

Experiencing God's Presence

¹⁹ "A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ At that day you will know that I *am* in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. ²¹ He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?" ²³ Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. ²⁴ He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me. ²⁵ "These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. (John 14:19–26)

A.W. Tozer said, "For millions of Christians...God is no more real than He is to the non-Christian. They go through life trying to love an ideal and be loyal to a mere principle. Over against all this cloudy vagueness stands the clear scriptural doctrine that God can be known in personal experience."

But what exactly is that experience? Some people think it must always be the *miraculous*. Their binary understanding is that normal life is somehow absent God, and therefore to see God work must always be an invasion of supernatural power, overturning the normal and the natural. To experience God is to see healings, exorcisms, to hear prophecies, to witness people being possessed by what they call the Spirit of God and then speaking or acting uncontrollably: fainting, falling, babbling, writhing. To them, the absence of these events is the absence of God. Experiencing God is almost entirely abnormal, supernatural, miraculous.

Other people think experiencing God is found in the *magnificent*. That is, God is known to them through blessing, which they usually define as wealth and health. To live a prosperous life filled with material possessions is to them, experiencing God. Sudden and increasing success, prosperous business, more money: this is the physical sign of an invisible hand blessing you. This is the sign of being a king's kid, a little god, a winner, a conqueror.

Others think experiencing God is in the *mysterious*. God is like an elusive and mysterious stranger, a clandestine figure who only wants to be known through a kind of detective game. He is forever leaving clues and hints of His existence. A remarkable coincidence here, a seemingly out-of-the-blue meeting there, an accident that proves fortunate, the unbelievably good timing of some event. This runaway, cloak-and-dagger God is known through fleeting glimpses, little breadcrumbs of the strange, the unexpected. Again, remarkable providences are part of every believer's life. But remarkable they are, and these are not the normal or the only way of experiencing God.

Instead of the miraculous, the magnificent, the mysterious, Jesus taught a far more everyday, and yet far more comforting form of experiencing God. Jesus taught how believers can live in the presence of God.

The Lord Jesus came to the world the first time not to stay permanently, but to die for sin and rise again, and then ascend, leaving His church to grow and expand until His Second Coming. But His disciples didn't know that at first. They expected that they would enjoy His presence with them right there. They never expected that Jesus' ministry would only last 3½ years. They thought He would become king of Israel and the Messianic age would begin. Now, on the night of His betrayal and arrest, Jesus was explaining to them that He was going, but it was all going according to plan. Their Christian lives were going to be lived with Jesus no longer on the Earth with them. John chapters 14 through 17 explain how this takes place.

And these are in our Bible because we are in that same position. We need to live our Christian lives without Jesus physically present. We need to understand what is it to experience God in this new covenant era of history.

Should we be expecting the miracles of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and the apostles? Should we be expecting the golden age of Solomon's wealth and power? Should we be seeking a semi-occultic, quasi-divination kind of Christian life, looking for God in the shape of the tea-leaves?

Here Jesus describes for us the promise of His presence even while He is gone. He explains what that means, and how believers will experience it. In essence, He answers three questions: what will it mean that He is present, how will believers experience this presence, and who will reveal this presence. Here are three explanations of experiencing the presence of God even after the ascension.

I. The Promise of His Presence

¹⁹ "A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ At that day you will know that I *am* in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

Now here we have to read very carefully, because there are two layers, or phases, here of Jesus being absent, and then present again. Jesus is going to be absent, then present, then absent again, then present again.

First, verse 19. Soon the world will not see Me, Jesus says, but you will see Me. What does He mean? He is referring to His soon death on the cross, followed by His resurrection. He will be gone, as far as the world is concerned, but then He will rise. But He won't reveal Himself to the world – we remember that Jesus did not appear to Pontius Pilate, or the Pharisees, but to His disciples. He is absent temporarily, but then after three days He is present again with them.

But that is just phase 1. Because Jesus is not going to stay on earth after the Resurrection; He will ascend. So He will be absent from them again. But He said in verse 18 He would not leave His disciples orphans, but come to them. That ultimately is His return to rapture His people. But even before that, there is a kind of presence of Jesus that will come to the disciples. What is that presence?

It is clearly an invisible, internal, indwelling kind of presence.

This is phase 2 of absence and presence: Jesus ascends, He is absent, But He comes to indwell believers: He is present. And now that resurrection power will be present in believers: That's 19b: Because I live, you will live also.

Now notice what will happen when this presence of Jesus comes into believers in verse 20:

²⁰ At that day you will know that I *am* in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

You will then understand all this talk of mutual indwelling in the Godhead, because you will know, experientially, that you are in Me, says Jesus, and I am in you. This must refer to the future, to the Spirit, since Jesus is right there in front of them physically.

Look at verse 21ff, and look out for the word manifest.

