

Building *Intimacy* with God

Devotional

W E E K S 1 - 4

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Is intimacy with God possible?

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Week 1

IS INTIMACY WITH GOD POSSIBLE?

We talk a lot about intimacy with God (whether or not we actually use those words). Knowing Jesus is supposed to cure our loneliness, give us purpose in life and help calm our fears. While an intimate relationship with God is presented as a “cure all” for both now and eternity, few Christians actually know what intimacy with God practically means.

One of my favorite authors, Dr. Larry Crabb, once said, “I know that God is all I need, but I don’t yet know Him well enough for Him to be all that I have.”

As we face the fear of losing loved ones, possessions and jobs, do we know God well enough for Him to be all that we have? Is it even possible to have that deep and meaningful of a relationship with the living God?

We may meet some “super Christians” like Francis Chan who seem to have special access to God. But that doesn’t seem like something that is attainable for the average Christian like you or me.

God told the Israelites, “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for me with your whole heart.” I believe that same promise is for you and me. I don’t have more of God only because I don’t want more of God. Another of my favorite authors, A.W. Tozer, wrote, “You have as much of the Holy Spirit as you really want.”

God can use our current circumstances to awaken in us a desire for more of Him. When we seek more of Him, we will have more of Him.

TAKING *notes*

Because intimacy with God is so intangible for most of us, I want to look at five practical ways the Bible shows us of intimacy with God.

1. We experience intimacy with God when we worship Him. Read John 12:1-8 and 2 Samuel 6:14-22. These are both intimate expressions of love and worship. Notice that both Mary and David were criticized for their lavish worship of God. They were lost in love, probably oblivious to how others viewed them in the moment of worship.
2. We experience intimacy with God as His child. The Bible often uses the language of Father and son/daughter to describe our relationship with the Lord (see Romans 8:15, Hebrews 12:7-11, and Matthew 7:7-12 as examples). Even if you didn't have a good and loving father, you understand the idea of a father who protects, shelters, teaches, disciplines and affirms his child. We find intimacy in calling out to our daddy for direction, comfort and love... resting in His care and provision.
3. We experience intimacy with God as a friend. In today's world, "friend" has a lot of meanings. You might have hundreds of people you consider to be friends. When Jesus invites us into friendship, He means intimate friendship (See John 15:13-15). Not everyone is a friend of God. In fact Paul said that when we were apart from Christ, we were His enemies (Romans 5:10). But trusting in Jesus's death and resurrection brings us into friendship with God. Jesus wants to be the first person you "call" with good news or bad. He will grieve with you and rejoice with you. He is the "friend who sticks closer than a brother."

TAKING *notes*

4. We experience intimacy in God's work. There is a huge difference between asking God to bless our work (even spiritual work!) and joining God in His work. Read John 15:1-17. Jesus expounds on friendship by saying that true fellowship will result in spiritual fruit. As we know Christ, we will naturally shift from doing our own work to being part of the work of the Father. Experiencing God work in and through you is an awesome way to sense His presence! (even if it's something as simple as reaching out to someone He's placing on your heart).

5. We experience intimacy with Jesus when we suffer. This is the intimacy that no one seeks, yet Jesus and His followers present it as the greatest way that we can know God. Read Philippians 3:7-11. Paul experienced such deep intimacy in sharing Christ's sufferings, that he actually longed for more. These sufferings can take two forms. First of all, we can choose to have the mind of Christ through the difficult things that come our way. Maybe right now, you are suffering loneliness, sickness or loss because of COVID-19. If you choose to have an eternal perspective, asking God to refine you through the trials, you will grow in intimacy with Him. The second way we know God through suffering is when we suffer persecution, loss or rejection because we follow Jesus. We choose the path of suffering because He is better than life itself. Paul, John, James, and Peter all refer to this type of suffering in their letters to the early Christians. This is perhaps the most profound intimacy we can experience with God here in earth.

