

Here

By David Wolf

I want to start today by taking us to a place that actually this song was in the middle of for me. I closed my laptop and put away my books, grabbed my wallet, my keys, my phone, my student ID card, and I stepped out of my dorm room—Talge Hall, 322. It's really not a detail you need to know, but it's still here. I could tell you my student ID if you wanted to know as well. It's really no good, but you learn to remember those numbers when you need to pay for food.

I stepped out of my dorm room and I walked down the two flights of stairs, out the back door behind the dorm, and walked to my car. It was Sunday, and I had slept in late like I normally did during Sundays at college. Well, those of you who have been there, you know what it's like. You get a little tired. The weekends are for rest. I had been working for a couple of hours on what I believe was Hebrew homework that was due the next morning at 8:00 a.m. I don't know why they had class at 8:00 a.m. I think that should be outlawed, and that's my final statement on that. Amen. Someone said amen. Yes, yes.

As I walk to my car, I get in, turn the key, and I just drive—nowhere in real particular. But I found myself crossing over I-75, taking a left down by the Volkswagen plant there in Chattanooga, and driving down some more back roads. And I took a right—I'm playing this through with you, so you've got to bear with me—took a right, went over the train tracks through these little back roads, and eventually took another left and another right, turned onto Champion Road, and then pulled into Booker T. Washington State Park right on the edge of a lake.

I went over these four really big speed bumps. I really appreciate that so far out here in the Pacific Northwest, I haven't really encountered any of these. But in the South, I guess everything is bigger, and their speed bumps are no different. So, maybe it was the speed bumps themselves or my car's failing suspension, but every time I went over, I was like, *bah*, like, *bah*. There were four of them, but I won't do the other two.

I parked my car down by the water, and I just got out and sat by the water's edge. It was rainy. It was cloudy. It was gray. And there was just this feeling of deep haze that settled around me as I just sat and watched the water just kind of lap against the stones. The weather was almost as gray as my mind.

And as I sat there, I asked God many questions without words. Maybe you've been in a similar space too, where it is just your heart that is talking with the Lord and there are no words—there are no prayers being said. It was just a silent cry of: *What is this? Where—what is—what is going on?* I had every reason to not be feeling this way. College was going well. I was feeling aligned with the classes that I was taking. I had a great family. My financial obligations for school, praise the Lord, were very minimal. I had a small group of people that I would consider friends. Jesus and I were probably closer than we'd ever been, but there was just something about the world that had just lost its color. And I was just sitting there, coming face-to-face, probably for one of the first times, with just how gray things had gotten.

Fast-forward a couple of months, and I'm doing the same thing, laying on the floor of the chapel within Talge. It's another Sunday night. It's maybe 11:00 p.m. or 12:00 midnight, and I'm just staring at the ceiling and begging God, *"Show me who you are. Come and meet me here, because I don't know how many more times I can sit in this space."* I think the question of *"Where are you?"* is one of the threading questions throughout the entire Scriptures. It might be the oldest question in the world, and I think it's the question the whole Bible is wrestling with from the very first page to the last.

For example, the garden. Before anything ever goes wrong, here's the first picture we get of God: He's walking in the garden in the cool of the day—not enthroned, not distant, just walking like maybe a friend who comes over after work. And then everything breaks. They eat the fruit. The hiding starts. Shame walks into the world for the first time. And here's the part that gets me: the very first thing God says in a broken world isn't, "*How dare you?*" or "*Why did you do this?*" It's simply a cry of a God who's wondering where his friends were.

"*Where are you?*" says the Lord.

He knows where they are. I don't think that's the kind of question it is. It's the kind of question you ask when you walk in the door of a place that you are expecting someone you love to be, and you just sense it in your soul. It's like, *they're not here*. "*Where are you?*" Fast-forward to Jacob. Maybe you know this story. Jacob is running away from home. He's running from his father; he had severely angered his older brother. I don't know how many of you have older brothers, but I'm so glad that I've never, ever angered my older brother. He tricked his own father, stole his brother's blessing, and now his brother wants him dead. So he's running. He's alone in the wilderness, sleeping out in the open with a rock for a pillow. And right there in the middle of nowhere, in the mess he had made for himself, God shows up in a dream and says, "*I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go.*" Jacob wakes up and he says probably one of the most honest sentences in the entire Old Testament. He says, "*Surely the Lord was in this place, and I did not know it.*" Moses—we're doing a little progression here, I hope you're catching on. Moses isn't even looking for God. He's tending sheep. He's a fugitive; he's killed a man in Egypt. He's 80 years old now, and he's out just being in the wilderness, tending his flocks. And he's not even looking for God, but what does God do? One day he encounters this flaming bush—that, in my mind, is the best way they could describe the glory of God, as just encapsulating this object. And he knows it is the Lord because there's a voice that says, "*Take off your shoes. This is holy ground.*" And what does God do for Moses after Moses complains and says, "*I don't know if I can do what you're asking me to do?*" God says, "*I will be with you.*" Presence with God was the whole answer. The answer to the question, even though it really didn't answer what Moses wanted.

