

PAUL BANE

MATT LITTON

IN THE
PRESENCE
OF
JESUS

*A 40-Day Guide to the Intimacy with God
You've Always Wanted*



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In the Presence of Jesus: A 40-Day Guide to the Intimacy with God You've Always Wanted

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Introduction

After thirty years of full-time ministry, I had arrived at a moment of desperation. I still recall pulling up a chair in the solitude of my study to take an honest inventory of my life as a Christian and as a pastoral leader. I had done all the “right things” that I’d been taught to do, but still I found myself burned out, weary, and frankly, I just didn’t sense the presence of Christ in my life. Yes, I had spent my days talking about God and had dedicated my life to serving Him, but I still felt like a nomad who had traveled far from home and couldn’t find my way back.

That morning, God seemed farther away than ever. To be honest, my spirit was thirsty, and my faith felt shallow. I could identify with all those people who had written about their souls feeling like “a barren desert.” I closed and locked the door of my office, not sure if I could go on in my ministry. I was dying for a new awareness and the real touch of God in my life.

As I prayed that morning and admitted my own failures to share the truth of God’s love and possess it in my heart, I remembered a Native American saying I had once heard growing up in Oklahoma. The wisdom of the proverb was profound to me in

that moment of spiritual despair: “The longest journey you will make in your life is the journey from your head to your heart.” The distance between my mind and my soul felt very real to me that day. I considered all the knowledge I possessed about Jesus, and yet I was not experiencing the intimate presence of my loving Savior on a heart level. That morning was a turning point in my life. There in the quiet and the stillness behind my locked office door, I invited Christ to show up . . . and He certainly did.

That moment began a journey where God helped me recognize that none of my theological training had prepared me to answer the spiritual dilemma I was facing. You see, all my degrees and my seminary studies attempted to resolve my spiritual struggles through biblical thinking, systematic belief structures, and rational thought. While I recognized the importance of those things, I had wrongly assumed that study, intellectual awareness, and cognitive knowledge were enough to produce a healthy and connected spiritual life.

I had been trained to think that if I simply worked at applying the Word of God to my life, I would naturally reflect the character of God in my behavior. In other words, if I knew everything I needed to know about the love of God in my head, then I would also feel and experience the presence and love of God in my heart. For years, this approach had made logical sense . . . until the day my heart didn’t allow me to believe it anymore. Mercifully, God brought me to that very moment of desperation when I finally understood I needed to change.

My friend, it became apparent to me that I had left my heart out of the equation. I began to see that I was incapable of thinking my way into a relationship with Christ. I realized the abundant God-centered life required focusing my heart on Christ and spending time being mindful of His presence. I also

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realized that my dilemma and its solution weren't anything new. They had been written about and practiced since the days of the early church. I simply had to go back and learn from many of the influential men and women who had shaped the Christian faith.

As I was a longtime Christian and a pastor, my intellectual faith was, of course, very genuine. But I found that I desperately needed to create intentional space to experience the love of God in my heart each day. I began to study and explore and pray about how God's love could transcend my intellect and being. My spiritual transformation started with the same questions that maybe you are asking yourself today: *Why do my thoughts and feelings constantly wander from the love of Jesus and the intimacy with Him that I so desire? How can I keep my heart open to Christ in such a fast-talking and faster-moving world? How can I nurture and maintain daily intimacy with God in the hectic pace of modern life?*

For me, the journey was a matter of survival. I knew I did not need to learn or study anything more about God; what I was thirsty for was a deeper connection. I needed to know an intimate relationship with Christ in my heart. All the standard answers from my training seemed insufficient for producing that kind of spiritual life. I realized that I needed to discover how to be mindful of God in a mindless world. I wanted to learn to live in the fullness of the moment and be truly alive in Christ.

That morning, with Christ present in the quiet of my office, was the first step toward learning the discipline of simply sitting in His presence. Day by day, I learned to quiet my busy mind and release all the worldly thoughts and anxieties that kept me from communing with God. I learned how to invite

His presence into the stillness of my life. I discovered how to find Him in the quiet of my soul, even with the chaos of the world swirling around me. I explored my heart and found the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. Frankly, I had to set aside many of the theological prejudices from my evangelical life in order to discover the gift of living in harmony and unity with God.

