

## Experiencing the Love of God

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The most precious reality in Christian experience following the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is personal knowledge of God. This is a promise of the new covenant and it becomes ours through Jesus Christ: 'And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent' (Jn. 17:3). The word 'know' here means much more than the knowledge of facts—to know about. It expresses the knowledge of intimacy in personal relationship. (Scripture describes the intimacy of physical union within marriage as 'knowing' e.g. in Matthew 1:24-25: 'Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: and knew her not till she had brought forth her first born son: and he called his name Jesus' (KJV).)

In redemption God takes those who have been alienated and separated from him and who have no knowledge of him, and brings them into a personal, experiential relationship with himself. Knowing facts about God does not guarantee that a person really knows him, although Christian doctrine is meant to bring us to an experiential knowledge of God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments:

It is possible for us to develop a false notion of knowledge....to take a purely theoretical and academic interest in truth and knowledge, to make knowledge an end in and of itself—the purely theoretical and academic approach....To vary the expression, this danger is one of knowing 'about' a subject rather than knowing it. 'Knowing about'! What a vital distinction this is—What a difference there is between preaching about the gospel and preaching the gospel! It is possible to preach round the gospel and say things about it without ever presenting it. That is quite useless—indeed it can be very dangerous. It may be true of us that we know 'about' these things, but do not really know them. And this, of course becomes all important when we realize that the whole end and object of theology is to know God! A Person! Not a collection of abstract truths, nor a number of philosophical propositions, but God! A Person! To know Him!—'the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent!'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. Marryn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp. 28, 30, 31-32.

Those who are born again of the Spirit of God experience the presence of God. A sure evidence of the work of the Spirit is to know God as our Father. There is a filial spirit produced in the heart of a child of God, 'For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... And because you are sons God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"' (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:6). This involves intimacy, communion, fellowship, tenderness and endearment. Many Scripture passages indicate that the Christian has fellowship with the Father and with the Lord Jesus: 'What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ' (1Jn. 1:3).

Communion and fellowship with God is the privilege and right of every child of God and is to some degree the experience of each one. The following verses express God's desire that all believers should enjoy it:

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19-22)

God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor: 1:9).

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me (Rev. 3:20).

If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him (Jn. 14:23).

The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms (Deut. 33:27).

Through the work of Christ and because of our union with him, Christians enjoy access to God: 'But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ....In whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him' (Eph. 2:13; 3:12). God desires communion with his people. He wants them to experience his love. He has done everything necessary through the work of the Lord Jesus and the ongoing work of the Holy

Spirit to make that experience a reality. Consequently our 'hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us' (Rom. 5:5). Thus the child of God experiences communion, fellowship and intimacy with God—an experience of the love of God! Once again John Owen finely comments:

I come now to declare what it is wherein peculiarly and eminently the saints have communion with the Father; and this is—LOVE—free, undeserved, and eternal love. This the Father peculiarly fixes upon the saints; this they are immediately to eye in him, to receive of him, and to make such returns thereof as he is delighted with. This is the great discovery of the gospel: for whereas the Father, as the fountain of the Deity is not known any other way but as full of wrath, anger, and indignation against sin, nor can the sons of men have any other thoughts of him (Rom. 1:18; Isa. 33:13, 14; Hab. 1:13; Ps. 5:4-6; Eph. 2:3), here he is now revealed peculiarly as love, as full of it unto us, the manifestation whereof is the peculiar work of the gospel, Tit. 3:14.<sup>2</sup>

As Owen says, this is the great discovery of the gospel. When a person is brought to know God through Jesus Christ, he finds that the love of God is the love of a father. What a wonderful truth! It totally transforms life. Every child of God is personally embraced by his love and has been brought into an experience in which love which passes knowledge will be experienced forever. The believer has a foretaste here of the world of love which is heaven and it transforms his priorities in this present life:

Spiritual realities are of the highest import in the kingdom of God. What are these spiritual delights which must be sought first?...First in importance is communion with God....Have we discovered that our souls have basic needs which tangible things will never satisfy? Have we learned by a felt experience that 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word....of God'(Matt. 4:4)?

