



*Practicing The Presence
Of God*

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Lesson one

Practising The Presence Of God

Cultivating a close partnership

Introduction

Christians have the assurance that they are constantly surrounded by the presence of God. For he has said:

Hebrews 13:5. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Psalm 121:8. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

In spite of these promises we do not always feel it. There could be many reasons for this, but let it be understood the fault is always with us, never with God. What then can we do to practise the presence of God in our lives. In other words, how can we increase, enhance and understand better the sense of God's presence? How can we sharpen our spiritual awareness?

Before we can practise the presence of God, we must first come to know God. When by an act of the will, we decide to let God in, then nothing will keep him out. Once God resides within us, we are ready to begin looking at some of the things we can do too help us become more conscious and more aware of his indwelling presence.

Good morning Lord

Our first thought upon waking ought to be the Lord. We do not know what the day may bring so being thoughtful of him from the start will only fortify our day.

Those who study the effect of thought upon the personality tell us that our last thought at night and our first thought in the morning are greatly influential in determining the quality of our sleep and our attitudes towards life.

If your day begins with God, it is more likely to continue and end with him. "Good morning, Lord." Sentimental? Some might think so, but that which suits one may not suit another.

Whatever method you use to focus your thoughts on God in the first few moments after you awake is not important, what is important is the fact that your thoughts turn from being self-conscious to being God-conscious.

Among many Christians is the spirit of non-expectancy. They do not expect anything spiritually exciting in their day - they expect nothing more than just to muddle through.

The same danger has crossed the threshold of many contemporary Christian churches paralysing the hearts of God's people, causing them to become resigned to spiritual defeat and failure. They have become naturalised in defeat.

The first step to experiencing a spiritual profitable day is to expect a profitable day. Usually, those who expect nothing are not disappointed. Such people think it utterly inconceivable that God would want to speak to them, guide them, or reveal himself to them in some new and fresh way. The Bible makes it very clear that God wants to do exactly that:

John 14:23. Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

Cultivate closeness

One of the most powerful and effective ways of promoting the awareness of God's presence is to regularly practise a Quiet Time.

Some have great difficulty with this, their lifestyle or circumstances prevent them from finding either the time or place to be alone with God during the day. God understands our circumstances so you can be assured he is waiting for you whenever you can make it.

We all need to cultivate our individual relationship with God. To fix a regular time and place aids the discipline.

In the same way our body needs fixed time to receive physical ***nourishment*** so our inner man needs regular times of prayer and contemplation to cultivate an awareness of God.

Jesus felt the need for three simple habits:

- 1) *Luke 4:16. He went into the synagogue as was his custom.***
- 2) *Luke 22:39. Jesus went as was usual to the Mount of Olives (i.e. up a mountain to pray).***
- 3) *Mark 10:1. As it was his custom, he taught them.***

Three simple habits of reading the scriptures, spending time in prayer and sharing with others, the ABC of the Christian life.

There are no fixed rules to make the best of our regular times of prayer and contemplations. A suggestion would be to begin with reading the scriptures. After reading sit quietly in God's presence and ask him if he has anything to say arising from the reading. Tell him the things that are on your mind, the joyful things and the difficult things. If your mind wanders or gets distracted pray about those things. Have a note book and pen near at hand to jot down what you believe God is saying.

Partnership

See yourself in partnership with God. Think of the responsibilities of the day not as yours alone but yours in partnership with him.

Talk to God about the issues of the day in the same way you would talk to a business partner. “What shall we do about this matter, Lord?how shall we handle that problem? how shall we deal with these people?

John 15:4. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

You need not go into any day alone, but arm in arm with God. Some might say that it makes us over-dependent and prevents us from developing as persons. We should think for ourselves to be self-determining and creative personalities.

Partnership with God does not mean that he dominates our personalities; his purpose is to guide, not over-ride. The Almighty relates to us in a way that is helpful and supportive, yet, at the same time, taking care not to snuff out initiative and creativity.

God's secrets are always 'open secrets', open, yet sufficiently secret to make us think. This kind of partnership, to guide us without over-riding us, is a task that only divine wisdom can accomplish.

Let's look at some of the qualifications and characteristics of our divine partner when he was here on earth, and see how eminently suitable he is for the role.

