

Intimacy with God



Gary Wilkerson May 21, 2018

Out of His Presence Come the Works of Jesus

At one time, the name Vince Lombardi was familiar to every American household. He was a cultural icon in the Sixties with his success as an NFL football coach. But his approach to coaching applied to much of life, and people picked up on it. Even stay-at-home moms knew Lombardi's sayings, because their elementary-age kids quoted him as often as world-renowned business leaders did.

When Lombardi first got a head coaching job, his players on the Green Bay Packers were already a skilled team. They knew how to identify a blitz and what to expect from a 4-3 defense. So, when Lombardi first entered the meeting room carrying a football, they wondered what special wisdom he had for them. Would he emphasize offense or defense? Would he bring in whole new strategic schemes?

"Gentlemen," Lombardi said, simply holding up the ball, "this is a football." It sounded silly. But what Lombardi was saying was, "We're starting with the basics. Because we all need to know why we're here."

Every Christian reading this needs to ask himself: "Do I know why I'm here?" It's a crucial question for any follower of Jesus. We all have to ask it of ourselves from time to time. As a ministry leader, I occasionally ask myself and my co-laborers: "Why are we here? Why do we do what we do? What's our purpose?"

The short answer, on the surface, is that we conduct a worldwide ministry to build up the body of Christ, reach the lost, and minister loving care to the needy. Doing these things means we need to know how to carry it out—to have plans, strategies, and systems in place. And we do. But the real answer to my core question—"Why are we here?"—is the same for both the youngest disciple of Christ and the most experienced, worldly wise ministry leader. The answer is: "We're here to minister to Jesus."

I've seen a terrible pattern in the church over the past several decades. It began with the church-growth movement, a phenomenon that birthed the idea that corporate strategies could advance the kingdom of God. If these movements were to answer the "Lombardi Question" about their purpose for being, they would admit, "We're here to get bigger, to expand, to bring in more."

If you see that as your purpose in the kingdom of God, you're already lost. Don't get me wrong: Growing a church or an outreach isn't a bad thing. And it would be wrong to say the church-growth movement has been all bad. But this movement re-focused the church's energies in a tragic way. It misdirected us away from our source of life, Jesus, and turned us instead to self-directed purposes and plans.

Let me repeat my answer to the Lombardi Question, which applies to every believer, church, and outreach: We're here to minister to Jesus. And we can't possibly minister to our Savior and Lord unless we begin in his presence.

No Christian will ever be misdirected, misguided, or off base if he or she starts out in Christ's presence and never leaves it.

No biblical figure ever needed strategic plans more than King David. He faced enemy armies that required quick, purposeful thinking in the midst of life-or-death situations. And he had to rule a divided kingdom between Israel and Judah. So how did David accomplish his purposes to bring God glory and end up as Israel's most renowned king?

It wasn't because of strategic thinking. David moved in victory because his heart in every situation was to minister to the Lord. The Bible makes this clear in his actions and in all the worshipful, yearning psalms he wrote. Ministering to the Lord was always at the forefront as David pursued the works God set before him.

Samuel was known as a great prophet in Israel—but not because of his strategic relationships to kings and leaders. Scripture makes clear Samuel had a heart to minister to the Lord from a very young age. Even as a boy, Samuel was continually in the Temple seeking God's presence—and that relationship above all gave Samuel influence with people from the lowest rung of life to the highest offices in the land.

David and Samuel show us that to achieve the works of God, we have to know his presence. And the same holds true for every believer today: Following the Lord means being Jesus-focused, Jesus-centered, and Jesus-empowered. The Bible calls Christ the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end of all things—and that applies to our lives. He has to be everything to us.

It's said there is no division of labor in God's kingdom. We're all called as gospel ministers, no matter what our job or vocation. I've met some of the poorest, most destitute people in the world, and some are powerful evangelists for the Lord. They all have one thing in common with the late, amazing Billy Graham: When you meet them, you know they've spent time in God's presence. That makes all the difference, no matter what our station in life.

It's easy for even the most dedicated Christian to drift from his purpose of ministering to Jesus.

A lot of ministers today are more comfortable implementing plans than sitting in Jesus' presence. The "new normal" for church leaders is to be a strategist as much as a minister. I think some pastors even fear intimacy with God. After all, it's a lot easier to strategize on our own than to keep Christ at the center, turning to him for everything.

To be clear, when I speak of being in God's presence or getting direction from him, I'm not talking about a mystical, revelatory experience. A lot of us have a mistaken idea of what "being in God's presence" is. We tend to think of it as a feeling or emotion or supernatural moment. All of these things can accompany God's presence, but they don't define it. God's presence is simply himself, his being. We don't need any kind of experience for his supernatural presence to be a reality in our lives.

With the Holy Spirit residing in us, we always have God's presence—and that's an incredible thing, as Paul says: "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" (*Colossians 1:27, ESV*).

In Old Testament times, the Lord made his presence known by rending the heavens or manifesting himself through a pillar of fire or a cloud of smoke. When Jesus came, it changed how we experienced God's presence. Through Christ, we actually got to see the presence of God. Jesus' life revealed exactly what God is like—how utterly full of love, grace, mercy, power, truth, and righteousness he is. The Son of God came to earth as an exact representation of the heavenly Father's nature.

Even more incredible is that we share in this divine nature, through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. A transformation takes place when we accept Jesus: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that *through them you may become partakers of the divine nature*, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (*2 Peter 1:3-4, my emphasis*).

So, what does it mean, exactly, to have God's nature in us? It means we don't have to try to be holy; we *are* holy, by virtue of his presence in us. We don't have to try to be acceptable; we are *made* acceptable by him. We don't have to try to be good; we already *are* good by his divine nature, which resides in us through his Spirit.

Have you ever wondered what would it be like to live each day totally free of shame? To be completely guilt-free, unafraid of anyone's accusation? What would that sort of freedom do to your life? I can tell you: You'd have a life without fear. You could live with abandon. You could do anything however the Lord led you, without hindrance or condemnation.

Friend, that is exactly the life that Jesus bought you. And yet, you probably aren't there yet, are you? Most of us aren't—but we have this potential. That's why Paul exhorts us to his own example: "One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you" (*Philippians 3:14-15*).

Although we can be free from condemnation, we'll never be totally free from mental battles.

As Paul points out, this is just the nature of the spiritual world we move in: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (*Ephesians 6:12*).

As we immerse ourselves in God's Word, eventually his promises become stronger in our minds than any message the enemy sends. His authoritative Word breaks the chains of fear, doubt, and unbelief that hinder us. "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ" (*1 Corinthians 2:16*).

Here is yet another aspect of God's presence in us: having the mind of Christ. No matter what mental battles we face, our stance is always one of victory, because we live and move in God's presence. Even on our worst days we're held together, propped up, and put at peace by the life and mind of Christ within us. Yet breaking chains is only the beginning of Jesus' work in us. The more time we spend with him, the more he prepares us to do his works: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (*1 John 3:8*).

To do the works of Jesus, we have to live the life of Jesus. That may sound like heresy to you. But as John instructs, "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (*1 John 2:6*). If we don't carry Christ's presence in our daily lives, we simply don't have the right to do his works. Why? Because those works are born in his presence. Jesus said even of himself, "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (*John 5:19*).

Intimacy with him is the beginning of our empowerment to do his works on earth. We simply can't move forward in those works without it. I urge you: Meet your Savior in prayer. Remind yourself of his amazing promises through his Word. He is faithful to guide you by his Spirit's presence in you. Make that your first step in doing the works of Jesus: to know him intimately. It's a work you can start today. Amen!

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