Made in the image of God, man's deepest longings can only be met in communion with the Lord most high. Human souls can make contact with a spiritual world which has no sensual appeal. Yet the soul has feelings of its own. Our world has finely honed the physical senses and despised spiritual experience. There are very real delights which some never know because they only trade in the material. Have you known God and his glorious presence in holy embraces of personal fellowship?...How can anyone, whose soul has been in the presence of his Maker, suggest that there is more

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<sup>2</sup> *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1965), Volume 2, *Communion with God*, p. 19.

important business for a creature than to know and adore the Lord of glory?... There are glorious riches to be had in the kingdom of God, spiritual riches, the foremost of which is knowing the only true.<sup>3</sup>

## THE OBJECTIVE TRUTH OF THE LOVE OF GOD

When we say that God is love we are speaking about one of the foundational truths of the Christian life. We are talking about the very essence of the heart of God and his attitude towards each of his children as individuals. The apostle John writes, 'We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us' (1 Jn. 4:16), and adds, 'We love, because He first loved us' (1 Jn. 4:19). The Bible tells us that before one can love God, he must first of all come to know and then believe the love which God has for him. Before we can experience the love of God, we must first of all respond to the revelation of his love. This is the basis of communion with God: the fact of his love. Communion with God is based upon objective revelation of the love of God which he has made manifest in Christ. This is why, over and over again, the Word of God sets before us the objective fact of the love of God demonstrated in the work of Christ:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us ... (1 Jn. 3:16).

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 Jn. 4:9-10).

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

Here we have the proof of the love of God. It is revealed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus. And the truly transforming thing about understanding the love of God for us, is the realization that God loves **me**, as an individual. He desires **me** for himself. He desires my fellowship, for the Savior died for **me** personally, and I am very dear to him. This is what draws my heart out to seek communion with him, as I respond to his love by faith. To know the love of God in this way is a wonderful experience indeed but it can be hindered. For the devil will oppose

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<sup>3</sup> God (Walter J. Chantry, *God's Righteous Kingdom*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), pp. 22-23, 25.

the Christian's apprehending the truth of the love of God, and will seek to interpose unbelief, resulting in our withdrawing from the Lord rather than a joyous abandonment to him. It should be understood that a full response to the gospel is necessary for an individual to experience communion with God. There must be a trust in Christ alone as Savior and the total submission of the life to him as Lord to live for the glory of God in worship and obedience. Out of this response of repentance and faith the believer is united to Christ in a personal relationship and out of that relationship he is called upon to enter into intimate communion with God. But the devil will seek to do all he can to hinder this experience. John Owen voiced a concern in his day that many were subject to such a hindering work:

Many dark and disturbing thoughts are apt to arise in this thing. Few can carry up their hearts and minds to the height by faith, as to rest their souls in the love of the Father; they live below it, in the troublesome region of hopes and fears, storms and clouds. All here is serene and quiet. But how to attain to this pitch they know not. This is the will of God, that he may always be eyed as benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable therein; and that peculiarly as the Father, as the great fountain and spring of all gracious communications and fruits of love. This is that which Christ came to reveal, God as a Father (John 1:18); that name which he declares to those who are given him out of the world (John 17:6). And this is that which he effectually leads us to by himself, as he is the only way of going to God as a Father (John 14:5,6); that is, as love: and by doing so, gives us the rest which he promiseth; for the love of the Father is the only rest of the Soul.<sup>4</sup>

Believing the love of God, and responding to it in faith, is the only way to enter into communion with God and find rest in him. Apart from this one will experience insecurity and uncertainty. But God wants his children to dwell with him in an open face to face relationship of love—a life ideally of unbroken communion and fellowship. To that end faith must understand and rest constantly on the work of the Lord Jesus. He came to reveal the true nature of God to us. He came to bring us into a wholly new relationship with the Father, into the conscious experience of his fatherly love, his favor, his protection and his care. God is a Father! He is love! And as a Father, he has a deep desire that his children will know his love and become secure in it. His heart is one that is full of warmth, compassion, tenderness and love. Surely one of the great truths that we find in the parable of the prodigal son is the father heart of God. There we see a yearning, aching love that desired a lost rebellious son to return. And when he did return in true repentance he found not a stern judge, but a father who dearly loved him and

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<sup>4</sup> *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1965), Volume 2, *Communion with God*, p. 23.

showered him with affection. In such words Christ reveals the intense desire of God himself.

