

CULTIVATING A CONNECTION WITH GOD

Do you feel like something is
missing from your devotional life?

“I’m starting to think that the idea of a ‘personal relationship with God’ is an invention of contemporary evangelicals,” I (Cynthia) blurted to a friend one day. “The term isn’t in the Bible—I checked. What if the concept of experiencing intimacy with God is just our wishful thinking? Do you think we just have to wait until heaven for real friendship with God?”

My frustration had been building for years, but it came to a head when my husband was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I needed God more than ever, yet my “relationship” with Him was a huge disappointment.

By Cynthia Bezek and Buddy Westbrook

Again and again I reached out to this God who Christianity said was my best friend, but my “friend” seemed hopelessly distant.

I had been taught that the key to intimacy with God was a daily quiet time. Beginning in my early teens, I had developed good devotional habits. Year after year I read through the Bible. I memorized verses. I journaled. I prayed. I worshiped. Sometimes I spent an hour or more in these daily quiet times.

I learned a lot about God, and what I learned equipped me for various ministries. But the intimate friendship Christians talked and wrote so much about eluded me. I was living proof that regular devotions do not guarantee a tangible sense of connection with God.

The day I dared admit my dissatisfaction was the first day of my journey into a satisfying relationship with the Lord. Over the years, God has given me different companions for parts of that journey. One of them is my friend Buddy.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

My (Buddy's) experience of wanting to connect with God was a little different from Cynthia's. I had always enjoyed my daily Bible study and prayer time, and I was pretty satisfied with my relationship with God. I thought I loved Him. Then one day Mt. 10:37 unsettled me:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

My love for God didn't measure up to His expectations at all! I could not conceive of loving God more than I loved my family. I adored my wife, daughter, and granddaughter. I had interactive, loving, fun relationships with them. But my relationship with God consisted mostly of prayer monologues. If I heard from God at all, it felt impersonal, limited to what I read in

the Bible or observed in nature.

I believed the Bible to be the literal Word of God, and I wanted to obey it. But this command to love God more than my wife, daughter, and granddaughter did not seem possible. I could only conclude that there must be more to relationship with God than I was experiencing.

In human relationships, we know that we need more than mere time together if we want genuine connection. It's entirely possible—even common—for a husband and wife to log hours with each other and yet never really relate. Similarly, men can golf together every weekend for a decade yet never know how the other feels about things that matter. Time itself doesn't cut it. In order to connect with one another, both participants must relate in ways that invite mutually satisfying interaction.

It's the same with God. Just clocking time every day is not what it takes to experience God relationally. We need to open ourselves up to Him, learn to hear Him, and then receive His deep love, understanding, and affection for us. Developing this relationship may take more time than we're used to giving to our daily devotions. But the results are more than worth it.

Cynthia and I have discovered several elements that contribute to a rich relationship with God. The first of these is believing that God really wants relationship with us.

“COME TALK WITH ME.”

The essence of connection with anyone—people or God—is giving and receiving understanding. For example, we may come together with others over common interests, shared opinions, or similar backgrounds. But even deeper connections take place at the emotional level. Authentic rapport happens when we entrust our hearts to others with the expectation that they care



Making CONNECTIONS

Virtually any facet of your time with God can be used to connect deeply with Him.

BIBLE READING, MEMORIZING, AND MEDITATION

As you ponder Scripture, ask God to speak to your heart as well as your mind. Take your time. Chew on words, phrases, details, or incidents, allowing them to affect your emotions: What do you sense God feeling for and about you? What do you feel about Him or about the matters that concern Him? Meditate on what God reveals to you, using both your intellect and your emotions. Journaling can help you understand what God is saying to you.

PRAYER

Apply the same communication skills you would use in human friendships to your relationship with your heavenly Father.

Be vulnerable when you pray. We share most openly with those we most love and trust. So take risks and pour out your heart to God, as Ps. 62:8 invites. Share your needs, fears, hopes, and secrets with Him.

