

Derek Flood

Intimacy with God

INTIMACY WITH GOD

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Introduction:

How to approach this book

In my circle of friends there was a phrase that got tossed around a lot, “Personal relationship with God.” A fire was sparked inside me ever since I heard it. I wanted to know God the same way that Jesus did when he was on earth. Maybe I was asking for too much, but the desire was insatiable. This ache to know God would not be content with Status Quo Christianity. It refused to “Sit down and be quiet.” It longed to kill the veil between God and me; to strip down the walls I so fruitlessly beat at. It was a yearning for intimacy.

This book is the product of that search, and has been around ten years in the making. During that time I have had a chance to read other books on this subject, (in fact I read every book I could get my hands on, in and out of print), and found for the most part that the most recent works were over 50 years-old, most over 100 years. Thus this book is an attempt to practically sketch out in

non-encumbered modern language what it means to be intimate with God—how to develop and maintain a relationship with God.

There are no flowery easy-answers here. After reading this book you will not find yourself in uninterrupted dialog with God, or enveloped in a constant heavenly stream of intense and ecstatic feelings. Paul said we see God here “through a glass darkly.” Only in Heaven will our union be complete. After my search my heart still longs for Heaven where “I will fully know, even as I am fully known.” Yet though it is unfinished, intimacy with God on this earth is still real, and to know God, even partially is indescribably life-wrenchingly amazing. In the end what I have found is trust. I know that God is here, now, and that I am loved, always.

Like any relationship, our relationship with God will take time. This is a small book, and I suppose most people could go through it rather quickly. It is intended however to be read slowly, one chapter at a time—prayerfully. The paper is pretty intense reading, so you may want to go off-line after loading into your browser, or print it first and then read it. After reading each chapter, take some time to digest the concepts, and to be with God. It is easy to mentally assent to a concept or idea, but it takes work to live it. This work is building

and developing our own relationship with God, and nothing—not this book or anything else—can replace that real interaction.

While this book is intended to be practical, you won't find any diagrams telling you exactly how to pray. In the end this would be just as impractical as a book on romance that gives tips on making candlelight dinners “and other creative ideas.” It's impractical because it's a copy of someone else's expression of love, and therefore often inauthentic. Instead I have tried to address the principles that hold true in relationships for all of us.

As far as the language used, I have tried to find a vocabulary that communicated these concepts, without bringing in a lot of other cultural or religious baggage attached to certain words that might distract from the message's intent. I have also attempted to formulate the concepts in the way we think today. It is my prayer that this book would bring these truths closer to your understanding, and help you to grow closer to God.

Chapter 1:
The Gaze of the Soul

*“The innermost strands are the strongest.
I need no outer props to hold up my faith, for my faith
holds me.”*

-E Stanley Jones

We're inclined to think there must be some secret to attaining intimacy with God that comes in a flash of enlightenment—some trick, or technique we must learn, and that once found, will whisk the seeker up into constant communion with God. This elusive search for easy answers is epitomized by the current assortment of pseudo-Christian self-help books available. Book stores are filled with literature that promises to help you lose weight, save your marriage, build your self-esteem, or discipline your time, *“Just by following these 3 easy steps!”* Unfortunately life is rarely that simple. We are

dependent on God, and the only “secret” is that if we desire to know God more, we must rely on God for our answer—not on anything we can learn or do, but on God. Intimacy with God is not a spiritual state to achieve, but a relationship. We may think what we need is more faith, more trust, holiness, hunger.... But the question is, faith in whom? Holiness to whom? Trusting whom? Hunger for whom? It is not a thing that we seek, but a person. The question to ask is not what, but who.

To listen to some Christian circles though, you’d get just the opposite impression. There’s always a story of amazing success in prayer or some person claiming to have a direct line to Heaven. It can be confusing when a guy on TV tells you his life is a constant stream of success and miracles. “*And you could do it too!*” they exclaim, “*If you just had enough faith...*” I imagine the feeling is similar to the frustration a poor person feels when being told by a yuppie to “just get a job.” Jesus taught that the poor in spirit were the ones to be admired and envied, not the rich; because the poor understand that we all need to rely on God, and not ourselves, in order to grow closer.

The Charismatic movement has brought lots of focus onto experiencing God, and this is in many ways a positive and needed counter-balance to the head-

oriented expressions of faith of other movements. It has unfortunately also often times led people to have unrealistic (and unbiblical) expectations of God, and to an unbalanced focus on emotions and self-fulfillment that has led to a great deal of disillusionment and hurt in the church. The goal of this book is to present a biblical, healthy, and realistic view of what intimacy with God means, and how we can develop it in our lives. That relationship is not dependent on our strength of faith, but on God and our learning to trust and rest in God's love.

FAITH IN FAITH

It's easy to get turned around in our culture of instant gratification, get-rich-quick schemes, super heroes, and superstition. W. Bingham Hunter talks of that Christian abracadabra "*In Jesus' name.*"

I was told as a young Christian that the phrase *In Jesus' name* was essential to God hearing my prayer. Without it prayers would not get through. I remember wondering subsequently if a prayer I heard offered with a naked *Amen* at the end would really work. Later I noticed that some saints tended to pray with much emphasis on *in Jesus' name*, often drawing the words out and

expressing real emotion. Others seemed just to tack them on at the end, almost as an after thought. More recently I have met persons who hold that evoking Jesus' name has direct power of its own. And once I was confronted by a very zealous believer who explained that praying in Jesus' name would actually *force* the father to give me *whatever* I asked.¹

He goes on to explain that what praying in Jesus' name really means is to pray as his ambassador, and with his intent. It doesn't give us a blank check, but means having our prayer echo God's heart and will.

Much of the confusion in this area comes from a misunderstanding of what faith is. We seem to think faith is something created within ourselves in order to be heard by God; a something pulled out of nothing, like a rabbit from a hat. If we can "muster" enough of it, then mountains will move. In times of crisis we work up this forced effort to believe and, already drained from the crisis, become overwhelmed. This added weight called "faith," instead of bringing us life, has added the yoke of

1 W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, (Intervarsity: Downers Grove Ill., 1989). This concept is discussed in more depth in chapter 3. For a further biblical analysis of this concept I would highly recommend the book by Dr. Hunter.

guilt to our misery. We think “*If I just had faith; if I would just believe hard enough then my situation would change.*” People see faith as this mysterious force which magically changes things around them. And they feel condemned if they don’t seem to “have” it.

To see how silly and backwards this sounds, just imagine if you tried to use this same “faith” with people. When we say we have faith in a friend it simply means that we trust them. I have faith in my friends, but this doesn’t mean I possess some power that makes them respond in my favor. There is no inherent power in faith, faith is simply trusting God.

A.W. Tozer wrote that, “*faith is the gaze of the soul upon a loving God.*”² God is here, whether we have the faith to believe it or not, and is willing and able to help us. Our faith does not change God, but it does change us. When we don’t believe, we shut ourselves off from seeing God’s power and influence, just as we shut out the rest of the world around us by closing our eyes. God is standing right in front of us saying, “Listen, I love you!” yet by unbelief, we can shut the eyes of our heart—blinding us from seeing the one who loves us.

2 A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1982). Originally published in 1948.

Our lack of sight doesn't mean God will cut off our food, or stop supplying for our needs "because you don't have enough faith." Paul writes, "*If we are faithless, He will still remain faithful. For He cannot deny Himself*" (2 Tim 2:13).³ Without faith though, we cannot see that it was God who did it. We are numbed to Christ's presence nearness in our lives. Without faith you can't notice that God has remained faithful to you, providing for your needs, watching over you, loving you, because your eyes are closed.

