

a guide to meeting God wherever you are

by Ness Cannon

Start From Here

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Start From Here: A Guide to Meeting God Wherever You Are

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For my babies: West, Penelope, and Clementine.

Never forget that God isn't a structure or a system; he is a person to meet. He really likes you, and so do l.

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Hi,my friend

I'm so glad we are here together, though "here" could mean a lot of things for you. You could be like me when I was a senior in high school, just beginning to navigate the confusion of Christianity and the Bible. Jesus was the one who pulled me close, and he seemed so approachable, but that giant book felt like a labyrinth—impossible to understand. The nuances of Christianity were confusing, and, as a teen who had never set foot in a church, I had no idea where to begin. Or maybe you've

been walking near to God for a while now, but you are in a place where you long for a fresh perspective—or perhaps, a reintroduction to the One who pulled you near in the first place.

Jesus is the best place to start. Always. I am writing these words the day after Easter, still recovering from a multiple sclerosis relapse. I am weak, I am in pain, and my heart feels confused about why things happen the way they do. I want to understand so much about the complications of life, but as I pray, I realize I might never understand the "hows" or "whys" about God. But, I have learned I can always trust the "who" behind God. God is not far or unknowable; he is someone to meet, and he longs for us to draw closer to him. So wherever you might be today, let's start from here—together—and discover the character behind God. He is the starting line and the finish line, and, friend, he wants to run the race in its entirety with us.

So much love to you,

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Let's Begin

I remember pieces of that summer. My family and I went to a beach in Michigan, and I was pretending to be normal, vacation-mode Ness, but it wasn't working. I was sitting on a towel, and my mind was frozen with sadness. The darkness of depression surrounded me, and my heart sank deeper and deeper into its tar. I had struggled with depression in short stints before, but this time two months had passed with no signs of the heaviness letting up. Depression hits everyone differently, but the worst

part for me was how lonely and distant I felt from God. My head knew he was there, but my heart missed him. It felt like I had lost touch with a very dear friend.

That day on the beach was sunny and perfect. My daughter, Clementine, was three years old. As she dipped her feet into the edge of the cool water, her delighted shrieks filled the shoreline. But I was lost in my thoughts, wondering what happened between me and God. I wasn't mad at God for this distance, just sad. I wanted to be near God, but he didn't seem responsive. I knew he wouldn't leave me, and I clung to that truth. But how long would that knowledge last for me without the *feeling* that God was close? I didn't know, and I was scared he would just fade away from me altogether.

I was standing at his door, pounding on it—not just politely knocking. But it felt like no one was there to answer. I needed him to answer.

I snapped out of my teary trance and saw Clementine's tiny body running toward me. Her blonde curls were dripping wet, and she was breathless as she thrust her little fists toward me. She had found a monarch butterfly in the sand getting rolled over by the waves. My husband, Chris, fished it out of the water, and Clementine wanted me to save it. I stretched out my hand, cradling the

sand-covered monarch in my palm whose wings looked anchored by water and beach.

Ever since I was a kid, I have felt connected to monarch butterflies. The root meaning of my name, Vanessa, is "butterfly," and my mom always said when you see a butterfly, it means things are going to be okay. She told me I was her butterfly because I had made her life better. Those are sweet mom words, and I always carried her beliefs with me. Apparently, a mother's words can shape your devotion to bugs. When I stared at this ragged insect, I felt like I was looking into a mirror. This water-logged guy was the perfect metaphor for how I was feeling—weighed down, totally exhausted, and alone. God felt so far from me. Do you see me, God? Do you see how scary the water and rock is to something so delicate and small? I began to cry right there holding that bug. I realized the full toll my depression had taken on my relationship with God. I felt crushed like a bug and needed to know he was near; I needed to be able to trust him again.

As I held that little creature, I thought about my own situation. I might be small and fragile, but just like this bug, I was in God's capable, kind hands. (In this case, because I was holding the butterfly, I was God. It's a metaphor. Go with me.) God *did* see me. He was not complacent or unfeeling; *he* was the safe place for my

sad mind to rest—just like my hand was for this tired flier.

