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Communion

There wasn't a dry eye in the church as the preacher declared 'what God has joined together, let man not separate.' The couple kissed and the congregation cheered. I am sure you have seen that scene many times, and may even have been the bride or groom. It is a wonderful day that celebrates the love that has brought two people together, but also hope for the longevity of their lives together. We all know what happens next: honeymoon together, move in together, live life together.

But what would people think if the bride suddenly went to the door and declared to her husband, 'Thanks for a great day and making me the happiest woman in the world. See you around!' Can you imagine if she then went off to live her own life, in her own home, with her own dreams. You'd be forgiven for wondering if this was a 'marriage of convenience', maybe a way of getting a Green Card or citizenship to a new country.

Could it be that some Christians have done the same with Jesus? We have taken the covenant of our marriage (being joined in union with Christ) but not cherished the outworking of that relationship (our communion with Him through the Spirit). As I started to unpack in the last

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chapter, Christ not only died to give us union with Him, but also communion with Him. That is, the experience of relationship: Love, peace, joy, comfort, conviction, drawing near, etc.

Before we look at how God wants to Interrupt us with times of communion with Him, I need to make two things very clear. Firstly, communion is the outworking of union. It is because we are united with Christ (and thus indwelt by the Holy Spirit) that we can enjoy communion with Him. Communion is the fruit of union, and not the basis. Secondly, communion is a myriad of different things. These are not just spectacular manifestations of the Spirit. It can be a still small voice, comfort in sorrow, challenge in church, joy in suffering, or assurance amid doubt. Don't limit God or miss out on His wondrous gifts of intimacy.

Creating space for communion

In Chapter 3, we looked at the way in which Jesus would often 'withdraw to a solitary place' (*eremos*). With many of these passages, the word *eremos* is translated in different ways: Remote. Solitary. Desolate. But it was always in order to spend quality time with the Father. The habit has common features: Jesus goes by Himself, often early in the morning, sometimes inviting the disciples to join him, but always to pray.

Richard Foster makes an amazing list of times that Jesus does this:

- Forty days for His inauguration of ministry
- Before He chooses the twelve
- After hearing of the death of John the Baptist
- After feeding 5,000

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- After a long night of ministry
- After the twelve have been on a mission trip
- After healing the leper
- On the mount of Transfiguration
- In the Garden of Gethsemane¹

This withdrawal to be with God was often to prepare for something or to process something. Basically, Jesus dotted His life with silence and solitude – to give it a rhythm. In effect, He was breathing. It is important that we breathe in life. We need breathing space. But that breathing must be more than a Christianised form of yoga; it needs to be breathing space with the Spirit – the breath of God.

The focus of this is not so much on a place as a pace. It is about stepping out and slowing down. Although we can all have our favourite *eremos*, like a mountain, a coffee shop, a chair in the house, or even a layby on the way home from work, the important thing about this is not the location, but the ability to meet with God.

We need to withdraw (silence)

As we have seen, Christians throughout the centuries have spoken about the spiritual discipline of silence. This mainly happens when there is external silence. It is good to find and create quiet places, desolate places. That could be out in creation (like we explored in Chapter 6), by putting a tea towel on your face (like John Wesley's mother), building a prayer closet (a bit extreme), or simply by having a commute without the radio, or walking the dog without a podcast.

1. Ibid., p. 122.

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Ultimately, we have to turn things off: Social media, entertainment, and work email / phone.

C.S. Lewis imagines how Satan wants to keep us surrounded by noise. In his brilliant book *The Screwtape Letters* he describes how a devil perceives silence and why they want to stop it at all costs: ‘Noise – Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless and virile – Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples and impossible desires.’² Lewis knew that silence is the soil in which spirituality soars.

But it is not just about quiet on the outside, for you can still have noise inside. There can be a roar of silence. And so, sometimes, we want external noise to drown it out. That’s what we thought of in the last chapter. But there is so much more in silence! God wants to meet with us and draw near. And whilst that happens predominantly in church and our devotions, it can also happen in creation, acts of compassion, communicating the gospel and having our conscience cleansed. In all of these, and more, we can enjoy communion with God.

Embrace boredom

We have forgotten how to be bored. Actually, we are scared of being bored. We make sure that every moment of our lives is filled with some sort of entertainment, email or exercise. Not wanting to sound like an old man, but I can remember walking to school with no phone or personal stereo / Walkman / Disk-man / MP3 player / iPod / iPhone (you can see how we have increased our ability to have entertainment at the touch of a screen). In those days, in

2. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fount Paperback, 1982) p. 113.

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allowing my mind to get bored, I actually thought about things. Processed things. Prayed! But now, I always have something to dull the pain of boredom.

The flip side to not having 'boredom' time is that we don't have any time to be Interrupted by God. We don't have moments or minutes for God to nudge us.

