

Week Six
Reading

THE POWER OF PRESENCE

SHE CHANGES YOU

She changes you.

No, she doesn't.

Yes, she does.

No, she doesn't.

Yes, she does.

Better or worse?

Better.

She makes me better?

Much.

How?

You've stayed in the same job for more than six months. You take better care of your body. You're content. Best of all, you chew with your mouth closed.

I chewed with my mouth open?

Wide open. Like a cow chewing its cud.

That's gross.

Yes, she's good for you.

HE CHANGES YOU

He changes you.

I know.

He really changes you.

I know.

You're not the same person you used to be.

I know. Isn't it great?

No.

It's not great?

No. It's not great.

But you said he changes me?

He does.

Not for the better?

Not for the better.

How?

You don't laugh anymore. We used to laugh a lot. Now you're serious all the time. Actually, you're worse than serious. You're gloomy.

Gloomy?

Yes, gloomy.

That's not good.

No, it's not.

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Let's be honest. We'd like to think of ourselves as immutable pillars of strength unchanged by those around us, but it's simply not true. For better and for worse, we are changed by the presence of others. At times, the change is immediate, but shallow: The teenage girls abruptly change their conversation when Dad walks into the room. At other times, the change happens over time, and it's deep: The troubled young boy grows into a confident young man through the influence of a committed mentor.

The power of presence, of course, cuts both ways. Scripture says as much...

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm (Proverbs 13:20).

We've seen this. Even more, we've experienced it. We think back to that season of life where we were in a friendship or ran with a group of friends who clearly brought out the worst in us. Maybe that season is years ago or maybe that season is the current season. Either way, we see this and know this. It's easy to see in younger years, but the influence of others is not reserved for junior high peer pressure. The influence of others is felt in the boardroom and the family room. We are changed by the presence of others.

The power of presence is more than simply our tendency to play to other people's opinions. Yes, the normal desire to be liked influences our actions, but there's more to it than that. Consider a young girl. She is not just influenced by her very normal desire to please her dad. She is also influenced by her father's character. Is he a peaceful man, or is he anxious? Does he make her feel safe, or does he frighten her? Does she sense confidence or insecurity in her dad? For better and for worse, her father's presence will influence the young girl, not just by what he does, but by who he is. The same could be said of other seasons of life.

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How about the presence of one's boss? Is he confident or arrogant? Does he bring stability or instability? Is the boss someone who offers constructive criticism, or does he belittle people to make himself feel superior? His presence, for better and for worse, influences those around him. Spend a little time with that boss and be changed a little. Spend a lot of time with him, and there's potential for much change. The insecure can grow in confidence, and the confident can grow in insecurity. Yes, we must take responsibility for ourselves, but clearly, one of those responsibilities is to consider whose presence we bring into our lives.

There are many important questions we could address when considering the power of presence. Yes, we could address questions of community, friendships, and family. These are important questions deserving of our attention. But there is a question of great significance that is consistently neglected when considering this topic. It's neglected, in large part, because the subject of this question is not commonly considered a *real* person. The question comes from one of Christ's most profound statements.

I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Christ is present. So consider this: *What influence does Christ's presence have on us?*

The question is straightforward, but it's a question ripe for simplistic answers. It's ripe for simplistic answers because, as mentioned, the ongoing presence of Christ in our lives is not commonly considered *real* or *personal*. Although we know God as a *being*, we commonly neglect God as a *person*. We think of him as *other*, as *different*. To be sure, God is both *other* and *different*, but this does not mean he is some sort of impersonal force. To the contrary, a central purpose in Christ's coming was to make God known. Scripture says as much...

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (John 1:18).

So we must not miss Christ's profound statement that he is always with us, to the very end of the age. This statement was not just for his immediate audience. If it were just for his immediate audience, he would not have added the statement, "*to the very end of the age.*" He was speaking to them, but he was speaking to us, too. Christ's presence continues to this day. For what purpose? The simple answers may be good answers, but if we answer too quickly we'll miss the profound. We must think broadly. What does God's presence bring about in our lives? Hold that thought. We'll come back to it in a moment. For now, roll the clock forward.

THE END OF THE AGE

Let's be blunt: Life as we know it will one day cease. We will breathe our last breath. For some, this will be decades from now. For others, the final exhale is moments away. Scripture is clear: We need not "*grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Yes, we will breathe our last breath, but our last breath here is not the ultimate end. In Christ, we have hope. Which leads to a question: *What will the next life be like?*

It's a grand question. What will we be like? What will we do? Scripture offers a variety of windows into eternity through which we may gaze; but like all windows, the views are simultaneously revealing and limiting. There is both mystery and revelation. One of these windows speaks to both the mystery and the revelation in a single phrase. It's a profound insight offering critical insight for our conversation today...

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Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

John acknowledges the mystery: *What we will be has not yet been made known.* But he then offers what we do know: *We shall be like him.* That's fascinating for our conversation. We are after transformation. This passage describes a day when our transformation will be full and complete. There will be a day, John tells us, when we will be fully Christ-like in our character.

The fruit of the Spirit will be fully present and without compromise. We will experience total and uncompromised peace and rest in our souls. We will not just have short moments of joy, but we will have fullness of joy. Love will abound. Self-control will be fortified. We will be both kind and courageous. In short, we will be whole. We will finally and fully be the people we long to be. Yes, not only will God be at peace with us, but we will be at peace with ourselves.

But we know this, right? There's more. Let's go deeper.

John's statement, that "*we shall be like him,*" has profound implications on our lives today. It's not just that John reminds us that transformation will be complete, but that he gives insight as to how this will happen. Will transformation happen by the waving of a magic wand or the snapping of God's fingers? Or more seriously, will the process of physically dying enable us to finally shed old habits entirely? What happens? How do we change? How do the fruits of the Spirit come to full maturity? Listen carefully to the statement...

...we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

Transformation will be complete not by the waving of a magic wand or the snapping of God's fingers, but because we will "*see him as he is.*" If that sounds odd, consider what we just noted: There's power in another person's presence. We know this reality. We experience this daily. Presence matters. Experience the presence of good and noble friends, and it influences our character. Work under the leadership of a wise and stable leader, and we sleep better. Spend time with friends who believe the best in us, and we, too, eventually see what they see. Now do this: Take that principle, magnify it by the presence of an infinite being, and we get a glimpse of how we are changed.

What happens when battles with anxiety over personal well-being are brought into the presence of the God who loves us and is infinitely capable of caring for us? In short, anxiety evaporates and is replaced by fullness of peace, or put another way: *We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* Or what happens when sensitivities to addictive behaviors, rooted in unfounded shame, are brought into the presence of the God who fully and wholly accepts us in Christ? In short, the sensitivities evaporate and are replaced by immovable self-control, or put another way: "*We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*" Or again, what happens when fear for life's challenges are brought into the presence of the God who declares all to be well. In short, fear evaporates and is replaced by great courage, or put another way: "*We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*"

The presence of God brings transformation. When we stand by grace in the presence of God, the ultimate authority, and hear him declare that we are "*without blemish and free from accusation*" (Colossians 1:22), we will never question this again. When we walk by grace with the one referred to as "*the Alpha and the Omega...the Almighty*" (Revelation 1:8), and when we hear him declare that, "*There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain*" (Revelation 21:4), then in that instant any residual anxiety or fear will forever be replaced with strength and peace. When we are finally with the Satisfier of our souls, the groping and griping of our previous lives will be a distant memory, and as we feast on God's presence our souls "*will be satisfied as with the richest of foods*" (Psalm 63:5). There is power in presence.

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Which brings us back to Christ's statement...

I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Must we wait to experience transformation by God's presence until the beginning of the next age when we are told his presence is with us to the end of this age? Of course not. There is an essential insight in this that leads us to our next imperative.

I must recognize the real me.

I must fight for my life.

I must trust.

I must walk by God's Spirit.

And a fifth imperative:

I must worship.

WORSHIP

Pause.

When you read the word *worship* what did you feel?

What went through your mind?

What went through your heart?

Excitement or boredom?

Life or death?

Vitality? Or does the thought of worship make you feel sleepy?

No doubt, perspectives will vary, but if thoughts of worship take us to an hour on Sunday morning, then our thoughts are limited. We must break the mold. Is worship truly a transformational practice? Or is worship a long and dusty service we had to endure when visiting grandmother as a child? If worship is limited to a weekly service, a service in which we may or may not find inspiration, then one rightfully questions this imperative. Odd it would be, though, for an unlimited being to be worshipped solely through limited methods.

And Scripture says as much. Christ says as much.

AUTHENTIC WORSHIP

She was tired. She had walked this path countless times. It was essential to living, to life: She needed water. At the end of the path was the well. Friends and neighbors were always coming and going. Conversation at the well was not unusual. But she certainly did not expect what she found on this day. Not only did she converse with a man, but this was a Jewish man, and she was a Samaritan. Differences were sharp.

The conversation got sensitive. The man told her things he should not know. He knew of her multiple marriages and her current live-in companion. She certainly did not expect this from a stranger at the well. How should she respond? What should she say? Maybe it was out of insecurity, an effort to change the topic. Or maybe it was a jab back, an effort to stir controversy. Whatever the reason, we

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do not know. We do know the conversation moved from her personal life to the topic of worship: *“Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem”* (John 4:20).

And such was the controversy between the Samaritans and the Jews. Worship would be limited to a location, a spot on the map. One group located a mountain. The other group preferred a city. They had their reasons, their explanations; they could make their case. So what would this man say? What did he think of the controversy? Clearly, he had powerful insight into people’s lives. He revealed things he was not told. What side would this apparent authority take? If this man, who was no ordinary man, sided with the Jews, then that would be a significant challenge: *“A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:21, 23-24).

Neither. Not on a particular mountain. Not in a particular city. The worship of God is now greater and grander than any tradition once claimed. True worship, authentic worship, is not limited to a location, a service, or a song. Authentic worship is not simply something we do at a particular place, on a particular day, at a particular time. Authentic worship involves the ongoing orientation of one’s heart. It is both spiritual and truthful.

And get this...

It’s powerful.

TRANSFORMATION

What happens when a person cultivates ongoing awareness of the presence of God in his or her life? What about when that person meditates on the goodness, greatness, and grandness of God? Or how about when that person enjoys quiet moments, moments with the Father, when God’s strength and gentleness seem so contrary to life’s frenetic pace? God’s presence is available but so often overlooked. Consider carefully the powerful observation made by Scripture about worship:

And we, who with unveiled faces, all contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18).

What is being done? We contemplate God’s goodness, greatness, and grandness...his glory...and the result is transformation. We are *“transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.”* Why? For the very same reason that transformation will be complete when we one day stand in his presence: *“We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). There is power in another person’s presence.

Consider this: We all contemplate something. What do we contemplate while making the morning drive to work? Do we contemplate the daunting challenges of the day before us? Or do we contemplate the God who is sovereign over all such challenges? Be mesmerized by the challenges, and there will be fruit from that contemplation in our lives. Be mesmerized by the God who will help us navigate those challenges, and there will be fruit from this form of contemplation as well.

Or how about the contemplation inspired by endless hours of passive entertainment? Does this contemplation bring about peace and self-control? Or does this contemplation plague us as we attempt to drift off to sleep? What would it be like if we trained our minds to contemplate the One we are called to love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? How might we rest better in the evenings if in our days we consistently brought our minds back to authentic worship? What would it be like if we allowed the wonder of the creation that surrounds us to point us to the wonder of the Creator? Might we be transformed into his likeness if we consistently and passionately contemplated his goodness?

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Our lives, our conversations, our interests can either blow fog over the presence of God in our lives or can blow the fog away. Scripture is clear that one day we will see him face to face. We will “*know fully, even as we are fully known*” (1 Corinthians 13:12). But today, we “*know in part*” and “*see dimly as in a mirror*” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). By worship, by contemplation of God, we gain clarity into this mysterious God, and as we do, we are changed; we are transformed. Christ tells us that he is with us to the very end of the age. If he is here, we must realize his presence and be changed by his presence. There is power in the presence of another, and by worship, we not only recognize the presence of God, but we revel in his presence and are transformed by doing so.

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