

Conversation 1: **God as Companion of my Soul**

One of the most often-missed aspects of God is how relational God is. God created us to *be with* us. Before the foundation of the world, God intended to build a community of people who would be the “dwelling place” (or home) of God here on earth:

- My *dwelling place* will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people (Ezekiel 37:27).
- And in him you too are being built together to *become a dwelling in which God lives* by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:22).
- I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that *Christ may dwell in your hearts* through faith (Ephesians 3:16-17).

Reciprocally, God becomes our dwelling place: Lord, you have been *our dwelling place* throughout all generations (Psalm 90:1).

Because of God’s relational way of interacting with human beings, Jesus’ invitations were also relational: Come to me; learn from me; abide in me. As we do this, we begin to follow Jesus’ commands in a natural sort of way (Matthew 11:28, 29; John 15:4 NRSV).

Going to visit God at church on Sunday and at Bible study midweek will never be enough. Or hearing *about* God through others will never be enough. Yet churchgoers frequently talk about going to church to “get fed” or switching churches because they aren’t “getting fed.” Followers of Jesus go to God to get fed. They live their lives “in Christ” (this phrase occurs about ninety times in Scripture including Romans 6:23). Sometimes God nurtures us through other people, including those at church, but church (or a sermon) was never intended to replace God and an interactive life with God. Here’s a poor analogy that makes the point.

Which would you choose?

Scenario 1: Being involved in a marriage where you and your spouse interact and enjoy each other, where you learn from your spouse, where you can go to your spouse and talk about anything, and you two do things together.

Scenario 2: Being involved in a marriage club where you don't live with your spouse but once a week you go and hear about how wonderful marriage is and someone even explains to you how wonderful your spouse is. On the best days, you maybe even sit next to your spouse for a minute or two. But mostly you just hear from someone else who knows your spouse. You go home and think, *I'm so glad I know this person who has a dynamic, thriving relationship with my spouse.* (Of course, that person may be limping along too but for your sake he or she puts a good face on it.)

Scenario 1 is obviously more attractive to you since you're taking this retreat. You understand that no frail human being can give you what only God can give you. It's true that God often uses frail struggling human beings to speak to us or minister to us, but these folks were never meant to replace a daily interactive life with God.

1) Opening To God's Message

Find a comfortable, pleasant spot to settle that will not present distractions to you.

Consider that Moses's conversations with God were so rich that he had to wear a veil afterward because his face glowed. But whenever he went to talk with God, he removed the veil (Exodus 34:29-35). As you begin this time of just being with God, what veils from your daily life do you need to remove?

- making sure you do everything right
- making sure you look good

- feeling as if you have to make everything work in life
- making sure everyone around you is OK
- providing direction for others
- trying to be happy
- trying to be good

What has led you to take this retreat? Is there any question you hope to be able to answer better when you leave?

{Insert 3 lines.}

2) Immersed In God's Message

CONTEXT: The verses below come from John 14-17, which is often called the Farewell Address (or the Olivet Discourse) because Jesus speaks it just before the prayer in Gethsemane and his arrest. It is recorded by John an apostle who was there. No doubt the Holy Spirit helped him remember and record such a long discussion that occurred on one of the most frightening and dramatic nights of his life.

SETTING: Jesus and his disciples have just eaten the Passover meal together where Jesus has washed their feet. They are probably hiding out in the upper room because the authorities have been trying to arrest Jesus (Matthew 21:46; 26:4; Mark 12:12; 14:1; Luke 20:19; John 7:32; 11:57). Their much-loved teacher is a wanted man who within twenty-four hours will be tortured and stand trial for his life. How might that affect the way that Jesus speaks to them?

Picture this discussion occurring first in the upper room and then probably continuing as they crossed the Kidron valley in the dark (possibly as they walked through a vineyard). Jesus explains that he will be leaving them, but that he will also then be *present with them in a different way*.

To quiet yourself and focus before reading the passage, say this slowly.

“In our meditation
we ponder the chosen text
on the strength of the promise
that it has something utterly personal to say to us today
and for our Christian life.”¹

Take a deep breath. Read the passage aloud slowly.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. [then in prayer] “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 14:3, 18-19, 23; 25:16; 17:3, 24).

Before reading it again, consider:

- The word for know (italicized in John 17:3) refers not to knowing *about* but to having an interactive relationship of “personal fellowship.” It doesn’t mean being aware of facts or even accepting them intellectually. Instead it means “a complete devotion of the life in harmony with the revealed will of God and an intimate fellowship with Jesus.”²
- This sense of the “with-ness” of God is different from *feeling* as if God is near or intellectually believing God is with you because you read that it’s true. It is a much

deeper and wider sort of *knowing*, more appropriately termed *sensing* the presence of God and being grateful for that. Notice all the ways Jesus says this:

- come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am;
 - not leave you;
 - come to you;
 - you will see me;
 - we will come to him and make our home with him;
 - a Counselor to be with you forever;
 - I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.
- If you wish, you might want to imagine yourself as one of the disciples listening.
- How does Jesus' voice sound as he says these things? Firm? Gentle? Confident? Tearful?
 - What do you feel as he says these words?
 - Keep in mind you (as a disciple) *left everything* to be with him. Being with him is everything to you now. How does that affect how you hear?

