

Spiritual Intimacy

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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
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STEP ONE-GETTING ACQUAINTED

1. Knowing God	15
2. Listening to God	30
3. Thinking Like God	43
4. Talking to God	53

STEP TWO-GROWING TOGETHER

5. Worshiping God	65
6. Praising God	76
7. Giving to God	88
8. Pursuing God	97

STEP THREE-GOING FOR BROKE

9. Knowing God's Will	113
10. Finding God's Will	124
11. Grasping God's Greatness	135
12. Pleasing God	148
13. Glorifying God	159
Notes	166

Whom have I in heaven but Thee?
And besides Thee, I desire nothing on
earth. My flesh and my heart may
fail, but God is the strength of
my heart and my portion forever.
Psalm 73:25-26

INTRODUCTION

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God” (Ps. 42:1). The psalmist yearned for God with the same intensity as the publican who cried out, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” (Luke 18:13)—though each had a different reason.

One sought for a deeper relationship; the other, a new relationship. But both cried out for spiritual intimacy with God. Perhaps you can identify with one of them.

Augustine wrote in *The City of God*, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in every man that only Christ can fill.”¹ That’s where spiritual intimacy begins but it is by no means where it ends. It extends on in time and maturity until: we become God’s friend like Abraham (James 2:23); we walk with God like Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24); we enjoy intimate fellowship with God as did Job (Job 29:4, NIV); we, like David, grow into a man or woman after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22, KJV); we know the high esteem of God similar to Daniel (Dan.

10:11, 19); or become a favored one of God like Mary (Luke 1:28). Just like them, we have the treasured opportunity to become "intimates of God."

Defining Intimacy

An intimate relationship is marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity. Expanding on that, an intimate friendship includes warmth, tenderness, love, closeness, transparency, security, vulnerability, strength, commitment, knowledge, and understanding.

Our chaotic world breeds a brutal, self-seeking attitude devoid of intimacy. That is why marriages crumble, families disintegrate, and friendships fail. To a world that callously disregards even the dignity of human life, God calls out with a word of love (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8) and beckons us to become intimate with Him.

In our "liberated" day, the intimate act of marriage has degenerated into cheap sex, both in and out of marriage. Mothers regularly kill their babies through abortion and children increasingly rebel against their parents in homes where family intimacy has long ago been abandoned. By ignoring God, society emotionally starves itself to death while all along God promises to love us forever and give us our fill of spiritual affection.

We live under continual threat of nuclear holocaust and experience daily, life-threatening violence. Newspaper headlines fill our minds with thoughts of euthanasia, infanticide, and genocide. These barbaric vulgarities can only be neutralized by spiritual intimacy with a compassionate God who alone can do all things and never fails. Our generation's greatest need is to reclaim a dominant sense of intimacy with God which will reshape our souls and redirect our lives.

Portraits of Love

- For most of us, the thought of being intimate with God defies our understanding since He is God and we, mere humans. So

God in His Word uses three illustrations to help us understand the intimacy He desires with us.

⟨ *A shepherd with his sheep.* So close and so loving is the good shepherd to his flock that he is willing to die for their well-being (John 10:11). When the sheep hear the shepherd's voice, they know it well and follow him (vv. 4, 16, 27).

⟨ *A man and his wife.* Nearer to most people's experience is the picture of marriage. God the Father stands as Israel's husband (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:32) and Christ serves as the bridegroom for His beloved church (Eph. 5:25-32). With everlasting love and covenant faithfulness, the Lord intimately bestows His grace upon those who are His through faith in Christ.

⟨ *A parent-child relationship.* God is our Heavenly Father. As His redeemed children, it is our unique privilege to experience the depth of His love and call Him by the most intimate of endearments—*Abba*, the Aramaic equivalent for "Daddy" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). In Christ we become little children (Matt. 18:3; 1 John 2:1). God knows us to the uttermost detail (Ps. 139:13-16) and reveals Himself in a knowing relationship that goes far beyond information—so far beyond that it results in eternal transformation (2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

To balance out our thinking, we must not forget that a tension should always exist between responding in awe to the King of kings and coming in love to our Heavenly Father. Too much emphasis on kingship robs us of intimacy while excess attention to our family privilege leads us to presumption. Our relationship with God must always be kept in focus as one between the human and the divine.

