



CLOSER
than
CLOSE

*Awakening to the Freedom
of Your Union with Christ*

DAVE HICKMAN

Dave Hickman has given a real gift to the church. His book is a clarion call to come back to a cornerstone of our faith: Christ *in* us. As practical and personal as it is theological, *Closer Than Close* paints a powerful picture of how rich and full life can be when we choose to live out of our *in*-ness.

JARRETT STEVENS

Pastor of Soul City Church, author of *Four Small Words*

Dave Hickman has written an empowering work that challenges us to stop trying to *earn* intimacy with God. Our greatest freedom lies in believing that Christ offers us a fully intimate *union* with God—an opportunity to live into our identity as “fully loved” sons and daughters. If you find yourself in the endless cycle of striving and trying to work for a closer relationship with Christ, you should read this book!

KEVIN PALAU

President of the Luis Palau Association, author of *Unlikely: Setting Aside Our Differences to Live Out the Gospel*

Dave Hickman reconnects us with Christianity’s deepest longing—“that all might be one . . . I in them and you in me!” Dave reveals his heart to us, and in it we see ourselves. Enjoy his journey, the journey of the church, and our own invitation from Christ to be *Closer Than Close*.

FR. MICHAEL T. MARTIN

OFM Conv., director of Duke Catholic Center

While the topic of union with Christ has been engaged at the academic level, I've hoped all the while that someone would make this important truth accessible to all Christians. Dave Hickman has done just that. With wit and keen intellect, Hickman moves us from the fact of our union with Christ to living out the reality of our union with Christ. May Christians no longer strive for a Jesus "out there" but instead realize his presence within our midst.

CHARLES RAITH II

Assistant professor of religion and philosophy, John Brown University

For a generation searching for something more authentic, something less superficial, and something of greater depth and purpose in their faith, Dave Hickman reminds us what the gospel is truly about and invites readers to come *Closer Than Close*.

ELISABETH NESBIT-SBANOTTO

Assistant professor of counseling, Denver Seminary

Dave Hickman possesses keen insight into deep truth and has a remarkable ability to make clear what all Christians need to know to grow up into union with Christ, which is so much more than escaping judgment by praying a simple, one-time prayer. This is a fine, well-written, and most welcome book.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

President, ACT3 Network

“Union with Christ” is a strange and potentially scary topic to many Christians. What most of us need is not a theologian’s detailed analysis, but the heartfelt reflections of a fellow Christian pilgrim, describing his own journey into the Christian faith’s deepest mystery and most foundational truth. Dave Hickman is such a pilgrim, and his winsome, funny, and touching story will help you to grasp the glorious freedom that comes from knowing you are united to Christ.

DONALD FAIRBAIRN

Author of *Life in the Trinity*



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DAVE HICKMAN

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FOREWORD

CLOSER THAN CLOSE is simply extraordinary.

This is mostly because of Dave Hickman's raw honesty about his years spent huffing and puffing to get closer to God, coupled with his startling insights into the mystery of God living in us. Dave's writing is powerful because it comes out of deep personal experience, which he courageously shares. Then, in an exceptionally practical and compassionate manner, he offers hopeful and helpful practices that can lead readers into an ongoing deepening awareness, appreciation, and enjoyment of God's ever-now presence in their lives.

In this achingly bold and beautiful book, Dave tells my story (perhaps your story too) by sharing his own. After nearly two decades of relentless striving and straining to gain a sense of growing closeness to God, he felt an increasing distance. He writes, "Even though I was 'saved,' I felt lost." It was not until his world had begun to fall apart that Dave realized he'd always been as close to Jesus as he could get.

Long after Dave was first united with Christ, beneath the

vener of his life lay weariness, discouragement, confusion, disappointment, and unresolved longing. Feeling orphaned in his relationship with God caused Dave to become less human and humane. Misunderstood and misapplied biblical truths damaged his closest relationships and kept him from experiencing his union with the God of his deepest longings.

It was the persistent urging of a mutual friend that led Dave to reach out to me for help. Despite my knowing that his life was spinning out of control, our initial encounter was more unsettling than I had anticipated. Immediately after he was seated in the cozy, quiet confines of my study, he nervously explained the cause for his sudden, brief, and repetitive movements that already were threatening my ability to listen.

Diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome in the fourth grade, Dave had also suffered the debilitating effects of obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention-deficit disorder, and anxiety and depression. Ever since, he had lived with an impending sense of doom. While asleep, he would sweat profusely. Upon waking, he suffered from "anxiety-induced vomiting." For years he dreaded nighttime and despised the coming of morning even more. Yet most devastating were the secrets he kept about himself. Eventually he led me into the hidden harbors of his heart, where fear, insecurity, and discontent had dropped anchor, revealing how his sense of identity had been tethered to externals, causing his sense of self-worth to be continually endangered.

FOREWORD

Dave's scorching honesty and humble transparency ravished my heart and brought me to tears. Despite the severity of his physical and emotional struggles, what had most plagued him was his soul's desperate search for what he'd already been given. Clearly, the greatest discovery of his life was when Dave woke up to the truth that he had been perfectly one with Christ since the day he gave his life to Christ.

The radical transformation that has occurred in Dave's own life is what struck me most while reading *Closer Than Close*. He writes as a man who has been ambushed and held captive by the consuming fire of God's love. It is a love, Dave writes, "that crossed all boundaries not just to be close to you, but to be closer than close."

Conveying more than information to the rational mind, Dave's words are a Spirit-infused revelation to the soul. Though every follower of Jesus knows that God loves her or him, that truth often remains *a belief we hold* instead of *a belief that holds us*. Until the truth of our union with God gets into our heart, it remains information. However, once it makes its way into our heart, it brings about transformation.

Dave's life echoes a profound truth: Only the person who has experienced the love of God really knows what the love of God is; and once you have experienced it, nothing else will ever seem more beautiful and desirable. If you plan on reading just one book this year about your life with God, this is the book that you must read. I would suggest

CLOSER THAN CLOSE

that you not just read it, but pray over each page, as I have done.

Closer Than Close heralds the matchless, liberating truth that God's intended home is our heart, and that it's meeting God in our depths, where God has always been, that truly transforms us from the inside out.

Fil Anderson

Pastor, spiritual director, and author of Running on Empty

A WORD BEFORE

THIS IS A BOOK I would like to have written twenty or thirty years from now. The truth of Christ *in* us and our being *in* Christ (see John 14:20) is a profound mystery. It's one that has captured the imaginations of countless believers throughout the centuries and has been the subject of many theological conversations and debates within the church (ancient and present). In my late thirties, I am new to the conversation. Those who have devoted their lives to the study of our union with Christ will certainly notice that a novice has somehow wandered into their ranks.

While I'm not an expert in the field, however, I am someone who has personally experienced the mysterious (and freeing) reality of what it means to be united to Christ. After years of striving to be close to Jesus, I stumbled upon the shocking reality that Jesus was already as close to me as he could possibly get. It was then that I discovered, in the words of Philip Yancey, "the Jesus I never knew."¹ Striving was replaced with abiding. Guilt gave way to joy. Fear was consumed by perfect love. Awakened to my union with Christ, I have become

a better and more loving husband, father, and pastor—as well as human being! While I’m not perfect, the truth of my union with Christ has *radically* changed me and continues to transform me every single day.

Our timing is not always God’s timing. And for whatever the reason, now is the time to share with you my story and my current understanding of the One who desires nothing less than to be “one” with those he loves. I pray God, in his time, will use this book to gently guide you into the life-giving awareness of what is *already* true of you in Christ. In doing so, may you discover the freedom and the wonder of the ever-now reality of your union with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Broadly speaking, I offer this book as my labor of love to the evangelical church of which I’m proudly a part. I hope that her leaders, pastors, and members will read this book with the heart in which I have written it—a heart bursting with love and optimism. It’s exciting to see many within my tradition beginning to reimagine faith and practice through the lens of the early church and uniting around the affirmations of the ancient creeds. In doing so, I am confident that the evangelical church will continue to experience refreshing times of renewal and reform in the years ahead.

The pages that follow contain my heart and soul. They represent my best attempt to articulate in everyday language one of the greatest discoveries of my life. As you read and interact with these pages, may our heavenly Father grant you a fresh awareness of his love and formulate a new vision for your participation in Christ’s body—the church.

INTRODUCTION

THE WHITE ARROW

YOU WOULD THINK after a lifetime of seeing it I would have recognized it. But I admit, I had no idea there was anything more than the bold lettering and the vibrant colors. But there is more, much more.

Embedded within the FedEx logo is something so unique that many people consider it to be the single most important aspect of the entire design. Because of it, the FedEx logo has won over forty major design awards and was named by *Rolling Stone* magazine as one of the eight best logos of the last thirty-five years.¹ Yet, for the first thirty-six years of my life, I remained completely oblivious to its existence.

Do you know what it is? If not, don't feel bad. I just found out about it a few months ago. Let me give you a hint. It's located between the *E* and the *x*.

For those of you whispering, "A white arrow," congratulations. You must be one of the chosen ones (or you work for FedEx).

The first time a friend pointed the white arrow out to me,

I remember being shocked (and a little embarrassed). *How could something so obvious and so blatant escape my attention all these years?* But now, every time a FedEx truck drives by, every time I receive a package, the white arrow is the first thing I see. In many ways, it's the only thing I see.



You would think after close to thirty years of being a Christian, I would have put two and two together. But I'll be the first to admit, I had no clue there was anything more to the gospel than salvation by grace, forgiveness of sins, and the ability to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Vibrant realities, sure, but that was all I saw.

Although I had read large portions of the Bible, received two degrees in theology, and listened to countless sermons regarding the nature of salvation, I remained strangely unaware of what many of my colleagues (and people throughout the centuries) have celebrated as *the* central aspect of the entire Christian faith. You can imagine my astonishment (and slight embarrassment) when an unlikely teacher pointed it out to me a few years back. But now that I've seen it, I consider it to be not only the centerpiece of the gospel but also the "glue" that binds the entire story of God together in a unified way.

Do you know what it is? Let me give you a hint. It's illustrated throughout the Bible as the relationship food and water have with the body, a building has with its foundation,

a vine has with its branches, and a husband has with his wife. You can see glimpses of it between Genesis and Malachi, but it particularly stands out in the writings of the New Testament—especially the Gospel of John and writings of the apostle Paul. So, what is this mysterious part of the gospel? See if *you* can spot it in the words of Jesus below:

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

. . . In that day you will know that I am in my
Father, and you in me, and I in you.

JOHN 14:18, 20

Did you see it? Like the white arrow, it's easy to miss. Yes, it involves the word *in*. But keep going. Here's a nudge: If something (or someone) is "in" another person, we say those two are in [blank] with each other.

Relationship? Right. But not close enough.

Harmony? Closer. But still not there yet.

Union? Ahh! Now we're seeing!

To be "in" someone and have that someone "in" us isn't just close, it's closer than close—it's to be in "union" or "oneness" with that person. Embedded in Jesus' words above lies, in the fiery words of the late Brennan Manning, the scandalous promise

that the living God seeks more than an intimate relationship with us. The reckless, raging fury of Yahweh culminates, dare we say it, in a symbiotic

fusion, a union so substantive that the apostle Paul would write: “IT IS NO LONGER I WHO LIVE, BUT CHRIST LIVES IN ME.”²



When I was growing up in the evangelical South, words such as *union* and *oneness* were rarely (if ever) used in relation to the gospel. Instead, the focus of the faith rested firmly on entering into a “relationship” with Jesus, whereby we could benefit from his “finished work on the cross”—benefits such as eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and a right standing (or status) before God. To claim to be “united” to Christ would have been looked upon with a fair amount of suspicion and associated more with “new ageism” or Eastern mysticism than “biblical” Christianity. It drew dangerously close to the clear line that separated Christ’s divinity from our humanity.

But it turns out that union with Christ has long been considered to be the central message of the gospel. John Murray, long-standing professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, contends,

Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . Union with Christ is really the *central truth* of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.³

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, affirms Murray's words: "For we await salvation from him [Christ] not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, *ingrafted into his body*, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself."⁴

But what does union with Christ mean? *How* are believers united to Christ in such a way that we are made "one" with him and "ingrafted into his body"? And more importantly, what difference does it make to understand salvation as "union and communion with Christ"? Aren't we saved by grace through faith?

While union with Christ, as a profound mystery (see Ephesians 5:32), cannot be fully *comprehended*, I am convinced that ordinary people like you and me can be *apprehended* by its reality in our lives. And as believers in Jesus Christ, we should be. Actually, we *have* to be. For to live oblivious of this truth is equivalent to a spouse being unaware that marriage is a union, or a boy never realizing there is such a thing as "sonship." Becoming conscious of our union with Christ is imperative for a full understanding of God, self, salvation, and the depths of God's eternal love and acceptance.



