

# EXPERIENCING FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

How the Wilderness  
Draws Us to His Presence



FAITH EURY CHO

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Draws Us to His Presence

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WATERBROOK

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook,  
an imprint of Random House, a division of  
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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-593-44557-0  
Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-44558-7

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the  
Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

[waterbrookmultnomah.com](http://waterbrookmultnomah.com)

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

First Edition

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To the Holy Spirit, my everything.  
You are the reason I live, and these words exist because of You.  
Thank You for Your friendship  
and for loving me to life.

A decorative title card featuring the word "FOREWORD" in a bold, sans-serif font, centered within a thin-lined rectangular frame that has rounded ends.

## FOREWORD

It was March 2020, and the world had shut down. There was so much fear, confusion, and anxiety about the future, and I was giving my first pandemic all-staff talk in what became affectionately known as the Upper Zoom Room. Scrolling through, I looked at our global team—all 160 people from 19 offices in 15 nations. The team was full of young individuals who had been working tirelessly to abolish slavery everywhere forever. They were some of the most gifted, talented, passionate, committed, and hardworking people I knew. Still, I could hear their concerns:

*“How can we reach vulnerable people, rescue survivors, and restore the victims of human trafficking if we are in lockdown?”*

## FOREWORD

*“How will traffickers be stopped?”*

*“What about our funding?”*

*“How will we pay for the programs to keep the mission moving forward?”*

Our frontline operations ceased overnight. We had goals for the year that now seemed unattainable. Like everyone else on the planet, we had no warning, no control, and no idea what would happen next. But we did still have the only thing we really needed—we had the Presence of God.

I told our team that although everything had changed externally, nothing had changed internally, because we always had been a ministry led by the Presence of God. My husband, Nick, and I were in no way shaken by what was happening because we knew the same God that had led us this far would continue to lead us forward.

I read Zechariah 9:12 to them: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double” (ESV). I reminded them that our stronghold is Jesus, because He is our hope, which is an anchor for our soul, and that we had to become prisoners of hope once again. This was an opportunity for everyone to see that God would do what only He could do and that it had always been Him at the helm.

So many of them had joined the mission once we had a large global footprint, not really understanding that it was not marketing, budgeting, planning, staffing, technology, organizational systems, or structures that had brought us to where we were—as good and necessary as those things are. It always was God and always would be Him. We did not need to lose our peace or joy or hope, because even in lockdown, we had the one thing that was the most precious—Jesus.

## FOREWORD

Nick and I were saved and called long before there was the internet or social media. From the outset, we learned the power of seeking the face of God in a secret place, in order to hear the voice of God and to determine His will and direction for our lives, marriage, family, and ministry. Our ministry has grown, developed, and become more complex, but one thing has never changed, and it is the distinctive that has always guided us—the Presence of God. It is God’s Presence that has sustained me through periods of trauma, grief, loss, betrayal, disappointment, failure, warfare, and success.

It is only through intimacy with God that we learn to trust and obey Him, to do what He has called us to do, and to be whom He has called us to be. Those who know their God do great things (Daniel 11:32).

This book contains the most important message this generation needs to hear. Faith Eury Cho is an incredible woman of God and lives and breathes this message. Listen to her and pursue Jesus with everything you have. He will satisfy your deepest needs and longings. He alone is worthy of all honor and glory. He is the goal. He is the prize.

Grace and peace.

CHRISTINE CAINE  
Founder A21 and Propel Women



**CONTENTS**

<i>Introduction</i>	000
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**PART 1:**  
**THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS**

CHAPTER 1: Created for His Presence	000
CHAPTER 2: The Mystery of His Presence	000
CHAPTER 3: The Sufficiency of His Presence	000

**PART 2:**  
**DRAWING CLOSER TO GOD'S PRESENCE**

CHAPTER 4: Acknowledging His Presence	000
CHAPTER 5: Accessing His Presence	000
CHAPTER 6: A Presence-Centered Life	000

**PART 3:**  
**LIVING AS A FRIEND OF GOD**

CHAPTER 7: Transformed by His Presence	000
CHAPTER 8: Propelled by His Presence	000

## CONTENTS

<i>Closing</i>	000
<i>Author's Note</i>	000
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	000



## INTRODUCTION

There is no sweeter manner of living in the world than continuous communion with God.

—BROTHER LAWRENCE, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

“**W**hat is the point?”

This was my desperate search for meaning in the hospital after I gave birth to my second child. Just hours before, my husband and I had walked into the labor-and-delivery wing, fully confident that all would be well. We had gone through the childbirth routine before, so we were already prepared to celebrate with our newborn son in our arms. Labor came a month earlier than expected, but we had no concerns—just excitement. We were joyfully confident that God was with us, having also the prayers of loved ones who waited in anticipation. There were smiles and laughter in the delivery room.

Yet when my son arrived, trauma crashed the party. The room immediately noticed the concerning shades of purple and blue on his face, so the nurses whisked him away for tests.

