

Cultivating the Presence of God Together

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Jesus said “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with you.” (Matt 18:20)

Moses cried out to God, “If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.” (Exodus 33:15)

Paul talked about unbelievers coming amongst worshipping believers and exclaiming, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor.14:25)

The Scripture talks often about God being ‘with’ his people, or ‘among’ them, or ‘within’ them. Clearly the real, tangible presence of God can be expected where God’s people gather.

What is this ‘presence’ like?

- Some describe a deep sense of *peace*, which has a gentle sweetness. It is like a storm is stilled by his presence.
- Others describe how the *love of God* comes among us or within us, and we feel our hearts melting with his warm and tender acceptance. Paul describes how ‘the love of God is poured into our hearts.’ (Romans 5:5) Tears of joy often flow as his loving presence is experienced.
- Some talk of their hearts being greatly encouraged or *lifted up*, being enlarged in their spirit. They lift their heads with joy and praise or song flows out. They experience God as ‘the lifter of my head.’ We see this in the story of Mary and Elizabeth, where Mary overflows in praise and worship. (Luke 1:46 on)
- Some describe an ‘*empowering*’ or strengthening for a difficult task. A calm and bold spirit is imparted to them, a confidence that they and God can do this.
- Some talk about his *protecting presence*, as he shields them from evil or from some danger. They can feel ‘safe’ in what is normally a dangerous experience. His presence brings calmness, courage and a steadiness of heart.
- Sometimes in a gathering his presence will bring *revelation* from Scripture. People will experience understanding – lights will be going on. He is among us as ‘the Teacher’ – and faith is being released. (Romans 10:17)
- Sometimes his presence brings a *cleansing experience*. We have an Isaiah 6 encounter as we realise that we are a sinful people, and we cry out for him to make us clean and new. And he does, and joy flows again.
- There are experiences of his presence where he imparts *his burden* of compassion or grief for a lost and broken world. People begin to see with his eyes, and may often weep and intercede. (Luke 19:41-44)
- There are times when his presence brings *healing*. As we worship and adore him, as he is proclaimed and given due honour he comes amongst us to heal. It is as if he walks around touching people and releasing his healing power. Awe, worship, tears and often trembling happen to us. (Luke 5:17)
- Often his presence will be revealed in people having *words or visions* from God to share. (1 Cor.14:26)
- Sometimes people get ‘*lost in his presence*’ and they are shown more of the wonder of who he is. They are in a place of deep awe and adoration. We see this in Revelation as John is shown many things about Jesus.
- Some enjoy a daily sense of him walking with them through their day, so they feel ‘*companioned*’ and equipped to be his ambassador wherever they are. Psalm 23 describes this well.

We desperately need the tangible presence of God. We must pray the prayer of Moses, "If your presence does not go with us with us, do not take us up from here." His presence is our inheritance. He promised before he left the earth, "Surely I am with you always..." (Matt.28:20) This is not an isolated experience for a few. We need to seek to cultivate his presence.

Cultivating his presence

Of course, God is everywhere present. There is no place we can go where he cannot be with us. (Psalm 139:7) But we all know from experience that some places have a real 'presence' of something, or someone. Perhaps you have walked into a home or a church building or maybe a garden and felt 'the presence of God' as a sense of peace. Probably that place had been soaked in prayer and worship for some time, and there is an unhindered access to God's presence. The reverse is a place where darkness resides, and the sense of evil, or danger or an awful coldness can be strongly felt. Again, the place has been soaked in evil practices and is tangibly inhabited by the forces of darkness.

Again, we can come together as his people and be very unaware of his presence, that he promises is with us. So there are two sides to us experiencing more of his presence in ways that change us and assist us in living like Jesus. One is that we can do all we can to acknowledge and increase the reality of his presence. The other is that God has his own way of deciding to 'visit' us in new ways, to do a work we desperately need him to do.

Acknowledging his real presence together

One of the simple ways of becoming more aware of his loving and life-changing presence is to speak about him and to him as if he is among us in all his love and power. Scripture is full of encouragement for us to do this. And as we praise him and thank him, as we declare we love him and need him, as we give testimony to who he is, something happens among us. He becomes more and more real.

In the Old Testament they talked about walking into his presence, as they moved into the Temple where he had taken up residence. There were three stages – the outer court, the inner court, and the most holy place. These represent for us New Testament believers stages into the presence of God. The Psalms call us to 'enter his gates with thanksgiving, and to enter his courts with praise.' Putting our focus on him, and speaking or singing our thanksgiving and praise can take us closer to him so his delightful, holy and loving presence is very real for us. Something shifts in our own spirit as we do this. The Spirit who lives in us responds by making us more and more aware of him. Our hearts become open to his love, our ears become open to his voice, our spiritual eyes become open to the glory of who he is.

When we gather in small groups, even when a couple or family or friends get together for prayer, his presence can become very real as we choose to thank and praise him for a period of time. The simplest way is to read aloud words of praise from a psalm or the prophets or Revelation. Turn them into phrases of thanksgiving and praise. The word is a gift to us to help us meet him personally. Another simple thing is to find a song or two on a worship tape and play it before you begin to praise him.

If there is heaviness or a sense of distress or fear in a place or a family, thanksgiving and praise like this can dispel the works of darkness and bring the presence of Jesus. Sometimes we may need to persist in this until we are uplifted and in a new place, enjoying the Lord's presence. When his presence is more real, our faith rises and we can ask with confidence and not just complaint.

If we each take upon ourselves the responsibility of cultivating God's presence, there will surely be many more times when he comes very near to lift us up, bestow his peace, pour in his love or bring a revelation.

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