

Finding Our Way Back

“Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face continually.”

—Psalms 105:4 NASB

Just the mere suggestion that we might want to find our way back to God is kind of misleading because, in all sincerity, we haven't really left him. We still love God and have a heart to serve him. For the sake of clarity, I want to point out that it's the closeness and intimacy with our Lord Jesus that makes us passionate about living for and serving him—that's what we hope to regain.

Let's begin this pilgrimage by laying aside our guilt trips and self-condemnation. God doesn't want to douse your smoldering wick with condemnation or judgment. You are, and always will be, his favorite son or daughter. He is running toward you to bless and encourage you, just as the father of the prodigal son did when his boy came to his senses and decided to come home. You may not have been out in the world squandering wealth or eating pig slop, or maybe you have! Either way, God will always run to you with the same enthusiasm and meet your desire to find your way back to his heart. Like he said to the prodigal's brother, “Look, dear son . . .

‘you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. It is right to celebrate. For he is your brother; and he was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’” (Luke 15:31–32 tlb).

God is for us. God is for YOU (Rom. 8:31). And with God on our side, our flickering flames can and will blaze again.

Fanning the Flame

The fire is there, but it needs to be fanned. That’s what the old apostle Paul told Timothy, his young son in the faith: “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you . . .” (2 Tim. 1:6 esv). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul seemed to have detected a frustration or weariness. He addressed several issues that may have contributed to the young pastor’s flickering flame.

Timothy, like us, had a lot on his plate, and was probably feeling overwhelmed and possibly a little burned out. Because Paul had a history with this young man’s family, he knew Timothy’s story. So he started out Timothy’s letter of encouragement by looking back, telling his protégé that he remembered the genuine faith that started in his mom and grandmother, and how he was convinced this faith was in him as well.

Throughout the Old Testament, God instructed his people to look back and remember. He even had them set up memorial stones, instruct their children about the meaning of these memorials, and keep the feasts, so in looking back, they’d always remember God’s mighty works and the unique relationship he has with his people.

It never hurts us to look back to remind ourselves of God’s redeeming grace, especially if we’ve been a believer for a while. This is particularly important for those of us whose lives are busy and who feel like we’ve been in a spiritual rut. We need memorial stones to remind us of who God is and what he has done in our

lives. These memorial stones mark spots in our lives—real times and places where something significant happened between us and God. One of my own memorial stones is an old piece of furniture—an old gray chair.

The Old Gray Chair

Back in the 1970s, when I was a brand-new Christian, I lived in an upstairs apartment in Pennsylvania. Our living room was furnished with an old, gray second-hand sofa and chair from the 1950s—the kind that had rough nylon texture.

Every night after putting my two-year-old son to bed, I got down on my knees in front of this old gray chair in the corner of my living room and talked to God—about everything. Our conversations sometimes went late into the night. I read my Bible every day like it was a best-selling novel. Except, I knew this book wasn't fiction. If the Bible said it, I believed it! And since God doesn't change, I was confident he would do for me what he did for the people in the Bible. God responded to the prayers of faith whispered in front of that old gray chair.

Back in those “beans and rice days,” there were times when my cupboards were bare. On my knees, with my head burrowed into the rough gray nylon of the old gray chair, I reminded God of a place in the Bible where he said his children would not have to beg for bread. By the time I got up to go to bed, I fully expected God to meet my need.

The next morning, there they were—three bags of groceries on my doorstep. I never knew who left them. It could have been someone from my church or a visiting angel, I don't know. But you can believe me when I tell you that it was God who got all the glory and thanks.

One frigid winter, while snuggled down in my old gray chair with a warm blanket and my Bible, the story of the widow whose oil was multiplied came alive to me (2 Kings 4:1–7). We still had about a week to go before payday, but hardly any food in the house. Knowing God doesn't show favoritism (Rom. 2:11 bsb), I took my position in front of the old gray chair on my knees and asked him to stretch our food, just like he did for that widow, so I could make meals for my family until the next paycheck.

