

CHARLIE CLEVERLY

the
discipline
of
intimacy



The Joy and Awe of Walking with God

"Charlie Cleverly's experience of prayer ... needs listening to!"

Justin Welby, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

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The Joy and Awe
of Walking with God

DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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1.

Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache.

- C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

O my delight, Lord of all created things and my
God! How long must I wait to see you?

- Theresa of Avila, *Let Nothing Trouble You*

Then I with the multitude of my redeemed
Shall enter Heaven long absent, and return,
Father to see thy face, wherein no cloud
Of anger shall remain, but peace assured
And reconcilment; wrath shall be no more
Thenceforth, but in thy presence joy entire.

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.'

I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance ...

[Then he said,] 'To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

'... I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.... You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

'Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.'

- *Revelation 1:9-2:7*

John on Patmos: ‘First Love Christianity’

The book of Revelation opens with the beloved disciple – obedient John, who had been leaning on the heart of Jesus at the Last Supper and present at Jesus’ crucifixion – now on the island of Patmos. He is in exile, in prison effectively, because of the testimony of Jesus. We might think his influence is over and that his life is wasting away. But in Revelation 1:10 we learn that John is in the spirit on the Lord’s day. Even in exile, he has a discipline of prayer it seems. And he has a vision in the place of prayer, a vision of the love of God and of God the lover that will speak to twenty centuries and more of seekers of God and which still speaks today.

Prior to the vision, John is cut off from his churches by a decree from unholy Rome, the current power. The gospel has apparently been a weak attempt to resist unstoppable evil. Two generations after Pentecost everything John believed and preached looks like a disaster. And then, without anything happening on the ground – no earthquake to change the face of the earth; no revolution to change the government – John is on his feet. He has a message. He has a job. He has a means of bringing God home to the people and the gospel to the world.¹ The difference between John the prisoner and John the pastor is a vision of Christ in the place of prayer. This is the power of prayer.

John sees Christ in the place of prayer and it changes everything – and he has a message that we would do well to listen to – some iconic words to describe our human condition: *‘I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance ... You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first’* (Rev. 2:2-4).

It is remarkable, if we pause to consider it, how this so perfectly expresses the state of so many of us today. We are hardworking, and persevering, but God is holding out his hands to us, wanting to woo us back to our first love.

This 'first love' calling is revealed throughout Scripture. Moses describes the first commandment of God to *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength'* (Deut. 6:5), then Jesus repeats this when asked what is the greatest commandment. Later, when the risen Jesus meets the one who denied him three times, he only has one question for Peter, and it is about this question of love: *'Simon son of John, do you love me?'* (John 21:15-17). It is clear this 'first love' matters. It is my conviction that 'first love' is another name for prayer.

The parallels between intimate love for God and romantic love between husband and wife are often present in the Bible. The prophets Isaiah and Hosea define it and the wise King Solomon speaks of it in the wonderful Song of Songs which can be read as a manual for the progression of prayer and 'finding our voice' and developing fearless, healed intimacy with God. I have written elsewhere extensively on this and will not say more here.² The apostle Paul refers to Christ's love for the church as being mirrored by a husband's for his wife. And Jesus refers to himself as the Bridegroom that we await and, here in Revelation, wants the church to come back to their first love.

Some years ago, my wife Anita and I were doing a marriage seminar in a summer conference and a couple came up to us at the end asking for prayer. The problem was that they had not made love for seven years. I sensed the pain and desolation as we talked about what had led to this. Difficult relationships with teenagers had gradually crowded out all intimacy. The man said, 'My wife goes up to bed and my daughter talks to her in the bedroom for so long I don't feel welcome.' His wife said, 'Yes but you go to sleep on the couch downstairs and don't come to bed until 2am. I am just too tired by then!' Had they ever talked to anyone about this? No, never. I asked her if she would like to rediscover intimacy and she replied without hesitation, 'Yes!' Her husband

then shot an amazed and hopeful glance her way. I said there was not much time to do more than to pray, and that they needed to talk about it together more but I sensed there was hope. Sometimes just the act of bringing a hidden secret, a subject of shame, out in the open is sufficient to give people the desire of their hearts – in this case, a restored, intimate marriage.

At the end of the week the same couple came up to us and, with smiles bigger than their faces, began to thank us. I was slightly embarrassed to know what question to ask, but they assured me that they had 'come back to their first love' in every sense of the term!

I believe we can see this story as a parable. Many walk through life longing for intimacy with God but not finding it. They are sleeping through it, or too busy to make way for it or feel rejection for different past reasons. Many sit in our churches week after week without this precious pearl. At the risk of causing some eyebrows to be raised, I want to say that intimacy with God is just as recoverable as intimacy in marriage. It may be difficult to recover, but it is recoverable. And once recovered, it is a joy to maintain, just as intimacy within marriage is a joy to maintain!

Many have had the experience of one or more encounters with God. They may have been dramatic and on the surface, or calm and contemplative in their interior castle. They may have been noisy or quiet. Any encounter with the living God, however, will have been, inevitably, life changing. But few have managed to maintain or remain available for a life of intimacy with God. Hence the parched and thirsty look of so many people in churches today. Of course, a mountaintop experience is not for every day. And yet intimacy with God can be a daily experience.

The best example, as ever, is Jesus, who knew the 'mountaintop' experience of the transfiguration, when he was bathed in glory and talked with Moses and Elijah – an event so powerful that Peter, who was with him, never forgot it (see 2 Pet. 1:18). Yet Jesus also had the discipline to get up 'very early in the morning' to pray (Mark 1:35). It was this experience of daily communion that, we could say, sustained Jesus.

The Bible tells us of those who lived an exemplary life of disciplined intimacy:

The psalmists ... Psalm 1 talks of the promises associated with a life of disciplined meditation – day and night. We are to be like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit.

The prophet ... Isaiah who, on his mountaintop, ‘saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne’ (Isa. 6:1), also speaks of being wakened morning by morning with a word, and of the consolation flowing from those who daily talk with the Lord and live in the discipline of intimacy (Isa. 50:4).

The king ... Solomon, in Song of Songs 2, if we are prepared to read the book allegorically as well as literally, speaks of the swooning, heart-stopping love affair with God that can be the privilege of those who are intimate with God.

The apostles ... Paul, Peter and John all speak of this dimension. Paul talks of being seated with Christ as a matter of daily fact (Eph. 2:6). Peter also knew the sustaining and directing voice of God in times such as this when he went up onto a roof at midday to pray (Acts 10). And John, on the island of Patmos, seems not to have found it unusual to have been ‘in the spirit on the Lord’s day’ (see Rev. 1:10).

As with the couple in the story above, who lost intimacy in their marriage, things can happen which cause us to lose intimacy with God. Jesus spoke of the cares of this world which grow up to choke the good seed. So the cares of work, and the stress of earning a living in a merciless economic climate, can rob us of intimacy with God. Bereavement, tragedy, loss, shame, unemployment, disappointed hopes, broken relationships can all choke our life hidden with God in Christ. Change, moving house, marriage, work, the arrival or departure or absence of children can all take over our lives to such an extent that our walk with God is put on the back burner and dries up. This section is written to address the question: How can we come back to this first love? How can we rediscover intimacy with God? Or how can we discover it if we have never experienced it?

The risen Christ speaks:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. (Rev. 2:2-5)

In this passage there is a threefold process. The church at Ephesus are to remember, repent and renew. First, they are to remember the height from which they have fallen; second, they are to repent, change, come back; and third, they are to renew ... the things they did at first. These are the first disciplines we will look at in the great endeavour of recovering the discipline of intimacy.

The Discipline of Remembering

This is a biblical key to so much, and is often recommended by God himself. The first chapters of Deuteronomy are all about steps to take 'lest your children forget' the great acts of deliverance of God from slavery. And one of Jesus' great signs, left for us today, is that of the bread and wine that we are to eat and drink 'in remembrance'.

As we shall see, even in times of trouble and lament, the prophet resolves:

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness. (Lam. 3:19-23)

The church has been called 'Cinderella with amnesia'. The act of remembering may be foreign to us and like athletes we may need to put our memories into training.

But what then is it that the risen Christ of Revelation wants us to remember?

Apparently, it is 'the height from which we have fallen'. This implies that high ground has been lost. In context, remembering that the passage is speaking to the church at Ephesus, we can reasonably believe a key may be in the stories of the birth of the church in Ephesus. These are found in Acts 19, which speaks of twelve disciples who listened to Paul: "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied' (Acts 19:4-6). Later on in Ephesus, Paul was involved in arguing the cause of the gospel in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (a kind of prototype apologetics Alpha or Christianity Explored course). There were dramatic scenes of healing and deliverance, people leaving occult practices and burning their costly books, as well as persecution and accusation.

A further key to understanding the meaning of the height from which they have fallen is Paul's teaching to the same Ephesians in his letter to them. 'God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:4-6).

All of this shows us that for the Ephesians to remember the height from which they had fallen was to remember something that was an event, an experience and a theological fact and lifestyle. The first step, then, to coming back to our first love and to intimacy with God is to remember our steps to faith in Christ. For myself, until the age of twenty-four I was not a Christian. I became convinced about Jesus through my girlfriend's insistence that I read the Bible with an open mind. As I did so, I was deeply drawn to Christ: I felt his magnetic pull. I argued vainly with the girlfriend (who later became my wife), and wrote letters refuting the arguments in books like *Mere Christianity*, which I had been lent. But I knew that the Bible rang true, and as soon as I understood the arguments about the evidence for the resurrection, I began to see they were convincing.

