

Living in the Presence of Jesus Christ

A Sermon on Abiding in Christ's Presence

Sermon Prayer, Repentance and the Spiritual Life 17 January 2021

Psalm 42:1-2

John 3:3

James 4:8

Matthew 1:23 (referenced)

Luke 11:13 (referenced)

Hebrews 11:6 (referenced)

Romans 3:11 (referenced)

"True followers of Christ seek to live always in His presence." This is the theme for our meditation today. This desire is truly Christian, and something all of us harbour in our hearts. However, it is ironic that this desire is only one of the longings of our hearts, given the nuances of the times in which we live — probably one in a hundred. In contrast, God has just one desire: that He wants all His people to be close to Him. He is wholly focussed on us, and nothing else. This desire, therefore, is mutual, though the weight of it is unequal, as we have seen. Given this understanding, I would say that we are created to be filled by the life of Jesus, never to be apart from Him. This is, perhaps, the direction this deliberation should take. Psalm 42:1-2 describes the human situation concerning God aptly. It reads, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" This cry for the presence of Christ in our lives originates from our admission that we threw away the blessing of being in His presence, and now desperately want to reverse the situation. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Jesus.

How do you respond to the proposition of a godly lifestyle? Do you consider it the fullness of joy and pleasure in this life, or something entirely different? God had a design for our life with Him, but humanity lost this original design when Adam and Eve chose to seek what they thought was pleasure and power outside of God's provision and authority. But God set in motion a plan of redemption, to bring His people back to His promise of true life. He knew that, without Him, our lives would always be lacking fullness.

Genesis reveals that the nature of humankind is both physical and spiritual. When God pronounced death, Adam and Eve did not die a physical death, though it was set in motion; they died a spiritual death. Spiritual death is the primary problem for humanity, according to the New Testament too. Paul repeatedly stated, in his writings, that humanity was dead in trespasses and sin. For this reason, Jesus declared that every person must be "born again," stating, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). We need, therefore, to undergo an inner

transformation, on the one hand, and to undertake the difficult task of preparing room for the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts, on the other.

This background serves as a basis for our quest for a life in Christ — our quest for Christ to live in us. Contrast Adam and Eve's former life in the garden, in the presence of God, with their lives locked out of the garden and apart from God. Sometimes, modern Christianity has been reduced merely to salvation and eternal life. But God wants to restore His life in us, here and now, between the initial redemptive act of Jesus and the eternal life we shall cross over into. I believe Christians ought to be the happiest community in the world. Our happiness comes from God Himself, who has made His home in us until we go to be with Him. So, our pursuit in life, as Christians, should be to be close to Jesus. All that we do in practice must always be about finding His life in us. That is His original design, and the purpose of redemption. Our goal is not Bible knowledge, theological understanding, social service, or a disciplined spiritual life. All of these ought to have a place in the Christian life, but they are not its purpose.

If we wish to live a life always in the presence of Jesus, we must live the life He epitomised for us. Jesus came to earth for many reasons. Among other things, Jesus lived a perfect life as a human being. He lived the life Adam should have lived. His Spirit-filled life was meant to be a new model for humanity, to be followed by His disciples, then and now. The way Jesus lived by the Spirit was meant to be imitated by us. Although we could never, and should never, think we can imitate His perfect ethical righteousness, or the atoning sacrifice He paid, when it comes to His life of dependence on the Spirit, we are meant to participate fully, even if imperfectly. One of the hallmarks of Christ's teaching was His promise to give the same Holy Spirit to His followers. Jesus was not merely the one who has the Spirit; He was the one who could give the Spirit. The questions before us are these: do we fully comprehend this purpose of His life on earth? Or are we focussed only on our afterlife and salvation?

That leads us, then, to the matter of making ample room for Christ's Spirit to dwell within us — the only way we can be near Him always. Before Christ came, the Spirit was given only sparingly, to individuals in leadership, during the Old Testament period. Yet there was a longing in the heart of God, and of His Old Testament prophets, to see the Spirit given broadly to all believers. Followers of Jesus were thrilled to have God with them in the flesh (compare Matthew 1:23, "God with us"). But Jesus knew that something radical was to happen to believers in the outpouring of His Spirit. We see, however, His eagerness as He sought to build His disciples' anticipation for the coming of the Spirit, without whom we could never hope to be close to Jesus.

