

# **Enthralled with God**

**Cultivating a Joy-Filled Relationship with Him**

by Rob Fischer

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## **Enthralled with God—Cultivating a Joy-Filled Relationship with Him**

### **Relationship with God stands at the core of biblical Christianity**

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.’” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

This is an amazing truth—that the God who created the universe and everything in it—created you and me for relationship with him. Let the magnitude of that truth sink in! God went to great extremes in order to restore our relationship with him even when we were still in rebellion against him. “God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.” (Ephesians 1:5 NLT)

*Relationship* with God through Jesus Christ stands at the core of biblical Christianity. John 3:16 oozes relationship, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And Jesus defined eternal life as relationship with him and with the Father (John 17:3).

When we think of relationships, there are good ones and poor ones. The kind of relationship some people expect from God is not a good or desirable one. But that’s not the kind of relationship God seeks and desires for us!

Listen to the passion with which our heavenly Father cries out to wayward Israel, “I thought to myself, ‘I would love to treat you as my own children!’ I wanted nothing more than to give you this beautiful land—the finest possession in the world. I looked forward to your calling me ‘Father,’ and I wanted you never to turn from me.” (Jeremiah 3:19 NLT) But don’t think for a minute these passionate words only apply to Israel!

In 2 Corinthians 6:16 and 18, Paul applies these God-promises to us, “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” God created us for relationship with him!

Finally, in John 15:9-11 Jesus says to us, “Do you know how much the Father loves me? That’s how much I love you. So live in my love. I live in my Father’s love by obeying his commands. So live in my love by obeying my commands. (I give you my commands as a great expression of my love for you.) I’m explaining these things to you so that you will experience the same joy that I do with my Father—an overflowing joy!” (author’s paraphrase)

Unfortunately, many people never experience this love-centered, joy-filled relationship with God. In fact, many live their lives in direct conflict with God. Their relationship with him is severed.

## **Our need to be reconciled with God**

How was our relationship with God broken? What caused this rift between us and God? Where did we go wrong? Sin, which is essentially rebellion against God, became our way of life after our ancestors Adam and Eve defied God's leadership and revolted. Their estrangement from God was immediate. They felt shame and they knew their relationship with him had been broken, so they tried to hide from him.

Adam and Eve's kids inherited the same propensity to rebel against God. And there was no evolution or progressive development of sin as we might think. Sin was immediately full-blown and their firstborn murdered his younger brother in a fit of jealousy. A few chapters later we read, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." (Genesis 6:5)

You and I are sinners, both by heredity and by practice. We are guilty on both accounts. Our sin has separated us, estranged us from God. "The entire world is guilty before God." (Romans 3:19 NLT)

"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood." (Romans 3:23-25 NLT)

God loved us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to die in our place for our sins. Jesus, who was holy and without sin, took the full penalty of our sins upon himself. There was nothing we could do, no payment great enough to pay our debt owed to God. But what we could not do, Jesus Christ did for us, dying in our place. Jesus opened up the way to God for us.

Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf was so effective and so all-encompassing, that he not only offers us forgiveness, but he declares us righteous before God and restores our friendship with God (Romans 5:10). What God requires of us is to receive his gracious gift by trusting in Christ.

*Knowing* that we need to trust Christ is not enough. Some acknowledge what Christ did for them by dying for them on the cross, but they stumble over the idea of Jesus Christ being the *only way* to be reconciled with God. But Jesus himself declared, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) And the Apostle Paul explains, "For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5 NLT)

Trusting in Christ means trusting in him alone. No one else including Buddha, Mohammed, or any other so-called prophet or deity can save. Jesus alone was worthy to pay the full price for our sins. He alone died in our place.

Still others recognize the truth that we must trust Jesus Christ for salvation and that there is no salvation in any other. Yet, out of a sense of pride that disguises itself as humility, these people seek to pay for or make it up to Christ for what he did for them. In one sense it is true that when we trust Christ to save us, we owe him all. But to suggest that we can pay him back or make our debt good with him is blasphemous because it minimizes the work and purposes of Christ on our behalf!

What Jesus did for you and me on the cross was nothing short of a God-sized work. You and I can never and will never pay him back, nor does God desire it. The sheer immensity of God's love, grace and mercy toward us in freely offering us the gift of salvation and reconciliation through his Son is precisely what brings him glory! We must not presume to steal or diminish his glory and the magnitude of his priceless gift of life for us! (See Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 2:4-7.)

### **How we interact with God**

God initiates a relationship with us through Jesus Christ. But how does this reconciled relationship work? How do we interact with him? *All interpersonal relationships require interaction.* The nature of our interaction determines the quality or health of a relationship. This holds true in our relationship with God as well as with people. For instance, arrogance, mistrust and self-centeredness all breed dysfunction and conflict in a relationship. Whereas humility, trust and love all produce harmony and enjoyment.

As God's children he desires that we grow in our relationship with him. To a great extent, the nature of our interaction with God will determine the health of our relationship with him. From Scripture I see a trio of interactions (relational responses) that are always appropriate, proper and healthy in our relationship with God.

These three relational responses are: *humility, trust and love.* Although there are other appropriate responses to God, these three seem to stand out in Scripture as foundational. Many other proper responses to God spring from these three. God himself draws attention to all three and he exhibits all three in his character. Love, trust and humility work together to help us live an authentic life before God and others.

### **Humility**

What does God desire from us in terms of our demeanor and approach to him? What pleases God and what will turn him off in our speech and conduct with him? In Isaiah 66:2, the Lord declares, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." And James 4:6, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God loves it when we're humble, because he is humble.

We don't often think of humility as a character trait of God. Yet Jesus described himself as humble, "I am gentle and humble in heart." (Matthew 11:29) And he said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) Jesus also demonstrated great humility in washing the feet of his disciples (John 13). And Paul explains that Jesus humbled himself by taking on human form and dying for us. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Since Jesus is God, the above is proof enough that God is humble. But consider the following as well: God does not need us or anything we could possibly offer him, yet he deeply desires fellowship with us! That demonstrates God's humility. Even when we were rebellious, shaking our fists in his face, by his great mercy he saved us. That's his humility. And the almighty Creator of heaven and earth chooses to make his home in us—though the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain him! That's humility.

The Gospels record an argument that arose among Jesus' disciples about which of them was greatest before God.<sup>1</sup> This is a very relational question. Think about a group of individuals arguing with each other over which of them God esteems most highly. It is interesting to note that in all three Gospel accounts, this argument took place shortly after Jesus' transfiguration. Remember, Jesus had taken only Peter, James and John with him up that mountain on which his glory was revealed as he met with Moses and Elijah. Given the context, I think it's safe to suggest that their "mountain-top" experience may have prompted the argument.

I can imagine the argument among the disciples possibly went something like this: "I still can't believe what happened on the mountain with Jesus! He told us we couldn't tell you, but it was awesome. And you'll never in a million years believe who we saw up there with Jesus! Yep, it was quite a privilege to be singled out to witness such an amazing thing like that. I guess that makes me pretty important!" Regardless of whether their dispute centered on the transfiguration experience, it's clear that it centered around them! Their dispute reeks of pride, self-importance, boasting, viewing others as less important and even putting others down.

We too flaunt our greatness in the kingdom of God based on: how long we've known Christ; how bad we were before coming to Christ; our church affiliation; our Bible knowledge; and our experiences with God.

What impact does boasting like this wield on those around us? Such behavior alienates, divides and destroys relationships. How do you think God views an argument about who is greatest in his kingdom, since it presumes to impose a judgment on his behalf? It would be like two siblings fighting over which child mom and dad love more. How painful would it be if the children took this argument to their parents and demanded, "Let's settle this once and for all! Mom, Dad, which one of us do you love more?"

When Jesus perceived what his disciples had been arguing about, he called a young child over to him and took him into his arms.<sup>2</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "I tell you

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:1-3; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:36

the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" Matthew 18:3-4. *Without humility we cannot approach God.*

A number of years ago, I was working for a company and made a poor business decision by overstepping the bounds of my authority. My boss was out of town when this occurred. On his return he called me to account for my decision. As a follower of Christ I knew I needed to respond with integrity. I humbled myself by confessing to my boss exactly what I had done and asking his forgiveness. Although he could have been justified in firing me, by humbling myself before him, he forgave me and gave me another chance to "get it right" on that project. If I had gone into my boss's office with a self-justifying or haughty attitude, I'd have been through!

God also delights in humility. This is how we come to him—with the simple, transparent humility of a child—without pretense or boasting. A little child is totally dependent. The small child has nothing to offer but to return love. And yet that is precisely what the Father desires of us! Micah 6:8 NLT, "No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

## **Trust**

Trust is another core relational response to God. Some synonyms of *trust* include: to have faith in, believe in, rely on, depend on, confide in, have confidence in, count on, and put one's hope in. Trust or faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation *and* for our continued growth in our relationship with him.