I wondered why I was so reluctant to become a Christian and realised that I was intellectually prejudiced against believing. I had studied French enlightenment literature and the existentialists at Oxford University, and all my training told me that to believe was to commit intellectual suicide! I began to go to church occasionally to see if the church matched up to what I was reading about. Then one Sunday morning I heard a strong call to conversion from the pulpit of a church in Oxford and, in a prayer with the pastor after the service, surrendered to Christ. The effects were not immediate, but the next morning when I woke up, it was as if someone had turned on the lights. It was as if the whole world up to then had been black and white, and now was suddenly filled with colour. I began to devour the Bible, reading whole books of it at one gulp. This is a height to remember.

The Ephesians might have remembered their experience of baptism in water, or how as hands were laid on them, they spoke in tongues and prophesied for the first time. They may have remembered burning their occult books or being healed or delivered from oppression. Do you have an experience of these things? I remember the time I first had what I would call an experience of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, speaking to God in a new language and prophesying. Some months after my conversation, I began actively seeking

him. I had become thirsty for a more biblical experience of a relationship with God. I longed to pray and hear his voice.

To cut a long story short, I found myself at a gathering of Christians where this passage of Acts 19 was being preached and prayer was being offered for those who wanted to ‘receive the Spirit’ or who wanted the Spirit to ‘come upon them’ as seems to be the Ephesians’ experience. The speaker prayed for me and I was taken up into the presence of God. I remember going away alone into a field afterwards and just sitting for an hour gazing on the beauty of Christ and speaking to my Father in the new language that was pouring out of me. This unlocked a period of intimacy with the Father and healing through Christ which was a period of ‘first love’. I began to understand the things Paul speaks about in Ephesians 1 and 2. There he says that we are blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. He says that we have been marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. Paul is praying that we will have the eyes of our hearts enlightened, that we may know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. He also says that God, even when we were dead in our transgressions and sins, made us alive with Christ. By grace we have been saved and raised up with him and seated in the heavenly realms of Christ Jesus. These mysteries become clear to us as God pours his love into our hearts and shows us Jesus and his magnificent loving work of reconciling us to the Father.

Dear Reader, do you know and experience these things today? Have you perhaps never known this, or have you perhaps, like I have at times, abandoned your first love? If you have abandoned this, then take time to do the first ‘spiritual discipline’ – remember! Remember the height from which you have fallen. Take time now to remember.

For Those Who Have Nothing to Remember

Perhaps you really do not have such an experience to look back on, when, having discovered Christ, the Holy Spirit spoke to your spirit and said that

you are a child of God. If so, my advice is to ask for it in prayer. You could say something like this:

Lord Jesus, I am thirsty to know God. I am hungry for the Bread of Life. I want to know you. I am so sorry for the years when I forgot about you. I have gone away from your ways like a lost sheep. I am so sorry. I want to come back to you, the Good Shepherd. Thank you that you died on the cross instead of me. Now please come and take up residence in all the rooms of my life. Come in as my Lord and as my Shepherd. Lead me to the water of life. Fill me with your Spirit. I love you. Please fill me with your love. Amen.

This kind of prayer is powerful. It may be good to talk with someone about all this and be in prayer for 'more' with others as was the experience of the Ephesians in the passage we are looking at.

It is wise to pause for a moment to reflect on this expression 'the height', or the words of Paul that we are 'seated with Christ in the heavenly realms'. It seems that it is part of the inheritance of the Christian to be able to come in to the presence of the Father. This is in a way the whole subject of this book, that this is the daily inheritance of every believer. And once we are in the glorious presence of the Father, then we will pray. Later, we will look at different intercessors and compare notes with them, as it were. But for now, let us make a distinction between the next emotional quick fix, and settling into the peace and joyful embrace of our 'first love'. How quickly, instead of remembering, we forget.

T.S. Eliot describes this in his poem 'Little Gidding', where he evidently refers to the call of Christ:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time....

A condition of complete simplicity
 (Costing not less than everything)
 And all shall be well and
 All manner of thing shall be well.³

Sometimes, says Elliot, coming into the love of God will indeed be to 'arrive where we started' – as we have been saying.

'Remember the height from which you have fallen.' Soon we will look at the experiences of different intercessors. We will see that they are each in the heights with God. We will see Abraham holding on and pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah; we can think of Moses asking God to 'show me your glory'. Of Moses it has been said: 'Intimate though he was with God, his intimacy did not abate the necessity of prayer. This intimacy only brought clearer insight into the nature and necessity of prayer, and led him to see the greater obligations to pray, and to discover the larger results of praying'.⁴ We will consider the secret history of Hannah, desperately pleading out of barrenness, holding on as it were to the hem of Christ's garment before breaking through to fruitfulness. We will look at the brokenness of Joel, calling a whole nation into the presence of the living God; at Jeremiah's gift of tears, so frequently found today; or Isaiah, who called for watchmen to join him on the heights of the walls and to give themselves no rest. We will look at Paul's discipline of intimacy, he who knew about the height so much that he was 'caught up to the third heaven' and heard 'inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell' (2 Cor. 12:2-4).

