, we need to engage our soul and emotions with the picture or movie that is playing on our mind. God wants your soul to engage with His word and promises. You know when you are truly worrying because you actually begin to feel it. You

know when you are truly engaging with the thoughts of God in your heart because you actually begin to feel and experience them. Do not just passively watch the movie of Heaven playing out on the screen of your mind. Feel it, and engage with it.

Fourthly, if we will engage with God's word in this manner, even our physical body will begin to engage in that direction. David said, "My flesh cries out for the living God" (Psalm 84:2).

Lastly, if we will engage in these steps with the thoughts and intentions of God, we will find it easy to repeat them. Whenever your mind, your emotions, your nervous system, and even your body are under the influence of God's thoughts, it becomes easy to maintain that as an ongoing pattern. If you were driving down the highway at 80 miles an hour, it does not take a lot of resources to maintain that speed. Your car can be in cruise control with very little gas being expended to maintain that speed. When you are at a stop, it takes a lot of energy to move you to even 10 miles an hour. Learn to live in a place of momentum in your heart with God.

Let us explore how to apply these truths by having a clear vision of our life in God and living them out in our daily lives. One way to move forward is to embark on a journey of defining our walk with God in written form. There is power in having our vision defined and written in a way that we can engage with and act upon.

"Write the vision And make it plain on tablets, That he may run who reads it." (Habakkuk 2:2)

There is power in a defined vision. This clarity determines our

journey. Our perspective shapes our walk. When we walk with blurred or undefined vision, our capacity to understand where we are and where we are going is hindered. I believe that we are in a season where God wants to move the church from a vague vision to a defined one. I believe that God desires to bring clarity and a higher resolution to the vision that lies before us. This truth is pertinent to our relationship with God. If we walk with a vague, fuzzy, and undefined sense of what it means to have a relationship with God, then that is the reality we will live out.

It is vital that in all relationships we bring definition. By their very nature, relationships exist in a place of mutual definition. The story of every relationship is a journey from the undefined to the defined. At every step in the development of a relationship, there needs to be appropriate definition concerning the present and the future. Without that definition of the present and a clear vision for the future, relationships will grow stale and not move forward.

Consider the analogy of a romance or a marriage. A boy meets a girl. They are attracted to each other. They go on their first date. Even at this very early stage, there needs to be some definition of what is actually happening for this relationship to move forward. For instance, if the girl is not sure whether the boy is relating to her purely as a friend and not seeing her through the lens of romance, that will determine the parameters and the potential engagement of even that first date.

Imagine a young couple who have been dating for several months. Naturally, there is a stage within this relationship where each participant will rightly begin to ask, "What is the future of this relationship? Is this just a casual relationship that is going

nowhere? Are we moving towards a lifelong commitment called marriage? What are the parameters of this relationship?" These questions relate to the current state of the relationship and how these young people are relating to each other at the moment. These questions also pertain to their hopes and dreams, what the Bible would call vision, for the future. If the two participants in this relationship have not reached a mutual understanding about where this relationship is going, it is hard for either or both of them to have hope about a future together. If one participant is filled with hope about a lifelong engagement, but the other is not secure in the definition and understanding of this relationship, then that relationship cannot flourish and become all that it could be.

The same principles apply to our relationship with God. There is a sense in which we have completely arrived in our relationship with God. That is to say, we are already standing in the fullness of the relationship God has with Christ. We are fully established in how God has defined this relationship with us. From a legal standpoint, it is vital that we know we are standing in the fullness of that relationship now. We are seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).

There is also the story of this relationship from our point of view. It is vital that our past experiences do not dictate our current relationship with God. So often, as believers, we walk with a vision of the future of our relationship with God that is only defined by our memories of the past. Often, these memories can be filled with our own failures, struggles, or lack of understanding about the practicalities of walking by faith. We walk with a blurred vision based upon our own past and the shared experiences of others. In the next chapter, I invite you to

embark on a journey of definition. I will challenge you to work with pen and paper and define the relationship that God passionately desires to have with you for the rest of your life. This relationship extends into eternity future.

CHAPTER 7 - VISION & RELATIONSHIP PART II

God is a God of faith. God is His word. Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven (Psalm 119:89).

God looks at every situation through the eye of possibility, promise, and potential. God cannot see anything that He cannot do. God is never disappointed or disillusioned in us, because He simply has no illusions to start with. God is not an illusion broker; He is the instigator of hope.

If we are to grow in the relationship that God desires for us to have with Him, it is absolutely vital that we become a people possessed with hope in this regard. I believe that God wants us to arise each day with a heart overflowing with hope, about the glorious potential that this day brings concerning our relationship with Him. God wants to establish our hearts in the fact that the past has been wiped away. His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Do you remember what it is like to be a child filled with hope, joy, and anticipation? Do you recall the sensation as a child when your birthday approached? It was not simply the fact of receiving a particular gift that might cause you pleasure. Rather, it was the whole glorious anticipation of that day. You had a vision of what that wonderful and special day would be for you. You imagined those presents piled before you, wrapped in colorful paper, each and every one speaking to the promise of something wonderful that lay within, that was just for you. I believe God wants to call out the childlike heart in every believer. Could it be possible that some of us have grown older than God? I simply mean that God has a childlike heart. He is not naïve; He is fully aware of the

relative position of every atom in the universe He made, and yet He is a God who delights in all things.

God is love (1 John 4:8).

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5).

In this chapter, we will explore how to define and establish the vision that God has for your relationship with Him. This is a very practical chapter, and I encourage you to get a pen and paper, and work through some of these points systematically. Take the time to revisit these subjects multiple times. One of the keys that has really helped me in my relationship with this subject is realizing that God always wants us to be present and future-oriented in the way we interact with Him.

God is eternal and exists outside of time. This does not merely mean that God lives eternally. Rather, as Einstein has proven, time itself is not an objective reality; it is relative to the observer's frame of reference. For example, the known universe is approximately 93 billion light years across. From one perspective, if we were traveling at the speed of light, it would take 93 billion years to cross it. However, according to special relativity, for a hypothetical observer traveling at the speed of light, time would not pass, and the journey would be instantaneous.

While God lives outside of time, we do not. Therefore, it is crucial that we relate to our past, present, and future in the manner that God intends.

* * *

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

One of the challenges of evangelicalism is that we have focused on communicating how God wishes to relate to us concerning our past. The basic message of evangelicalism, which is a correct and true message, can be simply stated this way: You were a sinner. In your past life, you committed sins that block and hinder your relationship with God. Jesus came and paid the price for those sins. If you repent and allow Him to cleanse you of your past, you can come into right standing with Him. Everything I have just stated is completely true, and indeed good news. The problem is that it is not the entirety of the good news.

The reality is that while I allow God to cleanse and wipe away my past, this does not solve my intrinsic problem. Every day, I create a new past. Every day, I am reliving Groundhog Day with my sinful nature, experiencing yet again things for which I will need to ask God's forgiveness. The result of this teaching is that we produce a body of people who are relating to God purely on the basis of what they did not do yesterday. We are basing the foundation of our relationship with God on the faults, failings, and shortcomings of the past. Again, I wish to be clear: this is an important and vital step in our Christianity. However, the pertinent truth here is that this is simply not enough.

We have preached a gospel of mercy, but not a gospel of Grace. Mercy relates to my past. Grace relates to my present and my future.

Mercy means that I deserve to receive something bad, and yet God is merciful to me, and I do not receive that just punishment.

Grace, rather, means that I do not deserve to receive something good, and yet, in spite of that truth, I receive the unmerited favor that I do not deserve.

If we only relate to God based on a gospel of mercy, we are always looking backwards. I believe the Bible teaches that God wants to create a relationship with us where we can flourish now, and also have one foot in the land of tomorrow. This is called vision.

When teaching, Jesus would often say, "The time is coming, and now is" (John 4:23).

To be the people God calls us to be, we need to learn to live with one foot in the time that is coming, and one foot in the time that now is. Selah.

The Apostle Paul, when speaking of our inheritance in Christ, employs an expression twice in the New Testament: "things present, and things yet to come."

Romans 8:38-39

"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

1 Corinthians 3:22

"whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come, all are yours."

* * *

Paul states that the present and the future belong to us. What about our past? Our past does not belong to us. Our past belongs to God. My past outside of Christ has been wiped away by the blood of Jesus. God does not want us to look at our future through the lens of our past. Rather, God wants us to view our future through the perspective of His promises concerning us, and the future. God wants to develop a relationship with us, which is not based on the feelings of our past, but rather on who His promises will call us to become in the future.

We see this principle played out in detail in Genesis 18. In this passage, the Lord has come to destroy the city of Sodom and Gomorrah for their gross and indecent sin. Before doing so, God decides to visit His friend Abraham. We will come back to this point at a later stage in the book, but it is vital to realize that God wanted to involve Abraham because of the relationship He had with him. As you read through the passage, you will see the Lord sitting down with two angels to commune, fellowship, and eat with Abraham. In the midst of this passage, Abraham goes away to speak to Sarah, and the Lord says to one of the angels present, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?" (Genesis 18:17-18).

Take the time to look at the tenses in God's comment. In effect, God is saying, "I want to relate to Abraham now, not because of who he was, not even because of who he currently is in his relationship with Me, but rather I will relate to him now, based on who he will become because of My promise upon his life."

This is a powerful and glorious truth. God wishes to build a relationship with you in the here and now, regardless of who you

were in the past, even in spite of who you are in your current season of walking with God. God desires to connect with you now, based on who you will be in the future, and indeed, in all eternity based on His immutable and glorious promises.

2 Peter 1:4

"Whereby are given unto us exceedingly great and precious promises, that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature."

The reality is that God has always related to you on this basis, and will always relate to you on this basis. God looks at you through the eye of faith, and sees you standing in Christ Jesus, in the fullness of His promise toward you, all of His promises toward you, yes and amen (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The challenge for the believer is to learn to define the vision or hope of the future relationship that God wishes to have with us. Then, to learn to believe by faith that our past is nailed to the cross, and to fix our hearts by looking through the lens of God's vision each and every day.

How can we begin to define God's vision for our lives? Over the course of this chapter, I want to give some practical keys that will help you in this, but let us start at a foundational level.

Firstly, I encourage you to look at the process of defining and writing the vision that God has for you as a journey and a process. At one level, one could adequately write a vision statement for your relationship with God in five minutes. And the reality is, if you did so, you would have an advantage over the vast majority of believers who have never engaged in such an

endeavor. In spite of this, I want to encourage you to take a season of time, and to learn to inquire of the Lord. By this, I believe it would be a positive thing to take a period of several weeks. Will you revisit this subject, and allow God to shift, shape, and define this vision in your heart, and then in a defined manner?

There are times when we can ask a question, and He will simply reply. There is also a process that we see in the Bible referred to as "inquiring of the Lord."

Again, you will see this phrase used, particularly in the life of David, who had a very relational engagement with God: Genesis 25:22, Exodus 18:15, Deuteronomy 12:30, Judges 4:4-5, Judges 20:18, Judges 20:23, Judges 20:27, 1 Samuel 9:9, 1 Samuel 10:22, 1 Samuel 22:10, 1 Samuel 22:13, 1 Samuel 23:2, 1 Samuel 23:4, 1 Samuel 28:6, 1 Samuel 30:8, 2 Samuel 2:1, 2 Samuel 5:19, 2 Samuel 5:23, 1 Kings 22:5, 1 Kings 22:7-8, 2 Kings 1:2-3, 2 Kings 3:11, 2 Kings 8:8, 2 Kings 22:13, 1 Chronicles 10:13-14, 1 Chronicles 14:10, 1 Chronicles 14:14, 2 Chronicles 18:4, 2 Chronicles 18:6-7, 2 Chronicles 34:21, Ezra 7:10, Psalm 27:4, Isaiah 30:2, Jeremiah 21:2, Jeremiah 37:7, Ezekiel 14:7, Ezekiel 20:1, Ezekiel 20:3, Zephaniah 1:6.

In my understanding, to inquire of the Lord is to take a period of time, and place a subject before the Lord. It involves being willing to sit in God's presence, and seek the Lord for His wisdom rather than a simple piece of information. This is a relational process, not a transactional one. To engage in this, we must be at ease with the concept of having a partially defined vision. This would be akin to writing a draft for a document where we are well aware that this is not the finished project, and

there are some parts of the document that will need to be rewritten. At a human level, when we are only willing to engage with something that is perfect, we will often block our creativity. It is not every part of our mind that engages in creativity, which the Holy Spirit will speak to. In the same manner, a software engineer might write a program, and call it version 1.0. The software is still buggy, and might often crash, yet it serves as a framework upon which the engineer can build. Give yourself permission to brainstorm with the Holy Spirit. Give yourself permission to write down thoughts, concepts, and ideas that may not make it into the final draft of this vision. Give yourself permission to engage in this endeavor privately and alone with the Lord, knowing that you will not feel the pressure of other people judging, scrutinizing, or evaluating this early draft vision.

Secondly, I encourage you to embrace the discipline of writing down this vision. There is something powerful in the act of writing. Learn to think with ink. In Habakkuk 2:2, the Lord encouraged the prophet to see the vision, write it down, and read the vision; this will cause the reader to act, and run with the vision.

There is power in recording our thinking, and our understanding of some of the most important parts of our lives in a written format. Most of us are guilty of an over-reliance upon our memory and understanding. Our memory is a glorious tool that God has given us for evaluating and dealing with current matters. Our memory is wonderful, but selective, influenced by many things, including the passage of time. There is something precise and final about documenting a vision in a written and defined context that will not change. When you have a written version of the relationship God wishes to have with you for now and

eternity, it will not have bad days. It will not care about your feelings. It will not change depending on the seasons, your emotions, or the cycles of life. If we accept the concept that God has an eternal, defined relationship with us in Christ Jesus right now that will never change, then it is important that we have that relationship defined in such a manner that we can look at it objectively.

Thirdly, I encourage you to embrace the power and resource of questions. Rather than asking God for answers, learn to ask God for questions. Jesus loved to ask questions, and he still does. When Jesus would ask his disciples or others questions, it was not because he was lacking information, or because he did not already know the answer. Rather, he was revealing something to them in the form of a question, which would empower them to challenge their own paradigm, and way of understanding.

When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" (Matthew 16:13), it was not because Jesus was having an identity crisis, or was unsure of who he was. Rather, he wanted the disciples to look deep within themselves, and to reflect on who he actually was: was he just one more prophet, a teacher, an Old Testament character come back to life, or was there something deeper to be grasped about his identity? Engaging with this question caused Peter to receive one of the greatest revelations of his life: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus's response was, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17).

God has things to reveal to you from heaven that you will not hear in the marketplace of ideas from well-meaning Christians.

Part of that process is learning to come to the Lord, and to sit in a question. Questions are invitations. Questions beckon you to step into a new place of revelation, and relationship with God. Questions call you to reflect, and meditate. At the end of this chapter, I include a list of questions that will help you in defining your vision with God. My suggestion is that you take the time to think these over, and to pray them over to God. With pen and paper in hand, allow the Holy Spirit to give you individual keys, and glimpses of the relationship He desires to have with you.

When defining and writing out a vision of your present and future relationship with God, it is important to engage the canvas of your imagination. Having a written vision is powerful because, when we read it, it creates a vivid image, or a mental movie that we can visualize. This is how God has constructed us to function, and it is vital that we grasp this fact. We all know and love the feelings and emotions that hope provokes within our souls. It is wonderful to live with anticipation, to wake up each morning, and look forward to the day ahead, believing that it will be a marvelous day. It is a potent thing to look at your future with earnest expectation of good. When we do not have this hope, we begin to shrivel, and die on the inside. Much has been said and written about the reality of depression in people's lives, and the various medications that people can use to deal with it. My simple suggestion is that God desires for us to be filled with hope. By having a vision that we can see, and a mental movie that we can play, we can nourish our emotions with that hope, and expectation.

There is a difference between writing down hopes and aspirations for the future, and writing them as if they are already accomplished, in the first person, and present tense.

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The former would look like this: One day I will have victory over sin. One day I will walk in close fellowship with Father God. The challenge with this approach is that it merely highlights the fact that you are not currently living in that reality.

The latter would look like the following: I am a new creation. Today, I am accepted in the beloved, and I am walking in glorious fellowship with Father God. I am a righteous one, and I have victory over sin today. I find it easy to live above sin, because my heart is full of the light of Jesus.

I encourage you to go over the following 10 areas in the journey of inquiring of the Lord. In these areas, you will process the questions and thoughts that arise in your spirit, as you meet God within them. Remember, each area is an invitation to upgrade, and a possibility of coming up to a higher place in your walk with the Lord.

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

- How do you wish your relationship with God to be for the rest of your life?
- Take a moment to depict a perfect day of walking in fellowship with Jesus, and completely abiding in him.
- Illustrate the sensation of walking with God in perfect union and communion. Describe living and walking through your normal day with all its activities, your different human relationships, and responsibilities, etc., and yet living with the absolute present reality of God's presence anchoring you, and all things.
- Portray the experience in reality of living in such a way that

God's presence and communion with you are more real and dominant than any other influence in your life.

- Explain the experience of walking with God in such a place that any and every temptation that might present itself along your path is insignificant, and worthless compared with the glory of his presence.

- John 17:21 – "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."

- Ephesians 2:18 – "For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father."

- 1 Corinthians 1:9 – "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

- 1 John 1:3 – "that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

- John 15:4 – "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me."

- Colossians 1:27 – "To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

- 2 Corinthians 13:14 – "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen."

- Romans 8:16 – "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,"

- Galatians 2:20 – "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."

- John 14:23 – "Jesus answered and said to him, '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.'"

