

Practicing the Presence of God

What's in a name? A woman wrote into the Reader's Digest saying: "Several years ago, when I worked at the phone company, my boss introduced me to Ken, a new addition to our staff. But Ken misunderstood my name and said, 'Nice to meet you Peggy.' I didn't want to embarrass him, so I decided to correct him later. But an opportunity never arose. So, finally, two months later, I walked into his office and said, 'Ken, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. My name isn't Peggy. It's Patti!' After a long pause, he answered, 'Well, Patti, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. My name isn't Ken. It's Ben!'"

What's in a name? The truth is our name is one of the most precious things we possess. That's why it's so cruel when children tease someone by making fun of their name. For example, when I was a boy, some of my classmates thought my last name was funny and started calling me "Shorts" instead of Schwarz. I laughed at the joke because I didn't want them to know it bothered me. But the truth is that sort of thing isn't funny at all. It's only designed to hurt.

One couple, hoping to avoid this problem, gave their baby a whole series of names—139 of them to be exact! The headline read: "WHAT'S IN A NAME? DON'T ASK THIS GIRL!" Because even though her parents say they will call her Tracy, her official name is Tracy Mariclaire Samantha Jennifer Christine Diane Lisa Elizabeth Joan...I think you get the drift. Asked why they did it, her father said, "We just wanted to give her something for when she grows up."

We didn't get that carried away, but we were careful in choosing names for our girls. Wanting to choose names that not only fit their personalities, but also said something about what we wanted God to do in their lives, we finally settled on Heidi Elizabeth and Rebecca Danielle. Heidi Elizabeth means "female warrior dedicated to God," because we sensed that she was going to have a very strong personality, but we wanted her to use it for the glory of God. Rebecca Danielle means "charmer protected by God," because we hoped her personality would be a little milder. It isn't. We have two beautiful adult daughters who love the Lord with all their hearts, but they both have very strong personalities that give them the courage and confidence to stand up and be counted for Christ.

The Bible also gives many other examples of how important names are. Abram ("exalted father") became Abraham, "father of a multitude;" Jacob the cheat became Israel, "a prince with God;" and Simon became Peter, "a stone." But the name which is above every name is that of our Lord Jesus Christ who, because of His infinite Personality, is known by many names in Scripture. In fact, I used to have a poster that hung on my wall listing 50 different names for Jesus, each one revealing something vital about His character. But the name I want to zero in on here is the one found in Matthew 1:23. Matthew says: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel." Why is this name so powerful? Because of what it reveals about His presence. Matthew goes on to say, "They shall call His name Immanuel which translated is 'God with us.'"

That truth will be the focus of this message. In past weeks we've studied several aspects of God's Personality including His knowledge, His goodness, His patience, His judgment, and His faithfulness. But now the focus shifts to His presence—the fact that He is both an always present and very present God—a truth that will help us experience God's presence in a new and fresh way. And there's no greater blessing than that. For "in His presence is fullness of joy and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore."

God Is Ever Present

Is God really present in every place? I know that's what the Bible says, but it doesn't always seem like it, does it? Even as I write this, Islamic terrorists are attacking our embassies in Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia. This comes on the heels of their 9/11 attack on our embassy in Libya and the murder of our ambassador, Christopher Stevens, and three members of our diplomatic service. I hope and pray that both they and their families sensed the comfort of God's presence in their final frightening hours. But from a distance, it's difficult to sense anything beyond the evil rage and violence inspired by the false god of Islam.

Nietzsche, an unbelieving German philosopher, triggered a whole movement based on the apparent absence of God from the world. He concluded, "God is dead!" Reacting to this mistaken notion, a bumper sticker came out several years ago. Maybe you've seen it. It reads, "Nietzsche is dead. Signed God."

I recognize that there are times when it's difficult to sense God's presence. But in those cases, the problem lies with us, not with God. For in spite of our doubts and disappointments, the truth is that God has never been closer to us than He is this very moment. Lady Julian of Norwich wrote, "God is closer than our own souls." King David confirms that in Psalm 139:7-10 where he asks the question: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me."

