

Like the One You Follow

By *Jake Wilkinson*

Series: Presence With: God

If you have not been around Summit much, we have a new vision, a new purpose statement, and we look at what it means to actually be present. We are people of presence. We're looking at that—present with God, present with each other, and present inside of our community. And we're exploring what this actually looks like more in our daily lives, but also as a community, and how we can actually integrate this. Because something that we realize—why this has spoken to me, and this is not *my* vision statement, this is something we came up with over months and months—is that we live in a world that is just not that. It's not present. It's somewhere else. We are constantly looking at something or not paying attention to the most important things in life, rather than actually being present and sitting in the moment and recognizing what it is that is most important in life.

And we are getting near our end to our section on presence with God. And I want to ask us a question—I have asked it once before, at least—but what does it mean to be a Christian in today's world? In fact, if you hear somebody say, "Well, I'm a Christian," there's an immediate answer, another follow-up question in my mind that pops up, and it's like, "*Well, what kind?*" Right? We laugh, but it's like, what does this word even mean? What is this lifestyle? I mean, what is it anymore? What does it mean to be "in Jesus," as we say in church? Anybody know? No? I heard one voice, a little voice. No, I don't know what that means? Good. At least she's honest. It's this weird term, but what does it mean to follow him?

And when we think about following anybody in today's world, it's a rather casual term. "I follow this person on Instagram and YouTube," and you have two million followers and you follow two million people. But what shapes us into the person that you are becoming? What actually influences us? Now, I like to think of myself as a free thinker, but there's this statement I came across: *None of us comes to what we believe by ourselves. The world has no free thinkers.* What do you think about that? Well, maybe, but we don't think like this. We don't like to think—I don't like to think like this. I like to think of myself, *Well, I think differently than the rest of them. All of them are a bunch of sheep, right?* I was talking with a young man this week, and we were walking on a hiking trail, and we asked each other deep questions of all sorts of things. And I remember I was like, *I'm going to ask him a really deep one now. We're going to cut right to the chase.* And I said, "Well, who are you?" And he actually had a really good answer to that. But what I really didn't like is his follow-up to that. As he goes, "Same question back to you." And I go, "Look, I'm the pastor here. I ask the questions. This is how this goes. I don't get the questions back to me like this." Because I became very uncomfortable very quickly. I had this genius question to ask him, but I didn't actually have a great answer to it. And I sat there and I go, *Oh, goodness.* I said, "I'm going to have to take a second to think about that."

And the more I thought about it, actually, the things that popped up are the normal things that pop up. What do we think of when we think of our identity? Like, who we are? What we do. Our jobs. Our family. Certain characteristics. My job popped up. All of you popped up into my mind—you're not my job, all right—but you guys actually popped up into my mind. This church popped up into my mind, and my answer actually surprised myself in this. And then I said, "Actually, I think my identity is largely tied to who I surround myself with. It's the very things that I hear from other people and see in other people, the things I consume with my mind, and the things that I watch, and the things that I put my mind into—my environment."

I do believe in free will, by the way. I just believe that we have a limited amount of it. And largely we are influenced by the very things around us—the things that are told to us, taught to us, shown to us.

Take music, for example. If you don't like what I'm saying here, let me try to help us here. Now, did you make the music that you love? No, you didn't. Unless you're a musician and an artist, and even then you were influenced by someone else to make that type of music. Okay, but I will say this: but you chose the type of music that you like, right? No, stop—you're not supposed to say no there. You're all supposed to say yes! We chose, we autonomously, freely chose.

You don't even choose the type of music that you like, really. We have this assumption—but that's our assumption below it—is that *I* choose what I want to actually like. But there are billions and billions of dollars—we have some people in here in the marketing business—billions of dollars engineering algorithms that subtly actually guide your tastes. Not just give you what you want, but they are pushing you in a direction. They don't force anything on you, but they suggest songs, people that you might tend to love. A quiet nudge, and year after year of quiet nudges and moving along in a direction, and you realize, *I'm 50 years old, and you know every bridge to "All Too Well."* It's a Taylor Swift song. You know the 10-minute version of it, not just the edited version, and you've got opinions about the *Folklore* versus *Evermore* debate. And you tell yourself it's because your daughter played this music in the car, but deep down you know that that whisper of the algorithm—Taylor was there long before your daughter ever started playing that music. And you're sitting there with your football buddies trying to explain this during a Kansas City Chiefs game, and they're thinking of where they can go next time so that they don't have to listen to that ever again. [Laughter] And you ask yourself, *How did I become a Swifty?* But this is what I'm saying is that the terrifying part is that we believe subconsciously that that was 100% our decision, and you wake up one day and you're like, *How in the world did I get here?* This isn't just about music. It has to do with your political ideology, your values, your religion, your sense of humor, your fears. They all run through a similar algorithm, by the way. This doesn't happen just through apps, but through parents, coaches, trauma, life experience, your neighborhood, your friend group, and the era in which you were born.

