

## CHAPTER 1

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# JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF GOD

Spiritual Practices That Will Transform Your Life

*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you  
except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

—1 Corinthians 2:2

**W**hen it came time for the apostle Paul to summarize what was really important, he wrote, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Paul took great joy in knowing, walking with, and loving Jesus Christ, and his overarching mission was to spread the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

What makes this so amazing is that Paul did not always hold this position. He had once been opposed to Christ and His message. . . . He sought to destroy anyone who believed the message of the cross. However, all this changed one day as he journeyed to Damascus. The Bible tells us that on that journey he came into direct contact with the crucified and resurrected Jesus (see Acts 9:1-18 for the full story). This encounter forever changed Paul’s life and thinking. He was converted. The one who had sought to destroy the message of the cross and all associated with it, now sought to proclaim its message!<sup>1</sup>

What did all this mean for Paul? For him, it was the beginning of a lifetime journey to know the heart of God.

What does it mean for us to know the heart of God? It means spending our lives intimately pursuing Him. This book focuses on enjoying God through an intimate relationship with Him—a relationship that can take place anytime, anywhere.

Although Paul was a prominent teacher of theology, he said that the focal point of his life was simply “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Clearly, he was not just talking about the day when Christ was crucified but about everything in relation to Jesus: His will, life, grace, work, teaching, and salvation. Paul wanted to teach the Corinthians about the deep things of God and how to connect with Him

intimately. He gave many instructions about prayer, worship, offering, and ministry, which can facilitate a deep connection with Him. We truly get to know God through a personal relationship with Him, cultivated through spiritual disciplines such as the ones we will discuss in this book.

In order to deeply connect with His heavenly Father, Jesus intentionally practiced many spiritual disciplines. He prayed, fasted, worshiped, studied the Scriptures, and gave His life for others. He found joy and comfort in doing these spiritual practices.<sup>2</sup> Men and women of God, such as Abraham, Moses, David, Esther, Paul, Peter, and Mary the mother of Jesus practiced these things in order to be closer to God. Faithful followers continue these timeless spiritual disciplines today.

As a pastor, I receive a lot of questions about spiritual life:

- How do I grow in my love, commitment, and service to Jesus Christ?
- What are the hallmarks of a spiritually mature person?
- Why does it take so long and seem so hard to achieve a higher level of spirituality?
- Will I ever really be any different?
- Will I ever be like Jesus?

If you have ever been frustrated with your spiritual life, wondered if real change were possible, or felt confused or stuck, I wrote this book for you and for me.

The Christian gospel insists that the transformation of a human's character and conduct through knowing Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit really is possible: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here" (2 Corinthians 5:17; see also Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 12:1, 2). Change is never easy and rarely quick, but it does happen. I see it happening in people all around me and can personally testify that the power of God has transformed me many times.

In this book, I will explore this intimate journey to the heart of God by dealing with several Christian spiritual practices, such as worship, prayer, Bible study, fellowship, fasting, giving, forgiveness, and touching lives. We do not do these practices out of fear, obligation, or drudgery. They are done out of joy to facilitate a relationship with God. As the love of God compels us to live out these spiritual practices, the Holy Spirit will transform our lives and make us more like Jesus (verse 14).

I can personally testify that the spiritual practices we are about to explore have brought me closer to God, changed my life, and filled me with joy. My prayer is that you will experience the same.

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1. Scott Savell, "To Know Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified," SermonCentral, November 14, 2006, <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/to-know-jesus-christ-and-him-crucified-scott-savell-sermon-on-discipleship-98019>.

2. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 1999), 93.



Journey to the  
Heart of God  
Through Seeking  
and Experiencing  
His Presence

## CHAPTER 2

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# EXPERIENCING GOD'S PRESENCE

Immanuel, "God With Us"

*"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name; you are mine."*

—Isaiah 43:1

**W**hen a president comes to town, the streets are blocked off and buildings secured. Access to the president is severely limited. When he leaves home, he often flies out on *Air Force One* and is surrounded by armed Secret Service agents. Every minute of his schedule has been mapped out and practiced.

Recently, when former president Barak Obama came to Chicago for a fundraiser, tickets for the dinner were more than \$50,000 each. This price got you a plate of chicken and asparagus and a piece of cake while sitting in the same room as the former president. If you wanted to be in his sight line, you had to shell out closer to \$100,000. (Think how much chicken and asparagus you could buy with \$100,000!) If you wanted to have a picture taken with the former president as evidence of your proximity to him, it would set you back \$250,000. Most likely he would not remember your name or that you were even there in the first place.

Thankfully, I don't have that problem when I want to spend time with God. He invites me to come into His presence for free. I don't have to meet any security requirements or have a certain amount of money in the bank. I don't have to be famous or dressed in a tuxedo. He won't make me wait in line for His attention.

Being in God's presence provides me with a banquet of blessings. He remembers our time together, and He not only knows my name but also the number of hairs on my head (Matthew 10:30). Every detail of my life is important to Him.

