

“God is Closer Than You Think—The Presence”

Two weeks ago we talked about God’s promise and desire to be *with* us. From cover to cover the Bible talks about God’s steps to have that relationship with you and with me. Last week, we looked at our *choice* to be with him—that it isn’t pushed on us, but that we make the decision on whether or not to be *with him* in the ordinary moments of our ordinary days. After that decision is made, how do we move toward living in God’s riches instead of in spiritual poverty? The foundation of this adventure we’re on during these six weeks is that God is closer than we think.

One of the most amazing verses in the Bible is John 16:7. It is when Jesus tells his disciples that instead of coming closer to them, he is going away from them. He’s preparing them for the day he’ll leave them and he says, **[SLIDE...] “I tell you the truth: it is for your good that I am going away...” (John 16:7).** I picture his disciples sitting there with their mouths hanging open in confusion. “What? You’re going away? And that’s good for us how?” Imagine if you were in their place. Your life has been turned upside down by this man. For three years you’ve soaked up his every word. You lived to watch him heal. You lived to see him love. You lived to see him drive out demons and take on the religious leaders. You left everything to follow him, convinced that he held the key to the future of the human race. You’ve bet the farm on it. And now he says he’s going to leave? That’s the end of your world!

You’ve sacrificed everything for him ... and now you’re going to lose him! But then Jesus has the audacity to add: “—*and it’s a good thing.*” Sure it is. Kind of like what parents say before they spank their child: “This is going to hurt you, but it’s good for you.” Right! But Jesus is serious and gives the reason why it’s a good thing that he leaves. He says: Because **[SLIDE...] “...unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).** Jesus talks about the Counselor, and that’s another name for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is Jesus’ ongoing presence with human beings once he physically leaves earth. Jesus physically leaves, but that allows him to be present to all people because he is no longer restricted to his physical presence.

This is really, really important because sometimes we think: “I’d give anything to have lived when Jesus did—to hear his voice; to see his face; to watch him perform miracles.” But Jesus says, “No. It is better to live in the era of the Spirit than it is to have walked with me on the earth.” Jesus is saying **we** are more fortunate than the disciples were because we live in the time when the Holy Spirit is present. Jesus is saying that you and I have an advantage over those who actually walked with him! If that’s true, and I believe it is, we’d better thoroughly know and lean on the person of the Holy Spirit—Jesus ongoing presence. Let’s get crystal clear on his identity and ministry. For Christ-followers to miss this would be disaster.

In the Bible, the image Jesus uses of the Spirit in our life is a river. Take a look at John 7:37–39: **[SLIDE...] “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive” (John 7:37-39).**

The King James version reads: “Out of his **belly** will flow rivers of living water.” The word that’s used for “belly” is *koilios*—it means the “center of your being; the deepest part of your authentic self.” The belly is that place that gets tied up in knots when you’re anxious, where squadrons of butterflies fly in formation when you’re afraid, where you are angry, or unsatisfied, or unhappy. It’s your inner core. It’s where every major emotion gets registered. It’s where you carry the real truth about strength and weakness and how you face life. Jesus is basically saying, “If you follow me right down in your guts, your belly—you will be flowing with energy, hope, love, and power.” In other words, his tangible presence. And this presence doesn’t have to be a squirt gun presence, it doesn’t have to be a garden hose presence, we don’t even have to settle for fire hose presence. Jesus said it’s like a river flowing into and out of you.

In Jesus’ culture a flowing river was symbolic of the flourishing of life. A lot of that part of the world is desert. It’s dry. The people knew that without water there is no life and the image of a flowing river was the image of abundant life—physically and spiritually.

If a river flows unobstructed, all kinds of good things will happen. It will nourish trees. It provides a home for fish and plants. It gives drinking water to human beings. But if a river gets dammed up; if it gets blocked, obstructed, polluted, cut off—there's death: **[SLIDE...]** **“As the deer pants for the water, So my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).** Without the Holy Spirit our souls wither, we will experience loss, unsatisfied desire, spiritual death. When we're filled with the Holy Spirit—Jesus' ongoing presence--there is power, hope and life. And this Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life when you choose to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The journey of getting in the flow is one of becoming aware and sensitive to that presence. Jesus says that he came so that you would be filled with life—that if someone asked how you're doing you would say, “I'm living the most complete, filled up, God-centered, peaceful, empowered life you could imagine.” I wonder how many of us would answer that way today?

