

## Intimacy with God

*David Powlison*

**M**ary Anne was a new Christian. And she honestly wondered what it meant to know God personally and intimately. Would the Bible speak to her like a magical fortuneteller, yielding answers to today's questions as she "flipped and pointed"? Or would God speak directly via words audible in her soul? Would He communicate to her through strong impressions and emotions? Should she internally repeat "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" like a mantra to elicit religious experiences? Would God guide and teach her through dreams? When she felt warm and giddy, was she close to God? When she felt dry or discouraged, was she far from God? When things didn't go well at work, was God upset with her and trying to get something through her head? Were difficulties in life a sign that the devil was opposing her, and she should trust God and press on? Or was God opposing her and trying to get her to change directions? Mary Anne wondered if she was getting the right message from her feelings and circumstances.

### **Puppet Master or Parent?**

Mary Anne was confused about her intimacy with God and about God's intimacy with her. She viewed God as a somewhat mysterious puppet master, busily pulling strings both in her soul and in her world in order to communicate with her. She imagined that intimacy meant becoming sensitive to God's mysterious tugs; she feared that she might prove a somewhat obtuse puppet. She feared God's will might prove

unclear, that she might misread something and make a mistake that would put her outside of God's favor. Mary Anne didn't yet realize that God was a loving Father and wise King in the business of raising up His children into His image: responsible, loving, wise decision-makers. She did not yet realize that the emotions of the most profound intimacy were not inconsistent with such things as reason, volition, hard work, counsel. God was at work in Mary Anne, not to make her into His puppet, but to grow her up into adulthood.

It's no surprise that Mary Anne got confused about intimacy with God. We human beings get confused easily enough about intimacy with each other. Before she was a Christian, Mary Anne had often confused true closeness with the emotional rush that accompanied cathartic honesty. She had confused true love with the intoxication of romantic and sexual attraction. She had confused true friendship with the sense of comradeship that came when she had shared intense experiences with others. Over time the falseness of such hopes had become clearer amid the wreckage of betrayals and disappointments. The living God had first met Mary Anne as light in the darkness of her confusion about intimacy with people.

### **Understanding God's Ways**

It's easy to get just as confused about intimacy with God. The living God continued to meet Mary Anne as light in the darkness of her perplexity about intimacy with Him. God promises that our relationship to Him is the most profound and significant

form of intimacy possible. He describes Mary Anne's oneness with Him in wonderful terms: mutual indwelling, love poured out in her heart through the Holy Spirit, husband and bride, parent and child, branches and trunk, a fruit tree deeply rooted by streams of living water. And the Psalms communicate a warmth and immediacy of our relationship back to God: honesty, gratitude, bewilderment, anguish, hope, trust, and the rest. But what do all these things *mean*? How do these things differ from what Mary Anne imagined intimacy with God was all about? Consider with me the following inexpressibly wonderful truths. Mary Anne's heart swelled at such truths. She leapt forward in wisdom, joy, and confidence as she grasped exactly how God intended to be intimate with her. She grew up as a woman after God's own heart.

**God watches you.** The Searcher of hearts sees everything, inside and out. "The LORD searches every heart, and understands every motive behind the thoughts." The Christian life is the absolutely open life, and can be lived in the wide open. Nothing need be furtive, because nothing is really "private." He who sees everything will evaluate everything that He sees. The fear of the Lord—Holy eyes gaze upon us!—is the beginning of wisdom. What amazing joy came as Mary Anne realized that she lived *coram Deo*, in the very presence of the God who had set His steadfast love upon her. (1 Chronicles 28:9; Proverbs 5:21 and 9:10; Psalm 139; Hebrews 4:13)

**God watches over you.** God oversees, guards, protects, provides, and looks out for the well-being of His children. You are never out of sight of the one whose steadfast love has been set on you, who looks out for you. Those who harm the apple of God's eye incur wrath. The protectiveness of a mother for her infant pales in comparison with God's jealous care. Ask for daily bread from our Father, because He is the one who sustains your life. (Psalm 121 and 23; 2 Thessalonians 1; Isaiah 49:15; Matthew 6; Psalm 145)

**God's hand is involved in every circumstance.** God is present in the midst of every trouble. There are no accidents in the lives of God's children. He is up to something good in the lives of His own. God's providence means that a guiding hand rests on every event. This is true, though in our experience we may feel perplexed, forlorn, empty, confused, distracted. We may feel forsaken even by God, but at that very moment He is working an eternal weight of glory. We may feel only agony and anguish, and yet be inseparable from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Mary Anne can TRUST in a personal and caring providence. She need not think she must somehow discover or obey God's secret will of control, somehow reading the message in

mysterious puppet strings. She need not think that raw experience registers intimacy or forsakenness. We are meant to read God's presence, will, and attitude *into* circumstance and experience, not *from* circumstance and experience. She can aim to trust and obey in the midst of anything, however difficult and perplexing. (Job; 2 Corinthians 4; Romans 5:1-10 and 8:18-39; 1 Peter 1:3-13 and 4:19; James 1:2-5; Psalm 119:67 and 119:71).

