

SESSION 4: PURSUING GOD'S HEART

A RELATIONAL FAITH

If we look to the time before time, before the dawn of Genesis and creation—we will find deep, intimate relationship. It is the intimate relationship of the Trinity. Together they create the universe. Together they exhibit and embody love. In this love, Jesus came in obedience to his relationship with the Father and died to create an eternal relationship with us. He pursued relationships and was fueled by relationships. To guide and protect us, Jesus sends the Spirit, called the *paraklete* in Greek, meaning “the one who walks alongside.” God the Father-Son-Spirit is relational.

If we look ahead into eternity, we also find intimacy. Almost all the biblical images of heaven are relational and communal. Some are about shared living: heavenly beings moving to and from in a Holy City, a gathering place of paradise, a royal city called New Jerusalem, a “sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” a place where Jesus will receive all his people to himself, and the Father’s house with many rooms. Other scenes are about shared celebration: a wedding banquet, a wondrous gathering from each of the twelve Tribes of Israel, a reunion of those who have died before, a returning to a long-lost home, and an all-included choir concert extraordinaire.

From start to finish, Christianity is a relational faith.

We often crystalize our relational God with this truth: *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Rom. 5:8).

“Christ died for us...” Not for a theology or religious framework. Our loving God desires that people connect at a heart level to him in this life. The Father sent the Son to die to accomplish this. “For us.” God has sacrificially pursued his relationship with us. But have we pursued our relationship with him? Whether we recognize it or not, as beings made in the image of a Triune and relational God, humanity hungers to relate intimately to our Creator. Most of us simply do not know how to find this intimate fellowship with God, yet deep inside we aspire to experience him in a deeper way. Consciously or unconsciously, we are seeking the heart of God.

Andrew’s Keys from Session 4

- LOVE FUELS ENDURANCE AND PERSEVERENCE
- DETERMINE TO LOVE GOD
- LOVE OVERCOMES OFFENSE
- SIMPLE DEVOTION
- LOVE IS MORE THAN EMOTION
- INTIMACY COMES WITH TESTING
- CAN GOD TRUST YOU?
- NURTURE LOVE FOR GOD
- BE INTENTIONAL

“It would be wrong to think that since communion with God is the supreme aim of man, it will be granted only at some later time...

No, here and now it must be our constant and unceasing state.”

■ Theophan the Recluse,
1860

PAUL PRAYS FOR HIS FRIENDS

In my Colorado garden shed, I pin a list of people to pray for. As I tend the plants and pull the weeds in the summer, I pray for people. Have you ever noticed how Paul prayed for those he loved? Looking at his prayers we see he keeps repeatedly asking for something. For what?

It is remarkable that, in all his writings, Paul's prayers for his friends never ask God for changes in their circumstances. Their world was full of dangers and hardships. They faced persecution, disease, oppression, separation from loved ones, and death. Yet in these prayers we see no petitions for better government leaders, for protection from war or crime, for safe children, or even for daily food. Paul does not pray for the things we would usually have near the top of our lists. Why not? Paul, led by the Spirit, has a higher goal when he prays. In Ephesians 1:17 he writes: *"I keep asking that . . . you may know him better."*

He prays that they may have more intimacy with God.

Paul knows that unless their hearts are connected to God, their ability to grow and safeguard themselves and others will struggle. This goes right to the heart of Jesus' command, *"Seek first the kingdom of God, and everything else will be given to you as well."* (Matt. 6:33). The Message translates it this way, *"Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met."*

"By praying in this way, Paul was assuming *the priority of the inner life with God*. Most contemporary people base their inner life on their outward circumstances. Their inner peace is based on other people's valuation of them, and on their social status, prosperity, and performance. Christians do this as much as anyone. Paul is teaching that, for believers, it should be the other way around. Otherwise, we will be whiplashed by how things are going in the world."

■ Tim Keller

"To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love...Come near to the holy men and women of the past and you will soon feel the heat of their desire after God. They mourned for Him, they prayed and wrestled and sought for Him day and night, in season and out, and when they had found Him the finding was all the sweeter for the long seeking."

■ A. W. Tozer

HOW THE GOSPEL SPEAKS TO BECOMING MORE INTIMATE WITH GOD

Dr. Bruce Demarest wrote, "Many believers are left struggling with a serious question: How do we live in nourishing communion with an invisible and holy God who is, nonetheless, 'with us'?"