Let's look at exactly what Jesus said. Turn in your Bibles to John 10:10...**[SLIDE...]****“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).**

Turn to any book in the New Testament, and you see this picture of amazing life painted. For example, 1 Peter 1:8 says: **[SLIDE...]****“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8).** How many here would say this pretty much describes you? That you are filled with inexpressible joy? When people are around you, they notice your belly is flowing with rivers of living water?

Here's what I think happens. Many people hear about the good news of Jesus Christ. They are overwhelmed by this vision of hope, and they say, “Yes! I want Jesus in my life!” And so, for a time, there's a kind of honeymoon period. They are drawn toward Scripture in a new way. They get excited and want to tell other people about Jesus. They love to worship. And some things change in their life. Language gets cleaned up. Addictions are overcome. They get involved in serving in the church. But over time this process of change seems to stall. And instead of my life looking like this amazing picture painted in the New Testament, it looks like this:

- I yell at my children.
- I worry too much about money and my job.
- I get jealous of people more successful or attractive than me.
- I use deception to get out of trouble.
- I pass judgment on people all the time.

When I read the New Testament words about putting off the old nature and being a new creature in Christ, I'm not jumping with joy at the change. Instead of feeling inspired by them, these words make me feel discouraged or guilty or confused or just tired. I get overwhelmed with all the stuff I'm supposed to do. And so I'm stuck with this gap of what I'm supposed to be as a Christian and what I'm actually experiencing. Have you ever been there?

Do you know what people do when they're not closing the gap? These are real strategies. A lot of people *try harder* **[SLIDE: “They try harder”]**. They think, “The problem with this gap in my life is I'm just not being heroic enough in my effort.” I see this in a lot of people. “I'll close the gap by sheer spiritual elbow grease—I'll get up earlier, pray longer, read another book, listen to more tapes, learn new disciplines, serve more, work hard to be nicer to my family.”

Then you hear about somebody else who gets up at 4 a.m. to pray, and you feel guilty—so you resolve to do that too. Even though you're not a morning person. Even though at 4 a.m. you're dazed and confused and groggy and grumpy and nobody wants to be around you. Even Jesus doesn't want to be with you at 4 in the morning! But you say to yourself, “This is hard, exhausting, and miserable—so it must be spiritual.” You do your absolute best to keep it up for days, weeks, or even months—but you can't sustain it. And when you stop, you feel guilty. Pretty soon you start something else.

I'll tell you a secret that deep inside you may already know, but are afraid to admit—You're tired. Not just physically tired. You are weary in your soul. You are one of those people Jesus was talking to when he said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Those are confusing words to you right now, because for you, coming to Jesus is exhausting. But he wants to close the gap. He wants you to experience rivers of water ... the Spirit ... flowing through you. And trying harder isn't going to sustain you in your journey.

Other people who aren't closing the gap between who they should be in Christ and who they are simply *pretend*. [SLIDE: "They pretend"]. They know they're supposed to be different, so they decide to "fake it till they make it." When you talk to them, their life is a miracle a minute. They smile a lot. Every prayer gets answered. Every decision is a word from God. Every sentence ends with "praise the Lord."

These Christians get good at impression management. One woman John Ortberg knows had a son who was going through severe depression. But his depression violated the family image of everything they were trying to portray as "Christian." And do you know what her counsel was to her son? She told him to smile because "fake happiness is better than genuine depression." For the pretenders, inside ... when everything's quiet ... and they're alone—the gap's still there.

Some people try to close the gap by *switching spiritual venues*. [SLIDE: "They switch spiritual venues"]. I have seen this happen time and time again. Somebody grows up in a non-charismatic church and thinks, "If I just go to a charismatic church, where they take a different approach to tongues/healing/prayer/worship—that will close the gap."

Someone else grows up in charismatic church and thinks, "Things here are so experience-oriented and shallow; if I just go to a church that's got some deep theology..." And so they go to real "heady" church. Some people choose to go to a church that takes some particular approach to teaching or evangelism or the sacraments or social action—and they think, "If I just went to another kind of church—that would close the gap." Sometimes it's like watching a giant game of musical pews. But it doesn't close the gap.