A BHAG prayer

The spiritual disciplines of the Christian life have been written about *ad infinitum* over the centuries. I have a collection of 'spiritual classics' in my office that have helped me think through meditation, prayer, fasting, simplicity, solitude and slowing. But I always have a nagging feeling that many of these books come across as a reflective observer's form of legalism. They can be a form of intellectual activism that seeks to commune with God through works. Obviously, I don't believe that is the heart of all the authors. But, over many years of pastoral counselling, I have seen Christian after Christian start to feel like these are exercises that can get you into the presence of God.

Whilst I think all Christians can benefit from learning to read the Bible prayerfully, explore silence and solitude, I also firmly believe that all communion with the Lord is a gift of grace that is only possible through the work of the Spirit. So, whilst God uses means of grace (like church, preaching, Bible reading and the Lord's Supper), we need to look to the Spirit to bring about that experience of communion. Moreover, I think we should pray for it.

Have a listen to Paul:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen

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you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Eph. 3:14-21).

Do you know what a BHAG is? It is an American term that is used in business leadership circles as an acronym for BIG HAIRY AUDACIOUS GOAL. Well, this second prayer in Ephesians is a spiritual Big Hairy Audacious Goal. It is a huge prayer.

Notice the three references to power: verse 16 *strengthen you with power*; verse 18 *may have power*; verse 20 *according to His power*. This is a prayer for power, from power. It is a prayer for power to do 'immeasurably more' than we could ask or imagine. In a nutshell, this prayer is a personal prayer for power, that Christ may dwell in our hearts, and our hearts may delight in Christ's love. When it comes to communion with God, Paul is saying, pray big or go home.

Beginning with the words '*For this reason*', Paul is looking back to Chapter 3, verse 1, where the flow of argument was broken. The actual context is not chapter 3 but chapters 1 and 2.

There you can read an amazing presentation of the gospel. The glorious grace that is ours through Christ. An awesome Christ-centred gospel that creates a new humanity – the

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church. So, he's told them that they are one in Christ, and in Chapter 4, he is going to show them how to live as one. But before he does that, he pauses to pray for them. Paul knows that gospel ambitions are powerless without prayer.

Look at how he describes the physical act of prayer: '*Kneel before the Father*'. We see desperation and intimacy here. Kneeling was not the usual position for prayer, and isn't in my own non-conformist tradition. But it can be when I am desperate. And look at who he is kneeling in front of ... his Father. This is the game changer for our prayer lives.

As a student, I struggled to pray and remember making some public excuses about it in a meeting to an amazing Christian man who bounced with grace and enthusiasm. But in that moment, in front of all my peers, he rightly rebuked me. He told me that Paul wrestled in prayer, and so should I. That had a huge affect on me, and made me want to try harder. But it didn't free me to pray. It didn't give me life. It was only a part of the answer. You see, prayer is not so much about how well you wrestle, but knowing who you are wrestling with.

The real game changer for me was reading *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller.³ It was like being born again, again. I finally realised that it was our understanding of God as Father that makes prayer a reality. No wonder Jesus taught us to pray, 'Our Father ...'

Prayer should be like talking to a father: honest, dependent, open, and natural. This has to be one of the most unique aspects of Christianity – the Fatherhood of God. Looking back at Ephesians 1:5, we read that 'In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ,

3. Paul Miller, *A Praying Life* (Colorado: Navpress, 2009).

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in accordance with his pleasure and will.’ As one writer put it, ‘God went beyond redemption to adoption.’ J.I. Packer wrote, ‘To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater.’⁴

On the cross, having lived a perfect life, and dying in our place, Jesus obtained: forgiveness of sin; imputation of righteousness; and adoption as sons. It is the full package! **But we need to see that this adoption is not simply external and legal, but relational – communal.** Romans 8 unpacks it:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children (Rom. 8:14-16).



This is an experience of the Spirit that is for all believers. For me and for you. Understanding this puts us on a journey of expecting more. We don’t just want formal externalism. A dry intellectual faith that is simply propositions. I want more than that; I want God ... Himself. Isn’t that how Jesus described eternal life in His High Priestly Prayer? *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*⁵

God offers ‘immeasurably more’ than we imagine, adoption into a relationship. Fatherhood. And our Father God answers our prayers ‘*out of His glorious riches*’. Not financial wealth – but the gospel. Back in Ephesians 1:6 he defines the riches: *to the praise of his glorious grace, which*

4. J.I. Packer *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 231.

5. John 17:3.

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he has freely given us in the One he loves. Glorious riches are the glorious gospel of great grace. In chapter 1, we see that we have every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus – and Paul listed about fourteen of them. It is according to those blessings that we ask this BHAG. If our Father has given us so much, how much more now?!

What does Paul want?

‘*So that Chapter 3 verse 17 ...*’ The prayer is essentially one request according to Charles Hodge.⁶ But with sub parts. So, what does he pray for?

For Christ to dwell in our hearts (Eph. 3:17a)

‘Dwell’ is about living somewhere. Being at home. When you are at home, you belong and change things. You may live in a hotel for a short while (one night or week), but you don’t change things. You just complain or move on. Moreover, hotel owners don’t let you look everywhere – like the broom cupboard – they are out of limits.

