

More Than Anything

More than anything, our hearts want to experience the presence of God in our lives. This is the way we are built. Nothing in the entire universe can satisfy our souls more than the reality of God's spirit comingling with our own. Nothing! Yet, there are a lot of people these days that are convinced God does not exist, or if he does exist, it is not worth the time or energy getting to know him. And, there are a lot of cheap substitutes being sold in the market place, too, that claim to offer the solace and peace only God can provide. But what if God really does exist? Most of us would give up everything, trade it all in, if we could feel God's real, palpable, loving presence in our lives - to know for sure he is there!

If you will read the Old Testament, and anyone can, you will discover the most riveting story of how God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt in approximately 1500 B.C. Talk about the presence of God! God worked through Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh and his mighty Egyptian empire in the most dramatic fashion. It was a power encounter of the highest order. It was a time to test whether the strength of God was more powerful than the power and might of the world. As Scripture tells us, Pharaoh and his people finally succumbed. However, the dramatic story didn't end there. Once the Israelites were emancipated, God instructed the Israelites in great detail how to establish a camp, build an ark of the covenant, and organize a Levitical priesthood in the middle of the Sinai Desert. God wanted a place where he could talk with Moses and give instruction to his chosen people.

Listen to what the Bible says about this time period:

"On the day the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered it. But from evening until morning, the cloud over the Tabernacle looked like a pillar of fire. This was the regular pattern - at night the cloud that covered the Tabernacle had the appearance of fire. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the sacred tent, the people of Israel would break camp and follow it. And wherever the cloud settled, the people of Israel would set up camp. In this way, they traveled and camped at the Lord's command wherever he told them to go." (Numbers 9:15-18a)



The Tabernacle

In other words, the Lord dwelt smack-dab in the middle of his people. He was not off to the side; he lived among his chosen people. He appeared as a cloud during

the day and as fire at night. He provided for all that they needed; even amidst their more difficult conditions. He led them through the Sinai Desert to the Promised Land. Throughout history, God has wanted to be in intimate relationship with his people. He is not a distant God who is far away, judging us heartlessly and coldly. On the contrary, he bends over backwards to be in a close, loving relationship with each of us. That is why he ultimately incarnated himself in the form of his son, Jesus, so that he could walk, talk, and be among us. And that is why he sent his Holy Spirit to set up shop in our hearts, so that he could be permanently in the innermost recesses of our being.

Most of us will not make a meaningful move towards God unless we are convinced that he exists, until his presence is real in our lives. The Bible tells us that if we earnestly and honestly seek God, he will more than meet us halfway. In this regard, the biggest turning point in my own life occurred when I was on a plane flight to Caracas, Venezuela, in 1981. At the time, I was an agricultural commodities trader for Cargill, Inc., living in Minneapolis, Minn. On this particular plane flight, I was going to Caracas to finalize a contract I had with The Seagram Company. I had sold them boatloads of molasses for alcohol production in Venezuela.

The first leg of the trip landed me overnight in Chicago. I decided to visit my parents and spend the night with them in the house where I grew up in Winnetka, Ill. After dinner with my parents, I went into the family library and looked over their books, something I liked to do. Immediately, my attention was drawn to a small book with a famous title and author, *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. I had never noticed it before; I also had no idea that the content of the book concerned God. So I pulled the book off the shelf, figuring I could read a famous book rather quickly on the long plane flight to Venezuela.

As I settled into my seat on the plane, I reached into my briefcase, pulled out *The Screwtape Letters* and began to read. Within moments, C.S. Lewis had grabbed my total attention. I had never read an author who used such vivid language and was able to describe human nature so accurately and well. As I read each page, I was convinced he was describing my innermost thoughts and me. I was humbled. In fact, as I read an extraordinary calm came over me I had never before experienced. As I approached the end of the book, an enormous peace suddenly overwhelmed my heart. It seemed as though the entire cabin of the plane was filled with the presence of God. I was joyful beyond description. God was no longer just an obscure idea to me. He had become a living presence in my heart.



Author C.S. Lewis

When I got to my hotel in Caracas, I went to my room and immediately dropped to my knees. I prayed to God for the first time in my life. God knew that I was ready and wanted to know him. I was tired of carrying life's burdens on my own. All I needed to know was whether God was real and full of love and truth. Thankfully, he revealed himself to me, telling me, indeed, he was full of love and truth.

None of us can experience God's presence without his help. God not only saved me from myself and the clutches of the world, he also led me into a life of ministry, which I could never have found on my own.

For the past 30 years, I have tried to show others who are seeking God or an ultimate truth, how to find him. I now realize how many people helped me along my way. It takes a community of loving and praying people to help an individual discover the reality of God. As you know, my heart aches for my Muslim friends to find the unique grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, the ultimate and fullest presence of God in our world.

Presently, Muslims are practicing Ramadan, a 40-day fasting period they observe once a year. Ramadan is one of the five pillars of the Muslim faith. It is of utmost importance. Now in the middle of July, Muslims worldwide are abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. Muslims fast because they want to draw closer to God, and earn favor from him as well. They forsake worldly pleasures in order to experience a closer walk with God. But, what they don't know is how much they need the reconciling work of Jesus Christ in order to enter into his kingdom and enjoy his loving presence. Fasting alone, as the Bible tells us, just won't do it. It is only through humble and sincere faith in Jesus Christ that we are invited into the Holy of Holies, into his peaceful kingdom, into his loving presence.

In addition, some Muslims not only fast but also engage in what they call "Whirling Dervish" dances. These particular Muslims are called Sufi. Many Sufi have become my friends here in Chicago. These particular dancers swirl rapidly in circles, trying to achieve a sensation of ecstasy. In their dancing, they want to lose all thought and encourage their hearts alone to interact with God. They want so badly to enter into God's presence. But God has said that it is only through faith in his son alone that we can achieve this goal. All the fasting, dancing, singing, church attendance or good works will not accomplish this goal apart from faith in the atoning and reconciling work of Jesus on the cross.



**The Whirling Dervish
Dance**

Don't settle for a second-rate, routine, or passive Christian life. God wants us at the plate, swinging as hard as we can. He loves those who are earnestly seeking him. So do something different. If you feel the Spirit moving now, drop to your knees

and pray to God, asking him to make his loving presence more real in your life and palpable to you. It will make a world of difference in your life, from top to bottom. Christianity is not an intellectual exercise or achievement; it is a dramatic experience. God longs to be real and intimate with us. The only thing we have to do is to invite him into our hearts.