

As You Begin ...

Most people live and die without ever becoming consciously aware of God's presence. He is all around them, like the ocean that surrounds a fish, but they are oblivious to His existence. So they flail about, desperately trying to make a life with a tragic deficiency. "Apart from Me you can do nothing,"¹ Jesus said ... and He meant it. The One who made you designed you to operate your life in His presence.

Everything flows from the presence of the Lord. Everything. If you are experiencing His nearness, you have all that you could ever need or want. Without His presence, you have nothing that matters or lasts. You were created to live in intimacy with God, consciously aware of Him all day long. The following pages are all about this awareness and the absolute necessity of close dependency upon Him.

Are you experiencing His presence? If you are, you are joyful and satisfied, peaceful and content. You have challenges, some intense, but you will never face them alone. Every day is a purposeful adventure as you walk and talk with God. Even life's darkest moments are holy and meaningful if He is with you.

But you will find yourself woefully insufficient if you do not know how to draw near to God. Or worse, you will be clueless about your inability but filled with a compensating pride that is a sad caricature of what you were created to be. You may not know how to enter into His presence or, once there, how to abide, to remain. Or, you may have experienced His presence in the past, but things have changed, and you have lost His nearness.

¹John 15:5

It is God's surprising intent to be with us. I use the word "surprising" because it is precisely that to most of us. We have believed the Big Lie about God, which we'll see in the following pages, and have settled into a life of unfruitful independence.

Don't merely read this study ... but pursue His presence. Ask God before reading each chapter to open your mind and heart. Stop at points and meditate on what God is trying to say to you. Pray these truths in. Most of all, ask God to make Himself known to you. He has gone to extraordinary lengths, even the giving of His Son, so His presence could become the foundational reality of your life.

You were made to be with Him.

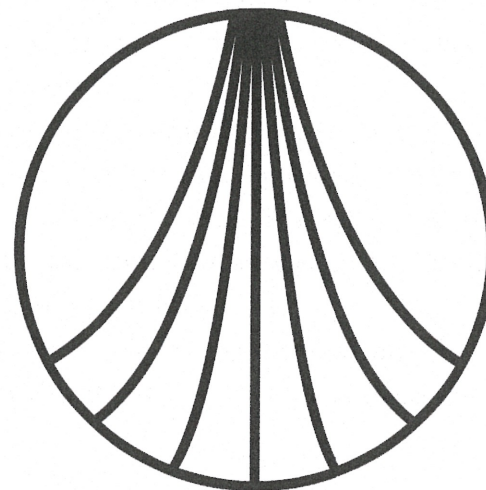
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(I am deeply grateful for Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays, professors at my Alma Mater, Ouachita Baptist University, and co-authors of *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology*. Their monumental book, kind and consistent counsel to me, and investment in innumerable students—including my children—have been invaluable.)

CHAPTER 1 THE STORY



WHAT IF YOU COULD SPEND A DAY, with anyone in human history? Who would you choose? Think carefully because you only have one choice.

Would it be a historical figure? Aristotle, Winston Churchill, or Abraham Lincoln? Madame Curie, Queen Elizabeth, or Harriet Tubman?

Or someone biblical? Think of spending an entire day talking to Moses, hearing about the burning bush and God's glory on Mount Sinai. Or an afternoon with the author of the Psalms, the shepherd-poet-warrior David.

Or maybe a New Testament believer? Hearing Mary Magdalene's account of her transformation and encounter with the resurrected Christ at the empty tomb. Discussing theology with Paul or spending a day with John, the disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast.

Here's the second question.

Do you think such a day would be beneficial to you? Would it change your life? Would time in their physical presence help you?

A Greater Question

But what if I told you that you could spend a whole day ... *with God*?

What if you could sit at His feet for twenty-four hours? If your day would be spent in His actual presence discussing with Him anything you wanted ... learning things that "eye has not seen and ear has not heard"?² What if you could understand the greatest secrets of life?

²1 Corinthians 2:9

How would your life change if He revealed to you the direction for your future?

Would this be valuable to you?

It's not only possible, but it's His deliberate intent. You were created to be with Him, but you must learn how to live in His presence. Discovering how to abide there is the most important thing you will ever do, for everything flows from the presence of the Lord. Everything.