## INTRODUCTION

I was left to recover in silent confusion. My mind scrambled to process what was happening. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to hold my son until twenty-four hours later, and even then, it wasn't without the tubes, wires, and beeping machines that were required to keep him stable in the intensive care unit. Disappointment clouded my spirit, and I asked, "Why would God allow this?" What was the purpose of this darkness?

I was a firm believer that God can heal, and in my several years as a pastor, I had witnessed and experienced God doing the inexplicable countless times. So, there I was, in my fragile post-delivery state, begging Jesus to do what I knew would be easy for Him.

"Lord, please heal my son."

I thought it was a reasonable ask. Yet not long after this prayer, a nurse walked into the recovery room to deliver more disappointing news. The test results weren't promising, and they needed to increase his oxygen to support his premature lungs. Under the pressure of my dismay, sorrow began mutating into frustration. Where was God? Was my plea not heard? Did my years of serving the church not merit this one favor?

I continued to plead, "Lord, please heal my son."

What was supposed to be a celebration with friends and family in the hospital turned into days of weeping in a dark room with my cellphone endlessly buzzing with sad-face emojis and well wishes. Each day, doctors and nurses came in to explain why more blood work needed to be done and why taking him home wasn't an option. Their matter-of-fact explanations were void of compassion, just as the room felt like it was void of God. Eventually, my desperate prayers slowed to a resentful silence. I had called, but He refused to answer—or so it felt. Perhaps my screaming silence would be heard instead.

At this point in my life, I had been a preacher of the good

## INTRODUCTION

news for years, but I discovered how a moment that strikes just the right nerve can unveil the fragility of one's trust in God. Grief took away every religious propriety I had and reduced me to an angry mother holding a grudge against God in her hospital bed. Although I was an experienced Bible teacher, my understanding of His Presence wasn't robust enough to keep my hope breathing in this hour. Even when friends came by to surround my husband and me with fervent intercession, I merely stared at the foot of the bed as my hot tears flowed in protest. What makes sense in the pews doesn't always seem to add up when you are facing the ugly realities of life. I was ready to forfeit. The sorrow was so deep and the fear was so demanding that I could only conclude that God had abandoned me. It didn't feel as if He was there, and even if He was, it wasn't enough for me. What if faith bears no visible results during times of despair? What, then, is the point of faith?

Questions like these demand answers because it is a weary soul who asks them, a soul who aches for what is true and real. Anyone asking these questions is increasingly intolerant of religious fluff and niceties, no longer willing to settle for inspirational words but rather aching for authentic change. You don't want a catchy sermon quote when you are dealing with tragedy. You need supernatural help when you are wrestling with anxiety. After you have endured repeated letdowns, one after the other, positive thinking and good strategy feel desperately futile—like holding an umbrella in the face of a tsunami. When you are in this rut in your faith journey, you swiftly swipe away the inspirational social media content on your phone because it doesn't encourage you anymore. You may have attempted to change your attitude, listened to motivational podcasts, and even gone to that conference that promised to take you to new levels, but your life still feels like an endless cycle of the same

## INTRODUCTION

issues and habits. When your heart is bleeding and your back is bent under a heavy burden, words are just not enough. You need more.

One day turned to three very quickly, and I was told that I wouldn't be able to take my baby boy home from the hospital, that I would have to leave him in the care of nurses and machines while I drove away. My heart could hardly bear it. I needed to storm into the throne room of God. I had a bone to pick with the King. Yet this pent-up angst was dressed in a hospital gown and still vulnerably healing, so I did the only thing I could do—opened my journal and held my pen, although I had no words to write. I had nothing to say, no song to sing. Still, I felt a voice say to me, "Give thanks."

Even though I am a pastor and this was supposed to be my moment to demonstrate great faith in hard times, I am ashamed to say I scoffed at the idea. Being a good example of Christian faith was basically my career, but I had nothing good to say that night. Give thanks for what? My newborn child was going through a mysterious health crisis and needed a machine to breathe! I couldn't stand the injustice of it all.

I felt the voice again. "Give thanks."

So, I reluctantly mustered up the strength to write an obligatory list.

*Thank You for the nurses.*

*Thank You for the clean hospital room.*

*Thank You for lunch. It was sushi—my favorite.*

Eventually, this obligatory list became more elaborative as I paused to appreciate the friends and family who were contending for us in prayer.

## INTRODUCTION

*Thank You for the kindness of those who are praying  
for us right now.*

*Thank You for this time spent with my husband. It  
has been meaningful, and we've grown much  
closer.*

What started off as half-hearted list-making turned into an immersive meditation on all the good that was for me and with me. My list of thanksgiving that I thought was for Jesus was actually His love letter to me. Forty more minutes of writing passed, and my heart thawed. It was as if wind began filling the sails of a ship becalmed on glassy water. An unraveling began as I started to recognize the signs of God's steadfast care all over my life. Oh, how He loved me! How kind He had been all this time! I became profoundly aware that, right there in that hospital room, I was before the blazing, shining Presence of Jesus. I used to think that choosing to be grateful in the midst of hardship was just choosing to be blind to one's problems. In this moment, however, I realized that it is choosing to recognize God's fingerprints on our lives.

