

## **“God Is Closer Than You Think—The Promise”**

A few questions to think about... Would you like a closer relationship with God than you have right now? Have you ever thought that it seems like God is distant or removed from your situation? Would you be willing to take part in a journey of discovery that could set you on a course to grow closer to God and recognize his presence?

Over the next six Sundays we are starting on a spiritual adventure. And I believe that every single person who really puts their heart into this will discover that ... *God Is Closer Than You Think!*

For some of us this will mean a course correction in our spiritual journey. Somewhere in the past we started to spiritually drift away from the close relationship with God that we had. For others it's going to be a season of discovery. Maybe you've never been close to God—but you've desperately wanted to have a relationship with him. Or maybe your relationship with God is perking along just fine. But because of your closeness to God there is an inner drive to be even closer—for prayer to be more personal, for a sharper awareness of God's activity in and around you. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey ... the next six weeks are designed to bring us even closer in our relationship with God.

The backdrop today is a painting by Michelangelo called *The Creation of Adam* [**PICTURE: The Creation of Adam**] In the painting it's like God is rushing toward Adam. Like God has this unstoppable determination to get as close to Adam as possible. God is as close as he can be, and having gotten that close, he allows just a little space so that Adam can choose. God waits for Adam to make his move. [**PICTURE: Creation of Adam detail**] All Adam has to do is lift a finger.

This picture reminds us that God is closer than we think. He is never farther than a prayer away. All it takes is the smallest effort. In fact the Bible is the story of God's desire to be with people, not our desire to be with God. God wants to be with us, not just love us from a distance. But to be with us.

We see this at the very beginning of the Bible in the story of creation. God creates Adam in the Garden of Eden and God is there with him. So in the Garden of Eden, God and Adam—in a sense—hung out together. When Adam worked—God was right there. When Adam named animals, God was right there. The Bible says that “whatever the man called each living creature—that was its name.” God would say: “Hey Adam, good name. You're a good namer.” When Eve was created, and Adam first saw her—God was right there. Adam said: “God—nice job on the woman! I had no idea you could do **that**.” Adam and God were inseparable friends. What Adam did—he did with God. Where Adam went—he went with God. Until Adam and Eve's decided to disobey God. A day some people call “the fall.”

After the fall, God comes to the garden to walk with Adam in the cool of the day. It's like that was part of their routine together. They'd go for a walk. But this time, Adam is not there. And God calls out: “Adam—where are you?” There's a rustling behind some shrubbery and a timid voice answered God: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid. So I hid.” God wanted to be with Adam. But Adam didn't want to be with God. And God's heart breaks. But God does not give up.

You see, God's great desire was to be *with* Adam. And even though the relationship had been broken because of Adam and Eve's choice—because of their sin—God continued to want that relationship restored. God longed for the intimacy of their walks—of just hanging out together.

So God worked with Adam's descendants. And every once in a while one of them would get it! For example, the Bible talks about a guy named **Enoch**: “and Enoch walked with God.” Later, the Bible says of **Noah**: “and Noah walked with God.” God wasn't being elusive or putting up huge hoops for a person to jump through to be with him. The simple truth of the matter is that most people didn't **want** to be with him. Mostly they hid. But God kept wanting to be with people.

One day, it's kind of like God said to the angels: “Now watch this. I'm going to start a new people—called Israel. I'm going to teach them to be with me so they can show the world how to be with me.” And the Bible records a new pattern of relationships with God. Talking about a grandfather, his son, and his grandson it says that “God was with **Abraham**. God was with **Isaac**. God was with **Jacob**.” And in those relationships, God would do surprising things to teach people about what it meant for them to be with him.

Jacob had a son named Joseph, and life got real bad for Joseph for a long time, but the strangest thing kept happening. Joseph was sold into slavery, but “the Lord was with Joseph” in slavery. He was put in prison, but the Bible says: “but while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him.”

Later on, God was with a guy named Moses, when the people of Israel were led out of Egypt, and the Bible says the Lord was in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night—so the people would know he was with them. It’s like God just keeps saying: **[SLIDE...]**

- **I want to be with you. I want to hang out with you.**
- **I’ll be with you in the garden.**
- **I’ll be with you in the flood.**
- **I’ll be with you in prison, in slavery, in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the Promised Land—**
- **I just want to be with you.**

Are you picking up on the great desire of God’s heart? On and on this theme goes, until finally God wants to be with his people so bad that he comes up with a **really** wild idea. It’s like God says to the angels: “I can’t stand it anymore. I’m just going to go on down there my own self.” And the angels say: “You can’t do that. How are you gonna do that?” And God says, “Watch this!” He sneaks down. And in the middle of the night, he is born in a manger. He grows up in a one-horse town. And then he gets a job pounding nails eight hours a day.