Our Pilgrimage

Does this confession sound familiar?

As a young man I must have tried a dozen techniques that people said were sure to guarantee a measure of passion

*Teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes,
And I shall observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law,
And keep it with all my heart.
Make me walk in the path of Thy commandments,
For I delight in it.
Psalm 119:33-35*

2 LISTENING TO GOD

◀ A well-known Christian author recently wrote, “Anyone who comes to the Bible with a primary purpose of gaining knowledge about theology misses its message. We must come with the purpose of understanding ourselves better so we can know God better.”¹

At first glance that sounds OK. We all agree that studying Scripture should not stop with information but continue on to personal transformation. Now think a little longer. •Do we understand God better by first understanding ourselves? After all, who created whom?

God, through the Prophet Isaiah, declared, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). Since His ways and thoughts differ radically from ours, we should start with Him—not ourselves—if we’re

to know and be what He wants us to be. To know God, we must start with Scripture for that is where He gives the most intimate glimpses of Himself and His design for spiritual well-being. >

Cultivating Intimacy

One of the most effective ways to cultivate a deeper relationship with God is talking to Him (prayer). Learn to speak freely with God about your concerns for others, your circumstances, your sin (confession), and your need for Him. Let your desire to be intimate with Him show by how you communicate with Him. Numerous other activities help cultivate a deeper relationship with God: worshiping in spirit and in truth, being filled with God's Spirit, praising God with thanksgiving, giving sacrificially to build Christ's church, walking in God's will, and framing your life with a desire to glorify Him in all things.

But your pursuit of intimacy can be detoured, ineffective, or even wasteful if you have not entered at the right gateway. All those wonderful practices presuppose that you know what God desires from His children and that you are acting in accord with His specific instructions in the Bible.

*The key to a great relationship with your spouse and children is good communication—particularly listening. That is also true of our relationship with God. Through Scripture, we can listen to and know the mind of God (Ps. 19:7-11; 1 Cor. 2:6-16). By it we entered God's family (1 Peter 1:23), and by it we can grow to spiritual maturity (Ps. 119; 1 Thes. 2:13).

Good communication heightens with intimacy. God's Word reveals all that we need to know about Him, His plan, and our relationship with Him. The Bible is God's way of talking to us. Scripture is like a photo album of other family members, a diary of past events, a calendar of future plans, a letter from home, a revealing portrait of God, and descriptions of acceptable family behavior.

Only in Scripture do we get intimate glances into the histo-

ry of God's involvement with this world (Genesis to Esther). Or glimpses into the diaries of men like Job, the psalmists, or Solomon. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes contain the treasures of God's wisdom. In the prophets, we learn of God's faithfulness to reward obedience and punish sin. The New Testament introduces us to God's Son in the Gospels, His church in Acts and the Epistles, and earth's ultimate destiny in Revelation.

Without Scripture, we would know relatively little about Him. Our level of intimacy would be extremely limited. To be specific, our praise would be incomplete (Ps. 119:164), our lives lacking the Spirit's power (Eph. 5:18-21; Col. 3:16-17), our prayers aimless (1 John 5:14-15), our love for God empty since it is manifested by obeying Scripture (John 14:15; 2 John 6), our fellowship with God shallow (1 John 1:3), and worship of Him misdirected since it is based on walking in the light of His Word (John 4:24).

Mankind's original intimacy with God collapsed because Adam and Eve listened to another's word and disobeyed God's Word (Gen. 3:1-19).^{*} Spiritual intimacy returns only when our attitudes and actions are based on Scripture.