That night, not only did I know that He was with me, but I also felt it. It felt like a firm, warm hug, the kind that makes you feel safe and seen. During my journaling, another nurse walked in to tell me that my son wasn't doing any better. Regardless, I kept scribbling the evidence that proved God was still with me because my heart was immersed in love.

It was enough.

My purpose in that moment was to know Him—not in theory but in friendship. Jesus is the point. He is the reward. Knowing His Presence is the purpose of the wilderness. This revelation was God's gift to me in that dark hospital room. An-

## INTRODUCTION

other gift came a week later when I was able to take my healthy, growing boy out of the NICU and to his own crib at home.

### The Wilderness

This hospital experience with my son later allowed me to resonate with the pain of those who walk out of churches or change religions and shut the door on Jesus. Truth is, from now until heaven, the harsh realities of life will constantly challenge our belief in Him. You will fail, and sometimes other people will fail you. Plans will fall through. Doors will close with no indication of opening again. Circumstances won't budge in your favor, and certain people may never change. You may be in a waiting season or, perhaps, a crushing season. If this remains your reality long enough, then you arrive at the same juncture that I came to while my child was on a breathing machine—disillusioned with a burned-out faith. This is the wilderness of the soul.

For the Israelites, the wilderness was an eleven-day trip that took forty years.\* The Hebrew people abandoned the rule of Pharaoh in Egypt to trust the rule of Yahweh, their God, hoping for a better lot in life. The miracles of God and the leadership of Moses interrupted years of oppression, and the Israelites left all they had ever known to cross the Red Sea to freedom. However, this wasn't a convenient, predictable journey that quickly led them to greener pastures. Instead, they followed Yahweh into the unknown, although at that time the uncertainty was eclipsed by the bright hope of the Promised Land ahead, “a land flowing with milk and honey.”†

The wilderness is a familiar scene in the Bible, for it was a

\* Deuteronomy 1:2.

† Exodus 3:8.

## INTRODUCTION

place where many of God’s servants reached the end of themselves and encountered God. Hagar cried there while she helplessly waited to lose her son to thirst.\* Elijah prayed for death there while fear exhausted him.† The Israelites’ wilderness journey wasn’t a hike along a scenic trail with a sunset that you could capture for Instagram. It wasn’t a place of respite with lovely views and adventure. No, for the Hebrews in the Mediterranean Middle East, the wilderness was a horrific wasteland that offered little chance for survival. It was an inhospitable region with bullying heat and desolate terrain. It would be hard to nurture a dream there and even harder to find a purpose.

The wilderness of the soul is no different. When in it, you travel across the wasteland of discouragement. Very few, if any, will fully understand your journey, which is why loneliness becomes an unwelcome friend there. You become familiar with pain rather than progress, confusion rather than vision. Some say pain makes you stronger, but this is a senseless platitude for someone who is sapped of strength while wandering. You might be naturally sure of yourself, but in the wilderness, you are met with destabilizing uncertainty. To make it worse, you aren’t sure when it will end.

After reading about the rest of the Israelites’ wilderness wandering in the Old Testament, you would know that many travelers, including Moses, never made it to the Promised Land. Consequently, you could consider this journey pointless because it wasn’t a victory march toward the blessed end. Instead, it was a drawn-out journey filled with twists and turns—and much fear and failure.

So, what was the wilderness for? What was the point?

The wilderness exposed Israel’s rebellious pride and disobe-

\* Genesis 21:14–19.

† 1 Kings 19:1–9.

## INTRODUCTION

dience, but if that was the point of it all, then they followed God out of slavery only to die in shame. Furthermore, if the wilderness was just the means to get to a better place, then it was an inefficient journey, one that must have felt like forty years of purgatory until God finally considered them worthy of the reward. The sojourning would have been a waste for an entire generation who believed the hopelessness of the wilderness more than the promises of God, then died in unbelief before they could set foot on the promise fulfilled. If this were the actual purpose of our difficult seasons—either to be destroyed by our own depravity or to earn our way into greener pastures—then remaining in slavery might be the better option.

Beloved wanderer, what if the ultimate purpose of the wilderness isn't just to be better or to get somewhere? Although hardship can prepare us for the fulfillment of His promises, the only reason the wilderness ultimately makes sense is the same reason Christianity makes sense. Israel didn't leave Egypt just to arrive at a desired destination and wait for eternity stably and happily. And although sanctification is indeed a by-product of walking through a desert season, the pain of the journey isn't merely the cruel means to that end. Rather, the purpose of the wilderness is to know the Presence of God, and an intimate, authentic, and passionate friendship with Him is the reward.

## A French Monk and an Asian American Girl

Admittedly, at one point in my life, if someone had told me that to befriend Jesus was the ultimate reward of my faith, I would have been underwhelmed. Because I am writing on the Presence of God, you may think that it came naturally to me or that I have always been on some heavenly cloud nine with Jesus. False. I was the one who would watch church members

## INTRODUCTION

cry as they worshipped while I wondered why God wasn't having the same effect on me. I didn't always know how to enjoy prayer, and I thought He directly spoke only with special, spiritual people.

