

EXPERIENCING INTIMACY WITH GOD

CONTENTS

Expectations Of Intimacy With God	2
Intimacy With God Is A Process	3
Five Myths About Intimacy With God	6
Five Truths About Intimacy With God	17
Great Expectations	21
Drawing Close To God	25

We all know how inclined we are to wander or even to run from God. We often get distracted. And sometimes we push thoughts of Him aside.

In picking up this booklet, however, you may also be showing that deep down you long for God—to know Him, to love Him, to experience Him, to trust Him.

In this excerpt of *Radical Reliance: Living 24/7 With God At The Center* written by Joe Stowell, we're given words of counsel from a longtime pastor and Christian leader about how to experience intimacy with God. I'm confident his words will be renewing for all of us.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

Cover Photo: Terry Bidgood

Scripture taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, ©1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972, 1973,1975,1977,1995 by The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, Calif. Used by permission.

This booklet is based on a portion of *Radical Reliance: Living 24/7 With God At The Center* by Joe Stowell, published by Discovery House Publishers, a member of the RBC Ministries family.

© 2006 RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in USA

EXPECTATIONS OF INTIMACY WITH GOD

If you're reading this booklet because you are expecting intimacy with God to arrive as a blast of the Spirit that will cover you 24 hours a day for the rest of your life with an eternal season of ecstatic praise, warm feelings, and tangible chumminess with the Almighty God of the universe, then this is going to be a disappointment to you. In fact, if these are the hopes and dreams of your soul in your search for intimacy with God, then my guess is that you probably won't even make it to the last page.

Our longing for intimacy needs to feed in the pasture of biblical reality lest we look for more than God has promised. What does He tell us that we can truly expect as we search

for intimacy with Him?

Expectations are everything. If we expect our spouses to be home at a certain time for dinner, and they aren't; if we expect our teenage son to come home early enough so that we can use the car to make our tee time, and he doesn't; when we expect friendship to be pleasant, rewarding, and uncomplicated, and it isn't; when we expect to receive that raise, that bonus, that promotion, and we don't—we inevitably feel disappointment, then discouragement, and finally despair if the broken expectation is big enough.

Some time ago, I was chatting with a couple of our nation's leading Christian counselors. I asked them if they were to make a list of the most prevalent root problems in people's lives, what would be on it? Without pausing they both blurted out, "Bitterness.

It's on the top of the list." They went on to say that bitterness often is rooted in ill-defined expectations and a misplaced point of ultimate trust. If we expect life to be nice; if we expect people not to use, manipulate, ignore, misunderstand, or abuse us; if we expect something outside the span of reality—then it's inevitable that our dreams will become nightmares.

INTIMACY WITH GOD IS A PROCESS

Finding satisfaction, sustenance, and security in our relationship with God is a process. Too many of us have become discouraged in the pursuit of God by expecting that the product will be ours quickly and that the experience will be in line with our expectations

of what it ought to be.

What can we realistically expect? The first task in the pursuit of intimacy with God is to deal with the disconnectedness that keeps us far from Him. This is our responsibility. God looks for repentant, radically reliant hearts in which to set up His residence.

The next step is starting on a pilgrimage toward God by being routinely faithful to the realities that trigger an experience with His fulfilling presence. When we are faithful about the process of connecting to God, He is consistently faithful about fulfilling us in His time and in His way. Each of us will experience Him differently. And He will respond to us differently at different seasons and intervals of life. The consistency and constancy of His reality in our lives will be a lifelong growth experience.

Intimacy with God must

not be defined in terms of its experiential elements. Experiences are too subjective, varied, and individualized to nail down as universal scenarios of intimacy. God doesn't meet all of us in the same way—emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually. Each of us perceives things in a unique way. If we define intimacy by what it looks and feels like, we will inevitably be defining it as one individual sees it, thus setting up other people for disappointment. When we read biographies of Christians or hear people tell of close encounters they have had with God, we shouldn't try to frame our own experiences to match theirs. God meets us where we are and not where someone else is.

While none of us experience God in precisely the same way, all of us do come to Him by way of the same road map. We do the

process; God responds with an individualized product. In fact, this is what Scripture teaches us when we are told to “draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (Jas. 4:8). That is a process statement.

I remember talking with a quality-control expert about his job as a consultant to some of the leading industries in America. He told me that the key to quality control was to create a process that was effective and efficient. If the process was right, the product was guaranteed. It was the process that guaranteed the product.

Good processes depend on clear definitions. If our definitions are not right, the whole process will be misdirected and misunderstood. Intimacy requires a clear understanding of what it is, what it is not, and how to know if we are

indeed tracking toward God.

