

Here, There, and Everywhere: Keys to Practicing God's Presence

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Let's begin with a passage from the Song of Solomon. It's definitely PG-13, and you should read it that way, as a celebration of marital love, sensual and earthly and real. For many years Christians either avoided the book or over-spiritualized it, making it simply an allegory for Christ and the Church. Here, as in Esther, you won't find the name of "God." However, God is in every word of the Song, either talking to us or someone else is talking about Him. It's a book never quoted in the New Testament; it's really not pious or religious. Interestingly, Jewish doctors advised their young people not to read it till they were thirty years old.

But even though it *is* about that wonderful relationship between husband and wife, like so many passages in scripture it is multi-layered in meaning. It does foreshadow our relationship with Christ. Like it says in Ephesians 6: 31-32: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – *but I am talking about Christ and the church.* So let's read these verses from the Song of Songs that way now.

Chapter 1, verses 1-4: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth – for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you! Take me away with you – let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers." This is intimate, intense, all-consuming, and urgent. And there's no let up in this throughout the book.

It's a picture of the relationship God wants with us. He wants all of us – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. He wants an intense, intimate relationship. And he wants it now, and yet will not press us but waits for us to come.

Now, I don't know about you, but for most times in my life, that has not been a picture of my relationship with God. In fact, I feel like for years I have been stuck in a whipsaw between law and license. Let me tell you what I mean.

When I came to college at NC State in 1976, I was blessed to be introduced right away to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I was introduced to the idea of "The Quiet Time." Well, I had quite a time with The Quiet Time. 20 minutes with the Lord, once a day. A good plan. Well, I managed to make that a law. 20 minutes? I'm done. I lasted about 3 weeks, and then I gave up.

I signed up for Urbana Missions Conference, even though I didn't know what to expect. It was great! I came back with a book called Search the Scriptures. One passage of scripture. Three thought provoking questions. Seemed easy enough and I was charged up after all the preaching and fellowship. I lasted about 45 days this time. I know, because I still have the journal full of those notes. They are so lifeless. Once again, I took something good and made a law of it. It becomes lifeless. I abandon it and drift for months thereafter until the next technique or formula comes along.

I was going to get serious about prayer. I developed a prayer notebook. I listed by categories all the issues/concerns/people I needed to pray for. I worried that I wasn't covering everything, and if I missed a day I had to make that up the next day, and so on. It became rote, lifeless, and I abandoned it.

I read Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline, and was determined I'd be more disciplined. It wore me out. It's like programming your marriage, deciding how and when you will be together, what topics you will discuss, when you'll make love, and so on, and so on. You know, I've realized that the problem is not with the techniques, disciplines, or helps; the problem is me. I'm able to twist every technique or discipline from a means of grace into a means of law, from life-giving to something that kills the spiritual life.

Jim O'Brien, former pastor of a PCA church here in Raleigh, once put it this way. He said: "We are always in a battle with Satan, and if you are leaning to the left or the right (he doesn't really care which way), he'll give you a shove to go further in that direction. We need to keep, as best we can, all the aspects of the faith together, because if we emphasize the law because we want to be godly and righteous, Satan will say "You like law? I like law." And he'll push you into a legal spirit. If you say "I don't want to have a legal spirit. I love the gospel." He says "You like the gospel? I love the gospel." Then he'll push you into a spirit of presumption and carelessness about righteousness." So, that's me – caught in this whipsaw, back and forth between law (when I'm good I'm good) and gospel (when I'm bad, I'm just slack). I've been wanting a way out for quite some time.

You know, Don Miller is a funny guy. Some of you who have read *Blue Like Jazz* know that. But in the book he wrote after *Blue Like Jazz*, called *Searching for God Knows What*, he rejects any kind of formula Christianity. Now maybe he's too far on one side of the whipsaw I mentioned; maybe not. But I do like what he says about the Christian life:

The truth is there are a million steps, and we don't even know what the steps are and, worse, at any given moment we may not be willing or even able to take them and still worse they are different for you and me and they are always changing. I have come to believe the sooner we find this truth beautiful, the sooner we will fall in love with God on His terms, who keeps shaking things up, keeps changing the path, keeps rocking the boat to test our faith in Him, teaching us not to rely on easy answers, bullet points, magic mantras or genies in lamps, but rather in His guidance, His existence, His mercy and His love.

