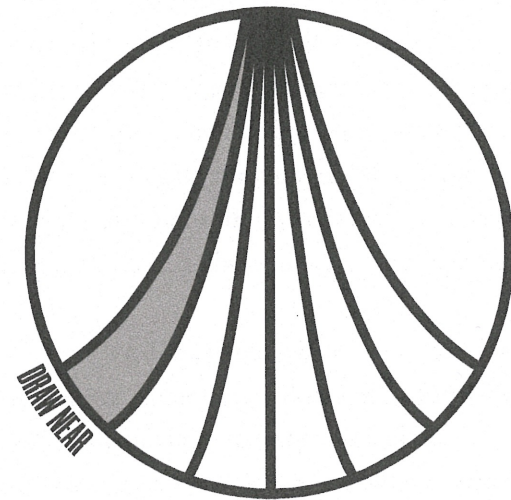


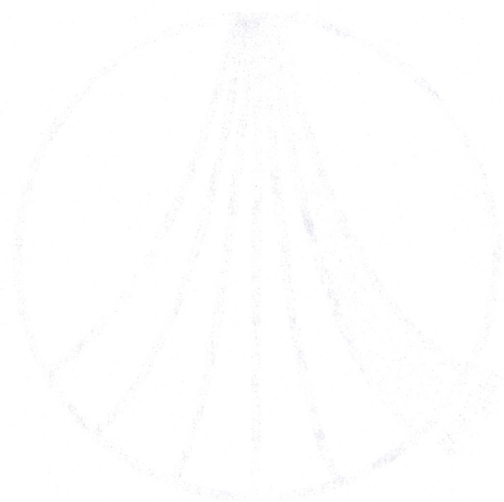
them together, that is essential. The continual practice and application of each part help us abide in His presence.

Our desire in the following pages is to put this in a way that is simple, understandable, and replicable. Memorize these six ways and use them to continually evaluate if you are experiencing His presence and, if not, to discern where you have been distracted and how to return.

We pray it will be a helpful understanding for you and a tool to help those you are discipling as you seek to live a Presence-centered life.

CHAPTER 7 DRAW NEAR





I FELT DISTANT from Christ. I had experienced this many times before, even as a pastor. This is common for most believers. But over the years, the Lord had shown me how to return to intimacy with Him. The Word of God, prayer, and fasting have always been important tools in returning; and so, in January 2010, I determined to seek the Lord in an extended fast. My one request to the Lord was that He would help me fall in love with Jesus all over again.

Toward the end of the fast, I was rewarded with an unusual sense of His nearness. It was a time of deep cleansing and renewal. I could hear His voice clearly again through His Word, and the joy of God returned to my soul. Our staff noticed this also, and many of them observed similar times of fasting and prayer and experienced the same renewal.

That fall, we felt led to call our whole church to a forty-day season of fasting and prayer. There came a deep sense of anticipation, and we began a new First Monday time of prayer, specifically praying for revival in our church, city, and nation. People would ask me about our church during that time and my standard answer was, "It feels like there is gasoline on the floor just waiting for a match." God gave us a heightened belief that He was about to manifest Himself in increasing measures.

In April 2011, I was preaching from 1 Thessalonians 5 on the quenching of the Holy Spirit. The passage says: "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."⁵¹

⁵¹1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

There is a wide range of interpretations of what a “prophetic utterance” is, but at the very least, it is when God is speaking. Paul is saying, *When God says something to you, don’t ignore it or treat it lightly. Examine it carefully to make sure it is from Him and then obey.* I illustrated this that morning with this fictional—but true-to-life—thought.

Suppose I was preparing a message from one of Paul’s letters on praying for the lost. The Lord burdened me deeply through the week as I studied, and I sensed that He really wanted to say something to our people. Then imagine that, as I got up to preach, there was an unusual unction on the message. The room was quiet, the people were leaning in, and all of us knew that God was calling us to a new level of intercession for those who were far from God.