TAKING *notes*

Of these five ways to experience intimacy with God, pick one or two that you want to focus on. Meditate on Scripture passages that paint the picture of this intimacy. Incorporate the longing for this intimacy in your prayer life, asking God to taking you deeper in knowing Him.

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe..." —Ephesians 1:17-19

Barriers to intimacy with God

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Week 2

BARRIERS TO INTIMACY WITH GOD

Last week, we talked about the fact that God invites us to intimacy with Him. We don't find Him because we don't seek Him. The goal of this devotional series is to help us use this unique time to focus on and develop a hunger for God and a more intimate relationship with Him.

We are going to look at three common barriers to knowing God. First, we need to understand that intimacy with God is always a spiritual battle. Satan doesn't want you to know God. This is true for people who have never trusted in Christ for salvation. Satan wants you to stay lost in your sins. But it is also true for Christians.

As you read last week in John 15, spiritual fruit comes only when we have intimate fellowship with Jesus (abiding in Him.) This means that a Christian who doesn't have intimate fellowship with God is no threat to the kingdom of darkness! God's enemy, Satan, is invested in keeping you from knowing God. Pursuing God is not just a matter of willpower, it's a spiritual battle. (See 2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

1. Religion

The first barrier to knowing God is religion. This can be the greatest obstacle to knowing God because it gives us a false sense of confidence. We can believe that doing things for God is the same as knowing Him. Read Isaiah 29:13. The religious leaders in the New Testament were the living example of this Old Testament warning. They were very religious and thought they were pleasing God, yet they missed the fact that His Son was standing right in front of them! This can happen within modern Christianity. We can be very religious and neglect having a true relationship with God. This is the most dangerous barrier because we don't know we are missing something. Religion is so close to knowing God that we think we have Him.

- What religious activities can give you a false sense of pursuing a real relationship with God?

- How can you tell the difference between religious service and knowing God?

TAKING *notes*

2. Shame

The second barrier is shame. Many Christians feel like they are unworthy of being in the presence of God. The Bible clearly tells us that we are made worthy to be with God if we trust in Jesus (see Ephesians 1:3-14). Shame will keep us hiding from God's presence instead of running to Him. Read Psalm 32. Notice that David went from hiding from God to hiding in God. Satan uses shame to convince us that if we run to the Father, He will condemn us instead of embracing us. We see several women in the gospels (known sinners!) have the faith to believe Jesus would embrace and forgive them. Their faith made them well. Shame is not first and foremost a psychological issue. It is unbelief ... the inability to walk by the truth of what Jesus has spoken. If He has set you free, you are free indeed.

- How does Satan use the weapon of shame to keep you from running to God?

TAKING *notes*

3. Self-reliance/pride.

Most of the time, Christians walk around thinking we are doing ok with the amount of God that we currently have. We might actually be afraid of more of God because He might tear down our self-reliance. Read Jesus's interaction with someone who felt this way in Mark 10:17-27. Can you identify with this man? Have you ever wanted just enough of God to comfort you but not demand anything from you? Notice that Jesus did not negotiate with the man in Mark. He doesn't compromise, but expects that we love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength. Read Matthew 10:37-39.

- What does Jesus say about the attitude of trying to follow Him while holding onto our self-reliance?

So how do we break through these strongholds? Jesus said, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God." He can give us the faith, desire and spiritual wisdom to pursue Him in spite of such daunting barriers. Our job is simply to believe (John 6:28-29).

Worshipping God with our hearts

Devotional

W E E K 3



Week 3

WORSHIPPING GOD WITH OUR HEARTS

About a decade ago when the Lord began calling me to grow in intimacy with Him, He directed my attention to a very familiar verse. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.” This verse is the most central of the Jewish and Christian faith. Jesus said that it is the greatest of all commandments. As I meditated on the verse, I got stuck on the word “heart.” How could I love God with my heart?