### **GOD'S MOST FREQUENT PROMISE**

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God repeatedly says, "I am *with* you." This is His most frequent promise in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, God was with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 2:4–3:24). God continued to be with His people. He promised to be with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob,

Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Mary, the disciples, Paul, and the list goes on. God initiated contact and made Himself known and available to humankind.

When God asked Moses to go back to Egypt and free His people, Moses was hesitant, but the Lord said, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). Later, when Joshua took over the leadership of Israel, he was anxious and fearful about leading the Israelites, but the Lord said, "No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Joshua 1:5). God's presence gives us the strength and courage to do whatever He asks of us.

When the Israelites entered the desert, God was with them. "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people" (Exodus 13:21, 22). Once the sanctuary was built, the tabernacle, mercy seat, and Shekinah glory were symbols of God dwelling with His people (Exodus 25:8). God's presence in the camp gave them protection and hope.

Jesus, the Messiah, was prophesied to be called *Immanuel*, meaning "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14). This was His purpose—to be God with us. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means 'God with us')" (Matthew 1:23; see also Isaiah 8:10). When Jesus called the disciples, it was first and foremost "that they might be with him" (Mark 3:14).

Jesus' desire to be with those He loved transcended His life on Earth. Jesus' last words to His disciples, after giving them the Great Commission, were, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). In addition, Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit, who now dwells in our hearts (John 14:16).

Wherever you are, He is there. God is with you all the time. You may not feel His presence, but that does not make it any less true. God will *never* abandon you. "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deuteronomy 31:8). This is God's promise to us today—Immanuel, God with us.

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE GOD WITH US?**

There are several reasons why pursuing and maintaining an intimate relationship with God offers hope, joy, and peace. Let's look at each one in the sections that follow.

1. *Living in the awareness of God's presence means we can face every situation in our lives with courage and assurance.* We live in a scary world. The threats of disease and terrorism are hitting closer to home. It can be tempting to stay locked in our homes, safe from the outside world. But because God goes with us, we have nothing to fear:

Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

A few years ago I had my own “darkest valley” experience when I was involved in a severe car accident that took the life of my best friend, left me in a coma for several hours, and fractured my knee. Eventually, I had to have surgery on my knee. Just before the surgery, the doctor told me I had the option of two forms of anesthesia—general or local. I asked him about the risks involved with each one. He said with the general anesthesia, the probability of never waking up was one in one hundred thousand; with the local, the chance of being paralyzed was one in sixty thousand.

I replied, “Are you telling me that I might be studied in medical books because I will never wake up or become paralyzed? I am scared to death.” He advised me to pray about it. I mentioned I was a pastor and that was what I said to other people when they were in the hospital. He said, “This is your chance to practice what you preach.” He prayed for me and read from Isaiah 41:10:

Do not fear, for I am with you;  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

These verses gave me the courage to trust in God and His ability to take care of me. There was nothing I could do on my own; it was up to God to keep me safe. He honored His promises. “‘For I am with you to rescue and save you,’ declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 15:20).

2. *Living in the awareness of God’s presence means God has a purpose and plan for our lives.* I came to the United States from Nineveh (Mosul), Iraq, to study engineering. As the semesters passed, I strongly felt the call to be a pastor. I decided to study both theology and engineering. I was set to graduate in the spring of 1980, but I didn’t have a job lined up. In December 1979, there was a banquet for the graduating students and conference employers to help them get to know us and see if we would be a good fit for any of their churches. The calls started to come to the theology majors in January 1980.

No call came to me. In fact, one of the conference presidents told me I would never get a job in ministry. I did not know the language well enough and did not understand the culture or the people. He reminded me that I came from a place

ten thousand miles away. His last words to me were, "Just forget about it. You will never make it."

I thought that maybe he was right. I interviewed for an engineering job. After half an hour, I told them, "I am wasting your time. I really want to be a pastor." Then a friend of mine called his father who worked in Kuwait. They offered me a high-paying engineering job in their company. I declined it.

Another friend encouraged me and kept telling me that God had a wonderful plan for my life. He claimed the promise of Jeremiah 29:11–13 for me: " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.' " My friend told me that God had a purpose in mind for me. It did not matter what the conference president said. The call would ultimately come from God.

The day before graduation in June, six months after everyone else had gotten their calls, I got a call from the Upper Columbia Conference. I could move forward knowing that God was leading me. What I once thought of as a hopeless situation affirmed for me that God would fulfill His plans and purposes for my life.

God has a plan and purpose for each one of us. It is through living in His presence that we can become confident that He is preparing the way.

3. *Living in the awareness of God's presence means we don't have to worry about being overcome by failure.* When God is with us, there is no need to worry about failure. Jeremiah, called as a youth, felt inexperienced and unqualified. But the Lord said, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you" (Jeremiah 1:7, 8). Much like Jeremiah, I was young and inexperienced when I went to my first church as a pastor in July 1980. That first Sabbath, when I showed up to meet the members, they asked me to read the scripture. It was 1 Timothy 1:17: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." I tried to speak with confidence, hoping to impress the church. Unknowingly, I said the *immoral*, not *immortal*, God. Everyone laughed.