If this is still difficult for you, think again of how trust works in human relationships, (after all it is a relationship we are talking about). Your trusting of a friend does not compel their love. My trusting you does not somehow cause you to love me. Trust does not initiate love nor does it maintain it. What it does do is open your heart to receive that love. We tend to look at faith as how we reach God:

Faith as a vehicle:



3 Except where noted all quotes are from the New International Version.

But in reality it is God who does the reaching. Faith is merely letting God into our needs—opening our hearts. God is reaching for us. Faith’s only work is to let God in. Consequently a more accurate picture of faith’s role is this:

Faith as a door:



We have simply to open the door and let the grace that has always been there, welling up, come flooding in, filling our hearts and lives with the presence of Christ. In the simply titled book “Prayer,” O. Halesby writes,

“If any man open the door, I will come into him.”

Notice carefully every word here. It is not our prayer which draws Jesus into our hearts. Nor is it our prayer which moves Jesus to come into us.

All He needs is access. He enters of His own accord because He desires to come in. And He enters in wherever He is not denied admittance.

As air enters in quietly when we breath, and does its normal work in our lungs, so Jesus enters quietly into our hearts and does His blessed work there.

Notice how graciously prayer has been designed. To pray is nothing more involved than to let Jesus into our needs.⁴

Faith is simply trusting, opening your heart. The rest of this book will be devoted to understanding and developing this intimate trust between us and God.

4 O. Halesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1931).

Chapter 2:
***The Cornerstone
of Intimacy***

*“Can you by searching find God?
Can you know the Almighty to perfection?
It is high as Heaven; what can you do? Deeper than
Hell; what can you know?”
-The book of Job*

Faith is opening your heart to see, but when our hearts are clogged with distraction and insecurity, this “simple” act may elude us. In fact, one of the first things you’ll notice, when you begin to seek intimacy with God, is how great the distance seems between the two of you. We search for God and find first our own selfishness, laziness, and most of all helplessness. In our loud MTV culture of diversion, stilling your heart in prayer can be disturbingly quiet. When all the distractions are gone, you can begin to hear how loud the inner turmoil is—the

unrest in your heart. Most of all you come to see how far away you are, and questions arise: What does it really mean to trust God? And how can we find God when our past ties us up with disappointments, guilt, and false hope?

Every one of us has been lost as a child. You no doubt remember frantically searching for your mother in a crowd; fearing you would never see her again. You look back and forth, your eyes racing across all the unfamiliar faces, but she's nowhere in sight. You brake into a run, but then realize you don't know which direction to go in. Today is no different. We are like a little child completely dependent on God, and totally lost on our own.

So how can we begin to bridge the gap? You know your need and your heart cries out to know God more, but sometimes it feels like you're just praying into the air. At times the silence is too much. You need distraction, something to fill your time and ease the pain. But you know that consoling with friends, or attempting to return to familiar times and things that have comforted you in the past would only result in temporarily avoiding the problem.

In times like these, we feel helplessly dependent, like a

speck in a huge universe. This is good, because it means we are “becoming like little children” (Mt.18:3).⁵ This is how we always are in God’s eyes, and if we wish to enter into a deeper knowledge of God, the first step is to see ourselves realistically.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

We are limited and dependent, especially when it comes to our relationship with God. This is so painfully obvious that it begs the question: “when it’s so self-evident, why are we filled with such anxiety about it?” Dependency threatens us. We feel the need to be secure and in control—*in and of ourselves*. A quick look around though will show that none of us are. We all have our little security blankets of romance, success, philanthropy, etc., but they only serve to cover up our actual condition.

As westerners though, and especially as Americans, from day one we’ve had it deeply ingrained into our minds that in order to have value as people we must be

5 In our sentimental culture, “becoming like little children” implies being innocent and sweet. In biblical times however, the emphasis was far more on their dependence. Compare Paul’s analogy in Galatians 4:1.

self-sufficient. This myth of American society praises self-reliance and independence; it tells us we can control our destiny, manage our time and money, and achieve our full potential, “*If you just work hard enough.*” In our Americanized thinking, to *purposely* be dependent on someone else (even God), is a totally foreign concept to us. In this western paradigm, admitting that we need God so much would imply that we are pitiful and weak and therefore worthless.

This couldn’t be farther from the truth. If God gave everything to save you, it naturally follows that you were worth it. Our value in God’s eyes is not based on self-sufficiency, but on the fact that we belong to God. To understand this we must understand “worth” as God does. A parent doesn’t love a child because they have “deserved” it. Worth or value in the context of a family is intrinsic. As part of God’s family, you were created valuable, and don’t need to “earn” God’s love. In fact, there’s absolutely nothing you can say or do to make God love you more. (This too is an area where we are dependent.) God doesn’t love your potential, or Jesus in you—God loves you, and loves you unconditionally.

From the beginning, Adam and Eve were dependent on God. In Heaven, through all eternity, we will still be dependent on God. We were made to be so. Dependency

is not a result of a fallen nature—the only thing fallen about it is our pride, refusing to own up to it, to admit our need—Dependency is our natural state. There’s no need for it to be buried and denied. This self-sufficiency so fruitlessly sought after doesn’t exist. Our lives are always empty without God.

DEPENDENCY VS. DIGNITY

Once we have accepted our dependency it is not uncommon to hear theological statements like, “*we can do nothing good*” or “*our love is meaningless.*” Taken at face value, this threatens our worth by calling our efforts worthless. It seems these two human traits are in conflict, so we must accept one and suppress the other. We suppress our dependency out of fear of worthlessness, and likewise, suppress our dignity out of fear that our ability and value might undermine God’s necessity. In fact, we fear that if we acknowledge *any* value or competence in us, that we won’t need God anymore.

Debasing ourselves, or downgrading our own love as worthless to bring God stolen glory is really not necessary. It’s a fear that springs from a lack of faith—or better—a lack of understanding. We’re afraid that God is

not big enough, so we lie about ourselves, our value and our capability, in order to put God into a good light. The fact is though, even with all our ability and potential, we still won't put God out of a job. One result of this denial of dignity is the current wave of apathy and mediocrity in the church. Why bother to plan or practice when it all depends on the Holy Spirit anyway? If all our deeds are worthless, then we don't need to try. In this world of pre-chewed truth and paint by numbers creativity, there is no room for a Bach, Bonhoeffer, or for that matter, Jesus.

Our dignity and competence are just as God-given as our need for God. Dependency on God is not an excuse for us to throw off all responsibility, and become little shapeless worms for Jesus, singing: *"God rules my life and then I don't have to think about it."* This sounds much more like a candidate for cult membership, where the followers are controlled by their authoritarian leaders. A dependency on man, and not on God.

Here we begin to see where our fear of dependency comes from: Dependency on things (whether cult, or a multitude of other human crutches) *does* effect our dignity. It smothers and enslaves us, while dependency on God fulfills and expands us. Our fear comes from wrongly assuming that dependency on God is the same

as dependency on things; but far from producing worms, or promoting escapism, dependency on God actually makes us truly secure and independent. Secure, because we find our place with God. Independent because we are freed from imbalanced dependencies, and are free again to enjoy these things in their proper healthy place in our lives. Thus with God we can have dependency with dignity.

IDOLATRY

Dependency on things can come in many forms: personal philosophy, your beliefs, morality, social comfort of a church, religious rituals and routines, spiritual gifts, fill in the blank—yet all have one factor in common: none of these security blankets can stretch far enough to cover our entire wide and complex lives. One day your world falls apart through divorce, cancer, a lay-off, and then, suddenly, your polite answers don't cut it. It's expecting God-like results from very human things.

Even friends and family are not a sufficient base. Not only will they at times let you down or not be there, but people were never meant to fulfill all our longings for unconditional love. To expect it from them is to expect the impossible. No matter how sincere and earnest,

human love is still far too weak. Despite what all the schmaltzy love songs in the radio say, people were not meant to be God to you.