This book is an attempt not to offer something "fresh" or "new" but to offer hope and healing to all who need a new and fresh awareness of Jesus in their lives. This book is for everyday people who sit in pews and padded seats on Sunday

mornings, yearning to experience Jesus in a deeper way but feeling “stuck” in their faith. This book is for those who haven’t been to church in years and even for those who have thrown in the towel on trying to follow Jesus altogether. But most of all, this book is for anyone who feels tired, exhausted, skeptical, discouraged, and orphaned in his or her relationship with Christ. If any of these words describe you, may the gentle and inclusive words of Jean Vanier encourage you:

[The holiness that comes from union with Christ] is not reserved for those who are well-known mystics or for those who do wonderful things for the poor. [It] is for all those who are poor enough to welcome Jesus. It is for people living ordinary lives and who feel lonely. It is for all those who are old, sick, hospitalized or out of work, who open their hearts in trust to Jesus and cry out for his healing love.⁵

No matter who you are, what you’ve done, or how close you presently feel to Jesus, you can awaken to the mind-blowing reality of your union with Christ and experience its life-altering power. No matter if you’ve been a Christian for fifty years or a few weeks, awakening to your union with Christ will allow you to discover the intimacy with Jesus you’ve always longed for, and the type of life you’ve always wanted to live—a life overflowing with the fruits of union with Christ, fruits such as love, joy, peace, and patience. As you read, I pray you will begin to view yourself, your

relationships, the spiritual disciplines, and Christ's mission (locally and globally) in a whole new light. Most of all, I hope you will find rest for your well-worn soul. Instead of endlessly "chasing after God" and perpetually trying to "press into" the heart of Jesus, may you discover the mind-bending truth that you are already as close to God as you can possibly get—having been made one with him in Christ.

Brennan Manning once suggested that "the real dichotomy in the Christian community today is not between conservatives and liberals or creationists and evolutionists but between the awake and the asleep."⁶ Truer words have never been spoken. As you read, my personal plea to the Father is that the Holy Spirit will open your eyes and graciously allow you to awaken to the overwhelming and scandalous love that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit *already* has for you in Christ Jesus—a love that crossed all boundaries not just to be close to you, but to be closer than close.

1

STRIVING TO ABIDE

*Just a closer walk with Thee,
Grant it, Jesus, is my plea,
Daily walking close to Thee,
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.*

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

I BEGAN A RELATIONSHIP with Jesus between third and fourth grade. It was 1986—the year of Hulk Hogan, Garbage Pail Kids, and Chuck Norris action figures. Ronald “Ray-Gun” was president, gas was eighty-nine cents a gallon, and *Top Gun* was a box-office smash. I had a mad crush on the lead singer of the Bangles, and “Walk This Way” by Aerosmith and Run-DMC was my favorite song. I remember being heartbroken when David Lee Roth was “booted” from Van Halen and sitting horrified as I watched the space shuttle *Challenger* explode into a ball of flames on our wooden floor-model television.

One evening that summer I was sitting in the living room with my older sister, Amy, waiting on our parents to take us to Sunday evening service at church. Growing up in the hills of East Tennessee, everybody seemed to go to some flavor of Baptist church. There were Missionary Baptists; Primitive Baptists; Southern Baptists; Independent Baptists; Full Gospel Baptists; First, Second, and Third Baptists; and what we were—Freewill Baptists.

Most Sundays, our family would go to church in the morning and again that night. Sometimes we would go on Wednesday evenings as well, which seemed to cap off the spiritual trifecta of the week. While I heard a lot about God and Jesus when I was a kid, I never fathomed that either one (or both) wanted much to do with me. The times I did think about them (which wasn't very often), I pictured two misty figures floating around in heaven somewhere ensuring that I was "safe from harm" and "being a good boy." As for the Holy Spirit? Well, I didn't think about him at all; no one talked about him much. Having seen *Return of the Jedi*, I figured I knew everything I needed to know about the Holy Force—I mean, Holy Spirit.

I believed that God and Jesus loved me. But I also believed that they were strict and stern—critical, even. In many ways, I pictured them like Statler and Waldorf from *The Muppet Show*, two grumpy old guys eternally peering down on my life, shaking their holy heads in constant disapproval.

God: Look at that Dave Hickman down there. Boy, he's not half bad, is he?

Jesus: Nope . . . he's *all* bad!

Both: BAAAHAAAAAAAAAAAA!

