

# Practising the Presence of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Having graduated from college in Michigan in the early 1990s, Tim very quickly started to climb the career ladder.

Several years passed, and one day he found himself feeling very poorly in hospital. Remembering one of his former professors, who he always related to, who had subsequently gone on to become a pastor of a church, Tim phoned him on the off chance and told him that he was in hospital.

His former professor, now the pastor, said, it just so happens that I'm going to be in your area later on. I'll pop in and see you. And so they struck up the friendship once again.

After a couple of years, though, it had become apparent that the reason why he needed to be admitted to hospital that day was rather more serious than everybody had initially thought.

And so this man, who had been so successful, found that his life was ebbing away. Sometime later, he was in the same hospital, and this same pastor, his former tutor, came to visit him again.

[ 1 : 28 ] As he entered the room, the pastor could see that Tim's life was clearly coming towards its end. He sat down, and there was silence.

Let me read to you the story from here. Tim eventually said, I've learned something.

The pastor knew this much, at least. You don't trifle with the words of a person who was about to die. You just listen carefully. So he said, Tell me, what have you learned?

Tim said, I've learned that life is not like a video recorder. The pastor didn't get it any more than you're not getting it now. What do you mean?

He said. Tim said, It's not like a video recorder. You can't fast forward through the bad parts.

[ 2 : 37 ] Long pause. The pastor's thinking to himself, Where does he get this stuff? Then Tim interrupts the silence again to say, You can't fast forward through the bad parts.

But I've learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame. And right now that is just enough. Ever been in that situation where you just wish you could hit that button that says fast forward?

Maybe you're in a situation, Maybe it's a situation of sickness or illness. Maybe it's a place of debilitating anxiety. Maybe it's a stuff you know it's going to be a bad day.

Or it's going to be a challenging day. Or week, or month. And you just think, If only I could just close my eyes, Hibernate, wake up, And just know that this bit has passed.

But we can't. There's no fast forward. But Jesus is there in every frame. And this whole series is thinking about what that means in real, actual, practical terms, To talk meaningfully of the presence of God in our everyday lives.

[ 3 : 58 ] Today we're thinking particularly about what that means, To put into practice this discipline of practicing the presence of God. But before we get on to that in more detail, Let's be really clear.

God is present. Even when we're not aware of it. And that magnificent psalm that we've just heard from, Psalm 139, Really presses this point home.

There are times when we may not feel the presence of God, But God is there. He fills the whole cosmos with his being. He's around you. He's within you. He's there before you.

He's behind you. Above you, below you. He never goes away. There is nowhere where you can be where God is not. That's the point that the psalmist is making. First and last and everything in between.

But of course, it doesn't always feel like it, does it? And there are times when, Because we're not aware of that presence of Jesus in every frame, We just want to hit that fast forward button.

[ 5 : 02 ] There's an old story. You've probably heard me tell this one before. It's a story about an ancient tribe That had a way of establishing When a boy became a man, When he came of age.

It was quite simple. He had to go out and spend the night on his own in the wilderness. If he tried to turn around and make his way back to the camp, Then he was not considered brave enough to be

considered an adult.

Well, the story goes about this one particular individual Whose turn it was to do this. He was terrified. As the custom dictated, Him and his father spent a day walking into the wilderness Where he was going to have to spend the night on his own.

As dusk set in, So the father helped his son build this fire. And he said to him, Look, you will be scared, But just stay by the fire.

And you'll be alright. And he walked away. And the darkness came. And it was the longest night that that Boy-stroke man had ever known.

[ 6 : 06 ] Every time he heard a sound, He was terrified. But he just remembered the words of his father And drew closer to the fire. Eventually, sun started to rise.

And to the boy's terror, He could see, About a hundred yards away, Standing motionless, The figure of a man clutching a spear. He just wished he could hit that fast forward button.