When our love runs out; when our illusion of moral perfection is shattered by uncovered pride, or lust, or whatever makes you stumble; when no one seems to be there for you; when our seemingly vast philosophy of life is in over its head; then it is painfully clear that we need to reach beyond our limits to God who is both inexhaustible and never-ending.

Knowledge is fleeting, people come and go. God does not need to take any of these “foundations” away from us. They simply run down, fade away, go out of style, or move to another town all by themselves. Here today, gone tomorrow. If you build on them they will fail you. Unfortunately, most people need to learn this the hard way.

Contrary to popular “suffering saint” imagery, being dependent on God does not mean living in denial and want, stranded alone on an island like Robinson Crusoe—without friends, family or external support. God has placed all these beneficial things into our lives to be enjoyed. Rather, it simply means not making them into our final source, and thus expecting in a leech-y

codependent fashion more from these things than they were ever meant to give.

Dostoevsky said, “man cannot live without worshipping something.”⁶ Because of our inherent need, we will inevitably attach ourselves to some security—success, family, religion, whatever it is, humans can not function without a “god.” But when our God is real, this will result in a responsible, secure, independent, and intimate life. Not unlike the life of a certain defiant, bold, outspoken rebel from Nazareth who was completely dependent on his Father.

As we’ve seen in this and the previous chapter, great faith rests not so much in great confidence, as it does in great dependency; the emphasis being placed not on us, but on God. This truth is the foundation that undergirds every step of our relationship with God: *The cornerstone to intimacy is dependency on God.*

6 Fyodor Dostoevsky, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew, *The Adolescent*, (New York: Publisher, 1971).

Chapter 3:

Reckless Abandon

*“Trouble me, with all your cares and worries,
Bother me with all your needs and doubts.”*

-10,000 Maniacs

We were made to be dependent on God. This is the reality that we live in. For many of us though, bringing our lives consequently in line with this truth will require a paradigm shift—a re-thinking and re-ordering of the way we live our lives. To do this, we need to learn to see our selves as God does, to find our place in God’s world.

When I was a boy there was a do-it-yourself ice cream parlor we used to go to. The set-up was a bit unconventional: You bought two scoops of ice cream, and then went through a self-serve line filled with all sorts of syrups and fruits and candies. My sister and I always loaded on so much chocolate, caramel, cashews, strawberries, bananas, coconuts, whipped cream, and

anything else you can think to put on a sundae, that it would spill over on to our trays forming a little syrup lake. (Which to our parents horror we happily lapped up.) I hear the place eventually went bankrupt.

I used to view Heaven as sort of like that: a do-it-yourself paradise. Everyone's own version of what they personally thought perfection was. For you, Heaven would be one thing, for me another. But as C.S. Lewis said, "*Heaven will look like it's made for you because you were made for Heaven.*"⁷ God's world isn't custom-made for us, *we were custom-made for God's world.*

Because of this, the best, indeed the only way to lead a fulfilled and realized life is to discover who we are and how we work as part of God's creation. This is hard though, since our conception of how we define our selves and our desires has been warped to a degree both by our upbringing and our environment. And so we find ourselves seduced by the "fulfillment" of instant gratification, and intoxicated by the promise of "happiness" that escapism claims, or blinded by the "winner" status of the egotistical and selfish, until we have adapted a "sin is fun" outlook on life. In the movies, the bad guys get all the cool costumes, and even

7 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

at church living dependently on God is often described in negative words like obedience and submission, bringing to mind a life resigned to becoming a blank-faced celibate somewhere in Africa surrounded by lots of dust.

This assumes a very uncreative and small God. Despite this Hollywood version of Holiness, it is sin that makes us boring. Psychologists can predict the exact behavior patterns that will dominate your life if you are the victim of a certain neurosis or addiction. Sin makes us the same, but only God can tell what the individual creative expression of your unique personality will become when it is freed to be itself.

Understanding God's will isn't some celestial version of "*Eat your lima beans—they're good for you*" (after all, God invented taste buds). When God places God's own desires in our hearts this is not forcing us to like something we hate, but rather helping us to find the desires that really fulfill us. Through this interaction we come to want what God wants, and our heart is back to normal, that is, free. This chapter will focus on how to do this in our daily life. Discovering what we, as God's creation, really want is a process. It is the result of an ongoing interaction between us and God. The Bible calls this the renewing of our minds; as we spend time with

God, God's heart and desires rub off on us a little. It's about getting our hearts to beat with God's again, getting God's desires under our skin. This is possible through a life of abandonment—a life lived openly before, and rooted in God.

ALL YOUR HEART DESIRES

Even if we want to, understanding the desires God has placed in our hearts is, of course, easier said than done. We have a tendency to hear what we want, and rationalize situations to conform to our wishes. For instance, if a boy is attracted to the girl next door, he will unconsciously place a meaning behind every look, every nod that she gives him. "*Did you see the way she smiled at me?!*" he exclaims. Since he wants to see it, he does—even if it's not really there. Similarly, because of this rationalization process, even though God has put a desire in our heart, we may misinterpret what our heart is saying, because in order to act on a desire we must first decipher it in our mind.

This is where the concept of *consecration* (as the earlier Christian writers called it), or *abandonment* (as I am calling it here) comes into play—we consecrate, or abandon over our lives into God's care, recognizing our

inherent dependency and living consequently in that reality. Practically that means not only bringing desires, hopes, cares, worries or troubles to God as we have done with our life as a whole, but goes a step further: After praying for instance that God guides or helps us in something, rather than jumping on the next open door that comes along, or general “feeling-of-peace-one-feels-when-doing-what-one-wants-to-do,” an abandoned heart will bring this circumstance or impression before God as well, in a lifestyle of openness and honesty.

Living in harmony with the reality of our dependency takes some doing. Being dependent on God by *God's* strength is a very hard thing to do when we're so used to doing the opposite: “*My* striving for *my* understanding of how to be dependent on God by *God's* strength.” It's been said that the beginning of all wisdom is to “know thyself.” Coming behind all of our own ulterior motives and misconceptions to find what our hearts are really longing for is nearly impossible. We all carry a lot of baggage around with us, and there is always a chance that a cultural or emotional bias may crop up. But here lies the beauty in God's sovereignty: God is stronger than our weakness. The Bible teaches that we should come into the light (God's presence) so the deeds of darkness may be exposed. In other words, through being with God, these misconceptions will come to light. We

don't need to go picking at scabs on our own, or digging in the backyard for bones we've buried. Doing so would be nothing more than attempting to be dependent on God by our *own* will, strength, and astuteness which is of course missing the point. God knows your faults. When the time is right, God will tell you about it.

What we should strive for is not to be aware of every possible deception and selfishness in us, but instead to constantly live openly before God—coming into the light and laying our lives before Him again and again. In this way the overlooked details will naturally become consecrated as they come into our awareness, just as a leaf is swept away by the flow of a river. This is what a life of abandonment is all about—a lifestyle of openness and honesty before God.

CASTING YOUR CARES

Jesus, in a parable of comical understatement, tells how two sparrows are sold for a penny yet God looks after them and provides for their needs. He then asks rhetorically, if we just might be worth more than a penny to God? Because of God's care, Jesus tells us to be anxious for nothing. This goes of course completely against our grain. We are used to doing just the opposite,

perpetually worrying about our problems, going over them again and again in our heads, churning and stirring them in the back of our mind until it's all we can see; rehashing scenarios and imagined mental conversations in a futile attempt to "solve" them for the umpteenth time. We've seen that we receive our needs from God through our interaction together. But what does it mean practically to "give" our cares, desires, or needs to God?

Our lives are a lot like little Harvey Stuttermeyer when he was struggling beneath the heavy weight of a cabinet. He strained with all his might against the burden, but just couldn't hold on any longer. In defeat, he dropped it, but it didn't fall! He looked around to see his father (Stanley Stuttermeyer), who had been holding the weight effortlessly the entire time. The boy never was lifting it—he had only been straining against something that was already being held.