I wanted this to change, but it seemed that every sermon or book I turned to ended with some rendition of "Pray a lot" or "Just go to Jesus." What I really needed was someone to usher me into His Presence and help me navigate the mysteries of getting to know Him personally. A pivotal part of my spiritual journey was when I ran into a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. I found it in a bookstore, and it was small—really, really small. Honestly, I bought it because of that very reason. A few minutes into the book, I realized it was written by a monk who enjoyed a deep friendship with Jesus. His pleasure and excitement jumped through the pages. I wanted what he had. Brother Lawrence seemed to have reached the Mount Everest of spirituality, yet his maxims were profoundly simple—almost child-like. They were simple truths applied to the simple life of a Carmelite monk from the seventeenth century. I didn't know it then, but the Lord had commissioned me into my own lifelong journey of befriending His Presence in today's increasingly complicated times. This book is the fruit of that journey so far. I hope it helps you fulfill your life's purpose. Although you can aspire to easier and better days, your purpose isn't found there. No matter what terrain of life you tread, your reason for existence is to access the gift of the gospel, which is to know His Presence—intimately, authentically, and passionately. This gift is yours to access today; it is also yours to access in the wilderness. It wasn't just for a monk living in the seventeenth century; it was also for a millennial Asian American girl living in the twenty-first century. *And it is also for you.*

## PART 1

The Purpose of the  
Wilderness



CHAPTER 1

## Created for His Presence

All that I sought, all this world relentlessly pursues in all the wrong places, is found in the presence of God.

—J. RYAN LISTER, *The Presence of God*

“**T**he Presence” or “the Presence of God” frequently comes up in Christian jargon and church-speak, but we often miss its meaning. When sung during worship, it can inadvertently sound as if He is an energy force that we must woo to accrue. When we misbehave or forget Him for an elongated period, it can feel as though He is a commodity that we must rush to regain. Throughout Scripture, the Presence of God has so many names and forms. Is He a burning bush like the one that appeared to Moses?\* Is His Presence like the cloud that led Israel through the wilderness?<sup>†</sup> Is He a gentle whisper like Elijah heard from a cave?<sup>‡</sup> The matter of His omnipresence further

\* Exodus 3:4.

† Exodus 14:19.

‡ 1 Kings 19:12.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

complicates the search. If God is everywhere, are we not always in His Presence? To seek Him, then, sounds as redundant and unnecessary as seeking air. However, to Brother Lawrence, our dear Carmelite lay brother, the Presence of God was a friend to know intimately, and doing so was “the life and nourishment of the soul.”\*

Indeed, God is everywhere, in the galaxies above and the waves below. As time and space exist, so does God. But this boundless Creator also desires to be present with His people. The Presence of God can be encountered and known by humankind. The God who is holy and infinite chooses to be relationally accessible to His creation. He is entitled to remain aloof from all that is beneath Him, and He could do so because He is fully self-sufficient. However, from Genesis to Revelation, we see a God who is constantly speaking, helping, comforting, defending, and providing. He is God, but He chose to be Emmanuel—God with us.

When we refer to the Presence of God, we aren’t speaking of an emotionally charged moment or “a vibe.” It isn’t a religious achievement reserved for monks, nor is it a feel-good saying that you sprinkle onto your church traditions. The Presence of God is God Himself, including His character, emotions, and thoughts. The Presence used to dwell with His people through the means of a covenant arrangement, with priests as intermediaries and amid the shadows of a tabernacle. Later, He became the God who dwelled among His people in a temple. Eventually, He came as a man named Jesus. And today those who say yes to Jesus also say yes to an everlasting friendship with the Holy Spirit, who remains with them through thick and thin.

\* Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, Pa.: Whitaker House, 1982), 67.

### *Created for His Presence*

When we choose to follow Jesus, we are offered the gift of experiencing the treasures of the gospel. Just as beavers are designed to build and birds are meant to fly, we are created to know our Creator—intimately, authentically, and passionately. Communing with Him breathes life into our bones. To know Him is to know peace. He is the wisdom above all logic. He is the pleasure above all earthly satisfaction. He is the love that makes our lives make sense. Thanks to what Jesus has done, this gift is accessible to us who accept Him as Lord and Savior.

I have sat for hours with a dear friend who has always celebrated my God-victories and cheered me on in everything I do for the church. I love and respect her deeply. Yet when it comes to knowing Jesus for herself, she always kindly declines. She doesn't like the thought of devoting her life to Christ, and she prefers to connect with her idea of the Divine through nature, rituals, meditation, etc. Seeking truth through her own means feels more freeing than submitting to the Truth. She looks for signs in order to feel close to God. Yet that desire to be linked to the Endless and Eternal doesn't come from within but rather is given to us by our Creator. This is why the gospel is such good news. God desires to connect with us intentionally and personally. What Jesus accomplished on the cross provided a doorway for you to have direct access to Him, to hear His words and know Him for yourself. His Presence is His intentional dwelling with us. As humans, we were never meant to look to the universe for signs and to hope for its random mercies. That isn't what we were created for. God doesn't offer us shadows of the real thing. He offers us Himself.