But a few weeks earlier, my sister had “asked Jesus into her heart.” And now God and Jesus seemed as real to her as her right and left arm.

Amy: Dave, does Jesus live in your heart?

Me: Huh?

Amy: Okay, go to your room, close the door, get on your knees, and ask Jesus to come into your heart.

Me: Okay.

I wasn't sure what closing the door behind me and getting on my knees had to do with anything, but I did *exactly* as Amy said. I knelt beside my bed and humbly prayed, “Jesus, come into my heart.” I meant every word, even though my prayer was so brief it felt more like a magical phrase—like “abracadabra” or “alakazoo.” In my mind's eye, though, I envisioned the pasty-white, long-haired Jesus from the cover of my children's Bible open my heart with his hands and slide in, one foot at a time.

It was in that moment that God and Jesus took me by surprise. To quote the famous words of John Wesley, my heart suddenly became “strangely warmed.” I found myself overcome with a mysterious and compassionate love I had never experienced. It was deep, real, and true. While I didn't know all the theology surrounding sin and salvation,

I knew from that moment on that somehow Jesus lived in my heart.

BOUND AND DETERMINED

On that sultry summer evening in 1986, I began what I would later learn to call a “relationship” with Jesus. I later discovered, however, that having a relationship with Jesus was only the *first step* in the Christian journey. According to my youth pastor, the *overarching goal* of the Christian life was to establish a “close and personal” relationship with Jesus, and that could only come about with time.

Although “close” and “personal” were never really defined (and strangely subjective), one thing was clear: In order to be close to Jesus, I needed to do certain things—things like praying, reading the Bible, and regularly attending church. Most of all, I needed to do the things I should and not do the things I shouldn’t. According to my youth pastor (and most sermons I heard back then), the more faithful and committed I was to these things, the closer I could get to Jesus.

I became bound and determined to be as close to Jesus as humanly possible. I would wake up an hour before school, run down into the den of my parents’ house, and listen to the music of Steven Curtis Chapman and DC Talk before having my “quiet time.” I prayed using the well-known acrostic ACTS, which stands for “Adoration,” “Confession,” “Thanksgiving,” and “Supplication.” And every time the church doors were open, I was in the front row with the rest of the youth group singing my heart out.

I was so determined to be close to Jesus that I eventually threw away all of my '90s hip-hop CDs (a decision I would later deeply regret), quit going to R-rated movies, and made a promise not to have sex before I was married. I did all of this willingly and joyfully out of my love for Jesus and my insatiable desire to draw close (and remain close) to the God I loved.

By the time I entered high school, I was “on fire” for Jesus. I became the president of our local chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and took on additional leadership roles within my church. I read every Max Lucado book there was, and worked through *The Mind of Christ* by T. W. Hunt and Claude V. King twice. I was a spiritual beast. Jesus was as close to me as I was to myself back then. I was head over heels in love with him.

Most of all, I was convinced that Jesus was head over heels in love with me. I mean, how could he not be? I had done everything I knew to do to please him and draw close to him. Little did I know that in a few short years, what seemed like closeness would feel like a great distance.

DETERMINED AND BOUND

College. I went there to study theology. I also went there to play baseball. I had a passion for both and wanted to attend a school where I could play the game I loved and grow in my faith in the process. Although I received multiple offers from local universities around Tennessee, I decided to go to Montreat College, a Presbyterian school up the road from the

small town of Black Mountain, North Carolina. Because of its Bible and Religion program and impressive baseball team, I was convinced that Montreat would be a perfect place to draw closer to Jesus than ever before.

For the first semester, it was. But over time, I became preoccupied with other things: writing theology papers, dating, and playing *Mario Kart* into the wee hours of the morning. Instead of waking up early to read my Bible and pray before class, I would drag myself out of bed in a puffy-eyed fog, throw on a pair of sweatpants, and stagger into my classroom. I would normally fall back asleep before the professor even entered the room. I still wanted to stay close to Jesus, but with every morning that I skipped my devotions, I felt as if I was drifting further and further from him.

As for not doing things I shouldn't? That became a lot harder as well. Things I promised myself (and God) I would never do, I found myself doing. And doing again. And again. And then again. Although I was learning more about Jesus and wanted desperately to please and obey him, I became trapped in what seemed to be an endless cycle of sin—confession—sin—confession—sin—confession. Before long, the peaceful quiet times I used to enjoy were replaced by panicked pleas for God to forgive me of my failures the night before. Eventually, my desire to spend time with Jesus started to fade altogether as I found myself perpetually “hung over” with a lingering sense of guilt and self-condemnation.