- 1) He was a person of immense courage, a quiet courage that held fast in the face of growing opposition and certain crucifixion. Are you facing a situation that requires greater strength and confidence than you feel you are capable of? Take heart, in Christ you have a partner who knows precisely how you feel and will, if you ask him, deposit his quiet courage and determination deep into your soul.
- 2) He cares more about the needs of others than he did his own needs.
- 3) Jesus is the kind of partner who gives himself and all that he has to the success of the partnership.
- 4) The disciples prior to Pentecost were afraid that they might not be able to continue the work which Christ had committed to them but, after receiving the power of the Spirit, all that was changed. Peter was clearly conscious that Christ had teamed up with them for he said:

Acts 3:6. Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.

Lesson two

Dwelling with God

Choosing to praise

The Bible constantly reminds us that God dwells in the midst of his people's praise.

Psalm 22:3. "You are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel or NKJ But you are holy, who inhabit the praise of Israel."

The more we cultivate a praising heart, the more deeply you will feel the Lord's presence in your heart.

It is important we differentiate between praise and thanksgiving, they are quite distinct and separate in their meaning. We thank God for what he does but we praise him for who he is. We might not always be able to find a reason to be thankful (though we should), but can always find a reason to praise.

Psalm 34:1. "I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips."

The prime purpose of praise is to honour and glorify God and because he never changes, then it follows that praise of him is always appropriate.

Praise, unlike thanksgiving, begins not so much in the feelings as in the will. We can choose to praise the Almighty whether we feel like it or not.

Psalm 42:6. "My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan the heights of Hermon - from Mount Mizar."

The Psalmist firstly admits to feeling downcast. He doesn't stay there too long with his feelings, but he is careful not to deny them. Then he makes a choice; **"I will remember you."** He chooses to focus his thoughts on the goodness of God bringing his people into the Promised Land.

In the final verse of that Psalm he affirms a truth that we should all focus on when we feel downcast.

Psalm 42:11. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God."

There is a connection between a readiness to praise and the state of our physical health. Why is this? God designed us to be praising beings. We are complete and fulfilled when doing the very thing we were designed for.

We increase and sharpen the awareness of his presence because the Lord inhabits the praises of his people. Don't whatever you do, leave it to the vagaries of feeling. Embrace the habit of turning your mind regularly to the Lord and give him the praise which he so wondrously deserves

Inner searching

Nothing dulls or blunts the awareness of God's presence in our lives so much as continuing to think or act in ways of which God cannot approve. The harbouring of moral wrong makes God unreal.

We should regularly examine our lives in the light of the five following questions:

- 1) Am I living a truthful and honest life? The truth is inviolable (never to be broken, infringed or dishonoured). Can you be depended on to tell the truth, no matter what the cost? The willingness to twist a meaning to gain a point. To misquote if the misquotation serves an end. To exaggerate in order to impress. The truth is inviolable.
- 2) Have I been pure? The question of purity is fundamental. Those of us who have put ourselves under the authority of Christ must watch our tendency to excuse ourselves when caught up in wrong. We must not allow our mind to dwell on things that blunt the awareness of Christ's presence in our lives.
- 3) Have I allowed bitterness to take root in my heart? Of all things that choke and poison spiritual growth, bitterness is probably the most devastatingly effective. If you hold on to bitterness you have to let go of Christ, and if you hold on to Christ, you have to let go of bitterness. Ask yourself. Do I hold grudges? Do I find it hard to forgive?
- 4) Has love been my motive in everything? All the motives of life should reduce down to love, the love of Christ. Our motives should never be achievement, success or reputation. When we do everything for the love of Christ, it transforms the menial into the meaningful, the sordid into the sacred.

1 John 3:24. "Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

- 5) Have I sought God's glory, or my own? What prompts my actions, self-interest or Christ-interest? Who has the final word me or Christ? Am I more self-conscious than Christ-conscious.

The Lord might lead you to ask other questions of yourself. Don't stop at examination, decide to do something about the things which are blunting the edge of our spiritual awareness.

Praying the affirmative way

Praying the affirmative way is not asking for something to be so, but affirming it to be so; it is proclaiming to oneself that a matter or an issue is exactly the way God has decreed it.

There are things in the Christian life that we do not have to ask for at all, they are part and parcel of our Christian commitment. The promise of God's continued presence is one of them.

Hebrews 13:5. "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."

Psalm 27:10. "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."

Once we surrender our lives to God and are his committed sons and daughters, then we have the guarantee that his presence will be in and around us every moment of the day. So do not ask for it, affirm it. Instead of praying, "Lord be with me through every moment of this day." Say: "Thank you Father you are with me right now."

Those things we are not sure of we pray and petition God for light and illumination before we can proceed. Petition is quite simply asking God for something. Affirmation is acknowledging that we have it.