RIGHTEOUSNESS

- Sit down and write about the experience of living in 100% perfect righteousness before the Lord.

- Describe living without any sense of shame, worthlessness, or any sense of ever having failed God, or others.

- Meditate upon the idea of living in such a way that righteousness is not the absence of sin, but your very nature in Christ Jesus, and an absolutely irresistible force that propels your life, and brushes away any obstacle, or temptation.

- Illustrate living in a situation where your standing in righteousness is completely divorced, and separate from your past performance, and actions.

- Portray living in a state of God's righteousness where your status in Christ Jesus flows out into every action, and performance, and your righteous standing produces the fruits of righteousness, and righteous works.

- Romans 3:22 – "even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all, and on all who believe. For there is no difference;"

- 2 Corinthians 5:21 – "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

- Philippians 3:9 – "and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;"

- Isaiah 61:10 – "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul

shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

- Matthew 5:6 – "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled."

- Proverbs 21:21 – "He who follows righteousness and mercy Finds life, righteousness, and honor."

- 1 Peter 2:24 – "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed."

- Romans 5:17 – "For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace, and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)"

- Psalm 23:3 – "He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake."

- Ephesians 4:24 – "and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness, and holiness."

THE NEW CREATION

- Write down a vision of you living each and every day as a new creation in Christ.

- Write down a vision of you living as someone who is completely dead to sin, and separated from your "old man."

- Write down a description of what it means to live as a part of the divine nature.

- Write down what it means to live out the Bible verse that states the desires of the righteous are only good.

- Write down a vision of your nature changing your desires, your

perceptions, and your priorities. Include having a heart that is inclined towards God, and against sin.

- 2 Corinthians 5:17 - "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

- Galatians 6:15 - "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation."

- Ephesians 4:24 - "and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness, and holiness."

- Colossians 3:10 - "and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,"

- Romans 6:4 - "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

- John 3:3 - "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"

- 1 Peter 1:23 - "having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives, and abides forever,"

- Titus 3:5 - "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit,"

- Luke 22:20 - "Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.'"

- Hebrews 8:10 - "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind, and write them on their hearts; and I will be

their God, and they shall be My people."

JOY

Write down the vision of yourself living in a place of abiding joy that never diminishes.

Describe yourself walking through the various circumstances of life, including difficult seasons at times, and yet never being disconnected from the joy of the Lord.

Describe yourself walking in such a place of infectious joy that everywhere you go, people are touched, and transformed (or even envious) by your revitalizing source of internal joy.

Describe the strength, flow, and motivation from your life, as you live out the reality of the joy of the Lord being your strength (Nehemiah 8:10).

Describe the reality of living in the constant presence of God, and knowing that in His presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11).

- Philippians 4:4 – "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!"

- Psalm 16:11 – "You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

- John 15:11 – "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

- Romans 15:13 – "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy, and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the

power of the Holy Spirit."

- Nehemiah 8:10 – "Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'"

- Psalm 30:5 – "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning."

- Isaiah 61:3 – "To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified."

- 1 Peter 1:8 – "whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible, and full of glory,"

- Psalm 126:5 – "Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy."

- Luke 15:7 – "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance."

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Describe the experience of being somebody who hears clearly in a natural, normal, and confident way.

Describe a vision of having an ongoing, conversational relationship with the Lord in every place, and circumstance.

Describe the relational aspect of yourself hearing God declare His love, affection, and heart towards you in a personal, and real way.

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Describe the experience of having God speak to you about real, accurate, and demonstrable things during the course of each, and every day.

Describe the vision of having the constant, abiding, and reliable Holy Spirit as your guide throughout the rest of your life.

- John 10:27 – "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."

- Isaiah 30:21 – "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' Whenever you turn to the right hand, Or whenever you turn to the left."

- Revelation 3:20 – "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock. If anyone hears My voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him, and dine with him, and he with Me."

- Psalm 95:7 – "For He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture, And the sheep of His hand. Today, if you will hear His voice:"

- John 8:47 – "He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."

- Hebrews 3:7-8 – "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness,'"

- 1 Samuel 3:10 – "Now the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel answered, 'Speak, for Your servant hears.'"

- Jeremiah 33:3 – "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great, and mighty things, which you do not know."

- Psalm 29:3 – "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; The God of glory thunders; The Lord is over many waters."

- John 16:13 – "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come,

He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come."

GUIDANCE

Describe a vision of a life with the constant leading of the Holy Spirit every day, and in every season.

Describe a vision of the plan that God has for your life being disclosed to you, as you walk with the Holy Spirit.

Describe a vision of the Holy Spirit steering you away from danger, poor choices, and things that would lead you down the wrong paths.

Describe an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit directing, and leading you in the practical, relational, and business decisions of life.

Describe a vision of the Holy Spirit being the one who directs you in your relationship with the Father, pouring the love of God into your heart continually.

- Proverbs 3:5-6 – "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths."

- Psalm 32:8 – "I will instruct you, and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye."

- Isaiah 58:11 – "The Lord will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose

waters do not fail."

- John 16:13 – "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come."

- Psalm 48:14 – "For this is God, Our God forever, and ever; He will be our guide Even to death."

- Proverbs 16:9 – "A man's heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps."

- Psalm 73:24 – "You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory."

- Isaiah 42:16 – "I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, And crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, And not forsake them."

- Psalm 25:9 – "The humble He guides in justice, And the humble He teaches His way."

- Jeremiah 10:23 – "O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps."

WISDOM

Describe a relationship where you are not leaning upon your own understanding, but learning to daily rely on the wisdom of our God.

Describe a relationship with God where His wisdom, concerning all the aspects of your life, is constantly available to you.

Describe a vision of a walk with God where He, who knows every possible outcome, and every potential danger, can steer, and provide wisdom for each, and every part of your life.

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Describe a vision of a journey with God where the Holy Spirit is giving you wisdom about your path with Him, your choices, and the posture of your affections.

- James 1:5 – "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally, and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

- Proverbs 2:6 – "For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge, and understanding;"

- Colossians 2:3 – "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, and knowledge."

- Proverbs 9:10 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

- Ecclesiastes 2:26 – "For God gives wisdom, and knowledge, and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering, and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity, and grasping for the wind."

- Daniel 2:20 – "Daniel answered, and said: 'Blessed be the name of God forever, and ever, For wisdom, and might are His.'"

- Proverbs 3:13 – "Happy is the man who finds wisdom, And the man who gains understanding;"

- 1 Kings 4:29 – "And God gave Solomon wisdom, and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore."

- Psalm 111:10 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever."

- Proverbs 4:7 – "Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding."

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SECURITY

Describe a vision of a walk with God where you feel absolutely safe, and secure in your relationship with God.

Describe the vision of a relationship with God where your actions, or performance play no part in your standing with God.

Describe the vision of a life in God where, regardless of your wisdom, and maturity, you live as a tiny child held securely in your Father's arms, knowing He has provided all, and everything is under His protection.

Describe the vision of an existence in God where you do not maintain yourself in that relationship; rather, God owns 100 percent of the responsibility of keeping you in Christ Jesus.

- Psalm 91:1-2 – "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge, and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.'"

- Isaiah 41:10 – "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'"

- Proverbs 18:10 – "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; The righteous run to it, and are safe."

- Psalm 46:1 – "God is our refuge, and strength, A very present help in trouble."

- Nahum 1:7 – "The Lord is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him."

- Psalm 27:1 – "The Lord is my light, and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I

be afraid?"

- 2 Timothy 1:7 – "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

- Psalm 121:7-8 – "The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out, and your coming in From this time forth, and even forevermore."

- Deuteronomy 31:6 – "Be strong, and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you."

- Romans 8:31 – "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

LOVE

Describe a vision of a walk with God where your primary identity is as a loved child of God.

Describe a vision of a relationship with God where you need do nothing, fulfill no duty, or action, to earn God's love.

Describe a vision of a bond with God where He is completely satisfied with you.

Describe the reality of a relationship with God where no circumstance, positive, or negative, no attack, no temptation, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

- 1 John 4:19 – "We love Him because He first loved us."

- Romans 8:38-39 – "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created

thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

- John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

- Ephesians 3:17-19 – "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted, and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width, and length, and depth, and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 – "Love suffers long, and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

- Psalm 136:1 – "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever."

- Zephaniah 3:17 – "The Lord your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."

- 1 John 3:1 – "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him."

- Romans 5:8 – "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

- Song of Solomon 8:7 – "Many waters cannot quench love, Nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love All the wealth of his house, It would be utterly despised."

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PEACE

Describe a vision of a relationship with God where you abide in God's perfect peace at all times.

Imagine what it would be like to live completely at peace, regardless of any circumstances, or situations.

Describe the vision of yourself walking through every circumstance where your primary awareness is God's peace, which leads, and guides you.

Describe the vision of a life where you know no fear, no worry, no anxiety, and nothing can remove you from the peace of God that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7).

- Philippians 4:7 – "and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts, and minds through Christ Jesus."

- John 14:27 – "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

- Isaiah 26:3 – "You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You."

- Colossians 3:15 – "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful."

- Psalm 4:8 – "I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety."

- Romans 5:1 – "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,"

- 2 Thessalonians 3:16 – "Now may the Lord of peace Himself

give you peace always in every way. The Lord be with you all."

- Psalm 29:11 – "The Lord will give strength to His people; The Lord will bless His people with peace."

- Isaiah 54:10 – "For the mountains shall depart, And the hills be removed, But My kindness shall not depart from you, Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed," Says the Lord, who has mercy on you."

- Matthew 11:28-29 – "Come to Me, all you who labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle, and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

CHAPTER 8 - RIGHTEOUSNESS AND SIN CONSCIOUSNESS

We have a difficulty. We have an issue that surpasses our comprehension of the matter. We face a challenge so immense that it obstructs our perception of reality. The encouraging news is that God possesses a resolution. The gospel reveals that God has supplied an answer to the most significant dilemma in the universe, and it has paved the way for a relationship with him in this life.

I am uncertain whether it is truly feasible for us to grasp the holiness of God. By definition, all of us fall short of the standards of righteousness, holiness, and glory in relation to the reality of God and his all-encompassing presence. If I were to compare the brightness of a candle to the reality of our sun, it would not adequately illustrate the magnificence of the glory of God.

Sin divides us from God. At the very outset of his history, God plainly stated that on the day man would sin, he would certainly perish. "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17). Adam and Eve did not seem to die that day. In fact, the Bible states that they lived a total of 930 years. Yet, from the day they chose to disobey God and disbelieve his word, the primary essence of their being, their spirit, died. I ponder how, as they aged, they understood and regretted that day. It must have been the moment when darkness enveloped them. They were expelled, both physically and spiritually, from God's presence and sentenced to a life apart

from him.

The Bible proclaims that everything God created originated from the very environment that these things required to sustain them for ongoing life and flourishing. God formed the trees from the ground. "And the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air from the ground" (Genesis 2:19). God fashioned the fish from the seas. "So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind" (Genesis 1:21). However, when it came to man, God created him in his own image. As a plant begins to wither without soil, and a fish starts to perish without water, so man will die when separated from the presence of God.

The reality is that sin has so diminished our perception of reality that we are no longer even capable of grasping how far we have fallen from God. Most people will acknowledge to some degree that they have faults and failings in their lives, and yet, without the direct action of the grace of God through the Holy Spirit, we tend to think that we are basically good individuals with a few minor faults and failings. It is vital that we understand the awfulness of sin and its consequences in completely separating us from God.

Over the years, many individuals have argued about the reality of hell, or Hades. People discuss eternal, conscious punishment, and similar topics. I genuinely believe that one hundred percent of people would choose to be cast out of God's presence when they realize the utter glory and holiness of God. We could not bear to be in his presence in a sinful state. Until we actually come to a full realization of the terribleness of sin, we are not truly on the

path to understanding the glories of salvation. Frequently, in a Western context, we have presented Christianity as a means to enhance one's life, to become a more virtuous person, and so forth. We do not require a cosmetic tweak to the peripheral issues of our lives.

When preaching the gospel, I will often make this statement: Jesus did not come to make bad people better. Jesus came to make dead people live. Outside of Christ, we are dead. The glorious news is that in Christ Jesus, we are alive. The Bible declares that the spirit is alive because of righteousness (Romans 8:10 - "And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.").

When we speak of God's righteousness, this has nothing to do with improving our character, helping us to make better choices, or making us better people. Righteousness is a legal term. If a person were to be put on trial and, at the end of that trial, to be legally declared not guilty of a particular crime, that is a legal status. It is not open to interpretation. There are no shades of grey with that decree; not guilty is not guilty. On the cross of Calvary, the great exchange took place. Jesus became sin, not simply took upon himself the sins of the world, but literally the actual nature of sin, so that, in return, we might take upon his very nature, the nature of God, the nature of righteousness.

He became sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The court of heaven has legally declared you to be righteous.

God is not interested in your opinion about this, or anybody else's; this is a legal fact in the eyes of God.

One of the most detrimental teachings ever propagated within the church, and one that is unfortunately still taught or suggested today, is the notion that God has saved us, but only barely. It is often taught, or implied, that we will not be righteous until after our death. It is frequently suggested that, at that point, God will transform us into righteous people who can fully stand in his presence. There is nothing whatsoever in the Bible that teaches or implies anything comparable to this. However, the Bible clearly teaches repeatedly that we now possess a standing of righteousness before God.

Those who receive the abundance of grace, and the gift of righteousness, will reign in life through one, Christ Jesus. "For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:17)

We have received the gift of righteousness; we are not going to receive it later. In fact, if you have not accepted the gift of righteousness, you will never stand in God's presence, either in this life or the one to come.

To develop and enjoy the relationship that God truly desires for us in this life, it is vital that we learn to adopt this identity as a righteous one. This has nothing to do with performing righteous acts. This has everything to do with an identity that one needs to step into.

* * *

The new man, which is created after him in righteousness and in true holiness, comes by being renewed in the spirit of your mind. "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4:23-24)

The challenge for the believer is to put on the new man. Paul clearly teaches that we accomplish this not by attempting to perform righteous deeds, but by being renewed in the spirit of our mind. In Romans 12:2, Paul instructs us not to conform to the world's image or standards, but to be transformed through the renewal of our mind. (Romans 12:2)

Every new believer embarks on a journey upon realizing that, despite being forgiven, they still have a tendency to sin occasionally. As mentioned in a previous chapter, religion often attempts to curb this inclination through various methods, primarily legalism and rules designed to rein in the sinful nature. However, Paul warns against such approaches, stating, "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using— according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh." (Colossians 2:20-23)

Indeed, the only thing that matters is becoming a new creation. As Paul declares, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation." (Galatians 6:15)

* * *

The believer's approach to sin in their life should involve two key aspects. First, we must repent of our sins. Whenever the Holy Spirit convicts us that there is something in our life that displeases God, we must quickly come to God, acknowledge our sin, seek his forgiveness, and then believe by faith that we are forgiven. A common pitfall is that, when we experience the emotional effects of shame and the reality of having disappointed God, we often struggle to believe that we are forgiven, sometimes for an extended period. It is vital that we learn to receive forgiveness by faith, not by feelings. As the Scripture affirms, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

Second, we need to learn to renew our minds. The biblical term "renew" does not suggest that we are merely improving something old over time. Rather, the scriptural concept of renewal involves exchange. We are called to exchange our old mind for a new one, relinquishing our former way of thinking and embracing the mind of Christ. As Paul writes, "For 'who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?' But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Corinthians 2:16)

To be carnally minded is death, to be spiritually minded is life and peace (Romans 8:6).

Our challenge is to daily clothe ourselves with the mind of Christ, and to learn to think his thoughts. The key to changing any behavior or habit is not found in trying to exercise self-control and willpower. In the kingdom of God, identity wins over action every time. When you begin to put on an identity as a

righteous person, then righteous actions will be the natural outflow of that identity through a mind shift.

The third challenge for the believer is a sin consciousness. We have been so accustomed to thinking in terms of sin that it has often formed many of the habits and perceptions that run and rule our lives. It is possible to make a conscious choice to perform an action or not. With our willpower, we can achieve a certain level of victory in a limited sense, but this will never produce a holy life or break the power of sin in our lives. Every day, we make thousands of choices and decisions, yet nearly all of these are made at an unconscious level. In the vast majority of times, we are not aware of the choices we are making; we simply see the results of them. How often have we all asked ourselves, "Why am I doing this?"

Develop a righteousness consciousness. Learn to think as a citizen of a new kingdom. We need to be more aware of God's presence and our righteous standing in Christ Jesus, and to develop the mindset that comes with this.

Understanding our status as a righteous people will bring peace and joy into our relationship with God. Without this, we will always be fearful of approaching him or his presence. Like Adam and Eve, we will be hiding from him and trying to hide parts of our lives from him who sees all.

In the early 2000s, my wife and I had recently married. We were living in Paris, France. We were part of a thriving church community. In that season, I had begun traveling in full-time ministry in Europe and Asia. I love to start every new day in the best possible way, and for me, that was spending time with God.

Because our apartment was so small, I would get up early every day and walk around the streets as I prayed. One morning, as I was walking, the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said something completely unexpected. He said to me, "I want you to go to America next week." America was the last thing on my mind.

My initial response to the Lord was, "I have no invitation to go to America, I have no money to go to America, and nobody wants me to go to America."

I thought that I had closed the subject, yet, around five minutes later, the Holy Spirit spoke in my heart again (not audibly), saying something similar but more precise. "I want you to go to America on Monday." I was so surprised that I literally stood there, racking my brain to remember what day of the week it currently was. Today was Friday. God had just told me to go to America in three days.