Through Christ's leading, I rediscovered the teaching and examples of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who practiced solitude and silence beginning in the third and fourth centuries. I learned through their direction how to experience inner peace and the presence of God. I learned to meditate and use the "Jesus Prayer"—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner"—based on Luke 18:13, in order to anchor my full attention upon Christ.

I also read *Practicing the Presence of God*, the collection of writings by Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century French lay monk, and I discovered that being mindful wasn't new to our faith. I also learned that Protestants had used the term *watchfulness* as a way of focusing their awareness upon Christ. All these forgotten practices seemed so relevant to modern life. I learned to calm my thoughts and to meditate on God's presence using the Psalms. I learned to become still in my spirit like Jesus when He stole away from His disciples and spent time alone with His Father. Most of all, I learned that all these rich spiritual practices were everywhere in Christian tradition.

I am not exaggerating when I say my life was transformed on this journey of discovering what many call contemplative faith practices. I found that there is a divine mystery in the quiet when I am alone with God. I was overjoyed to discover a depth of love and peace in my heart that is indescribable and eternal.

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In my relationship with God, an essential truth regarding time became very apparent. I learned that I can only “be” present with God in the now or the present moment. Over time, I learned how to practice *living* in the present moment with God. It wasn’t overnight. It was a discipline that took repetition. But the concept of being present with God revolutionized my life, my faith, my relationships, and my ministry. Once I found that the intimate presence of God was always there for me, I was wrapped up in a holy embrace of mercy, grace, and love.

Since it was such a transformation, I set out to share my experience with a few close friends. I quickly found that my desperation for intimacy with God amidst the noise and pressures of modern-day life was a common dilemma. Before long, I had connected with a million people from all backgrounds and all walks of life who also wanted to journey into a more grounded and mindful relationship with Christ. That journey was the inspiration for the book you now hold in your hands. I sincerely hope that these daily readings will open your heart and take you on the same healing journey that I have experienced.

In the Presence of Jesus is a forty-day contemplative experience meant to help you become fully aware of the living, resurrected Jesus. It is designed to ground you in the presence of Christ and introduce you to the important contemplative ideas that have been forgotten in many of our Christian faith traditions. I encourage you to open these pages and create space in your life to anticipate God’s arrival. I pray that no matter where you are on your life journey, you will find a secret place in His presence that you never dreamed existed. I want to invite you to listen for the voice of God in the silence of your heart.

My hope is that, during these coming weeks, you will discover practices that will help you let go of your thoughts and

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exchange them for the thoughts and feelings of God. I believe you will find the hidden treasure your spirit has been longing for as you learn to invite the presence of Christ into your life, just as I did. I know you will find that God's presence is always here, surrounding you and dwelling within you. After all, He tells us that He stands at our door and knocks, patiently waiting on us to answer (Revelation 3:20). May you find Christ, who is eternally longing for you to turn to Him, always healing you, forever teaching you, and steadfastly fulfilling His promises to you.

*Blessings in Christ,
Pastor Paul*

Entering the Seasons of the Great “I Am”

How to Use This Forty-Day Devotional

This devotional actually began in the most natural of ways, with an unexpected friendship and an organic conversation over coffee, as Pastor Paul and I connected in our mutual battle to stay spiritually grounded despite the chaos of modern-day life. Our shared interest in contemplative Christian disciplines led us to create a daily exercise that could help us maintain our connection to God. This devotional is a resource spiritually rooted in historical faith practices that the church has simply lost touch with over the years. Today, we need these practices more than ever. To put it in the words of the Native American proverb that changed everything for my friend Paul, we hope that this devotional will help you connect your head to your heart.

In a Richard Foster book from the 1970s, I noticed a reference to the noise and hurry of modern life that works to separate us from our awareness of the Divine. It is astounding to consider how much truer that is today. I'm sure you've

noticed the insidious way modern life—with its digital universes attached to our hands and wrists, and instantaneous connections fixed in our ears—can uproot our faith by keeping us fixated on *anything* but the present moment. I've even read that in the not-too-distant future, connectability somehow could be integrated into our bodies! All this has led us into an age where our levels of anxiety, fear, loneliness, and depression continue to soar.