Love has desire at the center of its being. Why did God send his Son, and give him as a propitiation for sin? Why did he forgive us, justify us and adopt us into his family? Because he desires us for himself. He loves us with stupendous love. He loves us to the point of passion, and desires fellowship and intimate communion with his children. Just as in the Song of Solomon the bride rejoices in the realization of the love of her bridegroom, so we can rejoice in Christ's love for his church and say, 'I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me' (Song 7:10). God's passionate desire shines throughout the life of the Lord Jesus who came to seek and to save the lost (Lk. 19:10). Our God is a seeking God because his heart is a heart of love. All the statements that he makes in his Word about his people confirm this fact. He speaks to us in words of intense affection and joy and longing. All his thoughts of us began with love: 'In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself' (Eph. 1:4-5). Love is the great reason for his purpose in redemption and adoption. He must bring us to himself. Again and again we are told that those who are truly called of God and are his children are greatly beloved by him: 'knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you' (1 Thess. 1:4); 'among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are beloved of God in Rome' (Rom. 1:6-7). If you are a Christian you are greatly beloved by God your Father! To be 'beloved' means to be 'greatly loved', to be 'dear to the heart'. This is exactly the same word the Father used of Jesus at his baptism: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased' (Mt. 3:17). His attitude towards his children is the same as his attitude towards the Lord Jesus! This is expressed even more forcefully in John 17:22-23, where Jesus in his high priestly prayer says, 'And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me.' What an incredible truth—the Father loves those he has redeemed with the same love with which he loves his very own Son! This is echoed throughout Scripture:

The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will [renew you] in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy (Zeph. 3:17).

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you (Is. 62:5).

I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior....you are precious in My sight, you are honored and I love you (Is. 43:3-4).

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness (Jer. 31:3).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us (Eph. 2:4).

This is the heart of our God and Father. He rejoices over his children with shouts of joy and singing as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. We are precious in his sight, we are honoured and the delight of his heart. Charles Spurgeon eloquently expresses this reality in these words:

If we are 'accepted in the Beloved,' then, first, our persons are accepted: we ourselves are well-pleasing to him. God looks upon us now with pleasure. Once he said of men that it repented him that he had made them, but now when he looks at his people he never repents that he made us....he takes delight in us. Look at your own children; sometimes they grieve you, but still you are pleased with them; it is a pleasure to have them near you; and if they are long out of your sight you grow anxious about them....Our Father is truly pleased with us: our very persons are accepted of God. He delights in us individually; he thinks of us with joy, and when we are near to him it gives pleasure to his great heart.<sup>5</sup>

## **RESPONSE TO THE LOVE OF GOD**

On the basis that God is love and has demonstrated his love towards us in the giving of the Lord Jesus, we now have the wonderful privilege as his children of responding to the manifestation of that love. There ought to be before us the glorious expectation of continuous fellowship with him. It is not enough that we know the facts related to the love of God as our Father, it is necessary that we respond to his love if we would experience communion with him. As John Owen says:

Our communion....with God consists in his communication of himself unto us, with our return unto him of that which he requires and accepts, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him (*The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1965), Volume 2, *Communion with God*, p. 8–9).

There are three major aspects to the response we are called to make to the revelation of the love of God if we are to hold communion and fellowship with him.

First of all we must respond with obedient, holy lives. One cannot walk in sin and walk in fellowship with the Holy One of Israel: 'Can two walk together, except

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<sup>5</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1971) Vol. 29, p. 403.

they be agreed?' (Amos 3:3, KJV); 'If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth' (1 Jn. 1:6). These Scriptures, as well as many others, show us that the Lord has intimate communion with those whose hearts and lives are pure before him. Psalm 25:14 reinforces this when it says, 'The secret [intimacy] of the Lord is for those who fear Him.' I Peter 1:14-17 equates the fear of God (an attitude which includes love) with an obedient life (cf. Prov. 8:13). In John 14:21 and 15:10 Jesus promises the manifestation of himself and the experience of his love to the one who obeys his commandments. Obedience or holiness of life and communion with God are directly related to one another, Only a child can commune with the Father but all God's children are also his servants who walk in obedience before him.