I was certain this was the Lord speaking to me, and yet it made absolutely no logical sense to my rational mind. I have since learned that God is rarely rational; He is wise. I responded to the Lord sincerely, but with humor. I said, "I will go to America on Monday, as long as You speak to my wife today." I thought I had closed the subject until I returned home from my walk. It was about 7 AM, and my wife had just gotten up and was making coffee in the kitchen. As I came in from my walk, she smiled and said to me, "I had a strange dream last night; I dreamt you were in America."

It was not hyperbole to say that I had no money to buy a ticket to America. As I sat down to drink coffee with my wife, we were both convinced this was God's will, but we could see no practical

way to do it. Suddenly, my wife said to me, "Well, actually, we do have the money to buy you a ticket; we have our rent money." We had money put aside to pay our rent the very next week, and that amount would cover a ticket to America. "Wonderful," I replied, "but how will we pay the rent?"

My wife, who has great faith in God, simply smiled and said, "God will provide."

That afternoon, we went to a local travel agent (this was 25 years ago) and purchased the cheapest ticket we could find for me to go to America, from Paris to New York. I had no idea what I would do in America, where I would go, or even the purpose of this journey. But I had peace in my heart that this truly was God's will.

On the Sunday evening, the day before my trip to America, I was in my own home church in Paris together with my wife. That evening, we had a guest speaker from Holland, a wonderful brother with a prophetic ministry. As I sat on the front row, I have to confess that I was not really listening to this man preach. In my mind, I was thinking about my trip to America! In the middle of this man's sermon, he turned around, pointed directly at me, and shouted, "You, come here now!"

My initial reaction was to think that this man had noticed I was not paying attention, and, for some reason, he seemed intent on embarrassing me or reprimanding me in front of my home church. As I came and stood before him, this man began to prophesy to me about the ministry God had given me. I will not delve into the details of the prophecy now, but it was a precious word that still resonates in my life today. At the end of his

message, he turned me around to face my home church and then made the following announcement: "I want every single person in this room to come and give Graham an offering right now."

Suddenly, the man said, "Stop!" He continued, "Many of you are offended because I told you how to use your own money." The man pulled out a bag from his pocket, full of money, and placed it on the table at the front of the church. He then said, "I would like everyone in the room to come and give Graham an offering. You can give your own money, or, if you prefer, take some of my money and give it to him." He emphasized, "The key is that I want you to obey the Holy Spirit." He announced, "To obey is better than sacrifice." He added, "God is not looking for a sacrifice. He is looking for obedience."

I stood there in front of the church, embarrassed as people came and placed money, checks, and notes at my feet. When every person in the church had obeyed this instruction, the man scooped up all of this money, put it in my jacket pocket, and said, "You can go now."

That evening, when we returned home, I emptied my jacket on the kitchen table. Together with my wife, we counted all of this money. It was exactly, to the penny, the amount the ticket to America had cost.

The next day, I left to embark upon the New World. That weekend, someone had told me about a Christian conference I could attend, where food and accommodation were provided for free. After flying to New York, I rented a car and went to this conference. I think, in the back of my mind, I had the idea that God would open up an opportunity for ministry. I believed

something wonderful would happen, and this would be the gateway to a flourishing ministry in America. I could not have been further from the truth. To be honest, I spent what turned out to be the most boring two weeks of my life. The conference was completely uninteresting. I was never given an opportunity to speak or minister in any way, and, to be honest, I felt that I had completely missed God during these two weeks. At the end of these two weeks, I drove the rental car back to New York City for my return flight home. Just before returning the rental car, as is normal, I went to a gas station, a mile or two from the airport, to fill the car with gasoline. As I stood outside of my car, pumping gas, a man pulled up at the other side of the pump and began filling his vehicle. As we both stood there, he smiled at me. I smiled back. He smiled again, so I smiled once more as he kept smiling. I began to get a little worried.

I have heard about these Americans.

This man began talking to me and asked how my day was going. I believe I replied that my day was not going well, unfortunately. He then inquired about my occupation, to which I responded that I was an evangelist. He informed me that he was a pastor in Connecticut. To be perfectly honest, I was not very impressed. I remember thinking that perhaps he led a small home church with only a couple of members and maybe even a cat. I think, although I am not certain, that I gave him my name and probably mentioned that I was living in France. That was the extent of our conversation. I returned my car, caught my flight, and went back to France.

Later, I received a phone call from this gentleman. I could not remember his name. He invited me to come and speak at his

church. Initially, I made an excuse, saying that I had no plans to visit America and so on, but he insisted and offered to pay for my ticket. I eventually agreed to go the following year, and thus began my ministry in the United States.

This pastor—his name is Brian Simmons, the author of *The Passion Translation*—was leading one of the largest and most influential churches in New England: Gateway Church in New Haven, Connecticut. On the first day I arrived back in America to preach at his church, another pastor came to the lobby of my hotel to meet me. His name is Dan Lee, pastor of Sturbridge Worship Center in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. This minister invited me to speak at his congregation. (I now lead this church myself.) My one initial act of obedience to the Holy Spirit had opened up a whole new field of ministry, and I have now ministered to thousands in the United States.

Over the course of the next ten years, I ministered many times in America. The Lord continued to open doors for me to speak in churches, conferences, and Bible schools in America, yet, every time I entered America, I faced a challenge. Each time I entered the United States, I would be questioned by the US immigration service about my purpose: Was I coming to work? Was I earning money? Etc. Any itinerant ministry is in a gray area in these regards. I was coming to preach, which I would do completely freely, yet churches or ministries in the US would contribute financially to my ministry and my family. I was always honest and upfront with immigration officers about exactly what I was doing, but they were never quite sure how to handle this. The end result was that, every single time I came into the US, I would be questioned for a prolonged period. It was quite often the case that I would be sent to the basement office for secondary questioning,

which, at times, meant I would have to wait several hours. There were several occasions when immigration officers were unsure whether to allow me entry to the United States or send me back. Again, to be clear, I did nothing wrong or dishonest, but the experience was very intimidating. Each time I flew over the Atlantic, instead of having a restful flight and looking forward to ministry and times with friends in America, I dreaded my experience at the US immigration border. My entry or denial into the United States was always at the discretion of a particular officer, their understanding of the law, and possibly what kind of day they were having.

In 2012, my family moved our ministry base to the US on a religious worker visa. Several years later, we were granted green cards (permanent resident status), and then, in 2020, we became United States citizens.

I live in the United States and travel internationally most months; now, I have a completely different experience when I return to my home in the United States. When I arrive in front of an immigration officer with my blue US passport, the response I receive is a smile, and the only comment is, "Welcome home, Reverend Jones."

I find the example of my experience with US immigration analogous to the approach many people have of approaching God and His presence. Many individuals are never quite sure if they are going to be allowed into God's holy presence, and they approach God with fear and dread, not feeling sure that they completely belong there.

In Esther chapter 5, we read the story of Esther, who wants to

approach the throne of the king and seek favor. She is uncertain whether she will be admitted into the king's presence. The king might accept her in his presence or reject her. She may lose her life, or she may have her request (the salvation of the Jews) granted. When Esther enters the king's presence, he extends the scepter, indicating that she is welcome to approach him.

As it is written in Psalm 45:6, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom."

Through Jesus, the scepter of righteousness has been extended to us, granting us free admission into God's presence. It is vital that we understand, at a heart level, that we enter the presence of God as citizens of heaven and as righteous ones who have a perfect right to be there. Indeed, we are there by God's invitation. We are not standing outside, hoping we might be granted admission. When we approach God, we are not being evaluated to see if we qualify; rather, we are welcomed as sons of His kingdom. Selah

The work of Christ on the cross was complete and total in its nature. Jesus drank the dregs of the cup of the wrath of God (Matthew 20:22). He has forever, once and for all, dealt with and put away mankind's sin problem. Paul deals with this extensively in the book of Romans. The God of heaven has declared his people to be righteous forever. That is our standing in Christ Jesus before the throne of God. We are not righteous because we do righteous things. Rather, when we embrace our identity as righteous ones and learn to think righteously, talk righteously, and place our faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, then we will naturally do righteous things as an outworking of this faith.

* * *

Acting in a righteous way has nothing whatsoever to do with earning our salvation through good works. When our righteous acts flow from embracing our new nature, then these acts are the fruits of righteousness (Philippians 1:11). The root is in the work of the cross, and the fruit will eventually work itself out in our life. It is so vital that we recognize that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is once and forever finished. Both Roman Catholicism and much of the reformed/Puritan teachings present a work of salvation that occurred on the cross, yet they also teach a partial work of sanctification that unfolds over time. This teaching suggests that, through the course of circumstances, our own efforts, God infusing a measure of his grace, and hard work, we will complete the work initiated on the Cross. At the end of Jesus's suffering on the cross, he cried out, "It is finished." (John 19:30) In French, that verse is translated as "everything is now accomplished." Our salvation is completely and eternally accomplished in Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1)

Because of the standing of righteousness, we are at perfect peace with God. God welcomes us in his presence, and we are completely at home with him. It is vital that we accept this as a theological truth, and yet, it is equally vital that this truth sinks into our hearts, so that, at an experiential level, we fully accept that we have peace with God. Having been a pastor for many years and daily interacting with believers, I have learned that most Christians have an intrinsic, or gut-level, feeling that God is angry with them and, at best, tolerates them. Most of us live with an acute sense of our own faults and failings. When we try to reconcile this with the holiness of God, the only conclusion we

manage to draw is that God must not be happy with us and indeed views us as failures. It is a glorious thing to have peace with God.

At the birth of Christ, the angel sang, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:14) I have heard that verse misquoted many times as "goodwill among men." The gospel is not about promoting horizontal goodwill, that is, goodwill among mankind. Rather, the gospel is a proclamation of goodwill towards mankind, from heaven to earth. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

We have peace with God, and we have boldness and access into his presence. "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation," (Ephesians 2:14)

"The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion." (Proverbs 28:1) For most of our existence, we live like the wicked who flee even when nobody is pursuing. This is a natural result when we are not in righteous relationship with God. There is a boldness and confidence that comes into our lives when we know we are in right standing with God. As we seek to grow in the relationship that we have in Christ Jesus and build this into the fabric of our daily lives, it is vital that we learn to embrace this peace and boldness that comes through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

How can we practically apply the truth of righteousness to our daily walk and to our ongoing relationship with God? Here are four practical steps that will help us take the subject of

righteousness and establish our hearts in these truths.

Firstly, it is important that we have our theology and understanding correct on this matter. Too many consider theology or doctrine a dry or boring subject, and I have often heard comments along the line of 'God just cares about what is in our heart' or to imply that it does not matter if we do not have correct theology. There is a measure of truth to the statement, but I would warn you that it is also dangerous. God will not reject us because we believe in bad theology, but bad theology will often end up in our rejecting God. I encourage you to read through the book of Romans and come to a thorough understanding of what that truly means. A wonderful book that I have found to be a great resource on the subject of righteousness is the book *The Two Kinds of Righteousness* by E.W. Kenyon. I have read this book many times and still believe it to be one of the greatest declarations of our righteousness in Christ Jesus.

Secondly, while it is vital that we have a good intellectual understanding of the subject, we need to bring that into a heart-level experience with God. You desire truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6, : "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.").

It is good that we sit in these truths and allow the Holy Spirit to make them real to us. Come into God's presence with His word and allow the truth of your right standing with God to sink into your heart and your very being. When we begin to feel the joy of truly being clean before God, it is a life-changing experience. It is vital that it becomes an experience and not simply a doctrine.

I remember years ago preaching in a large church in Northern

Ireland. That evening, many young people came forward and gave their lives to Jesus. The next day, I was in a coffee shop in the small market town where I was staying, and a young lady came running in shouting my name. She announced that she had been in the church service the night before and had given her life to Christ. In tears, she told me that she had not slept all night long. Her comment to me was that she just felt clean and right with God. She told me that, until the preceding evening, she had always felt dirty and 'shop soiled.' She looked at me with tears, but light in her eyes, saying, 'I am completely clean before God.'

Thirdly, it is vital that we learn the glorious truth of confessing God's word. For many Christians, the word 'confession' has always been understood as confessing our sins. This is right and proper, and yet, the word 'confession' has a much broader application in biblical understanding. The Greek word **homologeō** for confession simply means 'to say the same thing.' When we put God's word upon our mouths and declare that it is true, faith arises in our hearts for that very thing.

Romans 10:10, : "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

Revelation 12:11, : "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."

It is vital that we learn to confess with our mouths what the word of God says concerning our standing in righteousness. God knows that we are righteous, and there is no doubt about this, but, when we confess the word of God on the subject, we

establish this truth within our own hearts, and our boldness and our faith arise.

Satan is the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10, : "Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, 'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.'"); he is constantly coming and accusing us and trying to define us by his lies about our past failures. When we daily declare that we are the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21, : "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."), we are establishing our hearts in these glorious truths.

The communication of our faith is made effective by the constant acknowledgment of every good thing which is in us in Christ Jesus (Philemon 1:6).

Lastly, we must embrace an intolerance for sin and a lifestyle of quick repentance. When we know we have missed the mark or fallen short in some area, rather than trying to hide or justify that, rather than sitting in shame and hiding from the reality of God in our consciousness, we need to learn to repent.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

There is nothing Satan hates more than a Christian who will quickly repent. One of the greatest keys I have learned in overcoming sin is to repent before we sin. To repent is to do a U-turn. To repent is to change direction and to change our mind. It

is possible to repent after you sin, or while you are sinning, but it is also possible to repent before sin ever occurs. At the first realization that you are going through temptation, there is no better time to turn away from that temptation and to put your eyes upon God. The key is, at that very moment of temptation, to come back into your relationship and back into your identity in Christ.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

CHAPTER 9 - FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

God is a God of faith. To walk with God, we must learn to walk by faith. We can only work with God through faith. Faith pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). Whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). Faith is not complicated; it is a revelation. In my experience, 95% of Christians do not understand faith, how to believe in God, or how to receive from Him. I encourage you to approach the subject humbly, willing to let go of preconceived ideas that might hinder your growth.

In my stream of Christianity, such as charismatic or Pentecostal, we truly believe in experiencing the Bible. It is a glorious thing to experience God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and to see God move in signs and wonders. Personally, I know of nothing greater than experiencing God's love and His presence. However, a danger in biblical Christianity is living from one experience to another. I know many believers, including myself, who have had transformational experiences with God. I delight in these experiences, but their glory can lead us to seek more and base our lives on them.

At the end of his life, the Apostle Peter wrote about one of the most glorious experiences he had ever had. In 2 Peter 1, Peter recounts his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter speaks of ascending the mountain, hearing the voices of Moses and Elijah, and then the voice of God Almighty saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" Peter saw the veil pulled back, revealing Jesus' true identity as the glorious Son of God. What an incredible experience. I can well imagine younger Christians listening to Peter, now an old man, telling this glorious story. The startling thing in this chapter is

that after recounting the story of the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter says something provoking: "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:19-21)

In effect, Peter was saying that the written word of God, the Bible, is more certain than any experience anyone could ever have. Peter is stating that although he had heard the audible voice of God with his own ears and seen the glory of Jesus, the Scriptures are more sure and more certain than any experience, no matter how valid or glorious.

I used to view faith as this mysterious force or gift that some people seem to possess, but that many, including myself, did not. I believe most honest Christians experience the conflict of seeing God's promises and wondering why they are not working in their own lives. I remember as a young Christian feeling sick at times, and then asking God to heal me, begging, pleading, asking others to pray for me, etc. The sad reality is, as a young believer, nobody ever actually taught me how to receive from God by faith.

I truly believe the answer to why most of us do not receive is simply that we have never truly understood what faith is and how faith works. I do not believe the problem is that we lack faith or that our faith is too small. Jesus clearly says faith the size of a grain of a mustard seed can move a mountain (Matthew 17:20 - "So Jesus said to them, 'Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I

say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.""). I believe if you study and embrace the truth in this chapter, your faith will awaken and arise, and you will begin to receive the many wonderful things God has promised you.

Take a moment and think with me about what actually happens in these instances when we pray and perceive that our prayers are not answered.

Firstly, we have a need. Maybe we are sick, maybe we are struggling in an area of our life, maybe we have a financial need, etc.

Secondly, we believe, on the basis of God's word, that God will meet this need, heal us, give us victory, provide for us, etc.

Thirdly, we pray. Often in my experience, we pray hoping that God will do something or trying to talk Him into doing something. Usually, at this stage, we have faith that something could happen; we believe that similar things might have happened, in the past, to some people, but in my experience, we are not usually absolutely convinced that this thing will happen.

Fourthly, we look at our experience to evaluate whether the prayer has or has not been answered. We look at the body area with the pain to see if we are feeling better. We look at our finances to see if they have increased, or we look at whatever particular area we have asked for to see if anything has changed. We are confronted with the reality that absolutely nothing has changed. Possibly, we talk ourselves into giving God a little bit

longer to work, but after a while, we usually come to the conclusion that the prayer did not work, that God did not answer, and for some mysterious reason, we have not received from God.

