

Aware of His Presence

Ezekiel 36:27

During the month of August we are going to continue to focus on seeking more of God and experiencing a deeper relationship with him. We've already talked about why that's important, how our soul's yearn for more of him, and how we need to incorporate several practices into our lives in order to seek him. As we continue in this stream I want to focus on two more aspects of our relationship with God that I think are vitally important for drawing near to him.

You might have a consistent quiet time and be practicing the things we've talked about in this series, and that's going to be a tremendous help, but you're still not going to be able to experience a deepening relationship with God unless you're living with an ongoing awareness of his presence and work in your life and living in such a way that he is pleased to draw near to you and work in you. If you go through your life never paying attention to the reality of the presence of God, or if you're living in a way that's contrary to who he is and what he's doing, you're not going to go deeper with him.

Do you live with an awareness of his presence and work in your life? Do you live in harmony with his character and will in a way that invites him to draw near to you and work in you and through you? That's what our focus is going to be this month. And this morning we're going to start with having an awareness of his presence.

How often do you think about God as you go throughout your day? How much interaction do you have with him? We are all conscious beings and live with an awareness of what's going on around us. God has given us eyes and ears, mouth and nose, and nerves with the ability to feel things. We use these senses to interact with the natural world around us and they allow us to be very aware of our surroundings.

But we also know that there are things going on around us that are beyond our ability to perceive – all kinds of things that evade our senses. There are sound waves, radio waves, smells, Wi-Fi signals, magnetic fields, microscopic bacteria, cosmic rays, radiation, infrared light, and so on. These things are

very real, but we can't perceive them. And since we can't perceive them, we rarely have an awareness of their presence.

I'm a deer hunter and one of the biggest factors you have to consider to be a successful hunter is the deer's ability to smell. If they smell you, they go on high alert and often turn around and run. Their noses are incredibly sensitive and powerful – far more than ours. They can smell all kinds of things that we can't. As a hunter, you have to take this very seriously. If you hunt based on your ability to smell, you're not going to see very many deer. You have to think about the deer's ability to smell. That means you always have to be aware of something that you can't perceive. And that has to affect the way you hunt.

If you're a deer hunter you're very aware of this reality because we've all been busted. And because of that we take all kinds of precautions. We take a shower with scent-free soap. We wash our hunting clothes in scent-free detergent. We spray our boots with scent-killing chemicals. We're careful about where we walk. We're careful to set up deer stands downwind of where the deer are likely to be. We pay attention to wind direction and thermals. If we get to our stand and the wind is circling toward where the deer are coming from, we go somewhere else. We've learned to hunt with an awareness of something we can't perceive. And if we don't, we're not going to experience success.

If you want to grow deeper in your relationship with God, you have to learn to live with an awareness of something you can't naturally perceive. God is spirit. You can't see him, hear him, smell him, taste him, or touch him. And yet he is very real, more real than anything else that exists. And if you want to grow deeper in your relationship with him, you're going to have to learn to live with an awareness of him, his presence in your life, and the work he is doing in, around, and through you. If you don't, you're not going to experience much of him.

So how do we live with that awareness? We first need to understand what reality is. It's the same with deer hunting. In the same way you have to understand the reality of the deer's ability to smell, you have to understand the reality of God's presence in our lives. And there are two primary ways to do that.

First of all, we can understand that reality through observation and experience. That's what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus in John 3:8 when he was describing what it means to be born again: *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."* In other words, even though the Spirit of God is invisible like the wind, you can see and experience the effects of his presence in your life. If you are born of the Spirit and God is present in you, things are going to change. You are not the same person you used to be. You have different desires, different sense of what's right and wrong, different behaviors, goals, and so on. These experiences point to the reality of God's presence in your life.

Paul wrote about this as he observed what happened to the new believers in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 he writes: *"For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."* Stuff started to happen when the gospel was preached and Paul could see it was because God was present and working in their lives.

When you go deer hunting and you see the deer approaching and all of sudden they stiffen up, look in your direction, and put their nose in the air, you experience the reality that they can smell you even if you can't smell yourself.

As I've walked with God for over 30 years, I have experienced many things that confirm the reality of his presence in my life – there's been conviction of sin, the desire to please him, a deep, deep love for him, the uprooting of deeply embedded sin, a desire for his glory, overwhelming joy and passion for him, specific stories of his protection and provision...

You can come to understand the reality of God's presence in your life through your observations and experiences, and that is wonderful and important. But I'm so glad that's not all there is because there are a lot of things that happen that are really confusing at first, and there are a lot of times when I feel like he's distant or gone. So what am I supposed to do with that? How do I make sense of those experiences?

Well, God doesn't just reveal himself to us through our observations and experiences, in fact, he much more clearly reveals himself to us through his Word. It's in the writings of Scripture that we most clearly and accurately come to understand the reality of God's presence in our lives.

When it comes to his presence in our lives, Scripture teaches us many things. First, it teaches us that one of the central components of God's plan for our redemption in Christ includes him actually putting his Spirit within us. We read about this in the prophecy of Ezekiel 36:25-27. God told Ezekiel: *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."*

This would be a radical change from what Old Testament believers experienced. For them, God's Spirit dwelt in the tabernacle or temple and would only come upon individuals at times because of their office or role, but it wasn't a permanent indwelling like we see in this prophecy. After the coming of the Messiah, God would actually put his Spirit within his people. Jesus told his disciples about this awesome privilege in John 14:16-17: *"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."*

The Spirit of God dwelling within the worshipper of God is the reality that we're living in today. When you receive a new heart and are cleansed from your sins through faith in Christ, the barrier between you and God is removed and he sends his Spirit to dwell within you. From the moment of your conversion, the Holy Spirit has been living in you. Eph. 1:13 says, *"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."* Not only were you forgiven and made part of the body of Christ, but the Holy Spirit entered into you. 1 Cor. 12:13 says, *"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."*

The Spirit of God is now in you. This is a profound spiritual reality that transformed the lives and perspectives of the NT authors. And they wrote about it all the time. Here are a few of the verses that confirm this reality:

- Romans 8:9-11: “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.
- 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?”
- 1 Corinthians 6:19: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?”
- Galatians 4:6 “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”
- Eph. 3:16 “that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being”
- Colossians 1:27: “To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”
- James 4:5 “Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?