**God's voice speaks to you in all circumstances.** The Holy Spirit is the final author of the Bible, and the Bible speaks to all of life. Did Mary Anne need to learn about right and wrong, about true and false? Yes. And the living, true, speaking God had given her eternal and unalterable guidance in His written Word. A Christian is and must be a person of the Book, because Christ Himself lived by the Book. Those sheep who hear Jesus' voice hear the Bible. Did she need to understand anger and fear, anguish and joy, loneliness and hope? Yes. The voice of God is not ambiguous. Did she need wisdom about sex, money, citizenship, the purpose of her life? Yes, and no mysteries about where to find such wisdom. Did she need to make sense of sickness and health, betrayal and fidelity, bereavement and child-bearing? Yes. The Holy Spirit speaks in the Word to make her wise. God Himself would personally teach her. When Jesus said, "Come unto me...learn from me," Mary Anne was one of those He had in mind. The Lord was about the business of intimately uprooting her ignorance and evil. He was realigning her internally: heart, mind, conscience, soul, memory, plans, values, beliefs, meaning, desires. He was realigning her externally: words, deeds, choices. He will persist in training her to become like Jesus. That is an intimacy worth living and dying for! (Luke 4:1-21 and 24:25-49; John 10:27; Matthew 11:28-30; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Psalm 1 and 119)

**God's ear is open to the cry of His children.** "I love the LORD, because He hears my voice." God hears our gratitude and our joy. God hears our distress. God hears our requests. When God said, "The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God," He meant it. Mary Anne has been invited to enter into the throne room of the Most High. To "call on the Lord" is to be heard. It is the very definition of someone who knows God. That is intimacy of incalculable worth! (Psalm 116; Philippians 4:5f; 2 Timothy 2:22; Ephesians 2:18, 3:11-21, Hebrews 4:16)

**God extends powerful help to you.** Christianity is not about working up some sort of emotional or religious experience. Mary Anne was coming to know the God who IS and who DOES. God is the ruler of the universe, not a privately engaging ecstasy manifest within

---

the interiority of the soul. The Christian God is the living and true God, a personal being, not an impotent idol, a personal being, not a mystical experience. God is simply *there*, simply *here*, and always *at work*, whatever else is or is not going on. As Mary Anne learned how to pray, she learned also to see how God actively works. To become party and witness to God's redemptive love is an intimacy worth shouting about. The fog around Mary Anne's previous understanding of "spirituality" began to part, and the work of the Spirit became more and more evident on the stage of real life. (Psalm 115; Psalm 3; 2 Corinthians 1)

**God moves the hearts of people, that we might know Him**, believe in Him, and serve Him. The Father draws people to Jesus Christ. He reveals Himself to us. "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." "If you seek Me, you will find Me." As Mary Anne began to grasp the stupendous miracle of her growing faith, she marveled at the intimate inworking of God's power. Her heart had been changed. By God. (John 6; 2 Corinthians 3-4, especially 4:6; Luke 11:9-13; 1 Chronicles 28:9)

**God pours out His love in your heart through the Holy Spirit.** He makes you understand the message of grace in Jesus Christ. Intimacy? Of the highest order. Of the deepest depths. Of the most enduring happiness. Apart from God's self-revelation in Scripture? No way. The Spirit's power makes the Spirit's message a joy in the hearts of listeners. The inexpressible gift of intimacy with God was Mary Anne's. Does this mean that our experience of God's care is unwavering? All Scripture and all human experience tell otherwise. We waver, drift, forget. Our vision dims. We get distracted. Our hearing gets bad. But God works over the long haul. And He uses sufferings. Hardships distract, tempt, and overwhelm us. We are told repeatedly that in fact these very things provide the context in which God's "steadfast love" becomes better known. John Newton put it this way: "These inward trials I design, from sin and self to set thee free, to break thy schemes for earthly joy, that thou may'st find thy all in me." (Romans 5:3-5; James 1; 1 Peter 1; numerous Psalms)

**God gives wisdom to those who ask for it.** Do you know you lack? Do you long to be done with the chaos and fog of sin, to know the joy of growing righteousness? Mary Anne realized that her view of intimacy with God had some distortions in it, just like her view of human intimacy had been distorted. And she marveled that God freely gave wisdom, helping her see Himself, herself, other people, and all reality through new eyes. She experienced intimacy with God the way

God intended. She came to know herself as a daughter whom an infinitely wise Father was raising from the follies of childishness to the joys of adulthood. (Proverbs 2:1-11; James 1:5; Matthew 5:6)