Fortunately, a great antidote for this deep unrest can be found—not in some new device, pill, or high-minded formula but in a daily spiritual routine. It is an ancient and straightforward practice used by Christian believers for more than a thousand years. And it is actually quite simple. We believe spending time intentionally focused on the presence of God can place you on solid ground. But you must embrace being present and mindful. Learning to practice the awareness of God, to enter the presence of the Great “I Am,” to sit in stillness with Jesus each day, is the only real way to find peace in the world. It is truly how God transforms us. We hope this book can help lead you into the arms of Jesus moment by moment. So let's begin by answering some questions that will help you get the most from this forty-day experience.

Why Is the Book Organized into Four Movements Called Seasons?

The four movements of the devotional are called seasons because so many of Jesus' parables used agricultural references. Most of us have lost the truth of how valuable slow and natural growth is. In our instant download, on-demand, fast-food culture, we've lost our connection to the healthy rhythms of

God’s creation and a life centered on the different seasons of growing and harvesting. Seasons also remind us God is *always* at work, even when we cannot see what He is doing. Spring brings rebirth and new hope. Summer produces growth. Fall releases and celebrates the harvest. Winter is the time of darkness and death, rest and reset. Seasons mirror the cycles we experience in life, cycles of physically growing, raising families, building careers, and relishing retirement. You see, Christ is present and at work through every season of life just as He is through each season of nature. This journey is intended to be a tool to help you grow deep roots in the rich soil of your faith that can sustain you through every season.

How Do the Different Seasons of the Great “I Am” Work Together?

The Gospel of John reminds us that Jesus was there at the beginning of Creation. Entering the presence of the Great “I Am” means that we are bringing our awareness of Christ’s presence with us in every moment. Each season of the devotional is designed to wake us to the character of Christ and the way He is present and working in our lives. Every season is organized into a *ten-day movement* that provides us enough time to focus on a particular aspect of God’s presence and truly allow it to transform the way we live.

Throughout the Bible, we witness God’s people undergoing forty days of waiting: Noah in the ark, Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah fasting in the desert, and Jesus fasting and being tempted in preparation for His ministry. And throughout the history of Judeo-Christian traditions, forty-day liturgical observances such as Lent have been the measure for spiritual

revival, rejuvenation, and regrowth. Our hope is that the next forty days will be transformative for you.

What Will I Learn about Christ in Each Season?

Season One: I Am Always Waiting focuses on building our foundational awareness of the reality that no matter where we are in our lives, Christ is always there for us. It is the bedrock of faith that He is always pursuing us and His grace is always sufficient. This season allows us to explore the compassion and love of Christ, who secured our reconciliation and awaits our homecoming with open arms.

Once we grow in our understanding of God's patience and grace, we move into *Season Two: I Am the Great Physician*, which focuses on opening our hearts to the truth that Christ is always our cure. Not just for our physical ailments but also for our emotional and spiritual brokenness. Christ invites us to bring all our sins, our illnesses, and our wounds to Him for healing. He longs to make us whole.

In *Season Three: I Am the Way*, we progress into meditating on the eternal reality that Christ is our Teacher—He is always instructing us, leading us to follow in His footsteps, and working to perfect us. He is shaping us in His image. And if we follow in His footsteps, we will find eternal joy.

Season Four: I Am the Promise is the culmination of accepting Jesus' goodness. We spend the final ten days building our trust in God. No matter what we face in life, no matter what season we are in, we serve a God who is always "for us." This season is a movement into meditating on and accepting the truth that Jesus is always our Advocate and His promises to

us endure forever. He is always fighting for us, longing for us, defending us, and wanting the best for us!

Daily Application: How Do I Use the Book?

Each day's reading and practice are designed to take approximately ten to fifteen minutes. Try to find a quiet space where you won't be interrupted, preferably in the morning! This was quite challenging for me. I had to retreat to corners of my house and even my back porch early in the morning to find quiet. You might want to use a journal for the reflection activities or to write down your thoughts each day, but you certainly don't have to. Paul and I have found the reflection activities make for some great small group discussions if you choose to go on this journey with a community. There are many parts of this book intended to introduce you to contemplative faith practices, but it can also be used as a straightforward devotional.

What Is the Invocation?