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and **manifest** Myself to him.” ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, “Lord, how is it that You will **manifest** Yourself to us, and not to the world?” ²³ Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and **We will come to him and make Our home with him.**

Now notice, this is something for believers. Jesus is not describing the event of becoming a Christian, because this is conditional on certain acts of obedience. He is describing the experience of a Christian who does certain things. At the end of verse 21, Jesus says that He will manifest Himself to that Christian. The word for *manifest* simply means, make visible. So, though Jesus is absent, then present, then absent again.

He is going to make it so the believer is experiencing Jesus as present, visible in some way.

Well, what way? That's what Judas asks in verse 22. Judas is another name for the disciple called Thaddeus, or Lebbaeus. He thought Jesus was going to come back and establish His kingdom, and of course be manifest to the whole world. So, he asks, in what way, or what has happened so that we will see you and the world doesn't?

Now we already know the answer to that question, if we are talking about phase 1. Jesus rises and appears only to His disciples. But Jesus is talking about phase two, when He has already ascended. So how is it that in the future, when Jesus is in Heaven, that His people will, in some way, be able to see Him. Jesus answers the question in verse 23, where He basically repeats verse 21, explaining what this presence will be like.

²³ Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and **We will come to him and make Our home with him.**

Here the Father and the Son indwell the believer. So who indwells the Christian? Is it the Father, the Son, or the Spirit? Or all three? Theologians differ, some think it is all three, other think it is the Spirit, and the Father and Son in the Spirit. In many ways, the question is a moot point, because each person of the Godhead has the other two indwelling Him. So if the Spirit indwells us, necessarily the Father and Son have come to indwell.

But Jesus is not merely telling us about the indwelling of the Spirit. He is not simply describing conversion, with its new covenant realities that were not present in the Old.

It is not just the presence of Christ, it is the **felt** presence, the experienced presence of Christ.

It is more than that. Jesus is making this conditional – if someone loves me and keeps my commandment, then this will happen. In other words, Jesus is describing not merely the indwelling, but the indwelling **lovingly felt**. Notice that twice Jesus say **I will love Him, my Father will love Him**. This is experiencing the presence of a loving God interpenetrating your being. This is seeing with the eyes of your heart, experiencing a person within your person.

You can get a glimpse of this in Paul's prayer for the Ephesians.

¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height—¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16–19)

Notice the language of indwelling – the Spirit in the inner man, Christ dwell in your hearts, filled with all the fullness. Notice the language of love – rooted and grounded in love, know the love of Christ. For Paul, the Christian life can be one in which you experience the presence of Christ inwardly as He dwells in you by His Spirit, and it is an experience of loving communion.

But we probably have more questions. What does that feel like exactly? What do we do and what does He do? That becomes clear as we learn from Jesus how we experience this presence. He promised this presence, but secondly, He gives us the path, the way to experiencing this presence.

II. The Path to His Presence

In verse 21 and 23, Jesus gave us the promised result: I will love Him and manifest myself to Him; v23: my Father will love Him and we will come and make our home with Him. That's the promise of presence, loving, internal presence.

Notice the conditions in verses 21 and 23 that give us the *how*.

²¹ He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.

²³ "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word;

²⁴ He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.

Take in the Word, and obey it. Jesus speaks of His *commandments*, and in verses 23 and 24, His *Word*. Verse 24 puts it negatively, if you don't love him, you don't keep His Word, and it turns out, that means you're not keeping the Word of the Father who gave Him those words. To put it another way, if you don't love Christ, you won't keep the Word, and if you don't keep the Word, you don't love Christ.

So here is how we experience this internal, invisible indwelling. We have the indwelling, it is a reality, but here is how it becomes a **felt** reality. Two things: the believer lovingly **internalises** the Word; the believer lovingly **externalises** the Word.

First, the believer takes in the Word with the intention of knowing and loving the Lord.

This applies to reading the Word, reading Christian books, it applies to coming to corporate worship where we read the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word and hear the Word preached. It applies to listening to sermons and podcasts outside of Sunday. You're taking in the Word so that the Word dwells in you richly.

Notice in chapter 15: If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. (John 15:7)

You are internalising the Word so as to retain, so as to make His Word your own words, His thoughts your thoughts, His perspectives your perspectives. That's how you have His Word.

But then, the next thing you do is that you externalise the Word in loving obedience. Everything that is now on the inside of you, you bring it out in word and deed. You speak the truth in love, You pray and praise and thank God. You teach truth. You give the gospel to others. You conform your actions to His Word, you conform your family life, your business ethics, your financial life, your media habits, your leisure activities, your marriage, your parenting, your friendships, to His Word. If He loves it, you love. If He hates it, you hate it. If it pleases Him, you do it. If you can't do it for

His glory, you don't do it.

The path to experiencing the loving presence of God in your own soul is by internalising His Word, and then externalising His Word.

Why? If you cannot have someone with you, the next best thing is that person's words. If you are not with someone you love, what is next thing you do? You send them words, right? A text, Whatsapp, email, Zoom, Facetime, maybe even a hand-written letter. Receiving words from the person is almost as comforting as them being there. When you're in love, and your beloved sends you a letter, you read it repeatedly; you internalise it.