Our culture preaches something: be yourself, follow your heart, make your own path. And we follow this. We eat it up. We go, *"Yes, I'm not like the rest of them. I'm going to go to this college over here, or I'm going to go to this school because all my friends did this over here. I have to be different."* And we try so hard to be different, and you realize at the end of the day, we all bleed the same color.

Our culture preaches this thing of "be yourself and follow your heart," but I will tell you that—there is not a conspiracy theorist, hang on for a second—but there's an agenda behind that. This is the agenda: if a corporation, if a politician, an influencer, a marketer can convince you you're simply following your own authentic self towards happiness, they can keep you blind to the ways you're actually being shaped.

I know. I hear you. The key to getting people to follow you, even as an influencer, is convincing them that they aren't following anybody at all. Did you hear that? Who do you look up to in life? Who do you—I'm not talking about the bad sense of the word—who do you idolize? Great question, great answer, yeah, okay, you brought us to the conclusion, we can go home now. But everyone else is the sheep, right? Everyone else follows this other thing, and you see these debates on that, *"Well, you're a sheep and you're a sheep."* Evidently, we all are. And there's a couple of stories in the Bible about that, actually. They're not the most intelligent animals, by the way, but they understand something is they know a voice. They hear it. They know their master's voice.

What we used to call advertising, I think we should just call it *continuous behavior modification*, actually. The question is not *if* you are following somebody. The question is not *if* you're being—to use a churchy, Bible term—if you're being disciplined, if you're being taught something. The question is *who* are you following? By *what* are you being taught and being disciplined? This is part of your humanity—is that you are being taught, you are being brought in a direction by the things that you do and see and watch.

And this isn't absent from Christianity, whatever we mean by that word. I want us to hang on for a second. This is a little bit of a punchy quote. At least it punched me. Dallas Willard put it like this, very bluntly. He says:

"An increasing number of people who call themselves Christians would rather trust a politician, a celebrity, a rogue pastor, or a religious leader, rather than the simple words of Jesus in Scripture on what it means to follow Jesus. They would never even think to consult him on the issues that matter most: of politics, race, sexuality, gender, mental health..."

But we are being nudged slowly, and not just in the direction of listening to Taylor Swift. We are being nudged slowly and repeatedly away from having one teacher to having many.

First John chapter 2—now if you've heard this verse before, I want us to hang on a second because it's been used improperly, I think, in the past, and I want us to make it all the way through this before we have a visceral reaction to it. I do too when I actually hear this.

"We know that we have come to know him [speaking of Jesus] if we keep his commands. Whoever says, 'I know him,' but doesn't do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is actually not even in that person."

I don't think John is being harsh right here. I think he's trying to clarify something. He says it's not a question of if you're being formed or influenced by something and you're on a direction in life. Everybody's on a direction in life, no matter what. It's are you being formed and disciplined and pushed in a direction by the one who created you, or not? Whether you are intentionally being formed by Jesus, knowing him isn't just a belief that we hold in our heads, it's actually a life that we live.

When we read John 3:16 and we read, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life*"—we read this, I believe it, and we say these things like, "*I believe in my head.*" But what we don't understand is back in the day, that meant a belief that was—it literally means like inside-of-your-bones belief. It is, *The reason I exist is actually to believe and to worship this God.* And I want you to know that he surrounds these verses where he talks about keeping the commands—he surrounds both on either side, you can actually find him talking about grace. Because it's not a matter of *if* I'm going to mess up or fail. It's a matter of *when*, and you are caught in the grace of Jesus Christ, even as you're making effort.

He says this:

"This is how you know you are in him, in Jesus: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did."

It's really quiet. [Laughter] Is that intimidating for anybody else? That is like devastating to my soul because you know—we all know—the ways in which we've fallen short, and this tends to make us focus on our faults, doesn't it? That's how it's been used against so many people. But that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about looking forward. We tend to look backwards and look within ourselves and look at what a mess I am, thinking *I have to fix myself.* We don't say that—we like to use grace—but that's really what we do.

