

Knowing God Through Living in His Presence

John 15:1-11 **John 15:1** *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. ⁹ "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*

In the last ten or fifteen years, a whole new industry has taken off - online matchmaking. Websites such as eharmony.com, match.com are now providing a booming trade by allowing people who have never met in person, to begin corresponding, using videochat, until these eventually result in some kind of personal relationship or even marriage. Though some couples have never been in each other's physical presence, they sometimes make commitments to each other, and even get engaged.

This is a long way off from the old approach of knowing someone by being their friend, spending time with them, and then deciding on the future. Even in cultures where marriages are arranged, families know each other, know the children, and have been in each other's presence. While it is true that technologies like the Internet have made it possible for relationships to continue over vast distances, most would agree that being in a loved one's presence is superior to reading an email or seeing an image on a screen. When we think about a human relationship, fundamental to the relationship's growth, is that the persons must be in one another's presence. They must spend time together in real communion.

When it comes to knowing God, is it more like a long-distance relationship, or more like a face-to-face relationship? I think many would answer that it is more like a long-distance relationship. But if we study the Word of God, we'll find that knowing God is knowing Him by living in His presence.

From the beginning of the Bible to its end, we find an emphasis on God's people knowing Him through being in His presence. God desires to be in the presence of His people, and desires that they be in His. In that place, they may behold His beauty, reflect His glory and love him ultimately.

What do we mean when we speak of God's presence? God's presence with his people is not the same as his omnipresence. Although God is in all places, God chooses to manifest his presence in certain ways and places that reveal his attributes. Heaven is such a place. God has always wanted his people to experience this particular kind of manifestation of his presence.

I want you to walk through the pages of Scripture with me to see how God desires to be in the presence of His people, and to be in their presence.

We know that man begins in innocence in the Garden of Eden, God's garden, where they lived in God's presence. Apparently, the Lord would appear daily in the cool of the day and walk and talk with them. After they had sinned, they no longer loved this.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

As judgement for their sin, they were driven out from the Garden, which was the same as being driven out from the presence of the Lord. When Cain killed Abel and was judged, it is said explicitly that he went out from the presence of the Lord (Gen 4:16).

Now that man was a sinner, God could not be present with him in the same way. However, in grace, he continued to call individuals to Himself so that they could be in His presence, and He could be in theirs. Noah and Enoch are held up as exemplary, as what singled them both out was that they 'walked with God.' (Gen 5:24, 6:9)

God's desire for man to live again in his presence became focused on one man – Abram, through whom God would raise up a people to live in his presence.

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him, saying:

"I am God Almighty. Live in My presence and be devout. (Genesis 17:1 HCSB)

God's program with Israel continued through the Patriarchs, to Israel's covenanting with God as a nation, with God as their King. Listen to the language describing this covenant relationship:

⁵ I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. ⁴⁶ And they will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. Exodus 29:45-46

I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people. Leviticus 26:12

In fact, it is God's presence with a people that identifies them as his people. Moses says just this:

Now if I have indeed found favor in Your sight, please teach me Your ways, and I will know You and find favor in Your sight. Now consider that this nation is Your people." ¹⁴ Then He replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ "If Your presence does not go," Moses responded to Him, "don't make us go up from here. ¹⁶ How will it be known that I and Your people have found favor in Your sight unless You go with us? I and Your people will be distinguished by this from all the other people on the face of the earth." (Exodus 33:13-16)

For Israel God's presence was centred at the Tabernacle, and then later, at the Temple. The Shekinah glory rested upon those places, and they demonstrated that God's presence was with His people. One of the saddest scenes in all Scripture is in Ezekiel 11:23

Ezekiel 11:23 *²³ And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain, which is on the east side of the city.*

God had not abandoned His covenant with His people, but it did mean that the fullness of God's presence was going to be somewhere else.

The coming of Jesus signifies the beginning of the ultimate expression of God's presence with man. his very name – Emmanuel – means *God with us*, or *God among us*.

John 1:1 tells us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In verse 14, John writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".

This dwelling has the idea of dwelling in a tent. Christ "tabernacled" among us. God had been with Israel in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, but now God, the Son, by adding to himself a true and perfect human nature, was tabernacling among mankind in the most intimate way yet. God was in the presence of men as a man.

Colossians 2:9 *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;*

When Jesus came, he came not simply to dwell among us. He came to die for the sin that alienates man from God. In other words, he came to make it possible for us to live in God's presence perpetually. Because of the Incarnation, it is possible for humans to become the Bride of Christ, married to God, the Son. We know there is coming a day when this marriage will be consummated. We will live in God's presence physically, and know and see him in unprecedented ways.

Revelation 21:3 *And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*

Does this mean we must wait for Heaven to live in his presence? No! I want to show you now how Christians are able to live in God's presence now, and so come to know him and thereby love him. This is what brings us to John chapters 14, 15, and 16.

Shortly before his death, Jesus began to teach his disciples how this would be possible. He said, paradoxically, it would occur by his leaving and sending of the Third Person of the Trinity, who could indwell all believers and mediate the presence of Christ. In his incarnation, Christ was in one place at a time. With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, believers around the world could be in the presence of Christ.