What is the operational definition of the process that keeps our soul turned toward God? The pursuit of intimacy is *an intentional commitment to take steps toward God and, in the process of that Godward motion, to grow more deeply conscious of, connected to, and confident in Him alone as the only source to satisfy, sustain, and secure.*

The pursuit of intimacy is a process that is intentional. It is a process in that it is a lifelong adventure with increasing measures of satisfaction and meaning. It is intentional in that no one is zapped into intimacy; we must be actively focused on the pursuit.

The pursuit is a non-negotiable commitment on our part to actively apply the principles that God has given us and to patiently and persistently build our

lives around them. These principles include:

- a repentant turnaround in attitude and action;
- a repudiation of self-sufficiency that leads to a radical reliance on Christ;
- a conscious connecting in ongoing communication; and
- a connecting with Him in creation, in His character and conduct, in worship and praise, in crisis, and in faithful obedience.

A commitment to these principles empowers my consciousness of Christ, my connectedness to Christ, and my confidence in Christ. The pursuit of intimacy with God embraces a way of life that increasingly fills my soul with the satisfaction, sustenance, and security of His presence. The pursuit of intimacy is about growing more deeply connected to Christ as the ultimate source for all that I need.

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT INTIMACY WITH GOD

While it's important to have a definition of the pursuit of intimacy as our starting point, we should not allow myths that distort our perspective to sabotage the process. Part of defining deals with clarifying what is not true as well as embracing what is true.

MYTH #1: Intimacy is primarily about what He will do for us when we get close. The process of intimacy should never be motivated by what God might do for us but rather by our desire to do what we can for Him.

In 1985, the championship for the East Division of the American League came down to one game at the end of the

season. Frank Tanana was on the mound for the Detroit Tigers and pitched a brilliant game to bring his team to victory, 2 to 1. I still remember seeing the picture of Frank, arms lifted in ecstatic celebration, on the cover of the next day's *USA Today* and reading all the praise of the press for what a great pitcher he was.

Several days later Frank pitched in the American League championship series. If the Tigers could clinch this championship, they would advance to the World Series. But Frank didn't do as well this time. In fact, the Tigers lost the game and ultimately the series. This time the talk was all about Frank's less-than-spectacular performance.

At the time, I was Frank's pastor. A few days after the game I asked him, "How do you deal with being a hero one minute and the bad guy the next?" He said to me,

“Joe, I learned something a long time ago about baseball fans. They all live by the motto ‘What have you done for me *today*?’ That’s all that counts.”

Later I reflected on his comments and realized that same attitude characterizes a lot of us as God’s people. When we think about intimacy, it’s easy to envision it in terms of, “What has God done for me *lately*?” We tend to validate His reality and measure the quality of our relationship to Him by what He is doing for us at any given moment and by the frequency and intensity of His interventions in our lives. Is there any one of us who hasn’t assumed that the reality of God and the quality of our relationship to Him are measured by how many times He drops into our lives and does something good and spectacular?

When this is our

expectation, we quickly grow disinterested, discouraged, and even dysfunctional in our walk with Him. In my own life I’ve often felt cheated. If I hear someone talk about the marvelous intervention of God in his life and how spectacular God has been for him, I begin to wonder why God never does anything like that for me.

Do you ever feel abnormal—spiritually abnormal—because God just doesn’t seem to be doing a lot for you? Have you ever felt a lack of spiritual self-esteem, as though maybe you’re not all that important to God? Or have you ever felt as though He might well be the God of our fathers but is surely out of the office in our generation? It’s kind of like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice In Wonderland*, where the complaint is lodged: “Jam tomorrow, and jam yesterday, but never jam today.”

I think that's why a lot of us are seduced by anything that is spiritually experiential. If the recipe comes in the guise of Christianity, even if it's wildly exotic, we flock to it so that we can sense that God is doing something "real" for us. Rather than continuing faithfully to take the routine steps toward God in our pilgrimage, we wait by the side of the road looking for a holy handout. It's always easier to opt for the quick hit, the rush of spiritual adrenaline, than to focus on the long haul.

Rangers in Yellowstone Park tell us that in spite of all the signs that say "Don't feed the bears," people are constantly doing just that. As a result, rangers have to pick up dead bears in the woods that die from starvation because tourists weren't there to feed them. If there are no handouts for 2 weeks, the bears die. And

to think that the woods are full of nourishment! The bears could have gotten busy doing what they were built to do, but instead they died because they tried to get by on the easy handouts.