God is trustworthy. That is, he is worthy of our trust. He is faithful and true. "Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled." (Joshua 21:45) "The word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does." (Psalm 33:4) "The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made." (Psalm 145:13) "God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." (1 Corinthians 1:9) And God promises us, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

Somewhere along the line, many have become confused about faith and view it merely as agreement with Christian doctrine. But our salvation is relational. Salvation is reconciliation with the Father through Jesus Christ resulting in authentic relationship. Adherence to dogma does not save us, Jesus Christ does. Yes, there are doctrines (theological truths) like the one I just stated explaining our relationship with God that are vital to a correct understanding and response to God. Given that, consider the highly relational nature of trust, faith or belief in Christ.

Biblical faith is taking God at his word and trusting him. "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." (Romans 4:3 NLT) We trust, believe in and have faith in one whose integrity is proven. We depend on him and count on him to come through for us with his promises. This is all relational.

Abraham provides such a concrete example of what it means to trust God that Paul calls Abraham "the man of faith" (Galatians 3:9). Observe the strong connection between Abraham's relationship with God and his faith in God. God singled out Abraham from among a pagan people group and told him he wanted to bless him. God promised to make him a great nation, give him a great name, protect him, bless him and that the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

God told Abraham, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) Although Abraham was 75 years old and this involved a journey of over 1,000 miles with a large company of people and livestock, Abraham trusted God and went, not knowing where exactly he was going. When Abraham reached Canaan, God said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Time passed and Abraham was now about 80 to 85 years old. He still had no children, even though God's promise applied to Abraham's descendants. God appeared to him again and encouraged him, "Do not be afraid, Abram<sup>3</sup>, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great." (Genesis 15:1 NLT) At this, Abraham reminded God that he was still childless and that according to custom his estate would go to his servant. To which God replied, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own to inherit everything I am giving you." And then God led him outside and said, "Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that—too many to count!" (Genesis 15:5 NLT)

Note Abraham's response to God's promise, "And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith." (Genesis 15:6 NLT) Abraham simply believed what God told him in spite of the fact that he was so old and had already waited so long for a child. Abraham trusted God and took him at his word, because God is trustworthy. This is a profoundly relational response. And because Abraham believed God, God declared that Abraham had right-standing with him. In spite of the fact that Abraham had to wait until he was 100 years old before God gave him and Sarah a son, Isaac, Abraham continued to trust and believe God's promise to him.

Recently my wife and I once more experienced God's faithfulness as we trusted him. We were living in Anchorage, Alaska and were following God's clear leading for us to move back to Spokane, Washington. But we had a house to sell in Anchorage and in the summer of 2007 the housing market was already in a down-turn. Now a move out of Alaska is always a challenge due to the distances and expense of moving. So months in advance we had reserved a large U-Haul truck to load up and drive down the Alcan Highway.

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<sup>3</sup> God later changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "the father of many."

We had prayerfully scheduled to pick up the truck on a Friday with the intent to load it on Saturday and begin our journey out on Sunday. Meanwhile our house hadn't sold. We did not have much equity in it, so we didn't have room for major negotiations on price. As the months drew closer to our scheduled departure date, Linda and I were getting nervous. We were in constant conversation with the Lord about all of this and he kept assuring us that he was in control and to trust in him.

Soon we were only weeks away from our scheduled departure and still there was no movement on our house. Linda and I began looking into other options like renting out our home. But God continued to quietly encourage us to wait on him and trust him.

Then, one week prior to our departure date, we received our first and only offer. The negotiations centered not around price, but some built-ins that I had made in our home. That same day, we arrived at an agreed contract! The following day, a Saturday, we left the house so the buyers and an inspector could go through the house. We arrived back home just in time to meet the buyers in our driveway. Immediately, both Linda and I sensed, "These people are followers of Jesus!" So, we asked them and they confirmed our hunch.

Linda and I then expressed to them what an answer to our prayers they were—to which they blurted out that our home was a tremendous answer to prayer for them. They had just arrived at the Air Force base in Anchorage the previous week and needed to find a home quickly. God's plan and dove-tailing of our lives was mind-boggling to us all! We told them about our wonderful church and they agreed to visit the next day. They fell in love with the church and its people and began volunteering soon. They now lead Bible studies in their new home in Anchorage!

One last amazing element to this story is that the sale of our home closed in seven days! The morning of the day that I picked up our U-Haul truck we closed on our house! Such a speedy closing was unheard of. When I reflect back on this story and all the times we were tempted to doubt God and take things into our own hands, I'm humbled by his awesome faithfulness and love. He truly is worthy of our trust!

The Holy Spirit says in Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." We must trust God like Abraham did. God's trustworthiness prompted Abraham's faith. "Whoever believes in him will not be disappointed!" (Romans 10:11 NASB) God is trustworthy, so trust him! Trusting God pleases him and is our proper relational response to him.

## **Love**

The first and greatest commandment in the Bible is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:5) What confuses many is how *loving God* can be a command. "Can genuine love result from edict?" they ask. Know that God did not make a mistake. He did not overlook the fact that genuine love cannot be demanded.

Instead, think about this commandment in terms of a loving father coaching his son. "Son, let me give you one over-arching principle for all of life. Center your life on this one thing and all else will come into focus: Love God with all your heart, soul and strength. Cultivate desire and affection in your life for him. Let him enthrall and captivate you! Spend time with him and get to know him intimately, mustering all your available resources to pursue him!" This represents the heart of God and the essence of this commandment.

Before we proceed talking about our love for God, we must first establish his love for us. In my experience as a follower of Christ and pastor, one of the greatest challenges we must overcome is believing and trusting that God really does love us. Our experience with human relationships may have left us wounded, doubtful and cynical whether we could ever totally trust anyone's love for us. And we all experience times when we feel very unlovely and unworthy of another's love.

Let me say it again another way, if you and I don't believe God when he says he loves us, we will not be able to love him or others, nor will we be able to trust him. Grasping the full extent of his love for us is essential for the health of our relationship with him. Notice the importance Paul places on our understanding God's love for us:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

So let's consider God's great love for us. In Romans 5:6-8 Paul reveals some remarkable details of God's love for us: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

From this passage we understand that God's initiating love for us flows from who he is and not from who we were. We were unlovely, but God's love is gracious, merciful and transcendent. In fact, he demonstrated his great love for us not in some puny, token fashion that we might expect, but by paying the ultimate price of offering his own Son up for us to die in our place!

Although that kind of love is beyond our comprehension, for whatever reason it's not God's love for us before we trusted Christ that we doubt. Instead, our life experiences since trusting Christ are what most often cause us to doubt his love for us. All of us have at one time or another denied him, rejected him, gone our own way and continued fondling sin in our lives. And when we do so, we feel unworthy of his love and begin to doubt whether he still loves us.

There are several ways to respond to this feeling of unworthiness of God's love. First, keep in mind that God, who is all-knowing, is never surprised by our failures. When Jesus died specifically for you and me, he knew we would embrace him as Lord *and* he knew we would repeatedly fail at following him. Then it occurred to me while reading Ephesians 5:25-30 one day, that if God so loved us while we were still sinners, how much dearer are we to him now that he has paid the supreme price for us! He knew exactly what he was getting when he purchased (redeemed) you and me. But he continues his life-changing work in us to make us holy and without blame before him.

Another way for us to rise above these feelings of unworthiness of God's love is to remember the fact that he has made us his children. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1) My wife and I raised three children. We were not perfect parents. In fact, it's only by the grace of God that our children turned out so well, often in spite of our parenting!

Our kids rebelled and gave us some tumultuous years in junior and senior high school. Yet in spite of times when they rebelled, spoke disrespectfully to us and did things that hurt and grieved us, still we never stopped loving them. How could we? They are our children. You would behave the same way with your own children. "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11)

A third way of combating our feelings of unworthiness of God's love goes hand-in-hand with the previous two, but this one focuses on the character of God himself. Satan's original ploy in the garden was to get Eve to doubt the goodness of (or love of) God toward her and her husband. The evil one talked her into believing that by forbidding Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that God was withholding something good from them. And in this way he cast doubt on God's love and goodness.

The evil one has never stopped using this tactic in our lives. We experience a calamity in our lives—which can be as serious as the death of a child to as mundane as a flat tire. And the evil one whispers in our ear, "God must not love you, or this wouldn't have happened." Or perhaps in a moment of weakness we succumb to a temptation. Afterward, we groan over our weakness and sin and the evil one whispers, "Surely God doesn't love you now after what you did!" Or maybe we're simply experiencing a spiritually dry spell in which God seems distant and silent. And the evil one whispers, "God has left you. He doesn't love you anymore."