As people left, they were sober and humbled and said, “Pastor, the Lord really spoke to me this morning.” And then imagine that they got in their cars, went home, and *didn’t make one single adjustment in their lives to pray for lost people!*

How would we describe that? God was speaking to His body, trying to mobilize them for a sacred purpose, but we had quenched the Spirit by treating His call lightly and not joining Him in what He desired to do. Think of what this response, this quenching, would do, what we would miss and how it would grieve the Lord.

As I finished that illustration, I sensed that my sermon was over, although I had many pages of notes left. I argued with God for a mo-

ment, but finally said, “I think that’s all I’m supposed to say this morning.”

Suddenly a retired missionary stood up in our congregation and began to cry out, “We must obey God right now!” With tears in his eyes he exhorted the people to instantly obey and not quench the Spirit. A spontaneous exhortation like that was not normal in our church.

People began to stream to the altar and they continued and continued. I walked to the floor microphone and told them to do whatever the Lord was telling them, but most of all, to not quench the Spirit. They continued to come. People were being saved, confessing their sins, going across the room to clear their consciences with others. Much was happening.

An older woman approached me and asked if she could share something publicly. As I stood beside her, she shared a sweet word. Then another came and another until there was a line. The service continued for hours until we finally concluded at 3:30 p.m.

We had a scheduled prayer gathering Monday night, and I told the people to come back and, above all else, until then, don’t quench the Spirit!

The next night the building was packed. That service lasted more than three hours. It was orderly and beautiful, and God did amazing things. People were saved and baptized, money was given, folks were prayed for and gloriously delivered from many things. We knew we couldn’t stop, so we invited the people to return the next night and the next.

That movement of God’s Spirit lasted five weeks, every night except Saturday, in one of the most extraordinary seasons of revival I’ve ever known. People came from around the country to be a part of it. Most of the pastors in our city came at times and some saw fresh movements

in their own churches, which was one of our most fervent prayers. We received several calls from other countries.

Our watchword was "Don't quench the Spirit." Whatever He told us to do we instantly obeyed.

Only heaven could record all that happened in those days, but here was the most glorious result: we were in the manifest presence of God with no intermission. The gospel was being spread, and lives were being changed every day. As Andrew Murray's book title *The Secret of His Abiding Presence* suggests, we were experiencing His abiding presence. Life became very simple—an easy yoke—for it all centered around doing nothing to lose the awareness of His presence and prompt, loving obedience to Him. It was heavenly.

These life-changing days made us all realize that a Presence-centered life is possible if we will cooperate with God. When those five weeks of continuous meetings ended, we did not maintain the same intensity, but we have never been the same as individuals and as a church. We learned truths about His presence and in His presence that we will never forget.

By the grace of God, we were learning how to draw near.

The Need for Deliberately Drawing Near

Jesus' visit to his dear friends in the village of Bethany one day illustrates why we need to continually, consciously draw near to Him.

Christ was in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Martha was distracted with all of her preparations. The word *distracted* literally means "drawn away." Jesus quickly realized what was happening and gave a commentary that describes all of us. When Martha grew impatient and ordered Jesus to enlist Mary to help, the Lord answered

her with a kind, but strong reproof: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things, but only one thing is necessary."⁵²

The Son of God was standing in her house and yet Martha was angry, frustrated, and demanding. These are the normal behaviors of the spiritually diverted.

The reason we need to draw near to Christ is because we are so often drawn away. We are unaware of His presence and are living self-centered lives. The world, the flesh, and the devil bring a constant barrage of things that vie for our attention, that pull us from Him.

It is easy to wake up and realize that, although Christ is with us, we are unaware of Him, not talking to Him, and not including Him in our lives and decisions. The Word of God has become academic. Prayer is anemic. Our lives look just like Martha's. A distracted Christian doesn't look much different than an unbeliever.

Stop and evaluate your life. Over the last week, how often were you conscious of the Lord's presence? Communing with Him deeply and getting your instructions in His presence? Hearing from Him personally through His Word?