You were created to know God. This isn't merely cerebral knowledge such as acquiring fancy theological concepts and biblical information. It also isn't superficial knowledge like knowing a celebrity or a politician from afar. Rather, knowing

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

the Presence of God is an intimate connection that isn't of this world. It isn't magical, but it is indeed mystical. To know God is to know what He means before you exchange a word. To know Him is to see Him with your heart. It isn't the kind of knowing that is shared by colleagues or neighbors. To know Jesus is to experience a deep and consistent closeness. Nothing can fulfill you more. This is God's intentional design for your being. To recognize this design and prioritize your life accordingly allows you to enjoy the fruit of faith no matter how desolate the wilderness you face.

Your very existence is meant to be fueled by a friendship with God. This friendship can give your spirit more energy than the freshest cup of coffee. It can be where you find the inspiration to create, the direction to make decisions, and the wisdom to build a life on this earth. To experience Him should be to know beauty. To hear from Him should be your soul's food. To obey Him should be a sustaining joy. He is infinite, so to know Him is an endless unveiling of riches. A relationship with Him can charge your every inhale and exhale. This is how we were created. This is how it was meant to be. This should be our only fuel, but that all too often isn't the case. Let's explore what fuels us.

### Recognizing the Wrong Fuel

I once accidentally put diesel in my car. Yep, you got that right. I put the sort of fuel that belongs in semitrucks and boats into my brand-new little Honda Accord coupe. I was a sixteen-year-old first-time driver who had no clue there was even a difference between gasoline and diesel. All I knew was that the button was red and it was cheaper (at that time)! It seemed like a no-brainer until I started to drive out of the gas station. It

took about a minute for my car to slow down and emit some suspicious clicking sounds. Meanwhile, I kept pumping the accelerator, my way of denying what was going on and trying to push through. It should come as no surprise that I failed to push through. Thankfully, I was able to roll my way into a parking lot before my car came to a dead stop. It wasn't long before the mechanic gathered the data and figured out that my car was running on the wrong fuel.

I had put the wrong fuel in my car without realizing it, and you may be doing the same with your life. Any motivation or purpose that isn't centered on knowing His Presence is like diesel to a Honda Accord. Counterfeits or watered-down versions of the real thing are easy to reach, and it may even seem fine while you are filling up. However, these motivations will eventually fail us. For your life to run optimally and according to its God-given design, your friendship with God must be your highest priority and the center of all that you do.

Taking an honest inventory of your motivations will reveal the fuel that is running your life. This requires a bit of close inspection because some motivations aren't immediately visible and many are reasonable from a worldly perspective. Consider the things that influence your choices. What priorities, hopes, and desires get you through the day? Could they be any of the following?

- your ambition for a stable and blessed life
- your obligation to take care of your family
- your need to belong to someone or to a group of people
- your aspiration to be seen and acknowledged
- your desire to accomplish something worthwhile
- your longing to be worthy

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

Motivations that aren't centered on His Presence can also be uncovered by looking at our fears. An all-consuming fear of failure can reveal a desperation to achieve. Anxieties over changes and transitions can reveal the need for control. A fear of abandonment might reveal our compulsive need to be accepted and committed to. Fears fool us into believing it is wise to live for anything other than a friendship with His Presence.

Our church and faith lives aren't necessarily free of counterfeit fuels. But counterfeit fuels are the hardest to recognize in these spheres because some motivations are noble and righteous. Attending church, volunteering, and doing the right things are usually inspired by decent intentions, whether to be a helpful member of the community or to be a good person. These are virtuous goals to have, and they aren't a problem in and of themselves. The problem arises when we spend years in the church feeling as if we are abiding in the Lord simply because we are driven by such virtuous goals. As a result, we unknowingly trade a friendship with Jesus for sanctification and service.

Good works, noble character, and wisdom are meant to be the result of our intimacy with His Presence. They aren't the way to achieve that intimacy. Before living to be good or to do good, we must live to know Him. Changing for the better, accruing more Christian knowledge, or giving back to the community are all biblical desires. Yet, these, too, cannot be our fuel. Unless we pursue a genuine friendship with God first, trying to do these things doesn't give us life, and at some point, we will find ourselves like my unfortunate Honda Accord coupe. We will burn out. This is because our Creator didn't design us to function this way.

## A History of Humanity's Friendship with God

We were built to function from a friendship with God. At the start of their existence, Adam and Eve received an assignment from Him: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”\* This was no small task for those who only recently started breathing! And yet, from the very beginning, humankind was endowed with a calling to be fruitful, increase, subdue, and rule. Talk about ambition and a plan! God had big hopes and dreams for Adam and Eve. He has always been a big-picture sort, a visionary. With a calling like that, the most sensible thing would be to roll up your sleeves and get right to work. However, as we know, that wasn’t the way it transpired.

The day after God gave them the commission, they rested.<sup>†</sup> This is seemingly the opposite of what humankind was meant to do. Where was the forward momentum? Where was the productivity? Instead, their first step toward destiny was spending a day doing nothing productive. It was a holy day, set apart for humankind to be aligned with God. Despite appearances, this didn’t contradict their calling nor divert them from their mission. Although it may look like a pause in Adam and Eve’s pursuit of their purpose, it was the very fulfillment of that purpose.