The Beginning

This all begins with a story unlike any tale you've ever heard.

It is an eternal story, beginning before and lasting beyond time as we know it. It is as current as today's news but predates all human history.

This tale unfolds chronologically with breathtaking intrigue. Each chapter builds upon the last, carefully designed by the Perfect Author. You cannot understand the magnitude of this story without seeing the intent of each developing chapter.

It's also a comprehensive account. It explains everything that is and ties everything in human history together. Two wonderful theologians, J. Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays, have labeled this story *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology*, showing that every book in the Bible collaborates with the others to tell this story.³

And not just the books, but the characters too—the good and bad, the evil and righteous, the angelic and demonic, the Divine and the human—each one has been given a role in telling us what the Author wants us to know of what has been and what is to come. And right in

³J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2019.

the middle of the tale there is even found the perfect God-man, the Hero of it all. His presence is stunning.

You're in the story too! In many ways, you're what this true account is all about. When you begin to understand this overarching narrative, you will be overwhelmed by the height, depth, and breadth of God's love for you; you will be astonished by His uniquely designed purpose for your life and how beautifully you fit in it all.

The theme of the story is so expansive that it can fill every day with joy and purpose. It is so rich that you will spend eternity understanding its design.

What is this theme that will occupy your thoughts forever?

God's presence.

*God desires an unbroken, daily,
personal relationship with us,
but we must cooperate.*

*His presence is our greatest need,
and our presence is His great desire.*

Read that again ... multiple times.

FaceTime

Roberto Garcia had an idea. It had been stimulated by his work on a video gaming platform, but Roberto took it to a whole new level. He began working with his team at Apple to perfect his idea so it could be featured on the iPhone 4, which was set to be released in 2010. It was appropriately called FaceTime* and it revolutionized communication, making it possible to not only *hear* but *see* others on a call.

Roberto said that “one of the proudest moments” in his life was initiating one of the first FaceTime calls with his mother-in-law who couldn’t be present at the birth of their first child.

“We heard her bawling in crystal clear audio in the moments afterward,” Garcia said. “She told me she felt like she was right there. That’s what we aimed for when we created FaceTime.”

The Real FaceTime

As wonderful and seemingly indispensable as FaceTime is, God has prepared us for a far more fulfilling experience, a non-stop FaceTime with Him.

The word for “face” in the Hebrew language is *panim*. It is used in the Old Testament over 2100 times. When we see the word “presence” in our Bibles, it is almost always a form of this root word. It is a word to describe intimacy, reality, nearness.

Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew *face to face*.⁴

O God, restore us and cause Your *face* to shine upon us, and we will be saved.⁵

“For the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn His *face* away from you if you return to Him.”⁶

“Presence” (*panim*) is an experiential word. If someone is present with you, they are in the room with you, in close proximity. You are “in the

⁴Deuteronomy 34:10, (*emphasis mine*)

⁵Psalms 80:3, (*emphasis mine*)

⁶2 Chronicles 30:9, (*emphasis mine*)

same place as,” the dictionary says.⁷

Being Near

It is one thing to know about God, but another to experience His real presence. You may say, “Well, I know that God is with me,” as a fact, but are you *aware* of His presence? Are you abiding in His presence? Do you talk with Him?

If you know God at all, you know that you need Him. Without His presence, you have nothing that matters or lasts. But if you experience His nearness, you have everything you need.

God is present everywhere (*omnipresent*). But what we are describing is what we could call His *near* presence. Some use the term “manifest presence,” for the word “manifest” means “open, clearly visible to the eye or obvious to the understanding; apparent; not obscure or difficult to be seen or understood.”⁸

God is certainly capable of making Himself known to those He has created. And indeed, He *wants* to be known. He has designed multiple ways to communicate with us because He knows we cannot possibly function without Him. He tells us to draw near to Him and promises that He will draw near to us.⁹

Presence, as we are describing in these pages, is the difference between knowing about someone and being their close friend, between a mere awareness and deep intimacy. Some people we only know professionally (Dr. Smith), others by deep friendship (my best friend, Gary). Such nearness is the difference between sitting next to your friend in a

⁷*Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁸*American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828 Edition, Noah Webster, Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967.

⁹James 4:8

stadium and enjoying a game together versus being in the same stadium with thousands of others whom you've never met.

