

Week 1: The Promise

How many of you would like a closer relationship with God than you have right now?
(me too)

How many of you have ever thought that it seems as though God is distant or removed from your situation? (me too)

How many of you would be willing to engage in a journey of discovery over the next forty days that could set you on a course to grow closer to God and recognize his presence? (me too!)

Over the next six Sundays we are embarking on a spiritual adventure. And I expect that every single person who authentically engages in this endeavor will discover that ...

God Is Closer Than You Think!

For some of us this will mean a course correction in our spiritual journey. Somewhere in the past we started to spiritually drift away from the vibrant relationship with God that we once knew.

For others it's going to be a season of discovery. Maybe you've never been close to God—but you've desperately wanted to have a relationship with him.

It could be that your relationship with God is perking along just fine. But because of your closeness to God there is an inner drive to be even closer—for prayer to be more personal, for a sharper awareness of his activity in and around you.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey ... the next six weeks are designed to bring us even closer in our relationship with God.

I'm going to ask you to pray with me as we ask God's blessing on our spiritual expedition.

[PRAYER]

A woman at Willow Creek Community Church was telling John Ortberg about her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter. This woman overheard the little girl talking to her sibling and going over some ground rules for life.

"Obey God!" she said. "You must obey God! You gotta obey God! I want you to obey God!"

After a moment's pause, she said: "I'll be God."

I want to give you a chance to put yourself in God's place for a moment.

Given all the pain and grief it caused him, why did God create the human race?

What's he after? What's his purpose in it all? In a sense—what does he want to get out of it?

I'm going to tip my hand. Let me read you a recent quote from the best Christian philosopher I know:

"The Bible is all about life 'with-God.' It is about how God made this 'with' life possible and will bring it to pass. The unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life with God as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus."

For example, let's consider the very first relationship God had with *any* people.

God creates Adam in the garden of Eden.

I think most people picture it this way: Adam lived in the garden—and God lived someplace else far away called heaven and occasionally came down to earth to visit. But it was not that way.

You see, the Bible is real clear that God is omnipresent—he isn't restricted to any location.

So in the garden of Eden, God and Adam—in a sense—hung out together. When Adam worked—God was right there.

When Adam named animals, God was right there. The Bible says that “whatever the man called each living creature—that was its name.”

God would say: “Hey Adam, good name. You're a good namer.”

When Eve was created, and Adam first saw her—God was right there.

Adam said: “God—nice job on the woman! I had no idea you could do that.”

Adam and God were—among other things—inseparable friends.

What Adam did—he did with God.

Where Adam went—he went with God.

Until Adam and Eve's fateful decision to disobey God. A day some people call “the fall.”

After the fall, God comes to the garden to walk with Adam in the cool of the day.

Apparently, that was part of their routine together. They'd go for a walk.

But this time, Adam is not there. And God calls out: “Adam—where are you?”

There's a rustling behind some shrubbery and a timid voice answered God: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid. So I hid.”

God wanted to be with Adam. But Adam didn't want to be with God.

And God's heart breaks. But God does not give up.

You see, God's great desire was to be *with* Adam. And even though the relationship had been violated because of Adam and Eve's choice—because of their sin—God continued to want

that relationship restored. God longed for the intimacy of their walks—of just hanging out together.

So God worked with Adam’s descendants. And every once in a while one of them would get it. For example, the Bible says of Enoch: “and Enoch walked with God.”

Later, the Bible says of Noah: “and Noah walked with God.”

God wasn’t being elusive or developing huge hoops for a person to jump through to be with him. The simple truth of the matter is that most people didn’t want to be with him. Mostly they hid.

But God kept wanting to be with people.

One day, it’s kind of like God said to the angels: “Now watch this. I’m going to start a new people—called Israel. I’m going to teach them to be with me, so everyone will want to be with me.”