As you read the passage again, consider what word or phrase resonates with you or stays with you, or seems to shimmer for you. Cautions:

- Waiting for a word to stand out is not a spooky or magical thing. This is a natural thing that probably already happens to you when you read the Bible—you think: *How come I never saw that word or phrase or idea before?* Actually, you did see it before, but now you see it in a new and different way. It now stands out to you.

- Don't feel pressured to make something up. If nothing stands out, quiet yourself, read the quieting exercise ("In our meditation we ponder the chosen text . . ." and read the passage again.
- Don't use self-directed effort to try to *apply* the passage to yourself. When you attempt to apply a passage, you try to figure out what you should do to implement what you read. At this point, simply *let God bring to you* what you need to know. Let it be God's effort, not your own.
- Be open to let God speak to you. Expect to be surprised.

Now reread the passage again slowly (either aloud or to yourself). Don't *choose* what stands out to you. Let it come to you as you become open to being in the passage. Let God speak to you. Expect to be surprised. Underline the word(s) that stand out to you, if you wish.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.) I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. [then in prayer] "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 14:3, 18-19, 23; 25:16; 17:3, 24).

Write down the word or phrase that stood out to you or the feelings you may have had as a disciple. What comes to you from entering into the passage? (You may want to jot some notes here.) Take a few minutes to do this.

{Insert 3 lines.}

OPTIONAL: What feelings did you get in these verses?

{Insert 6 lines.}

What thoughts or impressions come to you? What connections do you make? What questions or perhaps objections do you have? Does anything surprise you?

{Insert 3 lines.}

Now consider: What might God be saying to you through what has stood out in this passage? (Again, don't try to make something up or try to apply it to yourself. Let it come to you.) Take a few minutes to do this.

{Insert 10 lines.}

3) Responding To God's Message

Set a chair across from you. Imagine Jesus sitting in that chair. Now read the passage aloud and hear Jesus saying it to you. Consider how it leads you to dialogue with God.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.) I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. [then in prayer] "Father, I want those you have given me to be

with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 14:3, 18-19, 23; 25:16; 17:3, 24).

Write your prayer response below or say it aloud back to Jesus. It will help if you write your prayer below or say it aloud. This will make it more concrete and relational. Be open to having a dialogue with God, to being gently led by the Holy Spirit.

If you write it, you may want to begin with “Dear God” or “Dear Jesus” and then say what you need to say in response to what Jesus has said in this passage to you. If you’re not sure, here are some possibilities:

- Begin with, “I’m so glad that you said . . .” or “I really needed to hear that you . . .” Tell Jesus what you don’t understand.
- Ask questions. Put a star by these because you may find them answered by the end of today or tomorrow.
- Never feel pressed to write pages and pages. One sentence might really be enough, or you may need to write more.

{Insert 10 lines.}

4) Resting With God in the Message

If you wish, read the passage again to yourself one more time. Or read aloud only the words that stood out to you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.) I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with

you forever. Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. [then in prayer] “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 14:3, 18-19, 23; 25:16; 17:3, 24).

As you’ve read the passage several times, how have you experienced God? What was God like? Reflect on how God seemed to you. Did you have a sense that you’re only talking to yourself or that God was present? Did God seem distant or attentive? Caring or frustrated Demanding or inviting? Talk to God about this.

{Insert 3 lines.}

Allow yourself time to soak in what has come to you—questions, new ideas or clarifications about God or yourself. Let it sink all the way down to where you really live. Sit for a few moments and ponder what has transpired. You may wish to:

- Sit and just “be” with God (Be still, and know that God is God.)
- Appreciate or celebrate what occurred in your conversation with God;
- Worship God in some way (even dancing, singing a favorite song, or drawing).
- Rest in the idea that you are the dwelling place of God and God wants to build a home in you.

Close this conversation with a prayer you particularly like or this prayer (a stanza from the Breastplate of St. Patrick):

Christ be with me, Christ within me,

Christ behind me, Christ before me,

Christ beside me, Christ to win me,

Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,

Christ in hearts of all that love me,

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Move into a time of enjoying the life and breath God gave you. You may want to:

- take a nap
- take a walk or a hike or swim or do relaxing exercises
- try “porch sitting,” watching birds and trees or sitting in a Jacuzzi.
- do a creative activity (using art materials, woodworking, needlework, beadwork), but don’t try to accomplish anything
- light, meditative reading (not a detective novel or something that will engage you wholly).

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¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), p. 82.

² Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 711. To know: “doesn’t mean a mere acquaintance with facts nor an intellectual acceptance.” Instead it means “a complete devotion of the life in harmony with the revealed will of God and an intimate fellowship with Jesus” (B. F. Westcott *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 239).