Personally, I was miserable before I understood these ideas, but now I am so happy I laugh all the time, even in my sleep.¹

And what I can offer today is three ways that have helped me be serious about my love relationship with God, and yet free and spontaneous with that love. So here are three phrases that capture that: Take a Walk, Write it Down, Join the Conversation.

Take A Walk

While I don't want to take away from the need to commune with God through reading the Book, there is another way in which I've come to know God. That's through everything else He has left me – creation, natural revelation to put a theological term on it. It's what the Psalmist meant when he spoke of trees clapping their hands, what Jesus meant when he used the ants or sparrows as an object lesson for us. It's impossible to walk outside in creation without seeing God at work. And it's not just nature but also in the built environment, in places where man has been at work, in cities, in your neighborhood.

I began walking for exercise, and I started to do it everywhere. But a couple of years ago I began to try and be as deliberate about where my mind was as where my feet were. I was in Milwaukee, WI, at a conference and took a long mid-day walk through the downtown with the purpose of noticing all that I could and giving it to God. No agenda. Nothing to cover. Treating every distraction as a window to God. And I can tell you that it took some deliberateness, some discipline, but I loved it.

Well, come with me for a minute: *On Lapham Street there was an old santa claus of a man, looking worn & frail, an overdressed rabble of a man, bearded, half-blind, under-nourished, with a sack of perhaps all his belongings on his back. God help him. God preserve him. There s a black man in a tank top, leaning lazily out of a window, staring sadly into space. Lord give him work. Lord give him hope. Lord, thank you for work. A very attractive blond woman in a sheek black dress walks into the café where I stopped, and as I look away, I say thank you God for woman, for beauty, thank you for my wife, the one you gave me. God bless Juliana now. And forgive me.*

¹ Miller, Donald. *Searching For God Knows What*. Nashville: Nelson Books (2004), pp.14-15.

Take a walk. Much as I enjoy the new sights and sounds of other places, I love to walk in my own neighborhood. As I walk out of my driveway about 6:00, all is quiet except for the hum of homes, and I thank God for Paul and Macon and their dear children across the street now for 20 years, for friendship, for God's providence in placing us together here, in one place, for so long. I look down the street towards my neighbor who hates animals and children, and I pray for him, that he'd be touched by a child's wonder and kindness, or befriended by an animal, or discover that he's a child of God. I walk quite a while. Maybe I'm lost for awhile in thoughts of work or some family member – what am I going to do for my mother? How will we care for her as she ages? How can I help her enjoy life now? – but after a few blocks of this, I give this to God as well – just like there's been a lull in conversation while thought is going on.

Take a walk. One day I'm walking looking for everything good. You know how easy it is to consider everything bad, all the evil in the world – like terrorists, tsunamis, or Duke fans (sorry!). I remember Proverbs says "if you search for good, you'll find favor; but if you search for evil, it will find you." So, I'm in Columbia, SC, and this time I'm looking for good: *For a purple-pink sunrise, for whoever planned this place, with its order and beauty, for creativity, for that early morning bird, for the smell of scrambled eggs and bacon, for the men fixing potholes, for all kinds of people like the man who smiled and said hello so early this morning.* It's all good.

Peter Kreeft says a good walking prayer is one that remembers where we are going. Walking is a good metaphor of our progress toward heaven. We can remember that history is not circular but linear, that sanctification is a real process, and that every day we move closer to real life, the life we live in glory.²

Having trouble concentrating? Can't pray? I encourage you to get up and walk. Just take a walk. It's a simple way to stay in touch with our Creator. Every walk there's something new to see or hear or think. And the companionship of God is great. After all, it says in Genesis that God walked with Adam in the Garden. He walks with us too.

Write It Down

Write it down.

Another way I try to stay in touch with God is by writing down bits of our ongoing conversation. I bring up things we need to work through on paper, and it helps, much like it's sometimes easier to write a letter to a friend or family member than call them or talk to them in person, because you're still processing something, still working through it, and, of course, the difference here being that God is right here with you.

² Kreeft, Peter. *Prayer: The Great Conversation*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press (1991), p. 165.

Here I think not of *walking* but *wrestling*. I remember that episode in Scripture where Jacob actually wrestled with God. He'd sent his wives, children, servants and possessions on ahead of him, across a stream, and it says there in Genesis that "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." He would not let the man go until he blessed him. And he did. God did. He even gave him a new name, Israel, because, he said, "you have struggled with God and have overcome." Prayer can be that way. And sometimes I can do that struggling better on paper.