About all I had left in the kitchen was a small box of instant rice. The box was made with a spout on the side to pour rice out as needed, so I couldn't actually see inside. By shaking it, I knew the box was nearly empty, with probably less than an inch of rice on the bottom. But that little bit of rice kept pouring out. Our family ate from that near-empty box all week long.

Now, I'm not saying that God always answered my prayers in miraculous ways, nor am I saying he gave me everything I asked for. Sometimes he said "no." But there was something special about our relationship that caused me to truly know he loved me, regardless of whether I got what I prayed for. I loved God, and just wanted to be with him and live my life for him.

Looking back at my "memorial stone" (my old gray chair), there isn't a single or specific event that I remember. And it really wasn't that old gray chair—it was the presence of God and the intimate friendship I had with him whenever I spent time in that special place.

Practicing His Presence

Looking back and remembering "what used to be," of course, isn't enough to get the fire going again, but it can motivate us to

action—the action of practicing his presence. This is something we can do, no matter what kind of life we might have swirling around us.

The idea of practicing the presence of God comes from a seventeenth-century monk named Brother Lawrence, who lived in a French monastery in the 1600s. Through letters and conversations, Brother Lawrence simply and beautifully explained how to continually walk with God—not from the head, but from the heart. After his death in 1691, these letters and conversations were published in a pamphlet titled *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

Brother Lawrence’s direct approach to living in God’s presence is as practical today as it was three hundred years ago. You don’t have to be a monk to live continually in God’s presence; in fact, people with busy lives like us can find freedom in following Brother Lawrence’s example.

What did this old monk do that was so unique and special to stay in God’s presence? It’s really very simple—aware that God is always with us, Brother Lawrence acknowledged him in all he did, all the time. That’s it. Rather than focusing on setting aside a time to pray over needs, he made a habit of continually conversing with God throughout each day, always desiring to honor the Lord in his actions and words. Whether he was working, going to the market, or interacting with other people, he practiced God’s continual presence.

This doesn’t mean you can’t have that special time in front of your version of the old gray chair, because those times are important and special and they do build us up spiritually. But as you develop a constant dialogue with God throughout the day, your spiritual oil is continually replenished. And when you do have

time to quietly sit with the Lord, your fellowship with him will be that much sweeter.

You may have heard the saying “He’s so spiritually minded, he’s no earthly good”—that isn’t what we’re talking about. Practicing the presence of God isn’t living life on a cloud; on the contrary, it’s living life with a fresh awareness of God’s ever-present companionship in every circumstance and conversation. With God walking alongside you, you don’t have to wait to talk to him about anything.

I admire people who know how to pray, those who have a natural way of communicating with God. Words just always seem to flow. When they say they’ll pray about something, they do. For some, spending hours and even days before God is not uncommon. It is where they live their lives. I think King David was probably one of those people. His psalms have the fragrance of a close friendship between man and God. David didn’t just ask for things; he loved God first. When he was in pain, angry, in need of help, or up against a wall, he prayed. He was expectant, and he trusted God completely.

That’s what I want to experience again in my relationship with God. If you read through the psalms of David, a common thread runs through them—David was very human in his emotions, yet reverent and worshipful. David spilled his guts, but then always declared the greatness of God and how his love toward him was ever faithful and trustworthy. David praised God in the midst of his worst battles and trials. He put all his trust in God. Is it any wonder God called him a man after his own heart? (Acts 13:22).

What I don’t see in these psalms is a prayer list. David prayed for the situation in front of him, but I don’t see anywhere that he went down a long list of needs. I’m not saying we should throw

out our prayer lists, but I do think we sometimes get overwhelmed before we even get the first few items or people checked off.

I have a big family. At times, I have prayed by going down the list for every family member by name and need. But by the time I get down to the sixth or seventh grandchild, I feel overwhelmed by all the other people I want to pray for, not to mention ministry needs and my own personal struggles. In this way, prayer and time with God can become a chore, rather than a place of refuge and peace as it should be.