Whatever the situation, if you are a follower of Jesus know that these accusations will come from the evil one. But recognize them for what they are—lies! "He [Satan] is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44) According to Hebrews 11:6, we please God when we come to him trusting not only that he exists but that he "rewards those who earnestly seek him"—trusting that he is good and loving.

There is an old hymn that beautifully captures the limitless bounds of God's love for us:

*The love of God is greater far  
Than tongue or pen can ever tell,  
It goes beyond the highest star  
And reaches to the lowest hell;  
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,  
God gave his Son to win:  
His erring child he reconciled  
And pardoned from his sin.*

*Could we with ink the ocean fill  
And were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill  
And every man a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry,  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole  
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

*O Love of God, how rich and pure!  
How measureless and strong!  
It shall forevermore endure  
The saints' and angels' song.<sup>4</sup>*

Because he loves us so much, loving him back is the only fitting response. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19) "But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." (Psalm 86:15) "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." (Ephesians 2:4-5) "God is love." (1 John 4:16)

Another aspect of God's love for us with which we struggle has to do with the interaction between the fear of God and love for God. The Scriptures inform us, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). On the surface, these two concepts almost seem contradictory. Part of the problem with our confusion lies with our understanding of "fear." Simply put, God desires a reverential respect from his children, whereas his enemies fear him with dread terror.

Make no mistake, with Jesus Christ as our advocate we have nothing to fear from God in terms of the terror or dread of judgment. "Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence." (Ephesians 3:12 NLT) And,

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<sup>4</sup> "The Love of God," F.M. Lehman, copyright 1917, renewed 1945 by Nazarene Publishing House.

"So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Hebrews 4:16 NLT)

1 John 4:18 explains that God's love drives out of us any fear of punishment for sin. In fact, if we continue to fear punishment for sin, we are not trusting in God's gracious love for us. So when Peter says, "Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king," he is speaking of a reverence and respect for God because he is who he is (1 Peter 2:17).

But let's come back to the question I phrased earlier about the relationship between fear of God and love for God. Put even more bluntly, how do we reconcile the enjoyment of God with fear of him?

A couple of years ago I was wrestling with how to reconcile our fear of God with our enjoyment of (love for) God. I wasn't content simply to understand this relationship, but wanted to be able to explain it to others. For a couple weeks I had been meditating on the connection between our fear of God and our enjoyment of him and was asking God for a clear illustration.

Meanwhile, the following scenario occurred in my life. We were living in Alaska at the time and I especially loved hiking and climbing the Chugach range of mountains that borders Anchorage. Up until then, winter had curbed my hiking in the mountains due to avalanche danger and the possibility of sliding off a mountain's steep, slippery slope. I had already had a couple of close calls and had developed a healthy fear of the mountains in winter.

One day, however, I learned that a friend of mine would climb Flattop Mountain all winter long and knew how to do it safely. So I asked Greg if he would take me up some time and train me how to conduct myself safely in the snow on the mountains. Greg perked up immediately and said, "Sure, how about Thursday?" I must admit, that I wasn't mentally prepared to take him up on his offer so soon, but agreed to go anyway.

That Thursday afternoon, we met at the trailhead. It was minus nine degrees Fahrenheit and the sun was on its way down. We were equipped with winter gear, ice axes and head lamps. We proceeded up the steep 1500-foot-elevation gain. And as we went, Greg stopped and taught me how to perform a self-arrest with the ice axe in the event of a fall. He also began pointing out different snow and ice conditions and formations and how to read them. Greg is a great mentor and gave me ample reason to trust him. So far, so good!

But the last 100 feet of the climb up Flattop is extremely steep. We kick-stepped into the hard, crusty snow that offered mere toe-holds and plunged our ice axes into the steep slope to avert a fall. All the way up this section, I was thinking to myself, "If it's this treacherous on the ascent, it's always more difficult and dangerous coming down!" I was really fighting back some significant fear as we climbed over the near-vertical lip of snow on the summit. I could feel my body trembling from the exertion and fear. And by now it was nearly dark and even colder.

We crested the top and the views of the snow capped mountains around us and of Anchorage and the Cook Inlet in the distance were stunning. But I remember expressing to Greg my anxiety over the prospect of going back down. Calmly and confidently Greg informed me that we were going to use "other techniques" for getting down. Then he said, "Follow me and do exactly as I do, but wait until I give you the go-ahead." And with that, Greg walked over to the edge of the precipice and simply stepped off. He proceeded to plunge-step about 30 feet down the mountain in just a few strides. He then demonstrated for me that in spite of the steep incline he could still arrest a fall.

Then Greg announced it was my turn. And as I walked up to the edge of that near vertical chute I don't think I've ever been so afraid! But I stepped off just as I'd seen Greg do and plunge-stepped with huge strides down the slope. It was exhilarating! Next, Greg told me to sit down in the snow and glissade (a fancy term for a controlled slide on one's butt) using my ice axe as a brake. In seconds we dropped about 500 vertical feet and I caught myself laughing out loud with the thrill of enjoyment!

Almost immediately, the Lord reminded me of my quest to discover the relationship between fear of God and love for God. He had just demonstrated for me graphically that my *fear* actually intensified my *enjoyment* of this experience. Instantly it all made sense. For how could we enjoy God as he truly is if we were not awed and humbled by his awesome presence! Check out the affinity between our love for and enjoyment of God and our fear of him (deep reverence for him) as expressed in Psalm 111:

- 1 Praise the LORD.  
I will extol the LORD with all my heart  
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
- 2 Great are the works of the LORD;  
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
- 3 Glorious and majestic are his deeds,  
and his righteousness endures forever.
- 4 He has caused his wonders to be remembered;  
the LORD is gracious and compassionate.
- 5 He provides food for those who fear him;  
he remembers his covenant forever.
- 6 He has shown his people the power of his works,  
giving them the lands of other nations.
- 7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.
- 8 They are steadfast for ever and ever,  
done in faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He provided redemption for his people;  
he ordained his covenant forever—  
holy and awesome is his name.

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.  
To him belongs eternal praise.

*Love* has become such a diluted concept in our generation that we may speak of *loving* chocolate or a warm bath. Or we hear bride and groom declare their love for each other in beautiful poetry at their wedding, only to hear them disavow ever having loved each other only months later in divorce proceedings. So what is this love with which we love God?

In Deuteronomy 6:5 we read, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." In Mark 12:29, Jesus adds, "Love the Lord your God . . . with all your mind." The point is clear: love God with your entire being! Involve your mind, will and emotions and love him intensely!

When my wife and I were dating, no one had to twist my arm to love her. My thoughts and yearnings were preoccupied with her. I wanted to bring her joy. My heart was set on pleasing her and serving her. And the wonderful irony of all this is that by loving her I found incredible joy, fulfillment and love returned.

As we love God and become enthralled and captivated by him; when we find our satisfaction in him and let him fulfill the desires of our hearts; when we long to spend time with him and learn what it means to please him; when we love him with all our being, we glorify God and experience true joy and fulfillment in life. As King David expressed to God, "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (Psalm 16:11)

Don't settle for anything less than this. Love God, make much of him and let him overwhelm you with the joy and pleasure of his presence and goodness in your life. Both our inclination and ability to love God and others spring from our grasp of his great love for us.

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. (Ephesians 3:14-19 NLT)

## Communication Essential to Relationship

Have you ever stopped to consider how essential communication is to relationship? In fact, I believe we could rightly assert that *without two-way communication, relationship cannot exist*. Without two-way communication, relationship can neither begin nor continue. Our relationship with God is no different.

A while ago I was meditating on this subject of how God communicates with us and we with him. It struck me how vital two-way communication is to any relationship—especially our relationship with God. I was looking for an illustration that demonstrates the essential function that communication serves in a relationship and Helen Keller came to mind. By way of analogy, I'd like to use her story.

As a child of 19 months Helen Keller became totally blind and deaf.<sup>5</sup> As you read the following excerpts in Helen Keller's own words, please imagine yourself in her situation and see what God reveals to you about the significance of communication in your relationship with him and others. Helen explains:

Then, in the dreary month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a newborn baby. Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came—my teacher—who was to set my spirit free. (pp. 6-7)

I do not remember when I first realized that I was different from other people; but I knew it before my teacher came to me. I had noticed that my mother and my friends did not use signs as I did when they wanted anything done, but talked with their mouths. Sometimes I stood between two persons who were conversing and touched their lips. I could not understand, and was vexed. I moved my lips and gesticulated frantically without result. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted. (p. 8) [The "signs" she refers to here are not what we know today to be sign-language, but were simple crude signs of her own making.]

