

DEEPER PLACES

The Spirituality of the Psalms

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INTRODUCTION

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

PSALM 84:1-2

In Search of Reality

“I feel nothing.” That is how many Christians would honestly respond when asked how they really feel about God. Beyond brief moments of inspiration and a basic underlying conviction, most people struggle to attain anything more than a remote and abstract idea about God. It is a symptom of a faith focused on concepts and propositions rather than real, personal encounter. We are children of our scientific culture, a culture obsessed with information about things. So we find our minds crammed with ideas about God, with concepts and facts about who God is and what he has done, but too often the reality of God is as remote to us as the reality of

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black holes and supernovas. It is little wonder, then, that we have no emotional connection with these facts. They are as abstract as a mathematical equation. It is true that three plus two equals five, but I cannot summon up any passion for that truth. I cannot love an idea. I can only love a person with whom I have some experience. The Bible tells us that we can have a real relationship with the real God. In fact, this is commonly and correctly upheld by theologians to be the main purpose of human life: to know God, to glorify God, to enjoy God. The Good News is that no matter what we have or haven't done, we have access to God through Jesus Christ, who paid for all our sins. If we put our faith in him, we can become God's children.

If you have been a Christian for some time, you no doubt have heard this Good News again and again from hundreds of different angles. You probably have also been encouraged to *delight* in this message, to share it with others as the most wonderful news in the world, and even to rejoice in this message by singing songs of praise and thanks to God for what he has done. But what do you feel? Do you feel anything?

It may well be that the more you hear this message the more aggravatingly boring it becomes precisely because the only thing you feel when you hear it is the pressure to feel something you just don't feel. It can be like people continually telling you about a wonderful place but not telling you how to get there, or whether it is even possible to get there. As long as the Good News remains a matter of abstract facts, it will have little more effect on your life than your insurance policy has on the way you drive.

Great Expectations

I get the impression sometimes that a relationship with God, for many Christians, means little more than the possession of a spiritual status that gives them assurance of going to heaven when they die. In this case, being adopted as a child of God is more about knowing where one stands with God than actually knowing God himself in the relational sense. The whole thing is abstract and removed, as though the object of faith is a great contract in heaven rather than a person. Perhaps Christians tend to think like this because they have accommodated their expectations to their lack of real, personal experience. They have tried to normalize their failure to engage with God.

If we believe that Jesus has given us access to God, to be children of God and to love and be loved by God, then the clear implication is that we should *not* be content with knowing *about* God. We should not be content with anything less than knowing God with greater intimacy and more experiential engagement than we know and experience with any other person. Is such a thing possible? I imagine there is probably little within you that feels this to be in reach. You have probably accommodated your expectations to what you lack. It is difficult to live with a conviction *about* God while lacking any sense of real engagement *with* God. It is difficult to live in continual spiritual frustration, so we tend to lower our expectations and then try to justify those lowered expectations.

We will find lots of literature to help us justify our lowered expectations of God, but we won't find any in the Bible. The more we read the Bible, the harder we will have to work to maintain low expectations of God. For example, if Moses could speak with God "face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exod. 33:11), how

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can we possibly justify an expectation of a lesser experience for us now? Is God's plan regressive? