

Living in God's Presence

The wonderful thing about the Christian life is that we know we are never alone, God is always with us, listening to our hearts and every prayer, aware of our needs and struggles (even before we vocalize them), reading our desires and waiting and eager to respond.

I was blessed by being raised in a Christian home. When I was growing up my parents would often remind me of the adage that, "Christ is the head of this home; the unseen guest at every meal; the silent listener to every conversation". While I could not understand the somewhat quaint practice of some, of leaving an empty chair at the table ("Jesus' place"), my parents were teaching me that God is everywhere, not just at church, and that what I did, wherever I went, whatever I said, He was always watching and listening.

That realization can be intimidating. I would feel awed and not a little nervous as I wondered how much of what I said and did was observed by God. Maybe He was busy doing other things and didn't notice. But what if He did? I could not conceal from Him things I successfully managed to hide from others. Couldn't He just visit from time to time? I would be on my best behaviour if I knew when He was coming. Besides, I didn't know what He looked like (my sister and I tried to guess, but no one could tell which of our stick figures was more realistic).

God is everywhere

Hagar declared, "God, you see me" (Genesis 16:13). The New Testament tells us in the book of Hebrews that everything is open to Him (Hebrews 4:13). How would we behave if we knew we were not alone? What would we do differently? Bringing God home with us from Sunday church services means that the Christian life has to be lived domestically; religion is not just for the professional classes of ministers, priests, nuns and missionaries.

Think about it. If we believe God exists and that His presence is everywhere (theologians describe this as his "omnipresence") how should we live? Few of us actively think about the presence of God, because the physical, visible world around us is constantly screaming for our attention. But just imagine what it would be like if our hearts and minds were switched on to the fact that God is constantly with us, in and around us. Paul told the ancient Athenians that He is not far from every one of us and that, "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). He has promised not to leave us (Hebrews 13:5b). He is personally interested and involved in what we do. If we were ever after a definition of faithfully "living" the Christian life, this would be it.

The Biblical Christian focuses on serving and pleasing God now, not as an abstract principle demanding obedience to a faraway entity who looks down benignly on His earthlings, but One who is always present, listening intently to our thoughts and conversations, observing our actions and weighing up our relationships.

Such a Christian believes it is feasible and desirable to live as though we were actually positioned in God's presence. When God created Adam and Eve they lived where they could experience His presence with them all the time, in a very tangible way; the immediate result of sin was that they felt alienated from Him (Genesis 3:8). The Psalmist declared that the "fullness of joy" was to be found in God's presence (Psalm 16:11). In the ancient Hebrew David was saying that he was "sated" by the "abundance" of joy that comes from being with God. He discovered that those who lived uprightly could dwell (literally "inhabit, sit down") in God's presence (Psalm 140:13). The presence of God gives us a sense of "rest" that transcends our circumstances. David declared:

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." (Psalm 139:7-10, NIV)

When you stop to consider, the notion of going to "church" to be "in the presence of God" or to sing and "invite God's presence" is unscriptural.

Let's look at the life experience of another man, France's Brother Lawrence.

One man's approach

The first time I heard the story of Brother Lawrence I was highly skeptical. How could anyone who lived outside of the Reformation world view have anything to say to an evangelical Christian today? However, as I read his works and considered what he had to say I was struck by the powerful simplicity of his guiding principles and lifestyle. Let me tell you about this remarkable Christian.

Brother Lawrence was born with the name of Nicholas Herman, in Lorraine Province, France, in the year 1605. He came from a very poor family background and grew up in a relatively irreligious age in war-torn Europe (ubiquitous churches, abbeys and monasteries notwithstanding). He was not well educated. He was converted to Christ in 1629 and after serving his community as a soldier during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) he entered a Carmelite community in Paris in 1649. It was there, as a monk, that he took the pseudonym Brother Lawrence (after his first parish priest). He was active in the community until his death in 1691. Most of the time he performed domestic chores in the monastery, working as a helper in the busy kitchen, where he became known for his simple but practical faith in God.

What made Nicholas remarkable, different from his comrades at the monastery, was that he fundamentally believed that he was always in the presence of God and that this radically informed the way he lived. At first he hated working in the kitchen (most of us have those feelings) and only did so because the grace of God changed his attitude and made him willing to perform menial and repetitive tasks amid the pots and pans. He made a conscious decision to do what he was asked, not out of slavish obligation to his superiors, but for the love of God.

What a lesson for us all, as we whine and complain about work, finances, timetables and relationship pressures, moaning about our circumstances, lack of opportunities, negative things that happen and our inability to change what we do not like. Ironically, Brother Lawrence was the one Christian living in the monastery at the time, who continues to influence the lives and attitudes of Christians more than three hundred years after his death. It is easy to see why.

Something about his faith challenged others. His inner sense of peace was so profound that others were drawn to him for counsel, comfort and spiritual direction. When talking with them, Brother Lawrence did not lecture or pontificate; instead of judging, he shared his own efforts to keep his focus on Christ, no matter what business was going on around him or how preoccupied he became with his daily chores. He discovered that this continual meditation on the things of God became effortless (how tiresome we sometimes make the life of prayer sound) and filled him with peace and joy.

Brother Lawrence was not scholarly, or a great leader of men, but his influence was felt throughout France. After his death, his writings, consisting mainly of “conversations” and letters were published in two volumes: *Maximes Spirituelles* (1692) and *Moeurs et Entretiens du Frere Laurent* (1694). As we read his thoughts about the Christian life, we discover a way of life and prayer that reflects an acute awareness of the presence of God whom he knew well. He did this by meditating on his Heavenly Father and by keeping his thoughts focused on the sacrifice of Christ and the things of the Spirit. He was not an idle monk spending long days in his cell at the monastery, but a busy man with people around him constantly. His writings have been popular with many thousands of believers. Did he have “down days”? Sure, but he discovered how to deal with them God’s way.

Brother Lawrence believed that, in the context of outward concerns and daily activities, it is possible to cultivate a life of “contemplation”, thinking about God, the work of Jesus, the blessings given to the Christian believer and the way of life to which our Saviour has called us. He taught that every Christian has the ability to enjoy ongoing fellowship with God, wherever he or she is and whatever they do, even in the more boring, trying, adverse or noisy circumstances.

Brother Lawrence lived as though the presence of God was an ongoing reality. Don’t think for a moment that he only did so when he was alone, where he could meditate and hear the pin drop. His experiences and beliefs were forged in the midst of the monastery community, hardly the logical locus for quiet contemplation, with more than a hundred people coming and going all the time.

I was inspired when I first read the story of this simple man of God. It is said that he was not much to look at, in a physical sense. If you passed him in the street, you may not have noticed him. He didn’t look like a spiritual giant. There was nothing obviously saintly about him. What most passers-by saw at first glance was a cripple. Whilst serving as a soldier, he had sustained a near fatal injury to his sciatic nerve, that left him lame and in chronic pain for the rest of his life.

Despite his personal problems, disappointments and frustrations, however, he would try to walk continually in God's presence, as though his Heaven Father was at his side. What a triumph!

His letters were not collected until well after his death, when they were published under the title, "The Practice of the Presence of God". Imagine putting the presence of God into practice. The Editor of his works, de Beaufort, included as introductory material the contents of four challenging conversations he had with this incredible brother. (Reputation is nothing if it dissolves under close scrutiny.)

Living in God's presence

Brother Lawrence believed that walking with God involved relationship – not from the head, but from the heart. He believed that God was in charge, even in the little things of life, such as leaves returning to branches after the bitter cold of winter. He believed that the Holy Spirit always wants to talk to us, if only we will list to Him. Surely this is the secret of making faith strong and shaping our lives to please God. He taught that there is nothing so fulfilling as to know we are doing God's will. Whether He leads us by suffering, or by great provision, if we are surrendered to Him we know we will grow spiritually.

If this is our attitude, it will not be a struggle to meditate or pray; for prayer is just a term describing a habit of conversing with God and referring all we do to Him. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote a letter encouraging Christians living in Thessalonica to, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Only by living in relationship with God can the Christian grow in grace and experience and reflect His love. Brother Lawrence stressed relationship with God above all else, based on honesty, stripped of religiosity and unnecessary form and verbose terminology.

Brother Lawrence believed that the greatest pains and pleasures of this world were nothing compared to what he experienced as a Christian actively enjoying fellowship with God. When was the last time you felt like that? Let's get back to simple communion with the Holy Spirit. Brother Lawrence taught that the worst that could happen to him would be to lose the sense of God which he had enjoyed for so long. We are reminded of the Prophet Moses, who pled with God not to remove His powerful presence from Israel (Exodus 33:14-17).

David had the same experience. After confessing to a particularly horrendous sin in his life and seeking God's forgiveness he implored, "Do not take your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 55:11). What a terrible thing to be separated from God. The goodness of God assured Brother Lawrence that he would not be abandoned.

The following is an extract from one of the last letters ever written by Brother Lawrence, to a Christian friend. It shows what was in his heart and it applies equally in our day and circumstances.

“God knows best what we need. All that He does is for our good. If we knew how much he loves us, we would always be ready to receive both the bitter and the sweet from His hand. It would make not a difference. All that came from Him would be pleasing.

“The worst afflictions only appear intolerable if we see them in the wrong light. When we see them coming from the hand of God, and know that it is our loving Father who humbles and distresses us, our sufferings lose their bitterness and can even become a source of consolation.

“Let all our efforts be to know God. The more one knows Him, the greater one desires to know Him. Knowledge is commonly the measure of love. The deeper and more extensive our knowledge, the greater is our love. If our love of God were great we would love him equally in pain and pleasure.

“We only deceive ourselves by seeking or loving God for any favours which He has or may grant us. Such favours, no matter how great, can never bring us as near to God as one simple act of faith. Let us seek Him often by faith. He is within us. Seek Him not elsewhere.

“Are we not rude and deserve blame if we leave Him alone to busy ourselves with trifles which do not please Him and perhaps even offend Him? These trifles may cost us dearly. Let us begin earnestly to be devoted to Him. Let us cast everything else out of our heart. He wants to possess the heart alone. Beg this favour of Him. If we do all we can, we will soon see that change wrought in us which we do greatly desire.”

Any Christian, regardless of age or circumstance, can put God's presence into practice. Anywhere. Any time. This is as real today as it was three hundred years ago. Like the Apostle Paul, who declared, “I want to know Him” (Philippians 3:10), let's make it a priority to do so.