Meanwhile, the desire to express myself grew. The few signs I used became less and less adequate, and my failures to make myself

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. An illness at the age of 19 months left her totally blind and deaf. At the age of seven, Helen began an amazing journey in which she overcame her double impairment with the help of her teacher Ms. Anne Sullivan. Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*.

understood were invariably followed by outbursts of passion. I felt as if invisible hands were holding me, and I made frantic efforts to free myself. I struggled—not that struggling helped matters, but the spirit of resistance was strong with me; I generally broke down in tears and physical exhaustion. After awhile the need of some means of communication became so urgent that these outbursts occurred daily, sometimes hourly. (p. 13)

Please don't miss what Helen is saying here. Her inability to communicate with others was intensified by her need to do so. This inescapable dilemma plagued her to the point of anger, frustration, physical exhaustion and distress. As a human being, Helen desperately wanted and needed to communicate with others.

In 1886, Helen's father took her on a visit to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell to consult him about teachers of deaf and blind children. Through contact with Dr. Bell, Anne Sullivan came to teach Helen the following year. Of this interview with Dr. Bell, Helen writes: "I did not dream that that interview would be the door through which I should pass from darkness into light, from isolation to friendship, companionship, knowledge, love." (p. 15)

I doubt whether even a few of us have ever pondered how desperately we would long for a means of communication were we to be stripped of it. Helen's description of communication as the door through which she should pass from darkness into light, from isolation to friendship, companionship, knowledge, and love is by no means exaggerated. *For without communication, we have no means for relationship.*

The following scene serves as incredible testimony to the inseparable connection between communication and relationship. Helen relates here how Anne Sullivan first attempted to communicate with her. Helen held a porcelain doll in her lap as Ms. Sullivan tirelessly spelled "doll" into Helen's hand.

I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no strong sentiment or tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of

something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow. (pp. 17-18)

I still get choked up when I read Helen's story. Did you notice that without means of communication Helen experienced "neither sorrow nor regret, neither strong sentiment nor tenderness [love]?" Yet when she captured one simple word *water* she exclaims, "That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!" And as a result, just minutes later and for the first time in her life she experienced repentance and sorrow—both relational emotions.

I believe for many, Helen Keller's story accurately portrays their relationship with God. We come into relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ. In those early days of our walk with him, we experience tremendous joy and love in his presence. Then, for many a "disease" sets in from which they emerge blind and deaf to God's presence and speech. And gradually they get "used to the silence and darkness that surrounds them and they forget that it had ever been different." If this condition describes you, take heart and read on! I believe you can experience an amazing, joy-filled relationship with God that is constantly refreshed with meaningful conversation and fellowship with him.

Also, don't miss this—we mistakenly assume that Helen Keller's heaviest burden was her lack of sight and hearing. But she clearly indicates that her greatest challenge was her inability to *communicate* with others. For without communication there was no means for relationship. Her new found ability to communicate opened up a whole world of relationships and meaning in her life, which she writes freely about thereafter.

Many people find themselves in a situation as desperate as Helen Keller's before she learned to communicate. Some don't believe it's possible to personally communicate with God. Others may grant the possibility, but don't know how to communicate with him. Still others deem the whole concept of communicating with God unfitting because they cannot accept that an Almighty God would actually speak to them or listen to their cries.

### **God speaks!**

The Bible records nearly 400 hundred specific instances in which God spoke to individuals. For some reason, we expect people like Abraham, Moses, Samuel and David to have heard from God. But check out some of the others with whom God spoke:

Adam, Eve, Hagar, Aaron, Miriam, Manasseh, Job, Ahaz, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Noah, Jacob, Solomon, Jonah, Rebekah, Eleazar, Joseph, Daniel, Joshua, Gideon, Manoah, Elijah, Jehu, Gad, Nathan, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Zechariah, Habakkuk, Joel, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi. I'd venture to guess there are names in that list you may not recognize. And the list doesn't end there.

We might consider it a given that God spoke with the fathers of our faith like Moses or Abraham. But he also spoke with some who were neither his servants nor doing his will. God spoke with Cain (who murdered his brother), with Balaam (a wicked and greedy prophet), and with Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (Job's three accusers).

In the New Testament we find God speaking with Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, unnamed shepherds and with Paul both at his conversion and later. He also spoke with the women at the empty tomb, the apostles as a group and with Peter, Philip, Ananias, Cornelius—the Roman centurion, the leadership of the church at Antioch, Agabus and many others.

There are at least a couple of reasons why we dismiss the idea that God actually speaks with us. First, we assume that these people in the Bible were out-of-the-ordinary or special cases. But the Bible itself argues against this assumption. In James 5:17, in the context of conversing with God, James reminds us, "Elijah was a man just like us." His point is that we too can talk to God and expect him to answer. When the people in Iconium wanted to revere Paul and Barnabas because of the works of healing God was doing through them, Paul cried out to them, "We too are only men, human like you."

Paul tells us in Romans 15:4, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (See also 1 Corinthians 10:6.) If we do not read the stories of the Bible as accounts of God's dealings with people just like us, then we unwittingly relegate these stories to the category of legend or myth. And we belittle God and his power and authority to work through us as well. The issue here is not our worthiness or level of spiritual maturity, but God's ability and our simply taking him at his word.

The second major reason we don't believe God speaks to us today goes something like this: "He doesn't need to speak to us like he did with Moses, Samuel or Paul because we have his Word, the Bible." This reasoning is strengthened by the experience of many who claim to know Christ, but have never heard God speak to them. I know, because I was one of them!

For many years I believed that God was active in my life, even to the point of having specific plans and a design for me. But I was very confused as to how to discover God's plan for my life. I spoke in terms of knowing his *will*, but thought that it was left for me to figure that out through the Bible, circumstances and the counsel of wise Christian leaders. When people around me used the terminology, "God told me...", or "God spoke to me...", or "God directed me...", I thought of them as either a bit loony or off on their doctrine. I also saw it as brash arrogance for them to claim that God actually talked to them.

Many have swallowed this argument like I did and sadly continue their walk with God in near silence. This view is a deistic view of the Bible—that God gave us the Bible and then walked away from us, letting his Book do all the talking. Also, without God’s clear communication to guide me, I found myself often more concerned with knowing God’s *will* for my life than with knowing God. And I know I was not alone in this tendency.

The evil one would like nothing better than to convince us that God no longer speaks to us. In the Garden of Eden, when the tempter confronted Eve with the challenge, “Did God really say...,” this was not just a matter of interpretation of *what* God said. Satan argued that God had only told a half-truth and had withheld the best from Adam and Eve. Notice what a small variation exists between, “Did God really say...” and “Does God really speak?” No, the evil one is back to his old tricks on this one.

Many of us were taught that we have available to us only two parallel, yet distinct modes of communication with God. The communication model looks like this—God speaks to us through his Word and we speak to him through prayer. That may seem oversimplified, but I know that I and many others have lived by this model.

God most definitely does speak to us through his Word, the Bible. And at no time does he ever contradict himself or tell us anything contrary to his Word or his revealed character in the Bible. But if we are moving through life with the assumption that God does not speak to us other than through the Bible, we set ourselves up for failure in several areas:

- If we don’t expect God to speak to us via any other mode than the Bible, when he does speak to us, we will reject his communication as counterfeit.
- We will never learn to *recognize* the voice of God and be able to distinguish his voice from other voices that we hear.
- We will fail to listen to him in prayer.
- We focus only on study of the Bible and one-way prayer to the exclusion of other modes of communication.
- Such a restricted view of God’s ability to communicate with us belittles God, is mechanistic, depersonalizes our relationship with him and runs contrary to the Scripture itself.

### **Our relationship with God hinges on two-way communication with him**

My wife and I spent nine months of our engagement separated by a continent and an ocean. I was in the Army stationed in Berlin and she lived in Alberta Canada. In those days, overseas phone calls were more costly than we could afford and email and skyping were not yet available. So our communication was limited to letter-writing. Even though we wrote each other daily, it took 10 days for a letter to travel one-way. That meant a 20-day-turn-around to get an answer back on a question in one of our letters.

During those long, nine months, our letters were our life-line, our sole means of communication with each other. Because of this, we cherished each other’s letters and read them multiple times. Through our letters we learned a great deal about each other: our likes and dislikes, personality, character, goals, etc. But let me tell you that when

the time came for us to actually be with each other—our relationship grew in ways that had not been possible solely through letters. (And I'm not merely referring to what just popped into your mind!)