Does this sound all too familiar? If it does, please keep reading. I believe your whole life is about to change. Faith is the key that activates every promise. Grace relates to God giving us things that, outside of Christ, we do not deserve. Faith appropriates and receives what God has already given. Faith is like having an invisible arm that reaches out and receives something that God is offering. Our biggest challenge is that we try to receive things through our feelings, instead of through our faith.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He presented Himself to some of the disciples. With amazement and wonder, they told the other disciples the story of His resurrection. We read in the gospel the story of Thomas, whom we commonly call doubting Thomas. Thomas refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, until he could touch and feel Jesus. Thomas's declaration was, "If I cannot touch and feel Jesus, I will not believe that He is risen from the dead." Jesus presented Himself to Thomas and asked him to touch Him, to put his hand in the wound in His side and in His hands. Jesus said to Thomas, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

At a human level, we are all like Thomas. We want to pray and then go back to our feelings to evaluate whether the prayer has worked. This is such a natural and human thing to do that the vast majority of Christians struggle with the concept that we could do anything else. We have so accustomed ourselves to the idea that our feelings represent truth that it often becomes

difficult to grasp the basics of faith. The challenge for the average believer is not that we do not have enough faith. The challenge is that we have simply not learned how faith works. We have faith, but we place our feelings before our faith. Like Thomas, we declare that when we feel something is real, then we will believe it. However, God's word says that faith is the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1 - "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.").

We have learned to place such faith in our five physical senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting) that to us, these represent absolute reality. While it is true that our feelings are real, it is not always true that what we feel represents the truth. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven (Psalm 119:89).

What we feel is real and true to a certain degree, but what we feel is changeable and not eternal truth. What God says is true and will always remain true. The truth of God's word can change the perceived truth of our feelings.

In Mark chapter 11, we read one of the greatest teachings of Jesus on faith that will open up the simple principles of faith. If we can grasp the lessons of this story, our faith will become active and valid in our lives.

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus is journeying from Bethany to Jerusalem to minister for the day. He passes a fig tree and goes over to see if there are any figs upon it. When He finds there are no figs upon the fig tree, He curses the fig tree. Take a

moment to notice that in cursing the tree, He does not stand there and say the words, "I curse you, tree." Rather, Jesus simply speaks the end result over the tree: "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again" (Mark 11:14).

Clearly, the disciples saw this incident and heard the words of Jesus. You can imagine the disciples looking at the tree as Jesus walked away. The tree seemed perfectly healthy, vibrant, and flourishing, full of bright green leaves (but no figs). To their perception, the words or prayer of Jesus had had absolutely no effect on this fig tree.

The next day, Jesus is making the same journey with His disciples when the disciples noticed the tree from the day before. This time, the tree is withered, shriveled up from its very roots. The words that Jesus had spoken had had their full effect upon this poor fig tree. The disciples were amazed, and Jesus used this incident to teach them how to operate in faith. Take a moment to read through this entire passage.

So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them." (Mark 11:22-24)

In this passage, we see the clearest teaching on faith in the entire Bible. Jesus begins by encouraging the disciples to have faith in God. Of course, Jesus is saying to have confidence and belief (faith) in God. A better translation of this verse would read 'have

the God kind of faith,' or perhaps better, 'have faith as God has faith.' In fact, Jesus is saying to learn how God operates and uses His faith. Then, you can do the same thing (Mark 11:23), or even greater things (John 14:12).

Secondly, Jesus tells the disciples to speak to the fig tree, or the mountain, or really whatever is hindering our way. I think Jesus's point in saying 'speak to the mountain' is that, to the people of that day, they could conceive of nothing larger than a mountain. Jesus is saying, forget fig trees; it is time to think about moving mountains. Jesus says to speak to the obstacle and speak the end result: 'Be removed and cast into the sea,' 'Let no man eat fruit from you again,' and so on.

At this point, Jesus says if we believe, and do not allow doubt to enter into our hearts, we will have whatever we say. We will come back to the subject of doubt later. In verse 24, Jesus explains exactly how to receive from God: 'Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them' (Mark 11:24).

This is so simple that the vast majority of Christians will miss it. I confess that I missed this for many, many years. Jesus says to pray, and then, at the moment you pray, believe that you have received the thing you pray for. Jesus says to believe that your prayer is answered when you pray, not when you see the result. Our challenge is that we pray, and then we look to see if our prayer is answered. We need to pray and believe that we have received. Jesus assures us that if we pray and then believe that we have obtained it, God will ensure those results take place (sooner or later) in our life. So often, we pray, believe our prayers are answered, and then quickly get discouraged when we

see no immediate results.

Do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise (Hebrews 10:35-36).

One of the greatest Christian skills you can ever learn is to hold a result in your faith in spite of contrary circumstances. Imagine if, on day one, the disciples would have approached Jesus after he had cursed the fig tree. Imagine if one of the disciples said to Jesus, 'Lord, the tree did not hear you; Lord, nothing happened to the tree.' I believe Jesus would have turned to the disciple and said, 'No, the tree is completely dead.' Imagine if our disciple would have run back to look at the tree and found it completely strong, green, and healthy. He then returns to Jesus and says, 'No, Lord, the tree is still alive.' Jesus would have assured him, 'No, the tree is dead. I have believed that I have received the death of the tree.' Now, it was God's job to produce death in the tree. It was Jesus's job to hold onto the outcome of that faith.

Let me be clear that it is often difficult to maintain the outcome of faith, especially when we have contrary circumstances, situations, or symptoms that speak to us loudly. I remember one of the first healings I ever received from God. I had been preaching the night before, and I woke up early the next morning with my neck in severe pain. I suppose I must have slept in an unusual position, and the slightest movement would cause my neck to shoot with pain. I could not turn my neck in any way and had to move my whole body to maneuver my head around. I cried out to God to heal me, and after about five minutes of self-pity and unbelief, I realized that I was not applying these principles of faith in my own life. I then spoke to my neck,

commanding it to be loose and healed. I reached out in my faith and received the result of a perfectly healed neck. I then continued my day, but every five or six seconds, I would feel pain shoot through my neck. I used the reminder of the pain as a prompt to stop what I was doing and thank the Lord for my healing. If you would have followed me that day, you probably would have thought I was crazy as I often exclaimed, 'Ouch! Lord, I thank you that I am now healed.' I was not saying 'I am now healed' as a method to try to get God to heal me. Many people have fallen down that path. If you are trying to get God to heal you, then you do not believe you have received healing already. When you believe you have something, you have it! When you believe you have something, you are no longer trying to obtain it. Around half an hour later, without me even realizing it, my neck was suddenly and instantly loose and healed. Praise the Lord.

The glorious news is that each and every day we are presented with opportunities to use our faith, both for our own lives and also to minister God's life and power to others.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17). But faith also grows by usage. Our faith needs to be active. Our faith needs to be invested. Our faith needs an outlet. Our faith needs to be taken to the gym and worked until it sweats. It is in that context that faith will actually grow and become dependable. It is vital that we learn to use our faith in the smaller things of life before we begin investing our faith in larger things. You need to kill a lion and a bear before you kill a giant and then become the leader of the armies of Israel. Most of us spend most of our lives trying to avoid any situation where we will ever need to use our faith. By definition, any situation in

which we need to use faith will be a challenge. We read in Hebrews chapter 11 of all the great heroes of faith and all of the wonderful things that faith had accomplished through their lives and testimonies. I challenge you to read through that list, and you will discover that they became heroes by engaging with challenges, problems, difficulties, and the enemies of God.

I encourage you to take the time to think through that simple principle. Faith is when we pray to God based on his promises. It is also when we speak to an obstacle using the authority he has given us. But faith means that at the moment we pray, we believe that prayer is answered, regardless of what we see, smell, feel, taste, or touch. If we hold onto those beliefs in our hearts, God will manifest them in our experience. God will always manifest in your experience the word that you hold in your heart. God's word is like a tracking number. You believe you have the order because you have the tracking number. A parcel may be working its way through FedEx or UPS. Your job is to hold onto the tracking number. The Amplified Bible calls faith the title deed of the things we hope for. The greatest challenge for all of us is the period between when we pray or speak to the mountain and when we receive. We walk through a season that the Bible calls the trial of our faith (1 Peter 1:7: "that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ"). All of us will go through moments when we need to believe something is done, even though our five physical senses deny that reality. At that juncture, our faith is put on trial and tested. Can we hold onto God's word, or will we let our feelings become the determining factor in our lives?

About 25 years ago, my wife and I lived in a small apartment in

Paris. We had recently married and had just begun to buy furniture. One Saturday morning, we were in the large Swedish furniture store IKEA, which is very popular in Europe. We saw a beautiful blue sofa that would fit well in our home and also double as a sofa bed. My wife immediately called me over and asked me to try it. As a man, I came over but immediately looked at the price tag. When I saw the price, I knew we could not afford it and tried to move my wife along through the maze that is IKEA.

When I told my wife we did not have the money for the sofa, she simply said, "No problem, let us pray and ask the Lord to give it to us." Not wanting to argue with my wife, I sat down. Before I could say anything, she prayed, asking Father to give her the sofa, believed she had received it, and then, to my consternation, said, "Father, I would like to have it within two days." She then thanked Him for answering the prayer, got up, and walked away. I was slightly amused, but part of me did not believe we would get the sofa within two days. That afternoon, back in our apartment, my wife began moving furniture to make space for the new sofa that she believed would arrive within two days. I smiled to myself and thought, "We will see."

The next morning was Sunday. At church, my wife kept one eye open, hoping someone would give her €600 (the price of the sofa). All day long, she looked and thanked God, believing she had received the sofa, yet no money or sofa came. I was secretly relieved that nothing had happened. The next morning, as the 48-hour mark approached, I was preparing to console her for the disappointment. Around 11 o'clock that morning, the pastor of our church called and asked if I could drive someone to the airport. I went to his house, picked up a guest minister, and drove

him to Charles de Gaulle Airport in the north of Paris. I dropped him off and began driving down the ramp. When I looked in my rearview mirror, I saw the man standing in the center of the road, waving and beckoning me to come back. I reversed my car back to the drop-off point and jumped out to meet him. I assumed he had forgotten something in the car.

The man exclaimed that as he was walking away, the Lord had spoken to him and told him to give me something. He turned, thrust a check into my hand, and walked away. That day, I had a surreal experience. I looked at my watch, and it was exactly midday, the same hour my wife had prayed two days earlier. I held the check up to read the amount, but the sun was shining in my eyes. I used the check to block the sun. It was a check for €600. As I lowered the check, I had another surreal moment. Most airports are surrounded by several miles of flat grass or terrain. As I lowered the check, I saw in the distance, about three miles away, a large bright blue building with yellow letters reading "IKEA." I went and bought my wife the sofa. Selah.

I am so thankful that I learned at an early age how to consistently receive healing from God. Before I understood this lesson of faith, I had a very hit-or-miss story of receiving from God. If I am honest, it was much more miss than hit in my story. The simple lesson of faith has helped me enormously when it comes to ministering healing to others, both as an itinerant minister and a local church pastor. Many people in ministry have the experience of praying for others and sometimes seeing wonderful instant results. What this lesson of faith has taught me, though, is that I can receive results 100% of the time if I hold fast to my faith and do not "cast away my confidence" (Hebrews 10:35).

* * *

To repeat, this is not about a formula of following some simple procedure that forces God to do anything. God is a sovereign God, and yet in His sovereignty, He has given us His sovereign word, His promise that can never be broken (Luke 1:37).

I have learned that sometimes we need to spend a period of time before we can bring ourselves to the place where we can believe that we have received the result.

Around 25 years ago, I received a phone call that gave me some terrible news about a medical condition in a family member. At that time, I had never heard of anybody who was healed of this condition. The very mention of the name of this condition intimidated and scared me. I remember going to the Lord directly after receiving the news and attempting to pray for this person. I have learned that it pays to be really honest with your faith. We can pretend to others that we are in faith, and sometimes we can deceive ourselves, but we can never truly deceive God. Over the years, I have gained the ability to recognize when I am truly in faith, to discern when I am actually not in faith, or to identify when I do have faith but my heart is also full of doubt, fear, and unbelief. Often, we are like the man in Mark chapter 9 who said, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

In this instance, I knew that I had unbelief as well as faith within my heart. Instead of praying for this family member, the Lord told me to come aside and fast and pray and seek Him. I spent one week seeking the Lord every day, not seeking Him for healing, but seeking Him for Himself. I have discovered there is a place in our relationship with God where our hearts come under more influence of Him and His presence than of any circumstance around us. After spending one week entirely with

the Lord, the Lord then spoke to me and said, "Now pray for this family member." As soon as I prayed, I knew that I knew that I knew that the person was completely healed. This was confirmed subsequently by the doctor's report. Faith is when we know that we know that we know. Faith is not trying; faith is not striving; faith is rest. He who believes has entered the rest and ceased from all of his labors (Hebrews 4:10).

How do we apply these lessons of faith to the concept of building and flourishing in a relationship with God?

We must realize that faith is a bridge and a connection to God. As stated earlier, it is biblical and correct that we will have glorious experiences with God, but I have learned both biblically and by experience that we cannot always rely on experiences. There are times when we worship God that we will feel a powerful sense of His presence, love, holiness, and more. There are other times when we worship when we will feel absolutely nothing. Does that mean that God is not there? Does that mean He is not with us? Does that mean He is not pleased with our worship? Absolutely not! Rather, He is teaching us to live by faith.

There are times when God will manifest Himself to you. There are times when God will visit you. There are times when you will experience Him in a glorious way. There are other times when it feels like none of those things are true. I have learned that these are precious and glorious times. When God is not visiting me, He is, in reality, inviting me to visit Him. When God is not touching me with His presence, He is inviting me to learn by faith that I can always access His presence. I love and enjoy the feelings of experiencing God's pleasure and love towards me. As I stated in a previous chapter, we can learn by faith to always access that

love. His love is always being poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). All of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is available to us at all times:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

Our challenge is that we need to learn to access these things by faith. I have learned that I can wake up in the morning feeling no joy, feeling down and tired, and then reach out by faith to draw water from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12:3). As I choose to rejoice by an act of my will and faith, I begin to experience joy. The experience follows the faith. Faith precedes experience. If I believe I am in the presence of God, I will begin to experience the presence of God.

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living (Psalm 27:13). In this verse, David says he needs to believe, in order to see. Religion has taught us, like Thomas, to see, in order to believe.

Every part of our walk and relationship with God functions by faith. We hear His voice by faith, we live out a life of righteousness by faith, we enjoy fellowship with Him by faith. I want to encourage you to reject the lie that you do not have enough faith. I believe that if you have been born again, you have all the faith you will ever need to access all the provision that God has already provided. Stop analyzing, measuring, and critiquing your faith. Instead, believe that your faith is real and adequate because God is the one who gave it to you. The challenge that lies before you is to activate your faith each and

every day. I encourage you to begin today. I encourage you to believe by faith that you are walking with God and fellowshiping with Him, abiding and connecting to Him as the branch abides in the vine (John 15:4-5). Selah.

CHAPTER 10 - BUILDING HABITS IN OUR WALK WITH GOD

One of the principal truths we desire you to grasp from this book is a simple concept: we are not each developing our own personal relationship with God. This is not an accurate way to view it. Some people are very close to God, while others are very far away. Rather, we have received, by inheritance, access into Jesus's relationship with God. We have been adopted into the family of God. We are not working to attain this, we are not working to earn this, but we are living it out in the course of our daily lives. We all have the identical relationship with God. We all have the same position in Christ Jesus, and we have all received the same inheritance, the life of Jesus.

However, we do not all practically live that life to the same degree. One person might devote every moment of their waking thoughts to the things of God, to growing in the knowledge of who they are in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:16-20). Another believer might simply take these things for granted, never taking the time to think or meditate upon them, and thus live practically far from God. Therefore, while we all have the identical relationship, we do not all experience that relationship to the same extent. God is not the deciding factor in how close we actually walk with Him. That is entirely our decision. As we draw near to the Lord, He will draw near to us (James 4:8).

Generally speaking, we are all born with the same muscle groups and potential within our bodies. I did nothing to receive the muscles in my biceps; I received them by birth. It is my choice, however, to determine to what extent I work on those muscles and develop them through pressure and usage over time. It is the

same in spiritual matters. (1 Timothy 4:8: "For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.") We need to learn to exercise spiritually. We need to learn to work out when it comes to the things of God, knowing that it is God who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

In this chapter, we will explore some of the practical details and habits that one should engage in to develop a close fellowship and walk with God. It is vital that we begin this journey, realizing that we have already arrived in Christ Jesus. We are not fighting anything except our own distractions and laziness. We are not reaching and striving for a higher place in God, for there is no higher place than to be seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).

If you want to build the relationship with God that you truly desire, and that God desires with you, then you need to learn, develop, and practice the habits of heaven. We need to practice our spiritual life until it becomes our identity. I have a dim and distant memory of playing golf in the late 1970s. By no stretch of the imagination do I, or should I, self-identify as a golfer. I have been playing guitar for over 40 years. I own approximately 30 guitars (though I am not sure of the exact number). I am never far from a guitar. It is a very rare day when I do not play the guitar for an extended period of time. For several years of my life, I have earned my living and paid my rent by playing guitar. I am a guitar player. I may not be the best musician in the world, but I am a guitar player.

Practice makes perfect. I encourage you to think about the

spiritual practices that constitute your walk with God. In my experience as a pastor, the sad reality is that most people have hardly any spiritual practices, habits, or experiences. A regrettable truth in the western world is that a vast majority of Christians simply maintain their spiritual life by attending church occasionally. Often, they are living vicariously through the spiritual lives of others. They have never learned to feed themselves spiritually, to pray on their own, or to exercise their faith. Instead, they come to the collective body of Christ or to ministries that God has placed within the body of Christ as the sole means of receiving and connecting with God. I do not say this to condemn anybody, and Jesus will not quench a smoking flax (Isaiah 42:3). Yet, I also recognize that these people will never grow, blossom, and flourish until they learn to stand in their own identity in Jesus Christ. So much of this comes down to the daily habits and practices that we need to engage in.

