



THE PRESENCE

Experiencing More of God

ALEC ROWLANDS

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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The Presence Participant's Guide

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INTRODUCTION

AWAKENING TO THE GOD WHO IS THERE

WELCOME to *The Presence Participant's Guide*, a companion to *The Presence DVD Experience*. This six-week curriculum is designed to inspire you with real-life stories of God's presence among his people, and to help you discover how to cultivate his presence in your own life.

There is a grand story being played out in the cosmos. It is God's story, but he has gone to extraordinary lengths to make a way for you and me to participate in the story with him. God's ultimate goal is to restore all of humanity to the level of intimacy and dependence that Adam and Eve had with him in the Garden.

God has not changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He has not removed himself from his creation. He has not withdrawn from humanity. We are not left to our own devices. Though it's often hard for us to fathom, the same God who created the heavens and the earth still wants

to be present with us. He is still *Jehovah Shammah*, the God Who Is There (Ezekiel 48:35).

We were created to live in God's presence, to be with him and experience him in every area of our lives. In our efforts to tell others about faith in God, we can sometimes become fixated on the salvation equation. But salvation is not an end in itself. Salvation is not just about being justified or having our sins forgiven. It isn't even about going to heaven. (Why would we even want to go to heaven if not to be in God's presence?)

Salvation is God's gracious gift to us that removes the hindrance of our past sin and the baggage of our old nature so we can be restored to fellowship and intimacy with him. Intimate relationship is the goal of our salvation, both now and for eternity. It is in the context of our living in God's presence that our lives are transformed and we experience the joy of our salvation.

The stories on the DVD are not those of heroes or tremendously gifted people. They are accounts of ordinary people with ordinary lives that were dramatically interrupted by God's manifest presence. As we will discover, whenever God shows up in a special way, everything changes. One woman, who came to faith in Christ during a revival on the Isle of Lewis in 1949, said that when God showed up, the whole island went from spiritual indifference to being covered by a "canopy of God-consciousness." My prayer is that this DVD series and participant's guide will be one of those miraculous interruptions in your life, bringing you under a canopy of God-consciousness.

AWAKENING TO THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Because God is sovereign, we don't know where or when he will move powerfully to manifest his presence. But while we wait on him and cultivate our relationship with him, we can and will be powerfully encouraged and stirred to faith.

HOW TO USE THIS PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

I ENCOURAGE YOU to gather with some friends or family at home, with colleagues at the office, or with fellow believers at church to work through the six sessions of the series together. By God's grace, it will launch you on a remarkable spiritual journey. Each video session is approximately twenty minutes long and is designed to fit into a one-hour group meeting. However, you'll quickly discover that there are far more discussion questions than your group will be able to answer in one session. This is by design, to allow your group to focus on the questions they find most interesting. But it also makes the video series adaptable for *more* (than six) or *longer* (than one hour) sessions if your group desires more time together.

Ask your group members to prepare for each session by reading the designated chapter in this participant's guide and reviewing the discussion questions. Some of these questions will make more sense once you've viewed the DVD

session, but all are designed to inspire and inform your group discussion.

This participant's guide is also designed to enhance your reading of *The Presence*, the book on which this entire series is based. Each session includes chapter readings and questions that will take you "back to the book."

Also, be sure to see Appendix A, where you'll find some helpful guidelines for hosting and facilitating a group experience. You'll also find a place to journal additional notes from each session at the end of this guide.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

- **Identifying the Destination (3 minutes):** A brief overview of the content of each video session and recommended reading in *The Presence*.
- **Connecting with Your Fellow Travelers (4 minutes):** A brief time of sharing with the group your response to a topical statement from Alec Rowlands.
- **Committing to the Course (3 minutes):** Inviting the Holy Spirit to guide and instruct you as you begin the session.

ON THE ROAD

- **Stories of God's Presence (20 minutes):** Watch the DVD session and prepare for the group discussion.
- **Group Discussion (20 minutes):** Discuss your insights and responses to the video presentation.

HOW TO USE THIS PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

The questions are numbered for ease of identification in a group setting, not to suggest an order of importance or limit your discussion.

- **Back to the Book:** Additional discussion questions based on *The Presence*.
- **Pursuing God's Presence (7 minutes):** This is the most important part of the group session—deciding how you will use what you've learned to pursue God's presence and renew your love for him.
- **Praying for God's Presence (3 minutes):** Thank God for what he has spoken to you during the video and the discussion time and ask him to use this season in your spiritual journey to reveal his presence to you.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

In addition to the DVD series, here's what you'll need to have a successful group experience:

- A group of friends, family, neighbors, or coworkers
- A comfortable place to meet
- A DVD player

Each member of the group should also have the following:

- A Bible
- A notepad
- Something to write with

- A copy of this participant's guide
- A copy of *The Presence*

Are you ready to get started? You are embarking on a journey of faith. God invites you to draw near to him. And when you do, he promises to draw near to you. Because God is sovereign, we cannot predict when or how he will make his presence known to us; but we know that he is always faithful.

I have two words for you as you start on this journey: *perseverance* and *expectation*. I encourage you to persevere in your pursuit of God and to expect that he will make his presence known in your life. Once you have experienced God's presence, you will never be the same.

SESSION I

EXPERIENCING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

As you prepare for this session, read or review chapters 2 and 3 in The Presence.