Invocation is just a fancy word for inviting Christ's presence into your devotional time. The invocation is designed to be a short prayer of invitation. For several moments, you can repeat the invocation while focusing on your breath. This prayer can help bring your attention to Jesus and your awareness to the present moment. This is an age-old Christian practice that is often called the "Centering Prayer" or the "Prayer of the Heart."

At the beginning of each season, we provide you with a unique approach to using the invocation as a spiritual exercise by reading each line and allowing it to bring you into the presence of Christ or into the Holy Now. Feel free to try the

traditional contemplative approach or just prayerfully use the sentence to invite the Holy Spirit into your time of devotion. The invocation is the same for the entire ten-day season so that you can grow accustomed to using the same words. On some days, my thoughts are like kites in a strong breeze, and no matter how hard I try to focus on God's presence, I keep thinking of meetings later in the day or my children or some nagging work issue. Other days, I am able to focus immediately. Don't be discouraged if you find this challenging at first. And remember, as Scripture promises, whenever you invite the Great "I Am" into your space, He will make His enduring presence known.

How Do I Use the Time with Jesus?

Each day begins with a personal note as if it were written by Jesus to you. It has been drawn carefully from the accompanying Scriptures and communicates biblically researched and theologically grounded truths about God's enduring presence and nature. It is meant to open your heart to the voice of Jesus. Each of the forty daily notes is designed to point you toward the eternal truths of Jesus' grace, love, and desire to connect with you. It is important to understand that each of them contains a lesson teaching a biblical truth that will help you grow deeper roots into the understanding of Christ's character. You may find some notes are more meaningful to you than others. You will also discover as you reread and reuse this book that they will likely mean different things to you as your circumstances change and you move through seasons of your life journey. We know from experience that God can use these to speak specifically into a situation you may be facing in your life this very day.

How Do I Use the Scripture?

Each daily reading includes several Scripture verses that support the truth of Christ’s character as it relates to you. You may want to read them slowly and prayerfully several times, asking God to reveal Himself through His Word. Meditating on Scripture in this way is an introduction to an ancient Christian practice called *Lectio Divina*. On some days, you may even feel led to write out a verse and put it in a place where you will see it often. Praying a Scripture over and over is a great practice. Of course, the traditional approach of memorizing each Bible verse that speaks truth and hope to you can also be an incredible life-giving discipline.

What Is the Purpose of the Reflection?

This section of the daily reading challenges you to apply the spiritual lessons and biblical truths to the context of your daily life and your ongoing journey with Jesus. It also helps you move toward a deeper understanding of the Great “I Am” and His enduring love for you. You may want to keep a journal and write your responses to the daily reflection activities. The reflection can also be used as a great catalyst for community discussion if you are journeying through the forty days with a small group. At the very least, the reflection will provide some challenges for you to consider and some practices to apply to your life.

How Can I Implement the Daily Prayer?

The prayer is a directive that asks Jesus to continue to show Himself to you throughout your day. It reinforces the daily

practice of coming before God and depending on Him to guide you. Each prayer highlights the truths of God's presence in your life. Not only does God respond to our prayers, but He changes our hearts as we learn to pray faithfully. We sincerely hope that this formal prayer practice grows into a daylong, informal, running conversation with Jesus. I have found it helpful not just to begin each morning with a formal prayer like this but to come back to this prayer at the end of my day as well.

What Should I Do with Today's Blessing?

The blessing is the benediction of your daily devotion. It is a challenge for the day. It is also your hope for the day. In a small group setting, it should be read aloud together. I have found reading the blessing out loud, even when I am working through the devotional time in solitude, seems to set the tone for the rest of my day. You are declaring to the world that your hours ahead are committed to your Creator. It is the final affirmation that God is not just present with you in these few moments, but that He is on the move with you wherever you go. We have found that it is often helpful to write this blessing down and repeat it throughout the day.

Some Final Thoughts

Let me assure you that anyone can use this book! In fact, it is designed for people who have no experience with contemplative faith practices at all. It is okay if you have never even heard words such as *contemplative*, *prayer of the heart*, or *mindfulness*. (Although we do think those of you who already use these ancient Christian practices will enjoy it as well.) We wrote this

book with the simple mission of helping you grow deep and unshakable roots that stretch into the well of Living Water that is Christ's very presence. And we know that those roots can hold you steady in the chaos of modern life, as they have for us. I want to encourage you to take the parts of the reading that you find helpful to connect you to the presence of Christ and simply leave the rest. Above all, may you discover the peace of the resurrected Jesus in new and redeeming ways through these pages.