I have spoken a lot in this book about our placement in Christ, about the relationship we have received by inheritance, and how we need to understand and ground both our thinking and our hearts in these truths. While this is all completely true, this is still propositional. I am presenting to you truths that are completely true, and yet the danger is that you might only give mental assent to their veracity without activating them in your life. There comes a time in all of our lives when these truths must be activated. This is where the rubber must hit the road, in the daily practices of our spiritual life and walk with God.

All relationships exist in context. Every relationship exists within a framework. This framework includes, to some degree, a geographical context and the habits that surround and facilitate that relationship. Over the course of life, I have often noticed that

we pay little attention to the context of relationships. Yet, when that context changes, we are often surprised, disappointed, or indeed hurt when the relationship can no longer survive outside of that context. Most of our relationships have begun within a specific context. Many of these relationships will struggle or fail to transition from that context into another context.

Imagine you have a work colleague who is a friend. You work together in the same office. You see each other five days a week. The first action of your working day is to greet each other. You drink coffee during a break and often have lunch together. At a certain level, it is possible that you are spending more time with this work colleague than with your husband, wife, or a close family member. If you invite that work colleague to attend church with you, join a family vacation, or attend a Thanksgiving dinner, you are moving the relationship out of its natural context into another one.

It is quite probable that you will not work at this office for the rest of your life, and the same is true for your friend and colleague. If the context which brought about and sustains this relationship is changed or broken, you will have to work at creating another context for that relationship to exist and flourish. We often end a context with good intentions, expressing things like "let us keep in touch," "we will still be friends," or "let us see each other soon." Unless you replace the original context and its associated habits with another one, that relationship will be more connected with your past than with your present and future.

The same thing is true for our relationship with God. It is my honest experience as a pastor that most people do not have a

functioning relationship with God. They are seated in heavenly places, yet they have never learned to develop the habits of heaven or to build a context where they will meet God. Is this because they do not love God? Is this because they are hypocritical about their walk with God? In my opinion, no. Life has taught me that most of these people are sincere. On a semi-regular basis, such as once a week in church, they express the desire to walk more closely with God, to read His word, to show their faith, and so on. I believe that most of the challenges do not come from inauthenticity or even from laziness. Rather, they have never taken the time to construct the context or habits in which that relationship will flow.

In this chapter, we will explore some of the habits and practices that will empower and enable you to build the Christian life that you desire.

We need to learn how to create a space for meeting with God. In the book of Exodus, Moses established such a place, known as the "tent of meeting." According to Exodus 33:7, "Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting.' Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp." This tent served as a designated location where Moses and others could go to seek the guidance of the Lord.

I have a friend who literally set up a tent in his office and named it the "tent of meeting." Although I find this action amusing and somewhat unusual, I believe there is significant value in the concept of creating a specific context for meeting with God. I once heard the international evangelist T.L. Osborn state that we should invest time, effort, and even expense into preparing the

place where we meet with God. His point was not that a beautiful room is necessary to meet with God in a special way; rather, he emphasized the importance of creating a place that feels special to you. Create a place you enjoy going to, where you can spend time alone with God and His word, and feel good about yourself.

I believe we can construct a meeting place with God anywhere and at any time. I can establish a "tent of meeting" in various locations, such as a Starbucks, a busy airport, on a plane, or even while driving my car down the highway. Nevertheless, I do have designated places in all of my homes and my church offices where I can meet with God.

My point in suggesting this is not so much about the physical structure—like a tent or an office—but rather about developing consistent habits. In a sense, one could legitimately claim that God is with us at all times; He walks with us constantly and, in fact, never leaves us. Why do we need to spend any special time with God exclusively? Well, I agree theoretically that we can walk in total communion with God, but I have learned, and the Bible also teaches, that establishing specific habits—such as setting aside particular places and times for meeting with God—can empower our spiritual life.

The measure of our spiritual life is the measure of our daily habits and practices concerning the things of God. It is possible to live with good intentions that never quite begin. I have met many Christians, and at times I have been among them, who live with the delusion that today is too busy, but tomorrow we will spend quality time with God, in His word, and in worship. The reality is, if you wish to understand the course of your whole life, then break down the daily habits that make up the practice of

each day. In one sense, every day is different. To some degree, each day will bring surprises, blessings, or challenges that we did not foresee. Moreover, each day will move the furniture around in our life. And yet it is also true that, to a large degree, we will practice the same habits each day. When something becomes a habit, we no longer think about it. When something becomes a routine, we have largely eliminated conscious choice and overridden our willpower. Did you brush your teeth this morning? Why? Now, perhaps you will give me a medical answer about taking good care of one's teeth, oral hygiene, having a beautiful smile, and so on. While all of those things are facts, they are probably not the truth. For the vast majority of us, the truth is that, when we were small children, our parents obliged us to brush our teeth several times a day. We were not willing participants in the experiment, and yet we were obliged to do so. Now, much later on in life, we do not really think about this. I did, you will be pleased to know, brush my teeth this morning. But it was not actually out of a reflection on the medical benefits or aesthetic advantages of doing so. Rather, it was a habit that had been so ingrained in me that I would not be comfortable if I did not do so. I would not be happy with the "gunk" factor if I have not brushed my teeth.

You can measure the depths or shallowness of a person's experiential walk with the Lord by the habits and routines that they engage in on a daily or near-daily basis. I am told it takes around seven weeks to put into place a lifelong habit. In this chapter, we will cover some of the practical ways to ingrain habits within our life. Have you ever taken a walk in the countryside and noticed a pathway that has been walked on for many years? The pathway has been created because people have continued to walk down that path. And yet it is also true that you

walk down that pathway because there is now a pathway there. You can learn to build pathways in the spirit. Selah.

Before exploring in detail the practicalities of building the habits of a walk with God, it is vital that we talk about the comparative role of habits versus legalism. Seen from the outside, there is very little difference between a person who sits in a chair and reads the Bible for half an hour as a religious duty or obligation, and another person who is truly feeding themselves from the bread of life. It is possible to perform the same action but have a completely different posture of heart or motivation.

I believe in tithing. My wife and I give over 10% of our actual income to the work of the gospel; we have done this for many years and intend to continue for the rest of our lives. I teach and encourage this practice in all of the churches I lead, and yet I must emphasize that I do this as a mature believer. I would rather that somebody in my church gave nothing than they gave from some sense of obligation, religious duty, or worse, attempting to buy or earn something from God. I do not have to tithe. God will love me just as much if I never give a single penny to the kingdom of God for the rest of my life. I do not tithe so that God will love me. I tithe because God loves me, and I love Him in return. The problem is not in the action; the problem is in the motivation.

The Bible is clear that by the works of the law nobody is justified (Galatians 2:16). We cannot please God by attempting to keep laws. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). What purpose does the law serve? The law shows us our sin. The law indicates to us that we have not met God's standard and are not qualified to be in His presence. The

law is like a mirror that one might hold up to see the dirt and stains upon one's face. That mirror could accurately show me the state of my face, yet it has no ability to cleanse my face or to remove that dirt or stain.

Occasionally, when preaching the gospel, I will ask everyone present if they have ever read through the Ten Commandments and taken the test. People will look at me with puzzled expressions.

I then inquire if they have ever stolen anything, no matter how small its value. People will usually respond affirmatively. I will then say, "Then you are all thieves."

I proceed to ask if they have ever told a lie, no matter how small. When people respond in the affirmative, I will tell them they are all lying thieves. This always goes over well.

I then question if they have ever committed adultery. Usually, at this point, people are relieved and think they have found a point on which they will not be condemned. I then ask if they have ever had thoughts about a member of the opposite or same sex that they would be ashamed of if those thoughts were projected on the wall. Jesus tells us that if we have committed adultery in our heart, we have committed adultery. Then I inform the listeners that they are lying thieves and adulterers.

The point I am making is that the law is completely incapable of saving us; that is why God sent His Son in the flesh to redeem mankind.

When we talk about spiritual disciplines and habits, it is vital to

have a mature mindset. We are not earning anything from God. We are not attempting to please God through these actions. The blood of Jesus is everything, and God is already pleased with His sacrifice. Rather, spiritual disciplines are the places of grace where we meet God and practice walking with Him. They are the context in which we build a relationship with God. Spiritual disciplines are the tents of meeting.

How could we tell the difference between those practicing the law and those practicing Grace? How can we tell the difference between dead works and the fruits of righteousness (Hebrews 6:1; Philippians 1:11)?

As we practice these matters, it will become easy to see the difference. For instance, if I have a habit of Grace, I am okay if I do not practice it for a few days. For example, I have a regular plan and approach to reading my Bible every day. However, there are days, such as when I am traveling and very busy, that I do not open my Bible at all. I never condemn myself, and neither does God. I am fine with this. I have such a good relationship with God's word that it does not change my relationship with God if, once or twice a month, a day arises when I do not manage to open God's word. If I have a healthy relationship with food and eat well, it is acceptable to occasionally miss a meal when I am too busy. It is also permissible to occasionally indulge in something that is not very healthy. The problem comes when the exception becomes the rule. If we are walking in legalism, we will feel guilt and shame when we do not fulfill our legalistic duty. When we are walking under Grace, we evaluate our relationship with God based on the declaration of His word. When we are walking under the law, we evaluate our relationship with God based on our performance of our religious duty.

* * *

I encourage you to take some time to look over the landscape of your life and ask yourself what other habits you would love to have in place that would propel you forward in your walk with God. When it comes to the habits of our lives, most of us live at a very unconscious level. I would suggest to you that most of the habits that shape the fabric of our lives have not specifically been chosen by us. Rather, we have adopted them by osmosis, or simply allowed poor choices to become habits over a period of time. I believe it is vital that we become intentional about our habits. Our character is the sum of our habits. Our habits are the sum of our decisions.

It can be informative and illustrative to look over the course of a day in your life and evaluate what you really do with your time. What are the habits, conscious or unconscious, that constitute the fabric of your day? Are these habits helping you or hurting you? Are there other habits that are pulling you away from a walk with God or propelling you towards a walk with God?

Before we talk about the specifics of forming a habit, I would encourage you to take some time to imagine and dream of a wonderful day walked with God. What are the habits that God wishes to weave into the fabric of your life? What are the spiritual practices that God wishes to bring into your life to such a level that they are running on autopilot and you really do not need to think about them? What are the other elements of your walk with God that you can turn into habits? Are there parts of your walk with God that you can practice so much that they become like motor skills?

"But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those

who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." (Hebrews 5:14)

Take some time to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you with this vision of the habits that mold your life. There are times when He will be interested in simply working on one habit in your life until it is well formed. We can, at times, make the mistake of trying to work on so many things that we do none of them thoroughly. I have learned as a musician and a guitar player that it is better to learn a musical skill thoroughly and well. I will take a metronome, a timekeeper, slow it right down, and play the notes until I can play them perfectly. Only at that point will I then increase the speed to a normal pace.

How can we practically form habits, both spiritual and natural? Many of us have tried to form and indeed to break habits through our willpower. As most of us have discovered, our willpower is an effective tool for accomplishing certain things. At a base level, we can choose to do or perform nearly any action, and yet, all too soon, it seems like the unconscious choices of our habits will overtake the power of our will. So often, we look back in genuine puzzlement and wonder why we did or did not do certain things. What happened to our good resolutions and our strong willpower?

There is so much wisdom in the idea that willpower does not always run at the same strength level. For example, in the morning, I have an incredible resource of willpower, resolve, and focus. I find it very easy to accomplish things in the morning, to make choices, and to apply myself to lots of work. As the day progresses, I am well aware that my willpower wanes. Decisions and resolutions that I make in the morning can, like any

substance or power, diminish by the evening of each day. Rather than deny this, I find it wise to embrace that reality and structure my day in such a way that I can accomplish much in the earlier part of the day and schedule the activities and choices that require little willpower for the end of the day.

Trigger, action, reward.

For a habit to be sustained and maintained in our lives, it requires three component elements that work together: trigger, action, and reward. The habit is simply the action that we perform. This is what we notice and focus on most when we talk about our habits. This is what we try to accomplish purely by our willpower, yet that very action needs to be sandwiched by two other elements that will cause it to be repeated on autopilot.

For every habit to be built and maintained in our lives, it needs a reward. This reward can be anything: a sense of accomplishment, the endorphin rush and the feeling one might get after exercising, a sugar high after eating, or a sense of relief after clearing all the emails in your inbox. The point is simply this: for any habit to be sustained, there must be a payoff, some kind of reward that we enjoy and unconsciously begin to look forward to. We can, through willpower, choose to perform an action, but if we want that action to be automated and woven into the fabric of our lives, we must learn to associate the action with a payoff or reward that will unconsciously motivate us to engage with it.

For a habit to embed itself in the fabric of our lives, it also needs a trigger. A trigger is a simple thing that brings to our consciousness the desire for the reward. A trigger can be a feeling, a time or place, context, clothing we wear, an association

with many other things, and more. The basic point is that the trigger reminds us of the possibility of that reward. For example, we might wake up in the morning feeling tired and groggy. This can be a trigger that initiates the action of drinking coffee, which produces the reward or payoff of feeling more awake and alert.

For all the habits we wish to form or strengthen that will help us in our walk with God, I encourage you to think through these three steps. The habit itself is the action. We should begin by thinking about what the reward is. This is not unspiritual to think in these terms.

"For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2).

What is the joy that is set for you? I want you to think through the following question and be brutally honest, at least with yourself: Which is more enjoyable, reading the Bible for an hour or watching Netflix? Which is more enjoyable, praying for half an hour or eating ice cream?

Now, clearly, if we are in church on Sunday, everybody will claim that they enjoy prayer more than ice cream and the Bible more than Netflix. I may believe you. The point I am making is that most of us unconsciously believe there is a greater payoff in eating ice cream than in reading the Bible. How do we conquer this problem? We need to learn to define the payoff or reward and take the time to actually think it through. If every time we read the Bible, we end by engaging with this reward—thinking about how wonderful that actually was, figuratively patting ourselves on the back, and praising ourselves for the action that aligns with the person we are called to be—we will begin to

desire that reward. It is also possible to link an action with a non-associated reward. For instance, what would happen if each day you made an agreement with yourself that after walking the floor confessing God's word for half an hour, you would eat a bowl of ice cream (this is just an example)? Very quickly, at an unconscious level, you would begin to desire to confess God's word for half an hour. Lastly, for each of these actions, we need to find triggers that will remind us to engage with the action. The trigger can be a place, a context, or even a bell ringing, like Pavlov's dogs.

Thus, to engage in these habits, our goal is to create a trigger that reminds us of the reward available when we perform the action. If we repeat this process, then very quickly, these habits will become automated and woven into the fabric of our lives.

What I started doing about two years ago, which has greatly blessed and empowered me in my walk with God, is the following: I now practice sitting absolutely silently before the Lord, in the awareness of his presence, each day. Sometimes I do this for an extended period, but my favorite method is to set a timer for five minutes and sit there in absolute stillness and silence before the Lord. I am not emptying my mind; rather, I am abiding in him. When I do this, the absolute reality of God flows into my soul. The love, joy, and peace that is abiding in my spirit all the time flows into my soul and even into my body. I find this to be a glorious reset. There is something in this practice that involves putting my spirit in the driving seat and submitting my soul and body to what is happening in my spirit. I find it hard to describe the joy and wonder that comes to me when I embrace this. I often engage in this practice several times a day, just for five minutes each time, and then simply enjoy Jesus.

* * *

I encourage you to read through the following list of spiritual practices and disciplines. I will not delve deeply into each of these, but I urge you to explore how these can and should be part of your ongoing walk with God. Allow the Holy Spirit to give you a vision of what it would look like for you to practice, enjoy, and bring these things into the habit domain in your own life.

READING THE WORD OF GOD

I believe it is vital that all of us have an ongoing relationship with the Bible, the written word of God. We must come to the place where this is not simply reading a book about God; rather, it is actually God speaking to us. I encourage you to develop, experiment, and discover your own personal approach to reading the Bible every day. It can be fine to use a prearranged reading plan, but feel free to change and tweak it until you have something that really works for you. If this is any help, here is what I try to do most days of my life: I try to read the Bible in five different segments. Each day, I engage with all five of these portions of scripture:

- The gospels and the Book of Acts
- The epistles of the New Testament
- The wisdom scriptures (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)
- The history books of the Old Testament
- The prophetic books of the Old Testament

If I am short on time, I start at the top of that list and work my way down, prioritizing the order of the list. While reading, I take time to underline in my Bible, write in it, and make notes that are pertinent to what God is saying to me. This very act of writing

and engagement helps me both as I read and as I come back later to that same passage.

CONFESSING SCRIPTURE

I encourage everyone to engage in the biblical discipline of confessing the word of God with their mouths. To confess the word is simply to take God's word and speak it out as declarations. This is one of the most powerful things we could ever do. It can change and transform our lives. The words that we speak with our mouths will enter into our hearts, and be established there, and then the inverse will also happen. The words lodged in our hearts will come out of our mouths (Matthew 12:34).

To do this, we simply take a Bible verse and rephrase it in the present, continual tense and the first person. For instance, if we took a verse such as Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose," we would then say:

All things are working together for my good, because I love God, and I am now called according to His purpose.

I encourage you to develop a list of scriptures that you review every day. There are some scriptures that I revisit nearly every day of my life, even though I have been doing the same list for over 30 years. There is life and power in Scripture. To move from merely mentally assenting or consenting to God's word to actually acting upon it and engaging with it, we need to take action. When we act upon Scripture, we activate God's word in our lives. Confessing the word of God is one of the most

powerful ways of personally engaging with Scripture.