God wasn't that far at all.

released from the weight, the butterfly stood up on my done, but I knew. Then, it stretched out its wings and flew away. I sat there and thought about the heaviness I his character. I remembered his heart for me—the way he sees me and loves me. God used that butterfly to remind me who he is. He is gentle in his process. He is patient. And though I felt alone then, I was actually safe in his

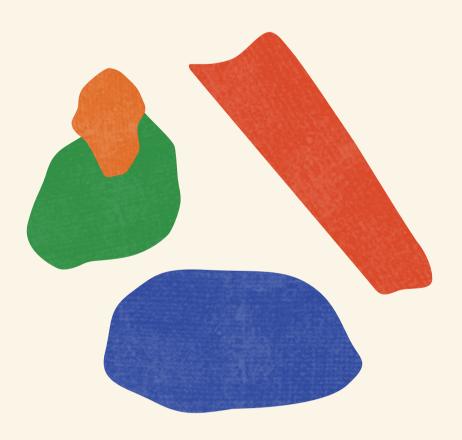
Clementine is much older now, but she still runs into my room after a bad dream. After a particularly scary one, she was frantic and filled to the brim with fear. I smoothed her hair and held her close. I asked her to imagine that her bed was God's hand. Could she snuggle up close and feel safe in that space? Could she relax knowing God was near her as he loved and protected her? She smiled and bounced into her room and fell right to sleep. The next week, she told me she had another nightmare, but she made it through because she knew she was in God's hand.

Maybe the trick of this whole thing is realizing what God is really like. Is he a trustworthy place to land? Do you trust him to care for you and respond to you with consistent love and patience? I want to peel back the layers of what we believe about the character of God. There are some key characteristics we need to grasp if we are going to walk closer with him; and if we can ponder those, we may end up seeing God with a fresh perspective.

Friend, you may be like that butterfly, tossed in the wind and waves. You may feel weighed down and so far from God, or you may be new to this whole faith thing and are wondering where to even begin. No matter where you are, you can start from here.

We can start the journey of remembering God if we can grasp his character. Perhaps we will realize that we have actually been in the palm of his loving hand the whole time.





God Loyes You

start from here

God Loves You

Clementine was my last baby and the one I had fought for the hardest. We had suffered through an awful miscarriage the year before, and I had never felt pain quite so visceral and real. Clementine was the blue sky after that dark storm. My other children came along so easily, but I begged God for Clementine.

She was born at 11:30 p.m. on April 15. I wanted to wait half an hour longer so she wouldn't be born on Tax Day, because it's the most boring day of the whole year, but I couldn't do it. I had to see her. The nurse placed her squirmy body into my arms. She looked just like my other babies: the same round head and big blue eyes. I held her tiny form close and took a mental picture. This hug was the first of a lifetime of embraces with my daughter, and I wanted to remember it forever

When I hold my kids, I feel like a force field against all the bad things. I must protect them from pain, bullies, rejection, and zits, I'm like Gandalf in Lord of the Rings, protecting my tiny hobbits from that giant fire monster. And for a microsecond, you can protect them-until their baby legs start to get antsy, and they crawl around and touch the inside of ovens, pull filing cabinets down on themselves, or attack your ancient cat who's never seen a kid before but knows she hates them nonetheless. They begin to explore and learn. and you know they need to grow, but you also want them to be completely safe. Unfortunately for parents, children learn the most formative and important lessons when poor choices are made, which is heartbreaking for us. The force field wasn't enough: the bad stuff made its way through, and your perfect, round-headed baby experienced pain. You love them so much, so very deeply, you can't really explain it. That's the love of a parent, and that's the way Jesus explains how God feels about us

When Jesus talks about God, he calls him Father. Here are Jesus' words:

"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'"

Matthew 6:9-10

These words are revolutionary. Think about it: when Jesus teaches us how to pray, he starts with, "Okay, first remember who you are talking to: God is your *Father*." Nobody did that before Jesus. It was actually a little controversial. Before this, Jewish people didn't even say "God." They called him other names, but never "God" or "Yahweh." God was someone to be revered and honored, and to call him "Father" was strange. Jesus reframes how we pray by helping us understand that God is both our Lord and Father. He's huge and eternal and personal: family and God.