When Linda and I were reunited and no longer had to depend solely on letters for communication, we learned to recognize each other's voices and inflections. Recently, I spent 10 days in the mountains of British Columbia with no means of communicating with my wife. When I got back to civilization, the first thing I did was call her. After 34 years of marriage, my heart still leapt as I heard her sweet voice!

No longer dependent on letters, we have learned to read each other's non-verbal communications: a smile, funny wink, cock of the head, furrowed brow, or a warning glance. These are all vital elements of our communication with each other.

I believe God intended our relationship with him to be the archetype or prime example of what our relationships with others should look like. Yet our relationship with God is challenged by our inability to see him. So let's explore how he communicates with us and we with him.

### **Jesus lives in us**

Our relationship with Jesus Christ transcends all other relationships in a primary way. Because Jesus does not physically live among us right now, he sent his Holy Spirit to live in us. Jesus explained to his disciples that it is actually to our benefit that he is not physically here so the Holy Spirit might live in us and be with us.

When Jesus took on human form, he chose not to be in all places at once. As a human in a body he confined himself to the limitations of the physical realm (which he created). But his Holy Spirit is spirit and not limited by the laws of physics as we know them. As a result, the Holy Spirit indwells all followers of Christ everywhere simultaneously. This truth is fantastic and mind boggling!

The fact that God chooses to live in and with us by his Spirit is indescribably beneficial to us. Every once in a while I still hear someone refer to the Holy Spirit as an "it" as though he were some impersonal force or non-being. The Holy Spirit is God. He is Jesus. He is a real Person and he lives in and with us as spirit. His interactions with us are extremely personal and intimate. Consider some of the following truths about God's Spirit and notice how relational they are:

- He initiates us into the family of God – 1 Corinthians 12:13
- God identifies his children by giving us his Spirit – 2 Corinthians 1:22; Galatians 4:6
- The Father and the Son live in us by means of the Holy Spirit – John 14:15-27
- The Holy Spirit empowers us to live a godly life – 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:16-18
- The Holy Spirit works in us to make us holy – 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2
- He communicates with us and to God on our behalf – John 16:13-14; Romans 8:26-27
- He comforts us and gives us joy – John 14:16-18; Romans 14:17

- We find fellowship with him – 2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1
- He teaches, guides, directs, prompts and counsels us – John 14:26; 16:13

The above truths about the Holy Spirit remind us how intimately God is involved in daily relationship with us. And communication plays a central role in our relationship with him. Without communication there is no relationship!

### **The Holy Spirit communicates with us**

Jesus told his disciples very clearly that his sheep “follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:4 & 16). Jesus also explained an amazing thing to his bewildered disciples in John 14 to 16. He said, “It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). Here’s what Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do for his followers: *be with us* forever (14:16); *teach* us all things and *remind* us of what Jesus said (14:26); he will *testify* about Jesus to enable us to testify of Jesus to others (15:26-27); he will *guide* us into all the truth, *speak* to us and *tell* us what is to come (16:13); he will *make known* to us what Jesus has for us (16:15).

To argue that the Holy Spirit does all his communicating with us exclusively through the Bible totally misses what Jesus was saying here. The Bible is not the Comforter of which Jesus spoke. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit God—the Spirit of Jesus. Of course, the Holy Spirit never contradicts the very Word that he inspired. But how can we think God is mute apart from his written Word? *His Word* says that he speaks to us! He tells us things. He teaches us, convicts us, reminds us and makes things known to us.

Jack Deere in his book, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, observes, “Many Christians seem afraid that if they ‘open themselves up’ to listening for God’s voice, they will be deceived by New Age demons. In fact, too much of the church today has *more confidence in Satan’s ability to deceive us than in God’s ability to speak to us and lead us.*”<sup>6</sup>

We also don’t want to fall into error by elevating what we perceive to be the Holy Spirit’s communication to us above the Scriptures. God has ordained his Word, the Bible, as our supreme authority for all things pertaining to God and our life. God’s revealed Word given to us in the Bible is God’s truth, his revelation. The Scripture is the Holy Spirit’s Word (Acts 4:25; 28:25; Hebrews 3:7; 10:15). When the Holy Spirit speaks to us

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, p. 215.

personally, he does not reveal *new* truth to us in the sense that he did to those whom he chose to record his Word (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21).

When the Holy Spirit speaks to us personally he confirms, explains and applies that which he already stated in his Word, the Bible. *Always think of the Spirit's communication with us in terms of relationship rather than merely providing information.* Think this way both in reading his Word as well as hearing a personal word from him.

Some examples of a more personal word communicated by the Holy Spirit might be helpful here. I will provide some examples both from the Scriptures and from my personal life. The categories of the Holy Spirit's communication that I list below are not important in and of themselves. They're simply categories that allow us to look at the broad scope of his communication with us.

***The Holy Spirit prompts us what to say.*** In Luke 12:11-12 Jesus said, "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."

In the mid 1970's I was serving in the US Army in Berlin. The Army mandated several days of training to deter racial discrimination. The facilitator presented lots of issues, but didn't seem to have any solutions. So when he asked for some, I volunteered to the group that I thought Jesus Christ was the answer to our racial discrimination troubles. The facilitator exploded in anger and verbally abused me publicly and forbade me to talk about Christ in our sessions again.

Quite honestly, my first thought was to report him for religious discrimination! But the Holy Spirit clearly led me in this instance to keep my mouth shut, to love the guy and pray for him. After our session the following day, he approached me and genuinely apologized for his outburst. This gave me an opening to demonstrate the love of Christ toward him. This situation also resulted in several conversations about the Lord with the other participants.

***The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin.*** John 16:8 NLT, "And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment." A number of years ago, I began discipling a guy who had just come to Christ. He had been a drug dealer and was associated with all the other crime that revolves around drug trafficking. We were walking through a grocery store buying some items that I needed to pick up.

I noticed my friend picking up candy from the bulk bins and eating it in the store. We arrived at the checkout and I casually asked him in the hearing of the cashier how many candies he had eaten so we could pay for them. I asked him without any hint of accusation or condemnation. He stated a number and I paid for them.

When we got outside the store, with his voice trembling my friend said to me, "You don't understand what just happened in there. A month ago, I came into this store wearing a trench coat and walked out with my pockets filled with T-bone steaks, not

thinking anything of it. But now the Holy Spirit has convicted me for almost stealing penny-candy!" The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin.

***The Holy Spirit sometimes provides us with specific instructions.*** In Acts 8:29 we read, "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'" And Philip led this Ethiopian official to the Lord. The Holy Spirit gave special instructions to Ananias in Acts 9:10-16 when he told him to go pray for Saul. We find another example in Acts 10:19-20, "While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.'"

Some years ago, my wife and I were leading a small group in our home. The group had been meeting for about a year. Randy and Debbie were part of our small group. They had been married about seven years at the time and were unable to have children. From time to time throughout that year we had prayed for them that they might have a child, but as of yet they had not.

One evening as we launched into a study of Luke's Gospel, I was reading the passage in Luke 1:5-25 regarding God's provision of a son to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age. All their married life Zechariah and Elizabeth had been unable to have children. As I read this story out loud, the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to me saying, "I want to do this for Randy and Debbie as well." I sensed the Holy Spirit's leading so clearly that I stopped and related to the group what I was hearing. To everyone's amazement, we were all thinking the same thing!

So we stopped and prayed again for Randy and Debbie, but this time we had a clear sense from God that his timing was right and he wanted to glorify himself through answering prayer prompted by his Word and his Spirit. Two weeks later Debbie was pregnant! There was no doubt in any of our minds that this child was a gift from God in answer to our prayers that night. Randy and Debbie now have two lovely daughters.

***The Holy Spirit guides us.*** We find an unusual example of this with Paul and his companions in Acts 16:6-7, they had been "kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to."

When my wife and I moved to Anchorage, Alaska in 2002 it was an especially difficult move for her. We were moving very far away from our children and grandchildren. We have always been a close-knit family, so being separated by such distance was particularly hard. Also, Alaska comes with its own unique set of challenges including long, dark winters and short, cool summers. So when I accepted the job in Anchorage, Linda graciously committed to staying up to five years. I agreed to these terms.

Both Linda and I would openly tell you that our time in Alaska was some of the best of our lives. But if you asked us how we liked living in Alaska, you would hear a very different reaction from each of us. I loved it—Linda endured it!

With the above as a backdrop for our situation, I was praying one morning about four-and-a-half years into our stay in Alaska. That morning I distinctly heard the Holy Spirit telling me that I needed to honor my commitment to my wife and begin to set things in motion to move back to the lower 48. When I told Linda what God had said to me, she threw her arms around my neck and cried. To her it was one of the most loving things I could have done. I was exceedingly grateful for the Holy Spirit's guidance!