By my sophomore year, I couldn't shake the feeling that my proximity to Jesus was somehow contingent on the faithfulness of my spiritual devotion. What I mean is, when I was consistent in praying, reading the Bible, and doing as I should, I considered myself to be "close" to Jesus. When I failed to do these things (which most often was the case), I thought myself to be "far" from him.

Before long, I became consumed with the fear of falling out of a relationship with Jesus altogether—which, consequently, only served to make me strive even harder to draw close (and remain close) to Jesus through *more* discipline, *more* study, and *more* good works. Ironically, the more determined I became, the more bound I found myself—bound by guilt, frustration, and self-condemnation. Even during the times I was able to check all the boxes on my spiritual "to do" list, there remained a strange nagging deep in my soul—a mysterious discontentedness about my relationship with Jesus. I was caught between wanting to please Jesus and not being able to. I jostled between feeling far from Jesus when I *wasn't* doing as I should, and longing to be closer still when I *was*. My life resembled the words of the apostle Paul in Romans:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . In my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work

CLOSER THAN CLOSE

within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

ROMANS 7:15, 22-24, NIV

At night in my dorm room, I would plead with Jesus to deliver me from the prison of sin and apathy I found myself in, and draw me close to him again. But no matter how earnestly I prayed, I continued to wrestle with sin at night and drag out of bed in the morning. And Jesus seemed to be a million miles away.

GONE WITH THE WIND

I wish I could tell you that somewhere between college, getting married, and becoming an “adult,” the distance between Jesus and me closed. It didn’t. If anything, the space between us continued to grow. Marriage, paying bills, and earning a living depleted my emotional reserves, making reading my Bible and praying that much more difficult. But I didn’t give up. No sir. I continued to fight for my relationship with Jesus. How could I not? To give up was incomprehensible. *How could I give up on the one relationship that was supposed to save me?*

Desperate, I joined a small group at my church. I scoured Amazon and Barnes & Noble, crossing my fingers to stumble upon that irresistible devotional (you know, the one with a good cover). I attended Christian conferences and events, praying (and paying) to press into the heart of God. I even purchased a diary (excuse me, journal) to record my feelings!

While all of these were helpful, *none of them* (not even going to church) bridged the gap for good. Jesus remained as elusive as ever, leaving me perpetually grasping for him like a child chasing a balloon in the wind.

I expressed my frustrations one evening in my journal:

Jesus,

What is wrong with me? What is wrong with us?

Why do I feel so distant from you? Why do you seem so

distant from me? I've done everything I know to do to

be close to you. Yet, why does my heart long for more

and my soul yearn for something it can't explain? Why

am I constantly dissatisfied? Why am I always striving?

Draw me close to you again, please. Reveal yourself and

make yourself real to me, I pray.

I wrote that entry in June 2003—seventeen years after beginning a relationship with Jesus. As I wrote it, I remember reminiscing on the spiritual bliss of my middle school and high school years. Actually, I've lived the large majority of my life in the shadow of that faithful, devoted little boy. The one who used to sing loud and mean it. The one who used to pursue Jesus with all his heart. The one who used to feel close to Jesus. The one who used to know he was loved of God.

But after nearly two decades of chasing hard after Jesus, I finally lost sight of him. And in doing so, I lost sight of myself. Even though I was “saved,” I felt lost. While I was a “son of God,” I felt like an orphan. While everything on the

outside appeared fine (because that's how Christians are supposed to be), on the inside I was living a life, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, of "quiet desperation."

But the wind, according to Jesus, blows wherever it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with the Spirit of God (see John 3:8). And at the most unexpected time, and through the most unlikely of ways, the Spirit of God breathed Jesus back into full view for me. And nothing could have prepared me for how close Jesus was in that moment—the moment I became a father for the first time.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Describe your faith journey. When was the first time your heart became "strangely warmed" by Christ's presence?*
- 2. In one word, describe your current relationship with Jesus. Why did you choose that particular word?*
- 3. Describe a time when you felt particularly close to God.*
- 4. The author shared that he considered his proximity to Jesus to be based on the faithfulness of his spiritual devotion (praying, reading the Bible, going to church). Do you feel this way? Have you felt this way? Explain.*