**God is with you, immediately and personally at work.** He is at work both in you and in those whom you seek to help by speaking the truth in love. What Mary Anne discovered is for all God's children—pastors and other counselors included. John 10:27 and John 15:1-5 are foundational sources of confidence for any and all ministry: Christ's sheep hear His voice; the Vinedresser prunes those who are in Christ. God works within His people, therefore we can pitch in towards others. Those in whom He begins to work, He will continue to work until the day when glory and joy are revealed, until the day when the intimacy of faith becomes the intimacy of sight. The apex of all hope and happiness can be stated in four words: *God is with us*. This is one of Jesus' names: Emmanuel. This is the supreme promise: I will be *with* you. This will sustain you while you live and when you die. When you are elated, your happiness will be infused with thankfulness. When you agonize, your suffering will be infused with hope because of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Philippians 1:6; 2:13; 1 John 3:1-3; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:15; Matthew 1:23; Joshua 1:5-9; Matthew 28:20; John 14:16-23; Colossians 1:27; Revelation 21:3)

Intimacy with God? The Bible is about the subject. Let the Bible speak for God on the matter. What does intimacy with God look like? What are His purposes? God must often take away childish toys in order to give us grown-up joys. He met Mary Anne. He can and will meet you, and me, and those to whom we minister. God has not left us groping to understand His ways. He has not left us afloat in the ambiguous ecstasies and despairs of both experience and circumstance. He has revealed His ways. He has revealed Himself. The living faith that listens to the living Word of the living God will experience the sort of living intimacy that gives foretastes of heaven.

### **For Application**

You know people like Mary Anne. Maybe you see something of Mary Anne in yourself. You certainly need the same living, working God she needs. It can be perplexing to sort out what it means to KNOW God. How can we become those who experience the true happiness of life in Christ, those "poor in spirit" who know their need and know God's inexpressible gift? (Matthew 5:3; 2 Corinthians 9:15; 1 Peter 1:3-9)

**1. Ponder each of the bold-print statements.** Simply say each truth to yourself. Think about what it

---

means. Think what it would mean if you remembered this every moment of your life, if you knew this with every particle of your being. Call to mind times when you are dry, or anxious, or irritable, or complaining, or discouraged. Think each statement into that situation, considering its weight and significance. Do the same in your current situation. Personalize each statement into a confession of faith to God: "Your eye is on me.... Your hand is involved in every circumstance in my life.... Your Word speaks to me in every part of life...."

**2. Study each of the passages** this article mentions. Ask God to show Himself to you. Look at the context, the story, or teaching that surrounds the passage. What were the implications of this for those who first heard it? What are the implications for you today? You will be richly blessed by God Himself, who will open the eyes of your heart to Himself (Proverbs 2:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-21 and 3:14-21; Luke 11:13).

What Mary Anne came to know and love is for you. It is for each and all of God's beloved children in Christ Jesus our Lord.

\* \* \*

Several themes thread through this issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*: the relationship between preaching and counseling, the slow fires of the grief process, the components of godly relationships, using vivid illustration in ministry.

We open with an interview with Pastor John Street, "Exegete the Bible; Exegete the Person." He has developed a lively ministry of counseling and training in the congregation he pastors, and he speaks of how that came about.

Joseph Lehmann's "Believing in Hope" puts onto paper his meditations on Scripture and experience in the aftermath of his wife's death. He closely examines the expectations of God that we bring to our sufferings. Some of these expectations are self-generated; some are brought to us by well-intended counselors and would-be comforters.

In "How to Help a Grieving Child," Judy Blore discusses how children grieve and how to help them

through their loss. The hard questions, the acting out, the withdrawal, the bland coping, and the heartache must all be addressed with tenderness and wisdom.

Joshua Harris discusses "Seven Habits of Highly Defective Dating," giving young adults and single adults an eye-opener about the dating game and the alternatives. Harris would not have us distracted from such solid treasures as commitment and contentment, friendship and love, maturity and true knowledge of another.

"Christian Communication" by Jeffery Forrey applies Ephesians 4 and Proverbs 18 to the details of daily human interaction. To become a *communicator* worthy of the word is to become a constructive and peaceable human being.

We've turned to *The New Yorker* (not our usual source of grain for the mill!) for a charming discussion of the current fad for genetic explanations of human behavior. "The Gods Are Anxious," by Louis Menand, gently satirizes theories that attribute human agency to biological programming.

Steven Jussely makes "A Case for Illustrative Preaching." Communication that is fit for human consumption needs stories, word pictures, vivid language, and application. The need is woven into the very nature of Scripture, language, human nature, and our times.

In "Illustrative Counseling" I develop Jussely's point, applying it to personal ministry and to case studies. Biblical principles and doctrines must be doubly illustrated: first, by tailored stories and images; second, by the life of the counselor.

In "Let Me Draw a Picture" Winston Smith discusses several of the drawings that he uses as teaching tools in marriage counseling.

We review two books, *Totally Sufficient* by Ed Hindson and Howard Eyrich and *How to Help Angry Kids* by Lou Priolo.

Finally, the struggle with temptation to any sin obviously varies greatly from time to time and place to place. In *Queries & Controversies*, Alan Medinger discusses one significant reason that struggles with sexual temptation vary in intensity.