Another way to evaluate is in the negative. Have you been worried, bothered, or angry? Are you frustrated at everything and nothing? Are you bored with life? Do you feel lonely, even in a crowd? Are you constantly looking for something to entertain you, to make you content and happy? Have your decisions been humanistic and not God-initiated? Is sin attractive to you, so attractive that you cannot seem to shake its grip? Is the Word of God vibrant and alive to you or merely perfunctory and dutiful? Are you living a prayerless life?

⁵²Luke 10:41-42

A Hunger and a Choice

We can learn a valuable lesson from Mary's response, which is the point of this story. Unlike Martha, Mary was so hungry for communion with Christ that other demands did not pull her away. She made a deliberate choice to be "seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word."⁵³ She drew near.

Lest we think that this is just the choice in the mornings during our devotions, we must remember that every moment of the common day should be filled with these choices. There's not a moment, a decision, a conversation that doesn't need the power of His presence. God has given us the opportunity and the means to draw near, but we must make the choice to turn to Him. We will often be distracted, so we must often draw near. We should do it so often that it becomes habitual, that it is our "way."

Brother Lawrence, who served as a "lay brother" in a French monastery in the seventeenth century, developed a continual awareness of God's nearness. He said, "By getting up after every fall, and by frequently renewing my faith and love, I have arrived at a state of mind where it is more difficult for me not to think of God as it was at the beginning to think of Him."⁵⁴ When asked, he wrote this admonition to his friend:

Please remember that I have recommended that you meditate often on God, day and night, during business and recreation. He is always near you and with you; do not leave Him alone. You would consider it rude to ignore a friend who came to visit you. Then why neglect God?

⁵³Luke 10:39

⁵⁴Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*, Whitaker House, 1982.

Do not forget Him. Meditate on Him often. Adore Him continually. Live and die with Him. This is the glorious vocation of a Christian. You could say that this is our profession. If we do not know how to do it, then we must learn.⁵⁵

We make choices all day long about what to think about, watch, and give our attention to. These were not originally natural but were learned and practiced over time until they became habitual. They are our current ways.

We pursue what we value. If we value the presence of God, we can learn to turn our minds constantly to Him, to draw near in prayer and meditation on His Word. It may take a while to wean ourselves from worldly distractions, and it can only be done by God's grace and with His help. Also, others may not understand and might think we are a bit fanatical in the fervency of our pursuit of God. But then, they may not enjoy His nearness. With practice, we can learn to draw near all day long.

Practically, we can draw near by pausing throughout the day and evaluating where we are. Have we become distracted? Are we near Him or distant? What is the source of the sin and the distance we're feeling from Him?

If we have drifted, we should pause in prayer immediately and take whatever time is necessary to enter into His presence through prayer. (We will see how to draw near in prayer in the next chapter.)

⁵⁵Ibid.

The Good and Lasting Part

Jesus reminded Martha of what a Presence centered life yields when He said, "Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."⁵⁶ There is a lasting reward for those who resist distractions and turn continually to Him.

What if we made it the primary focus of each day to consciously and continually draw near to God, and then we let everything else flow from His presence? Think of what a day, a week, a lifetime in the presence of Christ would yield. One thing is certain: if we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us.

Each of the disciples was as close to Jesus as he chose to be, for the Son of God had no favorites. With him, there is no caprice or favoritism. Their relationship with Him was the result of their own choice, conscious or unconscious. It is sobering to realize that we too are as close to Christ as we really choose to be.

It would seem that admission to the inner circle of deepening intimacy with God is the outcome of deep desire. Only those who count such intimacy a prize worth sacrificing anything else for are likely to attain it. If other intimacies are more desirable to us, we will not gain entry to that circle.

The place on Jesus' breast is still vacant and open to any who are willing to pay the price of deepening intimacy. We are now and will be in the future only as intimate with God as we really choose to be.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Luke 10:42

⁵⁷J. Oswald Sanders, *Enjoying Intimacy with God*, Discovery House, 2001.

The NEXT STEP...

1. What percentage of each day and week are you consciously drawing near to God's presence?
2. What distracts you most often from the nearness of God? (Make a list)
3. When others are around you, do you think they sense God's presence?
4. Think of what you must do today, right now, to draw near and begin to practice His presence.