



THE BLESSING OF HIS PRESENCE

LIVING TOWARD THE PROMISES, PART 5

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A ReVision Study from

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Blessing of His Presence
Living toward the Promises, Part 5
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Contents

Welcome to <i>The Blessing of His Presence</i>	4
1 The Blessings without the Presence	5
2 The Greatest Blessing	7
3 With Us, With Him	9
4 Strength to Overcome	11
5 Holiness to Completion	13
6 Worship unto Worship	15
7 Courage to Witness	17
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	19

Welcome to *The Blessing of His Presence*

Welcome to *The Blessing of His Presence*, Part 5 of a 5-part series on *Living toward the Promises*. In this concluding study, we are reminded that what God promises us ultimately and above all is Himself. Knowing Him, enjoying Him, and partaking of Him – this is the greatest promise anyone could ever realize.

We fall into a kind of idolatry when we look to God for temporal blessings of one kind or another as the source of joy and hope. God is our joy and hope, and when we know the blessing of His presence, all other blessings become strictly secondary.

In the presence of God, we gain strength to overcome adversity, power to increase in holiness, incentive to worship as a way of life, and courage to bear witness to the Lord. By realizing the promised blessing of His presence, we become equipped with power to flow His blessings to the people around us.

This is what it means to live toward the promises of God.

Don't rush through these studies. Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on the questions and *next steps* provided. Look for lessons you can implement so that your life begins to reflect more of the indwelling presence of Christ.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Encourage your fellow group members to prepare well and participate actively (Col. 3.16). Make sure you come away from each session with something to implement in your walk with and work for the Lord.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We are happy to provide these studies at no cost. If you find them helpful, please consider making a contribution to support the work of the The Fellowship of Ailbe.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Blessings without the Presence

“Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Exodus 33.3

Abundantly blessed

Even the most superficial analysis of the state of the Church in America will reveal that Christians are a people abundantly blessed of God.

New churches are starting every week, and new mega-churches crop up with regularity. Existing churches which are *not* abounding with new facilities and burgeoning budgets are at least holding their own. Training programs of every sort abound. Money continues flowing into churches and out from them to a wide range of ministries and services in local communities and around the world. A Christian subculture of media, publishing, higher education, Internet services, and many other products and opportunities continues to flourish.

Besides these corporate manifestations of blessing, American Christians enjoy the highest standard of living of any generation of believers in the history of the Christian movement. Truly, Christians in this country are a people abundantly blessed with good things from the Lord.

It’s difficult, therefore, to reconcile all this bounty with the strictly marginal impact the Church is having on almost every aspect of life in our society. Where are the blessings of God’s exceedingly great and precious promises flowing into the dark and dangerous places of American society? Into the dank recesses of a corrupt pop culture? Into the secular mind-traps of public and higher education? Into racial and economic divides? Into every sector of ethical and moral life? The nation in which Christian churches and other endeavors are flourishing continues its relentless death-spiral into relativism, narcissism, materialism, hedonism, and serfdom.

American Christians abound in blessings and good things from the Lord, yet we have not demonstrated the will or power to persuade our neighbors to forsake their vain materialistic hopes and seek the Kingdom not of this world. The Christian worldview that obtains in today’s churches holds no thrall for contemporary secular and unbelieving people.

Is Jesus present?

What’s going on here? Since Christians are a people *blessed* of God, to *flow His blessings* as far as the curse of sin is found, we should expect that, as fully blessed as we are, many people would be streaming into our churches to know the Lord and His grace (Mic. 4.1-8).

But it’s not happening. The reason is because, as blessed as churches are, people all around us, looking upon us with materialistic and narcissistic eyes, consider themselves no less “blessed” than we are, and all that without the added obligations and hypocrisy of organized religion.

That is, the Christians most nonbelievers see and know don’t look all that different from them. They do their work the same way, spend their time and money on similar pursuits, indulge the same small talk, wear the same clothes, watch the same programs and films, and are as fully immersed in the pop culture world of entertainment and frivolity as the next person. To our unbelieving neighbors, our churches appear to be little more than a place where people who can’t make it otherwise in this hectic world go to find succor and safety amid likeminded, small-minded friends. Possessing as much in the way of material and diversionary blessing as we, our unbelieving neighbors prefer to spend their available time enjoying their prosperity and friends in

pursuits other than church.