And if the one you love asked you to do something, hinted at what would please or delight him or her, you then take those words and externalise them by going and doing that thing, buying it. And though separated, it is as if you are together, because you took in the words, loved them, and then acted on them. Obedience is the language of love. It understands the words, and communicates back: I understand, I agree, I love you.

But even better than that would be if a person's words had a kind of life of their own, living in and among your own thoughts. What if the Words of God were the living thoughts and words of a living person? What if those Words were like a fuel which had power to ignite in your soul, if you added the spark or the flame of obedience?

For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Then you would have within you Words of God waiting to be ignited into the experience of His loving personal presence, if you will add the heat of loving obedience. It would be like if a doctor give you a pill, and said, take this. It will boost your energy, and your mood, and your health. But it only activates if you get your heart rate up to 120 beats per minute. If you don't do it, it's going to go through you. But if you obey doctor's orders, what is inside you will energise and activate.

That is the promise of internalised Words responded to in loving obedience. The result is like a memorised love letter that seems to be read out to you in the voice of your beloved. The result is the experience of His mind and heart mingling with yours, I in you and you in Me. His words and thoughts becoming part of your own. Not miracles. Not mysterious events. Words: loving Words from a loving Person, that glow in your soul because you have added to them the flame of your own loving obedience.

But there is one more reason why the internalised Word will be felt like the very presence of Jesus.

III. The Person of the Presence

"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

Jesus says I have spoken this while present. Verse 26 implies, I will be absent, but then taking my place will be the one sent in My name: the Helper, the Holy Spirit.

Twice Jesus has told us that the way His presence, and His Father's presence will be felt is through

the Spirit. Here again, He is called the Helper, and the Holy Spirit. Notice the personal pronoun: He. The Spirit is not a force, or an impersonal action. He is a Person.

But in the Trinity, the Persons of the Godhead are not like a council of three separate gods. Each Person is distinct, but not independent. They mutually indwell. So much so, that the 19th and early 20th century preacher G. Campbell Morgan referred to the Spirit as “the other Jesus”. And remember, it was Jesus Himself who said in verse 16 that the Father would send another Helper, meaning another of the same kind as Jesus Himself.

Jesus is now forever united to His human nature, so He is ascended and will return bodily to the Earth, but His Spirit indwells believers. Remember He is not only called the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God, in Philippians 1:19, Paul calls Him the Spirit of Jesus Christ. In Romans 8:9 he calls Him in the same verse the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Peter calls Him the Spirit of Christ 1:11.

So the Spirit of Jesus, the living Word, the Spirit who inspired the written Word, now dwells within you. And notice what He does, according to verse 26: He **teaches**, and brings to remembrance. Jesus does not say the Spirit will give new revelation. Rather, He will bring back to the disciples' memory the Word of Jesus. His role is to remind, teach, and explain. And as He, as a Person, teaches, and reminds, it is like having the Father and Son right there in the home of your soul. God's mind intermingling with your own.

Those living words of God are alive not only because they are God's Words, but because a living Person continues to speak them to us.

Perhaps we can say it this way. Jesus is the Father's Word. The Spirit's is the Word's Voice. The Spirit is the Bible vocalised in your soul.

But whom will He teach? To whom will He bring remembrance? Answer: those disciples who lovingly internalise the Word, and lovingly externalise the Word. They will experience the same Spirit who inspired the Word now illuminating that Word. It is not merely the enquiring mind that receives illumination, but the seeking heart. Spurgeon once said, “God is not truly sought by the cold researches of the brain: we must seek him with the heart. Love reveals itself to love: God manifests his heart to the heart of his people.”

If you are a Christian, I am virtually certain that you wish to experience God. But what you expect that experience to be is crucial.

You can be misled into thinking that experience will always be miraculous. It will not be. Perhaps you will have one or two moments like that in your life, but the experience of God is not one long magic show. Jesus did not promise that in the Upper Room discourse.

Nor should you look to blessing and wealth as God's presence. Paul said, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.

Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need”. (Philippians 4:11–12)

Nor should you make your Christian life about looking for the fingerprints of God, the mysterious workings of God. I am sure you will experience some remarkable providences in your life, and you will marvel over God's power over timing, and last-minute deliverances, and incredible coincidences. Those are real, but they will be punctuated, isolated moments of your Christian life, and you cannot make them your experience of the presence of God.

Instead, the presence of God is found in the Incarnate Word, Jesus, revealed now in the inspired Word, living and active in us as the indwelling Word by His Spirit. You want to experience God? Give your loving attention to internalising the Word, and your loving submission to externalising the Word, and the Spirit of God will lovingly make the Word of God live in your soul. The illuminating work of the Spirit in Tozer's words, is “the difference between a nominal Christian life and a life radiant with the light of His face.”