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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR GROWING IN INTIMACY WITH GOD

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This is the first of a three – part series on “Growing in Intimacy with God.” Our second feature will examine the spiritual discipline of noticing God and how we can be more attentive to our triune God’s presence in our lives. The third article will consider the various ways in which we can experience God in the different arenas of life.



For the Christian, spiritual maturity and growing in intimacy with God is never an option but a necessity! Countless reminders throughout Scripture reinforce this biblical truth. Consider Paul’s words to the Colossians: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Col. 2:6–7).¹ Notice some of the basic principles of the Christian life. Individuals begin their new lives in Christ when they receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. This is often referred to as union with Christ. Jesus demonstrates the importance of this when He declares that He is the vine and we are the branches and that apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). To live healthy Christian lives, we must remember: “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (John 15:4). The Christian life is not just about beginning well but remaining in Christ and consistently growing in spiritual maturity until we die. Paul asserts this often-forgotten message to the Colossians when he instructs them and us to continue to live in Jesus. The Greek verb for continue is a present imperative, which means this is not a suggestion



As amazing as it may seem, the undeniable truth is that God desires to walk with us in a deepening fellowship.



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or something we might consider when we have free time but a command and essential requirement for being faithful disciples of Jesus. This phrase also illuminates the imagery of walking with Jesus. The English Standard Version actually employs this language: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Col. 2:6).

Notice the connection with the Old Testament story of Enoch. We know very little about his life, but his legacy of faithfulness to God is remembered by all generations that “Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Gen. 5:24). If union with Christ is the beginning of our earthly pilgrimage, then walking with God or communion is the continuation of this relationship. Enoch cultivated this intentional fellowship with God for three hundred years (Gen. 5:22), clearly revealing it was his habitual practice and not something randomly he engaged. John Owen (1616–1683), the great Puritan theologian, wrote descriptively about this in his classic work *On Communion with God*. One can hear the sadness of Owen as he laments the situation in his day: “How few of the saints are experimentally acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love!”² His language is convicting. Enjoyment and communion with God is far more than a quick prayer muttered; it is, rather, a daily experience that we eagerly seek throughout life. Walking with God also communicates the movement and dynamic process that involves both God and individual believers in a reciprocal participation in which God initiates and we respond.

To summarize, spiritual growth for the Christian is never an option! If we are not maturing in our union and communion with Jesus, we will become stagnant and soon ineffective as Christ’s representatives in our broken and needy world. Regardless of our age or biblical knowledge or years of service in Christian



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ministries, we never graduate from Jesus school. For intimacy with God is more than just accumulating biblical truth but living as followers of Jesus who are being transformed by the Holy Spirit. It is important to understand the correct way of matriculating in this divine pedagogy. The human desire for growth can be built only on the foundation of our new life in Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Another way of saying this is that justification, or being made right with God, must precede sanctification, or maturing in Christ. Following Paul's instruction in Col. 2:6–7, being rooted reflects our union with Christ, while being built up and strengthened in Christ is descriptive of the sanctification process.

George Whitefield (1714–1770), the great transatlantic evangelist, learned this the hard way. Before he came to a settled place of salvation, he engaged in the hyperfrenetic activity of spiritual practices that exceeded a healthy and biblical asceticism. He felt if he only prayed more or fasted longer or denied himself more fully he would find peace with God. But the more he depended upon his own works, the more exhausted he became to the point that his physical health was compromised. Charles Wesley, his friend at Oxford, gave him a copy of Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677). Reading this classic radically altered Whitefield's understanding of the gospel, as he discovered the proper order and need for justification before he attempted sanctification. His central discovery was the importance of union with Christ. Note Whitefield's journal description — his own words:

Though I had fasted, watched and prayed, and received the sacrament so long, yet I never knew what true religion was, till God sent me that excellent treatise by the hands of my never to be forgotten friend... Some falsely placed religion in going to church, doing hurt to no one, being constant in the duties of the closet [i.e., personal devotions], and now and then reaching out their hands to give alms to their poor neighbors.