But if Jesus Christ were present in our churches, in all His radiant glory, holiness, mercy, generosity, joy, and love; and if He were truly *manifesting* Himself in the daily lives of believers, in every area and aspect of their lives, would our unbelieving neighbors be as indifferent – even *hostile* – to the faith as they are at present? Would they not see a *hope* and *presence* unlike anything they'd ever known? And would they not seek to know at least the *reason* for such a different way of life?

When Jesus walked the earth, people flocked to Him in multitudes, both seekers and detractors, because His presence filled the space He occupied with grace, truth, authority, holiness, hope, and power. This is what is lacking on the part of believers and our churches today.

Blessings with the presence

It's quite possible that Christians today have made an idol out of the blessings of the Lord, seeking Him only for what He can do for us, give us, or make better in our lives. We want the blessings He can give us, but do we want *Him*? We rejoice in the many good things He provides, but do we know the joy and pleasure of His *presence* with us, His *beauty* entrancing us, His *holiness* bending us in fear and wonder, His *joy* sustaining us in every trial, and His *power* at work within us, transforming us into His image?

We have become so eager for the blessings of the Lord that we are in danger of losing sight of the Lord of the blessings, Who is Himself the supreme blessing of all.

God will continue His blessings on His people, but that's no guarantee that He Himself will continue with us. The greatest blessing God intends to bestow on us, and through us to our sad and weary world, is the blessing of Himself. Take away all the other blessings of God, every temporal or material boon or good, and if all we have is God Himself, we have all we need for fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16.11).

But we will not seek this greatest of all blessings, nor will we share it with others, as long as we are content merely to enjoy the good *things* our loving Father provides us day by day.

For reflection

1. How do you experience the blessing of God's presence?
2. Why do you think Christians don't stand out as filling the space of their lives with Jesus? What's keeping us from realizing Ephesians 4.8-10?
3. Is it possible that the *blessings* God gives us could become *idols* to destroy us? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Have you mapped your Personal Mission Field? Watch this brief video ([click here](#)), then seek the Lord for guidance each day to help you bring the blessing of Jesus into the spaces and people of your life.

2 The Greatest Blessing

*You will show me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.* Psalm 16.11

The good blessings of the Lord

What do Christians mean when they say that God has “blessed” them? We all say this, and we sincerely rejoice with one another to hear the blessings of God reported. We even seem genuinely grateful to know the blessings of the Lord.

But what do we *mean* when we say this?

Typically, we associate the blessings of the Lord with whatever contributes to making our lives easier, more comfortable, and more filled with happiness. When we count our blessings, we tend to think in terms of such temporal and material goods as food, work, possessions, health, friends, family, favorable outcomes, our church, and so on. Or even, should bad come to worse, we hold on to the blessed promise of going to heaven when we die.

For Christians today, blessings are mainly counted in terms of the *good things* God does for us, for which we are genuinely grateful, but in the absence of which we tend toward anxiousness, sadness, depression, or fear. When we are abounding in blessings, we feel happy, and this state of being happy *because* of favorable external conditions is an indication that we are making *idols* of God’s *blessings*, and failing to receive and appreciate them as He intends.

Christians are called to the Kingdom and glory of God so that we might *bles*s the world with the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life (Jn. 17.3). But if the only *blessings* we share with the world are those of things, friends, and fun, well, they have plenty of that as it is, thank you, and you can keep your religion to yourself.

One of the great mistakes of the people of Israel in the Old Testament was to seek and wallow in the *temporal* blessings of God so much that they *missed* the *great blessing* of God Himself. We are in danger of doing the same today.

Blessing to idolatry

For nearly all the period of the Old Testament, including that which led up to the invasion of Canaan and the settling of the land of promise, the people of Israel did not have a heart for God (cf. Deut. 5.29). In spite of all they had witnessed of God’s power, and all the words and warnings issued by His prophets, when push came to shove, all the people wanted from God were His blessings, not Himself.

They whined for water, moaned for meat, longed for the leeks of Egypt, scurried to Him for safety from foes, compromised His Word in order to accommodate their unbelieving neighbors, made league with worldly powers rather than trust in the Lord of all power, and in general sought their joy and wellbeing in all the best conditions and things. They failed to understand that the presence of the Lord Himself is the greatest blessing, the one true source of holy pleasure and joy. The motto of God’s covenant, “I will be your God, and you shall be My people,” came off sounding to the people of Israel like, “I will be Your divine Sugar Daddy; just let me know what you want.”