We will learn from the master Jesus, whose great longing was that his house should be a house of – what? Small groups? Seeker-sensitive services? Community and social action? Ancient-Future liturgy? Cool Cultural Communication? No! Just a house of prayer. A house of prayer for all nations. A place where all humanity can come into, or come back to, a love affair with God.

The Discipline of Repentance

The second piece of advice given to those who have abandoned their first love is to practise the discipline of repentance. Repentance involves essentially change. It is not nearly as popular as other 'R' words today – revival, renewal, restoration – but it is perhaps more biblical and more essential. It is a change of heart and a change of action. It may involve tears. It may be the work of a moment or it may take time. If it is a deep move of God in our lives, it is good not to be in a hurry over it.

The Gift of Tears

I remember a young teenage girl in Brazil coming forward after a meeting and weeping for many minutes. She was inconsolable. When we asked her what was going on, she said, 'My father is not a Christian, but tonight I can believe he will become one. I am weeping out of gratitude, but also out of regret that I have not prayed for him more, and talked to him more. I am resolving to change'.

Sometimes tears will come as we regret our neglect of intimacy with God. You can feel this regret under the surface in Song of Songs 5:

I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking ... I have taken off my robe – must I put it on again? I have washed my feet – must I soil them again? ... I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the bolt. I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer.

The church fathers speak about this 'gift of tears'. For example, Gregory of Nyssa wrote: 'When I start to remember [St Ephrem's] floods of tears, I

myself begin to weep, for it is almost impossible to pass dry-eyed through the ocean of his tears. There was never a day or night ... when his vigilant eyes did not appear bathed in tears.⁵

Many Bible passages speak of grief and tears in prayer. One such is Zechariah 12:10: 'And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him, as one grieves for a firstborn son.'

Secular singers, like Paul Simon, also seem to think tears are a natural expression of regret:

If I could play all the memories in the neck of my guitar
I'd write a song called ... a necklace of tears
And every tear a sin I'd committed oh these many years
That's who I was: that's the way it's always been.⁶

As the spirit of prayer is poured out, the tears of regret flow. This is a precious gift that is evident when the Spirit of God is poured out. Often there is a mingling of grief and relief – tears of relief that there is hope in God and tears of grief that we have neglected him.

For Those Who Cannot Cry

Often, we meet those who say that they can't cry because of their upbringing. Jeremiah expresses this: 'Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people' (Jer. 9:1). Being around those who can cry may help us to get in touch with the burden of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is why Jeremiah says later: 'Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skilful of them. Let them come quickly and wail over us till our eyes overflow with tears and water streams from our eyelids' (vv. 17-18). During the past years, I have sometimes

seen men overcome with grief weeping in the place of prayer. It is not that we need to become maudlin and emotional, but as deep calls to deep and as the Spirit of God falls, we may find this mixture of repentance and intercession coming upon us with tears.

Many of us will find ourselves blocked off from this precious gift of tears because of past pain in our lives. I myself stopped crying at the age of fourteen when, out of the blue, my parents got divorced. I dried up emotionally overnight. I resolved from then on to be brave and to protect myself against any further pain. But inside I was bleeding. It wasn't until ten years later, at the time of being filled with the Holy Spirit, and with the help of my wife, that I dared to express what I was feeling and began to cry again – tears of repentance for my hardness of heart, and tears of relief because the Holy Spirit was telling my spirit that I was a child of God. They were the tears of another prodigal coming home.

If you feel this is 'just not British', you may well be right. I have been intrigued by Jeremy Paxman's book *The English*. In it he quotes Alan Bennett's definition, saying the English are "conceived in irony. We float in it from the womb. It's the amniotic fluid. It's the silver sea ... the waters at their priest-like task: washing away guilt and purpose and responsibility. Joking but not joking. Caring but not caring. Serious but not serious." It captures one of the essentials of Englishness'.⁷

It was not ever thus in the UK. In fact in times of revival tears were one mark of God's particular presence. In the eighteenth century the British Isles experienced revival – a glorious sense of the presence of God. At the time that France underwent a bloody revolution, in the UK tens of thousands came to Christ. One mark of these times was tears.

In 1742 in Cambuslang, Glasgow, George Whitefield preached to over 20,000 in a week-long tent meeting and wrote in his journal of the extraordinary scenes: 'For about an hour and a half, there was such weeping, so many falling into deep distress.'⁸ Scenes of Pentecostal power followed as the entire culture shifted on a hinge.

Perhaps it is because we are all afraid of emotionalism and are searching for 'real' Christianity. In that case, let me recommend the imitation of Jesus himself of whom it was said, 'During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Heb. 5:7). Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus and he wept in Gethsemane. But it seems also from this insight into his life that weeping intercession was a part of his daily walk. Let us be imitators of him.