A second essential aspect of our response to the revelation of the love of God is faith. We must believe what our Father has revealed to us about his heart attitude towards us, receive it, and respond to it in love. It is very important that we spend time in meditation on the Scriptures which speak of the love of God lest we become guilty of unbelief through an imbalanced concept of God. Because of our innate sinfulness we naturally tend to think of God as being angry, unapproachable and disapproving. It is true that the Lord disapproves of sin and if we are walking in known sin we will experience his displeasure. But where there is an earnest endeavor to walk in the light in submission and holiness and obedience before our God, then we can respond to his love and have boldness of access to him through the Lord Jesus Christ. We must beware of harboring hard thoughts about God, of refusing to believe what he has revealed of himself and of keeping him at a distance. The great desire of God's heart is that we believe in his love, receive it and thus experience deep intimacy and communion with him.

John Owen points out that in order to experience true communion with God, we have to fight an aggressive fight of faith against the suggestions of Satan. Otherwise these truths will not be believed and received into our hearts:

It is exceeding acceptable unto God, even our Father, that we should thus hold communion with him in his love, that he may be received into our souls as one full of love, tenderness, and kindness, towards us. Flesh and blood is apt to have very hard thoughts of him, to think he is always angry, yea, implacable....Now, there is not anything more grievous to the Lord nor more subservient to the design of Satan upon the soul, than such thoughts as these....it is exceeding grievous to the Spirit of God to be so slandered in the hearts of those whom he dearly loves. The Lord takes nothing worse at the hands of his, than such hard thoughts of him, knowing full well what fruit this bitter root is like to bear, what alienations of heart, what drawings back, what unbelief....in our walking with him. Communion consists in giving

and receiving. Until the love of the Father is received, we have no communion with him therein. How, then, is the love of the Father to be received, so as to hold fellowship with him? The answer, by faith. The receiving of it is the believing of it....Let the soul frequently eye the love of the Father....So eye it as to receive it. Unless this be added, all is in vain as to any communion with God. We do not hold communion with him in any thing until it is received by faith. This, then, is what I would provoke the saints of God unto, even to believe this love of God for themselves and their own part, believe that such is the heart of the Father towards them, accept of his witness herein. His love is not ours in the sweetness of it until it be so received. Continually, then, act thoughts of faith on God, as love to thee, as embracing thee with the eternal free love before described. When the Lord is, by his word, presented as such unto thee, let thy mind know it, and assent that it is so; and thy will embrace it, in its being so; and all thy affections be filled with it. Set thy whole heart to it; let it be bound with the cords of this love.<sup>6</sup>

There is nothing so transforming to a human soul as to come to know the love which God has for it. But as the apostle John writes in 1 John 4:16, these truths must be believed. The proper response to the revelation of the love of God is faith.

But then there is a third aspect to the response which flows out of faith and which completes the cycle of giving and receiving in our communion with God; it is the response of love itself. The natural response of a redeemed sinner to God's love is to love him in return. 'We love, because He first loved us' (1 Jn. 4:19). This means that just as we are his beloved so he is to be our beloved. He is to be beloved by us! He must ever be preeminent in our affections. He is to be our first love, our life, the total joy and satisfaction of our hearts, our all in all. Just as our Lord delights in his own and rejoices over them with singing and gladness of heart so they are to delight in him and sing to him with gladness and thanksgiving, 'Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart....O come let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation'(Ps. 37-74; 95.1). He is to be the rest of our souls, the one who meets the deep longings of our heart. Many Scriptures remind us that God has made us for himself and that in the heart of every redeemed saint is a hunger and thirst to know God intimately. He is to be to us the bread of life and the fountain of living waters:

Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Ps. 73:25-26).

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<sup>6</sup> *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1965), Volume 2, *Communion with God*, pp. 34-35, 22, 34.

O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water....Because Thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise Thee. So I will bless Thee as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Thy name. My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips....For Thou hast been my help, and in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy (Ps. 63:1, 3-4, 7).

As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (Ps. 42:1-2).

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. In his shade I took great delight and sat down, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He has brought me to his banquet hall, and his banner over me is love (Song 2:3-4).

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ....that I may know Him' (Phil. 3:7,10).