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Alas! thought I, if this be not religion, what is? God soon showed me... true religion was a union of the soul with God, and Christ formed within us... and from that moment... I knew that I must be a new creature.³

Whitefield's language reflects Paul's words, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19) — the central verse upon which Scougal developed his book. This set in motion the radical reorientation that not only led to Whitefield's conversion but empowered his relentless dedication to preaching both the necessity for the new birth and the urgency to mature in Christ.

God's Invitation

It is essential for us to recognize that God always takes the first step in inviting us to live in this union and communion with him. This is grace in action. We can discover the biblical foundation of this intimacy by first examining Scripture from God's divine perspective and then from our human vantage point. As amazing as it may seem, the undeniable truth is that God desires to walk with us in a deepening fellowship. Clarence Macartney (1870–1957), a conservative Presbyterian pastor and leader during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, preached a sermon titled "God's Favorite Word — *Come*."⁴ Although Scripture includes many gracious invitations, Macartney selected the text from Rev. 22:17: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life." Instead of God placing obstacles or elusiveness in our way, this invitation is freely offered to anyone who hungers to know God more deeply. What is significant especially for the purpose of this article is God's strong desire to lead us into a vibrant relationship with the Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore, hungering for God is a gift that God



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implants in the hearts and minds of those whom he seeks to draw unto himself. While there are many examples of God's welcoming invitation, I will illustrate this with two from each the Old Testament and New Testament.

Old Testament Examples

Early in Israel's history as Moses led them out from Egypt toward the Promised Land, the people were instructed to drive out the surrounding nations. God recognized that the heart of the Israelite people, much like our own today, was prone to idolatry and the incredible ability to rationalize that they can live amid unhealthy temptations without exchanging devotion to God for cultural fleeting pleasures (see Deut. 7:1–5). God reminded them that they were to be a “holy people” because God had chosen them “out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6). In an effort to awaken and encourage the Israelites, God proclaimed this amazing confirmation of His divine love:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”
(Deut. 7:7–8)

There was nothing that Israel did to earn this redemptive love especially when viewed alongside the group's insignificant size. It was pure grace, initiated by God as a renewal of His previous covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–9; etc.). Zephaniah lived during the same time as Jeremiah and directed

An open wooden treasure chest is shown, filled with a large pile of gold coins. A bright, warm light emanates from the center of the coin pile, creating a strong lens flare effect. The chest is made of dark wood, and the background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient of light and dark tones.

Taken together, we recognize how love is woven throughout the divine invitation to experience our triune God. A healthy love is always reciprocal and confirms our desire to grow in friendship and fellowship with Him.



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his prophecy to the people of Jerusalem. The ominous warnings of judgment of the first section of this book give way to the hopeful announcement of restoration in the latter part of chapter 3. Once again, we hear a message of grace from the Old Testament as the prophet trumpets this startling truth: “The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17). Despite Jerusalem’s rebellious disregard for God, God will lavish His strong love upon them. Additionally, this verse reminds God’s people that He is in their midst and finds great delight in them. Both of these passages reveal that God’s people had no reason to expect His favor. Their behavior certainly did not deserve such a gift. Yet God lovingly initiated the first step out of His profound favor for His creation.

New Testament Examples

In the New Testament, Jesus not only incarnates God’s invitation and desire for union and communion but is the means for making this a reality. As He gathered in the Upper Room on the last night of His earthly life, Jesus declared: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). There is no greater intimacy for one person to willingly choose to live with another individual. Jesus’s promise does not imply a brief weekend visit but rather a permanent indwelling of God within us (see also Eph. 3:14–21). This Scripture also captures the dynamic interaction between God and the individual person. Far from being a one-sided relationship, the believer must be obedient to Jesus’s instruction and express sincere love to God. These words were spoken within the larger context of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus would send to guide them in His absence (John 14:26).