And some people don't try to close the gap any longer—they *just give up*. [SLIDE: "They simply give up"]. They've tried all the solutions they know and feel completely discouraged. Or hopeless. So inwardly they decide a different way of life is really not possible. They stay a Christian. They keep going to church. They maintain their involvement in church life. They sure hope they're going to heaven when they die. But they decide that not much can be done about that gap in this life. So secretly, they give up. Some of you have.

But what if there is another way? What if Jesus was right? What if it's possible for you to come increasingly alive with love, joy, peace—and it's not by trying harder? What if the Spirit of God is like a river, flowing all the time in your life? What if your job isn't to try harder or run faster or get up earlier? What if God is at work all the time, in every place that you are? What if your job is simply to jump in the river?!

Your job is to figure out, from one moment to the next, "How do I just stay in the flow? How do I avoid things that close me off to the Spirit? How do I keep myself aware and submitted—so that those rivers of living water are running through my belly? How do I learn to flow with the Spirit?"

In John 14:16–18 Jesus is talking with his disciples and he says: [SLIDE...] "**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you**" (John 14:16-18).

He says he'll send "another Counselor"! *Who* is the *first* one? It's Jesus. And he tells his friends that he won't leave them as orphans. They won't be alone and on their own. In fact, he gives them this amazing promise about the Spirit: "*For he lives with you and will be in you.*" Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit of almighty God is inside you. He takes up residence in your life!

Think about your need for a good counselor. Have you ever made a dumb decision? Do you ever worry about things even though worrying didn't do you any good? What about people problems? Does anybody here have people problems? Do some of you have a problem managing anger? Do some of you beat yourselves up all the time for things that aren't your fault? Jesus says he will send what Lloyd Ogilvie calls "the Greatest Counselor in the world."

Let me ask you, if you had the ideal counselor—whether a professional counselor or a trusted friend—wouldn't that be awesome? For example, you would know that you are accepted. With the perfect counselor, you could say anything and they would always listen. They'd never turn away or reject you or laugh at you. As you spent time with that counselor, healing and change would start to take place. Time spent with the perfect counselor would bring perfect wisdom in your life. Your ideal counselor could diagnose you with perfect accuracy. You'd find yourself filled with insight and clarity, guided toward truth and able to make decisions which yield far less negative consequences and have exponential benefits.

With the ideal counselor, you wouldn't be stuck with the status quo ... instead you'd be empowered for change and better living. It would be nice if you didn't have to pay for your counselor's time. Better yet, it would be nice if your counselor could just go with you wherever you are. **All of this is what the Holy Spirit does!**

It begins when we say to the Spirit, "I want to be your counselee. I want to have deep, private sessions with you. I'm tired of trying to solve my problems myself. I'm tired of carrying life-draining anxieties. I want to ruthlessly follow your counsel. I want you to be *my* counselor."

The greatest counselor in the world helps us grow. And some of the ways that people grow in the knowledge of God and insight into the Bible is through the work of the Spirit within them. That's why, when someone becomes a Christ-follower, the truths in the Bible become more clear to them—there's a partnership taking place because of the Holy Spirit's presence.

The Spirit gives us insight into truth. The Spirit also gives us wisdom. Listen to this promise from the Bible found in the book of James: [SLIDE...] **"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).** God gives wisdom that we need through the Spirit. Here's how this can work. This week when you face a situation that needs wisdom, insight, and guidance, whether it's a: • Significant decision • A tough parenting situation • A relational challenge • A dilemma at work • A need for time management

First, stop. Be still—even at work, just take a moment to quiet your heart. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom and insight. And listen. The Spirit will bring Scripture to mind. You will have insights—sometimes a nudge to make the right choices. He'll guide! But you must listen.

When we partner with the Spirit through the course of every day, we start to build a healthy dependence on him. We become sensitized to his presence. It is as though he is flowing through us with the freshness of a mountain river. We're no longer trying to close the gap by trying harder, or pretending, or switching, or even giving up. We will discover that from within, rivers of living water are flowing from our belly ... and the fullness of life that Jesus promised will be ours because God is closer than we think. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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