One reason we cling so hard to our cares is the fear that if we give them to God it means that they will be lost. It seems to let go we need to cease to care, to forget about our needs. Didn't Jesus said not to worry? and if we don't worry about it, doesn't that mean that we don't care? So goes our reasoning, but giving something to God doesn't imply that it is abandoned or lost. Giving in this context means entrusting, as you would entrust an

accountant to prepare your taxes for you, not because you do not care about them, but precisely because you *do* care and are confident that they will be in competent hands. The “abandonment” does not refer to neglect. We should not neglect doing all that we can, nor does it mean we cease to care, but it does mean that we cease to carry the burden ourselves. Abandonment refers to the openness of our heart. It has a lot to do with trust, or better, entrusting our needs into God’s care.

Casting our cares is not some spiritual ATM machine transaction where you insert a promise or a faith-token and are zapped with spiritual power. God is personal and interacts though relationship. All God’s gifts, anything you ever receive from God are always through relationship. They are not like cookies God hands out, separate from the giver—mom-cookie-child, giver-gift-receiver. When God gives us love, God is giving Himself, when God gives us peace, God gives Himself.⁸

8 Theologically God contains and fulfills both male and female, being their creator. So to call God “he” isn’t really accurate. It’s a limitation in the language, but the alternatives “she” and “it” in our culture, would be even more distracting. I have made an effort therefore to avoid personal pronouns in this book when referring to God. With this sentence I gave up though. I personally find “God gave Godself” distracting as well. I ask the reader’s indulgence here.

And when God reveals his will, it is by sharing His heart. When we come to God with our hearts and needs, they are not met by some impersonal wave of spiritual “power.” God does love us practically and instrumentally, but it is the interaction itself that leads to intimacy. Through it we get to know God and ourselves better, and thus grow closer.

These promises were never intended to be used as a formula, but to reveal God’s character to us. When Mary’s brother Lazarus became sick, she sent out for Jesus with the request that he would heal her brother’s sickness. She was familiar with Jesus’ healing and so was fully confident that he could heal her brother. His promise came back to her: “This sickness will not end in death,” but then her brother died. Imagine how she felt. She had had plenty of faith, she even had a direct word

I have left all the personal pronouns as they are in the Bible quotes (and other quotes), but actually the Greek does not distinguish with pronouns between male and female as English does, but is more arbitrary. For example the pronoun for Holy Spirit in Greek would be “it” since the word “spirit” happens to be grammatically neuter in Greek. In Hebrew the word for spirit is female and so the pronoun would be “she” since the word is grammatically feminine. Grammatical gender is of course not the same as physical gender. So the male pronoun is in many cases imposed on the text by the English translation, not by the original biblical language.

from God to her specific situation. But she could not hold onto this promise now. The only thing she could hold onto was the character of God. The only thing she has left was the trust in who Jesus was.

Like Mary who saw her brother raised from the dead and her view of who Jesus was expanded, what we can expect from God when we come with our cares and needs is that the answer will often at the same time surprise us, and fulfill us. God does not answer our prayers in a bell-hop sense, God hears and answers you as a complete person.

Life had demonstrated to Mary two facts about reality, as Jesus said: *“In this world you will have trouble, but take heart I have overcome the world.”* God promises us only one thing unconditionally: himself. God will never leave you, no matter how bad it gets. Paul, who certainly had his share of hardship writes:

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:5-7)

CLOSER TO INTIMACY

Trust is learned by experience, and as it grows, letting go becomes easier to do as we learn that our cares are in good hands. This is the difference between being careless, and carefree. When we entrust ourselves wholly to God, the result is not an empty shell, or a life of want, but the fulfillment of our needs and of our true potential as people.

The healing of our hearts takes time and the outward symptoms of our deeper problems may be the last to go. That's why we often ask God to heal us or forgive us only to have the problem crop up again later. Likewise, when we bring our cares to God in a lifestyle of trusting abandonment, chances are that they will show up on our doorstep again at first. This is not due to God refusing to answer our prayer because of a lack of faith, nor to an inability or unwillingness to help us in our need; but because *intimacy and the healing of our hearts is a process*.

In the following diagram, Josh McDowell traces the progression of trust in friendship that leads to intimacy which sheds light not only onto the development of human relationships, but of intimacy with God as well:

Trust – (leads to) – **Vulnerability**,
Vulnerability – (leads to) – **Transparency**,
Transparency – (leads to) – **Intimacy**⁹

In McDowell's list the initial step is an assumed trust based on the other's integrity, (God seems to have good integrity); so we trust them with a little of ourselves, therefore making ourselves vulnerable. At this point the true character (transparency) of both parties is revealed by their response of vulnerable trust. Here the initial dangerous trust based on hope becomes a known resting trust based on knowledge—it is this deeper trust that leads to intimacy. It's the difference between knowing something in your head, and knowing it in your heart.¹⁰

With God, we often feel guilty that we are not instantly intimate, or believe our fear of intimacy is unnatural. Many of us feel overwhelmed and frightened by God's love. This is all quite normal. Trust has not had a chance to settle in, and intimacy without trust is terrifying. It takes time for vulnerable trust to grow into resting trust. So don't worry if a care comes back, just bring it again.

9 Josh McDowell and Dick Day, *Why Wait*, (San Bernardino, Ca.: Here's Life Publishers, 1987).

10 This knowing trust leading to intimacy is further developed in the following chapter.

Think of it as an opportunity to be with God more, and through this contact trust will grow. As they say, practice makes perfect.

Chapter 4:
Abiding

*“Thou breathedst and I drew in breath
and pant for thee.
I tasted, and hunger and thirst.
Thou touched me and I burned for thy peace”
-St. Augustine*

Some people say that God can't dwell where there is sin. Jesus showed us he does. He walks through the streets, filled with death and loneliness, and kneels beside the empty faces. God is with us, sin or not, always. God never leaves, never looks away, even when we wish he would. God never leaves for a moment. Psalm 139 in the Old Testament expresses the wonderful truth that God is here wherever we are, whatever we're doing, now, and always. The New Testament says something even greater: If you are a Christian, then God is not only here—God is in you, at this moment, and you are in God—closer than near.

Contrary to popular theology, we don't need to ask the Holy Spirit to come—the Holy of Holys is inside of you. This is much deeper than physical proximity; it is about intimacy. You are in God's soul, subject of God's thoughts and affection. Your heart resides at the core of God's being, and God's in yours. There is no closer a union possible, no deeper a love.

The question is then, why don't we experience this? Why don't we live in the constant overwhelming embrace of God's love for us? Why isn't our interaction with God an unbroken stream of communication? To some extent we may have tasted of this love—a short glimpse that left us burning for more, a moment, a season when we first believed, filled with joy and discovery and tears. But then it was gone, and we are left with the question: Where did our first love go?

There are three basic experiences of faith. The first is the early faith, largely dependent on emotions where most Christians begin. Everything is wonderful. God answers all your prayers. You're happy. We can live off of this milk for a time, sucking away, happily absorbed in our spiritual nursing. Until, it seems, the honeymoon ends: The feelings go, problems and insecurities set in, prayers go unanswered, and we find ourselves living from

Sunday to Sunday, waiting to get our next spiritual fix, in order to recapture that feeling of closeness with God again. We become discouraged and someone tells us about the second experience of faith.

This is a faith based not on feelings, but on biblical truth. It is explained that emotions can't be trusted because they are only indirectly connected with reality. (For instance, we feel the emotion of fear, sorrow, or relief in a movie even though we are in no real danger and nothing has really happened). Emotions are additionally often mixed up with non-connected past experiences and fears, rather than on the current situation, (like having a traumatic experience with a dog as a child, and then being afraid of all dogs as an adult). We are therefore counseled by the second school to muster all our will, and *decide* to believe that we are close to God and have all we need, even though we still *feel* far away and unhappy.