As I shared earlier, I was a very committed Christian. I studied and taught God’s Word and deeply desired to please Him, but I couldn’t say I knew how to love Him affectionately, with my heart. That realization created a mini-crisis within me. Although I was serving God, He felt so distant. I couldn’t say with confidence that I knew that He loved me or that I loved Him with my heart.

For about a year, that became my quest. How could I learn to love God intimately? Around that time, I read *Satisfy My Thirsty Soul* by Linda Dillow (and I was able to be mentored by the author!). In her book, Linda writes, “It’s so important to be able to say, *I am not primarily a worker for God; I am first and foremost a lover of God. This is who I am.*”

That book, along with some others by the “dead old guys” like Tozer, Murray, and Watchman Nee showed me how to approach God and His Word in a way that awakened my heart to intimacy with Him. There are two primary ways that I learned to engage with God beyond “head knowledge” and duty.

TAKING *notes*

1. Worship

First of all, I learned what it truly means to worship. Unlike my typical prayers, worship is when I choose to reflect upon and rejoice in the character of God. The Scriptures are filled with examples of worship like these passages:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength. (Isaiah 40:28-29)

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. (Psalm 95:1-7)

TAKING *notes*

Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and[i] knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”
“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36).

You are probably most familiar with corporate worship—praising God in church. But intimacy also means developing a pattern of personal and private worship. I've learned to set aside time to be alone with the Lord, simply engaging my heart in love for Him.

Here are a few ways you can begin to do this, even for a few minutes every day:

- Get on your knees with some worship music playing and meditate on the words. Perhaps sing along, lifting your heart of worship to the Lord, believing that He hears you.
- Read out loud Psalms of worship. You may even want to memorize portions of them so you can meditate on them when you are awake at night or engaging in a mindless task. Some of my favorites are Psalm 27, 63 and 103.
- Go through the alphabet, praising God using each letter to remind you of His attributes. A - God you are the Alpha and Omega; you are awesome and altogether lovely! B- Lord Jesus, you are my Beloved. You are my Bridegroom and my heart longs to be with you. And so on...
- Go for a walk and pay attention to God's beauty through creation. Talk to Him about what creation says about His love, greatness and faithfulness.

TAKING *notes*

2. Surrender

I also realized that God has a specific love language. Jesus tells us what it is in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Early in my walk with the Lord, I read this passage with a duty or legalistic mindset. I wanted to prove how much I loved God by doing all the right things and avoiding all of the wrong things. Rather than making me feel closer to God, this actually made me feel more distant. In my mind, God became a critical parent who I desperately wanted to please.

I now see that and other passages about obedience very differently. Jesus isn't asking for our obedience; instead, He's saying that when we fall in love with Him, obedience will naturally flow from us. Intimacy with God means much more than obedience—it requires surrender. Read Luke 11:15-32. This is the familiar story of the prodigal son. The older son was obedient to the father, but was never surrendered in love. His obedience was transactional—doing the right things to get good things from the father. Instead, the younger son came to a place of absolute surrender to love and appreciate his father.

Another contrast between obedience and surrender is the life of Saul and David. Saul began his leadership with a negotiated obedience to God which eventually crumbled. (Read I Samuel 15). David had an attitude of surrender (see David's prayer in II Samuel 7:18-29). Duty-bound obedience will ultimately keep us distant from God, but surrender is the greatest expression of intimacy.

Have you ever surrendered to God? What is keeping you from doing so?

I highly recommend going through *Satisfy My Thirsty Soul* alone or with a group of friends who also want to grow in intimacy with God.

**Making intimacy
with God
a lifetime priority**

Devotional

W E E K 4



Week 4

MAKING INTIMACY WITH GOD A LIFETIME PRIORITY

As I've shared with you over the past few weeks, about ten years ago I experienced a dramatic new depth of intimacy in my relationship with God. Many times, these "mountaintop" experiences fade and become anomalies of the Christian life rather than an expected norm. I was determined not to let that happen.