PRACTICING A PLACE OF ABIDING IN THE AWARENESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

As I shared above, it is wonderful to develop a practice of sitting in the awareness of God's presence. I have noticed that many people do not want to freely admit this, and yet I believe it is true that, at a selfish level, we often live as if God were not real. We find it easy, in our souls, to intellectualize the concept of the existence of God. At a practical level, we often live as if God were not actually real! One way of breaking that lack of reality is to practice the awareness of God. Simply to sit before the "I AM." When I do this, I find everything in my soul recalibrates, and is marked by the awareness of God's existence, His love, and His presence in my life. When you begin doing this, your body and your soul will want to take control, to make you think things, do things, write things, and so on. We need to simply bring our body and our soul under submission and subjection to our spirit.

"In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you" (John 14:20).

MEDITATING THE WORD OF GOD

"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2).

Meditation is when we think and engage our imagination with the word of God. It is possible to engage mentally with God's

word at many different levels. We can simply read a verse, we can think about the meaning of a verse. But something happens when we take a verse, a portion of Scripture, and sit in it, repeating it to ourselves mentally. God has created us in such a way that we can explore, unpack, and allow our imagination to bring things to life.

In a previous chapter, we talked about the practice of worry and anxiety. We take a negative thought and meditate upon it until we can actually begin to feel its reality and power, even though the original thought might not be real. There is power in meditating on God's word. In Psalm 43, the psalmist speaks about three stages of engaging with Scripture:

- First, God speaks.
- Second, we meditate, and as we meditate, a fire is released in our innermost being or belly.
- Third, then we speak.

People have embraced the discipline of confessing Scripture, but they have never allowed that fire to be released within them, which happens through meditation.

I will often take one Bible verse a day and choose to dwell on it, going over it again and again and again. If I am going to preach on a particular passage, I love to print that passage out and just immerse myself in it. I underline words and review it repeatedly until the life of the Spirit begins to be released into my soul.

STUDYING THE WORD OF GOD

There are many valid and necessary approaches to have, as a

believer, concerning God's word. One of the most powerful ways we can interact with the word of God is to simply read it. Reading the Bible can be transformative, allowing the word of God to wash over you, as you simply read through the books, as they were written.

"That He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26).

Another important way we are called to engage with God's word is to study it.

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

When we study the Bible, we are approaching it with the intention of understanding a particular thing, person, or theme, its context within the entirety of God's word, and its application in the life of the believer.

Personally, I like to spend several weeks studying a particular theme or part of the Bible. I prefer to take the time when I am not rushed or under pressure, so I can explore and come to a thorough understanding of the subject and what I believe the Bible truly is saying. Here are some of the tools I would use when studying:

- Different versions of the Bible.
- A Greek and Hebrew lexicon.
- Bible study software.
- Good Christian books on the theme from various backgrounds.

- Commentaries written by Spirit-filled believers.

PERSONAL PRAYER

Every believer is called to embrace the life of prayer. Jesus said, "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites" (Matthew 6:5). It is easy to become religious or mystical in our understanding of prayer. At its baseline, prayer is simply spending time with God. Interacting with God, there are many different kinds of prayer. Often, those kinds of prayer will depend upon the context or needs of our life.

"Pray at all times (on every occasion, in every season) in the Spirit, with all [manner of] prayer and entreaty. To that end, keep alert and watch with strong purpose and perseverance, interceding in behalf of all the saints (God's consecrated people)."

Ephesians 6:18 (AMPC)

If I have 30 minutes to pray, I will generally spend 15 or 20 of those minutes in simple worship and communion with the Lord. Prayer tends to fall apart when it becomes all about ourselves and bringing a shopping list before the presence of the Lord. Jesus said, "For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8).

If you are struggling with the subject of prayer or spending time alone with God in this way, I would simply encourage you to begin. I would urge you to start by spending five minutes every day alone with the Lord. Train yourself to come to the place where you actually enjoy and connect with the Lord in this manner. Then, begin to add extra time over the course of time.

Many of us live with an idealized notion of praying for hours at a time, and when we fail in this attempt, we create a habit of failure. The best time to pray is now. God invites you into the glorious fellowship of His Son.

A wonderful book on the subject of prayer is "In His Presence" by EW Kenyon. I highly recommend this book to you.

PERSONAL WORSHIP

I love the subject of personal worship. We live at a time when there is so much focus on worship, so many books written, songs composed, and, at least in the United States, hundreds of millions of dollars (or more) spent on developing and constructing elaborate theater-like worship experiences. My contention is not that this is necessarily evil or wrong, but rather that it is simply missing the point. If a church needs a laser light show, the latest song, and an amazingly talented Broadway-like production to connect meaningfully with God's presence, then we are completely missing God's heart. God has designed worship in such a way that when a small group of people—two or three gathered will suffice—meet and simply lift up the name of Jesus, His presence will invade the space.

God inhabits the praises of His people (Psalm 22:3).

I believe one of the challenges before the church today is that each member needs to develop a personal worship life that is not done in public. We need to learn to worship when nobody sees. "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly"

(Matthew 6:6).

Learn to worship without a candle and dimming the lights. Learn to worship without the latest popular song. Simply sing your own song to Jesus and watch what happens in your heart.

Similarly, as I advised regarding prayer, it would be better to start with a small commitment, perhaps spending five minutes a day in personal worship, and allow that time to grow gradually.

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

In the following chapter, we will explore this subject in depth and encourage you to go on a journey of learning to hear God in a personal, accurate, and precise manner. I believe this is one of the most transformative disciplines that we can ever embrace. Many years ago, I embarked on the journey of learning to hear God's voice for myself, learning to distinguish between my own thoughts, God's voice, Satan's influence, or any other voices. This has been a priceless treasure to my walk with God, and I believe it will be so for you if you embrace that journey.

My only comment in this context is that we need to learn to make this a daily part of our lives. Many of us only try to hear from God at important or critical junctures in our lives, such as when we need to make significant decisions. Often, in those moments, we live more under the influence of the fear of a wrong decision than under the guidance of God. This happens because we have not built a lifestyle of consistently practicing to hear Him. I encourage you every day to take a few minutes to listen to the Lord. Ask Him questions about your own soul. Ask Him questions about the day you are about to begin, and seek His

opinion about different things. If you develop a conversational relationship with the Lord, He will begin to build a place of confidence in your life that is precious and will show the reality of God to those around you. Selah.

CHAPTER 11 - HEARING GOD'S VOICE RELATIONALLY

God is speaking. He has always spoken, He speaks, and He will always speak. The church has never been confronted with the problem of trying to persuade God to speak; instead, the church needs to embrace the challenge of learning to listen. God has many things to say to each of His children, both individually and collectively.

I have discovered, through many years of ministry, that one of the most dramatic ways to allow the reality of God's existence to break through to an unbeliever is when we can hear God's voice. This voice reveals clear and accurate things that we could not possibly know without the Holy Spirit speaking.

The Bible clearly teaches that when an unbeliever comes into the midst of a group of believers, the very fact that we are hearing from God, and "the secrets of his heart are made known; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you," demonstrates this. (1 Corinthians 14:25)

To be clear, there are many challenges around hearing from God. I have pastored several local churches, and annually, I speak in many other local churches. I am a pastor, and most of my close friends are involved in ministry. I am aware of the danger and the potential for abuse or simple immaturity that this subject can, and often will, attract. The reality is, however, that the solution to those problems has so often been to move away from this subject. Some shy away from teaching upon it, or even proclaim the heretical lie that these things passed away in the first century. The biblical teaching of cessation plays spiritual origami with the

Bible. Theologians twist themselves into a pretzel to try to find a teaching that simply does not exist.

I believe the remedy to bad teaching is good teaching. The remedy to bad and unbiblical practice is not to move away from the subject, but rather to press into good and scriptural Bible practice. We need to embrace orthodoxy, which is correct Bible teaching. We also need to embrace orthopraxy, which is correct Bible application and practice.

The world around us longs to see a God who is real, a God who speaks, and a God who communicates with His children. This is our God; He is real and present, and He is willing to communicate. He is looking not for superstar prophets, but for ordinary men, women, and children who are willing to die to self and live a truly biblical life.

Many years ago, I was visiting America and ministering for a group of churches in New England. One day, I entered a supermarket. I was wandering around, making a few purchases. While there, I reached out and said, "Lord, I want to touch somebody with Your life." As I walked around the supermarket, I could not find anyone to talk to. In the end, I gave up and went to the checkout to pay for my groceries. The only checkout open was staffed by a young lady in her mid-20s. She scanned my groceries and politely asked, "How is your day going?" Without thinking or reflecting, I blurted out, "My day is going well, how is your adultery going?"

The young woman stared at me in amazement and horror at my comment.

* * *

I went on to speak prophetically to this young lady and said that she was a Christian who had given her life to Jesus as a teenager. She was now involved in an illicit relationship that was going nowhere. My word to her was that Father God loved her, did not condemn her, and was calling her out of this illicit relationship to repentance and to Himself. God's message was grace, grace, grace. She responded, and I was able to pray briefly with her.

That is a dramatic story and a wonderful illustration of the power of hearing from God. But I have a question for you: what was the word that God had for this young lady? The powerful and life-transforming message that God had for her was not that she was involved in an adulterous affair. God knew she was having an affair; she knew she was having an affair; the man with whom she was involved knew she was having an affair. The revelation, or the significant word from God, was the message that God loved her, was not condemning her, and was calling her to return, like the prodigal son, to the Father's house. That is the purpose of hearing from God: not to reveal the secrets of people's hearts and feel like a spiritual superstar, but rather to reveal Jesus and the heart of God. Selah.

I have discovered that the most vital and important part of hearing from God is its role in our intimate relationship with God. I know theologically that God loves me. I know that Jesus loves me, "because the Bible tells me so." And yet, if I am honest, this alone is not enough. I want to hear God speak to me and tell me He loves me. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17)

God has things to say to us personally. I actually enjoy it when God rebukes me and tells me off, as it shows me that I am His

son. (Hebrews 12:6) It is vital that we have a walking and talking relationship with God, that we are not simply following a set of beliefs, but rather that the set of beliefs we follow produce a relationship which is real and present in our daily lives.

Many years ago, I was ministering in the state of Kerala in the south of India. On the street where I happened to be staying, there was a small artisan workshop where a man was selling idols for the local Hindu market. Every day, as we walked past the idol store, all of the Christians would cross the road and say that that place was dangerous and we should go nowhere near it. One day, I decided I would go in and investigate. I believe that greater is He who is in me than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4) I was not going to be contaminated by anything there; rather, they could be influenced by the love of God in me. As I entered the idol store, the owner gave me a cheery greeting, probably thinking that I was a western tourist with money to spend, and he proudly showed me many of his wares. There were many different types of idols, different sizes, shapes, and so on. He asked me if I had anything in mind or if I was simply browsing.

I asked him if he had a god who spoke. He looked at me in puzzlement. Eventually, he answered that he did not have any speaking models, but if I was willing to wait a day or two, he could order a model that had a battery and some pre-programmed announcements on the inside. I explained that I was not looking for an electronic talking doll, but for an actual God who spoke and could converse with me. The man looked at me sadly and explained he did not have such a god.

I then asked if he had any gods who could heal the sick. Sadly, they were out of stock as well. He pointed with pride to a Hindu

god with about ten arms. I asked if he had a model that could reach out and touch or hug my children at home when I was away. Sadly, his gods lacked this power.

Lastly, I asked if he had any gods who forgave sins. I confessed to the man that I was a sinner and I needed a God who could wipe away sins. Alas, they were also out of stock. So I then told him about my God: the God who is real, a God who can speak, a God who can open blind eyes, a God who can reach out and touch and communicate, and a God who can wipe away every sin because He sent His only begotten Son to die in my place.

God has a plan for your life. God has a design for your life. There is not one thing you will ever encounter that God has not foreseen and made provision for. I believe in free will; I believe in the power of choice. But I also believe in a God who is so intelligent, all-knowing, and capable that He has already designed and laid out a plan for my life and the life of every person on planet Earth, a plan that has foreseen my independent choices, decisions, and even mistakes. God has a prescriptive plan for our lives, which means a way in which He desires and commands us to live. God also has a redemptive plan for our lives, which means His plan takes into account my rebellion, my mistakes, sins, and errors. And if I will allow Him to, He will turn what the enemy meant for ill into good.

Every Christian I know believes the statements above. Everybody I know accepts that God has a plan for our lives. The place where we are missing it is that God also has a guide. A plan without a guide can be a confusing thing.

Many years ago, while living in France, I would travel to

America with an itinerary to visit around twenty churches. This was in the days before the smartphone, and before GPS or satellite navigation systems were popular or affordable. In those days, there was a website called MapQuest. MapQuest was a service where you could enter your point of departure and then enter your destination, and it would print out a list of detailed and very accurate instructions that would get you from point A to point B. This was really useful, but it had one problem: you never quite knew where you were along the journey. If you missed one set of instructions, then the whole plan would fall apart.

Many times, I have to confess, I would be driving down an American interstate or coming to an intersection with six or seven lanes, trying to decipher a piece of paper that I had printed back in France, attempting to figure out exactly which exit or lane to take. When, as often happened, I got these instructions wrong, I would have to double back, sometimes several miles, and take the same intersection again, hoping this time my directions would produce a better result. This is analogous to how many Christians are living with regard to the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit. We do believe that God has a purpose, but then we have accepted the idea that we are on our own, with just the Bible here on Earth, trying to discern and work out that purpose. We have missed the glorious element of the guide on the inside: the Holy Spirit.

One of the things I love about a GPS, whether a dedicated device or, more commonly these days, a smartphone, is that even if we take the wrong turning or misconstrue the directions presented to us, the device will simply recalibrate. Even if we begin to drive in the wrong direction, it will constantly plot a connection

between where we actually are and our destination, doing this in real time. The only condition is that we are connected with the heavens, that we are receiving the signal from above.

This is how God wants us to live. God's will for your life is not a list of MapQuest instructions that, if you miss one, your whole life will fall apart. God's design for your life is glorious, and He has sent the Spirit of His Son on the inside of you to lead, guide, recalibrate, and reconnect you always with God's design. The wonderful news is that no matter how far you have wandered from God's design, the Holy Spirit is constantly recalibrating and plotting the course from where you are right now into the center of God's heart and God's will. Selah.

Have you ever struggled in relation to this subject of hearing from God? I believe, if we are honest, that all of us have done so. I think one of the challenges to this subject is the approach of the modern Western Church. In general, our mindset is to take a young believer and to want to teach them the basics of the Christian faith. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this, and it is vital that we have a foundational comprehension of the Bible and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The challenge with this approach is that it is not a relational approach. The issue with this method is that it tends to produce believers who have memorized a series of facts and propositions and yet do not have a corresponding relationship with God to connect with these truths.

Have you ever looked at a newborn baby and wondered about God's plan for raising that child? I remember once looking at a baby and thinking, why is a baby so helpless for so long? Why is it that a baby will spend several months, or even a year or more,

without seeming to grow that much, to learn to speak, etc.? While I was praying about this, God showed me three things that are true in the natural, that are also true in the new birth. There are three vital things that a baby will learn at a very early age, to some degree, even before the child is born, that if it does not learn at a young age, it will spend the rest of its life trying to catch up and recover those lost foundations.

Firstly, a baby will learn to know and be at ease in the presence of its parents. A baby naturally always wants to be with its parents. A baby is looking and longing for relational contact, especially early on with the mother. Even the very act of feeding or breastfeeding is an intensely personal, intimate, and relational act both for mother and baby. The baby learns to know the touch and feel of its parents, the smell, and to feel protected and at ease in that experience. In the same way, it is vital that new baby Christians learn to know the presence of God. It is important that they learn many of the principles of the book of Romans, but that is not more important than a young Christian learning to know the reality of God's presence, the reality of God's love, learning to be nourished from the Creator of heaven and earth, and to be anchored in the experiential knowledge of His existence.

Secondly, a baby learns to hear the voice of its parents. I would note that the baby does not learn to speak with a dictionary or a thesaurus. From even before its birth, the baby is hearing the voice of its parents speak. It clearly does not understand any of the words spoken, the grammar, construction, or syntax of the sentences. What the baby is actually hearing communicated through those words is the heart of the parents. Any good parents will constantly be communicating with a child and expressing their own heart. At times, parents will literally make up words to

speaking to a child that will be expressing the love, affection, and delight in that child. If we removed a child from its parents at birth, fed that child intravenously, and left it alone with a speech computer or AI system, it could technically learn to speak and understand language. In spite of this, it would be stunted, limited in its ability to hear and understand. In the same manner, we have taken young Christians and often told them that it is dangerous to hear from God, that they should simply hear from us as spiritual leaders. Often, several years later, that same Christian will read books or attend a prophetic conference, etc. They will try to work their way through the landmine-filled landscape of hearing from God. I will come back to this later, but I have discovered it is those Christians who were looking at the subject of hearing from God as an academic subject who struggle with knowing whether they are hearing from God or themselves. A baby, weaned at its mother's breast and lying contented, would never ask itself: is this my voice or my mother's voice? Relationship clarifies everything.

Lastly, a baby learns total dependency upon its parents. It literally has no choice. A baby can do nothing. A young baby is completely incapable of feeding itself, changing itself, providing for its needs and safety, etc. By definition, a baby is 100% dependent upon its parents. In this state, a baby will learn to trust that its parents are reliable, that they can be counted upon for provision, safety, guidance, etc.; in effect, the baby learns the lessons of faith. But a baby does not learn the lessons of faith by attending a faith convention or reading a book. A baby learns relational trust, which is faith. A baby learns that it can lean completely in utter dependence upon the goodness, integrity, and provision of its parents. In the same way and the same manner, we should take young Christians and actually encourage them to

trust God. I have often heard the comment in Christian circles that we should not allow Christians to use their faith in case they are disappointed. They might walk away from God if their faith fails. God is reliable. God is dependable. God is the only person in the universe who has never broken a promise, failed anybody, or lied. Our challenge is once more that we are coming to this as an intellectual subject rather than building a relationship as a much-loved child.