Now, I want to say one thing. If we're looking at this verse, if you're struggling in life right now and it feels like we're barely hanging on, I want us to be reminded that Jesus was rejected and despised by his own people. He was forgotten by his own best friends, and he was known as the man of sorrows. And that was the way he lived, by the way. And I believe that Jesus is close to the brokenhearted, and the people that are most blessed in life often are the people that are poor in spirit. He tells us that. I say that because we're not trying to lay another load upon us as more to do, by the way.

But I think that—I will say, maybe for the rest of us, and I would couple myself in the rest of us—I think often we follow Jesus like we follow our favorite YouTuber or favorite influencer. We like it. We maybe even subscribe, and we may even pay a little bit of a subscription towards it, right? Giving is up—tithe, offering—thanks, guys. Good work. That's what we want. But we're entertained, and we love it when one of his new videos or one of his reels pops up, right? And we're fascinated, and we're entertained, and then we're like, "Okay, next reel." We treat him like a Harry Mack video. Nobody? Nobody knows Harry Mack? Somebody does, I heard somebody. Okay, there's one hand that understands who Harry Mack is. Now, I'm not trying to freestyle, but I'm certainly entertained by his videos. He's a freestyle rapper, and he just comes up with this stuff off the top of his head, and I have no idea how he does it. He's trying to be like that—I would never try to be like that, he started when he was 10.

But this is the way we view following and discipleship and relationship with Jesus—is that we go, "Oh, well, I like that. I'm attracted to that." And it's this little part of my life over here.

In a first-century disciple, this was a far cry from what following Jesus actually meant. You got up and you left things that were important to you. I'm always blown away by Levi when he gets up from his tax booth. He's leaving a ton of money behind, by the way. He's leaving the security of the protection of the Romans. He's leaving all that because he sees something and he's like, "That's life. I've been lied to here about my security and what's important, and I'm getting up and I'm following something that is actually going to produce a life that I want, that my soul desires." But I think sometimes we miss that in today's world. And I think we think that some sort of affiliation with him, or that we listen to things about him, sometimes makes us his follower. And I am speaking to myself today.

There's a man by the name of Gerald Sittser—he's a professor at Whitworth University in Spokane—and he writes this book, *Water from a Deep Well*. And it's about the history of Christians, people that knew Jesus, followed him closely, and that were wounded along the way. And this is what he says. He says:

"Every generation of believers faces the risk of becoming a prisoner to its own myopic vision of the Christian faith, assuming that how it practices the faith is best."

I do believe that part of our—maybe all of our—the biggest lie that we've been fed in our culture is that it's just a part of our life. It's part of the many facets of life, and it's not actually this deep thing that we're committed to.

I'm a huge fan of the modern life, by the way. I know I've dogged on screen time a little bit, but that's not because I don't like it—it's because I love it too much. I spend a lot of time staring at my phone. We have more access to information than we've ever had before. We have access to information about Jesus, in fact, if we want it. But what's happening is that these information centers in our brain are, instead of becoming these deep troughs and these deep things that we practice over and over again, it's like instead of becoming a deep canyon, it's like we're becoming a river delta and we're spread out over a vast area and we become very shallow. That's a harsh word. I don't like it. I'm not going to say it again. But being followers of Jesus so that a small fraction of the information in our brains is actually about following him—here's the problem with that.

You guys like backpacking? No. Someone's like, "No! I hate it." [Laughter] I've been there before. Imagine if you liked it or you were experiencing it for the first time, and you're in your first night backpacking and you're laying there in the middle of the night—you're in Montana—and you're laying there in the middle of the night, and it's midnight, and you've kind of fallen asleep but you've never slept outside before. So you hear something outside your tent, and it sounds *not* like a squirrel. Like, it sounds really big, and not like a human either. There is something outside your tent that sounds like it could eat you. What do you do? Immediately you turn your little flashlight you bought from REI for \$50 on, and you whip out your little manual of how to survive in bear country, and you start reading. What saves you in that moment isn't information. It's what's been drilled into

you, by the way. It's what you've practiced and you've witnessed and you've even learned from someone else who's gone before you.

I remember I took this lady—she became my fishing buddy—I was eight years old and she was from Colorado, and we went fishing for the first time at like 3:00 a.m. in the morning because that's smart in Alaska. And in Alaska in the summertime, the sun like barely dips down, you know? And it dipped down just enough to where I could only see the silhouette—like just the sun coming up, but you couldn't actually see what was right in front of your face, in front of your feet. And I remember walking on this trail, and we were going fishing for salmon because that's how you get the best spots—is you get there before everybody else at like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. Nobody else is awake, for a very good reason.