We are like those bears. God has provided an abundance of things for us to feed on if we are tracking toward Him through prayer, Bible reading, fellowship with other Christians, and practicing the commands of Scripture. If we are faithful, none of us is going to starve. In fact, our spiritual hunger should drive us to seek out more of the good things of God. He calls us to be fed and nourished by Him at the core of our beings, yet we keep looking for easy, quick hits of His presence. It makes me wonder if heaven contains signs that say, "Don't feed the Christians!" Intimacy is not about holy handouts. It is characterized by steadfast faithfulness.

We can see this truth throughout the life of Abraham. God motivated him to leave Ur of the Chaldees with a whole list of promises (Gen. 12). Abraham obeyed God even though he had not yet received the promised son. When Sarah got too old to have a baby, she and Abraham were very confused about God's will. They even tried to fulfill His will through their own maneuverings. Yet Abraham continued to worship God and track toward intimacy with Him. God kept His promise, and Isaac was born. Later, when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham was faithful to the command and was willing to obey. God again kept His promise by sparing Isaac's life. Abraham committed himself to the process of obedience, and God intervened time after time with a new and

deeper level of intimacy.

It's easy to think we would all be faithful if God intervened in our lives the way He did with Abraham, but we forget that the story of Abraham covers decades. The recorded interventions of God into Abraham's life average about one in every 15 years. Think about going 15 years without having a Bible, with no indwelling Spirit, without spiritual friends, and not hearing from God. Yet Abraham lived a life of steadfast faithfulness to God.

When Joseph was 17 years old, God gave him a dream that someday he would stand in such great authority that even his brothers would bow to him. But that's the last dream he had from God for many years. In the meantime, his jealous brothers ganged up on him and sold him as a slave. His owner's wife tried day after day to seduce

him and eventually falsely accused him of attempted rape. He was sent to jail, where he helped out a guy who promised to repay the favor but then forgot about him. Yet Joseph stayed faithful to God.

God could have appeared at any time and bailed Joseph out of a problem situation, but He didn't. Instead, He worked behind the scenes, silently arranging the time when Joseph would emerge humbled and refined. Joseph was ready to be wonderfully used by God, and God delivered him. Joseph's simple, steadfast faithfulness led to power in his life (Gen. 41:39-45).

Job was clueless about what God was doing in his life. I find it interesting that God never explained that the devil was actually behind Job's sufferings (Job 1:1-2:6). But after Job exemplified steadfast faithfulness, God

intimately revealed Himself and helped Job resolve the conflict of his soul (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:34).

The willingness to serve faithfully while waiting to receive God's promises is not limited to Old Testament characters. Paul knew what it meant to remain steadfast in the midst of difficult circumstances. He wrote:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

In the same context he added:

We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things

which are not seen are eternal (v.18).

In essence, Paul was saying that our lives should be driven by the reality of eternity to come, not by here-and-now experiences.

***We may think
that Christianity
is about God
pleasing us,
but . . . our
ambition in life
should be to
please Him.***

We may think that Christianity is about God pleasing us, but Paul makes it clear that our ambition in life should be to please *Him*. That is the essence of authentic Christianity. God rarely invades our lives with dramatic interventions. And when He does, it is not only for our benefit but to reveal

His glory through us (1 Chr. 16:9-10). While it's true that God loves to be generous and gives us many good things, we have to remember that when it comes to the major interventions, He manages the agenda.

Romance requires our steadfast faithfulness—as well as our charm, personality, money, and everything else—to finally win the day. But as you learn to put the other person first, you discover the joy of what love is all about. You won't know the thrill of an intimate relationship until you faithfully pursue the other person.

So it is with our relationship to God. In the pursuit of God we are responsible for routine faithfulness. Eventually the reward will come. Intimacy is about faithfulness *now* and fulfillment *then*—in God's time.

MYTH #2: Intimacy is about an informal buddy-buddy relationship with God.

There's no doubt that an important element of our relationship with God is built on the fact that His Word welcomes us to call Him "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6). When we are close to someone, we are usually on a first-name basis. Christ tells us that we are no longer slaves but friends (Jn. 15:15). Yet there is far more to an ongoing relationship with God than backslapping chumminess. Intimacy with God is about being struck with His grandeur and majesty. We need to stand with reverent hearts in awe at the thought of a relationship with Him.

Think of it this way. If Christ were to walk into the room while you were reading this booklet, what would you do? When my wife Martie gets lost in a book, my only

hope is to say, "When you come out of 'book world,' I have a question I want to ask you," which usually elicits a distant, audible noise that registers as an acknowledgment of my request.

But none of us would be lost in "book world" if Christ walked into the room.

Some of us might think we would get out that list of questions we always wanted to ask Him. Others of us imagine jumping up and throwing our arms around Him and thanking Him for saving us. Perhaps the more exuberant types envision giving Him a high five for all He is and all He has done.