Anticipate and listen for His understanding response. When we share our hearts with someone we love and trust, we eagerly wait for an empathetic response. But many of us come to our quiet times think-

ing that if God reveals anything to us personally, it will only be so that we can obey more diligently, work more effectively, perform more excellently, and serve Christ more purely. Let the Lord enlarge that perspective. He no longer calls us servants, but friends (Jn. 15:15). God wants us to experience His compassion, kindness, and affection. Listen for Him to respond to your concerns in these ways.

Receive what He shares with you. Let it sink in and affect the way you feel. Then talk with Him about what it means to you. Journal about it. Ponder it throughout the day. Let it transform you.

WORSHIP

One of the best ways to worship is to recognize who God is and reflect that back to Him. We can do this by expressing understanding and appreciation in response to what He shares with us. For example, when He meets a need in an unexpected way, go beyond thanksgiving. Tell Him, "Father, You really do care about me and anticipate my needs. I love the way You surprised me and provided for me. Your love for me is extravagant. You are such an incredible father!"

Or when He reveals His heart to you through Scripture, you can acknowledge His feelings. For example, if you read the parable of the disrespected vineyard owner in Luke 20, you may feel indignation, anger, or sadness on His behalf. You might respond in worship by saying, "Lord, You are unbelievably generous and patient with us, and so often we just don't get it. I'm so sorry for the times I've taken advantage of Your matchless kindness. You are worthy of everything I am and have."

—Cynthia Bezek and Buddy Westbrook

and will respond in a way that makes us feel understood and loved, and vice versa. When our friends hurt, we hurt. When we rejoice, our friends rejoice. We feel a special affinity and unity with them. We may even feel like kindred spirits.

Don't most of us want that kind of relationship with God? Scripture implies it is attainable. The Bible paints the picture of a God who wants to relate to us:

Hear me as I pray, O LORD. Be merciful and answer me! My heart has heard you say, "Come and talk with me." And my

heart responds, "LORD, I am coming."

—Ps. 27:7-8, *NLT*

This is what the LORD says . . . : "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." —Jer. 33:2-3

"My sheep listen to my voice; I [Jesus] know them, and they follow me."

—Jn. 10:27

Throughout the Bible we encounter a God who interacts with His children. He

is a loving heavenly father who knows us inside and out, and a faithful friend who lays down His life for us and sticks closer than a brother. He's a counselor, a guide, a comforter, a helper. A great high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, someone who will never leave us or forsake us. These descriptions and many others suggest that God offers the kind of relationship we desire. But how does it develop?

One thing we need to do to relate closely to God is to learn how He speaks to us. After all, it's impossible for two people to connect if they can't communicate with each other.

GOD'S EVERYDAY VOICE

For most of us, an unmistakable, audible voice in the night like Samuel heard (see 1 Samuel 3) is not the primary way God speaks. If we expect to hear that, we may falsely think God is giving us the silent treatment.

For many years I (Cynthia) suffered under that misunderstanding. Consequently, for a

painfully long time I had little confidence that God spoke to me. Then I discovered the “everyday” voice of God.

First Corinthians 2:10-12 (*NLT*) promises that God will communicate with us.

For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God's deep secrets. . . . We have received God's Spirit (not the world's

spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.

This communication most often happens Spirit-to-spirit, quietly, deep inside us (see also Ro. 8:16).

When I realized God spoke to me in the stillness of my heart rather than from the burning bushes and smoking mountains

Afraid to Get Close

Just as fears often hinder our human relationships, they can also affect how we relate to God. Such fears aren't easily resolved, but if we are aware of their potential, we can begin thinking about how we might overcome them.

Fear of being disrespectful. Some of us come from backgrounds that emphasize God's majesty. We feel we can't approach Him as a father or friend because He is holy, transcendent, and to be revered. But even kings and presidents have children, and even CEOs have friends. God invites us into a unique relationship with Him that allows Him to be everything He is, yet allows us to be ourselves and come to Him like little children (Mt. 18:3) and friends (Jn. 15:15). Almighty as He is, He invites our intimacy.

Fear of disappointment. How many guys have missed out on a great date because they were afraid the girl might say no? Similarly, how many of us have missed out on a deeper relationship with God because we've been afraid we'll initiate and nothing will happen?