^{*}The Bible clearly illustrates the connection between knowing God and knowing Scripture. God looks with favor on humble individuals who tremble at His Word (Isa. 66:2, 5). Just like God spoke to Moses as a friend (Ex. 33:11), so God will speak to Christians through His Word as a special friend. Here is an illustrious listing of individuals who counted on the certainty of these truths:

Daniel (Dan. 9:1-23); Jeremiah (Jer. 15:16); Jesus (Matt. 4:4); Job (Job 23:12); Joshua (Josh. 1:8-9); Josiah (2 Kings 23:3); Paul (2 Tim. 3:16-17); and Solomon (Ecc. 12:13-14).

How well we would do to stand in their company by trembling at the Lord's Word.

Opening the Gate

The thought of personal Bible study intimidates many Christians. It seems so formidable when you have little or no

Thou wilt make known to me the path of life;
in Thy presence is fulness of joy;
in Thy right hand there are pleasures forever.
Psalm 16:11

12 PLEASING GOD

Having just flown home to Los Angeles from Pittsburgh, I rushed to make a seminary graduation speaking engagement. My opening remarks focused on an unusual event from the just completed flight.

Our 737 lost power to an engine and the plane dipped in the direction of difficulty. During the ensuing confusion, I heard the man next to me pray, "Lord, if You get me back alive, I will give You half of all I own." The pilot in the meantime had quickly corrected the problem and we continued toward our destination without further incident. But I couldn't get the man's promise out of my mind.

Once in the terminal after landing, I came alongside him and joked, "Sir, I am a representative of God and I'm here to collect your promise to Him." Without missing a beat he replied, "Oh, I've made a new vow. I told God that if I'm foolish enough to fly again, I will give Him *all* that I own." So much for that opportunity!

Pleasing God

Now tell me—who was this man trying to please? Himself or God? Admittedly, the story in fact is fiction but oh-so-true in spirit. It typifies the heart of self-centered, self-pleasing mankind whose driving bent focuses inward for self, not upward toward God. It's the spirit of our age; and it's out of sync with the Spirit of God. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11, KJV).

The Apostle Paul warns that this problem will intensify as time progresses, for in the last days people will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:1-4). James condemns self-pleasure as counterproductive to our prayer lives: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

God finds no pleasure in mere religious ritual (Ps. 40:6; Heb. 10:6, 8). Nor is He pleased with those who insist on walking by sight rather than according to faith (Heb. 10:38). The degree of spiritual intimacy that we share with God depends uniquely on whom we make our object of pleasure.

God's Pleasure

"I feel sorry for you, Dick. You will not be able to please everyone." During the first week of a new ministry I heard those words from a well-meaning and perceptive member of the flock. My reply went something like this, "That may be true, but I only want to please God." I would rather know God's pleasure at the expense of man's satisfaction than the reverse.

Why? For two reasons. First, I do not want to compete with God for He will do (in spite of me or you) what He pleases. I desire to move with Him, not against Him.

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases (Ps. 115:3).

Spiritual Intimacy

My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure (Isa. 46:10).

Second, I want to cooperate with God who, in Christ, gave me eternal life. Pleasing Him is an important part of my new faith relationship with God.

For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).

Too many Christians are like the elderly man who was traveling with a boy and a donkey. As they walked through a village, the man was leading the donkey and the boy was walking behind. The townspeople said the old man was a fool for not riding, so to please them he climbed up on the animal's back. When they came to the next village, the people said the old man was cruel to let the child walk while he enjoyed the ride. So, to please them, he got off and set the boy on the animal's back and continued on his way. In the third village, people accused the child of being lazy for making the old man walk, and the suggestion was made that they both ride. So the man climbed on and they set off again. In the fourth village, the townspeople were indignant at the cruelty to the donkey because he was made to carry two people. The frustrated man was last seen carrying the donkey down the road.

Unless our concentrated focus is upon pleasing God, we too will become spiritually frustrated. Pleasing others or pleasing self falls incredibly short of the spiritual epitome to