***The Holy Spirit sometimes gives us a prophetic word.*** In Acts 21:10-11, a prophet named Agabus approached Paul, symbolically took Paul's belt and with it tied his own hands and feet. Then Agabus declared, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" This prophecy was fulfilled just days later as we read in Acts 21:27 and following.

A few years ago, I agreed to embark on a project in which I knew I would encounter spiritual opposition. On my way to an initial meeting, I had a very unusual experience. I was driving my car into downtown Anchorage in late afternoon on a February weekday. It was almost dark and snowing hard. Suddenly the thought jumped into my head that *on my way home* (which would then be rush-hour) *my car would stall in heavy traffic* and that when I would try to restart the car, *the key would break off* in the ignition and that *I'd have to call a tow-truck* to get my car home. These four distinct elements of a future occurrence simply appeared in my mind.

I have to be honest with you, the thought totally caught me off guard and I wondered, "Where did that come from?" I pushed the thought away and proceeded to my meeting. On my way home I was reflecting on the meeting. I pulled up to a stoplight in the right center lane of four lanes of heavy traffic and my car died. I tried to restart it and my key instantly snapped off in the ignition. Immediately I thought about the premonition I had had a couple hours earlier and thought, "This is just too weird!" I could not restart the car and had to call a wrecker to tow it home. Why the Holy Spirit would give me a preview of these events was a mystery to me!

The next morning I met with one of my spiritual partners who pastored another church in town. I shared the above incident with Ron and asked him, "What was that all about? Why would God reveal the details of something like that to me? I don't see the point." Without hesitation Ron replied, "God was merely reminding you that he knows every detail of your life and that nothing escapes his notice. He is sovereign." The truths that Ron spoke to me impacted me powerfully. I was amazed how engaged and personal God is in the details of my life.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See also Luke 2:25-27 for another example of how the Holy Spirit sometimes reveals something to us and gives us specific instructions in a situation.

***The Holy Spirit comforts, encourages and confirms us.*** Observe from the following texts all the ways that the Holy Spirit relates with us and communicates with us. Romans 5:5 encourages, "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." And Romans 8:26 explains, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

Paul speaks the following blessing in Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Hope is not merely a warm feeling that comes over us from some stimulant. The Holy Spirit speaks hope into our lives by confirming God's love and promises for us.

And in 2 Corinthians 13:14 Paul writes, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." There is a fellowship with the Holy Spirit that every follower of Christ experiences. When we rebel against him, we sense the tension that temporarily exists between us and the Spirit. And we feel his urgings to make things right.

We experience sweet fellowship with him when we return to him in repentance and humbleness or when he prompts us to do something and we obey. And sometimes we simply enjoy his fellowship just knowing that everything is right with him. It's like a small child content to be held in the loving arms of mom or dad, knowing that all is well.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul reminds the followers of Christ in Thessalonica how they had welcomed the message of Christ with joy given by the Holy Spirit in spite of severe suffering. And the apostle John asserts that the means by which we know that Christ lives in us is by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:24). How could the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives demonstrate to us that Christ lives in us unless we could perceive him? And we don't perceive him like we would a full stomach or a light-headedness! We perceive his communication and interaction with us.

A couple of years ago I was hiking in the tundra on a mountain side in the Chugach range of Alaska. It was fall and there was a hint of frost in the air that invigorates with every breath. The tundra displayed as grand a pallet of colors as any northeastern forest does each autumn. And the delicious aroma of low-bush cranberries and blue-berries was almost intoxicating. Suddenly I was overwhelmed with a sense of God's love, goodness and pleasure in my life! To think that he had created all of this beauty for his enjoyment and ours! And he blessed us with all the sensory functions with which to enjoy it! He is constantly communicating with us if we're listening.

***The Holy Spirit enables us to think like Christ.*** In 1 Corinthians 2:10-16, Paul lays out an incredible truth for us. To paraphrase this passage, Paul says, "No other person knows *my* thoughts. In the same way, only God knows *his* thoughts. But since the Holy Spirit is God, he knows the thoughts of God. And God has given us his Spirit, so that we too can know God's thoughts!" And then Paul summarizes with the bold statement, "We

have the mind of Christ." This truth is highly relational and highly communicative. This fact stands at the core of Paul's assertion.

I think I speak for all followers of Christ when I say that we don't always *feel*/like we have the mind of Christ. We tend to judge the veracity of something based on our experience. When we don't experience having the mind of Christ (or what we assume that is) we either argue that Paul must not have really meant that we *have* the mind of Christ. Or we conclude that we must have some deficiency that prevents us from knowing the mind of Christ. Either way, we assume we don't really experience having the mind of Christ.

There is a companion verse to this concept of having the mind of Christ in 1 Corinthians 6:17. In the context, Paul employs a husband-wife metaphor to explain our relationship with God. Just as when a man and a woman marry and become one flesh, similarly when we become united with the Lord, we become one with him in spirit.

When my wife and I married over 34 years ago, we became one. But the oneness we experienced as newlyweds is not the same as the oneness we experience after living together for 34 years. And we continue to grow in becoming one. The fact that Linda and I are one does not mean that we don't have to continually work hard at growing our relationship and functioning as one. One way to express the growth of a marriage is that we are constantly learning how to *please* each other. In the same way, our lifelong pursuit of relationship with God is to "find out what pleases" him (Ephesians 5:10).

When we come to know Christ and he gives us his Spirit we become one with him. We have the mind of Christ. But the degree to which we grasp and function as one mind with him will grow as we spend time with him and get to know him better in all of life. Precisely because we have the mind of Christ, we must be diligent at growing in our relationship with him. "Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." (Philippians 4:12-13 NLT)

Paul's response to the Corinthian followers demonstrates the developmental aspect of having the mind of Christ. Right after telling the Corinthians followers that they have the mind of Christ and can understand the thoughts of God, Paul scolds them for behaving like spiritual babies and acting out worldly values instead of Christ's. This reminds us again of the *dependent diligence* involved in our following Jesus. And by the way, the reason God wants us to be able to know his thoughts and think like Christ is so we can be more like him in character.

What does having the mind of Christ look like practically? Asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" falls short of thinking his thoughts. We are not trying to put ourselves in Jesus' shoes or him in ours. *He lives in us by his Spirit!* Only the mind controlled by the Spirit of God can submit to God and do those things that please him (Romans 8:6-8). As we keep in step with the Holy Spirit and allow him to transform our minds, we are being transformed into Christ's likeness by his Spirit (see Galatians 5:25; Ephesians 4:20-24; 2 Corinthians 3:18). Very simply and practically, we begin thinking like Christ.

We begin thinking like Christ as we come to know him in his Word. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NLT) But not all situations that life throws at us are covered in the Word. Often the Holy Spirit will urge us to think like Christ and it's only after we obey that we realize a correlation or principle at work in his Word that we had never understood before.

Several years ago, I was on the management team at an aluminum hot rolling mill. Unfortunately, the company found itself in a two-year labor dispute with the union. Needless to say, tensions were high, especially in the early days of the strike. One day I was participating in a planning meeting when one of my peers totally lost his cool. Without cause he violently demanded that I do something that I was perfectly willing and ready to do. But he framed his request as a demand with expletives and in a demeaning, humiliating way.

At the time I and others in the room were shocked by his behavior. Witnesses in the room urged me to retaliate. But I clearly sensed the Holy Spirit telling me to keep calm, not to retaliate, and to humbly and quietly submit to his request. By God's grace I obeyed and fulfilled the assignment to his satisfaction. Out of obedience to the Spirit, I didn't breathe a word of this guy's mistreatment of me either to him or others.

As a result, this peer came to me some days later and genuinely apologized for his behavior. I forgave him and we became better friends for it. I humbly thank God that he gave me the grace to respond in a Christlike and biblical manner. But other responses could have been biblical as well. Having the mind of Christ involves following his lead in a given situation and in living our lives at all times.

***The Holy Spirit transforms us.*** On the face of it we may not think of the Holy Spirit's transforming work in us as relational and requiring communication. But if we reflect on what it is that Christ wants to change in us, we realize that the changes are predominantly character issues. God's plan for us is to make us more like Christ in character. "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:15-16)

The point is that these character issues (Christlikeness) have primarily to do with relationships—those with God and with others. Even a speedy review of key passages like Romans 12:3-15:7; Galatians 5:22-23 (the fruit of the Spirit); Ephesians 4:17-5:33; and Colossians 3:12-4:6 reveal that the nature of the transformation God wants to bring about in us is profoundly relational. As his children we are to imitate him (Ephesians 5:1).