When the Lord drew me closer, I realized I had been functioning with so little of Him. I want to always know God as my Beloved, my intimate friend, my caring Father, my Savior, and my Lord. True, the "feelings" of God's closeness come and go. Even David, Job, Paul, and Jesus experienced times through which God felt distant. Yet, we can trust and continually pursue the reality of God's intimate presence.

Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that he exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." By faith, I believe that the pursuit of God's presence is never a wasted effort, even if I can't "feel" Him on a given day.

Over the past ten years, the following practices have been my focus to bring me back to the singular pursuit of walking intimately with my God.

TAKING *notes*

1. Intimacy begins with priority.

Think of something you do every day. Start with basics like eating, going to the bathroom, and taking a shower. And then perhaps less obvious things you regularly do like talking to your spouse or roommate, feeding your dog or cat, and checking your news feed. How did these activities become part of your regular routine? Because you believe they are necessary for daily functioning.

Intimacy with God will become a regular priority when you believe it is absolutely critical for you to function. Earlier we looked at Jesus' words in John 15:5. Write the verse here:

Do you believe what Jesus said? Apart from abiding in Him, you can do nothing. Of course you can do many things apart from abiding in Christ. You can brush your teeth, drive your car, say hi to your neighbor, and post on social media. What Jesus was saying is that we can do nothing of eternal significance apart from Him. Disconnected from intimacy with God, we may be very busy, but we will ultimately have spent our time running on a treadmill, going nowhere. I have become absolutely convinced of this truth. Even my best ideas for my marriage, my children, and my work are empty. But when I am fully surrendered to the work of God in me, He works through me in every aspect of my life. I need Him! I need God's comfort. I need His direction. I need His perspective. I need His love. I am lost without Him. What in your life is impossible to do without being connected to Jesus?

TAKING *notes*

2. Set a time and place.

"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). The Gospels often refer to times (late night or early morning) and places (the wilderness, mountains, gardens) where Jesus got away to be with the Father. We see similar patterns in Daniel's, David's, and the apostles' lives.

Time alone with God won't just happen. We need to set apart a time and place that will nurture the practice. If your life is loud and busy, perhaps you can only find 15-20 minutes of quiet. Start with that! And the "place" doesn't have to be a whole room; it can be a special chair or place in your backyard.

In this season of life, my time with the Lord is best in the morning before everyone gets up. When the kids were younger, evenings were better for me. I've had to learn what it looks like to prioritize this time with God but not be rigid and legalistic about it. There are some mornings when I know I need to sleep and other mornings where it's important to spend time with my husband. Notice that the Bible didn't say that every night, Jesus religiously got away for three hours to pray. It was His regular practice but not His rigid routine. There are days when my time seeking the Lord looks more like an ongoing conversation rather than a "quiet time."

What does your regular time and place with the Lord look like?.

3. Be inspired by others.

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11), and “let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). Intimacy with God is contagious. When I’m around other Christians who are passionate for God and fully surrendered to His Spirit, I want to become like them. They remind me to be hungry and thirsty for the Lord; their lives convict me and warn me against complacency and spiritual pride. Whether in the flesh or through their teaching, I want to be in their company.

Be on the lookout for Christians around you who want to know God and walk intimately with Him. Pray for mentors who can encourage you as Paul encouraged Timothy: “I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands... join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.” I have been blessed to know men and women who encourage my walk with the Lord and who show me what it looks like to live a surrendered life. But I am also deeply encouraged by men and women who died many years ago and who I have never met. Among my greatest mentors are people like A.W. Tozer, Andrew Murray, and C.S. Lewis.

Even if we never personally meet, I hope and pray that we can continue to journey together to know God and to walk intimately with Him! Remember the quote I shared in week 1 from Dr. Larry Crabb, “I know that God is all I need, but I don’t yet know Him well enough for Him to be all that I have.” As we face difficult or challenging times, may we become ever desperate to know God and be sustained by His presence.