I was confused. I asked the senior pastor what happened. He laughed and avoided me. Later on, when I discovered what I did, I became very discouraged. I had blown it on my first day. I felt that I would never make it as a pastor. The words of the conference president came back to haunt me: "You are not equipped to pastor here."

Thankfully, someone came to me and said, "Joshua was inexperienced and felt inadequate to lead the people of Israel, but God had these words for him, which also apply to you: 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you

wherever you go' ” (Joshua 1:9). I realized that because God was with me, He would make up for my failure. He has continued to be with me and bless me with success during my more than thirty-five years of ministry.

God's presence makes up for our weaknesses, imperfections, fears, and inadequacies. God's presence is our ultimate resource in the battle against life's difficulties.

4. *Living in the awareness of God's presence means we have the assurance that we are loved.* On a recent flight from Houston to Chicago, I was upgraded to first class and sat next to an executive from Hewlett-Packard. He flew all over the world and was away from home more often than not. He missed his family very much when traveling. Not only did he fill his cell phone with pictures of his family, but he also had a special cell phone number exclusively for their use. Normally, his calls were screened through four levels of administration before he could be reached. But his family could call him anytime, and they knew he would answer. “No voices sound sweeter to me than those of my wife and children. I will stop everything to answer the phone and connect with them,” he explained. Nothing brought him more joy than being with his family. He told me that while he was in China, his son became sick. While he was able to talk to him on the phone, it was still heartbreaking to be so far away, unable to physically comfort his son.

My conversation with this executive reminded me that I have a direct line to my heavenly Father. He never feels that I am interrupting Him when I reach out in prayer. When I am sick or discouraged, despite the distance between Earth and heaven, He is able to reach down to comfort me or direct others to comfort me on His behalf. When I am excited, I can call out to Him. I am no longer just one out of seven billion people on Earth; I have a one-to-one connection with God. God is waiting for our call, waiting for us to reach out to Him.

Zephaniah 3:17 reiterates the personal desire God has for each of us:

The LORD your God is with you,  
the Mighty Warrior who saves.  
He will take great delight in you;  
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,  
but will rejoice over you with singing.

God wants to be with each of us individually. When we are out of fellowship with God, not only do we miss Him but He misses us. If I drop out of my relationship with God, there is a Joseph Kidder-shaped hole in His heart. If you drop out of your relationship with Him, there is a *you*-shaped hole in His heart that cannot be filled by any other person. Each one of us is special to and loved by Him. God delights in you; you are precious in His sight.

Ellen White beautifully captures the essence of God with us: “Since Jesus came

to dwell with us, we know that God is acquainted with our trials, and sympathizes with our griefs. Every son and daughter of Adam may understand that our Creator is the friend of sinners. For in every doctrine of grace, every promise of joy, every deed of love, every divine attraction presented in the Saviour's life on earth, we see 'God with us.'"<sup>2</sup>

## **NEVER ALONE**

You don't have to face anything alone. "The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Psalm 46:7). But God will only go where He is invited. Invite Him into your situation every moment of every day.

When you lose your job or face financial difficulties, when you feel like you are drowning, the Lord is still there with you. David says in Psalm 9:9, 10:

The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,  
a stronghold in times of trouble.  
Those who know your name trust in you,  
for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.

God's presence manifests in our lives in whatever manner we need. For the orphan, He is the everlasting Father (John 14:18). For the newborn baby, He is the compassionate Mother (Isaiah 49:15). For the lonely, He is the omnipotent Companion who is with us wherever we go and whatever we do (Psalms 68:6; 69:33). For those in unsupportive relationships, He is a Friend (John 15:15). For the sick, for the deserted, and for those going through the valley of death, "he upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free" (Psalm 146:7). This promise was fulfilled in a powerful way in the life of Jesus:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free. (Luke 4:18, 19)

Immanuel: God with us. He *is* with us! He took on Himself our nature. He took on Himself our form, feelings, and emotions so that He would know what we go through. So that He could not just sympathize but empathize, He was with us, He was for us—but He was God. And "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

God's presence can overcome all the forces and challenges that work against

us. Isaiah 43:1–3 gives us a list of these challenges and how God’s presence is our ultimate source of protection and victory:

- Verse 1: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” God’s presence dissipates our fears by reminding us that we are His.
- Verse 2: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” God’s presence will take care of any problems we have. God’s presence faithfully sustains us in the midst of trials.
- Verse 3: “For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.” God works our salvation out of who He is.

The preceding verses remind us of God’s past deliverance (verse 1), His current presence (verse 2), and His eternal, loving, and saving character (verse 3).

He is Immanuel, God with us. You never have to be alone. God is with you all the time. He is determined to stay with you and be your Companion in life. The big question is, Are you willing to let Him?

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1. John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 16.
  2. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1940), 24.