We were created to know Him personally and intimately, and our God-given calling is meant to overflow from this very purpose. Adam and Eve had such direct access to God that seeing Him walk through the garden in the cool of the day was no

\* Genesis 1:28.

† Genesis 2:2.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

strange thing.\* That access was the well from which Adam and Eve drew their inspiration and strength to expand the garden and grow in dominion. When they needed a plan, God guided and instructed. When they needed the means to carry out their plan, God provided it. Their commission was enabled by one thing—a friendship with God. They didn’t strain for survival, nor did they strive for progress. Everything was the fruit of knowing His heart, daily hearing His voice, and heeding His counsel.

Technically, every creature was in close proximity to God in that garden, for He walked among them too. But God created Adam and Eve to be His friends, which gave them authority over the garden and made it possible for them to be fruitful in it. No other living creature had the agency to discover His will and collaborate with Him each day. Adam and Eve weren’t like other created beings; they had the choice to ignore or acknowledge God, just as we do today. When humankind communed with their Maker, a garden grew and spread. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve broke the perfect communion they had with the Father, and ever since, we have been living in a fallen world where humans are still trying to expand their gardens—but without the Presence of God.

Thankfully, our destiny is still to do great things in friendship with God. What is thrilling about the Father’s ingenious way of loving us and restoring all things is that, thousands of years after the garden, Jesus gave another commission to His friends:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the

\* Genesis 3:8.

### *Created for His Presence*

Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.\*

Here is another call to God's children to be fruitful, another commission to spread His love and glory over the earth. It is essentially a chance to expand the garden once again but, this time, with a connection to Him that can't be broken by our weaknesses and failures. Here is another commission to expand His kingdom and increase. And again He offers us the only guarantee that matters. He will be with us. He offers His Presence.

### **The Power of Spiritual Longing**

I wasn't born into a Christian home. Having immigrated to America from South Korea at a young age, I was navigating a new world with a new language as a six-year-old in Los Angeles. Every night while I lay in bed, a curious longing brewed in my heart. Each evening as I felt the silence of my room, I would think, *God, are You out there?*

*If You're there, can You show up to me right now? I promise I won't tell anyone.*

*Can You help me understand what my teacher says tomorrow?*

*Can You hear me?*

*Where do You live?*

*What do You look like?*

I had never heard a sermon or attended a church service in my life. However, in my heart, there was a longing to know a higher being. I figured that if a deity truly existed, I should be on His good side. I wanted to be His friend, but I didn't know

\* Matthew 28:18–20.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

how. I didn't know back then what I know now—that the spiritual hunger to know Him is a gift. You may not consider it a gift, because sometimes that longing feels like a void. If you have attempted to fill that void with all sorts of things to no avail, then you may know disappointment quite well. But that void is a good thing. The soul's ache to hear a melody above the cadence of this life is a gift because it means that there is room for Him in your heart. And when you open your heart to Him, He will fill it—always. James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." And come near He did.

God began revealing Himself to this asker of endless nighttime questions. On a family vacation, I sat on the hotel bed while my parents were packing up our bags. I just happened to be watching a gospel film on cable television, and I asked my mother, "Who is that man on the screen?" She said, "That's Jesus." I said, "He looks like a very nice man." I learned God's name that day. After the trip, I went to the library and asked the librarian if she had any books on Jesus. Oh, the look on the dear old librarian's face at the sight of this little Korean girl asking in broken English how to find books on Jesus. She paused and kindly replied, "Child, you have to go to church to learn about Jesus." So naturally, I began asking my mother to drop me off at church on Sundays.

We are all built with spiritual longing, a desire to be connected to the Divine. It is proof of our God-given design. At every time in human history, there has been some form of spiritual ritual or worship. From the start, humankind has always been reaching for what is beyond the stars. It is in our DNA to seek connection with a being that is greater than we are. No one can claim they aren't spiritual enough to know His Presence. You are built to know Jesus just as you are built to breathe air.

Jesus doesn't neglect spiritual longing, and this book is

### *Created for His Presence*

proof, for it was written by that little girl who started her faith journey not knowing one Christian or having any biblical knowledge. I didn't know the proper way to worship or pray, but I knew how to want God. That was enough. We have spiritual longing so that He can fulfill it. Step by step, He led me to the right places at the right times so that I could chip away at the mystery that is God. I first discovered His name, and later, I discovered His love—through His provision of the right people, places, and moments.

Spiritual longing can be discouraging if you have no hope that it can lead to more of God. The desire to be more connected to Him can feel like loneliness or emptiness because nothing on earth can quench it. To recognize spiritual longing is also to recognize that life isn't satisfying you, that you want more. It is, at times, uncomfortable, which is why we are quick to dismiss it as a distraction or bury it as if it is an emotional crisis. However, befriending the Presence of God must begin with accepting spiritual longing and listening to its cries. Your soul's pining is an invitation for you to grow in deeper knowledge of your Creator. Even if you were baptized as a child and attend church regularly, your spiritual longing is proof that God has more for you. If you have even a droplet of desire to know Him better, start there. Keep that and stir it. That simple desire is potent with transformative power. You were created to intimately know Jesus, and your very being is aching to be fueled properly.