I can assure you that if Christ walked into the room while you were reading this booklet, none of the above would occur. We would fall flat on our faces before Him, feeling phenomenally undone, exposed, unworthy. Thankfully, He would come

near, lift us up, and tell us not to be afraid. By His grace He would welcome us into His presence that we might know the joy of His fellowship. But our relationship with Him would always be marked by a sense of awe and respect, even when we enjoyed sweet moments of close fellowship with Him.

MYTH #3: The experience of intimacy is the same for all of us.

The expectation of a universal standard for an intimate relationship with God usually falls somewhere between highly charged emotional experiences and deep, quiet personal encounters at the depth of the soul. While both are valid ways in which we can experience intimacy with God, it's dangerous to try to pour ourselves into the mold of someone else's experience.

I've always been intrigued by the temperament and the personality differences among the disciples. The breadth and mix of their differences guaranteed that none of them experienced intimacy with Christ in the same way or at the same level. There was Thomas, who was highly cognitive, wanting to analyze and reason everything through to his full satisfaction. There was Peter, who was quick, verbal, and aggressive. And there was John, who was soft, warm, and mellow. Some of us will experience intimacy with Christ as a cognitive and intellectual experience, as it probably was for Thomas. Others of us will experience intimacy in the emotional side of our beings. People from different cultures and different backgrounds and with different personalities will experience Christ in a

wonderful variety of ways.

What we will have in common, as we have already learned, will not be the nature of our experience of intimacy with Christ but the process through which we move toward that intimacy. If we are to encourage one another toward deeper, more meaningful experiences with God, we should not flaunt or promote our own experiences as the standard but rather help one another stay in the process.

MYTH #4: We can experience the fullness of intimacy with God in the here and now.

It is vitally important to remember that God's Word tells us, "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). We will never know the fullness of the joy of unhindered intimacy with God on this side of heaven.

Our limitations are too severe.

We are encased in bodies and have minds that are still affected by the Fall. After Eden, sweat and fatigue became a way of life. The physical state of our bodies affects our minds and emotions. When we are drained of energy, we experience God's presence in far different ways than during times of strength and vitality. If I had the opportunity, I would spend large blocks of time sitting on a cliff overlooking the vast expanse of His creation, walking through the countryside, or letting my eyes plumb the depths of the starry universe above me. The problem is, those times are few and far between.

I try to carve out time in the mornings just to spend with God. But after a wonderful time of reading His Word, praying, and

meditating on Him, I have to throw myself headlong into the busyness of my day. God is still there to help and encourage me, but my day with its routines and challenges clouds the specialness of those quiet moments at the beginning of my day.

Yet my work is part of my responsibility to serve Him. We all were put on earth to do more than experience His presence in quiet corners. Now is not the stage in life to spend all our time in contemplative solitude. The world around us needs to hear about Him. Hurting people need help. Despairing neighbors need the encouragement that only God can provide through us. Our employers need a good day's work from us.

Not being able to sense deep intimacy with God all the time should motivate us to live for the day when we will see Him face to face.

Soon enough, the baggage of our fallenness, the press of life's responsibilities, will be lifted from our backs, and the cares of this life will evaporate. In the twinkling of an eye, we will find ourselves in an eternity where the prime preoccupation will be to enjoy unhindered intimacy with Him. Forever.

MYTH #5: We can experience intimacy with a partially surrendered life.

The experience of true intimacy with God does not require perfection, but it does require that we be fully surrendered. Full surrender means that we live with an attitude of unlimited obedience. Though we may fail, an immediate response of repentance that refuses to let us become entrenched in our failure will keep us on the path toward Him.

It would be hard to believe that we could have intimacy in an earthly relationship in the fullest, most rewarding sense if we were living in continuing offense toward the one with whom we were seeking to develop intimacy. Many marriages suffer a loss of intimacy because one of the partners has ceased to be loyal. Lying to or cheating on a spouse, ignoring the other's needs, using the relationship for your own benefit when it's convenient, and neglecting responsibilities when it's convenient are all prescriptions for a quick distancing between two hearts.

So it is with God. All through Scripture, God requires that we give Him the totality of our beings. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, strength, and mind (see Dt. 6:5; Mt. 22:37; Mk. 12:30).

In the letters Christ wrote to the churches in the early chapters of the book of Revelation, it was their ongoing, undealt-with sin and shortcomings that shortchanged their relationship with Christ.

We cannot expect intimacy when we live like the person who said:

I'd like to buy three dollars' worth of God. Please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want about a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I'd like to buy about three dollars' worth of God, please.