And the Bible records a new pattern of relationships with God. Talking about a grandfather, his son, and his grandson it says that “God was with Abraham. God was with Isaac. God was with Jacob.”

And in those relationships, God would do surprising things to teach people about what it meant for them to be with him.

Jacob had a son named Joseph for whom life didn’t work out well for a long time, but the strangest thing kept happening.

Joseph was sold into slavery, but “the Lord was with Joseph” in slavery.

He was put in prison, but the text says: “but while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him.”

Later on, when the people of Israel were led out of Egypt, the text says the Lord was in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night—so the people would know he was with them.

It's like God just keeps saying:

- I want to be with you. I want to hang out with you.
- I'll be with you in the garden.
- I'll be with you in the flood.
- I'll be with you in prison, in slavery, in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the Promised Land—
- I just want to be with you.

Moses came to prize this “life-with-God” so much that once when Israel was in the wilderness, God told them they could go on to the Promised Land.

“Then Moses said to him, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased ... with your people unless you go with us?’” (Exodus 33:15–16)

In other words: I'd rather live in the wilderness with you than in the Promised Land without you.

Are you picking up on the great desire of God's heart? On and on this theme goes, until finally God wants to be with his people so badly he comes up with a really wild idea.

It's like God says to the angels: “I can't stand it anymore. I'm just going to go on down there my own self.”

And the angels say: “You can't do that. How are you gonna do that?”

And God says, “Watch this!”

He sneaks down. And in the middle of the night, he is born in a manger. He grows up in a one-horse town. And then he gets a job pounding nails eight hours a day.

Do you remember the conversation the angel had with Joseph when he informed him about Mary's pregnancy? The angel said that Jesus would be called "Immanuel."

Do you know what that means? It means: "God *with* us." In fact, I believe a central theme of the Bible could be called the "Immanuel Principle." The Immanuel Principle is *God's constant desire that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place for him.*

At the end of his ministry Jesus confirmed this when he said: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

When you asked Jesus to be your leader and forgiver, God sent his Spirit into your life *to always be with you.* Your body really is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Think about it: *you* can be Beth-el, the house of God.

It's like God is saying: "I just want to be with you."

God's desire is so central that at the very end of the Bible—when God sets everything right—the fulfillment of human existence is described in the same terms:

"Now the dwelling of God is with[human beings], and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Revelation 21:3)

God's desire and plan leads all the way to eternity! Now, let's get specific and talk about what this means for us today—and this week.

When the Bible says "the Lord was with Joseph," what exactly did that look like? How do we experience that?

God can use an infinite variety of ways to express his presence: creation, other people, Scripture, teaching, art, solitude, world events, even the joy of eating a Krispy Kreme doughnut!

But the place where we always must record these expressions of his presence is in our minds and our thoughts and feelings.

My part is to learn to continually focus my attention on God. I think about him, talk to him, ask for his help, tell him my plans, pour out my heart; I complain about my problems; I give thanks for what makes me happy.

So this week, start here. When you're at work and you sense anxiety or worry—think about the greatness of God. He's big enough to take care of you through whatever is looming. Talk to him.

When you're faced with some kind of temptation—be up-front with him about the temptation—he already knows what you're facing. Ask for his help to show you the best route of escape and then the courage to take it.

If you're facing problems in your life—pour out your heart to him. He is waiting to hear from you ... let him know from your perspective how difficult or impossible it seems.

If you're thankful or happy—tell him ... and be specific.

Are you getting the idea? If I were going to boil down the practice of all spiritual life in a single statement from Scripture, it would be this:

"I have set the LORD always before me." (Psalm 16:8)

When I do that, there are certain thoughts that are characteristic of God that settle into my soul. When these are present, there is a good chance that they are the result of God's presence with me. I want to walk through these signs of God's presence so you can recognize them when they come.