The starting point, simply, is the Gospel of Jesus. The basic premise of the Gospel is that God himself desires to be connected, and so removes the barriers which estrange humanity from him. In Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and in his Word, God explicitly communicates and connects himself to people. Marvelously, God is working to establish a universe where human beings live in community with him and with each other. William Barry, citing writings from John MacMurray, calls this, "God's one action for the universe."

Because of love, God pursues intimacy with us.

Scripture is full of examples. For example, God spoke with Moses and showed Moses a small portion of his glory, transforming Moses' face to radiance. God sent an angel to speak to Manoah and revealed himself in the flame. God speaks in dreams to the pagan Abimelech (Gen. 20), Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28), and both Joseph in Egypt and Joseph in Nazareth. God allows Isaiah to hear his voice and see his robe from the throne of the heavenly Temple and even sends an angel with a coal from the altar to touch him. Clearly, God is a God of self-revelation. In Jeremiah 9:23-24 this truth becomes clear: *"This is what the Lord says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me...'"*(emphasis mine). In Isaiah 49:13-16, we find:

Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me."

Spiritual intimacy is a gift from God's heart. He is like a mother to his people. We are his treasured possession. *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession."* (Ex. 19:4-5).

LEARNING FROM IRAQ

"Mohammed and his wife are from Mosul, the largest city in Northern Iraq under ISIS control. He was a Sunni Muslim when, about ten years before our meeting, he had a dream in which Jesus Christ came and spoke personally to him. When Mohammed woke up, he made the decision to follow Christ—the One who would come and speak personally to him. At first, Mohammed's wife was very upset that her devout Sunni husband would become an apostate, an infidel. How could he turn his back on the true faith? But, about three months later, she had the very same dream Mohammed had described to her. Jesus came and spoke to her, personally. When she woke up, she made the same decision her husband had: she, too, would follow Jesus... Having been saved by Christ, Mohammed began to tell others in their neighborhood in Mosul. Their house was burned down. The family fled Mosul, eventually coming to this camp near Irbil. Since their arrival, Mohammed and his family have led people from two other families to Christ."

■ Todd Nettleton, *When Faith is Forbidden*, 2021

Over 400 times in the Bible the Jewish name for the "I AM" God is paired into an intensified, relational Hebrew title, *Yahweh Elohim*, "*The Lord **your** God.*" This is used by God during the giving of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2) and repeated over 30 times by Moses as he quotes God in the Law passages of Leviticus. Jesus uses the Greek form of this title many times, including in the Great Commandment of Matthew 22:37-39: "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment." The Lord defines himself as both personal and possessive.

2 Peter 1:3-4 (Message) declares, *"Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you — your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust."*

INTENTIONALLY PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD

Paul desires that Christians pursue God deeply. But how do we do this? It begins with making our deepening relationship with God our priority. By our choice to be intentional in our faith walk, no matter what, we grow closer to God. Especially in times of testing.

Saying you love someone is easy. Really loving them is much harder. Jesus teaches us that real love often requires sacrifice. *"Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."* (John 15:12-13).

"As a communion of three persons, God is a relational being. He is the originator of a personal relationship with us, and our high and holy calling is to respond to his loving initiatives. By loving God completely, we discover who and whose we are as we come to see ourselves as God sees us."

■ Ken Boa

If we love someone, it will often cost us. Real love makes us willing to undergo suffering for the sake of those we love. If we want to love God and pursue his heart, we must be ready for sacrifice. Andrew notes, "Love is what makes us willing to undertake risk and hardship, to carry burdens. A lover is willing to endure much for his beloved."

Love fuels endurance and perseverance.

Do we have endurance and perseverance? David, after years under the stars seeking God, became a man after God's heart. Anna spent years waiting in the temple, in prayer and fasting, for the promised Messiah. John the Baptist dedicated his whole life to preparing for the coming of Jesus. Mary is willing to disappoint her sister and their houseguests to be with Jesus.

I wonder if we too often think faith should be quick and easy, like a drive-through restaurant? We have so many other things to get to, Jesus. People are counting on me. *"For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."* (Phil. 2:21).