We have a Father who loves His children and desires to speak to them. Imagine, as a parent, lacking the ability to communicate with your children. I recognize that this sometimes happens due to handicaps, accidents, and life circumstances, but that is never normative or God's desired plan. Your relationship with God will grow exponentially as you learn to hear and cherish His voice. This needs to be a daily practice in many small ways, rather than something we engage in occasionally when the important decisions of life cross our paths.

In Galatians chapter 4, it is written that God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father." (Galatians 4:6) Abba is an intensely personal, intimate, and childlike expression. It is literally like a child crying out "Daddy." That is the relationship God wishes to have with all of His children. The first role of the Holy Spirit is to release that daddy cry within our hearts and bring us into that place of relational intimacy with the Lord.

Your relationship with God began when God spoke to you and you responded. Nobody begins a relationship with Jesus purely based on an apologetic argument or an intellectual presentation of the gospel. Those things can help in clearing away the

brushwood of intellectual thinking and in removing the roadblocks that our culture has placed in our minds, but we are never truly born again until we hear and respond to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

I began in full-time ministry in 1987. Initially, I worked full-time through the Assembly of God denomination in the UK as part of the church planting department, and from there began traveling in full-time itinerant ministry, speaking in churches and conferences. As I shared in an earlier chapter, God had given me a revelation of faith and the power of His word. This revelation caused me to begin seeing many healings take place in my life and ministry. This fact began opening many doors, and I had more invitations than I could fulfill. The church background in which I had come to Christ and been raised believed in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, yet in practice, these gifts were always limited to three: speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy. I did not mean to criticize this background or denomination, and I honor and esteem them for all I learned during that season. Despite this, the prophetic gifts, such as hearing from God, always seemed to function at a very low level. There would be regular prophecies spoken during Sunday morning gatherings, but they were essentially biblical truths spoken to those present. I was not accustomed to seeing people move in the gifts of the Spirit, such as the word of knowledge, or to hearing words that were specific, accurate, and could be tested to see whether they really were from God.

During that season, I came in contact with some ministers from another stream of the church who operated proficiently in these gifts. I was initially startled to see God reveal specific and accurate conditions, such as pointing out exactly who in the room

had a particular issue, including their names, and so on. I immediately realized the power of ministering in this way and that I lacked the knowledge and experience to hear from God in such a manner.

In the late 1980s, I attended a conference by the wonderful British evangelist Ian Andrews (who is now a personal friend). For many years, Ian had demonstrated God's power and moved proficiently in the gifts of the Spirit, such as the word of knowledge. I attended a weekend conference, hoping that there would be some teaching on the subject. I sat through teachings on Friday evening, all day Saturday, and the first session on Sunday morning. When there was only one last session to go, I was really desperate to hear some teaching, so I plucked up my courage and approached this wonderful man of God. I asked if he could teach on this subject. He smiled and replied that he would pray about it and try to teach on it in the very last session.

I was so excited that I went to pre-order the cassette tape (it was the 1980s) in anticipation of him teaching and expanding on this gift. He preached a wonderful sermon, but did not mention the word of knowledge or hearing from God once. I was deeply disappointed. However, at the end of his message, just before ending the conference, he said, "There is one more thing I need to do." He said, "There is a young man here who wants to learn to move in the word of knowledge." He then pointed at me and said, "Graham, would you come forward." I was startled. I was shocked. I had my notepad and pen open with my Bible and my pre-ordered cassette tape, ready to acquire profound information that I could put to use at some future moment in my life. Instead of this, this precious man of God called me out in front of 500 people and invited me to learn in person as others watched.

* * *

To be honest, I was terrified, but I could not think of any other exit strategy. The evangelist simply asked me to close my eyes and said that God would speak to me about someone in the room who had a physical condition. As I closed my eyes in abject terror, the thought came to me that there was somebody in the room with a leg problem. I communicated this to Ian Andrews. He smiled and said, "That is a good start, but with 500 people present, it is more than likely that there are many people in the room with a leg problem." He challenged me to go further.

He asked me to close my eyes again and then pray that God would show me a picture of the leg. I was startled by the very idea. He said, "As you close your eyes, you will begin to see a picture of the leg." He said, "Look closer. Men's legs are often different from women's legs." If it is a large, thick leg, it might possibly be a man's. As I looked, I somehow sensed that this was a man's leg. The evangelist replied, "Wonderful, but let us go further." He then invited me to look from the stage at the congregation. In the hall where we were gathered, there were three large sections of attendees. He asked me to look back and forth between the three sections and said, "As you look, you will feel more peace in one area than in the other two." This seemed crazy to me, yet as I acted upon his words, it was true: there was actually a lot more peace in the center area of the congregation. He then asked me to divide that central section into three more areas: the front, the middle, and the back of that section, and asked me to repeat the process. I did, and came to the conclusion that the person was in the middle of the middle section. There were about three rows of chairs in this section. He then asked me to do the same thing with those three rows, and I came to the conclusion that the person was in the row furthest from me.

There were now about three men sitting in that row.

Ian Andrews made the comment to the crowd and to myself that we have now discerned that there is a person here with a leg problem, who is a man, and who is sitting exactly in that row. He turned to the three men sitting in the row and said, "Which of you men have a leg problem that you need healing for right now?" I was convinced nobody would respond, but straight away, a gentleman did and came down to the front of the hall. Ian Andrews asked me to place my hand very gently upon the man and then command the leg problem to "go" in the name of Jesus. As I did this, the man collapsed on the floor under the power of God. Nobody was more shocked and surprised than I was. The people in the crowd began to clap and cheer. Instantly, Ian Andrews whispered quietly in my ear (though it was recorded on the cassette tape I later received), and said words to me that I have never forgotten. He said, "Quickly, give all of the glory to God; do not touch the glory." Together, we prayed and thanked God for what He had done and gave Him all the glory.

I had come that day for teaching. I had wanted to go away with a notepad filled with Bible verses, examples, and principles that I could learn to apply. Instead, it felt as if I was pushed off the deep end of a swimming pool and taught to swim, live in front of hundreds of people. I thank God for this wonderful man of God and the example he set for me.

Since that day, I have repeated the things he taught me thousands and thousands of times and seen God do incredible miracles. It is vital that we learn the practical lessons of hearing from God. Selah.

* * *

In 1 Samuel chapter 3, we see the story of Samuel as a young boy who begins a journey of learning to discern God's voice for himself. Initially, Samuel has some struggles and confusion, yet God brings him to the place where he never fails in hearing from God. I believe there are some vital keys in this passage that, if we will grasp, will move us forward on this journey. Take a moment to read through the story of Samuel.

1 Samuel 3

1 Now the boy Samuel ministered to the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation.

2 And it came to pass at that time, while Eli was lying down in his place, and when his eyes had begun to grow so dim that he could not see,

3 and before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the Lord where the ark of God was, and while Samuel was lying down,

4 that the Lord called Samuel. And he answered, "Here I am!"

5 So he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." And he said, "I did not call; lie down again." And he went and lay down.

6 Then the Lord called yet again, "Samuel!" So Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." He answered, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

7 (Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, nor was the word of the Lord yet revealed to him.)

8 And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. So he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you did call me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord had called the boy.

9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and it shall be, if

He calls you, that you must say, ‘Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 Now the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel answered, “Speak, for Your servant hears.”

11 Then the Lord said to Samuel: “Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

19 So Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the Lord.

21 Then the Lord appeared again in Shiloh. For the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

At the beginning of the story, we see the character of Samuel, who is serving God, but yet does not know Him personally in any relational way. The same thing is said to be true of Israel, who again are serving God, but they have no revelation available to them.

KEY ONE: THE PRESENCE OF GOD

In verse two, we see Eli going to sleep every night in his own chamber, but Samuel choosing to place himself as near as he could to the presence of God (the Ark of the Covenant). Samuel knew that he was not allowed to touch the Ark of the Covenant, but he chose to rest, abide, and literally sleep in the presence of God. The first key to hearing God’s voice is to realize that God’s voice comes from God’s presence. When we spend much time with Him, that is the context in which we will hear His voice. There are choices we can make, and contexts around which we

can build our lives, that will cause us to be the people who hear from God. The opposite is also true: come into God's presence often and with intentionality, and learn to rest. This is the place from which God speaks.

KEY TWO: GOD SPEAKS IN A NATURAL AND NORMAL VOICE

I remember, as a young boy, hearing the story from my parents, or in children's church. In the story, we see a young boy interacting with God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. The thing that struck me was, how could Samuel not tell the difference between God's voice and the voice of a familiar elderly priest with whom he interacted every day? At some level, I judged Samuel and thought he must have been foolish not to have known the difference between God's voice and his colleague Eli. One day, while reading this passage, the answer came to me, which was a revelation for me about hearing God's voice. When God speaks, He speaks in a natural, normal, and familiar voice. When God speaks, it is normal not to be surprised; it is normal not to be shocked or feel odd. God speaks in a still small voice. (1 Kings 19:12)

Take a moment, and in your own mind, count gently from one to ten: one, two, three, four, and so forth. That is exactly how you will hear God's voice when He speaks to you the vast majority of the time. By setting people up to look for the dramatic or spectacular, we have set them up for failure. Jesus was natural, Jesus was normal, and when He speaks to us in our walk with Him, His voice will sound the same way.

KEY THREE: GOD SPEAKS TO FAITH

* * *

There is another aspect of the story that always bothered me as a young child. In the story, we see God speaking to Samuel. Samuel gets up and thinks that the voice is Eli. Why, at that stage, did God not say, “Hey Samuel, it is Me speaking”? God spoke to Samuel three times. Each time Samuel thought it was Eli, God would stop speaking to him. Why would that be?

I believe that the answer to that question is a powerful key in hearing God’s voice. God is a God of faith, and He speaks to our faith. It was only when Samuel took a step of faith and said, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears,” that God then continued the conversation. It was as if Samuel was saying, “Lord, speak, and I am going to believe that the voice I am hearing is not Eli or my own mind; I am going to believe that I am hearing from God.” At that stage, God continued to speak to him. When we believe that God can speak to us, we will begin to hear from Him. When we believe that God is speaking to us, our faith will increase, and God will continue to speak to us. When we allow doubt into our minds about whether this is really God or just ourselves, like Peter walking on water, we will begin to sink in our doubts.

KEY FOUR: BUILDING HISTORY WITH GOD

The end of this passage says that Samuel grew, the Lord was with him (the presence of God), and as time went by, Samuel established a testimony from Dan to Beersheba (from one end of Israel to the other) that he truly was hearing from God.

In my experience, most Christians do hear from God at some level. If they had never heard from God, they would not actually

be born again. Yet they have never grown and developed in this area to the point that hearing from God becomes a reliable tool in their own lives. Again and again in ministry, I see people who have never really matured in this area and have a very hit-and-miss record of hearing from God. The challenge arises when these individuals try to speak into the lives of others when they have not established a testimony in the eyes of their own brethren.

How do you learn to walk? One step at a time. It is acceptable to fall; it is acceptable for a young baby to take three steps and fall flat on its face, but do not necessarily enroll that child in the Olympics on day one. Let its walking ability develop a little. I believe it is incumbent upon us to learn to hear from God in the small things of life. If we will develop a conversational relationship with God in a natural and normal way, it will become easier to hear from Him in the larger decisions of life. If I am used to speaking to God, and listening to Him one hundred times in one week, then it will become easier to recognize His voice when He speaks to me about something really important.

I am absolutely certain of this truth: if somebody is truly hearing from God, they will not need to keep trying to persuade others that they are hearing from Him. The very testimony, fruit, and results that hearing from God produces in their own lives will quickly validate themselves.

I believe it is imperative that every Christian be a committed member of a local church that both believes the Bible (on this subject) and also incorporates into the fabric of the weekly gathering a place for people to grow, develop, and practice hearing from God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We need fewer

Internet prophets and more healthy local churches. The local church is the place to grow, to develop, and indeed to fail. It is acceptable to fail when you are surrounded by a community of people who love you and believe in you. It is the local church that is equipped to discern whether a word truly is from God or not. It is the role and responsibility of the local church to correct a word that is not in line with the heart of God or the written Word of God. Every ministry must be rooted and grounded in the local church. If you are not a committed, flourishing member of a local church, then you have absolutely nothing to say to the wider body of Christ.

I encourage you to begin this journey today of hearing from God. A great way to begin this is to get a journal each day, and write down what you think God might be saying to you. Give yourself permission to get this wrong. Give yourself permission every day to ask the Lord what will happen in that day, and write down what you think you are hearing. The next day, go back and compare what you thought you were hearing from God with what actually happened in reality. It is an act of faith to keep trying. It is an act of faith to keep seeking to develop and grow in this area.

Everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:8)

CHAPTER 12 - WALKING WITH GOD IN EVERY SEASON

Ecclesiastes 3

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

In this final chapter, we will be discussing how to walk successfully with God in a deep and meaningful relationship through all the seasons of life. As we have affirmed repeatedly throughout this book, we already possess a glorious and eternal relationship with the Father through Christ Jesus. We received this bond, our inheritance, and it is not something we need to labor to earn or build. Our task is to learn to enjoy, unpack, and explore the glories of the riches of the inheritance that are already in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:11).

Watchman Nee provided us with a beautiful method for understanding the dynamics of this relationship in his classic book, "Sit, Walk, Stand." In his study of the book of Ephesians, Nee demonstrates that we have a seated relationship in heavenly places in Christ Jesus with the Father. We have arrived (Ephesians 2:6). As we are alive and on this earth, we need to

walk with the Lord (Ephesians 2:10). Lastly, there is a real and personal enemy, Satan, against whom we need to stand, and, having done all to stand, continue standing (Ephesians 6:13).

Life is a journey. Life is a transition, and will always remain transitional. We cannot rest in our relationship with God, and there is no retreat.

There is a story from the Battle of Waterloo about one of the British generals who lost one of his buglers in combat. He called to Lord Nelson and asked if he could spare one of his own, and Nelson sent over a trained young man. The general instructed the young man to sound the advance on his bugle. When he did so, the troops moved forward. When the general observed how many of the enemy came to meet that charge, he quickly shouted to the young man, "Sound the retreat." The young man replied, "Lord Nelson has never taught me the retreat." The young man sounded the advance again, and, of course, the battle was won.

It is essential that we keep progressing forward in our journey with the Lord. Onward, Christian soldiers. As we proceed with God, we will traverse various seasons of life. There are the natural phases of our own lives, from childhood into maturity, and as we advance towards old age. There are natural experiences attached to this aging and the stages of our lives, such as education, courting, marriage, children, career, retirement, and so forth. Additionally, there are seasons in our walk with God, the places through which God desires us to grow. It is crucial that we permit the Lord to develop us through the stages of growth that He guides us through. I believe there are many people who have a genuine relationship with God, yet they have never advanced beyond the infant stage of Christianity. The

writer of Hebrews speaks about those who by now should require solid food, and yet they need milk, that they may return to the very basic truths (Hebrews 5:12-13).

In 1 John 2:12-14, we read the following: “I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write to you, little children, because you have known the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.”

In this passage, we see the Apostle John define three stages of Christian growth:

- Little children, these are baby believers, and all they know is that their sins are forgiven.
- Young men, these are those who are growing strong in the Lord, they begin to do battle against the enemy, and the word of God abides in them.
- Fathers, these are those who are mature in the faith, and they truly know the heavenly Father in a deeper, more meaningful way.

We need to know and recognize what season of growth we are in, and how God wants us to respond within that season. During each season of our journey with God, there are specific things He wishes to affect and accomplish. I believe that God has a watch on, but it does not have seconds, minutes, hours, days, or weeks. Instead, I believe it has seasons. God does not tend to look at

time in the way we do; He looks at the seasons of our growth.

God does not measure growth on a chart or a ruler; He measures growth by the development in our inner man.

In Deuteronomy chapter 1, we read that it only takes 11 days to cross the desert from Egypt into the promised land, and yet the very next verse states that in the 40th year, the people of Israel arrived at the destination. Eleven days versus forty years? I believe it is not God who determines whether we take the fast track or the slow boat to China. Rather, it is our response to the word He is speaking to us in the midst of those seasons that will determine how quickly we move into the promised land He has prepared for us, and into future seasons.

There are also external seasons through which we walk with God. These are the times that God is trying to affect a certain thing in our lives, our wider community, or on the Earth. If we can know and recognize these seasons, we can cooperate with the plan of God rather than working against it.

The Bible says that the sons of Issachar were men who had discernment of the times and the seasons. They knew by discernment what God was doing during a season in the life of Israel. They recognized the shift from the house of Saul to the house of David, and they brought alignment to the people of God to prepare them for the shift in season (1 Chronicles 12:32).

There are seasons of war, and seasons of peace. David advanced the kingdom of Israel through war. He would inquire of the Lord, and the Lord would often tell him to go to battle with the army of the enemies of Israel. King Solomon, David's son, advanced the

purposes and plans of God for Israel through peace instead of war. Many of the wives that Solomon married were part of alliances he made with neighboring nations, thereby creating peace treaties for Israel. Both were correct and right in their time, but they had to recognize their own individual calling. David raised the modern-day equivalent of millions of dollars to build the temple of Israel, but he was not allowed by God to build it because he was a man of war. Solomon, in spite of his many character faults, was a man of peace, and it was he whom God commissioned to oversee the building of the temple.