God’s Spirit is in you. You and I are temples and together we are the new covenant temple that God dwells in. The reason you can observe and experience God’s presence in your life is because he is actually in you. And he doesn’t come and go. He’s always there. There are things we do that affect the degree to which he works in us and we experience him and that’s what we’re going to talk about in future weeks, but he doesn’t come and go. He isn’t distant. He’s always in you, always present, always available and always working.

I know this isn’t a new concept for most of us, but maybe it’s hitting you in a new way this morning. Is this a reality that you actually live by? Do you go throughout your day with the awareness that God is actually living in you and

present with you at every moment? Or is it more like he's way up there in heaven somewhere looking down upon you from afar, and maybe not even paying that much attention? If we are going to experience a deepening relationship with God, this is a reality we need to learn to live by.

As much as I believe this to be true, I have found it very difficult to live this way. I don't know if it's harder or easier for me than it is for you, but it is not easy for me. The way that I'm wired allows me to be able to focus and concentrate very intently on whatever is before me. I have a very stereotypical "one-track mind." It comes in handy when it comes to writing sermons, or getting projects done, or having a meaningful one-on-one conversation. When I'm meeting with someone, I'm all in. When I'm working on something, I'm really focused.

But when it comes to being aware of God's presence in my life all throughout the day, I find it very difficult. Having a one-track mind also means that for me, when something is out of sight, it's also out of mind. I'm aware of God's presence during prayer and quiet time when I'm intentionally focused on him. But when I move on to something else, I can easily forget. I don't naturally think about him or interact or pray...

Some of you are probably like me; for some of you it might be much easier. If this is something you struggle with, I want to share some things that I'm trying to do...

First of all, whenever I wake up, whether that's 3:00 in the morning or when my alarm goes off at 6:00, I'm trying to train my mind to acknowledge God's presence before I do anything else. I started doing this involuntarily because I would keep waking up at about 3am and not be able to go back to sleep for about 2 hours. After many nights of this on different occasions and trying various things unsuccessfully, to try to fall back asleep, the thought finally occurred to me, "Maybe I should pray." So I would talk to God and confess that when it came to sleep, I couldn't make it happen. "I depend completely on you. Please bless me with the gift of sleep." And what I've experienced so far, is that more often than not, he puts me back to sleep – which I really appreciate. So I'm trying to make it a habit. And since I don't know what time

of night it is when I wake up, I've ended up acknowledging him whenever I wake up.

The next thing I do is my normal routine is to start my day with that 30-60 minute quiet time that I've been encouraging all of you to do. If I start my day by meditating on God's Word, prayer, worship, and journaling, I'm much more likely to think about God later on than if I don't. If I hit the ground running with all the things I need to do, my mind will never stop running and never acknowledge God's presence in my life. So I start by spending time with him.

I wish I could say that makes me think about him the rest of the day, but usually it doesn't. Once I get going, I'm thinking about whatever I'm doing. And that's not bad, it's just that I want to experience the reality of God's presence in my life and all the blessings that come from that – peace, a calm spirit, self-control, the fruit of the Spirit, joy, contentment, loved... I want to live according to his values and priorities and be mindful of his mission that I'm on. And if I never think about him, I just don't think about those things.

So, a few things I try to do throughout the day:

- 1) When something happens and I can see God's work in my life or someone else's, I try to just stop and acknowledge his goodness and thank him for what he's doing.
- 2) Since I'm a pastor and have the privilege of spending many hours studying Scripture, when he opens up my eyes and heart to something new in the Bible, I try to just stop and praise and worship him right there.
- 3) One of the best reminders for me of God's presence is the life and beauty of his creation. In recent years I've taken a major interest in growing things – trees, native plants, food plots – and I find it fascinating to see how fast and big things grow in just a few short weeks. I see trees that I've planted grow 3 feet in one growing season. I see native trees and plants grow even faster – poplar trees can go from nothing to a substantial tree in just a couple years in the right conditions. I see certain types of sorghum I've planted grow 15 feet in one year! All these things amaze me and when I see them I make it my habit to praise the Lord because he's the Creator and the one who makes all things grow.
- 4) More recently I've been learning to acknowledge God when bad things happen, which seem to happen quite a bit lately. Cars breaking down,

machines not working, kids getting hurt. These are the things that naturally bring up fear, anxiety, and complaint. But I've begun to see how God provides in every situation – in really unbelievable ways. He just puts things in place to take care of us, so I'm trying to acknowledge him and express my trust and reliance upon him.

- 5) I listen to Christian radio in my car. I've been doing this for years and God truly does use the music at times to remind me of him and minister to me.

Scripture teaches us to train our minds on what to think about: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:2-3)

"Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:13) "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Php. 4:8)

If I can train myself to be aware of a deer's sense of smell and make changes in how I hunt because of a reality I can't perceive, I can train myself to be more aware of God's presence in my life and make changes to how I live based on that reality.

And that's what we need to do if we're going to go deeper with God. We need to be aware of his presence and the reality that he is with us wherever we go. And it's because of that reality and this power and work in our lives that we will be able to grow in this way.