Having failed to pursue the *presence of the Lord*, Israel ultimately came to despise His many blessings, attributing

them instead to their own prowess or to the false idols and pagan deities of their unbelieving neighbors.

Yet God promised that their highest pleasures and most lasting joys would be found in Him, and not in the conditions of their lives. Not in His *blessings*, but in *Him*. Israel completely missed the mark, and we today are in just the same place.

The blessing of His presence

As long as we continue to seek our happiness in the *blessings God provides* rather than in the *God Who provides blessings*, we will be in danger of falling short of the exceedingly great and precious promises of God. “Come to Me,” Jesus insisted, “and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11.28). We will never know complete contentedness in the presence of the Lord as long we count our blessings primarily in terms of conditions and things.

The Lord promises that in His presence are *fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore!* What is it about this promise that we do *not* find alluring? Is it that we just don’t *believe* this to be true? Or have never *experienced* it as such? Has no one ever showed us *how* to engage this greatest of all blessings? And have we never considered that it is the blessing and rest of *Jesus Himself* that He aims for us to share with the world?

Fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore – all the *blessing* anyone could ever want – are only to be found in the presence of the Lord of glory. Until seeking Him, knowing Him, dwelling with Him, walking with Him, delighting in Him, and *partaking of Him* is the greatest blessing, richest pleasure, and surest joy we know, we will be in danger of falling into idolatry and failing at our Kingdom-and-glory calling from the Lord.

But how may we enter the presence of the Lord? What is required of us, if we would truly know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore?

For reflection

1. Is it wrong to *appreciate* the temporal and material blessings of God? How does God intend us to respond to these?
2. Is there a difference between having a heart for *God* and having a heart for *God’s blessings*? Explain.
3. What does it mean to know the presence of the Lord? How does one enter the Lord’s presence? What can let us know that we have arrived there? Or are dwelling there?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a Christian friend about what it means to know the presence of the Lord. How might you help one another in this matter?

3 With Us, With Him

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2.4-7

Two facets

Living toward the promises of God entails seeking the blessings of God's exceedingly great and precious promises, so that we might live as His promised blessings in and to the world. But if we fail to seek the *greatest blessing* of all – that of knowing, enjoying, loving, and serving God and Jesus Christ – then the blessings we will bring to the world are not likely to outstrip the blessings they know directly from God by His common grace. What's worse, failing to seek the Lord Himself as our *supreme* blessing, we will be in danger of making His temporal and material blessings into idols, and of seeking our happiness and fulfillment in them, rather than in Him.

Because we enjoy so many blessings in this country, and in such abundance, we could very easily conclude both that these are the primary blessings we should be seeking, and that being in possession of these blessings indicates that all is well between us and the Lord.

And if we assumed that, we would be wrong on both counts.

God may well grant many and abundant blessings to His people – as to others as well – at the same time, withholding His presence from them – since that is not what they seek anyway – and allowing them to drift into idolatry, complacency, irrelevance, and worse. The presence of the Lord is the ultimate locus of all joy and virtuous pleasure; if we do not aspire or attain to this, we will never know the true sense of meaning of eternal life (Jn. 17.3).

The presence of the Lord: *this* is the great blessing promised, and to be sought. And there are two facets to the Lord's presence which, as we daily explore and enjoy them, bring us into the power, joy, and pleasure of the Lord in ways that cannot be affected by outward conditions. Let's take a closer look.

With us, where we are

The first facet we may enter of the Lord's presence is His presence with us, where we are. Numerous expressions of this promised blessing appear in the Scriptures. God promises never to fail in His Spirit's presence with us (Ps. 139.7-12). He has given us His Spirit to be in us and with us always (Jn. 14.16, 17). Jesus promised to be with us always (Matt. 28.20). God has said He will never fail us nor forsake us (Heb. 13.5). And He plants His Word deep within our souls, to renew and transform us into His image day by day (Col. 3.16; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

This "with us" presence is real and true. Objectively, that is, as a matter of *truth outside us*, we may know that God has promised His presence to be with us always, in all these ways.