Later on in Exodus, God tells Moses, "*Build me a sanctuary so I can dwell among you.*" God could have stayed up on the mountain at Sinai. Sinai was holy enough, but instead he says, "*Build me a tent. As people are moving, and as people are going to move—well, I want to be able to move with them too, but I want to be closer.*" The God of the entire universe becomes a traveler with a band of refugees. He won't stay put. Wherever they go, the cloud of fire by night or the cloud of shade by day, it follows.

And then generations later, the nation is settling down, and finally the Lord has a permanent dwelling place. Solomon has built him a temple. And on the day they dedicate the temple, Solomon prays this interesting prayer. He says, "*But will God really dwell among men? Heaven cannot contain you. How much less this house that my hands have built.*" If we keep following the narrative of Scripture—we're going through it, friends—you keep following, you get to this little book of Ezekiel. And Ezekiel has this heartbreaking moment as he watches the presence of God leave the temple—the presence of God being slowly removed from Israel as they are led off into captivity. But what does God even say in this moment as the whole nation has turned their back on him? And he's crying as he backs—I've envisioned him crying as he is backing up out the door—he says this, "*I promise. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*" So even in the leaving, even on the way out the door, he's already promising to come back—not back to where he was, *closer*.

And then, John chapter 1: "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" Closer. This word is not just a meaning of "in the house" or "living with." It is the very embodiment of what the Old Testament means of *tabernacle*—to dwell with, to be in the same place, to be so close. All of this divine glory, all of this God who originally walked in the garden with Adam and Eve who asked, "*Where are you?*"—who slowly got closer and closer and closer—has now wrapped all of this into a human, into a physical body that walked the earth. That

was anxious, that was afraid, that was sad, that wept at a tomb of a person that he loved, that celebrated with his friends, that partied and ate food, did life with people. Closer. The divine was finally someone you could sit at a table with and share a meal. How much closer can that get?

Well, then comes the cross. The very moment Jesus dies, that curtain in the temple is torn—the separation between that holy place and the most holy place, the thing that was the symbolic and literal barrier between the presence, the holy, consuming presence of God and humankind. It was ripped. And some of you know this, which way was it torn? Top to bottom. Because no human hand could reach the top to rip it down, even though this was super thick—this was a curtain like you've never seen. No human hand could have torn it anyway, but just in case there was any doubt, God said, *"I'm going to be the one who breaks this divide so I can be closer."* Closer.

Fifty days later, Pentecost—we're in Acts now, we've come a long way, hold with me. The same fire that once filled that tabernacle, the same cloud that once filled Solomon's temple, is now distributed to all believers. I'm going to say it again because this is us here today, friends: the same fire, the same holy presence, the same Spirit that was in that temple space—that had walked with the Israelites through the wilderness in the cloud by day and the fire by night, the same God who was in Genesis saying, *"Where are you?"*—the barrier was removed and the fire was given, and it lives in us now. How much closer could that be?

And then in the final chapter—the final chapter of the Bible, the very last page, I should say—Revelation 21. John—the whole book of Revelation is so trippy, and John is seeing so many different things and trying to make sense of it, and even reading what he's saying, and he's like, *"I don't know that you fully are able to articulate what you're writing down."* But he sure gave it a shot. It's going to be one of my favorite moments when we get to the other side. I'm just going to be like, *"John, what?"* Although, honestly, probably we're going to be like, *"Oh, no, I get it now. Like, yeah, I don't... it's like the eyes and the beast."* Okay, moving on.

The very last page. John gets a vision of the new heaven and the new earth. And out of everything that he could have said—he said a lot already, you know he's capable of it—the loudest voice in heaven shouts one thing: *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man."* Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

And so we have this beautiful narrative from Genesis all the way to the end of Scripture—of a story of a God whose only desire has been to be with us. Closer, closer. Every step closer here and now, beginning to the end, takes us right back to the garden—the walking in the cool of the day, God back with his people again, but this time permanent. This time nobody's hiding.

So we go all the way back to the question—the one I was crying out on that floor, the one I was wrestling with as I sat by the water: *"Where are you?"* Friends, may I pose this as a question? I think from the first page of the Bible to the last, the question has only ever had one answer. And the answer isn't a place. The answer is, *"I'm closer."* Closer than the garden. I want to be closer than the tent. I want to be closer than the temple. Closer than you have ever let yourself imagine. The whole story, beginning to end, it's just God refusing to stay away.