FIVE TRUTHS ABOUT INTIMACY WITH GOD

Pushing the myths aside clears the way for the process of our progress toward God to take hold. It opens a realistic door to knowing and experiencing Him at new and rewarding levels.

I think I have a major starch deficiency in my life because I'm passionately addicted to things like potatoes, rice, and pasta. I can't get enough of them. If Martie is away for an evening, when she returns she will inevitably ask me what I had for supper while she was gone. I have to tell her I just boiled some pasta and put a little butter and salt and pepper on it. She just looks at me in amazement.

What is more amazing to me is that often, when

I'm full of pasta, I still want more.

That's like the wonder and joy of growing toward intimacy—we can never get enough of Christ. It's a never-ending, increasingly rewarding process. To help encourage the process, here are five truths that replace the distracting myths about intimacy with God.

These truths help us form realistic expectations about intimacy.

TRUTH #1: Our primary purpose in life is to embrace the transcendent God by faith and to worship Him in purity and service.

This life-focus is a directional thing. Intimacy is not about God doing things for me. It's not about Him making me feel good. It's about this: I embrace the transcendent God of the universe and pledge to worship and serve Him, no

matter what happens. When the arrows of my passions and worship point from me to Him, I've successfully reversed the direction of my expectations. And as I worship Him with the purity of my life and the service of my hands, I can say with Job, no matter what happens, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (13:15). Intimacy begins by giving self away. It gives self to God as the ultimate gift of our love.

TRUTH #2: God intervenes in dramatic ways only periodically and selectively for major purposes in His kingdom and the blessings of His people.

That ought to be enough for us. It should be sufficient to hear about or to see God's work in somebody else's life and say, "Isn't that just like my God? I love to see God busy!" Instead, we

tend to feel sorry for ourselves and complain, "That never happens to me. Why isn't God busy about me?" We should learn to rest and rejoice in the fact that God does marvelous things in others' lives, and that if our need ever gets dramatic enough or our place in His plan ever gets strategic enough, He'll do something dramatic for us as well. Until then, we need to be forever grateful for His daily presence; His quiet work behind the scenes; His grace that is sufficient; His mercy that stays His judgment; and heaven.

TRUTH #3: God has already done more for me than I deserve. If God never does anything more than redeem us—cancel hell and guarantee heaven—if He never does anything more than that, He has already done more than we deserve. That ought to be

enough to launch me in praise and worship for the rest of my life.

Think about it. God has already dramatically intervened in a major way in our lives when He opened up the story of the cross to us and bid us come by the power of His Spirit. When we embraced that rugged cross and felt the weight of our sin leave us and were washed by His cleansing blood, it was enough—more than enough to keep our hearts lovingly grateful.

TRUTH #4: God is probably doing a lot of things for us that we don't even know about. These may not be big, dramatic things, but God's Word teaches us that He stands like a sovereign sentinel at the gates of our lives, keeping out anything that is more than we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). He lets in only those things that He,

by His power and with our cooperation, will turn to His glory and gain and to our good. Paul declares in Romans 8:28, "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Why then do we put our head on the pillow at night and murmur, "Where were You today, God? You didn't answer my prayer. Nothing big happened. The day was flat and dull." Instead, we should say with hearts full of gratitude, "Lord, thanks for being busy in my life today in ways I don't even know about. You, by the power of Your angels, have protected me from the enemy who sought to destroy me. And thanks for the assurance that, as the sovereign sentinel at the gate of my life, what You did let in today, You promised that by Your power You

could turn to glory and gain and good.”

We have to remember that God is a lot busier in our lives than we think. For us to go around thinking that He doesn't do much for us contradicts the reality of His marvelous grace that is in our lives 24 hours a day: guarding, keeping, excluding, insulating, protecting, and blessing.

TRUTH #5: When God thinks of intimacy, He thinks of a heart relationship with us.

We're like kids at Christmas begging, "Give me the gift! Give me the gift!" and forgetting that it's out of love that the gifts were given to us by our parents. Of course our parents love to give and bless us with gifts, but what they really want is a love relationship with us. Intimacy is about a relationship, not a gift exchange. When we live

expectantly, serve Him purely, slow down and spend seasons on our knees with His Word in prayer and meditation, He fills our souls with Himself.

If it's intimacy we want, we need to be more intrigued with the Giver than the gifts.

God doesn't meet us at the mall. He seeks us in the inner sanctum of our hearts. If it's intimacy we want, we need to be more intrigued with the Giver than the gifts. It's not what He does for us that we should be loving; it's God Himself. If we want to experience Him more than we do, we need to love Him more than we do—more than all those other things we are attracted to, more than all the provisions we expect from Him.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

From the Old Testament to the New, Scripture is about God's personal, prioritized agenda for restored fellowship and a rewarding relationship that satisfies the longings of our souls and glorifies Him.