There is a lot to be learned from this. We are a complicated blend of body, soul, and spirit. Many times when we are feeling far away from God emotionally, what we may in fact need is to get some exercise, or take a nap, or open a window and get some fresh air, or sunlight. You'd be surprised how much these things can change your prayer life. It is very important that we are

in tune with ourselves, understanding what our body and our emotions are telling us, but this does not mean that reason is a substitute for feeling. We can not be content with an affectation, and although we admit that this second school of faith is more reasonable, we secretly long to return to the former days. The shallow solution to merely decide to believe is dissatisfying. We want the fire back again.

Most Christians stop here, somewhere in between milk and solid food—perpetually taking nourishment from a bottle that is filled with nutritious formula, but is at the same time is cold, plastic, and impersonal. There is though a third experience of faith. This third faith comes from trust. Like the second, it is based on unchanging biblical truth, and like the first the joy is there too. This third experience of faith—or simply put, a mature developed trust—is the focus of this chapter.

MATURITY

David wrote, “My heart is steadfast, like a weaned child in its mother’s arms” (Psalm 131:2).¹¹ A weaned child

11 Notice David does not say, “Like a weaned child, alone in a crib while its mother is off somewhere talking on the phone,” but rather, “Like a weaned child in its mothers arms.”

does not fearfully, desperately cling to the mother, sucking away for dear life. This is infancy. Instead, the child has grown in trust and confidence, and quietly rests in the arms of its mother. It does not strive or cling because it knows that it is safe and held. This weaning experience comes in our relationship with God when we really come to know the truth of God's love for us in our heart and can rest in it. The feelings are deeper than the former emotional ones which come and go, because they are rooted in God's love. This is what Paul is addressing when he says, "Until we all become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." and, "So they might have the full riches of complete understanding."¹² In Ephesians 3:18 he prays that we would,

...grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ [for you], and to know [by experiencing it] this love which surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure [to the rim] of all the fullness of God.

Read that over again slowly. To live in that kind of love, to be in intimate interaction with Christ; this is the

12 Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 2:2. See also Colossians 4:12 where Paul prays that we would be "mature and fully assured" in God's will.

Christian maturity Paul talks about. It seems so beautiful, and yet so far away. How can we ever get that deep into God's love? I've got good news: you *are* there. Paul isn't praying that we could achieve or reach this state of intimacy, but that we could realize where we are. Just one verse before he says,

I pray that you ***being*** rooted and established in love [Past tense—it's already been done], may have power together with ***all*** the saints [not just the really spiritual ones] to grasp how wide and long and high and deep ***is*** [present tense] the love of Christ.

As Christians we have been rooted and established in God's love, and at this moment are in intimate union with Christ. You have, now, all the love of God directed towards you. As you read this, at this moment, you are in the presence of God. It is not a point to reach or attain, it is a realization, a discovery, an acceptance of a truth: You are loved, more than you can know.

REST

How we come to this restful knowledge with God is different than you might think. We are accustomed to rationalistic thought—*We experience it, then we believe*

it. This is true in science but not always in relationships, and because of this misunderstanding we may be waiting for some big “experience” with God before we believe. But if we insist on experience first, we are insisting on a contradiction. It’s like saying, “*You’ll have to show me you love me before I let you show me you love me.*” Trust is a process of learning, and the most important thing from our side is the openness of our heart to receive. It can seem like a lot of work, struggling and striving to remember the truth about us, squirming back and forth trying to find a comfortable position. This is the work of learning to rest. We do not need to strive to attain it, we need to stop kicking against it.

When Dana was growing up, there was a certain chair he loved—his father’s chair. It was a beautiful chair, rich and dark, but Dana knew he was never allowed to sit in it. Years passed and Dana was spending the night at a friend’s house. To his surprise, he saw the same chair! He pretended not to notice though, and went on with the evening. But that night, when the whole house was asleep, Dana stole down the stairs, as he had done at home, into the living room to sit in the chair. All the times he had been caught before raced across his mind. Gingerly, timidly, he sat down, ridged and watchful. But slowly, as he realized his father wouldn’t come, he let

himself relax. Sinking into the fabric, really sitting down for the first time in the plush chair, Dana slowly fell asleep. When he awoke the next morning, he found that someone had put a blanket over him.

Trust is learned. Our past experiences with trust—with learning to rest in the love of another—effect and shape all our subsequent relationships, including ours with God. Because of this we can learn a great deal about how to have an intimate relationship with God by examining and understanding our intimate relationships with each other. The three experiences of faith mentioned earlier draw a close parallel to the development of love in romantic relationships. Both begin with intense feelings, the thrill when his knee accidentally touches hers, butterflies in the stomach, and long deep stares into each other's eyes. As the relationship matures, it is not based on romantic moments though, but on letting the other into your heart. When a romance is only a search to capture the right romantic moment—as dating can often be—it has no basis for growth. We can do the same thing spiritually by going from Sunday to Sunday attempting to get our next spiritual high.

Relationships can grow only when trust is developed through the experience of being loved. Emotions and experiences are vital to the building of this trust, but

only in the context of love. When a romantic moment happens with someone who you know loves you, it is meaningful and wonderful, but it is a demonstration of the love not the basis for it. It is equally unhealthy to have a relationship based solely on emotions and the search for idealized intense “romantic moments,” as it is to try to act like we don’t need these times at all. When these moments are experienced within the context of trust, they enrich that trust, rather than merely providing an insecure neurotically-dependent escapist temporary “Sunday fix.” Thus a mature relational trust is not a denial of our need for these special times, nor is it an insecure addiction to them, but rather a healthy integration of these times into our lives in the context of trust and love.

In an immature relationship when we feel insecure, we have a need for constant reassurance and affirmation. We need to talk, to sit close together, to hug and nestle. All relationships, including our relationship with God, begin in this sheltered emotional stage. If we are sitting on the couch close together, and one of us goes to get some coffee, the union is not broken. With a young insecure relationship it can feel like it though, because trust has not developed. Hugging is not intimacy and love, it is an expression of it. The love is constant, the hugging (hopefully) is not.

What it means then, to live constantly in the presence of God, is to live in the knowledge of God's continual love for us, at this moment, and at any moment—to be able to rest in this love. As in any relationship, there will be times of intense emotional closeness. These times come and go, but if the relationship is mature, we know that the love remains constant. Intimacy with God is not a constant stream of intense feeling, it is the closeness that comes from experiential trust—knowing we are loved and abiding in this knowledge. To some this realization comes all at once, in a flash. But to most the Holy Spirit brings us there gradually and in steps. It takes time. But with both, the way to begin is to start with now.

Ironically one must really learn to truly be present here and now, rather than being hung somewhere in limbo in the past or the future like a bird suspended over an ocean finding no place to land. We spend our time caught in the future obsessed with our worries, or reveling in some vivid emotional time with God we long to recapture in our past. We bide our time caught in the regrets of the past, or setting our heart so much on some future date that we are no longer present here, right now (“maybe after I finish this book *then* I’ll be close to God”). We spend our time just about everywhere but right here. Even in good times we fail to be present, our insecure

heart thinking “sure it’s good now, but then it will go away and I’ll be here alone again.” So even when God is practically screaming in our face “I LOVE YOU!” we manage to be absent. One must cultivate the ability to live in the present moment with God—to really be here now.