But we must learn to *practice* this presence. It does us no good to know objectively that air is essential to life and health. We must continually *breathe* the air if we would know the promise it contains. The same is true with the with-us-presence of the Lord. We must understand both *how* the Lord is with us, and *how we may engage* His presence at any and every moment. Through the disciplines of meditation, prayer, singing, contemplation, and so forth we may *engage* our always-present Lord and thus enter His pleasure and joy wherever we are, whatever we're doing, no matter the outward conditions of life. But we will not *know the*

blessings of His presence with us until, like breathing, the disciplines of prayer, meditation, and singing become simply who we are and what we do.

With Him, where He is

The second facet of the Lord's presence involves us being *with Him, where He is*. This is what Paul refers to in Ephesians 2.4-7. We have *truly* and *really* been seated with the Lord in heavenly places. Our lives are hidden there with Christ, in God (Col. 3.3). By virtue of His Spirit dwelling in us, and His Word being richly planted in our souls, we now possess an *eye of faith* (Eph. 1.15-23) by which we may penetrate the veil separating us from unseen realities, and enter the Lord's presence in glory, amid the radiance, splendor, beauty, majesty, and holy clamoring of the heavenly realm. As we set our minds on such unseen realities (Col. 3.1-3; Heb. 11.1), we see by faith both the larger world in which we dwell, and our own world – our daily lives and Personal Mission Fields – from the vantage point of the eternal Christ and His ever-coming Kingdom.

This vantage point fills us with worship and awe, and confidence and hope, as we see from that venue the possibilities of Jesus filling the all things of our lives, more and more, day by day (Eph. 1.22, 23; 4.8-10). This prospect moves us to long for a greater refracting of the heavenly landscape into our earthly terrain, empowers us with creativity and boldness to walk the life of faith in new and transforming ways, illuminates the glory and joy of the Lord in even the everyday activities of life, and results in our manifesting a *hope* that can startle and pique even the most hardened of our unbelieving friends.

We are in the presence of the Lord, both with us where we are and with Him where He is, at all times, in every situation and circumstance of our lives. But unless we *desire* to know the Lord's presence, and *practice the disciplines* that lead and keep us there, we will never know the boundless blessing that is to be realized, there in the presence of Him Who is our full and ultimate blessing – Jesus Christ, in Whom all the promises of God are “Yes!” and “Amen!”

For reflection

1. How do you practice the presence of the Lord with you, where you are? What difference does this make?
2. How do you practice the presence of the Lord with Him, where he is? What difference does this make?
3. Would you say that your disciplines are sufficient to help you gain the full blessing of the presence of the Lord? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Review the disciplines by which you enter the presence of the Lord. How might you improve and increase these?

4 Strength to Overcome

*But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob,
 And He who formed you, O Israel:
 "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by your name;
 You are Mine.
 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
 When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,
 Nor shall the flame scorch you.
 For I am the LORD your God,
 The Holy One of Israel, your Savior..."* Isaiah 43.1-3

Beyond our strength

Christians are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our strength. This is the very reason why the faith of so many Christians is shallow, unreal, and lacking in fruit. We are not loving God, to the extent we love Him at all, even in our own strength – not, at least, so that we serve Him faithfully as conduits of blessing to the people in our Personal Mission Fields. And we fail to realize that there is strength in the presence of the Lord to enable us to *go beyond our strength* into greater *degrees of strength*, so that our love for God increases continually, filling our souls and everyday lives with the presence of Jesus Christ (Eph. 3.20).

So often, in the everyday situations of our lives, we fail to overcome the temptations, trials, and other tests that come our way, because we rest in our own strength rather than draw on the strength of the Lord which takes us *beyond* our strength and *through* our circumstances from the vantage point of His presence with us. Here's what happens: We find ourselves confronted by some difficult or troubling situation – some problem at work or home, or some larger issue of culture or society. We apply all our intellectual, emotional, and physical strength to overcome this challenge, by words and deeds in some combination. But nothing changes. The situation continues. We begin to feel frustrated, angry, anxious, resentful, fearful, or depressed. Then we focus on these emotions, trying to overcome them by some means, but usually failing. These affections thus increase and multiply, exacerbating the situation which summoned them, and we go seeking some diversion or distraction to rekindle our sense of wellbeing, all the while failing to discover the overcoming strength of the Lord because we do not flee to His presence.