The theme of absence plays a critical role in the letter to the



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church at Laodicea. Jesus's well-known words of invitation have encouraged many: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Rev. 3:20). Unfortunately, some people ignore the context of this letter and use this as an evangelistic appeal for those who have not yet experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ. If we read the entire passage, we discover that Jesus is speaking to those in the church not outside of it. He laments their lack of zeal and faithfulness saying, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15–16).

Therefore, Jesus's invitation is to recommitment not conversion. But this clarifies more vividly the extravagance of His desire to continually draw us back to Himself even when we are lethargic in our faith. Jesus is persistent so that we might again enjoy the intimate fellowship that He has prepared for all those who respond in faith and love to Him. Taken together, we recognize how love is woven throughout the divine invitation to experience our triune God. A healthy love is always reciprocal and confirms our desire to grow in friendship and fellowship with Him. John Owen again has captured this critical component: "Christ having given himself to the soul, loves the soul; and the soul having given itself unto Jesus loveth him also."⁵ This echoes John's teaching, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Hungering for God

Scripture also provides numerous examples of what growing in intimacy with God looks like from the human perspective. Hungering for God can be seen throughout the book of Psalms, but two powerful examples will clearly illustrate this. Psalm 42 is



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a lament of a person who knows God but is now separated from this vital presence. The psalmist cries out, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Ps. 42:1–2). The psalmist had already established a vital relationship with the living God. But now he is exiled, forcefully removed from God’s presence. We might be surprised by his question. He doesn’t ask, where is God? He knows that answer, the living God is in His temple; rather, he pleads for when he will be able to return. One imagines the anguish of this pilgrim as he speaks of the taunts of his enemies who ridicule him about God’s absence (Ps. 42:3). Gerald Wilson further clarifies this desire for God:

Here Yahweh is seen as the source of life and refreshment that satisfies the longing of the psalmist to “meet with God.” The emphasis is not just on his utter dependence on God for life (while that is, of course, assumed); it is rather the joy and pleasure of being in God’s presence that the psalmist misses and longs to restore.⁶

Simply stated, there is nothing that can satisfy this deep longing except God, and the psalmist will accept no substitutes or counterfeit solutions.

David, known as a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), frequently cries out in his hunger for God. The same graphic imagery of thirst and longing in a desert is employed in Psalm 63 to heighten the urgency of experiencing God’s life-giving presence.

*You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land*



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where there is no water.

*I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you. (Ps. 63:1–3)*

One commentator suggests that David is exiled in the desert due to his estranged son Absalom.⁷ This would likely increase his emotional distress and intensify his search to find comfort and sustenance in God. Therefore, this is not the longing of someone who is interested in discovering God for the first time. The personal nature of this thirst is evident by his prayer to “my God.” David’s life had been enriched by his previous experience of God’s power and glory. As a result, he dedicates himself to a life of praise and gratitude.

The New Testament echoes and reinforces this hunger for God. Once individuals taste the presence of God, they will never be the same. Matthew captures the resulting search in two parables. Jesus employed parables as one of his most basic ways of instruction. He frequently used them to communicate a comparison between two things, often in relation to the kingdom of heaven as he did in the following two examples:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (Matt. 13:44–46)

The kingdom represents Jesus’s reign or rule. These miniparables introduce two different persons, one who is not identified and could

*But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
(Phil. 3:12–14)*



For you, I trust you might
perceive more clearly who Jesus
is so that His compelling beauty
might motivate you to greater
consistency





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represent a normal individual. This person discovers a treasure, perhaps even by accident. He recognizes its value and joyfully exchanges all his possessions so he can purchase not just the treasure but the entire field. Clearly this individual was willing to sacrifice everything he had to secure this treasure. The second person is a merchant of fine pearls. He is trained and recognizes the value of precious gems. In his search, he discovers that one exquisite pearl cannot be compared with anything he has ever seen. Like the first person, he sells all his possessions to purchase this unique pearl. In both cases, these parables demonstrate that no human sacrifice can be compared to the worth of living in God's heavenly kingdom. The very nature of parables is to confront listeners with a response to Jesus's teaching; in this case, Jesus challenges His listeners and us that if we possess the same willingness to surrender our lives as did these two people, we will live in His kingdom.