I need to honestly ask, "Lord, is this me?" I wonder if we are willing to count the cost. Are we hungrier for God or for expediency? Are we, in our instant culture, more ready to check our hearts or check our watches?

TO HANDLE PERSECUTION, WE MUST DETERMINE TO LOVE GOD

One of the turning points for Andrew in his Turkish cell was learning to worship God when it came as a sacrifice. He worshiped when there seemed to be little reason for praise. His singing and dancing to God was a "declaration to him in very difficult circumstances." It was an act of love. An act of surrender. An act of love toward God, "I love you Jesus!" Andrew learned that in torment, Christians need to cultivate a simple, loving devotion.

Pause. Lord, can you trust me to love you?

Love is an emotion. But it also expresses itself in other ways. In loyalty, commitment, surrender, worship, spiritual hunger, and perseverance. Deep love remains even when God is not easily found or experienced. Or when the costs of isolation and loss brings tears to our cheeks. Love becomes intimate love when it is willing to sacrifice for its beloved. Love becomes proved when we are tested. Andrew affirms, "There is an intimacy that only comes with testing."

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis uses this wonderful example:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

God is committed to our spiritual overhaul, not just our comfort. Is this not supposed to be true of all good parents—willing to allow their beloved child some pain and struggle so that their wisdom grows? Spoiled children often chase the wrong things. More on this next session.

"Lord, you are my Lord and my God, and I have never seen you. You have made me and nurtured me, given me every good thing I have ever received, and I still do not know you. I was created for the purpose of seeing you, and I still have not done the thing I was made to do. Come on then, my Lord God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here, where shall I find you?"

■ Anselm of Canterbury,
c. 1060.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) What can we learn from the fact that God is relational by nature, a “God with us”?
- 2) How does a person who is “pursuing God’s heart” look? What can we notice in their life?
- 3) How do we “bring a sacrifice of praise” to God? How might persecution effect this?

ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Who is your closest friend? What makes a friendship work? Write a list. (Time together, transparency, joy, etc.?) Look at your list. Which of these do you regularly share with God?
- ✓ Right now, take one step toward God, for he is the perfect parent and friend. Read Deut. 31:8 and Psalm 131.
- ✓ Pray, “Father, pour out your love into my inner self by the Holy Spirit, that my heart may overflow in love back to you. Allow me to comprehend Jesus’ love for me and to abide in it and stay connected to it (Jn. 15:9). I also ask that you impart your love for Jesus into my heart (Jn. 17:26). I ask for grace to love you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk. 12:30).”

FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—WHY ARE GOD’S PEOPLE TESTED?

It might bother us, but God allows painful tests to come into our lives. Without giving up his sovereignty over all things, he uses the broken and hardhearted nature of the world’s powers to refine his people. 1 Peter 4 is clear:

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” 19 So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Psalm 66 is another clear example of this. Let’s examine it deeper.

8 Praise our God, all peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; 9 he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.

10 For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver. 11 You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.

12 You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.

13 I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you—14 vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble. 15 I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats.

16 Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me. 17 I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.

18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; 19 but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. 20 Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!

In this worship song, the psalmist calls the people to praise God, for he has kept his people from destruction and falling. Israel then, and the Church now, have many reasons to praise the Lord. For God has rescued us from slavery, guided us through the desert, enabled us to defeat our enemies, empowered us with his presence, and given us a future inheritance.

Still, it is God who tests us. God is IN the punishment, ALLOWING the pain, although not the source of evil. When his people disobey, he disciplines us. Like a careful craftsman, he put us “through fire” to remove our impurities. Here this includes prison, burdens, subservience, and persecution.

The psalmist has endured the test. He responds by pursuing the Lord and engaging in worship to fulfill the promises he has made in his grim times. He brings what is biblically asked of him, and he brings the best—“fat animals”—that he has. It is a heart sacrifice of praise. His message or endurance needs to be shared! It is not about the testing, but on the results which flourished in chains. His mouth and tongue, like Andrew’s, surprise him by breaking out in praise. “Praise be to God!” “I love you Jesus!”

It has been a time of refining. Sin has been identified and confessed instead of cherished. His prayers (like ours) are answered. God has not—even through suffering—rejected his prayer (or ours) or withheld his love. Amazing!