*With grace and gratitude,
Matt Litton*



SEASON ONE

I Am Always Waiting

The Centering Prayer

Dear Jesus, may I be *still* and *aware* that Your enduring love is always present and waiting on me.

Dear Jesus, may I be *still* and *aware* that Your enduring love is always present.

Dear Jesus, may I be *still* and *aware* of Your enduring love.

Dear Jesus, may I be *still* and *aware*.

Dear Jesus, may I be *still*.

Dear Jesus, may I *be*.

ONE

I AM ALWAYS AT YOUR DOOR

INVOCATION

Dear Jesus, may I be *still* and *aware* that Your enduring love is always present and waiting on me.

Listen up! I stand at your door and knock. And I promise that in every moment of your life, I am *present* and *patiently* waiting to commune with you. Since the beginning of time, My eternal blueprint and My deepest desire has been to walk closely with you through every step and every season of your life. Why? Because I want to reveal My love to you, to share My grace with you, and because I never want you to feel alone or hopeless. But you should also know that I will not kick your door down. I will never force My way into your life.

I understand how crazy your living space can feel behind your closed door. I know about the restless thoughts that

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keep you awake at night. I recognize the anxiety you feel for your loved ones and how often those worries invade your entire being. I know that you feel you have so much to do and so little time to do it. I hear you when you wonder if you will ever get a moment's peace. I know how loud and overpowering life's uncertainties can seem as they swirl around you. But even when you are too distracted or overwhelmed to hear Me, I am still here, calling your name.

And when you are ready to let Me in, you simply need to open the door, and I will be standing there. You do not have to clean house or prepare dinner for Me. You don't have to dress up or try to put your best foot forward. You don't have to worry about where you have been or what you have done when you invite Me in. Leave all those worries to Me. I just want to be with you. When you invite My presence into your life, peace, comfort, and abiding joy will rush into the depths of your soul. My work of true salvation begins when you encounter My love and ask Me to reside in your heart. I cannot wait to dwell with you and be a part of every aspect of your life.

Remember that I Am the Creator of all the stars in the sky. I Am the Author of time. I Am the Alpha and Omega, and yet I have come to stand at *your* door because My deepest desire is for us to be together. I am always patient and steadfast in anticipation of your invitation. I am forever longing to share My love with you. I want to move into your life so that you can witness My resurrected glory the way the apostle Paul did. This very day, this very moment, in this very breath, even in the most chaotic moments of your life, I stand at your door and knock. Are you ready to welcome Me?

SCRIPTURE

Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.

REVELATION 3:20

Be . . . as though you were waiting for your master to return from the wedding feast. Then you will be ready to open the door and let him in the moment he arrives and knocks.

LUKE 12:35-36

REFLECTION

There is something invasive about even a loved one coming into the intimacy of your home. It can be extremely stressful to try to get your house perfect before someone visits. But consider the profound revelation that the God of the universe did not wait for you to come to Him, but He patiently waits outside your door. The truth is that Jesus longs to be invited into every moment of your life, whether you are experiencing stress, worry, grief, or joy. He wants to bring His presence and unconditional love to every aspect of your existence. As you go through the busyness of this day, quiet yourself to listen for Jesus' gentle knock. Consider what anxiety, need, relationship, and moment He is patiently waiting for you to release to Him. What areas of your life are you trying to keep hidden from Christ?

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DAILY PRAYER

Lord Jesus, please help me hear Your gentle knock today. Clear my mind of anything that distracts me from responding and inviting You in. Thank You for patiently waiting. I will let go of the illusion that I need to do anything to get my life in order before I open myself to You. I invite You into the living spaces of my life this very moment. Forgive me for shutting You out. Fill my life with Your Spirit, and bring me the deep and abiding joy that You have promised. Amen.

TODAY'S BLESSING

May you boldly invite the God of the universe into the living spaces of your life today. May you sit in silence as He moves throughout each room of your life. And no matter where you go, may you always be aware that He gently knocks at your door.