But remembering the words of his father, He stayed put by the fire. As the sun eventually came up fully, He realised that that figure standing right there Was his father who had been there all night long, Watching over him In every frame.

But he just simply didn't know about it. So what are we to do then? We can't hit the fast forward button.

What might we do, In practical terms, To be reminded, To more than be reminded of, But to know the presence of God.

[ 7 : 23 ] To know that he's there in every frame, When actually we just wish we could just fast forward. Well, this is where we bring on, Practising the presence of God.

Brother Lawrence, Or as he was born, Nicholas Herman, Who lived in the 1600s. He was a soldier from the age of 16, And eventually entered a Carmelite order, In France.

But when he became a monk, He was assigned the most mundane duties, Every single day, In the kitchen, And also repairing sandals.

And, Very quickly, He realised just how mundane this was. Drawn to the monastery, In search of a life of prayer, And vibrant spirituality, He found himself confronted, With most of his time, Being taken up by doing these things.

You know, It would be understandable, If in that situation, You wanted to press that fast forward button, And get to the prayer times. But gradually, Brother Lawrence came to the realisation, That is actually, Within those moments, Of mundane activity, Of repetition, That God is to be found, As much as those moments, Of focusing specifically, In prayer, In a place of worship.

[ 8 : 53 ] Whether that's contemplation, Whether it's reading the Bible, Whatever it may be. And so he became, To see, Those, Those, Those, Those, Those chunks of time, Which was actually, Most of the time, Where he was going about, His daily business, Doing daily things, Not as repetitive moments, Of boredom, Or frustration, Where he wanted to hit, The fast forward button, But precisely in those moments, Where he could lay hold, In a real way, Of the reality, The truth, That Jesus is in every frame.

If that sounds complicated, It's not. It's simple, But simple of course, Is not always easy. So it was, That eventually, In these conversations, And he was no academic, He just, It was in conversations, And in letters, That eventually, These thoughts, Got put together, In the book, Practicing the presence of God, Practicing the presence of God, Which came in Christian literature, To be known as a classic, Of spirituality.

And the reason why that is so, Is because, Its power lies in its very simplicity, Anyone can do this. In our everyday lives, It is about knowing, That God is there.

Every time you turn on a tap, You put your toothbrush, In contact with your teeth, Or when you make a cup of tea, Or when you're tying your shoelaces, Or when you're sitting down, Or when you're getting up, And when you're breathing, So think of the most ordinary, Ordinary stuff, You possibly can imagine.

It's in that, That we pay attention, To the presence of God, In that situation. You know, It is highly imaginative, But it's not imaginary.

[ 10 : 34 ] And this is where we need, To be acutely aware, That it's not imagining, The presence of God. It's not making it up. It's practicing it. So where do we do, Where do we go about that?

How do we go about it? Particularly when life is so busy. Somebody called Frank Laubach, Was a missionary, In the Philippines.

And he, Discovered this spiritual practice, Practicing the presence of God. When he went to become a missionary, When he went to become a missionary, For the first time. And when he arrived, He had to learn language, And he had to make friends.

And he found himself, With a lot of space in his diary. So for the first few months or so, As a missionary, He found that he had far more, Opportunity to focus on, On this spiritual practice, Practicing the presence of God.

But as he began to make contacts, And began to establish his work, He found that his schedule, Became more and more, And more busy. Here's what he wrote.

[ 11 : 56 ] Either this new situation, Of busyness, Will crowd God out, Or I must take him into it all. I must learn a continuous, Silent conversation, Of heart to heart with God, While looking into others' eyes, And listening to other voices.

If I decide to do this, It is far more difficult, Than the thing I was doing before. Yet if this experiment, Is to have any value, For busy people, It must be worked out, Under exactly these conditions, Of high pressure, And the throngs of people.

We can't fast forward, Through the difficult bits. But Jesus is in every frame. You know, It might be tempting to think, But is this not just all about, Human activity?