A successful pilgrimage toward intimacy not only demands that we replace faulty or unbalanced expectations with truthful ones, but that we ask ourselves, *What can we expect?*

We can expect that God has promised to provide for us in our relationship with Him. Scripture suggests at least three attainable outcomes of a deepening personal relationship with Him: (1) He will satisfy our souls; (2) He will sustain our lives; and (3) He will secure us even in the face of great danger.

Nowhere are these outcomes more clearly defined and demonstrated than in the familiar Shepherd Psalm of David, Psalm 23. Let's examine that psalm, thinking about how we can attain these outcomes in our experiences of intimacy with God.

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want. He
makes me lie down in
green pastures; He leads
me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul; He
guides me in the paths of
righteousness for His
name's sake. Even though
I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I
fear no evil, for You are
with me; Your rod and
Your staff, they comfort
me. You prepare a table
before me in the presence
of my enemies; You have
anointed my head with
oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and
lovingkindness will follow*

*me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the
house of the Lord forever.*

Note the dynamics of the relationship. It's not between equals; it's between a Shepherd and His sheep. Sheep are radically reliant on the shepherd. Little Bo Peep's consultant was wrong: Sheep don't find their way home if you leave them alone! They require a shepherd to provide leadership, provision, and protection. The shepherd consistently tends the sheep—sometimes at great sacrifice to himself.

What does the shepherd provide? The shepherd is a source of *satisfaction* for the sheep. We need to forget about our lists of want-to's and hope-so's and dwell on what we really need. The true test of satisfaction is to be able to say with the psalmist, "I shall not want." Contentment doesn't mean that we won't have a desire

for additional commodities or better relationships. It means that those desires don't drive and manage our lives. It means that we allow God to be the provider while we are content with Him. The psalmist paints this picture of satisfaction: "He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul." Note the satisfying components of provision, peace, and recovery.

If you've ever walked the hills of England or spent time where sheep are part of the agrarian economy, you know that there are few pictures of contentment clearer than the psalmist's picture of sheep that, though they sometimes wander, never intentionally run away but find themselves fully satisfied in the care and provision of their shepherd.

To be content is to be satisfied with God.

The picture of God's

securing work is reflected in the psalmist's response to facing his enemies in the valley of the shadow of death. He testifies that God has made him so secure that he can dine in the presence of his enemies and fearlessly walk through the valley of death if that were necessary. Why? Because God is with him. The reality of His rod (protecting work) and His staff (rescuing and guiding work) secure the psalmist.

***To be
content is
to be satisfied
with God.***

The presence of God brings with it all that God is. He doesn't leave pieces and parts of Himself behind. He blesses us with the fullness of His partnership in our lives. His presence guarantees His protecting

power, His sovereign direction, His unsurpassed wisdom, His tender loving care, and His just involvement in our lives. To be afraid, to permit fear to shadow our souls, is to deny His presence. Yet, embracing by faith the reality of His presence convinces us that He will fully secure us—regardless.

The final verses conclude with God's *sustaining* work. The psalmist's peace while dining in front of his enemies reflects the pleasure of being sustained by Him. He speaks of God's sustaining work in his life as an overflowing cup, and then he marvels that the goodness and lovingkindness of God will follow him every day of his life. The psalmist celebrates ultimate sustenance as he anticipates that someday he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We know that intimacy is working when we can say with David, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." When we can honestly say that we really don't need additional things to be satisfied, sustained, and secured, then we will know that we are a long way down the road toward connecting intimately with the God who offers all of Himself to us.

Satisfaction with God is beginning to take hold when we cease being driven and defined by earthly things and begin to long for spiritual realities. Paul affirms this dynamic in his own testimony in Philippians 4:10-13.

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content

in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

When we find our all in Him, our lives will be marked by an unshakable confidence that lies beneath the surface tremors of our daily activities. This is the confidence that only comes when we are connected to the fact that He will be all that He says He is; that He will be there for us, whether we feel it or not; and that He cannot deny either His character or His promises. This sense of intimate sustenance comes to those who by faith connect to a God who will never leave them or forsake them.

This security that comes with intimacy with God is marked by an undaunted sense of courage. We will say with Paul:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

DRAWING CLOSE TO GOD

I have to confess that I am technically challenged. Several years ago when we moved into a new home, I bought a whole new stereo system. I love music—I love it loud, I love it soft, and I love it big. I love it all the way across the continuum—jazz, blues, light rock, country, pop, and classical, depending on the mood I'm in. I love it all. So we bought a stereo with all the sophisticated nuances of volume, balance, and tone. Excitedly, I brought the boxes home and unwrapped the pieces of digitized equipment. There they were—wires and everything. Halfway into the project I was in the prenatal position, curled up under the knee hole of my desk, weeping, with cords tangled around my body! I just don't get technical stuff.