Repentance Is Not Only Tears

Repentance is primarily a change of mind and action. When the Ephesians were exhorted to remember and to repent, it was a call to change their forgetful ways and come back to intimacy. In Acts 19, repentance involved burning books on the occult. In our church in Paris, I knew this to be necessary for some, as a sign of hating sin and desiring radical change. For some of us the problem may be an idolatry of wealth – a materialism which deadens us and keeps us running with no time for God. We have a life which is the very opposite to that of living by faith. We need to repent. For others it may be bitterness, unforgiveness or anger which haunts us and which we need to confess. For others, repentance may involve giving up internet sites filled with pornography, or the giving up of habits of television watching that wash our minds with images that rob us of our first love of God. This is one example of spiritual adultery that often needs radical action today. I remember a young man coming forward for prayer once who was looking to be filled with the Holy Spirit. But he had a problem which he wanted to confess: addiction to pornography. His marriage six months earlier had not helped him to break free from something he was ashamed of. He had never talked to anyone about the problem, but as he brought it out into the open, and as we prayed, God answered, the bondage was broken, and he became free. The results were that he was filled to overflowing with the love of God and rediscovered his 'first love'.

The same is true of screen and phone addiction. This can wash our brains of any hunger for God. The thing needed is to repent. For both these things, it may be good to ask for help. You may find that accountability and asking for prayer from others can break the cycle.

Other events that are healthy in themselves can rob us of intimacy with God. I remember talking with a newly married couple who had completely interrupted their hitherto effective prayer life when they got married. The lack of privacy and time, and the different rhythm of life, had blown apart their 'discipline of intimacy'. They had replaced intimacy with God with intimacy with each other ... they took stock and resolved to find a way back to their 'first love'.

E.M. Bounds says: 'Let us thoroughly understand ourselves and understand this great business of prayer. Our one great business is prayer and we will never do it well without arranging the best conditions of doing it well. Satan has suffered so much by good praying that all his wily, shrewd and ensnaring devices will be used to cripple its performances'.⁹ We may need to repent of getting ensnared and break free.

Often, in addition, pain, loss and bereavement can threaten our fruitfulness like the winter frost can kill a poorly rooted plant. Some twenty years ago our family went through a tragedy that still affects our lives today. Our first, beautiful, apparently perfect son died in his sleep without any explanation. It was a cot death (or 'SIDS') – something that I had hardly heard of at the time, although within days I became an expert on the subject. My wife and daughters and I entered a period of colourless existence in a desert where there was little spiritual water; a desert in which Anita showed her incredible strength and deep love and trust for God. For myself, I went through the motions. I was a pastor, preaching about the love of God, but wondering why he had not answered my prayer and healed my son as I'd held the limp body in my arms in that cold hospital and called out to him. I knew without a shadow of a doubt about the hope of my resurrection; I knew that the promise was for me and my children (Acts 2:39). But my wife and I missed our son terribly.

Then three years later, when I least expected it, I was ‘surprised by joy’. I was assisting at a conference on the kingdom of God. The coffee break came and the preacher came over to me and prayed for me. Suddenly it was as if heaven opened. I felt the weight of the glory of God come down. The preacher moved off, to be replaced by one of his team, who asked me what I thought was going on. I said I felt that I was aware, physically, of his love. I felt God was speaking to me about this event. I still didn’t understand what had happened to my son but I knew that God the Father loved me. It was as if the cloak of glory was upon me, and I could hear his voice telling me, ‘Charlie, my son, I love you. You don’t have to strive. You don’t have to prove anything. I am for you. You are my son in whom I am well pleased.’ I was crying and laughing at the same time, tears of grief and of relief. I got up from that encounter a new person. It was a time of profound transformation which is what repentance is. It was the mercy and love of God that had wooed me to repentance, but repentance there surely was, and there was a deep change. Whereas for the past three years I could hardly listen to a sermon about healing without feeling physically sick, now, although I still did not understand why my son had not been healed in the sense I and Anita had prayed for so desperately, I knew afresh that Jesus is the healer, for he had healed me! I was keen to pray for the healing and comfort of others with the comfort I myself had received from God (2 Cor. 1:3-4). And as for intimacy with God, I couldn’t wait to get alone with him, and come back to the love I’d had at the beginning.

Some reading this chapter may be in the dark night of the soul. You are perhaps in the middle of the ‘evil day’ (Eph. 6:13 ESV). I gently encourage you to hang on and look forward to the deliverance of God, when the winter ends and the spring comes again, and he gives you a time of sweet repentance.