For our lives to work properly, we must be *near* God relationally. God longs for this more than we can imagine. He made us for this intimacy. In fact, it is where this whole story is headed, for in heaven, we will see God's face forever with no interruption.¹⁰ Two words from God, stated over and over in the Bible to His people, summarize this nearness: "with you."

If we are experiencing His near presence, we have everything necessary for our lives, relationships, homes, churches, and nations. Conversely, to be separated from His presence is to lose everything that matters. The loss of His nearness explains all that is wrong with this world.

Our Presence with Him

His presence *is* our greatest need, but *our* presence as "His great desire" is hard to fathom. In fact, most of us don't believe it. Our constant enemy, Satan himself, is the vicious culprit behind our skepticism. He is the Father of Lies and has worked since the Garden to make this truth seem unrealistic. He's constantly whispering to us:

"God doesn't care about you."

"He doesn't want to be with you ... He just wants to use you."

"You don't really matter to Him."

"Look at all the tragedy in this world. If God were interested in us, He would have stopped all this."

¹⁰Revelation 22:4

"God just barely tolerates you. He doesn't really love you at all."

... and he is relentlessly accusing us, day and night ...

"With what you've done, how could He allow you in His presence?"

"Why would He be interested in someone as insignificant as you?"

"How could you possibly have a relationship with God anyway? You're too sinful, and He's too distant."

"He likes others way more than you. They are more significant to Him than you are."

"What have you ever done for God?"

"Do you realize what you just did this morning? How you failed Him? He doesn't want to be with you."

... and on and on.

Have you heard these whispers?

I was with a group of 100 men on a retreat at a vibrant church, sharing some of these truths. The pastor asked if he could say something before the next session. He stood up and said to the men, "The Lord showed me something about you men while I was praying, and I want to ask you a question: How many of you feel that God just barely tolerates you at best?" Over half of the room stood to their feet. A quiet soberness fell over the room. And then there were moist eyes and some weeping. They had believed the big lie.

Do you feel that way?

If you have ever felt that God just tolerates you, then you have fallen prey to Satan's lies. He has accomplished the first step in separating

you from God's nearness and cutting off your source of life and power to battle the schemes of Satan. After all, why would you seek to draw near to a God that you believed had no desire to be near you?

If you don't really know and believe "the love which God has for us," then your relationship with the Father is limited at best.¹¹ This has been our Enemy's plan all along, and centuries of practice have made him grievously good at his deception.

Across the Room

Remember when you were in high school (men) and saw *that girl* across the room, and your heart skipped a beat? Suddenly, she came on your radar, and you were intrigued. You asked your friend, "Do you think she'd go out with me?" and he candidly replied, "Are you kidding me? No way!"

But you persisted. "Why don't you ask *her* best friend to ask (that girl) if she would go out?" you suggested to your buddy. When that filtered through the communication chain, it got back to you that she might entertain the idea. So you asked her out and, to your amazement, discovered that she had wanted to go out with you all along! You had an awesome time on the date and asked her out again and again and again. And then, one day, you asked her to marry you, and ultimately, you had eight kids and twenty-seven grandkids! (At least, that's what happened to me!)

Imagine all you would have missed if you had not believed she wanted to be with you! Your faith in *her desire for your presence* helped you pursue and receive an incredible gift.

In His perfect love and sovereignty, God wants us to live in His

¹¹ 1 John 4:16

presence personally, daily, and continually. He has been on an unending pursuit to bring us back into the Garden, back into His presence. In multiple, powerful ways, He is inviting us to be with Him, and it is His great delight to do so.

In the following pages, we will see this overarching theme through five ways that God has pursued us. In fact, you may be surprised that you didn't see this sooner, for it is the framework of the whole Bible and human history. He invites us into His presence through creation's design and voice, His calling to us, dwelling among us, indwelling us, and coming again to take us into His uninterrupted presence. But to know His daily nearness calls for a deliberate and continual response. We will see this in the second half of the book, giving us a path to enter and remain near Him without interruption through six ways that must become our pattern for living. Remember ...

*God desires an unbroken, daily,
personal relationship with us,
but we must cooperate.
His presence is our greatest need,
and our presence is His great desire.*

The more you know the whole story, the clearer this becomes.

The WAYS of our PURSUING GOD