

The Ultimate Answer to Prayer

Sensing God's Presence

By Jonathan Graf

As a kid, I used to love to visit my Grandfather Graf. He came to faith in Christ as an adult but later went into the ministry and pastored churches for decades. Howell Graf was probably best known for his prayer life. In fact many elderly friends who knew Howell have told me that they believe I am in prayer ministry because of how my grandfather prayed.

When my family would visit, one of the things we loved to do together was play games. But when my grandfather would play with us, he had a funny little quirk. Often, when it wasn't his turn, we would look over at him, and he was daydreaming. He seemed off somewhere unknown, in a trance or something. We would say, "Grandpa, Grandpa, wake up. It's your turn."

He would come out of his "trance" by rubbing his chin or putting his arm in the air and quietly saying, "Bless the Lord. Bless the Lord." We thought, What in the world is the matter with Grandpa?

I didn't realize it at the time, but now I understand that my grandfather had such a close relationship with Jesus Christ that when his mind wandered, it automatically went into God's presence.

Wow! How can I get to a point in my spiritual walk where that happens to me? When I don't have to stay focused and can be thinking about anything, how can I automatically go to

communing with God?

Near the Presence

One of my favorite characters in the Old Testament is an obscure guy named Obed-Edom, the Gittite. In 1 Chronicles 13:9–14 Obed appears in the story of King David bringing the ark of the covenant to the tabernacle in Jerusalem.

When they came to the threshing floor of Kidon, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark because the oxen stumbled. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God.

Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. David was afraid of God that day and asked, "How can I ever bring the ark of God to me?" He did not take the ark to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. The ark of God remained with the family of Obed-Edom in his house for three months, and the Lord blessed his household and everything he had.

I try to imagine what this experience was like for Obed. Maybe it went something like this:

Obed hears that the ark of the covenant, the most holy item in a human being's worship of Almighty God, is coming through his town on a given day. In fact, the route passes right by his house. He figures people are going to come into town from miles away to view this.

I wonder if early that morning Obed got out the lawn chairs and put them by the road in front of his house to reserve a good viewing spot for his family. Maybe they had a tailgate party. "Get out the barbecue grill and throw on some lamb

chops.”

After a while a murmur ripples through the crowd: “It’s coming; it’s coming.” Everyone rushes to the side of the road to view it.

Just when the procession is in front of Obed’s house, the oxen stumble over some stones in the road. The ox cart starts to wobble. The ark starts to teeter. And a man named Uzzah reaches up to do a good thing, to steady the ark. But the instant he touches it, he dies on the spot.

The king is so frightened to go any further that he looks for the closest place to store the ark. He sees Obed’s house, and plops that thing down in his living room.

Obed’s got a problem. What if, in a spat, one of his kids pushes the other one against it? Will the baby crawl in there and touch it? I can picture him going into that room at night and shimmying along the wall to stay as far away from it as possible.

Yet Scripture says for the three months the ark remained at Obed’s house, God blessed his life—and everything he had—so much so that it made a lasting impression.

Close to the Presence

This passage is not the last we see of Obed. Three months later, David again gets the ark and finally takes it to the tabernacle. Over the next several chapters of 1 Chronicles we see Obed mentioned four times. Somehow he has gotten a job at the tabernacle, first as a gatekeeper at the outside of the tabernacle (15:17–18). Next he is a musician inside the tabernacle (15:21). Finally he is a doorkeeper at the very tent the ark is in (15:24). He is just feet away from the presence of God.

We see him one more time in chapter 16:

David left Asaph and his associates before the ark of the covenant of the Lord to minister there regularly, according to each day's requirements. He also left Obed-Edom and his sixty-eight associates [often translated kin] to minister with them. Obed-Edom son of Jeduthun, and also Hosah, were gatekeepers (vv. 37–38, brackets added).

Obed's hunger to be near the presence of the Lord was palpable. His passion about it seemed so infectious that it led to many tabernacle jobs for his kinship as well—brothers, sons, cousins, and nephews. His hunger changed his life and that of his family.

His hunger and passion for being near the presence of God was somewhat like my grandfather's hunger and passion. But for present-day followers of Jesus Christ, the presence that used to be in the ark is now in us! The Spirit of Christ—the Holy Spirit—indwells us. So we are not talking about doing physical, tangible things to be near the presence of God. We are talking about internal things that cause us to be in the presence of God—communing spirit to Spirit. How do we do that?

The Gift of the Spirit

Luke's gospel provides a clue. In Luke 11, Jesus tells a story about a late-arriving friend who needs to be fed. The homeowner has no food, so he goes to his neighbor and wakes him up. His persistence, Jesus said, will get the bread. That passage is about intercession and persisting in prayer. But there is something in this passage that most teachers seem to miss:

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give

him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (vv. 9–13).

Wait a minute. What is asking for the Holy Spirit doing there? We weren't talking about that in the passage. I believe Luke saw a connection between prayer and the activity of the Holy Spirit that no other gospel writer saw.

Consider two familiar stories in Jesus' life, contained in multiple gospels—Jesus' baptism and the Mount of Transfiguration. Luke, in his version, mentions something amazing, something no other gospel writer chooses to point out—the supernatural activity in both: Heaven opening and the Holy Spirit coming in the form of a dove, Jesus' countenance and clothes glowing, and the glorified bodies of Moses and Elijah appearing. This all happened while Jesus was praying!

The Need for Hunger

You see, we tend to use prayer to get stuff—fix this, make this better. But in reality, when we pray we get the Holy Spirit. We get God's presence welling up within us, blessing us, and making us a blessing to others.

That's why we need to work on our prayer lives and encourage weaker believers not to neglect prayer. Prayer will cause us to experience God. It moves our connection with God from something in our heads to a reality in our souls.

To me, the greatest factor in my desiring to develop my prayer life is hunger. Obed uprooted his life to be near the presence of God. Do I have that kind of palpable passion or hunger to be in God's presence?

I have been a Christian since I was six years old, but it was not until age 30 that I began to hunger for the presence of God. The key for me was learning to ask for hunger.

I started praying a simple prayer: "God, give me a greater hunger to know You. Give me a longing, a greater desire." As I started regularly praying that prayer, something started to happen within me. I began to experience and long for His presence in greater ways. As a result, the last 25 years of my walk with God have been vastly different from the first 25 years!

Am I where my grandfather was, where his mind would automatically go to communing with the Father? Not yet. But I have my moments. And I am learning that the ultimate answer to prayer is not the stuff I get or the miracle God might provide, but the presence of God Himself!



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