Our responses toward others, meanwhile, do not refract the overcoming joy and pleasure of the Lord, but too often leave others feeling confused, offended, unedified, and unblessed. Our strength to love God having failed us, the strength of *God's* love does not reach those to whom He has sent us for blessing.

Strength like Jesus

If we could practice the presence of God with us at such times, we would know strength *beyond* our own strength, beyond *any* strength we've ever known before, so that the *reality* of Christ would glow and flow through us, even in difficult and trying situations. Jesus knew the joy of God's presence even as He hanged on the cross, suffering in great physical anguish and spiritual distress (Heb. 12.1). The joy He knew there gave Him strength beyond His own strength, to endure and do the will of the Father, when His *own* will might have chosen a more comfortable path.

We see this clearly in Psalm 22. In the first half of the Psalm (vv. 1-21) the Savior rehearses His pain and suffering. Each stanza, however, ends with renewed focus on the Lord, and renewed resolve to trust in Him and hope for His just and righteous outcome. Then, in the second part of the Psalm (vv. 22-31), the suffering

Savior engages in joyous worship and celebration, as He anticipates the blessing of God's favor and of the world hearing the Good News of His salvation.

Outside-in strength

That kind of strength does not come from within us. It comes outside-in, from the Spirit and Word of God, doing within us exceedingly abundantly beyond anything we've ever known before, as we rest in the presence of the Lord and allow His overcoming strength to grow in and flow out from us (Eph. 3.20).

God is with us always, ready to lend His strength to help us overcome in our times of need. We access that strength as Jesus did, by setting our minds on the promises of God, opening our mouths in praise and thanksgiving, and taking whatever next step of faith will lead us *beyond* our own strength into the *overcoming strength of the Lord*. Thus, from within the presence of the Lord, we are stretched beyond ourselves into new thoughts and plans, new affections, and new next steps of faith, as He Who makes all things new makes His presence known through us.

Practicing the presence of the Lord can be a source of great overcoming strength, but not as long as we try to live our Christian lives in our own strength alone. Love God with *all* your strength; then, enter His presence and plead with Him for *more* strength to love, obey, and serve Him every day. When trials and challenges come, look to Jesus, forsake the easy and safe comfort of your storm-tossed vessel, and step out on the waves of promise in the overcoming strength that comes from being in the presence of the Lord.

For reflection

1. How do you typically respond to trials, challenges, and provocations?
2. What does it mean to love God with all our strength? Do you believe that more strength is available to you in the presence of the Lord? Explain.
3. What does it mean for you to "step out on the waves of promise" as you work your Personal Mission Field?

Next steps – Transformation: What's one thing you can do to increase and improve your practice of the Lord's presence each day? Ask a friend to pray for you as you take up this improved discipline.

5 Holiness to Completion

LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle?
 Who may dwell in Your holy hill?
 He who walks uprightly,
 And works righteousness... Psalm 15.1

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. 2 Corinthians 7.1

As He is holy

Christians are the beneficiaries of exceedingly great and precious promises, the sum of which consists in being the *people* of God, with access to the *presence* of God, unto the *power* and *praise* of God in our everyday lives. God promises to *bless us*, which He does above all by bringing us into His presence, and teaching us to dwell there and to go forth *from* there into our daily lives. As we go, He promises to *make us a blessing* to the world, primarily by communicating Him and His Good News.

Thus we need the blessing of God's presence, not just to overcome the daily challenges we may expect to encounter, but that we might be *increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ*, and so demonstrate in every area of our lives the reality of Jesus, risen from the dead. The more we practice the presence of the Lord – with us where we are, with Him where He is – the more we will know His joyful and pleasurable presence in our everyday experience, and the more we should expect Him to make Himself known through us.

But demonstrating the goodness, justice, love, kindness, thoughtfulness, grace, and truth of Jesus Christ – His holiness – is not a given. We must work at bringing holiness to complete in the fear of God, which fear we experience most pointedly and consistently as we continue in the *presence* of the Lord. The *promises* of God free us from sin and mere self-interest, as we focus on what *God* wants for us and the world; and the *presence* of God nurtures in us such *fear* and *enjoyment* of Him, that we will increase in holiness and thus *partake* of Him more constantly.

Becoming holy

But how do we sustain the presence of the Lord unto holiness. Or, as the psalmist put it, how shall we *abide* in the Lord and *dwell* in His presence?