The point is: God is present wherever we go. That's unwelcome news to those who try to hide from God. Jonah did that. When God commanded him to preach to the Ninevites, he boarded a ship headed in the opposite direction "to flee from the presence of the LORD." Once aboard, he went down to the hold of the ship and fell asleep. Have you ever tried that? To escape God's presence by traveling, sleeping, or dulling your mind with a stupor-inducing substance? How well did it work? In Jonah's case, the Hound of Heaven tracked him down in the midst of the sea and disciplined him until he came to repentance.

Sometimes it's helpful to define something by saying what it isn't, instead of what it is. Let me try that. One thing God's presence is not is an awareness of everything going on in the world. Some folks cannot conceive of a Person who is literally present in every place. So they redefine God's omnipresence in an administrative sense - like the British Empire on which the sun was said never to set. In other words, God is aware of everything and in control of everything, but not actually there Himself. But that isn't what the Bible means by omnipresent. Instead, it means just what it says - God is personally present at every point in the universe. Or as A.W. Tozer put it, "God is our environment as the sea is to the fish and the air is to the bird. He is over all things, under all things, and outside all things without being enclosed or excluded by any of them."

Another mistaken notion about God's presence is that God is spread throughout the universe like a thin layer of jelly on a huge piece of bread. That's the New Age concept of God - that God is in everything and everything is a part of God. The pantheist believes that each point in the universe is a part of God, so that one part of Him is here, another part is there, and still another part is over there. But that's not what the Bible means by omnipresent. When we say that God is everywhere, we mean that the entirety of God's person is present in every place.

A missionary to India told of seeing Hindu worshipers tapping on trees and stones whispering, "Are you there?" hoping to find a piece of God's presence. The Christian answer to that question is good news: "Yes, God is here, but not just part of Him! All of Him is present in every place." This was the good news Paul shared with the people of Athens. Pointing to their idol shrines, he said, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:24-28)

But you say, "If God is everywhere, why don't I sense His presence in my life?" I asked that question every Sunday as a child sitting in church, trying to feel God's presence, but never finding Him. Why not? I attended a liberal church where no one told me that I needed a Savior. Isaiah 59:2 says the problem is, "Your sins have cut you off from God!" That means the first step in finding God's presence is dealing with our sins. I liken it to radio waves which are always streaming past us, whether we realize it or not. Consequently, who is at fault if we fail to pick them up? Not the Transmitter! The problem lies with us, the receivers.

So check yourself before I go on. Have you believed in Jesus for salvation? If not, call on Him today and have your every sin washed away. "For whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Roman 10:13) Or maybe you believe, but you're involved in something that's displeasing to God and keeping you from enjoying His presence like an immoral thought life, bitterness toward others, or a conscience made guilty by lying lips, a loose tongue, or behavior unbecoming a Christian. If so, accept the blame for your sins and turn to Jesus for cleansing and forgiveness. David was right! "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit." (Psalm 32:1-2)

God Is Very Present

You and I have difficulty being present. What do I mean by that? I'm referring to those times when someone is speaking to us, and we see them with our eyes and hear them with our ears, but our interest has long since departed, forcing us to guess what they're talking about and to pretend that we've been listening the whole time. My wife, for one, does not find this amusing. On the other hand, there are times when I am very present. I remember, for example, when we were first dating and we ate lunch together at least once a week, I would sit across the table from her listening intently to everything she said. She was all I thought about - how she looked, what she said, how she felt about me. Unfortunately, the human personality cannot sustain that intensity for very long.

A couple of hours of window shopping and we men are ready to drop. Two or three football games on New Year's Day and our wives are ready to throw the TV out the window. Thirty minutes of good preaching and our minds start to wander. Why? Because it's too much for us! Our brains can't concentrate that long. We need a break! But thank God, this is one way He differs from us. He never grows weary. His mind never wanders. His capacity to absorb is unlimited. As Psalm 46 declares, He is always "very present." Why should that matter to us? Let me give you five reasons why His presence is not only valuable and encouraging, but absolutely essential if we hope to make it safely through this very dangerous and wicked world.