Andrew Murray writes, “Each time your attention is free to occupy itself with the thoughts of Jesus, whether it be with time to think and pray or only for a few passing seconds, let your first thought be to say—now at this moment I do abide in Jesus.”¹³ As we do this we can be sure that God is not inactive or dispassionate about us. All of God’s love is directed towards you at this moment. It’s not about working up a feeling, but about resting in where you are right now. So whenever you think of it, let your heart come to rest in the knowledge that you are right now, at this moment, in the presence of God and deeply loved. Don’t worry if your concentration is bad, or your trust is weak. Don’t waste time in regret that you did not come sooner, or that your faith is small. Don’t worry if this message finds you unprepared. Come just as you are, begin right here, right now with this moment. Abide here in the present love of God. As time goes on trust will develop and mature, but

13 Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ*, (Pennsylvania: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1968).

Derek Flood

Intimacy with God

the way to begin is right here, right now. So put the book down.

Chapter 5:
The Silence of God

*“In the hour of trial,
each man must have his own convictions,
or he will find himself with none.”*

-A. Lloyd Jones

The Contemplative Monks, particularly St. John of the Cross, talk of the Dark Night of the Soul. It is said by the monks that if you are coming into intimacy with God, you will inevitably experience this Dark Night. These times of darkness and silence can range from periodical to chronic, from momentary ditches to long valleys. They can be the result personal tragedy or loss, a major life change, or spring from our own insecurities. The most vividly illustrated example is recorded in the book of Job, the record of one long agonizing silence. But Job was no exception, David had his valleys too, and Christ his Gethsemane. Silence takes as many different forms as there are individuals, but if we are in

the process of growing closer to God we are bound to encounter “growing pains.” Centuries ago John Bunyan wrote of the ebb and flow of perception—the darkness and silence that is part of our Christian experience:

It seemed very strange to me that though God sometimes visits my soul with wonderful blessed things, yet sometime afterwards, for hours at a time, I have been filled with such darkness that I could not even remember what the comfort was that had refreshed me before. Sometimes I have gotten so much out of my Bible that I could hardly stand it. At other times the whole Bible has been as dry as a stick to me.¹⁴

The story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus offers us profound insight into the nature and character of God in our lives in times of silence. Mary and Martha wrote to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was sick and asked Jesus to come. It is clear from the text that Mary knew that Jesus loved her and her brother. This is the same Mary that washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, and in the letter the sisters refer to Lazarus as “the one you love,” but Jesus chose to remain where he was for two days. He only conveyed the message “This sickness will not

14 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, (London: Meston, Scholar P., 1666).

end in death.”

When Christ did not come, and her brother died, Mary was devastated. When she has most needed God’s help he was inactive, and his promise that the sickness would not end in death turned out to be, in Mary’s eyes, false. She felt abandoned, alone, helpless, and without hope. Even if we know that God loves us as Mary did, silence is crushing. Sir Robert Anderson writes of the silence of God in the face of suffering:

The heart grows sick at the appalling story and we turn away with a dull but baseless hope that it may be in part at least untrue. But the facts are too terrible to make exaggeration in the record of them possible. Torn by wild beasts in the arena, torn by men as merciless as wild beasts, and, far more hateful, in the torture chambers of the Inquisition. His people have died, with faces turned to Heaven, and hearts upraised in prayer to God; but the Heaven has seemed as hard as brass, and the God of their prayers as powerless as themselves or as callous as their persecutors!¹⁵

Four days after Lazarus’ death, Jesus came. Mary fell at

¹⁵ Robert Anderson, *The Silence of God*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897).

his feet in tears and said to him “Lord if you had been here, he wouldn’t have died.” Partially because we know the story and its outcome already we half-expect Jesus to respond by saying something like “Oh ye of little faith did you not know that this is for the glory of God?.” But he doesn’t. His response is extraordinary and offers great insight into God’s character. The Greek word translated in the English as “deeply moved” means to make the snorting noise of a horse. In other words he was so overwhelmed with the sorrow that it literally knocked the wind out of him. It goes on to describe him as troubled in his spirit—in his heart Jesus was instinctually insulted at the injustice of suffering.

To anyone familiar with grief, these two reactions: on the one hand shock—an intellectual and spiritual numbness, and on the other hand anger at the evil of suffering—are exactly how we feel. Even though he knows that in a few minutes Lazarus will rise from the dead, the next thing he does is to weep. Not some pious controlled socially appropriate tears, but hot honest choking tears. He is deeply and intimately involved with us in our pain. God suffers with us, feels every anguish, knows every doubt. Being infinite does not mean merely infinitely large, but infinitely small as well, so that God understands and experiences our silence, our pain, with us, not just in a theoretical way, but deeply and

completely. Sometimes in our suffering, in the midst of silence we have the wind knocked out of us, and there is nothing left to pray with. You can be sure that at that moment God is praying for you with groans that words cannot express.

That Jesus was troubled is perhaps even more shocking to our theology than that he was overwhelmed. Like Job's summertime friends, in the face of suffering and pain we often feel the need to call evil good in a misguided attempt to defend God. God uses suffering in our lives to develop trust in our relationship together, but that does not mean that the evil, the suffering becomes good. Lazarus' death was not good.

Evil remains evil no matter how much good God may be pleased to reveal. Romans 8:28 does not say that God makes all things good, but rather that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." Confidence in God's love, presence, and providence does not require that we deny the objective reality of evil or say that pain really does not hurt. Jesus delighted in doing God's will, but he did not delight to go the cross. The text says that Jesus "For the joy set

before him *endured* the cross” (Heb 12:2).¹⁶

God used Lazarus’ death to show them and us that no matter how bad it gets, God is still in control. Mary knew that Jesus could have healed him, but she did not know that he was even stronger than death. Paul writes that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ—*nothing*. Now Mary knew this first hand.

Though this was a crucial lesson for Mary to learn, it did not make the death of Lazarus a good thing. Jesus felt this, and suffered it with Mary. God is not sitting comfortably in Heaven in our times of silence observing us from a far. God knows and experiences our pain vitally and intimately. This is not some celestial game of Chess for God. Silence hurts, and it is important to know that we are not abandoned. God understands, God entered the dark night of the soul at Gethsemane, crying on the cross “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?.” God suffered alone so that we, even in the silence, need never suffer alone. God was there, and even when we can’t see, God is here.

DOUBT

16 W. Bingham Hunter, *The God Who Hears*, (Pennsylvania: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986)

In the last chapter we saw a vision of deep trust and intimacy, but what do we do in the meantime, when this knowledge is somewhere between our head and our heart? What is especially hard about doubt, insecurity, and silence is that they are by their nature in unfamiliar territory for us. Mary had no problem believing that Jesus could heal her brother. She had experienced this. Her doubts came when he died. This was uncharted territory. When all the outward props are removed and we are left alone with just the trust we've built, our own inner doubts and insecurities can become clamorous and loud against a background of silence, and when this happens, our response is critical.

Doubt is a lot like anger—it can get bottled up, eating away at your soul, chewed over unhealthily like gossip, or it can be dealt with constructively. A vital distinction to make in this is between the *question* and the *emotion*—between *intellectual doubt*, which is asking hard questions that pull away our blinders and bring us closer to the truth that is in God, and *emotional doubt* which is largely based on fears and unrelated past experiences.

The nature of emotional doubt is often more of a vague, far away feeling than any particular thought. since it has no basis in reality, being based rather on our insecurities

and fears, it thrives on impressions rather than logic. The last thing it wants you to do is to think clearly. Then it would be discovered for what it is—a lie. Instead it gets us looking down at all the problems in and around us, and keeps us from looking up to God. It fills our eyes, so it's all we can see. It separates us from God.

These emotional doubts can be divided up in to two types: Those regarding God, and those regarding ourselves. In the first category, we may think God is unapproachable—maybe God's mad about something. God seems at times impersonal and frightening. These could be the result of something we've been told, or maybe we had a bad relationship and are transferring that to God. If your father beat you it is confusing to think of God as your father. If everyone you've ever loved has deserted you, you will most likely struggle with the fear of God leaving you, too. This projected slander clouds how we can love God and receive love from God.