I realize that talking about fathers could be pretty tough for some of you. Statistically speaking, more than 50% of individuals come from divorced families, and that may add complexity to your relationship with your dad. But let's get real: dads are just humans who had children, and are therefore, just people—flaws and all. No father is perfect, and if you have a great dad, good for you; but the truth is you are in the minority. Dad stuff is really complicated and deep, and I know describing what a good dad looks like might make you sad, but I also want to encourage you. My friend, you have a Father in heaven who is *good*. He's not distant, mad, or volatile; he's good, and he really, really likes you. You don't have to compare your dad on earth to the perfect dad because there is no comparison.

I'm a mom, and though I try my darndest to be a great one, I fail constantly. We can acknowledge that our own parental baggage might be a hindrance to us grasping the goodness of God, but for now, let's try to understand that though dads on earth will fail, our God isn't like that. I know letting go of this comparison is tough. I'm with you, but let's go for it, okay?

Give me your first impressions of the word "father." How does it make you feel to think of God as your Father?



Describe what you think a really good dad should be like.



Sometimes. I forget to dwell on the "Father" portion of God and end up thinking about the "far away, all powerful" part of God. I can tell when I'm forgetting the "Father" part when I start making my relationship with God about being productive. I think a lot of evangelical Christians struggle with this. We've coined the phrase "quiet time" to describe our daily time with God. This typically consists of prayer, journaling. Bible reading. and Bible study. If any one of these things doesn't feel fulfilling, interesting, or bring you joy—or if it's not done in the morning—something feels wrong. Most of the time. when I ask my friends how their walk with Jesus is going. they refer to their quiet times to describe the quality of their relationship with Jesus. Am I reading the Bible everyday? Doing great! Killing the game! Have I missed some days of journaling? I've been busy, but I'm going to get back on track tomorrow.

There have been many times in my life that this pattern has worked for me like a charm, I felt all the "right" things, and I felt close to God—until I didn't. I was doing the right processes, and yet it wasn't giving me the result I wanted. I had checked all my boxes and done all the right things, and yet it felt like God didn't show up. What was wrong?

Describe a time when this may have happened to you. How did it make you feel when you did the right stuff, but you didn't experience God the way you thought you would?



I think this is more of a "me" problem than a "God" problem. I'm not quite sure how we came up with the process of a quiet time defining our relationship with God, but I don't know if what we "do" as we spend time with God should define the relationship. Don't get me wrong, processes like quiet times can be extremely beneficial, but they also can lead us to believe that formulas and checking boxes are the great definers of our relationship with God.

Think about it: When somebody asks how you are doing in your walk with Jesus, how do you describe it?

Have you ever thought of what God actually wants from us as we spend time with him? What do you think he wants?

I think this is a big question. What does God desire from us as we pursue him? Jesus does this thing where he tells stories to illustrate very deep points. He goes back to the idea of a father to illustrate a key characteristic of God in a way humans can grasp.

Let's jump into the story. Please read Luke 15:11-32.

I used to think about that story and focus on the lost son; but after I had kids, I focused on the father. Imagine him looking at that younger son and seeing his perfect baby boy grow into a man who was experiencing the realities of life. When I imagine this, I think of Clementine and how often I want to run to her elementary school and take away the pain she feels when someone calls her "fruit girl" or other nasty names. (I know it was a risk naming her after a saint who shares a name with an orange, but honestly, kids can be so cruel.) In the parable, the father chose to let the son experience life the way the *son* thought it should be lived, for better or worse. The dad doesn't force the son to stay home (even though I totally would have grounded him for life).

What does allowing the son to make his own choices say about the father?

The son blows it—as kids tend to do—and comes home financially broke and emotionally broken. He's practicing his apology on repeat. Write it here (it's in Luke 15:18-19):



Which, if any, particular words stand out to you in that apology?

I keep thinking about the fact that this kid is repeating, "I am no longer worthy," again and again. I am no longer worthy to be your child. No longer worthy to live in your house. No longer worthy to be near you or to be held by you. No longer worthy.

There are so many times I have felt this way when I'm thinking about God. I feel unworthy to have his love and absolutely unworthy to be his child. This son is just like me, and maybe just like you. How do you resonate with this?

This concept of worth is so important. Often, when we need God the most, we tend to hide from him, similar to God's first created people. We aren't alone in this. Don't forget: when Adam and Eve did the ONE thing God told them not to do, they hid. Granted, they realized they were totally naked and ran for cover in the bushes. But the point is, after their royal screw up, they ran away.