Start to set God always before you. One of the indicators of God's presence is:

1. Reassurance

When God was talking to Joshua, just before Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, God reassured him of his presence and said:

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)

Somebody sent me a list of statements that are supposed to be actual quotes from employee performance evaluations:

- I would not allow this employee to breed.
- This employee is not really so much of a has-been, but more of a definite won’t-be.
- He would be out of his depth in a parking lot puddle.
- This employee is depriving a village somewhere of an idiot.
- He doesn’t have ulcers, but he’s a carrier.
- If you see two people talking and one looks bored, he’s the other one.

I mention this because for a lot of people, when they think about God, they think about him primarily as a kind of divine performance evaluator. If you think about God in this way, you will find yourself avoiding him in your mind. You won’t talk to him much.

Understand—in the history of the universe, God has never asked anyone to do something by themselves.

Whatever God calls you to do, he calls you to do in partnership with him. And one of the ways you will know God is present is when you experience his reassurance.

—Somebody rejects you, but in the midst of the pain the thought occurs to you: *I am loved by God.*

—You face a challenge at work—maybe even losing your job—but in the middle of all that anxiety an idea comes into your mind: *I can handle this. This will not destroy me.*

—You're in transition. Facing a big change, not sure how it will work out, suddenly you have this sense that you're not alone.

—It hit a man named Paul in prison one day when he realized: "I *can* do this. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

When those thoughts come into your mind—whether through Scripture that you know, through a book or tape, through another person—be open to the possibility that this is not a random occurrence.

This is "God-with-you." This is the "Immanuel Principle" at work.

A second sign of God's presence with you is his ...

2. Guidance

The psalmist wrote: "I will praise the LORD, who counsels me, even at night my heart instructs me." (Psalm 16:7)

Sometimes guidance will come to you:

—You're in a store, there's a clerk behind a counter that everyone treats like a machine, and you get a sudden inclination to look her in the eye, to say an inner prayer of blessing.

—You're stumped at work and all of a sudden an idea breaks through that is just what you need.

—You're feeling distant from your child, all of a sudden an opportunity to build a bridge, reconnect is just dumped in your lap.

—You're about to say something stupid/self-promotional/damage-inflicting when a still, small voice in your head whispers, "Shut ... up."

Remember the Immanuel Principle and be open to the possibility that God is doing what he said he would do. He is with you. He is reassuring you. He is guiding you.

The third sign of God's presence with you may not feel like he is "for" you. But it is one of the greatest expressions of his love and desire to be with you and that is ...

3. Conviction

Jesus said that when the Spirit of God is present "he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." (John 16:8)

This is the hardest aspect of God's presence.

The truth is: my desire for God can be pretty selective. Sometimes, I want God *not* to be around.

An example of this is seen in children's behavior when they're doing something they know they shouldn't do. In the small group video lesson John Ortberg tells about two-and-a-half-year-old Larissa who was enjoying water in the backyard with "Nana."

Nana gently counseled her to water the potted flowers, but she had just discovered mud for the first time by pouring the water on a small patch of dirt. Nana told her not to put water on the dirt because it makes mud and mud will "get everything dirty."

Well, mud it was anyway, and the little girl even put the mud into a small tub of water nearby, calling it "warm chocolate."

Nana, who had been reading facing away from the action, soon discovered and cleaned up what to her was a mess. Then Nana returned to her reading, but *now* she was seated so as to be facing Larissa.

But the little girl soon resumed her "warm chocolate" routine, saying sweetly: "Don't look at me Nana. OK?"

Nana of course agreed (Nana was a little codependent) and continued her reading. Then Larissa would make black mud, and put some of it in the tub. Then some more.

Three times she said as she continued her work, “Don’t look at me Nana. OK?”

The tender soul of a little child shows how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong. Most of the evil and darkness in our lives requires hiddenness to continue to exist.

The soul that chooses wrong runs from God.

The Scripture writer says that when the face of God will no longer be avoidable, the soul will cry out in agony “to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne.’” (Revelation 6:16).