The first benefit **it gives us is security in danger**. Psalm 46:1-2 assures us:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

God's presence is important, first of all then, because it provides us with safety and security in times of danger and uncertainty. The story is told of a Scottish lad who took a shortcut across the moors one night on his way to work. The area was known for its limestone pits, a large one lying directly in his path. But he was sure he could avoid it. Setting out through rock and heather, he listened to the far-off bleating of the sheep and the rustling of the wind. But otherwise he was alone...he thought...until a voice rang out, "Peter!" A bit unnerved, the lad called back, "Yes, who is it?" No answer. So he assumed it was the wind blowing across the moor. But a few steps later and the voice came again, more urgent this time. "Peter!" it called. Bending forward and peering into the darkness, the lad found his hands clutching thin air! He'd stopped right at the edge of the deserted quarry - one step before a fatal plunge into the rocky pit far below!

Later, Peter Marshall, the great Presbyterian preacher and Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, said that event was the great turning-point of his life. For although he was already a Christian at that point, it was the nearness of God in his moment of danger and the sound of His voice calling out to him that led him to become a minister, one of the greatest ministers our nation has known. My point is this: God is not a distant deity or abstract entity. He is a "very present Help" who knows each one of us by name. Therefore we need not fear, "though the earth be removed and the mountains be carried into the heart of the sea." We can "be still and know" that He is God and ever with us! (Psalm 46:10)

Think about the dangers you face - the possibility of another recession with more job losses and a further decrease in your net worth, unanticipated health problems with an unfavorable diagnosis, family heartaches, ongoing attacks on your religious freedom. The "what ifs" are terrifying until you ponder the words of this psalm and its assurances. Reflect, rejoice, and rest in what it promises you - that you are not alone for your great God and Savior goes before you, walks with you, and is ever working to protect you from every danger. Nothing can touch you without His divine permission, and whatever He does allow, He promises that He will make it "work together" for your good." (Romans 8:28)

You are safe and secure. For you belong to a "very present" God who loves you in spite of your sin and stands ready to help you no matter what life brings your way. So, as James advises, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you." (James 4:7-8)

The second benefit **it gives us is comfort in sorrow**. When toddlers fall down and skin their knees, they cry out to their mothers for comfort. Teenagers learn to rely upon both family and friends for their moral support. Those of us who are following Christ find our support team has also grown to include a spiritual family that is ready to weep with us when we weep. But what about those times when we're called to fly a solo mission or the depth of our grief is too great for another human being to fully understand, where do we turn for our comfort and support? Some of us turn to comfort foods like chocolate chip cookies, pizza, and ice cream in times of stress. But they only serve to expand our waistlines and multiply the problems we have to solve.

But there is a better food that is able to satisfy our emptiness and soothe our emotional pain. That food is the Living Presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35) The hunger and thirst to which He referred is not physical; it's an inner hollowness which nothing in life is able to fill. So that's why Jesus came. He said He was sent to "heal the broken-hearted" and "set at liberty those who are oppressed." (Luke 4:18) What tool does He use to effect this miracle? His presence is power enough! For in His presence is "fullness of joy" and at His right hand are "pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:10-11) The more pertinent question is: What do we do to enjoy the comfort of His presence? Psalm 46 again supplies the answer. In verse 2, the Psalmist told us not to fear. Now in verse 10 he says:

"Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth! The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

Isn't that good of God? Instead of straining to gain a sense of His presence, we're told to slow down, be still, and let His Spirit minister to our hearts. Psalm 131 expands on this truth describing the childlike spirit that opens the door to His presence: "My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore." The truth is we never outgrow our need for Jesus to pick us up and comfort us. For neither age nor wisdom nor maturity is able to shield us from life's heartaches. We must therefore remain childlike in our dependence on God, welcoming the soul-soothing presence of His Holy Spirit.

I'll never forget the first time I learned to lean on this truth. It was the middle of November when we noticed our daughter, Heidi, just four years old at the time, going to the bathroom every 15 minutes around the clock. First, we consulted her pediatrician, and when he was unable to help, I took her to the urologist who asked me, "Have you felt her tummy lately?" "No," I said. "What's wrong?" He explained, "She has a large mass right here inside her abdomen." So the next day, the day before Thanksgiving, we took her to the hospital to undergo a CT scan. The initial diagnosis: "She has a large inoperable tumor in her abdomen." We didn't have a very happy Thanksgiving that year. On Friday we drove her back to the hospital for a needle biopsy. It had snowed more than a foot on Thanksgiving, increasing to the coldness of the experience and stress of the trip. Even more devastating was the report. The verdict came back: "Malignant."