David says that we may expect to know the presence of the Lord the more we increase in that holiness which characterize those who dwell with Him. The Lord is holy; He is complete and perfect in every virtue, action, and intent, and He commands us to be perfect and become holy as well (Matt. 5.48). Obviously, we're not going to achieve this objective in this life, as the law of sin continues to plague us. But, as Paul indicates, we should expect to *make progress* in holiness, in being like the Lord. And, as we do, we will find ourselves more at home in the presence of the Lord, and more present with Him always.

Bringing holiness to completion begins with knowing what holiness is – what it looks like, and how we should expect to see it in our lives. The more we practice the presence of Jesus, looking to Jesus and reflecting and meditating on His attributes, appearance in glory, works, and ways, the more we will *see* what holiness is, and what we are pressing on to become. In addition, by meditating on the holy and righteous and good Law of God – regularly reading through it, reflecting on its application to our lives, envisioning ourselves obeying each relevant detail – the more that Law will serve as a lamp unto our feet and a light for our path, leading us in the way of holiness that Jesus walked (Ps. 119.105; 1 Jn. 2.1-6).

Put off, put on

Two problems confront us as we seek to bring holiness to completion in our lives, and thus to refract the holiness of Christ into our Personal Mission Fields.

First, holiness does not come naturally to us. In fact, left to ourselves, we are not inclined to be holy, but to allow the law of sin to rule our lives (Rom. 7.14-23). If we don't *do* something about this, we'll only ever *think* sinfully, *feel* wrong affections, and *set* vain and self-serving priorities. Second, the holiness we are called to embrace can only come by diligent and determined effort. Our natural tendency to seek ease and the status quo thus works against us in both these challenges.

Here we must heed the prophet who sends us "to the Law and to the testimony" (Is. 8.20). By shining the light of God's Law into our souls we can, first, *see* the wickedness and self-centeredness that remain there (Rom. 7.12), and, second, discern the path of Kingdom greatness which we should plan for and pursue (Matt. 5.17-19; Ps. 119.59, 60). The Law of God marks a path *into* the promises of God, because it is the path that outlines *the course of His blessing*, both in His presence and in the world.

Increasing in holiness thus involves putting *off* whatever of our lives – thoughts, feelings, values, priorities, words, deeds – are self-serving and sinful, and putting *on* everything that reflects the holiness we discover in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4.17-24).

Without holiness we will not see the Lord (Heb. 12.14). Unless we practice the presence of the Lord, we will not know what holiness is, and we will not have the vision, incentive, or power to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God. Holiness is our blessing to the world, because holiness points away from the world to the holy God Who sends us with the blessings of His presence and love to the world.

For reflection

1. What is holiness? How can we know when we are increasing in holiness?
2. What are the greatest obstacles keeping us from bringing holiness to completion?
3. Why is holiness the greatest blessing we bring to the world?

Next steps – Transformation: Where in your life is there need for greater holiness? What would that look like? What steps can you take to increase in holiness in these areas?

6 Worship unto Worship

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. Romans 12.1

Mad joy!

Except for the return of allergy season, and the portent of hot weather just ahead, spring is one of my favorite times of the year. In my view, the whole of spring could be reduced to one annual event: March Madness.

March Madness, of course, is the annual national basketball tournament featuring the best teams of Division I colleges and universities. I watch as much as I can, for the skill, choreography, timing, and beauty of it all. I enjoy most of all the celebrations, on and off the court. These are particularly vibrant and joyful when someone hits a three-pointer at the buzzer to win the game, or, as in the case of Villanova's Wildcats in 2016, to win it all. Imagine the thrill and happiness. The shooter running around on the court, holding out his school's name on his jersey. His teammates mobbing him, falling all over him, holding up their index fingers in "Number 1" salutes, laughing and shouting, hugging and high-fiving. Fans spilling out onto the court. Even the announcers can't contain themselves, and shout and marvel and rejoice along with everyone else.

It's a pure, unabashed, albeit brief, celebration of joy, and it's a thing of beauty to behold.