You know, it may be that out of all the prayers that are ever spoken, the most common one, the most quiet one, the one that we least acknowledge making, is simply this:

Don’t look at me, God.

It was the very first one spoken after Adam and Eve’s sin.

God came to walk in the garden, to be with the man and the woman, and asked: “Where are you?”

“I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid, so I hid ...”

Don’t look at me, God.

A businessman on the road checks into motel room late at night. He knows the kind of movies that are available to him right there in the room.

No one will know. His wife won’t find out. His kids won’t see. (He knows the drill and that hotels have a disclaimer, “The name of the movie you watch won’t be on your bill.”) Go ahead. No one will know.

But first he has to say a little prayer: “*Don’t look at me, God.*”

[PAUSE]

A mom with an anger problem decides to berate her kids because she's so frustrated, because she will get a twisted rush of pleasure from inflicting pain—

But first she has to say a little prayer: *"Don't look at me, God."*

[PAUSE]

- An executive who's going to pad an expense account
- An employee who is going to deliberately make a coworker look bad
- A Christ-follower who makes financial decisions that will keep him from tithing, keep him from being the kind of steward he knows God wants him to be
- A student who looks at somebody else's paper during an exam
- A longtime church attender who relishes the opportunity to pass judgment on somebody else
- A couple who claims to follow God but refuses to give up sleeping together
- A participant in a bitter divorce who chooses to hang on to resentment and self-righteousness

First you have to say a little prayer.

You don't say it out loud, of course.

Probably don't admit it even to yourself.

But it's the choice your heart makes:

Don't look at me, God.

Here's a key question when you experience the sign of God's presence through conviction—*will you at that moment stop?*

Listen to God's Spirit.

Be honest with God: “God—the truth is I don’t want you here right now. I want to do what I want to do. But I’ll stop. I’m willing to surrender. I’d rather let go of my anger/addiction/pride than let go of you.”

Spiritual growth, in a sense, is simply increasing our capacity to experience the presence of God.

The fourth sign of God’s presence is...

4. Joy

The Bible says: “You have made me to know the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (Psalm 16:11)

Rate your joy-capacity on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “Some people actually mistake me for a mannequin” and 10 being “You have to paint a frown on my face for it to exist.” What’s your capacity for joy?

[PAUSE]

Jesus said to people who refused to follow him, refused to be with him—it’s like this:

“We played the flute for you—and you wouldn’t dance.”

Sometimes, when God is present with you, you’ll know because a little voice inside your head will say: *“Dance!”* (Or, if you’re Baptist—“Move in a rhythmic and graceful manner.”)

—Some of you will be in your car, driving away from the church service, music playing that makes you happy—you will be singing and dancing and looking like a fool: that will give you joy.

—Some of you will be driving next to someone who is singing and dancing and looking like a fool—that will give you joy!

—Others of you will have put in intense effort at work and accomplished something significant—it'll be really good. You get a surge of satisfaction and that will give you joy.

—Or you see a sunset, or a tree in a forest preserve, or the face of a friend you love—that will give you joy.

—You will feel a rush of gratitude for no reason at all. Just the sheer goodness of being alive. And you feel joy.

God's great desire is to be *with you!* He has expressed it from cover to cover in the pages of the Bible. He has gone to extreme lengths to be sure you know it. He is showing you signs through every day of his presence.

This week ... experience the reassurance ... the guidance ... the conviction ... the joy of his presence.

Let's make a commitment together ... that for the next six weeks we'll do everything in our power to show up for a small group—even if it's way outside our comfort zone.

That we won't miss a Sunday if it's at all within our ability to be here.

That we'll be faithful to do our reading of the book.

And that we will stretch out our hand to grasp the hand that is reaching down to us from heaven.

God is playing the flute for you.

You're at the foot of Jacob's ladder.

You're living in "Beth-el," the house of God.

God is closer than you think.