Another place you can see that going on is in the Psalms. Listen to David, the shepherd-king, in Psalm 42: "I say to God my Rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? He's questioning God, wrestling with that sense of being alone, and yet reassuring himself by reminding himself of the hope he has in God, saying that "I will yet praise Him." A lot of Psalms are that way, a sort of dialog with God and self, where you speak your doubts and struggles and preach the truth, God promises and character, back to yourself. Wrestling. Struggling.

Pondering a career change? August 15, 1992 I wrote this: "God, why don't I like my job? I work with great friends, many Christians, and have all our needs met, and yet my enthusiasm is lacking. I resolve to try in the morning, but by afternoon I'm back to pushing paper and wondering about the meaning of it all. Why? Am I just lazy, discontented, or do I need to move on? What do you want?"

Troubled by some trial? August 10, 1994 I wrote this in response to a great sadness and loss we felt: "God, are you deaf? Can you hear me? How can this happen? Why are you silent?"

And then, by the next day I brought a bit of writing from Simone Weil into the conversation. August 11, 1994: "There can be no answer to the 'Why' of the afflicted. . . . [But] he who is capable not only of crying but also of listening will hear the answer."

I'm still asking why. I'm still listening, I'm still loving, God.

So, *write it down*. Writing is the place you can remember, as well, and remembering is a very righteous thing. Thomas Boston, one of the Puritans, said that the Christian is to study two books – Scripture, and Life – the acts of God in history and, even more specifically, our own history. God tells His people throughout history to remember. Deuteronomy 8:2: "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these 40 years, to humble you and to test you, to know what was in your heart." Just an example. The prompt to remember is always linked with present action, so it's not a nostalgic looking back (like Lot's wife looking back at Sodom) but on what the lesson is for now.

For me, remembering can bring encouragement (as when I remember God's faithfulness in the midst of some trial), thankfulness, and even understanding. But if I don't write it down, if I don't memorialize the conversation I'm having with God, it's difficult to recall. Is it any doubt that God intended us to use words to capture our understanding when He used the written Word to communicate with us?

Write it down. Capture a single thought, or a long argument. But *write something down.* No formula. Discipline, yes, but abandon it when you are focusing on the writing and not the Person, that is Jesus. Keep it real and full of life, of reality. Else Satan may say "You like writing? I like writing." And before you know it life is gone and you give up in frustration.

Keep it loose. Keep it free. Keep it honest.

Join the Conversation

If it's not already apparent, there's a great conversation going on here, and we can either join the conversation, or not. Relationships, particularly love relationships, only work well when both parties converse.

It makes me think of one point in my legal career when I received a phone call from an attorney, a real windbag. I settled back in my chair for a long and tedious one-way conversation. I must have fallen asleep, because I woke up and didn't know who I was talking to or what we were talking about, but the voice on the other end just kept going. After listening for awhile, I was able to find my place. Well, it's kind of that way with God sometimes – it's like I went to sleep. He keeps talking, but I'm not listening or contributing to the discussion.

And He's talking alright. Psalm 19: 1-4: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." Not only is God speaking to us in Scripture, He's speaking from everything that's made, everything. Everything is really saying something – God is speaking. We just need to join the conversation.

You know, it may sound childlike, but I sometimes just imagine Jesus with me, wherever I am, not in some abstract way but in a real way. I think this is OK and not unorthodox. I mean, Jesus is incarnate, he is embodied, and he is with me. It really *does* help me to see him sitting with me in the passenger seat of the car, walking beside me (at my pace, not his), in my office, or when I sleep. It just reminds me that this is *real*, that there is a *real* conversation with a *real* person.

I'd always wondered what it meant to "pray unceasingly, or continually," as Paul admonishes us to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. I've seen folks give themselves little reminders – like the alarm on the wristwatch going off on the hour, a note on the computer screen – but that never really seemed to do it for me. Too mechanistic. I mean, it says "continually." How do you do that? I don't know, exactly, but I know it takes time and attention, and that relationships are not mechanical but vibrant and organic (developing naturally).