Taking God at his word is vital. God knows our heart and can over-ride our words. The problem is with us. When God makes statements in Scripture we must exercise our faith in believing what he has said. Faith, generally speaking, is not something we are very good at displaying.

Often we parrot what we hear others say without clearly reading in God's word what he said.

A constant closeness

It is important to establish some habits that will help remind us of the nearness of God's presence. These practices might not appeal to everyone, but they can help in bringing about a sharper awareness of God's presence in our lives.

Dr Frank Laubach made a study of the methods which Christians follow to increase their awareness of God's presence. He discovered that the most popular are: walking on the inside of the pavement and visualising the Lord walking on the kerbside; playing the game of "minutes", in which you see how many times during an hour you think of God, then counting the number of minutes you thought about him; taking a breath and saying: "As this physical breath I am taking is filling my whole body with life giving oxygen, so the breath of God, when I take it in, strengthens and stains my inner life"; leave a vacant chair at a table or at the bedside and imagine Christ sitting there.

You might view these habits and practises as nothing more than 'crutches' for those who do not give priority to daily Bible reading and prayer, but these in addition to regular reading and prayer make ones relationship with God even more meaningful.

Being alert and watching for anything interesting or unusual that happens during the day, and immediately bring God into it. God makes arrangements for our day, appreciate what he is doing and be aware of his constant presence in these moments.

Let every completed task become a trigger for speaking to God and thanking him for being present.

God delights in our response to him and he quickly detects an appreciation of his presence.

Lesson three

Fixing our gaze upon him

Biblical Meditation

Let's stop to remind ourselves about what we understand and mean when we talk about practising the presence of God. It is the fixing of our souls gaze upon God, the savouring of him, the remembering of his unbreakable promise that "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Brother Lawrence defined it in this way: "The unbroken attitude of mind which envisages God within, the hearer of all speech, the monitor of all thoughts, the judge of all actions."

Since we can easily lose sight of the fact that God is with us in everything we do, we need to pause from time to time and direct our thoughts and our gaze towards him. And the more often we can do this, the more deeply aware of him we will become.

Another way of practising his presence is through Biblical meditation. This is, without doubt, one of the greatest ways we can ever discover of realising God's presence in our lives. Take a verse such as ***Psalm 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God."*** Allow it to soak into your thoughts. This practise is called Lectio Divina. Let the verse lie in your mind throughout the day. Probe it, contemplate it, and draw from it all that God has put into it, letting it affect the deepest part of your being.

One of the synonyms for the word "meditate" is "ruminate". Many animals, such as sheep, goats, antelope, camels, cows and giraffes are called ruminant animals. This is because they have stomachs with several compartments, the first is called the rumen. The way a ruminant animal digests its food is fascinating. First it literally bolts it down and then later regurgitates it from the rumen back into its mouth, where it is chewed again to extract further nourishment from the food. This process of rumination, or chewing the cud, enables the food to be thoroughly digested, whereupon it is absorbed into the animal's bloodstream so becoming part of its life.

When a Christian takes a text or phrase of the Bible and quietly and continuously contemplates it, the power and energy that is contained in the Word of God is absorbed into the spirit, the motivating centre of the personality. You see the mind is not the most important part of us; the spirit is the most important part. Truth held in the mind must become assimilated by the spirit if it is to have its greatest influence and effect. Some truth reaches the spirit from that which is held in the mind, but the more we contemplate and meditate on Scripture, the more speedily, the more effectively and the more powerfully is truth impressed into our spirit.

Meeting with God

With the exception of the housebound and the informed all Christians meet together in fellowship with other Christians. Unfortunately, not all understand the power and significance of what happens when we meet together in the Lord's name. The presence of Christ is with every Christian individual, but whenever we meet together corporately for prayer and worship, the presence of the Lord seems to be intensely felt within ourselves individually. One reason is in the process of opening up our spirits to one

another, we automatically open up more of our spirit to God. The more effort one makes to relate to brothers and sisters in Christ, the closer one seems to get to God. It is as if, in the physical presence of other Christians, praying together, singing together, something is triggered that opens one's spirit more to God.

C.S. Lewis once expressed a similar thought: "God can only show himself as he really isto men and women who are united together in a body, loving one another helping one another, showing him to one another Consequently the only really adequate instrument of learning about God is the whole Christian community, waiting for him together." The closer we get to each other the closer we will get to God, and the closer we get to God, the closer we will want to get to each other.

If we do not take the necessary steps to experience true Christian fellowship, then we inevitably deprive ourselves of the joy of his corporate presence. God can only mediate his presence in and through a community of his people to the extent that they are open to him and to one another.