I'm lying on the chapel floor, staring up at the ceiling, begging God, *"Where are you? Show me your face. Show me your glory."* And I'm weeping, sobbing—I told you that I was a crier, and you haven't seen half of that. And I remember him answering me, and I say this from a place of—not, hear me, so don't tune me out yet—I say this from a place not as a destination, but very much as just one stop on the journey.

So I hear him answering me, and it's not loud, it's not violent, it's not a big show, but I hear this phrase: *"You are my son, beloved one."* And it breaks me again to another level that I didn't think was possible, because I was already pretty in my feels. Because I don't know if you know what the name David means, but it means *beloved*—the one that I love. And for a split second, I caught a glimpse of this God who has been pulling closer

from the beginning of time until the end—so close that he uses even the name that my parents gave me at birth to come back 21 years later and to speak that over my life.

As I'm looking back on it now and I am continuing to learn, I don't think it was the water that made God closer. I don't think it was the silence on the chapel floor. I don't think he was more present out at that lake than he had been in my dorm room three hours earlier. What these places did for me—for the introvert, for the quiet soul—they got everything else quiet enough in my life so that I could finally hear and see what was already true.

I'm going to say it again because I think this is an important distinction. These places were not sacred in and of themselves. I did not enter that space simply because I knew that I would meet God there if I did the right things. No, these places for me and my personality were places where distractions ceased to exist, where my mind was quiet and I was able to connect the head and the heart, and I was able to hear what the Lord was trying to say to me. It was not those places; it was simply the environment that those spaces had that allowed me to realize that God was right there. Always.

For years, I have treated—I'll make this an "I" statement, Jim. There's an inside joke there, in case you wondered. [Laughter] For years, I have treated God's presence like something I had to go find—walk with me, maybe you are in that boat too—some place that I had to go find. If I just did the right things, or sang the right songs, or went to the right church, believed the right things, then maybe God would be with me.

And yeah, as someone who feels a calling as it relates to corporate worship and how do we do this well and how do we lead our community in that experience, this—this kind of broke my world. Because it means that we don't gather to summon him. It means that what happens right here is not this special, formulaic structure that says, *"Okay, if we do this in this order, and we do it this way, and all the people are here and standing and sitting, then God will show up and he'll be here."* Because I know you've left some moments where you're like, *"Was God there? I don't know... like maybe we didn't do the right things. Maybe, maybe, maybe... I don't know, it was someone's day for a blessing, someone's day to meet with God, but it wasn't mine."* But what if it's so much bigger than the spaces we normally find God in? What if the whole story from beginning to end really is God moving into us? And the Spirit isn't a "someday" thing. It's not—dare I say it—it's not a "latter rain" thing that is going to happen *there*. The Spirit is here and now. The kingdom of God is here and now. And yes, it is not the end—it is not the perfect representation of all that will be made right. But if I am to believe the narrative of Scripture from Genesis through Ezekiel, through John and Acts, and all the way to Revelation, I have to believe that a God who is moving closer is here now, in you—closer to you than you have ever realized. He's in this room. He's in your car on the way home. In the conversation that you're dreading to have tomorrow. In the dark stretch you haven't told anybody about. He is with you.

I want to be extra honest, and I'm working through being more vulnerable with the people around me—so why not do it in front of 250? You know, we're built different. [Laughter] I would be lying if I told you that what I realize now was severe depression in my college experience—I would be lying if I told you that it was "one and done." And once the Lord spoke, *"You are loved, and I love you, and you are my son,"* that I picked myself up by my bootstraps the next day and lived out a perfect life and never felt this icky gray settle into my brain again. That was not the case.

It was therapy. It was spiritual direction and a chaplain who poured into me and challenged me to view the Lord and what we're doing here in a whole other way. And it was medication. Help came in a lot of different forms. Healing came in a lot of different forms.

And you know what? As I am still learning and realizing this, the more that Jesus leads and guides and I surrender—hear me, *I surrender* to his process of healing in my life—whatever he places in front of me, I'm

realizing now that when there's something there and I'm like, *"Oh man, like I really don't want to deal with this,"* it might be an invitation from the Lord to say, *"Hey, I actually want to heal you through this."* And I'm realizing as I live my life, day after day, and things happen, I'm realizing that God is able to draw closer as we are healed as individuals. My awareness, my understanding of how close God is... He was always close. He is the same amount of distance as any point in my life—I am realizing that now. But all of these things in this world—this sinful nature, sin, grief, pain, the things that he did not intend—slowly he is removing those and teaching me through that.