Because these changes are relational, it stands to reason therefore that the means the Holy Spirit uses are relational as well. And Paul urges us to live or walk by the Spirit; to let him guide us; to be led by him and keep in step with him (Galatians 5:16, 18 & 25). These all describe relationship. The Holy Spirit is not some mysterious, impersonal force, but God who lives in us. Our dwelling, abiding, remaining with him (John 15) is relational and demands continual conversation and communication!

For example, holiness is a highly relational pursuit. By contrast, men who are caught in the clutches of pornography (which is unholy) may try to argue that viewing porn is a "private matter and doesn't hurt anybody." But viewing and being controlled by pornography has devastating and destructive affects on relationships. Just as smoking damages virtually every organ in the body, so pornography degrades and destroys *all* of one's relationships.

Some years ago, I was in the habit of picking up our mail after my evening run. One day after a run, I found a copy of the *Victoria's Secret* catalog in our mailbox. As soon as I saw it, being a man I was tempted to flip through it. But the Holy Spirit asked me to immediately place it out of sight at the bottom of the pile of mail and then toss it in the garbage on my way into the house. Then he prompted me to tell Linda what I'd done and ask her to call *Victoria's Secret* and have them stop sending us their catalogs. (Linda never ordered the catalog in the first place!)

Let me be clear on something here. Some may view my behavior above as rigid, prudish, or legalistic. I assure you it was none of those. Let me explain by analogy. I'm a woodworker. Am I legalistic because I use hearing and eye protection when using loud tools? Am I rigid or legalistic because I use a push-stick instead of my hand to push a piece of stock through the table saw? These measures are all basic shop survival. In the same way, the Bible tells us to "Flee from sexual immorality." (1 Corinthians 6:18)

The result of fleeing from sin is not simply the avoidance of sin. We flee from sin *and run to God*. I want to please him! I want my relationship with him to mean infinitely more to me than the illusion of pleasure I might gain from sin. "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you." (Psalms 73:25) I desperately want God to continue to change me and make me like him!

Another way in which I see the Holy Spirit transforming me has to do with patterns of speech. More and more in recent years, I'll be in conversation with a group of people and I consider saying something, but the Holy Spirit checks me. I hear him quietly say, "Rob, don't say that, it would be hurtful" (or prideful, or indiscrete, or unwholesome, etc.). I must confess to my shame that I don't always follow the Holy Spirit's lead. But each time I do, I find it easier to obey the next time and soon I discover that he has changed my character.

***The Holy Spirit explains the Scriptures to us.*** "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:26) The Holy Spirit authored the Scriptures to be read and understood. He delights in making himself known to us through his Word.

There are a variety of ways in which the Holy Spirit explains the Bible to us. Sometimes he gives us the ability to suddenly grasp the meaning of a passage, which had confused us before. Such an experience seems primarily cognitive in nature, but may have far reaching relational impact as well. I say that because we're not merely seeking an intellectual thrill in understanding a new thing from the Bible. The Bible *is* very intellectually stimulating, but that's a by-product not the goal. Paul prayed for the church in Ephesus, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious

Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." (Ephesians 1:17)

Let me describe an incident that demonstrates the Spirit's work in our lives like this. I had been teaching others about the pitfalls of compartmentalizing our lives—that is living and behaving in one compartment (or facet) of our lives differently than another. In so doing, we rationalize a different code of dress, ethics and language in one compartment that we would never allow in another. (E.g., contrast one's "God compartment or church compartment" with one's "work or recreation compartment.") Such living promotes a double standard, hypocrisy and a sinful lifestyle.

I was thinking about all this while out on a hike in the mountains. The Holy Spirit brought to mind and clarified to me a very obscure passage that had confused me for years as to its application. In Haggai 2:11-14 we read:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?" The priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" "Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled." Then Haggai said, "So it is with this people and this nation in my sight," declares the LORD. "Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled."

It occurred to me that Haggai used the analogy of consecrated foods, etc. to reveal to the Israelites that they were living a compartmentalized lifestyle. Haggai explained that maintaining one compartment of our life as "holy" does not render our whole life as holy. And if one compartment of our life is "unholy" then the whole of our life is unholy before God. This passage nails the hypocrisy and sinfulness of trying to live a compartmentalized life.

Another way in which the Holy Spirit explains the Scriptures to us is to impress on us the personal application of God's Word in our lives. This usually happens in a way that reveals more clearly and personally some aspect of God's character as it relates to our life. Understanding his character better results in knowing and experiencing him more deeply.

At one point during Bible school I found myself letting negative circumstances get the best of me. I was feeling depressed and full of self-pity. On one particularly cold, rainy day I was driving somewhere and feeling sorry for myself, when my car suddenly struck and killed a sparrow. Although the incident transpired in a fraction of a second, I vividly took it all in.

Instantly the Holy Spirit reminded me, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29 & 31) Immediately I was

overwhelmed with a sense of God's kindness, love and care for me. I was also convicted of my preoccupation with self and lack of trust in my heavenly Father.

This was a case in which I had understood the meaning of the passage in Matthew for years, but I had never personalized it the way the Holy Spirit did for me that day. I have never forgotten that incident, nor the impact of Jesus' words in Matthew.

In all these variety of ways and more the Holy Spirit communicates with us in deep, intimate relationship. "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:5)

### **How do I recognize God's voice?**

In 1 Samuel 3:1-14 we read the account of young Samuel's first exposure to the voice of God. The Lord called to him and twice Samuel mistook God's voice for that of Eli the priest. The text comments, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him." (Vs. 7)

We hear many "voices" out there besides God's. We often find ourselves lured by the voice of world—its philosophy, thought patterns and priorities. Others with whom we spend time influence us profoundly by their language, cajoling and opinions. The evil one rails on us by accusing, discouraging and casting doubt. Our own fleshly desires call to us to self-preoccupation, self-gratification and self-importance. Sometimes a foreign thought simply appears in our mind and we wonder, "Where did that come from?"

Have you ever marveled over the concept of voice recognition? Isn't it amazing that we can hear a recording of Bob Hope, Bing Crosby or Danny Kaye and know it's their voice we're hearing? Any one of us could probably recognize scores if not hundreds of voices of celebrities. Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice and follow me" (John 10). But we recognize Jesus' voice in a different way than we would recognize George Clooney's or Harrison Ford's.

How do we discern whether we are hearing from God or from someone or something else? As in the case with young Samuel, our ability to distinguish God's voice from others' voices comes largely through experience with him. We gain experience in our relationship with God over time in all of life. As we become more acquainted with God and his character through his Word and works in our lives and the lives of others we learn to recognize his voice and his activity in our lives.

A few years ago I was encouraging a man in his faith as a new follower of Christ. He and I were hiking when he confided in me that he often heard thoughts in his head that spoke things like, "You're not worthy to be a child of God. I can't believe you blew it again, you're such a loser! God is not pleased with you!" I stopped in my tracks and looked back squarely into my friend's eyes and said, "Those comments are NOT from God, but from the evil one! Don't listen to them for a moment!"

How could I say that with conviction and honesty? Because I know what God has stated in his Word about his love relationship toward us. Through his Word and years of

walking with him I also know his character. I know that God does not say things like that to his children. So I reminded and encouraged my friend from Scripture of the truth about how God really feels about us. My friend found great comfort from these words and grew in his recognition of God's voice and character.

God never ever contradicts himself. If he has stated something clearly in his Word, he won't speak to us in some other way and contradict himself. When someone claims that God told them to do something that clearly disagrees with God's Word, we know they have not heard from God in that instance. Usually matters of this nature are obvious. For instance, when I was in the Army a group of so-called Christians refused to get their hair cut according to Army regulations. They claimed that God had told them not to. And when they received disciplinary action for their rebellion, they boasted how they were suffering for Jesus! Were these young men hearing from God or clearly rebelling against God's Word?

What does the Scripture say? "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." (Romans 13:1-2) These young men were not hearing from God on the issue of disobeying their military leaders, because God had already spoken clearly in his Word on that issue.

However, there are times when either Scripture is not clear, or we do not perceive it as clear. In such cases, we must reflect on the character of God. A few years ago I was counseling a couple who was on the verge of divorce. He had been a controlling, verbally abusive husband. His wife decided she had had enough and wanted out of their 30-year marriage. Both profess knowing Christ.

Initially the husband wouldn't own up to his failures, but eventually he came around and genuinely began letting Christ change him. But his wife would not forgive him. At first she attempted to justify her desire for divorce by hiding behind the confusion that we have imposed on Scripture around the issue of divorce. She claimed she felt great peace from God about her decision.

Finally, I appealed to her based on the character of God. I asked her, "Knowing what you know of God and his character—that he is loving, forgiving and merciful—what do you think he would have you do in this situation with your husband?" She responded, "I don't care! I'm going to divorce him anyway." I tell this story because perhaps all of us at one time or another either have or will use the Scriptures dishonestly for our own purposes. We are not listening to the voice of God when we do that.

