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Delighting in God's Presence

by W. David Beck

As a young boy, I spent many summer days at my grandparents' home. My favorite place was their big, front porch. It had pillars around all three sides, and green awnings to keep out the hot, afternoon sun and the rain.

What I enjoyed most about the porch was sitting there during a storm. It was fantastic! The rain would pound on the roof, the lightning would streak across the dark sky, and I would cringe, waiting for the deafening crash of the thunder. I found it all an exciting adventure! A sudden gusting of rain or an unexpected rumble of thunder might startle me, but I wasn't afraid.

Instead I was awestruck at the power of God. Why? Because my grandmother had explained to me that God made the wind and the rain and that he was in control of all things. As a child, I learned what it meant to enjoy God's presence, even though I could not see him.

To this day I love to stand on my own front porch during a storm. It is a reminder of God's sovereignty.

God is not hidden from me. He has not left himself without a witness. He desires to fellowship with me.

But how can I be sure? How do I know that God loves me? Because God actually entered human history and demonstrated his love: "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."¹

God did not leave us guessing about our relationship with him. He actually lived out truth in human form. Usually those who complain that God has not given sufficient evidence of himself have failed to look for it. As the Apostle Paul triumphantly announced in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus conquered death by resurrection.² Hence, I am not a fool to believe that I can have fellowship with God. I know that I do because God "has called [me] into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord,"³ and I know that some day I will meet Jesus face to face and will enjoy a full fellowship beyond anything that I now experience.

Is God Hiding?

One of the most common difficulties for Christians, and perhaps the most frequent complaint from unbelievers, is God's "hiddenness." Why does it often seem that God is difficult to find? Many Christians live their lives with only occasional, even rare, encounters with God. Perhaps I take part in an extraordinary worship service where I sense God's presence, or I have a time in my personal devotions when I am overcome by peace as God reassures me of his love. But otherwise I seem to be on my own and quite unaware of his presence. As a result, fellowship with God becomes at best a rare exception, a time-out from the norm. So before I specify just where God is to be found, I need to read what the Bible says about why it sometimes seems so difficult to find him.

"No one has ever seen God."⁴ Why? Because God is by nature without the limitations of space and time, and hence he is not restricted to the confines of a physical body as we are. On the one hand, this means that fellowship with God is not limited to a particular place or time. On the other hand, however, it means that I must not be looking for some visible or audible sign of his presence. God is a spiritual being, so I must learn to fellowship with him in spirit and on his terms.

Recently I was flying home to Lynchburg, Virginia, and on the last leg of the flight late at night I was the only passenger on a small commuter aircraft. I had met the pilot and was able to watch what was happening in the cockpit. As we approached home, all that I could see were clouds and occasional patterns of light on the ground—nothing that looked like the airport that I drive by every day. I was lost. But the pilot was not even looking out the window. He was busy watching screens and gauges on the airplane's panel. He was obeying the first rule of pilots: always trust your instruments, not your feelings. Sure enough, we landed precisely on the runway.

Fellowship with God is like that. I need to learn from Scripture that God is present with me and I need to know that he does what he says he will do. There are times when it feels as though God is not with me, or is not listening to me, or is refusing to answer me. None of these, however, is ever the case. Our God is true to his Word. Trust the instruments!

How Does God Fellowship With Me?

How, then, has God chosen to meet me? God has promised to meet and to fellowship with me in many ways. As I take my directions from Scripture, I discover how to enjoy that communion with my heavenly Father which is so essential to my life.

God has no limitations. His love for me is unlimited, as are his holiness and his justice. We cannot go anywhere without remaining in the focus of God's gaze. It is strange that I so often think of this in a negative sense. How often have I said to one of my children, "Even when no one can see what you are doing, God can!" That is true, of course; but God's own presence is also a matter of great comfort. I am never alone. Fellowship with my Lord is continuously mine. He may often seem hidden, but that is merely my emotions. He is present! To put it more accurately, I am always in his presence. Jesus promised, "Surely I am with you always."⁵

Then, of course, there is fellowship in prayer. As God's child, I have been given the privilege of speaking to the King of kings. Beyond that, he has promised to hear and to answer me.⁶ I once heard someone say that prayer is just like talking to God. No! Prayer is actually talking to God. What an incredible gift I have been given as God's child to have constant access to him. I may always speak to him.