It's true that God doesn't always respond to us with skywriting and celestial fireworks. However, in our (Cynthia and Buddy's) experience, God reaches out to anyone who with faith and a persevering heart seeks to connect with Him. He does not disappoint.

Cry out to Him for help in finding the relationship you long for and He longs to give. Get help from others who hear from Him. Ask Him to teach you to discern His voice—and hang in there. God is not a microwave

oven that gives instant results; connecting deeply with Him can take time. But don't get discouraged. Even if it doesn't happen on our schedule, He promises that He will answer when we call on Him (Jer. 33:3).

Fear of disclosure. Openness can be painful in human relationships. Sometimes we share our struggles and get criticism instead of empathy. We may expect a similar response if we are vulnerable with God: “He'll start pointing out all the sin I need to deal with, and I'm not sure I want to go there!”

It's true that you'll feel more exposed with God than you do in other relationships. But here's the thing: He already knows all about you—sins, weaknesses, fears, and failures included. Our experience is that when we've had the courage to bring these up with our heavenly Father, He has been welcoming, accepting, and loving. Yes, He addresses our sins, but He does this in order to set us free.

Fear of silence. Most of us have experienced times when God has seemed silent and removed. That can discourage us from seeking Him. But what if God isn't silent so much as protecting us from hearing more than we're ready for?

It's not uncommon for loving parents to say to a child, “Kiddo, I love you, but we're just not going to talk about that right now.” Likewise, there are times when the Lord shows His care for us best by not speaking (see Jn. 16:12, 1 Cor. 3:2). When we sense God being silent, we can ask Him, “Is this one of those times when we're not going to talk any more on this subject?” That's what I (Buddy) do, and God usually responds. His reply may be brief, but it's clear. He doesn't turn His back on me, fold His arms across His chest, and give me the silent treatment—that's not who our Father is.

—Cynthia Bezek and Buddy Westbrook

I'd been expecting, my communication with Him started to take off. I'd always had creative ideas and random nudges to intercede for or help others. Now I saw that these impressions were actually God talking to me. He had been seeking connection all along, but quietly. I started to pay more attention. During my quiet times, I began listening more intentionally for the Lord and writing down what I thought I was hearing.

A TIME TO BE VULNERABLE

It's wonderful when we gain confidence in God's personal leading, as Cynthia was doing. But there's more. God not only tells us, "This is the way; walk in it" (Is. 30:21), He also ministers deep in our hearts, comforting us, affirming us, and reassuring us that we are His (see Ro. 5:5, 8:16; Gal. 4:6). Learning to hear Him in these incredibly personal ways is an active pursuit. Any life experience, problem, or question can be used as a springboard to deeper relationship with God. The key is to be intentional about seeking and receiving God's understanding and parental care.

When I (Buddy) encounter a problem, for example, I've learned to ask God's perspective about it: "Father, how do You view the way my spouse is treating me?" "What is Your perspective on this rebellious child?" "How do You look at this problem at work?" When I ask questions like these, God seems to delight in revealing Himself to me.

In order for this conversation to take place, though, I have to risk being vulnerable. If I'm embroiled in conflict with a guy at work, for instance, there are a couple of ways I can pray about it. I might say, "Father, Bob and I are having problems. Please help me to do what You want me to in this situation." That prayer is not vulnerable. It does not reveal my true heart to God, nor does it invite His understanding.

A more vulnerable prayer might go like this: "Father, I'm so upset with Bob. He's being unreasonable and selfish. Why can't

he just accept me? I feel discouraged, helpless, and hopeless about this—and I don't want to do the Christian thing." In this prayer, I've admitted my true feelings and my struggle. I've indicated my neediness. I've left the door wide open for God to give me true understanding. Next I must be still and listen for His empathetic response.

What is God's response like? Like that of a father. However, many of us need to adjust our perceptions of our heavenly Father before we can accurately receive His parental understanding.

We may think of God as harsh, demanding, or unresponsive. For example, in response to a prayer like the one I said about Bob, some people might expect to hear, "You know what the Bible says—you're supposed to be patient and forgiving. Instead of focusing on Bob and his weaknesses, why don't you take a good look at yourself?" But that's not how our Father responds to us.