### *Show Me Your Glory*

Moses knew he couldn't live without the Presence of God. In Exodus 33:15, he said, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." This was the cry of Moses in the

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

wilderness. God had offered him a way out of this arduous journey, but Moses refused to take it. God promised a land flowing with milk and honey to the Israelites, and it was an age-old oath given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God even offered to send an angel to drive out the enemies that inhabited the land. Israel just had to get up and go.\*

Exodus 33:3 says, “Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

However, this didn’t please Moses, because God Himself wouldn’t go with them. Moses wouldn’t have it. He could have gotten everything a person would want out of life. His people would have been stable, well fed, and fruitful. He would have had a successful political career, and his name would have been renowned for generations. Everything God had promised as they left Egypt was right at his fingertips. God even offered to make this happen supernaturally. But it still wasn’t enough for Moses. He said, “Do not send us up from here.”

Moses knew that the Promised Land was nothing without the Promise Keeper. He was able to discern this because he knew God better than anyone else did. He met Yahweh in the mystery of the burning bush.<sup>†</sup> He witnessed God’s power in the ten plagues against Egypt that set Israel free from slavery.<sup>‡</sup> He saw God’s faithfulness in the parting of the Red Sea.<sup>§</sup> Nevertheless, Moses didn’t relate to God simply as a miracle-working deliverer of the Hebrew people. His relationship with God wasn’t based on the manna that fed them daily or the water that came from a rock to quench their thirst. To Moses, God wasn’t just a solution to a problem. Instead, God was his friend.

\* Exodus 33:1–3.

† Exodus 3.

‡ Exodus 7–11.

§ Exodus 14:21–31.

Whenever Moses had to meet Him, he would go into the tent of meeting and they would speak “face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”\* Moses knew the Presence of God, personally and authentically, and this was enough for him to know that the Promised Land without Yahweh was meaningless. Moses knew that Israel’s greatest good wasn’t provision or stability; neither was it to be known as a powerful nation that could conquer all their enemies. Simply put, there was no Israel without God, because God was the point of Israel’s existence. Just as Adam and Eve’s purpose was to be with their Creator, Israel’s purpose was to be with Yahweh.

It is possible to find ourselves choosing the Promised Land over the Presence, the blessings that come with God rather than God Himself. In fact, would it be unreasonable to think that sometimes we draw near to our Father only because we want to get to the Promised Land? Perhaps sober introspection would reveal that we are attending church for the answered prayers and praising Jesus to earn some help through tough times. Although these blessings undoubtedly come with who God is, they do so by grace, not by a transaction of faithfulness. The goal of our devotion to Christ must be nothing other than friendship and intimacy with Him. At the end of the day, if your faith gave you only Jesus, would that be enough?

Church was always meant to be a gathering of people who seek His Presence and live His ways. Yet too often it isn’t that. If the Presence of God isn’t the purpose of the gathering, then the church has become a wishing well for our needs and wants. The ultimate reward for our existence isn’t the life that we build here. Rather, it is the One who isn’t of this world. It is time to check what we really believe about His Presence today. It is time to check our fuel.

\* Exodus 33:11.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

### Already Blessed

The wilderness of the soul is a far cry from a pleasant experience. Yet there is some good news if you are wandering through a wasteland. Numbers 6:22–27 says,

The LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons,  
‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The LORD bless you  
and keep you;  
the LORD make his face shine on you  
and be gracious to you;  
the LORD turn his face toward you  
and give you peace.’

So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

This was the blessing God had for His people from the start of their trek. After Israel left Egypt, they temporarily stayed at Sinai, where God gave marching orders to Moses. Those instructions included this priestly blessing that Aaron and his sons were to give to the people. Throughout their wandering, as the Israelites set up camp, broke camp, and bore children without a permanent home to settle in, this was the blessing they received on a regular basis. There is no mention of a land flowing with milk and honey. Instead, it is about the reward of knowing God.

When I was on the high school swim team, we would oftentimes stand at each end of the pool to cheer on our teammates in the race. Especially for the long-distance races, we

would shout encouragement such as “Almost there!” or “Get it!” implying that the racers were still on the way. Once the races were over, our encouragement would turn to celebration because the swimmers made it to the end and there wasn’t a lap left to strive for. The blessing that we see in Numbers 6 is the equivalent of saying “You made it!” because Israel already had the treasure. As they were wandering and waiting for the land flowing with milk and honey, they weren’t waiting to be blessed. Israel was *already* blessed.

This is good news. This means that we, too, are blessed now, before the breakthroughs happen and the upgrades arrive. We can experience the pleasures of His Presence today, before any of the problems get fixed or the worrying situations go away. Your blessing isn’t lost in the past, nor are you working for it to arrive in the future. You no longer must wait and hope to be blessed. You have the blessing, thanks to Jesus. Just as Moses had access to the Presence of God, you have access to the Holy Spirit by grace through faith. Your pilgrimage is not to attain something you don’t have but rather to grow in awareness of and intimacy with it forever.