These verses make it abundantly clear that when a man is redeemed he receives a new heart in which God himself becomes the central desire and love. George Burrowes makes this point in his commentary on the Song of Solomon:

The desire which in the heart of the saint absorbs every other, is for the manifestation of the love of the Lord Jesus through the influences of the Holy Spirit; and this love is thus ardently desired, because its effect is more reviving and exhilarating than any of the pleasures of sense, even wine, the most refreshing of them all.

This desire is not a blind instinct or a fanatical impulse, but springs from an intelligent apprehension of the excellency of the nature of Christ, as transcending every thing known to man, more than the holy anointing oil of the sanctuary surpassed any other perfume; an excellence so rich, that the pure in heart, and they only, love him, and they cannot do otherwise than love him.

The thought of the excellency of the character of Christ and of the influences of the Holy Spirit shedding abroad his love in the heart, creates the desire of coming as near to him as possible, without any delay—of running to him; and as our own insufficiency and weakness are felt sensibly at such times, we pray for the attracting power of his grace and for the strength of his Spirit. This desire is never expressed in vain; with kingly majesty and condescension, he brings us into confidential communion with him apart from the world; this communion is attended with fulness of joy and a holy exultation in his superior grace....At such times, in near communion

with Jesus, and with the affections in vigorous exercise, we feel our Lord amazingly precious....Jesus towers on high in majesty and grandeur; the citron tree is his emblem, illustrates his character as combining majesty with beauty, as affording shelter and protection to his people, as capable of satisfying the wants of the soul....Hence, when we come under the shadow of Christ, we have great delight, and find food for the hungering heart; his ways are ways of pleasantness and all his paths are peace.<sup>7</sup>

Love for God does not consist only in the love of obedience and reverence. It also consists in the giving of the heart to him in response to the declaration of his love. It means that we seek to see him as the chief delight, satisfaction and joy of our heart; that we prize his fellowship as more to be desired than any other experience on earth. He must have the central place in the affections. We were made for God and he alone is the true rest of our souls. No other human relationship, indeed nothing in this world can satisfy our hearts. And the call of the gospel is for men to abandon the pursuit of trying to find life in this world, to turn to God and, through Christ, to enter into his love. Thus we learn to love God supremely and to have him first in the heart so that he becomes our very life. The command of Scripture, that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, is both our highest duty and privilege. This is why the Lord Jesus says, 'He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me'(Mt. 10:37). In Revelation chapter 2 the exalted Christ addresses the Ephesian church and commends them for the labor, their doctrinal purity and their zeal. But he rebukes them for the fact that they have lost their first love. They were doing many right things, but they had failed to maintain close fellowship with their Lord. He had been displaced from the place of preeminence in their affections. These believers are warned that, if they do not repent, he will remove their candlestick. In other words, he will remove their testimony. They may continue to be busy, they may even have great knowledge of the Word of God, but there will be no light and no joy.

A first love relationship which is maintained through worship and communion is obviously of the highest priority to Jesus Christ. Communion with him is not something that can be incidental. It is primary to our calling as Christians and to our ministry. We need to remember the words of Jesus spoken to Martha to which we have already referred: only one thing is needful. Christ must come first in every area of our lives. He must be our life, our chief joy and the ultimate satisfaction of our hearts. We must be careful to watch over our hearts, lest anything else be allowed to displace him from that first place in our affections. We must set aside the necessary time on a consistent basis to be alone with him in prayer. Communion with him is our highest calling.

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<sup>7</sup> George Burrowes, *A Commentary on the Song of Solomon*, (Edinburgh:The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1973), pp. 105-106, 109, 111.

This whole concept runs counter to much modern day Christianity which majors on activities and programs and say very little about cultivating intimacy with Jesus Christ and the Father through worship and communion. But Christ's word to the Ephesian church should be a sobering word to the excessively busy evangelical church of our day which has lost true biblical priorities. J.I. Packer makes the following observation:

There is another reason, too, why the experiential reality of perceiving God is unfamiliar country today. The pace and preoccupations of urbanized, mechanized, collectivized, secularized modern life are such that any sort of inner life (apart from the existentialist *angst* of society's misfits and the casualties of the rat race) is very hard to maintain. To make prayer your life priority, as countless Christians of former days did outside as well as inside the monastery, is stupendously difficult in a world that runs you off your feet and will not let you slow down. And if you attempt it, you will certainly seem eccentric to your peers, for nowadays involvement in a stream of programmed activities is decidedly 'in,' and the older ideal of a quiet, contemplative life is just as decidedly 'out.' That there is widespread hunger today for more intimacy, warmth, and affection in our fellowship with God is clear from the current renewal of interest in the experiential writings of the Puritans and the contemplative tradition of prayer as expounded by men like Thomas Merton. But the concept of Christian life as sanctified rush and bustle still dominates, and as a result the experiential side of Christian holiness remains very much a closed book.<sup>8</sup>

Hebrews 10:19-22 explains that, on the basis of the work of Christ, the Christian has been given boldness of access into the holy place, that is, the place of God's abiding presence. We are exhorted to draw near to that place with a pure heart, in sincerity of faith. But to draw near means much more than simply coming aside from time to time to seek God. It means drawing near with a whole heart in faith, so that we dwell continually in God's presence in unbroken communion and fellowship.

'Draw near' is a term that suggests not only a confident, diligent seeking, but also great love and tenderness. Since all Christians have been brought near to God by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13), they are exhorted to draw near to the Father (Heb. 10:22). All the work necessary to give us access to the Father has been accomplished, all the barriers have been removed. It is now our responsibility as Christians to respond to God's initiative by drawing near to him.

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<sup>8</sup> J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984) pp. 74-75.

The first biblical occurrence of the term 'draw near' is in Genesis 48:10 in an incident where Jacob blesses Joseph's sons. There we are told that Joseph brought them near to his father, who embraced them and kissed them. Jacob showered them with love and tender affection. When the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) was produced, the same Greek word was used in Genesis 48:10 as is found in Hebrews 10:22, 'draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith'. That picture of Joseph's sons being brought so near to their grandfather that he could touch them beautifully portrays our fellowship with God.

When we draw near to God, we are assured that he draws near to us (Jn. 4:8), and we are in turn drawn into his embraces of love and affection, for we are his children and his beloved ones. If we will but respond in faith and love to the overtures of our Lord, get alone with him, seek his face and maintain our first-love relationship with him, fellowship with him will be increasingly prized. We will experience his love and he will truly satisfy our heart. It cannot be said too often that God desires our love and fellowship and that we experience his love, not because he needs anything from his creatures but purely and simply because he is love. He loves all his children. In the words of one writer:

God loves to be longed for, He loves to be sought, for He sought us Himself with such longing and love: He died for desire of us, marvellous thought! And He longs for us now to be with Him above.

Close fellowship with the living God is the calling and privilege of every Christian. In regeneration the Holy Spirit produces a filial spirit in the heart of every child of God so that his natural heart cry is 'Abba, Father!' He has come to know God. Christians are beloved of him, and he of them, and their deepest desire is to commune with him in love. This is their right, purchased at the high cost of the blood of Jesus. As Charles Spurgeon puts it:

'My Beloved,' this is a sweet name which our love takes liberty to apply to the Lord Jesus. His inexpressible beauty has won our affection, and we cannot help loving him. We are carried away by the torrent of his goodness, and have no longer the control of our affections. As long as we live we must and will love the altogether lovely One. Yes, he is, and must be to me, 'My Beloved.' But suppose, suppose for a moment that we loved and had no right to love.... The beloved was longed for, but could not be grasped.... Thank God, this is not the case with the soul enamoured of Christ Jesus; for he freely presents himself in the gospel as the object of our confidence and love. Though he be infinitely above us, yet he delights to be one with all his loving ones, and of his own will he gives himself to us. A polluted sinner may love the perfect Saviour, for there is no word in Scripture to

forbid....Suppose yet once again that, though we loved, and rightly loved, and actually possessed the beloved object, yet our affection was not returned. Alas, misery, to love and not be loved! Blessed be God, we can not only sing, 'My Beloved is Mine,' but also, 'I am his.' He values me, he delights in me, he loves me!....The truth that Jesus calls me his is enough to make a man dance and sing all the way between here and heaven. Realize the fact that we are dear to the heart of our incarnate God, and amid the sands of this wilderness, a fountain of overflowing joy is open before us.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1971), Volume 27, pp. 698-700.