I think we're a lot like that in a spiritual sense. God has created, redeemed, and given us all we need for an intimate relationship with Him. And though we have all the equipment we need to connect to all the beauty and harmony of His glory to be pumped through us, we never quite seem to get it figured out. Spiritually, we are connectedly challenged.

Intimacy with God requires that we connect with Christ. This "plugging in" has a pattern and a sequence to it. Having all the wires is not enough. Applying them correctly in all the right places is what makes it work.

CONNECTING THROUGH PRAYER AND THE WORD

How do we connect? I can hear you thinking, Here we go again. I'll bet he's going to talk about reading the Bible and prayer! You guessed it—

26

it's at the top of my list. How else do we think we will connect intimately with God unless we are in a pattern of ongoing communication with Him?

How else do we think we will connect intimately with God unless we are in a pattern of ongoing communication with Him?

It's like the old story of the woman who dragged her husband to the counselor and complained that he never said he loved her. To which the surprised husband turned to his wife and said, "Hey, when we got married I told you that I loved you, and if that ever changes, I'll let you know."

Marriages don't ever make it all the way to intimacy without ongoing loving communication. And Christians don't make it to intimacy with God unless they have established regular patterns of communication with Him.

When it comes to intimacy with God, absence does not make the heart grow fonder. It makes it grow more distant. Seasons of absence from communing with God in prayer and through His Word make sin and self-sufficiency stronger and reentry difficult and challenging. Not only do we get out of practice, but also, having been apart from divine input, we develop systems of independence and patterns of thought and behavior that are immediately challenged by reentry. Intimacy requires a steady pouring out of our hearts in praise to God and prayer and the steady

absorbing of His Word into our hearts.

Reading, meditating on, and studying the Bible is critical to connectedness. When is the best time to be in God's Word? For some, it is in the morning. For others, it's midday. For others, the best time to be with God might be 11 o'clock at night. Whenever it is, we need to give Him our best time. And we need to be careful not to make it a legalistic thing. If we miss having time with Him one day, we shouldn't feel guilty about it, because intimacy with God is more than a half-hour discipline. It's a daylong continual walk. But if we miss our time with God for 3 or 4 days, we may be in trouble.

Two psalms wonderfully illustrate the importance in our lives of connecting to His Word and prayer.

Psalm 1. Here we read of the satisfying, sustaining, and securing work of God's

Word in our lives. The psalmist tells us that when he has delighted in the law of the Lord instead of living in the counsel of the ungodly, his life has been like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bears fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither.

Whatever he undertakes prospers. The contrast to the ungodly is clear. In their aloneness they are like the chaff—the worthless outer sheath of a kernel of wheat that is left to blow away in the wind.

The word for the condition of those who lose themselves in the Word of God is *blessed*. The psalmist begins the psalm by saying, “Blessed is the man.” Blessed because he experiences the satisfaction that comes from a well-ordered life of a Word-led person. It is the blessing of lives that have meaning and purpose, that are clean and

organized, that are driven by systems that ultimately satisfy. The choice in this psalm is clear. We find our lives being influenced either by the godless world in which we live or by the Word of God that enables us to live an abundant life.

Psalm 13. This psalm speaks to the stabilizing satisfaction that comes when we pray. At the beginning of this psalm, the psalmist is lost in despair. He complains that God has forgotten him and left him in a disastrous environment (vv.1-4). But then the psalmist turns his heart toward God (v.5). By the end of this brief psalm, God has not delivered him but instead has satisfied his soul in the midst of the distress (v.6). The psalmist has experienced one of the most meaningful aspects of prayer: not the *answers* to prayer, but the *way* in which prayer opens heaven for us

to see God realistically and lose ourselves in a deep and unshaken confidence in the character of God. The psalmist closes this psalm, having transitioned from despair to delight, exclaiming:

I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me (vv.5-6).

PERSONAL APPROACHES TO PRAYER AND BIBLE READING

I have found several approaches to be helpful in connecting with God in my times of personal Bible reading and prayer.

Bible Reading. First, I must read the Word as a personal encounter with God. For me it cannot be just an exercise in reading through the Bible in a year

or making sure I read a chapter a day or any other system I am trying to fulfill. Connecting with God in Scripture is just that—connecting personally with God. Each encounter must search for something from Him to me that is relevant to my life. I find that I need to read until He has spoken to me in a substantive way. If it comes quickly, I may not need to read further, though I may wish to read on. And if it takes more time than I had planned, I need to keep in the Word until there has been a ministry to my soul, heart, and mind.

