

# Encountering the Presence of God

By Dale

So from childhood the woman felt her heart captivated by the love of Jesus and her neighbor. She joined a missionary order. She made a vow to give herself unreservedly to God. She felt called by Jesus to serve him radically in the poorest of the poor; to her spiritual director she privately revealed that Jesus appeared and spoke with her in a series of interior discourses and visions. For a couple of years she experienced a profound sense of union with Christ.

But soon after she began her work among the destitute and dying the visions ceased, and she began to feel a spiritual darkness that lasted until her death fifty years later. She felt lonely and abandoned. She felt terrible loss. She felt that God did not want her; even more darkly, she sometimes felt that perhaps God was not God, that perhaps God did not really exist. The woman was Mother Teresa of Calcutta and with her story we are introduced to the great difficulty of encountering the presence of God.

I think of my own story – how I was raised in church. And I was raised in church. When I was young my father preached for two congregations at once. So on a Sunday morning I would go to church and Sunday school twice, then church again Sunday evening, then Bible classes Tuesday evening in one church and Wednesday evening in the other. I went to a Christian high school. I went to a Christian college. I graduated with a degree in Theology from a Christian graduate school. I taught Bible in a Christian college for two years. Through all that time, I acquired a formidable set of ideas about God – proofs of his existence, a substantial grasp of systematic Christian doctrine, of everything from epistemology to eschatology. And a lot of it was exciting. It was a head-trip to know so much. But I did not know God.

I knew a lot about God, but I did not know God. And when I read of Jesus praying to his Father in John 17:3 that we might know God, I had no real clue what that meant. I don't doubt that I was better for knowing many of the things that I knew, but I knew little power in my life, little spiritual power, little transformation. I still felt an unaccountable emptiness.

Over time I broadened my horizons and began to sense in things I read and then people I met lives aglow with the Spirit of God, often from spiritual traditions very different from my own. From people I least expected it from, I learned of almost constant God-consciousness! I encountered people who sense the sacred all around them, who see the world as not sacred and mundane but as sacred and more sacred, who understand the interconnectivity of all that is, who know that the visible and invisible worlds are inseparably linked so that all things are “indwelt” to some extent, who perceive the whole range of life as being open to the Spirit.

It was this that Brother Lawrence discovered when he was working in the kitchens for the Carmelite Order in seventeenth-century Paris, cooking or repairing sandals. He devoted his life to living every moment in “the presence of God.” Whatever he was doing, whoever he was with, he focused on God directly and affectionately. He said he got tired of reading all the books about God, and so he decided to just start loving God. Every minute, even when he was busiest, he brought his mind back to God. For the first ten years it was hard, he said. But then it got easy. He left for us an amazing spiritual pamphlet which came to known as “The Practice of the Presence of God.”

Now no one says any of this is easy. The scale of God is so big. The thirteenth-century mystic Rumi once wrote,

“Until you’ve kept your eyes  
and your wanting still for fifty years,  
you don’t begin to cross over from confusion.”

For me, I’ve been at it for a while, but I feel I’m just beginning to get it. So I have good days and I have bad days. I can’t even really complain. The bad days are entirely my own doing. It all comes down to feeling connected to this Oneness that is the God revealed preeminently at Sinai, in the Sh’ma, and then in person in Jesus of Nazareth. On the good days I put God first early in the morning. I remember God often throughout the day. For short bursts of spiritual joy, when I’m really in the zone, every breath I take is God’s.

In the food I eat,  
the work I do,  
the people I meet,  
the struggles I face,  
the fun I have,  
I mindfully sense the Presence of God.

On bad days, I don’t. That’s it. That’s what it comes down to. That’s the difference between good days and bad.

– Dale Pauls