Let's flip back to Genesis and see what God was doing while they were sewing some leafy undies.



Read Genesis 3:6-10. What does God ask Adam and Eve in verse 10?

First off, do you realize that God is just walking around in the garden? Imagine taking a casual stroll with God. That was Adam and Eve's life. They had access to the best dad possible, and when they screwed up, they ran away and hid. And yet, *God was looking for them*. Of course, he knew where they were the whole time, but he asked them to show themselves. God wants them to trust him and realize how he feels about them, so he literally calls out: "Where are you?"

God wants to find his kids and searches for them until they are home. He never gives up, and he always draws near. That's your story, too: you are God's kid, and he is your very good dad. He sees that you are wearing that leafy bathing suit, he sees that you are hiding, he knows the stuff you've done, and he still loves you and looks for you. My friend, this isn't about what you have or haven't done; this is about God and his affection for you. You can't lose it. You are his round-headed baby, and that cannot change.

The same stuff is happening here in our story about the son and dad in Luke 15. It's just Genesis 3 playing out again, but in a different way. Of course, Jesus does this on purpose. Everyone who is listening to his parable already knows the Genesis 3 story—it's *their* story. Jesus takes the opportunity to tell it again, but he shows us

another child who has screwed up and another dad who is lovingly looking for his kid.

Go back to Luke 15:20 and read it again. Look at this beautiful sentence: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." You can't see anyone who is "still a long way off" unless you are looking. You can't see someone who is "still a long way off" unless you are at the edge of your property, searching the horizon. This good dad is waiting, hoping, and searching for his baby. When he sees him, he feels compassion.



Tell me your definition of compassion.

It's like this perfect mix of empathy, love, hope, and emotion, all welling up to form this "with-ness." You know what I mean? There's a sort of "I'm with you, I'm for you," happening when you feel compassion. God is with his son, no matter what he has done.

Okay, let's get down to the nitty-gritty: what do you think the son thinks the dad wants from him?

What do you think the dad wants from the son?

This is where the rubber meets the road, people. The father looks at the kid and wants a hug. He wants to hold him close, he wants to celebrate with him, he wants to tell the child he is worthy.

Jesus shows us what God wants from his kids when he shows us how the father reacts to the son's homecoming. Put a robe on him, so he can feel warm and safe. Put a ring on his hand, so he knows he is worthy to be in the family. Put shoes on his feet, so he can heal after that long journey home. Make him the best meal, so he can feel full and satisfied. Let's celebrate, so he can feel welcome and experience joy again.

I'll ask again: What does the father want from his lost son? The same thing God wants from you. He's not hoping you'll be a hired servant. He doesn't want you to earn his forgiveness and love—he gives it to you freely. He wants to hold you, to comfort you, to show you that you belong with him.

He takes a mental picture every time you allow him to encourage you. Every time you read the Bible and you feel loved, it's kind of like you are allowing him to hug you. Every time you pray and you feel his presence, you are allowing him to hold you. I don't believe he wants you to grovel to him or believe you are horrible. Can you imagine a good dad wanting that for his child? Of course, God wants us to seek forgiveness and restoration, but before all, you are a beloved child of God. If Jesus is right—and he always is—this is what God wants from you. He wants you to hear him say, "You are accepted and loved so deeply, and you'll never lose that." You are his child, and this is just one of a lifetime of embraces.

Chapter 01

Baby Steps

I love practical steps to apply the stuff we are learning. It's not a crazy amount of homework, just baby steps toward God. So this week, I want you to practice listening. Ask God for the "hug" as you pray—and by "hug," I mean encouragement. And by "pray," I mean listen. Ask God to encourage you and just be quiet for a while. Try to do this in a quiet place, preferably outside. Imagine walking home like the prodigal son. Imagine God seeing you and running toward you. He's happy to see you and happy to love you. You make God happy. Can you imagine? Friend, give him

what he wants. Let him hold his beloved kid. He thinks you are very good.

If you'd like, you can meditate on this verse:

"Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."

Isaiah 46:4 ESV

He's with you all the way. After you meditate on this verse, I'd love for you to journal your response here.





Love what you're seeing here? Finish the journey at HosannaRevival.com/StartFromHere