And I say that as someone who is still on medication—started a second one because things weren't doing so great in the last couple of months—who still wrestles with the idea of: *How can the world be so dark sometimes?* And yet—and yet, here's the thing I don't want you to miss: this gospel was not only for the hurting. I feel impressed to say this because I think sometimes we hear stories like mine, and there has been a deep, a deep pain, and there are wounds, and we are walking that out, and we are learning to "walk with a limp." But I know that there are other people who—that has not been their experience. And I say, praise God! That is not something for you to feel shameful about and to be like, *"Oh, well, if I just had this story that was like a little more graphic or a little deeper, then like maybe God would meet me in that."* No—like, I think you are blessed. God is as close to you as he is to me, and there's nothing that's going to change that.

But I'm curious for you—for the person who's like, *"Yeah, my life is good, and I am well, and I am a whole person"*—where are the places for you that God meets you? May I correct my own language: where are the places where it seems like the veil is torn apart and you are able to recognize the God who is always with you?

Maybe that is in a room full of people with really good conversations. Maybe that's how the Lord has wired you. I wish I had that, in full transparency—I see him there, but for only a little bit and then I leave. Maybe it's up on a mountain. Maybe you are mountain biking. Maybe you are out in the forest. Maybe you are—I don't know. I don't know where the space is that you are able to encounter God, the presence that is already there, in a deeper way. I don't know. But I know for me, it is in places of quiet. It is in moments of stillness, because that's how he's wired me.

But if there is one thing—and I know I just said this—but if there is one thing that I would hope lands today, as a shared part of my story, as we've looked at Scripture from beginning to end and saw this narrative of a God who wants to be closer here and now, what would our lives look like if we left this place instead of saying, *"Well, I met with Jesus. It was good. Now I've got to wait another six days, seven days, in order to meet with him again"?*

What if instead we said, *"You know, that was good, and I was able to encounter him because the team at Summit and all of the volunteers and the pastors and the worship leaders—like, they were able to create an environment that removed distractions so that I could encounter God corporately with other people, and we were able to remind each other of the fact that God is here now"?*

But what if I took that and I stepped into next week and said, *"Where is God in this moment?"* Where is he when it's late, and I'm frustrated, and I have forgotten to take out the trash and I really don't want to? (This is not a personal story.) [Laughter] And I really don't want to, but I know I need to because it's my job, and I should, and I'm getting frustrated at myself—it's like, *hold on, where is God in this moment? What would the Lord do?* Maybe it's someone—I know this is cliché—maybe someone cuts you off in traffic, and you're like, *I don't like that.* Where's the Lord in that moment? I think he's right next to you and he's saying, *"You know what? Like, it's two seconds. Chill." "Chill?" "Yeah."* That may be how the Lord talks to you. So it's like, *"Chill. It's two seconds. It's not the end of the world. Like, you're going to arrive at your destination. It's okay."* Maybe he's teaching you how to be a more patient person. I'm sure I could make many more analogies, but I think you get the point.

What would our lives look like as we, as a church, practice being present with God in every single moment? And as we've seen, it is not God—hear me—it is not something that God is doing to draw closer. Because I think until the earth is made new, he is as close to us as he is ever going to be. He is right here. And yet I wonder, as we seek to be people of presence and learn what it means to be present with God, if that isn't something that is lived out in the day-to-day, the hour-to-hour, the minute-by-minute: *God, where are you in this moment? What are you teaching me? What are you saying? May I know that you are here in the here and now.* I'm going to invite Luke back up to play the keys a little bit.

I'm not going to ask you this week to go and find God. He's not lost, and neither are you. I just want to ask you to notice him. Ask him to help you notice him—here, now, in the car, in the hard conversation, in the work that nobody sees, in the moments you were about to scroll right past. Not because you have to summon him, but because he's already here. He always has been.

I want you to close your eyes with me for just a few seconds.

I want us, as we begin to just rest in this moment... maybe you are someone who is like, *"Yep, I completely get that. I know that. Thanks, Dave, for sharing something that I already know. I can't wait to walk out of here and go to lunch."* Or maybe you are someone who is wrestling with that idea. Maybe you are someone whose entire life as a Christian you have wrestled with the question of, *"Well, I don't feel you. I don't know you. I don't know what this must mean. I'm not sure how this all works. I don't think I'm even a Christian because I don't feel you."* With your eyes closed, what would it look like for God to reveal himself to you as someone who is closer than he has ever been? What would that look like? Is it a word? Is it an image? Is it nothing? Is it silence—which I am talking over right now?

We're going to sing a closing song today. And providentially, it matches so beautifully and perfectly with the word the Lord laid on my heart for this week. And maybe for the first verse, maybe just listen to the words. But then as we hit that first chorus, if you know it and you are wanting to pray the prayer of: *God, show me your face, show me your glory, make this real to me. May I realize how you are a God who is with me in every moment, not just Saturday morning.* If you would stand to your feet when we get to that chorus and sing with us, may we learn what it means to be present with a God who is closer than we ever imagined.