Renew – Do the Things You Did at First

All over the world, God is calling his people back to their first love. When we come back to the sweet presence of God and back to our first love, we may

feel it is a contradiction in terms to 'do the things we did at first'. We don't want to do things; we want intimacy. But this is to misunderstand the nature of these things. Throughout this book we will look at different disciplines learnt from the Bible's praying heroes. Some are ancient practices – and some new, such as 'headphone time'. But to conclude this introductory chapter, here are ten steps to take to renew the love you had at first:

Steps to Intimacy

1. Make a rendezvous first thing each day.

Just as in a marriage great gain can be had when the couple have a date night regularly, so with the God of heaven, it is good to keep a regular time or times with him. It is my sense that he seems to prefer the morning! Perhaps this is because it is then that we are preparing for the day ahead of us. As they say: 'The band doesn't tune up after the performance'. Find a special place and choose a special time. Just as in a marriage it is not only good to communicate and listen well every day, but also good to go away alone for special times of marriage renewal, so special days of retreat can significantly renew our walk with God. As regards the daily discipline, many agree that there is nothing better than early in the morning, before the concerns and rush of the day have come upon us. The psalmist says, 'Early will I seek you'; Isaiah talks of being 'woken morning by morning' with a word. And Jesus was up 'very early in the morning' to pray. So, if you want to do the things you did at first, it is probable that they will include time with him early. For some of us this will require drastic action. I remember David Watson telling us that once, when living in community, he was so keen to seek God early that he bought two alarm clocks. One he set for 6 am in his room. The other he put in the corridor outside set at 6:10 am. If he failed to get up with the first alarm, the whole household would know that he had overslept again!

2. Remember how to climb into the presence of God.

Through the atonement of Christ, we have access to the presence of the Father. This is the heart of the matter. But it is good to remember how you knew the presence of God around you and upon you at the beginning or how you have best experienced the presence of God. For some it is through worship: if so, put on some worship music. For some it is through confession of sin, although for others this will come later. For some it is a gradual progression as in Psalm 95: declaring the deeds of God, then declaring who he is – a shepherd – and who we are – the sheep of his pasture. Then it is that we humble ourselves and bow down. Physical posture is important for some, irrelevant for others. I find it helpful to stand with my hands uplifted at times, or to be stretched out on my face (taking care not to fall asleep!). Psalm 95 says the same: ‘Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker’ (v. 6). Physical positioning can be good to match a spiritual truth.

3. Learn to be a lover of God.

Bernard de Clairvaux wrote: ‘Let love enkindle your zeal, let knowledge inform it, let constancy strengthen it. Keep it fervent, discreet, courageous. See it is not tepid, or temerarious, or timid. See for yourself if those three commands are not prescribed in the law when God says: “You shall love the LORD your God with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole strength.”’¹⁰

It is such a privilege to draw near to God and to love him. The door for communion stands ajar, but it is rare to find people who enter the holy place daily. Too busy, too tired, too bent by care, we need to straighten up and worship. But it has been said: ‘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.’¹¹

This 'embrace' is well expressed by the saints of old. For example, Thérèse de Lisieux said this of her love for Jesus:

I was at the dangerous time of life for young girls, but God did for me what Ezekiel recounts. Passing by me, Jesus saw that I was ripe for love. He plighted His troth to me and I became His. He threw his cloak about me, washed me with water and anointed me with oil, clothed me with fine linen and silk and decked me with bracelets and priceless gems. He fed me on wheat and honey and oil and I had matchless beauty and He made me a queen. Jesus did all that for me, Jesus did all that for me.¹²

She speaks, as others do like her, in terms of almost disturbing intimacy. Yet if we are called first to love God with all our heart, we should not be surprised if we are drawn to expressing this love in similar terms. I encourage you to try. For example, why not try writing a love poem for God. This may be challenging if you are not in the habit of 'expressing love' to Jesus. But it may lead to breakthrough. It may be what is longed for even by God. He may be saying to you these old words: 'My dove in the clefts of the rock, ... show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely' (Song 2:14).

4. Learn the art of Bible meditation.

My early life as a Christian was much influenced by Campbell McAlpine, a man whose messages often referred to the riches to be gained from Bible meditation.¹³ What is Bible meditation as opposed to transcendental or yogic meditation? It is eating the words of the Bible and being nourished by them. It is allowing the words of Jesus to feed our souls. Just as a cow chews the grass again and again to extract nourishment, so we can turn a phrase from Scripture over in our hearts until we are fed. *Lectio Divina* is a powerful discipline that can help us to meditate on the context of, for example, an incident

in the life of Christ. We can imagine the sights, sounds, colours and smells, and hear the words as if addressed to us, and since the Christ who spoke them is outside time, they can become his 'now' words to us today. But above all, we are turning over the words of the Bible in our minds and applying them to heal, instruct, fortify and equip our hearts. The psalmist speaks tellingly of this discipline of intimacy:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers. (Ps. 1:1-3)

Clearly, in this text, there is a deep love for the 'law of the LORD', so much so that the psalmist delighted in it. Do you have that experience? The psalmist is so delighted that he is meditating day and night. As we come back, remember, repent, we too will find renewed intimacy with God.

In Psalm 119 (a good place to start for all those wishing to come back to their first love) we read: 'Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands' (vv. 129-131).

We can pray with this psalm: 'Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law' (v. 18).