Beloved, are you experiencing His Presence daily? Do you know the incredible release from shame when you encounter the kindness of His forgiveness? Do you know His loyalty to you in the face of your character flaws and misjudgments? Do you know the gentleness in His voice when He speaks life into your weary soul? Do you know the intricate genius of His wisdom when you are at a loss for what to do? How about the comfort of the Holy Spirit as you grieve loss?

Let’s check our fuel today. You may know many things about God but fall short in knowing Him on a personal level. The world’s currents are always going to pull you away from living out this purpose of experiencing friendship with God.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

We are so easily deceived by the significance we get from the things we do and the people we are with. Days that are filled with temporary and secondary matters will leave us continuously running on empty. Busy—but empty.

If you have been away from God or you have known church traditions and spiritual leaders more than you have known your Savior, today is a wonderful day to start your journey back to His Presence. While the process isn't always easy, here are three simple and practical encouragements to help you along the way.

### 1. Check Your Fuel Honestly

We need to take an honest look at why we do things. Kick-start an inquiry into your whys. Keep unraveling the layers of your motives until you get to your core purpose. Your inquiry might look something like this:

Example 1: *Why do I work hard? → Why does it matter what other people think of me?*  
*→ Why is my identity so tied to other people's opinions?*

Example 2: *Why do I go to church every week? → Why do I pray more at church than I do at home? → Why do I pray?*

Example 3: *Why do I spend money the way I do? → Why do I feel like money can buy satisfaction?*

If your core purpose isn't a more intimate friendship with God, then there are counterfeit fuels to recognize and remove. Exam-

ining our motives is necessary work. We don't want to end up living as strangers to God without being aware of it.

## 2. Be Intentional

Just like any other relationship, ours with God requires intentionality. What are some things you can do to encourage this desire to develop a deeper friendship with Jesus? Think of things that will naturally fit into your lifestyle. For example, if you set an alarm to pray at the same time each day but you aren't usually around your phone at that time, that wouldn't be the most effective action to take. When it doesn't feel natural to you and your lifestyle, it will be extremely difficult to maintain and add undue pressure. Here are a few ideas on how to be intentional with God:

- If you wouldn't consistently carry around a physical journal, start journaling your prayers on your phone, like personal letters to God.
- If you are a young parent who rarely has a quiet moment to read Scripture, try listening to Scripture while you are watching your children or doing chores.
- If you aren't a morning person, try investing in your friendship with Jesus during the evenings.

## 3. Avoid Substitutes for God

Be careful not to treat the things of God as a substitute for God. We can spend hours at church, have Christian friends, and consume Christian resources while still never interacting with Him. Listening to a sermon can be a form of hearing from

## THE PURPOSE OF THE WILDERNESS

God, but it can never replace listening to God Himself. The Bible in our hands and on our electronic devices is an open invitation to delve into His words ourselves. The gift of the gospel is that we can access Him personally, not just through others. Reading a book about God is helpful to guide us to Him, but it can't take the place of praying to Him directly. Learning about ourselves can aid the sanctification process as we walk into spiritual maturity, but it can never outweigh the value of knowing Him personally. It is all too easy to feel as if listening to a Christian podcast counts as communing with the Holy Spirit for the day. Listening to other people's thoughts is nice, but it can never replace connecting with Him through our own praise and worship. Let's not trade God for the things of God.

## Dear Friend of God

As someone who used to struggle to grasp the purpose of life, I have found that there is nothing more fulfilling than befriending Jesus. However, even as Christians, we can easily miss this. I have found myself in burnout and disillusionment time and time again, and it always came down to this—I was living for a purpose other than knowing my loyal Savior.

Once I aligned myself with this holy agenda of befriending Him, life became more than bearable. There was sweetness even in the mundane, and there was strength in times of pain. As a young, energetic female preacher full of dreams, motherhood hit me hard. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had been fueled by ambition. Accomplishments excited me. Getting things done for the kingdom was what got me going. Traveling around the world gave me reason to live. However, when much of that came to a halt, the way I responded to my newfound

limitations made me realize that I had been running on counterfeit fuels. I would rock my children at 3 A.M., wondering what the point of life really was. So, I began talking to Jesus. Even though they didn't feel like it at the time, those nights were a gift to me. I spent the most time with the Holy Spirit during those hours—grieving, pondering, sharing, requesting. From the world's perspective, I was unseen and unproductive. But from heaven's perspective, I was fulfilling my very purpose because I was communing with Him. It was a gritty and messy season of discovering all my counterfeit fuels and going back to living for a friendship with Jesus—the way He created me to live.

You could be going through your difficult season in the hope that self-growth or better days are waiting for you on the other side. These are common aspirations, and it is natural to be driven by these things. However, Christ offers us a better hope. He designed you to be fueled by a friendship with Him. Any dissatisfaction or disillusionment that you may experience in this world is testament to a spiritual longing that can be quenched only by knowing Him—intimately, authentically, and passionately. Living for His Presence was possible for Brother Lawrence in a monastery as well as a very tired mother in a nursery. It is possible for you too.

# EXPERIENCING FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

How the Wilderness  
Draws Us to His Presence



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