As a good father has compassion on his children, so the Lord will have compassion on us when we share our struggles with Him (Ps. 103:13). When I talk honestly to God about my problem with Bob, He is likely to say, "You do feel discouraged, don't you? I am sorry, My child. I know how difficult it is to be mistreated. Let's talk about this."

What happens next in the conversation is vital to a genuine relationship with God. In order to experience this care and understanding, we must receive His responses, allowing them to penetrate and affect our hearts.

RECEIVING AND GIVING

The easiest way *not* to receive God's understanding is to ignore or gloss over whatever God says to us. We can be silent, change the subject, or just repeat what we've been saying without acknowledging God at all: "Right. Bob is so unreasonable. Like I said . . ."

In contrast, receiving God's understanding might sound something like this: "Thanks, Father. You are so good at understanding me. You're right, I do feel mistreated. Thanks for helping me feel cared for and valuable, even when I know I'm not responding the

way I want to. You do such a good job of caring for me." It is when we receive His understanding that we start to connect with Him emotionally.

Most of us can appreciate how important it is to receive understanding from God. But what about giving understanding? What if God wants to feel understood too? Jeremiah 9:24 says our highest goal should be to know and understand the Lord and what He delights in. Yet Ro. 3:11 laments, "There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God."

I (Cynthia) happened onto the idea of giving God understanding when I was reading Luke meditatively during my quiet times. As I put myself into the stories, I experienced deep compassion for Jesus. I felt for Him when He explained things to His friends and they couldn't seem to get it. I wondered if He felt discouraged when the number of His followers dwindled. I grieved for Him as He asked for prayer in His most profound need, only to have His closest friends fall asleep.

I was surprised that I'd never given much thought to how Jesus felt. I knew God was big and didn't need my pity or sympathy. But I also knew that He experiences and displays emotions, and it seemed self-centered of me not to acknowledge them. So I told Him, "Lord, I hurt for You that You had to endure all this without anyone being there for You. Feeling this compassion for You helps me see that You do understand everything I'm going through. And I sure love You for that."

I connected deeply with God that day. Since then, giving the Lord understanding has become the most genuine and natural form of worship I've ever engaged in. I experience intimacy with Him—like I'm experiencing the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings (Phil. 3:10). In those moments I feel like a friend of God.

Building a personal relationship with God is possible. It doesn't come automatically, but as we learn to hear His voice, risk being vulnerable in our conversations with Him, and receive His understanding (and

give understanding to Him sometimes), we will connect with Him.

We may even discover we love God more than we love those closest to us. We'll likely find ourselves enjoying Him not just in quiet times but throughout the day. Now that's a personal relationship with God! 🙏

about the authors



CYNTHIA BEZEK is editor of Pray! magazine. "It's important that the way we experience God matches what we say about Him," she says. "I wanted to live out what I was talking about."



BUDDY WESTBROOK is pastor of Crossland Community Bible Church. He is convinced that "if we can truly connect with the Lord and receive from Him, then everything works."

On Your Own

Is God Silent?

1. One of the clearest examples of a conversation with God in prayer is found in 2 Cor. 12:7-10. What did Paul ask God to do?

2. How did God respond?

- Said yes to Paul's request
- Remained silent
- Said no
- Replied with His own viewpoint

3. God's response changed Paul's perspective. What did Paul do instead of pleading for relief (v. 9)?

4. We sometimes talk of God's responses to prayer in terms of "He'll say yes, no, maybe, or wait." But sometimes God may want to redirect the conversation or, as He did with Paul, give us something we hadn't thought to ask for. When we're seeking to connect with God in our devotional lives, but feeling as if we're hearing nothing, it can be helpful to allow God to redirect the conversation. What questions did the article suggest that you ask God in a circumstance like this (see page 43)?

5. Practice connecting with God by asking for His perspective on a circumstance you're currently praying about.

If you'd like to learn more about hearing God's voice, search our free online archives at www.discipleshipjournal.com for "May I Have a Word with You?" by Roc Bottomly (Issue 150).