Or we can add to our meditation the discipline of memorising: 'I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you' (v. 11).

5. Learn the discipline of listening to the voice of God.

This is important and mysterious. But our God is a God who speaks. And we may need to tune out other noises to hear him. The Bible says he speaks

through nature – ‘*the heavens declare the glory of God*’ (Ps. 19:1); through visions, through a burden that he may give to us. We can and should ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us, particularly to convict us of sin. The Bible speaks of God waking his servants in the night, or speaking to them in shrouded, mysterious ways. We know also that there are times of silence, the silence of God, when the word of the Lord is rare.

But the way that God has mostly chosen to speak to us is through his Word. In a chapter later on ‘finding a rule of life’, we will speak more of this, and particularly the powerful practice of *Lectio Divina*. But the fact is, if we will let him, ‘he wakens morning by morning, he wakens mine ear to hear’ (Isa. 50:4 KJV).

6. Learn to use a prayer journal.

When I was writing this chapter, my daughter gave me a particularly smart prayer journal for Christmas. It has maps and is leather bound, but otherwise it is just a book with a page for every day. I appreciate her present every day, for it is in this journal that I note down what I feel the Lord is saying to me. Particularly I will note down a short passage of Scripture that I want to meditate on and consider throughout the day.

This has been my discipline ever since I became a Christian, although it has sometimes waned in times of suffering. A prayer journal is not the same as a diary, in that it has to do with intentions and with your walk with God. I encourage the use of a journal because it helps us to summarise our God-ward thoughts. I sometimes write out an intercessory prayer, a bit like writing a letter to God, as I find I can be clearer about the longing of my heart about a subject, and sometimes less sloppy.

Looking back to my journal of twenty years ago, coming out of a time of bereavement, and on my ordination retreat, I wrote the following:

3 July. Praying and fasting in an attempt to meet with the Lord Jesus. What happened was that I was led into a meditation on these words:

Jesus, name above all names. *Above all others, you are Lord. You are stronger than presidents and princes, bankers and bishops, you are stronger than the enemy and above death.*

Beautiful Saviour. *You saved me from a life of aimless emptiness and this year have saved my son from death. You save Anita and me from despair.*

Glorious Lord. *You are bright and so strong in holiness. We burn in your presence. Our hearts burn in us when we approach you in worship. Glory and honour are your garments. You are Lord and captain of our lives.*

Emmanuel, God is with us. *I had forgotten that you really are inside me, making your home there. No doubt that's why a song of praise so often wells up to you. The Holy Spirit flows over.*

Blessed Redeemer. *For a lost mankind, you paid the redemption price: your blessed Son. How torn and battered and bitter is the world. And yet God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself.*

Living Word. *Not only are you alive, but you speak to us as well, and your words bring life to the lost, the broken, the captive – such as me!*

After this meditation, as I sought to hear from the 'dear, darling only Son of God, Jesus Christ', he began to speak to me from his Word.¹⁴

A journal can be an expression of our passionate love for God in the same way that a love letter can be to our beloved.

7. Learn to be equipped for ministry in the day to come.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of how, as we listen to God in prayer early in the morning, we will be equipped for the day ahead. This is in a way also the birthplace of the prophetic ministry. Isaiah 50:4 says: 'The Sovereign LORD

has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.'

As we spend time soaking in the presence of God and meditating on his Word, perhaps noting down what he is saying to us, perhaps just enjoying his presence, often he will be showing us 'the word that sustains the weary'. We find that when we meet someone in need later in the day, the word we have been considering will be precisely what is needed to build up and sustain that weary person. Why is it that so many Christians are ineffective and powerless? Surely it is because they are not allowing the Word to dwell in them richly each day. Jesus himself illustrates this in the famous incident in Mark 1 when he gets up early in the morning to pray. His disciples come and find him and say, 'Everyone is looking for you!' The reply of Jesus, in my opinion, flows out of his time with the Father. He says, 'Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come' (v. 38). He is being led out of intimacy into his day's ministry, with direction and sustenance from God.

The discipline of a journal helps us in this way as we can look back and remember how we believe God has been leading us. In the year I wrote this, I was so encouraged to look back at my journal for New Year's Eve. At the start of the year, I had felt God say to me, 'Prepare for the harvest.' I noted down and meditated on the verse: 'Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest' (John 4:35). I had forgotten this when later in the year, we had planned a week of events for our friends and neighbours in Paris. The results exceeded our dreams: we stumbled, as it were, on a harvest, with people coming to Christ through most unlikely routes. For example, a Muslim woman had a dream in which the Lord was called Jesus. She went to the *Mairie* (the town hall) to find out where to find Jesus but was told that the council workers were not equipped to tell her how to find Jesus. She returned home disappointed but then she had a second dream in which she saw a woman who, she was told, would lead her to Jesus. A couple of days later

she had a knock on the door; there was the woman, a Christian visiting from Africa, whom she had never met but recognised from her dream. This woman then brought her to our church and to Christ. The fields were ripening for harvest, and God was prompting his church to be ready. My journal showed me he had been preparing for a long time.