This, my friends, is what heaven is like – except for the *brief* part, and the *merely beholding* part. Jesus has accomplished an unimaginable victory over the most formidable foe. Lifted on shoulders of highest praise, He has ascended to heaven, surrounded by shouts, huzzahs, trumpets, and holy fight songs from angels and departed saints. He has been appointed MVP of history and the cosmos by His Father the King, and He holds the trophy of uprightness in His hand, as He dwells amid the continuous praises of His people (Ps. 45.6; Ps. 22.3). The cries of victory and celebrations of joy, coupled with proclamations of His greatness, go on incessantly, in full, loud, and rich harmony, filling the court of our heavenly King with more joy and pleasure than all the March Madnesses and all the other madnesses of men, rolled into one.

And you?

And there you are, seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Joy and gladness going on continually around you. Holiness splashing like champagne over every celebrant. Songs and cheers and tears of laughter streaming endlessly from all and every. Worship – glorious, vibrant, ceaseless, heartfelt *worship* – sweeping the heavenly court where Jesus has cut down the nets and is sharing them with everyone.

So why isn't there more of this worship in our everyday lives? Why are we so *normal*? So *dull*? So lacking in joy and hope and confidence and celebration? Perhaps because we haven't been watching the holy wildness that is our home court in heaven, or we haven't taken our seat with Jesus, full of joy and pleasure because of His victory and reign. Only the presence of the Lord can move us to exuberant, unimpeded, unashamed praise and thanksgiving, lifting our souls in eternal joy, rapturous pleasure, and unquenchable hope. Without the presence of the Lord, worship quickly becomes about us, about blessings, about idolatry.

Worship that isn't about Jesus doesn't last very long. It's like the joy of the team three years ago that won the national title. Yeah, I don't remember them, either.

Worship that *is* about Jesus takes place in His presence – both with Him where He is, and, just as important, *with us wherever we go*.

Celebrating with the Lord

You don't have worship right if during worship you're doing anything other than straining your mind, heart, and body to see and celebrate and get at Jesus. Worship is not about you. Or your church. Or the music. Or whether babies are crying somewhere in the sanctuary. Worship is about Jesus, and if, in your worship, you get to the place where you *see Jesus* and know yourself to be *present with Him*, then you will enter the home court celebration of saints and angels with new exuberance, humility, joy, tears, and pleasure.

And *that* worship will be more likely to stay with you as what you might *reasonably* expect to be the normal ambience of your walk with and work for the Lord.

Because when you're able to worship the Lord in His presence, with Him where He is – truly to worship and celebrate Him – then that worship becomes your outlook and natural environment as you practice His presence with you wherever you go.

Jesus hasn't just won the big game. He has gained the victory of life for lost sinners, renewal for the entire cosmos, and hope beyond hope for every created thing. Worship the Lord daily, friends. Make the time for it. Learn the skills and disciplines that bring it forth. Jump into the happy and glorious throng of those who are piling around Jesus to celebrate and touch Him. Make worship the most important part of your day – not just your week – and you'll find that your daily life is more abundantly filled with worship and joy – fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

And if anyone wants to know why, just hum a few bars of your favorite Jesus fight song, and show them your piece of the net!

For reflection

1. Why does worship not seem to be any more exuberant and uplifting than it is? What's in the way?
2. Do you worship the Lord daily? How? When?
3. Why is it *reasonable* to suppose that worship should be a way of life for Christians?

Next steps – Preparation: Do you pray for wisdom? Solomon did (2 Chron. 1.7-12), but then he applied himself diligently to acquire the promised wisdom of God (cf. Eccl. 1.12, 13). What is your plan for growing in wisdom? Talk with a Christian friend about this matter.

7 Courage to Witness

“Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” Luke 12.11, 12

The great hindrance

It is not accidental that, in the same breath Jesus commanded His disciples – and us – to make disciples as we are going, He also assured us of His presence with us always (Matt. 28.18-20). Making disciples is our primary calling in this world, the work that should define our daily walk within the Personal Mission Field to which the Lord has sent us. But making disciples can be scary work, especially the part that finds us proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom to people around us.

Evangelism has fallen on hard times in our day. Instead of following Jesus to seek and save the lost (Lk. 19.11), we have decided to let the lost seek and find Him, and we do everything in our power to attract them to our church with that aspiration in mind. We’ve turned our Sunday morning services, which should be joyous celebrations of Jesus and His victory, into spiritual delicatessens, where we invite seekers and those who have already *found*, to indulge whatever they find helpful, and to leave whatever they don’t particularly fancy, without complaining about anything. We do what we can to encourage unbelievers to feel right at home in our worship, bending as much as we can to suit their familiar interests and comfort, and we rejoice when one of them seems to find the Lord. We do not fear having unbelievers come to us to hear the Good News.