What makes a group of Christians a living fellowship is their desire and willingness to open up to one another and to share on the deepest levels of their personalities. What is your church like? Is it a place where you feel you really belong? Belong not just to Christ but to one another? If so, rejoice in it. If not, then begin to share yourself with your brothers and sisters as deeply as you are able. A church where people have no true relationships with each other blocks the way for the mediation of God's corporate presence.

Another way in which we can heighten the awareness of God's presence is through being **"Filled with the Spirit."** One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to make God and his Son Jesus Christ, real to us. **"He (the Holy Spirit) will glorify me, for he will take of what is mine and declare it to you."** John 16:14. It follows, therefore, that the more we allow the Holy Spirit to have sway in our lives the more aware we will be of the divine presence.

Transformed by God

When Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit, he used three prepositions .. 'with', 'in' and 'upon'. Let's look at each of these in turn. When he said the Holy Spirit was 'with' the disciples he meant that the Spirit was accompanying them, was working with them on the outside. He most certainly was not in them, for Christ clearly indicated that that phase of the Spirit would be at some point in the future: **"He will be in you."**

John 20: 19-31 depicts the post-resurrection meeting of Christ with the disciples in which, after commissioning them, he proceeded to breathe on them, saying: **"Receive the Holy Spirit."** What did the disciples receive at that moment? Obviously the Holy Spirit. But if that is so, then what happened on the Day of Pentecost? Here in the locked room where Jesus appeared, the disciples' hearts were regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit. He who had been 'with' them to accompany them, now came 'in' them to convert them.

We look now at the third preposition which Jesus used in relation to the Holy Spirit: ***“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Acts 1:8.*** This was a prophetic reference to a day not far distant, the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit would once again have a part to play in their lives.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit, who had been ‘with’ the disciples prior to the cross and resurrection, and who came ‘in’ them in the Upper Room, would now come ‘upon’ them in all his fullness to saturate them with divine power and turn them from timid, vacillating disciples into men and women who were ablaze and invincible. The disciples immediately began to feel his personal presence in a way that transformed them within. Now they had no doubt that Christ was actually living in their lives, feeling his personal presence with them, they went out and began to turn the world upside down.

Living for God

We turn to consider an aspect of practising the presence of God which may seem out of place, but, if kept in its proper perspective, plays a vital part in maintaining a heightened awareness of God’s presence in our lives. I refer to keeping the physical body, as far as possible, in good health and order.

Our physical body is the house in which the soul lives, and if, through abuse, we allow that house to fall into disrepair, it might well have an adverse effect upon our soul. Just as what goes on in the soul can influence and affect what goes on in the body, so what goes on in the body can influence and affect what goes on in the soul.

There is not one word of Scripture that leads us to have a morbid view of our bodies. On the contrary we are exhorted to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. The Bible teaches that the body has been affected by the fall and that the curse, which fell on the earth, has greatly affected our physical functioning, but it encourages us, nevertheless, to respect our bodies and view them as a temple in which the presence of God dwells.

Jesus accepted his body as a gift from God: ***“A body you have prepared for me.” Hebrews 10:5.*** His body and soul were attuned. He neither neglected his body nor pampered it, he offered it as the vehicle of God’s will and purpose. Just enough sleep to make us fresh, and a little less than that which would make us lazy. Just enough food to keep us fit and not make us fat. Just enough physical exercise for fitness and not so much that we become preoccupied with it that it drains higher interests.

We must not be tempted to ignore the needs of our body. They are the temple of the Holy Spirit and deserve a high concentration and interest.

If the body is the temple in which God dwells, then what can we do to make it a fit habitation for the Almighty? We shall not consider our emotions at this point purely your physical frame.

First have a physical check-up to see if there are any structural problems in your body. Second, make sure you have plenty of physical exercise. It will assist writing, thinking and concentration.

Third control your appetite. It is good to have an appetite but make sure the appetite doesn't have you.

Fourth, learn to relax. If tense or under stress sit down and speak to your body and remind it that it is in the presence of God and needs to calm down.

Fifth, build into your life periods of recreation. Activities that leave you physically rejuvenated and tuned up. Life must have periods of creation and recreation.

These simple guidelines will help prevent your body from dampening the delights of the presence of God in your soul.

Lesson four

The testing of your faith

A mind for God

We turn our attention now to the realm of the mental and the emotional. Wrong mental attitudes and unhealed hurts can reside inside of you to such a degree that they can sometimes effectively suppress the sense of God's presence within your soul.

Unhealed hurts from the past, some disturbing memory that has been repressed, or some wrong attitude that had never been corrected rises up from time to time and blunts spiritual sharpness and sensitivity.