8. Learn to pray.

When we ‘do the things we did at first’, it may be that one of those things is to pray the prayer that Jesus taught us. The fact is that when the disciples came to Jesus, it was not to ask him to teach them to preach, nor ask him to teach them to heal the sick, but to teach them to pray. It is worth reflecting on why this is: perhaps because it is too difficult, so completely beyond the wit of man, unless he catches it from heaven. Or perhaps it was because they saw that the source of Jesus’ power to teach, heal and deliver was in his discipline of intimacy. They glimpsed perhaps that Jesus walked with the Father and communed with the Father, and were thirsty for the same relationship. The next chapters will examine other intercessors in the Bible and how exactly they entered the reality of intimacy with God, but before we move on to them, let us pause for a moment with Jesus himself and his precious advice.

9. Learn to speak.

Tucked away in Jesus’ reply to the request ‘Teach us to pray’ is the little phrase ‘when you pray, say ...’. It may seem obvious, but prayer needs to be expressed in words. There is a place for contemplation, silence, gazing on the beauty of the Lord. There is silence in heaven. But many of us don’t need to learn to be silent, but to speak. The human being has been so designed that his thoughts often only take form and become coherent as they are spoken or written. Shakespeare understood this when he gave this advice to someone grieving: ‘Ne’er keep your hat upon your brow: Give sorrow words!’¹⁵

Even if the prayer is silent, it is good for it to be uttered, as with Hannah, of whom it was said, while she prayed for a child, ‘Her lips were moving

but her voice was not heard' (1 Sam. 1:13). Her prayer was articulate, full of content and specific, as we shall see later. Many who are beginning in prayer and intimacy with God would do well to speak out their hearts, their requests, their praise. The apostle James said, 'You do not have because you do not ask God' (James 4:2). Often prayer dries up, because we do not take the simple step of speaking out loud. It may be a shock to the system to have our tongues untied, but if we will apply this simple discipline, we will find it bears much fruit.

We may be hesitant because Jesus' teaching comes after he has apparently warned against too many words:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others ... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. (Matt. 6:5-7)

The two things the Lord is warning about are first, hypocrisy – praying in public rather than in secret. This is a warning we need to heed today. And second, the danger of 'babbling like pagans', repetitive mantras which are not heart-to-heart communication. Jesus is not telling us to be brief and to the point; he is telling us first to have a secret history of prayer just between us and the Father, and second to be sure we mean what we say and are really communicating. We can see he is not against speaking at greater length to God from other statements he makes about prayer, notably, when telling the story of the unrighteous judge who judges in favour of the widow who will not be silent. He adds: 'And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell

you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly' (Luke 18:7-8). Here is a clear instruction to 'cry out to him day and night'. With these things in mind, let us dig deeper into Jesus' answer to the disciples' request: 'Teach us to pray'.

10. Repeat steps 1-9 every day.

We now advance into an adventure in this discipline of intimacy. As we do, I will leave you with a health warning: 'Before we set out on the so-called thrilling adventure of prayer, it cannot be too strongly stated that nothing more significant, more awe-inspiring, can occur than meeting the God we set out to meet. It is essential to realise that we will lose our life in the process: the old Adam we are must surely die'.¹⁶

Let us step further into the joy and awe of walking with God.

Chapter 1 Study Questions

1. **Remember:** Can you remember your conversion or the first time you were filled with the Holy Spirit? Can you recall a time when God felt especially close or real to you? Write down or share in your group what you can recall about the circumstances, the feelings and the effect on your life.

2. If you haven't had an experience like this, why not ask God for one? If you're in a group, ask those who have experienced this first love to pray for all those who haven't. If you're studying on your own, pray something like Charlie's prayer on page 37: 'Lord Jesus, I am thirsty to know God. I am hungry for the Bread of Life. I want to know you. I am so sorry for the years when I forgot about you. I have gone away from your ways like a lost sheep. I am so sorry. I want to come back to you, the Good Shepherd. Thank you that you died on the cross instead of me. Now please come and take up residence in all the rooms of my life. Come in as my Lord and as my Shepherd. Lead

me to the water of life. Fill me with your Spirit. I love you. Please fill me with your love. Amen.'

3. **Repent:** Is there an area of addiction or idolatry in your life that you need to repent of? What is taking the place of the 'first love' in your life? Bring it to God now. Confessing to a trusted friend or church leader can also often be key to finding freedom – when we bring our sins into the light, they lose the hold they have over us in the darkness. Consider who you can trust to pray with you and help you to return to your first love.

4. **Renew:** How do you feel about the suggestion of writing a love poem or a love letter to God? Could you give it a try, even if it feels awkward? Use some verses from the Psalms to get you started, if that helps. Think about mentioning each of your senses.