The Lord Himself is the desire of a believer's heart. We long to feel close to Him, to sense His presence, to experience His enabling power,

to hear His still small voice, and to see Him at work as we seek Him and serve others in His name. On earth, all of those desires are met by the Holy Spirit, which is why, in Luke 11:13, we read that He is the greatest gift the Father can give His children. Jesus wants to be near us. So, to meet our desire, and His, He has taught us how to be filled with His Spirit through seeking Him in faith.

A sentence in James 4:8 provides one of the most concise Biblical statements on this subject. He wrote to Christians who had been resisting the Spirit, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." In a word, the way to become more filled with the Spirit is to draw nearer to God. Drawing near to God takes deliberation, resolve, and considerable effort. How, then, do we draw near to God and receive His Spirit? The principle of spiritual reciprocity — that when we go close to God, He will come close to us — is the promise from Genesis to Revelation, although some of the finer details may differ between Israel in the Old Testament and Christians in the New Testament era.

We cannot earn the Spirit's fullness. Drawing near to God, therefore, is a fruit of faith. When we make the effort, and humble ourselves, pray, turn from wickedness, and seek God, we are not switching to a mindset of performance; we are drawing nearer to God because we believe in His promises. Legalism is the pursuit of merit, based on our performance. Seeking a godly lifestyle, in stark contrast, is the pursuit of God's presence and power, based on our faith in His promise to draw near, knowing that we already stand fully justified through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the Cross.

Faith begins by believing in God's existence. Faith must also believe that God rewards those who seek Him. Therefore, at the heart of our relationship with Jesus, we must be Christians who seek God in faith, and seek Him as a rewarder. Only true believers can seek God (Hebrews 11:6; Romans 3:11), and not those who consider Christianity a religious option. In other words, one cannot first seek God and then come to faith; one must have deep faith before one can seek God.

Seeking God is hard work, taking time and effort, like anything else worthy of pursuit in this life. Becoming a Christian is only the first step; without diligently applying yourself, you will never draw close to the Lord, or experience His presence and power in your life. But, as with anything else worth pursuing, the benefit far outweighs the effort. Seeking God means discovering what He loves and values, and connecting with Him so that those same values permeate our inner being. It is about knowing the heart of God, identifying with Him, and carrying out His purposes.

We seek God through a variety of actions and attitudes of the heart. We read, in Scripture and in Church history, of many such actions and attitudes, put into practice by those who have found God. For the sake

of ease, I have put these practices of seeking God into seven principles. One could divide these aspects in many other ways; this list of seven is not the only way to conceive of drawing nearer to God on a regular basis, but it is a helpful way to think about how we can come closer to God with intention and a whole heart.

Principle One – Humility. Humility before God means that we honour Him as God, and that we submit to Him as His creatures and His children.

Principle Two – Fervent and perpetual prayer. Because God is all-powerful, talking with Him and asking Him to intervene on your behalf changes your circumstances like nothing else.

Principle Three – Learning and imbibing the Word of God. There is no substitute for diligently studying the Scriptures.

Principle Four – Repentance of our sins. Repentance should culminate in the removal of all that causes us to sin, and the cleansing of our inner selves, thus creating more and more room for God the Holy Spirit to work within us.

Principle Five – Obedience to God's commandments. The Gospel accounts provide the road map for our lives, from the point of redemption until we enter eternal life. Obeying the principles, values, and commandments given to us by Jesus is true obedience to God.

Principle Six – Perseverance in faith. Turbulence in life is to be expected, but God will never test us beyond our endurance, and will never desert us. With this knowledge, we must persevere in faith.

Principle Seven – Fellowship with others. We are not expected to be selfish in our faith; we are called to share our faith with others in utmost sincerity. True fellowship arises from this attitude.

May the all-knowing God bless us with intention, perseverance, and diligence to seek Him through the rest of our lives, until we meet with Him in eternity. Amen.