This was without question the most frightening experience Cheryl and I had ever faced, because we were certain that we were going to lose our little girl. I recall plowing through the snow on our way home that day, tears rolling down my cheeks, and Heidi sitting in the backseat, singing a new song she'd learned: "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? The big bad wolf? The big bad wolf?" Cheryl looked at me, and I looked at Cheryl, both of us screaming on the inside, "We are! We're terrified right now." Heidi then went on to ask us questions like, "Mommy, Daddy, what's it like to die? Do you just lie in a hole in the ground forever?" We, of course, comforted her with the promises of heaven and the fact that God was able to heal her and make her well. But it wasn't until later that night that something happened to lift the terror I was feeling.

After Heidi went to sleep, Cheryl and I knelt down by her bed and asked God to send an angel to touch her body and make her well. Then we did something we hadn't done since she was born. We rededicated her to God transferring the care of our little girl into His trustworthy hands. And guess what! From that moment on, all the way through her operation and recovery, I had perfect peace that she was going to be OK. And she was! We found a surgeon at Children's Hospital in Seattle who was

able to remove the tumor, which took two hours instead of the anticipated seven. And when the final biopsy came back, it indicated that all of the grapefruit-sized tumor, except for its core, had turned benign. And 26 years later, Heidi is still OK, joyfully serving the Lord whom she loves with all her heart. The only evidence she had cancer is a faint scar on her abdomen.

God was gracious to us in sparing Heidi's life. But even if He'd chosen to take her home to heaven earlier than we wanted, I'm convinced that He would have given us His peace and comforted us in our loss. Why am I convinced of that? Because of Psalm 46:11, "The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

Why not apply that remedy to the trouble you're facing? That debt. That health issue. That loved one you're worried about. How do you get victory in these trials? By drawing near to God through simple childlike faith in His Son. He gives comfort in sorrow, peace in place of panic, and stillness in a time of storm. For He "is our refuge and strength, a very present Help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear." Instead, what will we do? Be still and know that He is God, so that "He will be exalted among the nations. He will be exalted in the earth."

Many people assume that serving Christ is easier for pastors than for ordinary Christians. That's based on the mistaken notion that we who serve as pastors do so because we're extraordinary human beings and that serving Christ in difficult circumstances comes naturally for us. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

I hate to admit it, but like Timothy, I tend to be timid, which makes acting with boldness a real stretch for me. I'm thinking, for example, of one of my earliest failures in ministry. I was teaching Vacation Bible School at our church and had a button pinned to my coat that read, "God has news for you!" Hurrying to one of my college classes later that day, I forget to take it off. So, when I walked in the classroom, the first thing my professor asked was, "So what's the news?" A perfect opportunity to tell him about Jesus! Instead, I nervously stammered out something about teaching kids at church, neglecting to explain what "the good news is" - that Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give us new life.

Of course, I'm not the first to fight this frailty. Peter wrestled with it big time. In fact, his fear led him to deny our Lord 3 times in one night. Nor his battle end there. Paul says on one occasion he had to rebuke Peter and his companions for caving into the pressure of the Judaizers, who were requiring Gentiles to keep Jewish rituals like circumcision before they welcomed them into the fellowship of the church. He writes, "But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish Christians followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy." (Galatians 2:11-13)

What do we do about this cowardly tendency? For the truth is: None of us starts out as a giant of faith. We're each given a mustard seed of faith which, like a muscle, grows stronger the more we use it to serve our Master. But you say, "Where do I get the initial faith to do that? Again, the answer is: Courage and confidence are the result of God's presence in our lives.

It gives us confidence in service. My greatest fear prior to becoming a Christian was public speaking. I remember going through the course listings as a college freshman looking for a way to

satisfy the communications requirement without having to take a speech class. No such luck, especially once I made the decision to follow Christ my second year of college. Because immediately His Spirit began to compel me to profess my faith in public...every chance I got.