As I read the Bible, I am having fellowship with God: "All Scripture is God-breathed."⁷ While God doesn't have a physical hand that held an actual pen with which he wrote, he did, nevertheless, bring about the written words that are his communication to us.

God has given me the truth in Scripture, so that I am not left guessing about my life and about my relationship to him. Not only is the truth about our fellowship certain, it is also embodied. Here I find the historical record of how God has related to everyone from Adam to Zechariah, but especially how he lived it out in the Person of Jesus, the One who could claim, "I and the Father are one."⁸ The Bible is not only a way to have fellowship, it is also the manual for how to have fellowship.

I also have fellowship with God in his Spirit. Scripture lists many ways in which God's Spirit witnesses to my spirit. In John 16:8, for example, I read that it is the Spirit who convicts me of my sin. Thus I know that whenever I am convicted, I am experiencing the Holy Spirit's fellowship. The same is true for the other functions carried out by the Spirit. His work is the indication of his presence.

God shows his presence in other ways. In Romans 1:19-20 Paul tells us that while God is invisible, he is still plainly seen. In fact, he is so obvious that we are left "without excuse."⁹ Here it is put in the most general terms. We can see God "from what has been made."⁹ In many other places the evidence is more specific: In Psalm 139 it is the human body, in Psalm 19 it is the stars, in Acts 14:17 it is the passing of the seasons. In Romans 2:13-15 the general agreement about morality shows God's Law. Because God is the Creator and because "in him all things hold together,"¹⁰ everything in our world tells us about God. We dare never be confused by the idea that nature is God, but we should also not ignore this important way in which God communicates with us, by showing us truth about himself in the creation that surrounds us.

The Results of Fellowship

I cannot have fellowship with God without its changing me. There are many ways to know God's presence, and different people respond in different ways and with varying intensities. But as I look to Scripture for direction, the Prophet Isaiah's description of his encounter with God provides me with clear guidelines and examples of how I should respond.

First, Isaiah's experience produced in him a deep humility. A fresh vision of who God is puts me in my place. It reminds me of my complete dependence on him. Confrontation with God is often a humbling experience as I recognize my failure to be holy. But when I respond correctly, with humility rather than with stubbornness or anger, I come to see that this is God's love drawing me to be like Christ.

Second, humility led Isaiah to confession and to the desire for purity. First John 1 is the application to me as a Christian. As I live my life in the light of God's presence—in the clarity that comes from knowing that he is present in many ways, perhaps especially in his Word—I am able to see the sin in my life: "If we walk

in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin."¹¹

Third, Isaiah responded in obedience. Jesus said that my love for him will result in my keeping his commands.¹² I cannot expect that I will continue to enjoy fellowship with God if I am not progressing in obedience. It is not that God becomes hidden, but rather that my disobedience will prevent me from seeking fellowship with him. I have learned that a lack of desire to spend time with God is often an indicator of unrecognized sin in my life.

Finally, as God's presence produces holiness and obedience, it will lead to power. In Isaiah 7 Isaiah boldly proclaims God's message under difficult circumstances just as he had promised to do.

God's fellowship is a priceless gift. I cannot live a life that pleases God without the power that he provides, and that power is found in the fellowship of his presence.

(1) Hebrews 1:2, NIV. (2) 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. (3) 1 Corinthians 1:9, NIV. (4) John 1:18, NIV. (5) Cf. Matthew 28:20. (6) 1 John 5:14-15. (7) 2 Timothy 3:16, NIV. (8) John 10:30, NIV. (9) Romans 1:20, NIV. (10) Colossians 1:17, NIV. (11) 1 John 1:7, NIV. (12) John 14:23. Bible verses marked NIV are taken by permission from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado

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