Practicing God's presence isn't just praying down a list. It entails conversing with God as you take a shower, pack school lunches, pass a screaming ambulance, prepare a sermon, visit someone in the hospital, or listen to a coworker tell you about her recent breakup. Practicing the presence of God can be as simple as making yourself aware of all that is going on around you, talking to God about it, and then listening for the Holy Spirit's response.

If you're pumping gas and see the guy next to you smiling at his infant in the car seat while carefully stopping his pump at five dollars, listening to God means paying attention to the Holy Spirit's tap on your shoulder to reach into your pocket to give that guy the twenty-dollar bill you've been hanging on to. It's whispering a prayer or giving a word of encouragement to the young mother struggling to manage a fussy baby while her toddler is grabbing things off the shelves in the grocery store. It's talking over an important decision with God while you're driving down the road or peeling potatoes for dinner.

Yes, it's important to pray for needs and guidance, but you don't have to have a specific time and place to come into God's presence. Remember, you are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He is ever-present in time of need. He is always attentive to your prayers,

whether spoken on your knees in front of an old gray chair or while you're stuck in rush hour traffic.

Of course, this kind of praying-without-ceasing habit takes time to develop, especially if your oil is a little low and your wick hasn't been trimmed in a while. But there is no need to condemn yourself or give up.

According to his letters and conversations with Joseph de Beaufort (the man who first published *The Practice of the Presence of God*), even Brother Lawrence became busy and forgot to talk to God at times. When he did, he didn't put himself under condemnation. He just admitted his failings, accepted grace, and continued on. He could do this, because practicing the presence of God is also practicing the love and mercy of God.

As we begin to walk in this continuous communication with God, it will become easier to lay our burdens and struggles at Jesus's feet.

Crippled in the Thirty Years' War before he became a monk, Brother Lawrence walked with great pain and difficulty. Once, when his superior asked him to go to the city of Burgundy and bring back a provision of wine from the monastery, Brother Lawrence told God he would require his strength and help for the task.

The monk's sentiments on his assignment are recorded in his conversation with Joseph de Beaufort: "This was a challenge for him because of his lame leg and because he had no real head for business. He couldn't even get around on the boat except by dragging himself from cask to cask."¹

How many of us, when we face unwelcome tasks, grumble or find excuses not to do them? How many of us never even think about God being right there with us, ready to provide whatever

we need to get through it—even if it means doing things the hard way and rolling over a few casks?

Obviously, no one is perfect, and we are all going to mess up at times. But imagine how different our attitudes would be if we walked in continual communication with God—his mercy and grace would become second nature to us. Repentance and confessing our failings would come quickly and easily. We would be so acutely aware of God’s presence, so aware that he is listening and ready to forgive us, that we would repent without suffering any separation from him.

This is what Paul was talking about in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 when he said, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (niv).

Galatians 5:25 says, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (kj21). That is what this is—walking it out. We know God will never leave us or forsake us, so instead of waiting for the perfect time or perfect circumstance to talk to Jesus, why not go through our days acknowledging and “practicing” his presence?

Put Down Your Smartphone

Speaking of acknowledging someone’s presence, we have a rule in our house: no smartphones or electronics at the dinner table. How many times have you been to a restaurant and observed five or six people around the table, none of whom is talking to each other because they’re all either texting or otherwise absorbed in their smartphones, oblivious to their surroundings?

My husband and I noticed a family doing this one time, but with one exception. The youngest child, about eight or nine years old, didn’t have a phone. Everyone at the table was so engaged in

their social media conversations that no one acknowledged this boy. He just sat at the table full of people, all alone.

I think sometimes this is how God must see us. We are so occupied with our own social worlds, talking to anyone who will listen, about *our* needs, *our* dreams, *our* fears, *our* wants, even *our* ministries, but never looking up to see that Jesus is right there with us, waiting for us to engage *HIM* in conversation about those things. Practicing the presence of God is a little like putting down our smartphones and talking to Jesus, who is sitting right there at the table with us.

Note

¹Robert Elmer, *Practicing God's Presence: Brother Lawrence for Today's Reader (Quiet Times for the Heart)* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 124–25), Kindle edition