Paul likewise demonstrates how a hunger for God reorients and motivates a person's life. In the following passage, he confesses he has discovered the futility of human striving and that his earlier very impressive accomplishments amount to nothing in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ as Lord (Phil. 3:8). Further, what he has experienced of Jesus does not in any way satisfy his longings but only intensifies his continual desire for Christ.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12–14)

What should encourage us as we read Paul's litany of desire is



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that he has not yet reached his goal. The prize that captivates Paul's passionate hunger for Jesus reflects the treasure and pearl of the above parables. As we seek to follow Jesus as his contemporary disciples, we, like Paul, need to cultivate a similar pilgrim attitude that continually renews our commitment to press onward for the consummation of our faith in heaven.

Conclusion

I can imagine readers coming from a wide variety of places. Some might not yet have experienced the saving grace and freedom of Jesus Christ. I trust you will soon know Jesus personally as the only One who can satisfy your deep longings for meaning and purpose for life. Other readers have begun the journey and are seeking to grow in deeper spiritual maturity. But you may occasionally be haphazard in your pursuit and go through different phases of zeal and stagnation. For you, I trust you might perceive more clearly who Jesus is so that His compelling beauty might motivate you to greater consistency. Some of you have been faithful followers of Jesus for decades. You know yourself as God's beloved and have tasted His unrelenting desire for you. Your response of hunger for God echoes the psalmist's: "I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands" (Ps. 119:10). ■



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NOTES

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.
- ² John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost In The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2, ed. William H. Goold, 1–274 (1657; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 32.
- ³ George Whitefield, *A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* (London: W. Strahan, 1740), 27–28.
- ⁴ Clarence E. Macartney, *The Greatest Words in the Bible and in Human Speech* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 51–58.
- ⁵ Owen, *Of Communion*, 118.
- ⁶ Gerald H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 670.
- ⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 224.



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God cannot give us a happiness and peace
apart from Himself, because it is not there.
There is no such thing.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

According to Tom Schwanda, spiritual growth for the Christian is never optional. What Bible verses does he cite to support of this?

2

In his article, Schwanda cites a number of examples from Scripture of what growing in intimacy with God looks like from the human perspective. What examples does he cite of “hungering for God.” As you think about your life, are you hungering for God? Would you like to ask God to give you greater hunger for Him?



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The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton, and Whitefield and is currently preparing a book on George Whitefield for Crossway's Theologians on the Christian Life series. He and his wife, Grace, have two adult children, and five delightful grandchildren.



RECOMMENDED READING

1 God God God, G
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God Is The Gospel¹
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Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself

John Piper

John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Crossway, 2005)

This book is a cry from the heart of John Piper. He is pleading that God Himself, as revealed in Christ's death and resurrection, is the ultimate and greatest gift of the gospel.

None of Christ's gospel deeds and none of our gospel blessings are good news except as means of seeing and savoring the glory of Christ. Forgiveness is good news because it opens the way to the enjoyment of God Himself. Justification is good news because it wins access to the presence and pleasures of God Himself. Eternal life is good news because it becomes the everlasting enjoyment of Christ.

All God's gifts are loving only to the degree that they lead us to God Himself. That is what God's love is: His commitment to do everything necessary (most painfully the death of His only Son) to enthrall us with what is most deeply and durably satisfying—namely, Himself.



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RECOMMENDED READING

Saturated with Scripture, centered on the cross, and seriously joyful, this book leads us to satisfaction for the deep hungers of the soul. It touches us at the root of life where practical transformation gets its daily power. It awakens our longing for Christ and opens our eyes to His beauty.

Piper writes for the soul-thirsty who have turned away empty and in desperation from the mirage of methodology. He invites us to slow down and drink from a deeper spring. "This is eternal life," Jesus said, "that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." This is what makes the gospel — and this book — good news.