And I remember walking with her down this path, and I remember this like—it's a haunted memory almost—I remember a bear from me to this plant probably right there, standing up right there. And I could see the silhouette of it standing up right there, and I remember just freezing. And I remember hearing her turn around and start to run, and I grabbed—eight years old—I grabbed her backpack and held her right there. Why? You don't run from a bear. I heard my father's voice. From the time I was a young little boy, my father told me about bear safety in bear country, and everything in me wanted to run in that moment to get away from this danger, but I knew if I ran, this thing is going to chase me and it's a lot bigger than me. I remember holding her backpack there. I remember looking at the ground and calmly talking to it and backing away. Eight years old, because my father had ingrained something into me. Now, we found this group of really drunk guys down the street, down the road—there were like 10 of them—and we thought we could outrun *those* guys. And they're like, "*Get in the middle of us, we'll go fishing.*" We had a great time fishing. [Laughter]

But sometimes I think we get this idea—we adopt this thing in our culture—that we are one of one. And that is true, you are unique and loved by Jesus, but at the same time, you are one of many. You are a human being, and we are influenced by the things that are around us, that are told to us. And in order to become "one of one," to become original, you know what you have to do? You actually first have to become a copy of something else. None of you learned to speak English because you invented it. None of you learned to walk, to tie your shoes—you followed someone else's example. I remember drinking my milk not because I liked it, but because my father liked it. And I remember bawling my eyes out as a kid because I spilled my milk, and how else was I supposed to grow up and be strong like my dad? I wanted to be that. We all have to look at someone and say, "*I want to be like that.*" There are things that are teaching us in this life.

I know I've had a lot of quotes today, but none as complex as this one. It's hard to grasp, but please stay with me for a moment. A couple of weeks ago, there was a group of us that went on a two-day training session on what it means to actually be a follower of Jesus. And at the end of this whole thing, we get this text in our text chain. And it says this, it says: "*So, let me make sure I understand this correctly. The entire purpose of Christianity is for me to become more like Jesus. That's it? And then through relationship, introduce others to Jesus?*" I'm like, what a concept, right? [Laughter] For me to actually be like Jesus. I mean, like, he says this tongue-in-cheek, but at the same time, it's like this mind-blowing experience of like, "*What if we actually looked at him as a model of what it means to live a fulfilled and good life and said, 'I want that?'*" I think there's fear in sharing this because I think a lot of times what we do is we guilt ourselves into being better. We look at all the negative parts of our life and say, "*I've got to get rid of those, and I've got to work really hard in doing that,*" and we burden ourselves with this. And no doubt, if you come across a seasoned Christian—you will ask a seasoned follower of Jesus—ask them, was it difficult? What do you think the answer is? I don't even think that's a good question. Is there effort involved? There's a lot of it.

But more importantly, I think there's a presence of a God who healed my life. And so many times what we do is we put this extra burden on us to heal ourselves and fix ourselves and move us forward, when what we need is to sit in the presence of our God. This is the very thing. This is what is called *transformation* for a reason—to

be recreated, to be made new again. This is the language of the New Testament. And it only comes through communion with our God. Presence with him.

Our self-effort isn't what changes us. Our self-effort is the thing that gets us to the thing that changes us. To intentionally set aside time in our busy, crazy, filled lives for his presence to overwhelm my soul. Believing that we are not—rejecting the lie that our culture tells us—that we're just our own autonomous human beings, that you can create yourself. We're found and we're reborn in this life—that's the reality. The walk with Jesus—we're taught how to live by our presence and our proximity to other people, and specifically to our God.

I'm going to end here with a poem that I've read about 25 times in the last couple of weeks until I came across it. It's by author Malcolm Guite. He says:

"I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
A mind behind the mind through which I seek,
A light within the light with which I see,
A word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound wisdom finding me."

Lord, I pray that that is our prayer this morning. That often we take the heavy weight of our to-dos in our life and even our distracting things that pull us away from the pain of life, Lord, and we lay them at the foot of the cross and we give them back to you because you want to give us life. You said you came to give life to its fullest, more abundantly, Lord. Help us to hear that call on our souls, Lord, and respond to it—not out of obligation and grinding to the next thing, but Lord, out of wonder, as we just sang, out of amazement of your love for us.

It starts there with your presence in our lives. Lord, let us put every effort into our connection with you. Show us how to do that. Teach us how to do that—it doesn't always come naturally, Lord—so that when there's a time where there's pressure upon us, that our identity will be revealed, and it will be revealed because you have done something else that reveals your character. Help us to follow you with everything, with every part of our being. In Jesus' name, amen.