Do you remember the conversation the angel had with Joseph about Mary’s pregnancy? The angel said that Jesus would be called “Immanuel.” Do you know what that means? It means: “God *with* us.” In fact a central theme of the Bible could be called the “Immanuel Principle.” The Immanuel Principle is God’s constant desire that we should be should be with him. At the end of his ministry Jesus confirmed this when he said: **[SLIDE...]** “**Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age**” (Matthew 28:20).

When you ask Jesus to be your leader and forgiver, God sends his Spirit into your life *to always be with you*. Your body really is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Think about it: *you* can be the house of God—Beth El in Hebrew. It’s like God is saying: “I just want to be with you.”

Now, let’s get specific and talk about what this means for us today—and this week. When the Bible says “the Lord was with Joseph,” what exactly did that look like? How do **we** experience that? If I were going to boil down the practice of all spiritual life in a single statement from Scripture, it would be this: **[SLIDE...]** “**I have set the LORD always before me**” (Psalm 16:8). And when I do that, there are certain signs that are characteristic of God that settle into my soul. I want to walk through these signs of God’s presence so you can recognize them when they come. These signs are already there but if we don’t know about them, we won’t recognize them. Start to set God always before you.

One of the indicators of God’s presence is: **[SLIDE...]** **Reassurance**. When God was talking to Joshua, just before Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, God reassured him of his presence and said: **[SLIDE...]** “**Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go**” (Joshua 1:9). Reassurance.

I came across a list of statements that are supposed to be actual quotes from employee performance evaluations:

- I would not allow this employee to breed.
- This employee is not really so much of a “has-been”, but more of a definite “won’t-be.”
- He would be out of his depth in a parking lot puddle.
- This employee is depriving a village somewhere of an idiot.
- He doesn’t have ulcers, but he’s a carrier.
- If you see two people talking and one looks bored, he’s the other one.

A lot of people, when they think about God, they think he’s just a kind of divine performance evaluator. And here’s the tragedy, if you think about God like that, you’re going to find yourself avoiding him in your mind. You won’t talk to him much.

Please understand—in the history of the universe, God has never asked anyone to do something by themselves. Whatever God calls you to do, he calls you to do in partnership with him. And one of the ways you will know God is present is when you experience his reassurance.

—Somebody rejects you, but in the midst of the pain the thought occurs to you: *I am loved by God.*

—You face a challenge at work, maybe even losing your job, but in the middle of all that anxiety an idea comes into your mind: *I can handle this. This will not destroy me.*

—You're in transition. Facing a big change, not sure how it will work out, suddenly you have this sense that you're not alone.

—It hit a man named Paul in prison one day when he realized: "I *can* do this. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

When those thoughts come into your mind—whether through Scripture that you know, through a book or tape, through another person—be open to the possibility that this is not a random occurrence. This is "God-with-you." This is the "Immanuel Principle" at work. Reassurance. Have you experienced it?

A second sign of God's presence with you is his **[SLIDE...] Guidance**. The psalmist wrote: **[SLIDE...] "I will praise the LORD, who counsels me, even at night my heart instructs me" (Psalm 16:7).**

Sometimes guidance will come to you:

—You're in a store, there's a clerk behind a counter that everyone treats like a machine, and you get a sudden inclination to look her in the eye, to say an inner prayer of blessing.

—You're stumped at work and all of a sudden an idea breaks through that's just what you need.

—You're feeling distant from your child, all of a sudden an opportunity to build a bridge, to reconnect, is just dumped in your lap.

—You're about to say something stupid/self-promotional/damage-inflicting when a still, small voice in your head whispers, "Shut ... up."

Remember the Immanuel Principle and be open to the possibility that God is doing what he said he would do. He is with you. He is reassuring you. He is guiding you.