I'd been doing this for a while and discovered a kindred spirit in a monk named Brother Lawrence. Some of you probably know about him. Some may not. I like the way he described himself to Joseph de Beaufort when he met him in 1666. He said he was a "footman who broke everything." De Beaufort said he was "rough in appearance, but gentle in grace." He lived in a Paris monastery, where he was cook for 15 years, and then in charge of sandal repair, for about 100 monks. But what was amazing about him was his sense of always being in the presence of God. I found in him something to aspire to (not sandal repair but moment by moment awareness of God's presence with me).³

He said that "[i]n the beginning he had often passed the time appointed for prayer in rejecting wandering thoughts and falling right back into them. He could never regulate his devotions by certain methods as some do. At first he had practiced meditation but, after some time, *that went off in a manner of which he could give no account.*" Sound familiar? He said that it really didn't matter whether it was devotions or work in the kitchen: He said that "[w]hen the appointed times of prayer were past, he found no difference, because he still continued with God, praising and thanking Him with all his might." He did not trouble himself that his mind might wander; he just kept returning to God and offering Him even that distraction.

So, I have a new opinion of distractions. They are all *holy* distractions when offered up to God. Though perhaps planted by Satan, prayer subverts or co-opts his intent. All our meanderings lead back to God. All things work together for good to those who love the Lord, the Apostle Paul says – even distractions. That's providence. That's a God who takes even the discordant, seemingly random, and even ungodly strains of life and somehow wraps them all together in his good plan.

It reminds me of the Creation Story contained in *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien's companion to the *Lord of the Rings*. Before the realm of the hobbits, and the elves, and dwarfs, Iluvitar made the world. And as I recall, the making of it was like a symphony – it was musical – until a discordant note entered, one produced by Melkor (representing Satan). But what happens is Iluvitar simply

³ I'm quoting from the wonderful and short classic about Brother Lawrence called *Practicing the Presence of God*. It recounts a series of conversations with Brother Lawrence by Joseph de Beaufort, and includes some of his letters. You can find it online in its entirety (with other helps) at www.PracticeGodsPresence.com.

takes that discordant note and works it right into the symphony so that it simply melts away, becoming part of the whole. The same thing happens here – God takes the discordant note, the distraction, even the sin, and brings about His good purposes with it. Nothing is outside of His providence.

So rather than chastising yourself about a distraction, use it. Carry it back to God. Keep returning to the path. There is real discipline about it, but it's not a formula discipline.

Well, what about sin? How does that impact the relationship? Brother Lawrence said that "he carried no guilt because, 'When I fail in my duty, I readily acknowledge it, saying, I am used to do so. I shall never do otherwise if left to myself. If I do not fail, I immediately give God thanks, acknowledging that it comes from him.'"

Don't live in past failings, even if you feel like they are a mountain behind you. We are forgiven. Live like it. We know the scripture: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, *and remember everything wrong we did and ever remind us of it*. No! God loves us. He treats us as if there were no sin. We only need to deal with the present sin, not the past, not the future. Acknowledge it, turn it back to God, and understand that He will use even that for His glory.

Join the conversation. Write it down. Take a walk.

Peter Kreeft has a little book called *Prayer: The Great Conversation*, which I recommend. It's a long conversation between Chris, a mature believer, and Sal, a growing if somewhat new believer. Listen to this bit of dialogue, as they discuss what prayer is:

Chris: Do you *say* prayers, or do you *pray*?

Sal: What's the difference?

Chris: All the difference in the world. Like the difference between blowing a kiss to someone and kissing them.

Sal: Prayer is like kissing God?

Chris: Yes, and wrestling with God, and just sitting with God. . .

So really, we're back to where we started, in the Song of Songs, with this kissing stuff, aren't we?

Jesus is saying something like this to us:

*Come away with me in the night
Come away with me
And I will write you a song*

Come away with me on a bus

*Come away where they can't tempt [you]
With their lies*

*I want to walk with you
On a cloudy day
In fields where the yellow grass grows
knee-high
So won't you try to come*

*Come away with me and we'll kiss
On a mountaintop
Come away with me
And I'll never stop loving you*

That's called holy appropriation. Thank you, Norah Jones, for that song.

Think about it. That's the love of God for us. That's deep love. Don't you want it --- *now?*⁴

⁴ If you're interested in the written prayers I used, I opened with one called *God Be in My Head* and closed with the prayer found on *St. Patrick's Breastplate* ("Christ, be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me. . .), both reprinted in Kreeft's book *Prayer: The Great Conversation*.