But what’s scary and off-putting for many believers is the thought of going *to* the lost to tell them the story of Jesus.

I’m persuaded that one reason the work of evangelism has all but dried up among evangelical Christians is that we are fearful of the task. We’ve convinced ourselves that most people aren’t interested in spiritual matters, and so we’re afraid they might not welcome our overtures to talk about such things. We’re afraid they’ll laugh at us, think us naïve or silly, or that they’ll lash out or talk about us behind our backs. We don’t like the thought of being yelled at, dismissed, or asked a question we can’t answer. Most Christians today have set aside the clear and undeniable mandate of the Lord to *be His witnesses* and *make disciples* because we lack the courage necessary for this important part of our Kingdom-and-glory calling.

Courage

Courage is a matter of the heart, as we might expect (from the French, *cour*, *heart*). A *fearful* heart loses courage because it focuses on threats, dangers, and things that can go wrong. But if we’re practicing the presence of Jesus, living toward the promises of God by worshiping and walking with Him day by day, we won’t see the threats and dangers as such, because we’ll only see Jesus, victorious, reigning, empowering, and coming again.

The Spirit of God makes us bold to bear witness for Jesus (Acts 1.8). He also, as Jesus indicated, gives us the words we need when the opportunity for bearing witness arises. As we dwell in the presence of the Lord, and know the rich and joyful blessings of being with Him always, He will give us the outlook and abilities we need to carry the blessing of His Good News to the people He sends us to each day.

We’re in good company when it comes to lacking courage to witness. Even Paul sought the prayers of his fellow believers so that he would not falter in this matter (Eph. 6.18, 19). We should not be ashamed of fearing to witness; however, we must not give in to our fear, but, in the presence of Jesus, find renewed vision and power to carry out this blessing-laden part of our calling.

The courage of Christ

We can overcome our fears if we remember what's involved in living toward the promises. *Prepare* for being a witness by coming into the Lord's presence in prayer and His Word. Think about what you might say, and to whom, as you interact with Lord in your daily times of preparation. *Plan* what you want to say, even to the point of practicing some phrases of the Gospel in your prayers to the Lord. William Wilberforce, the great 19th century Christian reformer, used to keep a list of what he referred to as "launchers," phrases, questions, and other conversation starters that he might use to engage someone with the Good News about Jesus.

Then go in the *good works* and *holiness* of the Lord, so that you show Jesus to the people in your Personal Mission Field by all your words and deeds. *Take every opportunity* to express the love of Christ or share a word about Him with the people around you, as you *plunder every moment* and take the time of your life captive for Jesus Christ (Eph. 5.15-17).

The more you practice the courage it takes to witness, the more courage you will have, and the more your witness will flow naturally from your being in the presence of the Lord. Jim Kennedy used to say, "The more you evangelize, the more you evangelize." He was simply saying what I just did, that talking to others about the Lord, out of the joy and pleasure we have *with* Him, becomes itself a joy and pleasure so real and vital that we cannot *not* talk about Jesus at every opportunity.

We do not have to succumb to fear in telling the Good News of Jesus. As we live toward the promises of God, basking in the joy and pleasure of His presence, He will bless us, and make us a blessing to others, by giving His Spirit to empower and script us for this important work.

For reflection

1. What is the Gospel? That is, given an opportunity to explain the hope that is within you (1 Pet. 3.15), what would you say?
2. How can believers help one another overcome the fear of man that hinders our witness?
3. What will you do to prepare and plan for being a witness to Christ each day?

Next steps – Demonstration: Start a conversation about spiritual matters with someone today. Pray about what to say, and to whom. Jot down some ideas. Take the initiative in the contact (go for coffee? grab some lunch? ask you a question?). Then make a point to do this every day.

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you counsel a new believer to know the presence of the Lord consistently and deeply?
2. How do the blessings of the Lord become idols? How can we know when this has happened?
3. What can you do to make your worship be more about Jesus and less about anything else? How can you make your daily walk with and work for the Lord an experience of worship?
4. Suggest some ways you might initiate a conversation about the Gospel with an unbelieving friend or co-worker.
5. What's the most important lesson you've gained from this study? How are you implementing that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

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Thank you.