Then I find that it is important to capture the ministry in a way that I can take with me through the day. Writing the concept down and putting it in my pocket, in my money clip, or in my briefcase so that I am confronted with it throughout the day is a big help in keeping the issue

alive in my heart. Sometimes memorizing a key verse or making it a brief and memorable prayer that I can lift before Him throughout the day is a help as well.

Second, I find it helpful to read God's Word in terms of its intended purposes. This aligns me with what God wants to do in my life. He has told us that His Word is . . .

- *A Mirror*: Therefore, I need to read to see myself as I really am in the light of what the text is saying.
- *A Seed*: I permit the Word to be implanted deep in my heart and then envision what the fruit will be if I water and nurture it with care.
- *A Sword*: The two-edged kind that pierces through all the externals and reveals the deepest secrets and motives. In this metaphor it is essential to let the Word

cut where it will and to honestly admit and submit to its surgery.

- *A Lamp*: It gives guidance and direction in the darkness of life.
- *Bread For My Soul*: I need to let the Word of God nourish my soul through reading it to feed me, not just to inform me. When my soul is touched by a truth, encouragement, comfort, reproof, or insight from God's Word, it's a moment of feeding.

Third, I find it helpful to share with a trusted friend what God has given me from His Word for the day. This is especially productive if the friend is someone on the same spiritual wavelength. Sharing life-related insights can be a powerful tool in bonding not only with God but also with friends, your spouse, and your children.

Fourth, I often vary my approach to Scripture. For a

season I may be reading two or three chapters a day in the Psalms and the proverb that goes with the day of the month. At other times a study of a theme (such as friends, money, love, repentance, forgiveness) using my concordance can be very enlightening, particularly if I'm studying an area that I'm struggling with in my own life. The biographies of Old Testament saints are full of stimulating food for connecting with God. Reading through a short New Testament book at one sitting may be helpful at another time in my pilgrimage.

Whatever the approach, don't let yourself get bogged down in duty or artificial goals for your Bible study. Like any relationship, communication is most exhilarating when it doesn't keep talking about the same thing over and over. It's best

when it centers on a point of need and interest.

Fifth, I must read the text submissively if I am to profit from its ability to connect me with the One who is speaking through it. Engaging the Word with less than an open, yielded spirit is a sure formula for an experience that will be distant and perfunctory. There is an old adage that appropriately says, "This book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this book!"

Prayer. In regard to prayer, let me relate a couple of things that are helpful for me. Praying honestly is of utmost importance. The psalmist was never shy about "getting in God's face" about his life. This honesty opens our spirits up for Him to meet us with the resolution to our frustration. None of the psalms ever end with the psalmist still being ticked about life or God.

Prayer has a wonderful way of getting us to see all of life from God's point of view.

Prayer must have elements of worship. This could be in the form of singing, gratitude, or communicating specific ways in which we express His worth in the coming day or situations. Needless to say, prayers of repentance and resolve are purifying and satisfying to our own souls and God.

I find that praying out loud helps me deal with a wandering mind. When my mind does wander, I often use it as an opportunity to pray for the situation or the person that my mind has drifted to—unless it's my golf game. That's hopeless.

Journaling prayers can also be a help to keep our hearts riveted.

Praying God's Word back to Him is a wonderful exercise in meaningful prayer. It not only helps

us process His Word personally, but it lets God know that we have been paying attention and that we really do get it after all.

Most important, it is critical that we stay at it. There will be times when the exercise seems to be less exhilarating than you expect it to be. For a lot of reasons, we don't always feel emotionally or spiritually sharp all the time. Don't abandon the process. Faithfulness is the key. Stay at it and your connectedness to God will deepen, and intimacy with Him will be your reward.



This booklet is excerpted from *Radical Reliance: Living 24/7 With God At The Center* by Joe Stowell. *Radical Reliance* is published by Discovery House Publishers, a member of the RBC Ministries family. Joe is the former president of Moody Bible Institute and currently serves as Teaching Pastor at Harvest Bible Chapel in Chicago.

Get your free Bible Resources catalog!



Discovery Series booklets can be valuable guides to help you learn what the Bible says about a broad range of topics. Each 32-page booklet can be used in your personal Bible study or in a small-group setting.

Your free Bible Resources catalog includes a brief

description of each Discovery Series booklet. To get your copy, write to us at the address below and ask for a catalog. Or follow the link below to request your copy today.

www.discoveryseries.org/catalog

USA: PO Box 2222, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-2222
Canada: Box 1622, Windsor, ON N9A 6Z7