John 14:16-20 ⁶ *"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever --* ¹⁷ *"the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.* ¹⁸ *"I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.*

In what way will Christ come and not leave believers as orphans? In the sense he is speaking of here, he will come when the Spirit comes to dwell in believers.

Here is the New Testament version of living in God's presence. Once we are justified, God the Holy Spirit comes to live within us, locating the very presence of God in our bodies, rendering them temples. He can do this because at the moment of justification, we are placed in Christ.

After the Incarnation, Scripture emphasises that believers are in Christ, while at the same time, Christ is in them by the Holy Spirit.

How does this truth enable us to know and love God? This position is the basis of our confidence to keep approaching God and living in his presence. Living in God's presence is no longer a matter of having to make your way to some faraway Temple or Tabernacle, where God's presence is particularly

manifest. The glory of the Christian life is that God has chosen to dwell within his people, and it is now possible to experience His presence at all times, in all places. The merits of Christ make it possible for God to continually dwell in you and never leave you nor forsake you. The presence of the Holy Spirit means you do not have to shout with raised tones to reach God, for he is within you. You do not have to find a priest who can mediate God's presence to you, for the indwelling Christ is your High Priest.

How do believers respond to the indwelling presence of God, so as to know him and love him? Jesus explained it through a simple image: branches abiding in the vine.

John 15:4-5 *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.*

This passage has some simple pictures. A grape vine with branches, and a vinedresser, who prunes, lifts up, and casts away, seeking as much fruit as possible. As branches remain connected to the vine, they are fruitful. They don't make fruit, or create fruit; they bear it. And they only bear it if the branches remain in the vine. Branches which do not remain in the vine, do not bring forth fruit. If they remain that way, they wither, and need to be clipped off and burnt.

Jesus is the vine. Believers are branches. The Father is the vinedresser. The fruit is showing forth the life of Christ: His life, His beauty in love for God, Christlike character, answered prayer. . The goal here is that believers, as branches, stay connected to the vine, so that they bear fruit.

Do not look for hidden meanings in the word *abide*. It simply means *to dwell*. Abiding is the idea of living together. Branches must live, remain, or dwell in the vine to bear fruit and stay alive. Believers must live in God's presence. Since you are now located in Christ, and since he now abides in you through the presence of the Spirit, then dwell together; live together, live in his presence.

What does it mean to abide:

I. Believe You Are In God's Presence

"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. (John 15:3)

To begin with, you must trust that you are in God's presence by grace. You do not have to go to a Temple or a Tabernacle to get into God's presence. If you have trusted in Christ to be your Lord and Saviour, then as verse 3 says, you are already clean. You are already in Christ, and Christ in you.

Many Christians fail on this point. They do not believe by faith that they are already in God's presence by grace. They believe they need to earn God's presence. They believe they need to attract God into their presence. They believe God's presence is something that will only come to you when you have been exceptionally good.

But in this image, where are the branches in relation to the vine? Do the branches attach and re-attach to the vine? No, the branches are in the vine, and the life of the vine is in the branches. Any branch which is not really in the vine, so that the vine is not really in the branches, is dead. It's good only for firewood.

What is the Christian's position?

"At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. (John 14:20)

Living in God's presence begins by believing by faith that you are in Christ and Christ in you, and that because of the Gospel, you are in His presence. This is the first part of abiding.

II. Let God's Word Dwell in You Richly

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

The Lord Jesus says that the secret to abiding and bringing forth the fruit of answered prayer is to have His words dwelling in you. That is, the word of God is to be present and at home in you. I'm reminded of Colossians 3:16:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. (Colossians 3:16)

What does this mean? It means that you are loving the person of God, loving His will, loving His ways enough to search it out and make it part of your life.

Charles Spurgeon:

Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.

I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like the reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.

To have the Word of God in us in this way is fuel for living in God's presence and knowing Him. The Word of God shows us the mind of God, and the heart of God, and the ways of God. It is one thing to be in Christ, and Christ in you – but the Spirit of Christ dwelling in you works on and uses the Word of God. It is the medium He uses to communicate God to you. Starve yourself of the Word, and you are hardening your own spiritual arteries, so that the life-giving flow of the Spirit within you is stifled. You

are quenching the Spirit.

If you take in the Word richly, you will live in God's presence, communing with Him. You will have enough Bible in you to adore God, to admire God, to recognise and confess sin, to thank God, to ask for enabling grace, to yield to Him in difficulties, and in all things to find God as your portion.

The Word of God dwelling richly in you becomes a conversation that you have with God, a two-way conversation. This communing gets better, the more of God's Word we have in us.

III. Live To Please Him in All of Life

As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

From family life, we know what this means. If you live with someone, that relationship can either be pleasant or unpleasant. Pleasant relationships result when co-dwellers deliberately try to enjoy one another, by avoiding the things that displease the other, asking for forgiveness for wrongs done, and seeking to please the other.

Abiding, and living in His presence means we seek to obey Him, and please Him in all of life. Since He is in Me, and I am in Him, then wherever I go, and whatever I do, I want to please Him. And the more the Word of God dwells richly in me, the more I will know what His will is, and how to please Him in all of life.

Because God's presence is no longer restricted to one place, but is with us everywhere, at all times, so we live like that everywhere and at all times. That's why Paul could write:

Colossians 3:17 ¹⁷ *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

Colossians 3:23 ²³ *And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,*