Isn't it not, More meant to be about, Just the presence of God, That is there, Independent of what we're doing? Well yes and no. Yes, In that God is present, Regardless of what, Whatever we're up to.

But no, In the sense that, It is fundamentally part, Of our Christian discipleship, That we play our part. Being a disciple of Jesus, Is not just about, A passive existence.

[ 13 : 21 ] It's actively engaging, In the presence of God. Paul writes in Galatians chapter 5, If we live by the spirit, Let us also keep in step, With the spirit.

We have a part to play. God's presence is real, It's not manufactured, But we have a part to play, In engaging with that. The following illustration, Might help.

There was a patrol of GIs, And they had the job, Of tethering a surveillance balloon. There was quite a lot of them, They had a length of rope each. But there was a sudden gust of wind, And this balloon began, It was seized by the wind, And it began to take off.

Well, Some of the GIs, Probably quite sensibly, Let go of the rope. But others didn't. They felt that, If they held on tight enough, Their collective weight, Could keep this thing put. That was a fundamental miscalculation.

Very quickly, This thing left the ground, And they were flying through the air. Eventually, All but one had to let go.

[ 14 : 31 ] Many of them were injured. A couple of them were killed. Except for one survivor, Who hung on. When he was eventually rescued, It became clear, That he had done one thing, That the others hadn't.

Rather than simply clinging on, With his own strength, Very quickly, Somehow he had the presence of mind, To wrap the rope, Around his waist.

He said this, I tied the rope, Around my body, And allowed the balloon, To hold on, To me.

The presence of God, Is something that we don't manufacture, It is there, But the role of the Holy Spirit, Is to hold us.

But there's a response, That needs to be made from us, If we are to be conscious, Of that presence. Let me leave you, With this last image.

[ 15 : 38 ] Well, You'd imagine, That you're sat, In a prison cell, It's dark, The very large, Thick door, Is firmly locked.

God approaches, That door from the outside, Inserts the key, And flings wide open, That door. The cell in which, You are otherwise incarcerated, Suddenly floods with light, And you are called, To walk to freedom.

God's done all of this, Not you. Unless God from the outside, Had intervened, Had opened up the door, And flooded it with light, You'd be there forever. It's down to him, First and last.

His presence, And his presence alone, That exists independently, Of you, Or anything you think, Or say, Or do. It's down to him. But you ain't gonna leave that place, Unless you choose to move, And walk through the door.

And that's a fundamental principle, Of discipleship, Which we do well to remember, Every day of our lives, That it's God who acts, But we are called to follow, It's always in God's strength, And it is

only ever, By the presence of God, That anything happens, But he calls us to move, We may well be the recipients, But we're not, Passive recipients, We cannot fast forward, Through life, But Jesus is there, Present, In every single frame, And as we come to pray together now, Let's hold our lives before him, And let's ask him, To remind us of that presence, And to enable us, To be more empowered, By that presence, Not just here, As we're gathered to worship, And to pray now, But more fundamentally,

[ 17 : 55 ] In the coming week, Whatever that looks like for us, In our everyday lives, Let's pray, Lord God, Sometimes we long, For life to be put on fast forward, Perhaps sometimes we wish, We could just close our eyes, For a day or a week, Or whatever that may be, And wake up and it's just gone past, But we can't do that, Thank you, That you are present with us, Help us, To know that, And to see that, Give us the courage, And the confidence, To look beyond the cell, To your light, And to dare to move, And to walk through that door, To freedom, Help us,

In our daily lives, To pay attention, To your presence, In and through, To the ordinary, The mundane, And the repetitive, Lord, Wherever we may be, Tomorrow, Afternoon, Morning, Evening, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Whatever we may be doing, Whether that be at home, Whether that be at work, Whether that be in the car, Whether that be on the bus, In the shops, Wherever we may be, Help us, To practice your presence, To know that you are with us, And that you never leave us, In Jesus' name,  
Amen.