Consider what Jesus said to the teachers of the Law in John 5. He acknowledged that they diligently studied the Scriptures (God's Word). And yet he said of them, "You have never heard his voice" (John 5:37-39). It is almost as though we play a childish game with God's Word sometimes, trying to "catch" God in his words and hold him to something that he doesn't say in order to satisfy our own desires.

Another common situation in which the Scripture may not offer a clear word is in personal situations and about unique topics. The Bible is truly a remarkable book and true about everything it claims. However, the Bible does not speak about all issues. For example, the Word of God provides us with general guidelines about the character of the spouse we should choose, but it does not tell us whom to marry. So we must follow God's Word (God's Word "is a lamp to our feet"—Psalm 119:105) as far as it will take us and rely on his Spirit to guide us in the particulars.

### **What do we do with what God tells us?**

A couple of years ago a young man came to me in complete frustration and confusion about God's leading in his life. Steve was totally convinced that God had told him to pursue a relationship with a certain young lady. (She is also a follower of Christ.) Steve's frustration came when this young woman refused to enter into a romantic relationship with him. She simply had no such affections for him, nor felt God leading her the way Steve insisted God was leading him. This internal conflict went on for some months, during which I had several meetings with Steve.

Then one day, this young lady announced her engagement to another man and soon married. Steve was heart-broken over his loss, but even more difficult was his confusion and disappointment over God's leading in his life. Did he or did he not hear God say, "Pursue this woman"? *The outcome does not necessarily answer that question.* And I could not tell Steve with certainty whether he had or had not heard God correctly or at all.

Steve was convinced God told him to pursue this woman and interpreted that to mean he would marry her. Could it be that Steve did in fact hear God correctly, but jumped to a false conclusion about the outcome? I looked for a precedence in the Bible in which God asked someone to do something that brought entirely different results than expected. Two such incidents came to mind immediately and I suspect there are others as well.

When God asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, he never intended for Abraham to actually slay his son. When the angel showed up to stop Abraham, how foolish it would have been if Abraham had said, "No, God told me to do this, so leave me alone so I can get on with killing my son!" (See Genesis 22.) Abraham did hear God correctly, but the outcome proved to be very different than what he expected!

In Judges 19 and 20 we find another example of God telling someone to do something that led to very different results than expected. Twice the Israelites asked God whether they should engage the Benjamites in battle and twice God clearly said, "Yes." Yet both of these times the Benjamites totally whipped Israel. The Israelites had to be wondering, "did we hear wrong?" It is clear from the passage that God had a battle to win in their hearts before they could win the battle on the field. The third time they asked God, they did so in repentance, sorrow and fasting and then God gave them their desired result.

There's a huge lesson for us in these examples. We often hear God's voice in our lives and then follow him in obedience. But when things begin to go wrong we assume that we either misunderstood God, did not hear him at all, or worse, that he is toying with us. Certainly it is okay to question, "Did I really hear God?" But we jump to those negative conclusions too quickly!

In Mark 4:35-41 there is a powerful story that illustrates this. In this passage Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side [of the lake]." They all pile in the boat and take off for the other side. Jesus has been teaching the people all day, is tired and promptly falls asleep in the stern.

Out in the middle of the lake a terrific storm begins beating against their boat to the point that it's filling with water and they fear for their lives. They wake Jesus and are upset with him for his lack of concern over their peril. At this, Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves and a dead calm ensues. He then chides his disciples for their lack of trust in God. Seeing Jesus' power and authority to still the storm, his disciples are terrified at him and ask, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

How does this story apply to us and hearing God's voice and responding to it? God sometimes intentionally leads us into a "storm." We must not lean too heavily on circumstances to determine whether we heard God rightly. Just because all is well does not mean we heard God clearly and are following him. (Jonah conveniently found passage on a boat heading in the opposite direction God wanted him to go!) And on the flip-side, when all seems to be falling apart we must not assume that this is an indication that we're not following God's leading. "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12)

Let's look at another situation. We know of a woman who wants to divorce her husband. Although he has been a real jerk in the past, he has recently come to Christ and there is no Scriptural foundation for her divorcing him. She claims, "I have a tremendous sense of peace from God about divorcing my husband."

Two things are going on here. One is that she is elevating her feelings above the authority of God's Word in her life. There is a sense in which we must agree with her feelings. If she has been living with a verbally abusive husband all these years and now is separated from him, of course she is experiencing a new kind of "peace" in her life that she has not enjoyed for some time. The problem is in exchanging that temporary peace for the true peace that God can give when husband and wife love each other unconditionally and are walking in obedience to God.

The second thing that's going on here is more subtle and very dangerous. When the serpent tempted Eve in the garden with fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he prompted her to question the good intentions of God. "If God were truly good, why would he deny you this happiness?" As soon as she gave in to questioning God's goodness and love, she stopped listening to God.

Then the Scripture reveals, "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some

and ate it.” (Genesis 3:6) Don’t miss what the text is saying here. Put into different words, “Eve became overwhelmed with a sense of peace in her life that eating this fruit was the good, pleasing and desirable thing to do.” Do you see how subtle and insidious this lie of the evil one is?

I think we must all honestly agree that sometimes hearing God’s voice is not all that difficult. It’s obeying him and following him that we really struggle with! What I have discovered in my own walk with Jesus is that when I am in the habit of listening to him and obeying him—no matter what, I increasingly find it easier to hear his voice and obey him. And conversely, if I stubbornly go my own way when I know I’ve heard from him, I shy away from listening to him and build a pattern of not obeying his voice. In that mode, it becomes more and more difficult to discern his voice and obey him.

There are also times when God clearly communicates with us, but we jump to the wrong conclusion about *why* he’s giving us that communication. We see such an example in Acts 21:10-14:

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

From this account, we might be prone to agree with the other Christians in Caesarea who took Agabus’ prophecy as a warning that Paul should NOT go to Jerusalem. Was Paul wrong? Did Agabus really get this message from the Holy Spirit? The Scripture says he did. But look back at Acts 20:22 where Paul a short time earlier addresses the elders of Ephesus:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Based on the account of the Scripture, I believe we can safely conclude that the Holy Spirit was indeed warning Paul about all he would suffer, not *if*, but *when* he got to Jerusalem. The clear intent of the Holy Spirit was not that Paul should avoid Jerusalem and these perils, but to assure Paul that God is sovereign and that all these trials would serve his greater plan and glory. Paul merely needed to trust and obey, but he certainly wouldn’t be surprised by what he would soon encounter.

When the Holy Spirit reveals this kind of information to us we must also be totally dependent on him for the wisdom to know what to do with it. Hearing God and knowing how to respond rightly to what he is saying flows from a life of abiding or remaining in him. I hope you're not discouraged by that! As we spend time with him getting to know his character and ways better, he will also guide us in responding to him properly.

### **Enthralled with God!**

When our youngest son, Luke, left home he and three of his friends drove three vehicles from Anchorage, Alaska to Phoenix, Arizona. Before he left, my wife and I told him that he was embarking on an adventure with God. We went on to explain that we meant much more than the 4000 mile trip he was about to take. We challenged him to view everything that came his way as an adventurous opportunity to trust God and get to know him better.

That day and only 109 miles from Anchorage, the boys had their first opportunity to trust God when a water pump went out in Brad's Jeep. They were able to repair it that night and resumed their trip the next day. Then, on a remote stretch of highway between Glennallen and Tok, Alaska, Brad's Jeep died. As the four of them stood along the highway, Luke prayed that God would help them and show them what to do. He said, "Amen" and a guy in a pickup stopped to offer help. (They had seen no other vehicles on the road!)

Luke asked the man if he had something with which they could tow the disabled Jeep into Tok. The man chuckled and explained that a friend of his had just given him a tow strap that morning and he had wondered what he would do with it. He simply gave the tow strap to the boys, waved and drove off. Luke and his friends stood there in the beautiful Alaskan wilderness overwhelmed with God's care and provision for them!<sup>8</sup>

I encourage you also to see your walk with Christ as a great adventure! I pray that what you've read in the preceding pages has encouraged and stimulated you in your relationship with him. Trust him, love him and humble yourself before him. Expect God to work in your life and be ready to thank and praise him as he does. Let him and his great love for you permeate everything you say and do and think. Learn to recognize God's voice and character. Listen for his voice and obey him. Make much of God before others and let them see his character in you.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke was able to tow Brad's Jeep the 75 miles to Tok with that tow strap. The boys continued to experience adventure with God watching him provide in highly unique and personal ways all the way down the Alcan Highway!

“Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.”

(1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 NLT)