Another less obvious way emotional doubt crops up is indirectly, by doubting ourselves. We think we are so fake, worthless, and sinful that God couldn't possibly want us. The question though, is not who are we, but who is God. It is unlikely that our evil could exhaust God's love.

When emotional doubts are exposed by times of silence, they reveal areas in our lives where trust has not yet developed. In this way they act as a sort of barometer, showing how far the trust in our relationship with God has developed—and by the same token, they present an opportunity for that trust to grow when we decide to believe—despite our fears and circumstance—in God’s present love. In these times, the best advise I have ever heard was that of Os Guinness. He counsels us to suspend judgment, keep faith, and do the last thing God told us to do. Never at a loss for a literary antithesis, he explains,

Faith may be in the dark about guidance, but it is never in the dark about God. What God is doing now may be a mystery, but who God is is not. So faith can remain itself and retain integrity by suspending judgment. Jesus underwrites such faith when he promises “I am the light of the world—no follower of mine shall wander in the darkness.” Jesus does not say that we will never walk in the dark but that we need not wander in the dark, or have a way of life at home in darkness.¹⁷

17 Os Guinness, *Doubt*, (Batavia, Il.: Lion, 1987).

The darkness won't last forever, and I think you'll find as you grow in your relationship with God that these times of silence will become fewer and farther in-between. We will always have trials, but not always of insecurity. In the meantime we can suspend judgment, remembering that what we do understand of God is good and loving and merciful, and what we do not understand we must commit to God's care in faith and dependency.

PAGAN WINGS

C.S. Lewis described pain as God's megaphone to get our attention. When his wife died of cancer and he wrote "A Grief Observed," a collection of his thoughts at the time, he did not wax quite so philosophical. Like a child when it cries, "*Mommy, why does it have to hurt?*" the answer we seek in our pain is not so much one of explanation but of relief. What we mean is "*Make it stop.*"

One reason we feel such pain is that we usually feel it alone. Bertrand Russell, when he still believed in God, said that he kept his doubts to himself for fear of destroying those around him. Those oppressed doubts destroyed him, however. One can only assume that

many are contained in his infamous book “Why I am not a Christian.” Our problem is not honesty, but isolation.

In Jesus’ dark night of the soul in Gethsemane he pleaded with his friends to help him. So far the story fits in well with our rugged individualist hero picture of Jesus. As the story is often conveyed, he asks his friends for help, and they let him down, but our hero (played by Bruce Willis) goes on to do it alone, the way God intended. He asks for help of course, but if you want something done right...

But this is not the way it really happened. Jesus was in anguish. He cried out to God in desperation. He said he was overwhelmed to the point of death, and finally needed the help of an angel to go on.

Think about that for a moment. *Jesus would not have been able to go to the cross without help.* He couldn’t make it on his own, and this was perfectly within the will of God for his life. As Christians we are happy to give help, but reluctant to admit that we need it. Jesus demonstrated though, that even in the most important test of his life, it was not a sin to need help. When he asked for the help of his friends, he really wanted it, and really needed it. And to be fair to the disciples, the Bible says were asleep because they were exhausted from

sorrow, not because they were lazy or callous.

We need each other. This not only applies to the comfort we can provide one another in times of emotional doubt, but to the intellectual side of doubt as well—having the courage together to work through the hard questions we have involving injustice, suffering, personal sin, and a myriad of theological concerns. Questioning is not an immature phase to get out of your system, but the expression of an honest and dependent soul.

Because we are human, and live perpetually within the blinders of culture, corruption in our thinking is inevitable and understandable. Therefore we must continually test, continually ask, continually seek. George Bernard Shaw famously said, “All great truths begin as blasphemies.” We must dare to ask the hard questions, to tear it down and build again. Our faith must be of such a mettle that it can withstand the arduous questions that refine it—questioning ourselves, (even our own concepts of God), but at the same time clinging to God. This way we can prune the tree without sawing the limb out from under us.

Most of our answers though, unfortunately tend to be the one paragraph type, meant to appease non-Christian skeptics. Questions are often mistakenly discouraged as

a sign of weak faith, or at best, patiently tolerated in the hopes that the seeker will “grow out of it.” At worst they are seen as a malicious smokescreen to cover up pride. There are many mature, trusting, humble Christians though, who know the issues better are tormented by these same questions. In “Pagan Wings,” Jace Seavers asks what so many of us are afraid to,

*Why have you cast us here so stranded,
Logged in the swallows of regret
Shot down by grief and empty handed,
Shouldering our souls with debt?*

*Why have you not broke down the silence,
And spoke with your celestial tongue?
We've called to you with inner violence,
You've left the snares we've set unstrung*

*Why do you hide from the shafts of man?
Is there safety in the dark?
Why is the past pregnant with legions
Of those who've searched for guiding sparks?*

*If our hearts are choked with evil
Why refuse to heal us now?
If you've the means to cure the feeble
Why won't you cast your pearls to sows?*

*Questions are the mortal cancer
Sweeping down on pagan wings
If I expect to find an answer
Why do I fear to ask these things?*

I have found that when I have tried the foundations of Heaven, God did not fall off the throne. But my faith was made more sure, and the misconceptions came to the surface like dross. Truth can withstand this scrutiny, while the cultural biases and errors are exposed. Most of this book was written because of such scrutiny—facing doubts, agonizing questions, and fears. The hard stick looks more sturdy than the green one, but in the wind one breaks and the other bends. Through this lifestyle of dependency, even in times of silence we can have the faith to confront life with an open face, to see reality and not be crushed by it.

Chapter 6:
Loving Others

*“If I knew the world would come to an end tomorrow,
I’d still plant an apple tree today”*

-Martin Luther

God is invisible. You can’t see, hear, smell, touch or taste God. This frankly makes communication difficult. Intimacy on this earth is hard. Our hope is set on Heaven where our union will be complete. In the meantime, our life with God is at turns immediate and profound, and at turns isolated and painful.

Even in the Garden, before any sin, God looked at Adam and said “It’s not good for him to be alone.” We may be apt to think (especially after reading a book like this) that it is somehow unspiritual and weak to need other people—that our sufficiency should come completely from God. But what we fail to realize is that one of the major ways God loves us is through other people.

In Hosea God says, “I led them with cords of human

kindness, with ties of love” but, “They did not realize it was I who healed them” (Hosea 11:4 & 11:3). Everything we receive—any love we experience whether from people, songs, books, the Bible, whatever—none of it can reach us unless God breathes life into it. If a Pigmy headhunter somewhere in the depths of Africa talks with a friend and is comforted, that is God loving him through that person. God loves people in this way all the time, all over the world. This is the unselfish love of God. A love that is, for the most part, unacknowledged. All the people over the course of your life who have cared for you were only able to reach you because God was giving you love through them. Without God’s touch, without God breathing life into it, it would fall short like a dead arrow never penetrating the heart.

This is how God has woven all our lives together. Loving others is not simply a polite after-thought when speaking of intimacy with God, but an integral part of what it means to love, and be loved by God. When you love me I am receiving God’s love, and at the same time you are loving God through me. Jesus said, “As you’ve done it unto the least of these my brethren, you’ve done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40). Intimacy with God is not an isolated relationship, but one that intertwines all of our lives.

LOVE VS. FEAR

One of the most obvious ways that loving God interrelates with loving others is through sharing Christ's love with those around us. When you're in love, you want to share your happiness, so it comes as no surprise that evangelism should be an outgrowth of intimacy with God. With all the pain around us though, all the lostness in the world, this can get mixed up with pressures to save everyone "before it's too late." We want to shake them, and make them see, but we can't. Love compels through truth not force.

