

## “THE MATTER OF ‘AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD’”

Sometime ago, I received in a letter a series of questions which triggered much thought in my mind and gave me incentive to explore and explain. The questions all had to do with “an intimate relationship with God.” I have received such questions in some form or another several times, but seldom (if ever) in such a close succession. I want to address some of them in this vignette.

“Does the Bible teach that we can have an intimate relationship with God?” My answer was, of course, *Yes*. It not only teaches that we *can* have an intimate relationship with God, it teaches that the only possible *real* relationship with God is the intimate relationship. This is why the New Birth is a “must” (John 3:3, 7), because without it, man has no relationship with God at all. Though the unsaved man lives out his entire life with God as his “frame of reference,” he has no relationship with God until he is born again. By means of the New Birth, man receives the very life of God within himself and *is thus brought into identification* (a more intimate relationship with *anything* or *anyone* is not possible) and *union* with God.

In John 17:3, Jesus said to His Father, “This is life eternal, that men may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom You have sent.” The word “know” is exactly the same word that is used in the Septuagint (Greek) Version of the Old Testament in such verses as Genesis 4:1, “Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain.” The word “knew” pictures in both cases the greatest possible intimacy, a physical intimacy in the case of Adam and Eve and a spiritual intimacy in the case of man with God. But the word in each case is an expression of the deepest possible intimacy. Yes, it is fully possible and absolutely necessary for one human being to have an intimate relationship with God. The old catechism question and answer said it well, “The chief end of man is to know God and to enjoy Him forever.” It might also be added that one of the chief purposes of *God* is *to know man and to enjoy him forever!*

“Where in the Bible can we find examples of human beings experiencing an intimate relationship with God?” My answer was, *On page after page*. I want to preface my explanation at this point with a few necessary remarks. Most people seem to have a terrible misunderstanding of “an intimate relationship with God.” They seem to think that such a relationship must always be perfect or there is no relationship at all. In my measured understanding, this *misunderstanding* is the product of very shallow thought. When human beings are involved in a (any) relationship, they always prevent its perfection because they are sinners, and the distortion of being sinners necessarily twists to some degree any relationships they may have. This is the reason man needs to be saved, and the reason salvation *is/must be* by *Grace*. Without grace, without God acting toward man in grace and mercy, there could be no salvation at all. This is what makes the message of Christianity a “Gospel”. It is the Best News any man can ever hear, know and experience. The Gospel tells us that, despite man’s helplessness and hopelessness in sin, God has graciously acted to open the way for man to come into intimacy with Himself. Later in this series of vignettes, it is my hope to show why the awareness of this

Gospel may be the most important factor in establishing a climate, an atmosphere for daily intimacy with God.

My relationship with my wife is certainly not perfect (after all, my wife is a *woman*—a quite admirable Divine arrangement, but one that throws into the relationship an often baffling “mix”—and she would firmly admit the same thing with regard to me, a *man*), but in spite of its imperfection, my relationship with my wife is intimate. We both are aware of the absence of perfection in our relationship (we have not yet found a way to surmount that difficulty), though we work constantly to improve our relationship. The mutual effort we put into the maintenance of our relationship creates a deeper understanding of each other, and creates in each of us a greater appreciation for each other. Any relationship requires careful and regular attention, and the same is true of one’s relationship with God. I work steadily to adjust my relationship with God, correcting any breakdown or distortion I am aware of, and maintaining the disciplines of the relationship as regularly as I can. The human imperfections in any relationship, properly understood and accepted (without excuse or extenuation), *still do not detract from intimacy in that relationship*. The Gospel of the grace of God assures me that every deficiency is covered—if I am intent on “leaning toward Him” as I take the successive steps of my daily pilgrimage.

Biblically, the spotlight of our attention might be thrown upon the stories of Enoch in Genesis 5:21-24, a story of remarkable intimacy with God. And that of Abraham in Genesis 15 through 21, as well as the story of Moses in the book of Exodus. Note in every case that the relationships of these believers with God were not perfect, but were always covered by the grace of God. Throughout the Bible, one person after another had a believing, struggling, singing, shouting, *protesting*, etc., relationship with God—and the protesting was often the greatest show of intimacy, because it showed how much God meant to the believer. Carnal, timid people tend to *ignore* God because of their own failures, but truly spiritual people engage in full, honest and real relationships with Him, and *especially so when they are aware of failure*. Some of the signs and symptoms of these relationship are positive, some are negative, but they are *intimate*. I have been engaging in a Quiet Time examination of the book of Job for nearly a year now. The thing that has most impressed me about Job is his open, honest, uninhibited exchange with God in the most intimate possible way, while always maintaining personal confidence that God has final dispatch of all matters and is open to our approach with any matter we want to bring to him. Job’s intimacy with God is the feature that allowed a major subtle change to occur in him (Job) in the last chapters of the incredible book that bears Job’s name. The same will happen with any human being who engages in regular intimacy with God. He will discover vistas of mystery and mercy, love and grace, disclosure and honesty, that he never would have known apart from such a relationship.

I do not mean to leave the impression that intimacy with God was most evident only in Old Testament characters. The lives of all of the Apostles of Christ were marked by intimate exchanges with Him—in conversation, in observation, in learning, in communion, etc. It was through the deepest scrutiny of personal intimacy that they arrived at their Spirit-taught conclusions about His identity, His integrity, His Purpose,

etc. It was this intimacy that established the “power base” of their lives and enabled them later to “turn the world upside down.” One has only to read the extensive accounts of John, Peter, Paul and others to see great examples of intimacy with God through Jesus Christ.

“How would you define an intimate relationship with God?” It is surely something of an oversimplification, but I would begin with the word Jesus used. Intimate relationship with God or with Jesus Christ can be defined as “abiding.” It would be valuable here to read and/or re-read John 15:1-8 and I John 2:28 as examples of the use of this word. Someone interpreted this as “centering” on Jesus Christ all day long every day. This is a good definition, even if it requires much amplification. This brings into the picture all the “means of grace”, all the supportive means of relationship-building and relationship maintenance, that are essential. The list includes the daily dependent study of the Word of God, turning the Bible into a territory of encounter and intimacy, not a mere object of academic study. Another means of relationship is open, realistic prayer, the “talking” and communing side of the relationship. Another is fellowship and worship with other believers who are engaged in an open, all-cylinders-active, relationship with God. Another is witnessing and soul-winning, an activity in which God “jumps rails” and joins you so that the intimacy of relationship is enhanced. The one setting I have often found to be very quickening of my own relationship with Him is the open, free, uninhibited small group of disciples in a disciple-making setting, expressing transparency, freedom, happiness and honesty together as expressions of their own free relationship with Jesus. *I have left many meetings of such disciples wonderfully aware of the near Presence of our Lord, more intimately aware of His Person and His Purpose, and more determined to know and serve Him better.* “While we were musing, the fire burned.”

Perhaps this vignette will “open the door” for the coming “Suggestions About “How to Improve Your Daily Quiet Time.”