Could this be how we let Christ live in our hearts? He is welcome on a Sunday morning during the worship and Word, but we don’t want Him to change things, or search every part. This is not how Christ should be in our hearts by His Spirit. He owns our heart; He has the deeds to the house. He can (and will) change things. He can (and will) go everywhere. But this is a thing of degrees with us. To let Him dwell is to let Him be Lord and become more like Him.

Don Carson comments that this notion is deeply akin to a much-loved emphasis among the Puritans – that *Christ might be formed in believers*.⁷ Is Christ at home in your

6. Charles Hodge, *Geneva Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, Reprint 1991), p. 124.

7. Don Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), p. 165.

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heart? Does He have complete access? As we come to the end of this book I want to invite you to be ready for Divine Interruptions. In helping the poor and sharing the gospel, yes! But also, in knowing and feeling Christ. This is the missing note of modern evangelicalism.

Christ has so much more for us than we realise. The Puritan and theologian John Owen said: ‘Our greatest hindrance in the Christian life is not our lack of effort, but our lack of acquaintedness with our privileges.’⁸ We need to make sure we know the gospel and grasp God’s love for us.

For our hearts to grasp Christ’s love (Eph. 3:17b-19)

God wants us to know His love. Love is foundational to our faith. We are to be nourished and stabilised by love. How do we know what this love is that Paul is praying about in Ephesians? As every good Bible teacher will tell you: look at the context. In Chapters 1 and 2, he spells out the gospel of grace and shows us the love of God. The Apostle John puts it beautifully in 1 John 3:16, ‘*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*’

Now, what do all these dimensions mean in verse 18? Simple: no matter where you look, there is love. Love is everywhere in the gospel – it is all of love. ‘Wide’ means it embraces all (Jew and Gentile); ‘long’ shows it goes into eternity; ‘deep’ reminds us that it is for the vilest offender; and ‘high’ helps us see that the gospel lifts us to the heavens. This is a limitless love.

And so, when it comes to verse 18, we need power to grasp it.

8. John Owen *Volume 2: Communion with God* (Edinburgh:Banner of Truth, 1998) p. 32.

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I can do some simple addition in my mind, but I need a calculator to do divisions and big numbers. But, there are PhD students and engineers who utilise computers to do complex sums. The bigger the number, the more power you need to work it out. Well, according to Paul, we need power to grasp the limitless dimensions of God's love. Divine power! We require limitless power to grasp limitless love!

Just as 'dwelling' is by degrees – so is our knowledge of God's love.

When I married my wife nearly twenty years ago, I knew that she loved me. But, after two decades, I know it *more*. In the same way, we must grow in our understanding and experience of God's love. This is not about something new, but the same love as was shown on the cross. And that love must be known objectively and subjectively. We must understand our union and enjoy our communion. We must never move on from the cross, but we should move deeper into the cross.

And let me underline something here. He is not praying that we would love God more, or that He would love us more. No, he is asking that we would grasp His love more.

Do you believe this is for you?

That you can know God's love more and more?

I believe that in church and conferences, in devotional readings and daily prayer times, in small groups and serving teams, with others and on our own, we can know God more. We can enjoy communion.

In the end, my prayer for you dear reader, is that you would know Christ more. That you would get those distracting interruptions under control so that you can

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see more Divine Interruptions, and that all of them would ultimately lead you to cherishing Christ.

This is a BHAG prayer.

This is normal Christianity

Before you assume this is not for you, please be assured that communion with Christ is:

- for the new Christian
- the young mum with sleep deprivation
- the businessman with deadlines and debts
- the disillusioned Christian
- the grandmother who has cancer
- the dad or mum trying to balance family, work, church and an elderly relative
- the depressed and stressed
- this is for you.

This is for all of us, as we all have the same Father! In Christ we **all** have a Father who gives according to His glorious gospel of grace! Just in case you missed how amazing your Father is, Paul gives us a doxology in Ephesians 3:20-21. I love the New King James Version (NKJV) here: *'able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us'*.

Doesn't this sound more amazing than the latest Twitter trend or work email on a Sunday morning? Wouldn't this give you far more satisfaction than fifty Facebook likes, or reading the newsfeed before breakfast? Can you imagine having moments of communion like this, Interrupting your normal day ... dare I say, your boring day? God has so much more for you than the distractions of tech and social media. He has Himself, for you.

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Selah

1. Are you scared of silence and solitude? Why do you think that is?
2. Or, are you craving silence and solitude? Why?
3. Where could your *eremos* (solitary place) be? What do you need to do to make that a regular reality?
4. Do you believe that Jesus wants you to know Him more? How does that make you feel?

Prayer

Dear Father in heaven, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, I pray that out of Your glorious riches You may strengthen me with power through Your Spirit in my inner being, so that Christ may dwell in my heart through faith. And I pray that I, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that I may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.