This urgency is motivated primarily by fear not love. "Of course I believe that love leads to God and salvation," says our impatient reasoning, "but there isn't enough time! What if they died tomorrow?" So in our urgency we try to help God out a bit, and speed up the process. But fear is always a bad motivation. Love is patient. Love always hopes, always waits, always trusts, always believes, and though it's hard to take—love hurries for no one. We are not the Holy Spirit. Salvation is God's responsibility, ours is to love.

Everyone finds themselves somewhere along a scale leading to God. We need to therefore love each person

with the amount of truth they are able to bear, where they are at. For some towards the end of the scale, this may mean telling them the Gospel, but for others, their need may be another at this point. We must therefore dependently listen, both to them and to God, to know how we can love them the best. And if we are lucky, we'll be able to contribute to them moving a step or two closer. This perspective is important to keep in mind. When we approach life without it, it's easy to feel love is wasted time if we don't see people getting saved. But evangelism rushing ahead of, and outside the context of love, is a polluted and ineffectual Gospel. We cloth the naked, we heal the sick, we love those around us, not as a bait for salvation, but simply because it is good, because it is loving.

Contrary to popular opinion, the ends do not justify the means—the means determine the end. The means of manipulation, condemnation, or dishonesty will reap what they have sown, regardless of the end in mind. Do not focus on the end result, but on the right means, and the right result will follow. Our means is love, and this is never a waste of time.

SHOW AND TELL

Ever since the enlightenment, our society has tended to think that all our ills could be solved through more education. Thus in our information-age thinking, the Gospel is regularly exchanged for an impersonal “hit-and-run evangelism” of unsolicited information. We hand them a tract, rattle off some prepared speech of apologetics, and think since they’ve “had a chance to hear the Gospel” our work is done. The problem is, they probably didn’t hear a word we said. People, (and that includes us), can only internalize what they are ready to. You can’t answer people’s questions until they are asking them, and you can’t solve their “problem” unless they see that there is one, and are seeking a solution. Evangelism isn’t just a question of information—as if a mass-mailing advertising campaign could fulfill the Great Commission. It has to do with relationship and love, which is something you not only tell, but show. Christianity is not a doctrine to be assented to—it is a life to be demonstrated.

The Great Commission was not just verbal, but a verb. It is a charge to do the work of love: heal, feed, cloth, and tell the good news. The early Christian’s most powerful witness was the love they had for each other, and in this day of dislocation and disillusionment it’s all the more true. What is missing in people’s lives today is not a flashy professional presentation, but genuine community

and love. As non-Christians are exposed to Christian love and community, they can meet Christ vicariously through our actions and example. When we, in this context, tell them of God's love, it is no longer perceived as cliché and impersonal, but tangible and relevant. Non-Christians don't need mere information, or some facade of a trouble-free existence. They need to see God's love demonstrated in our lives. Our message is not ourselves—but Christ, and our dependency and need for God's love.

You might ask at this point, “So what does all this have to do with intimacy with God?” This needs to be the question we constantly ask ourselves when evangelizing. We need to be leading people towards deeper intimacy with God as an expression and outgrowth of our own intimacy with God. We need to be demonstrating love motivated by our love for God. Anything else is selfish proselysation. The dichotomy between loving God and loving others in our thinking is symptomatic for our time. Biblically and practically however the two are inseparable. The next section explores this interconnected relationship.

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

Jesus, on the night before his arrest and crucifixion, took the disciples aside and opened his heart to them. In one of the most intimate moments in the Bible, he promises not to abandon them, tells them “I am in my father, you are in me, and I am in you”—that they are intimately bound to one another—and says that if they love him, they will obey his command: love each other.¹⁸ John, who was at his side at the time, later writes, “Since God loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us” (1st John 4:11-12).

You would be hard pressed to find a single place in the Bible that speaks of intimacy with God that does not immediately connect it to loving others. When you love someone you want to care for them, comfort them, protect them, nurture them, but it is hard to imagine doing these things for God. How could we comfort God? How can we minister to God’s needs? Although there are many expressions of our loving God that may be shared directly, (trust, respect, affection), specifically these aforementioned “parental” characteristics (comfort, protection, nurture), of our love for God find

18 See John 14:1-15:17.

their expression in our loving the least, the weak, the tired, the lonely. In this very way we can love God with our whole being, with the complete expression of who we are as people. Biblically, loving others, (who we can see), is the proof that we love God (who is invisible). In other words if we love God, then we will love as God does, because we love others with the love of God in us. As a single candle lights a hundred others without weakening its flame, God's love overflows in our hearts to those around us.

Agape-love—loving the way God does—is frequently defined in negative terms such as *disinterested benevolence* and *unselfishness*, thus drawing connotations of unfulfillment, and dutiful sacrifice. Additionally, a common, albeit immature, image of Christianity is of a God that commands us to have miserable lives, giving up of all the “fun” so we can get into Heaven later. All this gives the impression that agape-love is an inconvenient burden. But just as intimacy with God does not result in boredom and want; intimacy's natural outgrowth—unselfishness—is how we are ultimately fulfilled as people. We are not just isolated individuals, but need the love and community of others. And since you can't have a relationship and only think of yourself, being unselfish does, in fact, benefit us.

The term “unselfish” is thus a bit misleading: Because of the self-benefit of unselfishness, it can look like unselfishness is really selfish after all. This confusion is purely semantical though. Really, agape-love is not so much negative and passive, (*un-self-ish* or *un-self-focused*), as it is positive and active, that is, other-oriented. Agape-love neither seeks reward nor does it refuse it—it doesn’t think of itself at all—but of the one it loves.

The closest we can get to understanding this kind of “disinterested” benevolence is to think of what goes through a mother’s head when she is protecting her child from danger: She doesn’t notice her own pain, doesn’t care how noble she might look; her one concern is for her child. As Christ explained on the Sermon on the Mount, and demonstrated with his life: *this is how God loves*. As Christians we are to love, not only with our own human love, (i.e. what comes naturally), but with this Godly love, intentionally. Love is a choice, not based on our immediate feelings, or even on our will, but on the other’s inherent value and dignity.

Precisely because it usually doesn’t come naturally for us *not* to focus on ourselves, it’s easy for selflessness to turn to self-obsession. Many a minister’s family has

complained that they felt neglected in the wake of the many duties and obligations of a congregation. There's a certain addictive thrill to being a "martyr.". I suspect however that the majority of us suffer from the other extreme: focusing too much on ourselves. We have healing sessions, counseling, bible studies, men's luncheons, retreats, concerts, books, tapes, *ad nauseam*. Of course none of these are bad in themselves, but our focus has been turned inward. Love is atrophied in such an unbalanced environment, and our full potential as Christians—and as humans—is dwarfed.

Everyone admits that doing something good makes you feel good. But it's much more than a warm fuzzy feeling. The entire universe, God, and all the angels rejoice when someone does something right, virtuous, and unselfish. This is so ingrained in the human heart that it is discernible, at least as a nice feeling, to everyone. Our hearts somehow know that the whole world is smiling on us. To seek unselfishness is to seek God.

Often the very cure we need for our own self-esteem is to reach out beyond ourselves. If we stopped worrying so much about being loved, and healed, and ministered to, and blessed, and started to love others, to sit up with someone who's hurting, to listen to someone who's

lonely—to give ourselves away; we’d find that in the process many of our own problems would be taken care of. When we love, something incredible happens: Our needs do not just take care of themselves, rather the very act of our loving is the medicine that heals us as well. Not only does God love us through others, but by us loving others, God loves us as well. As Jean Valjean sang in the musical *Les Misérables*, “to love another person is to see the face of God.”

A Selected Bibliography

This book is not an academic study, it was written on my knees, as I struggled to come to know and rest in God's love. These books here were all deeply formative for me in that, and so I commend them to you with the hope that they might be as much as a blessing to you as they were to me.

Abide in Christ, Andrew Murray, (Pennsylvania: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1968). Originally published in 18--.

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Derek Flood

Intimacy with God

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