The *heart* is a common metaphor used to describe the very center, or core, of our being. “If you want to know who a person truly is,” writes Gregory S. Clapper, “you have to find out what they love, what they hate, what they take joy in, what they fear, and in what they find peace.”¹

God’s primary concern for our Christian walk is not the frequency of our church attendance, our study of the Bible, our style of worship, our service to others, or our tithing record. His primary concern is for the condition of our hearts toward him. One of the saddest images in the book of

Revelation is that of Jesus knocking on the door of a luke-warm church, waiting to be heard and invited in for intimate fellowship.² This is, unfortunately, the current condition of much of Christianity in North America.

One Christian polling organization discovered that only 39 percent of evangelical Christians considered their faith in God to be their most important priority in life—and those numbers were more than twice the response found among other Christian groups.³ This means that more than six out of every ten Christians are pursuing other priorities ahead of God. What tragic evidence of our heart condition toward him!

We need an awakening. We need a restoration of our first love. How is that going to happen? What will turn the tide? Whatever the solution, it *must* engage our hearts with God.

Identifying the Destination

In this first session, we will journey to Durban, South Africa, to examine the life of a local congregation of believers in the early 1960s. Through their story, we will evaluate the condition of our own hearts toward God. We will also watch my father's spiritual journey to see how God got hold of his heart. And we will witness what happened when God made his presence known at a moment of incredible despair and discouragement in my father's life.

Connecting with Your Fellow Travelers

In one or two sentences, share with the group your response to the following statement:

God is more concerned about the temperature of your heart toward him than about any other component of your Christian journey.

Committing to the Course

Read the statement below and pray before viewing the DVD.

Few Scriptures are as sobering as Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (ESV). No wonder we’re concerned about being misled by our hearts. But on the positive side, we have God’s promise in Ezekiel 36:26: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

As we embark on this journey of discovery together, let’s ask God to do a work in our hearts, a work that only he can do. In order to prepare our hearts for God’s presence, let us invite the Holy Spirit to use the stories we are about to watch and the group discussion that follows to gain access to every corner of our hearts, “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13, ESV).

Prayer

Before you start the DVD presentation, pray that the group members will be able to surrender their hearts and their minds to the influence of the Holy Spirit as you watch the video and share your lives together.

ON THE ROAD

STORIES OF GOD'S PRESENCE

As you watch the DVD, make a note of anything that captures your mind and your heart.

Group Discussion

These questions are designed to be conversation starters. Focus your discussion on the ones that are the most interesting to the group.

1. What was the most interesting part of this video session for you? Why?

EXPERIENCING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

2. What do you make of the revival experience in the church in South Africa?

3. Near the end of the video, Alec asks a question about the Durban revival: “Was this a once-in-a-lifetime experience, . . . or is there a possibility that the stories you’ve heard are closer to God’s original intention for his church and for his people in every season in life?” How would you respond?

4. When Alec’s father first came to the church in Durban, he found many things in disarray. His response was to try to try to “preach it straight” by focusing on strict expository teaching from the Bible. What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach? Why do you think it didn’t work in Durban? What was the turning point in the story and what can we learn from it?

5. As a pastor, Alec's father experienced three years of extreme hardship and trial in the church in Durban. Reflecting on what happened in his life, can you identify at least three things God is able to accomplish in our hearts through hardship?
 - (a)
 - (b)
 - (c)
6. Have you ever experienced the tangible presence of God? If so, how would you describe that experience? What have been the lasting changes in your life as a result of that experience?
7. How do you respond to Alec's story of witnessing a man's withered arm being healed right before his eyes? What stood out to you in Alec's account of this healing? What does this story reveal about the presence of God?

Back to the Book

1. In chapter 2 of *The Presence*, Alec recounts a breathtaking experience of God's presence while traveling with his daughter. Have you ever experienced this kind of essential presence in your own life? How does it affect your perspective of God?
2. In chapter 2 of *The Presence*, Alec writes: "God's *presence* can sometimes be . . . elusive. Seldom are we able to find him directly, and never will we find him by our own efforts alone." How are we to pursue a God who is not always easily found, but who loves to be found?
3. Discuss the following issue from chapter 3 of *The Presence*: "It's a plain fact in Scripture that God is already everywhere, so why would we ever strive to seek *more* of him than already exists? Why would we long for a greater sense of his presence if he is already always everywhere?"

4. Based on what you read in chapter 3 of *The Presence*, how can we cultivate our hearts to put ourselves in the proper position and condition for God to make himself known to us?

Pursuing God's Presence

This is the most important part of the group session—deciding how you will use what you've learned to pursue God's presence and renew your love for him.

In partnership with the Holy Spirit within you, what specific things can you do this week to draw closer to God and prepare your heart to respond to his presence? Make a list below.

- (a) Daily time in God's Word (John 17:17; Hebrews 4:12)
- (b) Daily time in prayer (Romans 12:12; Colossians 4:2)
- (c)
- (d)
- (e)
- (f)

EXPERIENCING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Now identify and prioritize one or two of the activities listed above as a reasonable goal to pursue between now and your next meeting.

This next week, I commit to draw near to God by

Encourage one another in your group to journal your expectations and experiences as together you seek to draw closer to God and pursue his presence.

Praying for God's Presence

Thank God for what he has spoken to you through the DVD presentation and the group discussion. Ask him to use this season in your spiritual journey to change your heart and to use you as a catalyst for others to be renewed in their love for him.