A third sign of God's presence with you may not feel like God is "for" you. But it's one of the greatest expressions of God's love and desire to be with you and that is **[SLIDE...] Conviction**. Jesus said that when the Spirit of God is present **[SLIDE...] "he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8).** This is the hardest aspect of God's presence. The truth is, my desire for God can be pretty selective. Sometimes, I want God *not* to be around. Does anybody know what I'm talking about?!

Just look at little kids when they're doing something they know they shouldn't do. If you're a parent you've seen it. Your kids are doing something they know is wrong and you happen to see it and they'll just tell you, "Don't look at me, Dad. OK?" They're making a mess, or a mess in their pants. They're cutting their own hair, or have gotten into mom's makeup. They didn't want anyone to know, "Don't look at me, Mom." Kids just reveal how all of us want to be unobserved in our wrong. Most of the evil and darkness in our lives requires hiddenness to continue to exist.

You know, the most common prayer, the quietest prayer, the one that we least acknowledge making, is simply this: *Don't look at me, God.* A businessman on the road checks into motel room late at night. He knows the kind of movies that are available to him right there in the room. No one will know. His wife won't find out. His kids won't see. (He knows the drill and that hotels have a disclaimer, "The name of the movie you watch won't be on your bill.") Go ahead. No one will know. But first he has to say a little prayer: *"Don't look at me, God."*

A mom with an anger problem decides to berate her kids because she's so frustrated, because she will get a twisted rush of pleasure from inflicting pain—But first she has to say a little prayer: *"Don't look at me, God."*

- An executive who's going to pad an expense account
- An employee who is going to deliberately make a coworker look bad

- A Christ-follower who makes financial decisions that will keep him from tithing, keep him from being the kind of steward he knows God wants him to be
- A student who looks at somebody else's paper during an exam
- A longtime church attender who looks for the opportunity to pass judgment on somebody else
- A couple who claims to follow God but refuses to give up sleeping together
- A spouse in a bitter divorce who chooses to hang on to resentment and self-righteousness

First you have to say a little prayer. You don't say it out loud, of course. Probably don't admit it even to yourself. But it's the choice your heart makes: *Don't look at me, God.*

Here's a key question when you experience the sign of God's presence through conviction—*will you at that moment stop?* Will you listen to God's Spirit? In that moment be honest with God: "God—the truth is I don't want you here right now. I want to do what I want to do. But I'll stop. I'm willing to surrender. I'd rather let go of my anger/addiction/pride than let go of you." Spiritual growth is simply increasing our capacity to experience the presence of God. Sometimes that happens through conviction.

A fourth sign of God's presence is **[SLIDE...]** Joy. The Bible says: **[SLIDE...]** "**You have made me to know the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand**" (Psalm 16:11). Rate your joy-capacity on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "Some people actually mistake me for a mannequin" and 10 being "You have to paint a frown on my face for it to exist." What's your capacity for joy?

Jesus said to people who refused to follow him, refused to be with him—it's like this: "*We played the flute for you—and you wouldn't dance.*" Sometimes, when God is present with you, you'll know because a little voice inside your head will say: "*Dance!*" (Or, if you're born to be seated rather than born to be wild—"Move in a rhythmic and graceful manner.")

—Some of you will be in your car, driving away from the church service, music playing that makes you happy—you will be singing and dancing and looking like a fool: that will give you joy.

—Some of you will be driving next to someone who is singing and dancing and looking like a fool—and that will give **you** joy!

—Others of you will have worked hard and accomplished something significant—it'll be really good. You get a surge of satisfaction and that will give you joy.

—Or you see a sunset, or a tree in a forest preserve, or the face of a friend you love—that will give you joy.

—You will feel a rush of gratitude for no reason at all. Just the sheer goodness of being alive. And you feel joy—a sign of God's presence with you.

God's great desire is to be *with you!* He's expressed it from cover to cover in the pages of the Bible. He has gone to extreme lengths to be sure you know it. That's his promise to you. He is showing you signs through every day of his presence. This week ... experience the **reassurance** ... the **guidance** ... the **conviction** ... the **joy** of his presence.

Let's make a commitment together ... that for the next six weeks we'll do everything in our power to be here every Sunday. I also encourage you to get in a home group if you're not in one—we have some awesome new material that will help you go even deeper. We're going to learn in the weeks ahead what we can do to truly experience the closeness of God. We will stretch out our hand to grasp the hand that is reaching down to us from heaven. God is closer than you think. And for today, as we begin this journey, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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