There have been times during church history when the Lord has called men to oppose movements like the Roman Catholic Church, which was teaching heresy and leading people away from Christ through its false teaching of indulgences and justification by works. There are Christians in the 21st century who are still trying to fight and litigate the battles of the 16th century; they have not realized that we have moved on, and there are different fights and battles that we are called to oppose in our day.

I believe there are four primary seasons of the Holy Spirit that the Lord will lead us through. Sometimes these seasons will be repeated, and I believe it is vital that we can know, recognize, and discern the season we are in, and learn to walk and build a relationship with God in that season.

SEASONS OF REST

There are seasons when God wants to take us aside to spend time with Him. Seasons where He calls us to cease from our own labors, and enter into His rest. There are Sabbath days, the

Sabbath years, and the rest of seasons. There are things that God can accomplish in a season of rest that He cannot accomplish when we are "distracted with much serving" (Luke 10:40).

There are seasons, like Mary, where the Lord wants us to sit at His feet, and hear His word (Luke 10:39). It is vital that we discern these seasons. I have had the experience in my life where, if I did not obey God's call to come aside and spend time with Him (Mark 6:31), then the Lord would engineer circumstances to produce the same result. It is far better to embrace the call of God in the season, than to have to be disciplined into that same place.

During one of my first trips to the United States, I was ministering every single night I was away from my wife and new baby. I literally booked every possible engagement without any real sense of how far apart these locations were. Within a 10-day period, I flew from New York, to Boston, to El Paso, Texas, to Chicago, to Buffalo, New York. I preached in New York City on a Sunday morning, and that evening in Los Angeles, California. The next day, I flew to Florida, then on to South Carolina, and then I had a final engagement in North Carolina. On the evening of my final ministry date, everybody told me about a snowstorm that was coming the next day. Being from Europe, I did not take snow so seriously, and I simply laughed it off. The next day, I drove from Chesapeake Bay to New York City in a rental car. The snow came down thick and fast, and all transport was banned from the highways. The only people driving on I-95 were emergency vehicles, and a foolish British evangelist. I eventually made it into New York City, only to discover that my flight had been canceled. They had rescheduled me on a flight five days later.

* * *

All that to say, I had a brief season of enforced rest in New York City, and during that time, God met me in an incredible encounter that still has an effect on my life.

God calls you to rest from, but God also calls you to rest to.

God called you to rest from activity and distractions, but it is not simply in order that you would do nothing. God calls you to rest, in order that your attention and affections would be upon Him. God calls you to rest towards Him.

In Exodus chapter 24:12, we read the call of the Lord to Moses: "Come up to the mountain and be there." God called Moses to come and be, not to come and do. A season of rest is a season of identity. A season of rest is a season of alignment. A season of rest is a season where we learn to live out of our identity, rather than the roles that we play in life.

I am a son of God. I have many roles in my life, but I am a son of God. I pastor a church, I travel in ministry, I record videos, I am a husband, I am a father, I am a son, I am a brother, a neighbor, a citizen, and many more things. All of these are roles in my life. Some of them are transitory, some of them will last as long as my life. But I only have one identity. I am a son of God. During a season of rest, God strips away our roles, and reinforces our identity.

In a season of rest, God teaches us to stand in our inheritance. He teaches us not to pray based upon our need, but rather out of our relationship with Him. Selah.

* * *

I have many people who tell me they are in a season of rest, and yet their seasons of rest never seem to end. It is quite possible to deceive oneself, and believe we are in a season of rest, when we are simply in a lifestyle of laziness. If somebody tells me they are in a season of rest, I usually reply, "Wonderful, how long will this last? How will you know when this is over?"

During a season of rest, God can do glorious things in our inner man.

SEASONS OF BIRTHING

The times when God wishes to birth or bring forth His purposes here on the earth are significant. These are the seasons of birthing. There are times when, out of the intimacy of your relationship with God, He will bring forth new life into the earth. In my experience, these seasons of birthing usually follow a season of rest. It is as if God wants us to cease some of our activities, so that He can then begin something brand new within us.

God's way of bringing forth a brand new thing is really very simple; we see it clearly in the birth of Christ, particularly in Luke chapter 1. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary and brings a word from heaven. The only response the Lord wants is the correct response, which Mary gave: 'Be it unto me according to your word' (Luke 1:38). Mary received the engrafted word with meekness.

When God wishes to birth something in us, He speaks a word to us. When God speaks a word to us, it is not for us to figure out in our own strength how to make that happen. God is not looking

for our wisdom or efforts, rather, our humility and our cooperation. God will speak a word to us that seems irrational or nonsensical. God's word does not call us to lean on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5), but rather to lean upon His word.

There are times when God will speak a word to us, and He simply wants us to hold and incubate that word. When Mary questioned the angel about how the Messiah would be born within her, Gabriel's response was illustrative: 'For with God nothing will be impossible' (Luke 1:37). Indeed, every word that comes from God has the capacity within itself to produce the thing it speaks of, as it is written, 'So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55:11).

Apple seeds produce apples, peach seeds produce peaches, fig seeds produce figs, and when God plants a word in your heart, it will produce the very thing He speaks of. Jesus said, 'The seed is the word of God' (Luke 8:11).

There are seasons when we need to simply incubate what God has spoken, like a pregnant mother. I think one of the dangers of these seasons is when we try to share and communicate with others what is going on in our inner man. God gave a word to Joseph as a young man, but instead of simply incubating that word, Joseph boasted about it to all of his brothers, and ended up paying for his foolishness.

The Bible says in Psalm 105:19, 'Until the time that his word came to pass, The word of the Lord tested him.' The word that God speaks to us needs to be held and incubated, and, for a

season, it will test us.

When the angel Gabriel came to Zacharias in Luke chapter 1 and spoke about a season of birthing that he and Elizabeth would go through, Zacharias immediately went to his rational mind and said, 'How can these things be?' (Luke 1:18). It is interesting that after Zacharias's unbelief, the angel Gabriel closed his mouth. Have you ever wondered why? I sincerely believe that Zacharias, with his mouth, could have caused Elizabeth to miscarry the plans and purposes of God, namely, John the Baptist. It was only after this season of birthing was over that the Lord loosed his mouth, and a torrent of prophetic praise and thanksgiving came forth.

SEASONS OF ACCELERATION

Redeeming the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16).

How does God redeem time? He could help us to be more organized. He could give us another productivity app to put on our phones. Can God give us back the time we have lost? I think if we are honest, we would all acknowledge that during the course of our life, and indeed our Christian life, we have all wasted time. I believe God redeems time by accelerating His purposes. There are times and seasons in our life when it seems that God is doing work, and it is vital during those seasons that we cooperate with God in what He is doing. There is a time to sit still, there is a time to walk with God, and I believe there is a time to run with God.

When Joshua was fighting a battle, he was making progress, but running out of time. In the midst of that battle, he called for the

sun to stand still, and for time to be arrested, while the purposes of God were worked out (Joshua 10:12-13).

I believe it is possible for the believer each and every day to have God stretch our time by accelerating His plans and purposes upon our lives. If you look carefully, you will see this principle played out all the way through the Bible.

The Lord comes to David and speaks about the call of God upon his life to be King of Israel (1 Samuel 16:1-13). David does not simply accept this word passively and say, "Wonderful, one day this might happen in God's timing." Rather, David interacts with the word of God, and allows the word of God to change and shape his very being. David is not yet king; he is an unimportant shepherd boy, and yet, because of the word of God, he begins to develop the heart and perspective of a king. When David comes before Goliath, he is still a shepherd boy, and yet he is thinking like the king of Israel. David is a shepherd, but with a promise over his life one day to be king. It is as if David reached out by faith for the promised kingly anointing of tomorrow, and pulled it into today, because the need confronted him today.

You will see this principle played out again and again in Scripture. In John chapter 2, Mary, the mother of Jesus, approaches Him and asks Him to do a miracle (provide wine). Jesus only does that which He sees the Father do (John 5:19). And as He checks in with heaven, His reply to Mary is, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." Mary does not argue with Him; rather, she gathers all the servants, and immediately tells them, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:4-5).

* * *

Immediately, it was time for a miracle. Mary accelerated the purposes of God by her willingness to act upon the word of God, and not let go.

In John chapter 4, Jesus commanded His disciples to lift up their eyes and look, saying that the fields are white for harvest, and yet the laborers are few. Jesus then goes on to tell the disciples that there is a proverb, "Four months and then comes the harvest" (John 4:35). Jesus goes on to say that they did not have to wait four months for the harvest, that there will be a generation with its eyes on the things of heaven who will bring the harvest into the present time. Jesus speaks of a generation where the reaper will overtake the sower (Amos 9:13).

How can we know if we are in a season of acceleration, and what is our response in these seasons? The answer is that when God speaks a word to us about the future, He does not expect us to wait passively for that word to come to pass one day. There is an old song, "Que sera sera, whatever will be will be, the future is not ours to see, Que sera sera."

This may be a wonderful song, but it is terrible theology. Jesus never taught us to simply accept what will be will be. He taught us rather to bring to the earth the plans and promises of God – on earth, as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

When God speaks a word to us, and we accept that word in our hearts, that word will upgrade us; that word will bring us into the place where we can step into the future purposes of God. It is the very word which will change us, and accelerate us forward.

Do you have a computer at home? Probably a cell phone or

perhaps a laptop. Do you remember the operating system Windows 95? I still remember vividly in 1995 when this software was released; it transformed the computing world at the time.

Imagine if you went to an online site and tried to download some 2025 software, perhaps a game or a word processing software, and then you try to use that 2025 program on a Windows 95 machine. I am not sure, but possibly smoke might come out of the back of the machine. What is the problem? Even if the machine is still functional, it would need an upgrade in its operating system.

I believe there are many Christians who are running on outdated versions of Jesus, like Jesus 1525 or Jesus 1925. Here is a wonderful truth I would like you to grasp: God does not want the Christians of today running on an outdated version of Jesus; rather, He wants us running on Jesus 2027, Jesus 2030, Jesus 2035. He wants to prepare a people who are thinking ahead of what is currently going on, a people who will skate to where the prophetic puck is going, not where it was 10 years ago. Allow God to accelerate His plans and purposes in your life, and to redeem your time.

SEASON OF MAINTENANCE

There are seasons of rest. There are seasons of acceleration. There are seasons of maintenance. There are times when God simply causes us to ride on a high place with him, and hold ground.

It takes an immense amount of energy to move a car that is

parked, from 0 miles an hour to 5 miles an hour. It actually takes far less gasoline or energy for that car, once it is on the highway at 70 miles an hour, to simply maintain that speed. A manual car would need to be in a low gear to leverage the engine capacity to move the vehicle, even at a very slow pace. When the car is flying down the highway at a high speed, you would normally be in a very high gear, or an overdrive. The tachometer would be very, very low. Basically, you would be inputting a very small amount of gasoline to maintain the high place of speed and momentum.

Have you ever tried to stop a moving vehicle? It is actually quite easy to stop a car that is rolling at 2 miles an hour. I have done this several times. If you try to stop the same car when it is going at 70 miles an hour, you will instantly lose the battle, and probably receive a one-way ticket to heaven.

There are times when God wants to accelerate things, and thrust us forward, but there are also periods where he wants us to hold ground, and maintain ground. There are moments in the walk of faith where we are challenged to grow, and stretch our faith. It can feel like we are taking our faith to the gym, and pulling muscles that we did not even know existed. But there are also times of maintenance where we have taken ground, and are simply maintaining that place.

I remember in the early days of learning to live by faith when it seemed like an enormous struggle for me to believe for \$100. At the moment, I am personally responsible for believing in around \$500,000 a year, give or take, for the various churches and ministries I am involved in. When a \$50,000 project arises, I do not lose any sleep over it. Often, a smile breaks out on my face,

and I think to myself, great, we are going to enjoy this. Why is that? Simply because I have taken ground, and I have maintained that ground in my walk of faith.

I believe we will all go through a season where our faith is tested. We will go through the trial of our faith, but the goal of that trial is to bring us to a place of victory that becomes a place of testimony and ministry to others. For instance, if you have battled with depression for a long time, and fought that fight, reaching out in your faith, and receiving the deliverance that Jesus bought and paid for on the cross, that very deliverance becomes a testimony and a ministry to others.

There are periods in our relationship with God where God calls us to new heights. There are times where we climb a mountain. There are moments where we push past, and push through the obstacles in our own hearts to take us into a new place of fellowship in our relationship with the Lord. There are also periods where the Lord causes us to rest in that high place, and look down from that new perspective, and enjoy the ground we have taken. God enjoys you. God loves you, but God actually wants you to enjoy him, and indeed for you to love him.

It is important as we walk through the various seasons of our own lives. We must learn to change, and upgrade our experiential relationship with the Lord to meet and match the season we are in. It is not enough that we simply rest upon the relationship we have formed many years ago. This is true for a human relationship. There are people who are close friends for several years. Yet, as they grow older, they outgrow that relationship. You will sometimes see people come together 20 years later, and realize that the friendship is more dependent on the mutual

memories than the mutual affection, and indeed the mutual hope for the future. It is sad when this happens in the context of a marriage. Often, two people will come together, and invest so much into the hope of that mutual present and future together. In fact, they are in a period of acceleration in the joint relationship. Within any marriage, there will be times of maintenance where we simply stay at a maintenance level within that relationship, and walk through life. Sadly, it is also possible for a married couple to begin to lose even that place of maintenance, and, like the car on the highway, slowly begin to decrease in speed. Whether a plane is flying at 40,000 feet and 550 miles an hour, even if both engines were to fail, that plane has so much height and momentum behind it that it can still fly for a very long time. Nevertheless, it is true that over time, it will continue to lose speed and altitude. These two realities will increase, and come to a place where the plane can no longer maintain the necessary speed to stay in the air.

How can we apply these truths to our relationship with God?

Learn to ask the Lord questions about the season you are in. Learn to ask the Lord for a word for your current season, and also for the seasons yet to come.

God has words to speak to us that can be like the word God gave to Joseph about the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine. Every season is an opportunity to meet God in a fresh and new way. Every season is an opportunity, and invitation to upgrade and move forward in your relationship with God. Every season is an opportunity to ask God to open the eyes of your understanding, and show you the glorious relationship you already possess in Christ Jesus, and to learn how to live that out

to the stature of the fullness of the measure of Christ this and every day. Selah (Psalm 46:10).

"To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

CHAPTER 13 - FINAL THOUGHTS

Welcome to the end.

Welcome to the beginning.

You have reached the end of this book, but it is also the start of a new level of walking and fellowshiping with Christ Jesus. As we close, I encourage you to take a moment to think and pray through the following points.

The value of any book or teaching is not measured by how novel its ideas are, or how much it entertained us for a few hours. As we have emphasized throughout this book, the true purpose of teaching is transformation. The goal of Bible doctrine is to lead to Bible experience. Our hope is not just that you would ponder what is possible, but that you would actively build a lifestyle that sustains that experience. I encourage you to make a firm decision to be a doer of the Word, not merely a hearer, deceiving yourself. (James 1:22)

Take the time to write down a clear, concise vision of the life God desires for you, and the relationship you long to enjoy with Christ.

“See the Vision, write it down, make it plain, read it and run with it.” (Habakkuk 2:2)

There is power in clarity and definition.

Transformation occurs when we move from the vague to the precise. For any fellowship to reach its full potential, it demands deeper levels of commitment and clarity. If you desire to advance

in your walk with God, dedicate time to writing, journaling, and inviting the Lord into that process. When you ask Him to share His thoughts about your relationship, you will encounter Him in a new way.

The time, focus, energy, and effort you put into this exercise will determine the value it releases in your life.

This book is accompanied by a study guide that includes reflective questions and practical exercises to help you apply the truths from each chapter. I encourage you to consider working through it, either on your own, or as part of a small group.

As you continue to pursue a deeper fellowship with Christ Jesus, I suggest returning daily to these three key principles:

1. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF AND WITH GOD.

Be truthful about where you currently stand in your walk with Him. Resist the temptation to live in self-deception or excuses. Ask the Lord to reveal His perspective on where you are. Honesty is the first step to real change. Remember, repentance is not an emotion or self-pity; rather, it is about changing your perspective—acknowledging reality, and then making adjustments.

2. LIVE DAILY WITH GOD’S VISION BEFORE YOU.

Make it a habit to view everything in your life through the lens of God’s promises and vision. While it is essential to recognize where you are honestly, it is equally crucial to overlay that reality with God’s vision for you. We need to see what God sees, so that

we can think as He thinks. By faith, Moses saw He who was invisible. (Hebrews 11:27)

3. REST IN THE TRUTH OF WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE IN CHRIST.

Remind yourself daily that you have already received a relationship with Christ by inheritance. Starting each day resting in this truth frees you from striving and stress. The greatest pursuit of our lives should be allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal to us that which we already possess in Christ. Revelation leads to transformation. The principal discipline in the new covenant is abiding.

Finally, I urge you to begin this journey today. Many people have good intentions, but never take the first step. The best time to start building a fellowship with Jesus was the day you were born again. The second-best time is today. The worst time is tomorrow. Today is the day to start forming beautiful habits with Jesus.

“So they began this good work.” (Nehemiah 2:18)

Learn to capture moments throughout your day to turn your heart toward heaven. Learn to invite Jesus into everything! In every circumstance, reach out for the manna from heaven, and the living water that satisfies the soul. In just a few seconds, you can remind yourself of the reality of Father God, tell Him you love Him, and listen as He tells you He loves you too.

What a glorious way to walk through each day!

* * *

I would love to hear your thoughts and comments. I am praying for you, and cheering you on as you walk with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Graham Jones

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