You can be aware of Christ's presence in your life when, without warning and for no apparent reason, a dark cloud descends upon the soul and dampens your spirit. One of the major causes of this is that something out of your past, a repressed fear, an unhealed hurt, a deep rejection has intruded into the present, taking its toll on the personality.

The spirit is wounded. We usually think of wounds occurring in battles or during a fight, but the spirit can equally be wounded. These wounds usually arise from deep hurts or deep horrors. The hurts primarily come from rejection or deprivation of love. The horrors come from having experienced deep trauma, brutality, violence and physical mental or emotional abuse.

Conversion will not resolve all our emotional problems. Through the ministry of deliverance Christ has provided for the Church spiritual healing. Seek out those whom God has gifted and graced with the ministry of deliverance and receive their help.

First, face the facts that these things are going on within. Second, accept the responsibility that you must do something about it. Third, take action and seek our help. The ministry of Jesus exercised through his Church is along with other things to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and release the oppressed.

Sharing God

We have freely received much from God to remain in his presence we must freely give. We must discipline ourselves to share. The natural impulse of the heart in which God's love and presence dwells is to radiate that love and presence to others.

If it has not occurred to you already, then the point must be made now, that the practise of the presence of God involves discipline. The things that I have been suggesting need deliberate and concentrated effort. It is much easier to relax and let things happen of their own accord, but, it is the disciplined, the disciples, who get the best results.

Many start the Christian life with real passion but in time that has ebbed away. Why is this? There could be many reasons but often the cause for this is failure to share what they have known of God with others. If there is no outflow the inflow automatically stops. The more we share what we have received, the more we will have to share.

Many people are hesitant to share what they know about God with others because they do not know how to go about it. If the truth you know about God is vital to you when you speak about him that will be obvious. But remember you are not selling something so don't push too hard it might produce an unfavourable reaction. The more we speak about God or Jesus or our faith the more natural it will be for us and the more natural it will sound to others.

Overcoming with God

The final suggestion I have to offer on how to sharpen the awareness of God's presence in your heart is by willingly and joyfully opening the door of your life to any trials and tribulations that may knock upon it.

J.B. Phillips paraphrase of *James 1: 2-3* goes like this:

“When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.”

When we open the door of our lives to trials and temptations, they serve, not to demean us, but to develop us. When trouble comes knocking at your door don't slam the door in its face open wide the door and welcome it in as you would a long lost friend. Why? Because trials and temptations will, if we respond to them correctly, cause us to rely less on our own strength and more on the strength of Christ within.

The apostle John experienced one of the greatest trials anyone could be called upon to endure, banishment and isolation. He was bereft of his Christian friends and companions, but not of the presence of God.

Revelation 1:10. “On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,” Shut off from man, he was open to God.

Romans 8: 38-39. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

When you are shut off from the presence of others, it will serve only to enable you to feel the presence of Christ more keenly.

If we are afraid to face a trial or a temptation, then we will never experience the deep power of Christ's compensating presence in the midst of those trials and temptations. When a trial comes our way, it means that we will experience even more deeply and keenly the sustaining power and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. They open us up more to knowing Christ's presence in a deeper way.

Luke 22: 39-53. We read how Christ went into the Garden of Gethsemane and endured such agony that it says an angel was sent to strengthen him. In the hour of his greatest need, he experienced the greatest strengthening. You may be called on to face a “Gethsemane” experience, then remember, you can come out of it, as did Jesus, with a deeper sense of God’s strengthening and enabling presence than you ever knew before.

Practise makes perfect

What are some of the benefits that flow from an increased awareness of God’s presence in our lives?

The first benefit is it makes us stronger in faith. The more we realise that, by a simple act of memory, we can sharpen the awareness of God’s presence in our heart, the more easily we will be able to put our faith into operation in the bigger and wider issues of our lives.

Secondly, hope grows in proportion to our knowledge and accordingly as our faith penetrates through this holy exercise (reminding ourselves that God’s presence is constantly with us) into the secrets of the Divine. Thus our hope grows and strengthens itself.

Thirdly, it makes our love stronger. The more we gaze upon God, the more we will love him. The more we love him the more we will gaze upon him. The more we practise his presence, the more perfectly we will feel his presence.

We are never alone, at the time of seeming aloneness, he is closer to you than you realise, watching every move you make. But do not take his presence for granted, practise it. He has said he will never leave you or forsake you, but you must constantly remind yourself of that fact. Like all things in life, practise makes perfect. Determine to practise the presence of God.