For example, you know the speech class I didn't want to take? Not only did I have to take it, but the Spirit wouldn't let me rest until I used it to share my faith with the rest of my class. How did that go? I got through it, but not without receiving several negative evaluation slips from my classmates criticizing me for my narrowness and shunning me as the class pariah. But I kept on accepting any and every invitation to speak out for Christ - teaching Sunday School, giving the devotions at AWANA, speaking at youth events, and finally and most terrifying of all, preaching in my pastor's place while he was on vacation.

I went on to seminary and eventually overcame my fear of public speaking, only to find the faith trials taking new forms. For example, during my first week as a new pastor, an older member of our church was admitted to the hospital with cancer. So I went to visit him. When I arrived, the doctors and nurses were at his bedside while his wife waited outside. Suddenly the surgeon appeared saying that her husband's heart had stopped and asking if they should try to resuscitate him. She turned to me, her 29-year-old minister, and asked, "What should I do, Pastor?" Strange. That never came up in seminary. So I handed the ball to the doctor, "What's your advice, Doctor?" He said, "His body is riddled with cancer, and even if we succeed in reviving him, he'll linger in pain and won't live but for a few months." So together we decided to let him go. Thankfully, his wife was a wonderful Christian and never second-guessed our decision.

Looking back, where have I found the courage to take on new ministries for which I feel inadequate? Because the truth is: None of us is adequate for the tasks we face. Paul humbly admitted this in writing the cocky Corinthians. He cried out, "Who is adequate for these things!" The correct answer is no one. Our adequacy comes from Christ alone who said, "Without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) And yet, Paul went on to learn, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) This is the great truth on which I've been leaning my entire life - as a student, a father, a pastor, and as a missionary. Like Timothy, I'm timid. But I refuse to turn away from what unnerves me. For I know that His presence will empower me no matter what challenge I face.

It gives us strength in temptation. God's presence is the key to spiritual victory. Instead of wrestling with the enemy in our own strength, we rely on the indwelling Spirit of Christ to empower us. Like the little girl who was asked, "Does Satan ever tempt you?" "O, yes!" she said. "He tempts me all the time." "Then how do you resist him?" "That's simple!" she explained. "Whenever the devil comes knocking, I ask Jesus to answer the door." That, in childlike terms, is the secret to the abundant Christian life - remembering that no matter how near the devil and his demons approach, there is One who is closer still. As John writes, "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

Finally, **it gives us assurance in worship.** Have you ever been sitting in church, trying to worship God, but wondering, "Am I getting through? Does He hear me? Or is this just a nice little religious ritual I'm going through?" Most of us have felt that way at times. Sometimes it's because we are out of fellowship with God. At other times it's because we're sick or tired or discouraged by the circumstances of life. So what should we do? Many people try to manufacture a sense of God's presence by churning up warm and fuzzy feelings from within. But that isn't necessary because God's presence is more than a feeling. The Bible says it's a fact that stands true in and of itself. God is here and eager to be found, if we come to Him in childlike humbleness, repentance, and trust.

Romans 10:6 assures us, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved... For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

As I write this, the world grows ever darker and more discouraging. Violence, hatred, immorality, and corruption dominate the headlines, causing us to lose hope. But that's when we need to remember that no matter how dismal the news or distant God seems, He is working out His plan for this planet, and has promised to faithfully be with always, even to the end of the age.

That was the hope of the poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Grieving the death of his wife in a tragic fire, he fell into a deep depression later that year when the Civil War broke out. Sitting down at his desk on Christmas morning, he penned a poem that later became a carol. You may know the words: "And in despair I bowed my head: 'There is no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.'" But then, as the Christmas bells continued to ring, Longfellow began to worship, and as he worshiped, his mood began to change, so much so that he added another verse to the poem: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men.'"

No matter what problem you face, don't despair. God is here listening to your prayers and ready to lead you out of that dark valley to green pastures and beside still waters where you can rest in His peace and restore your faith. All you need do is draw away from the world for a few quiet moments and tell Him what you need and ask Him for His strength. His presence is only a prayer away.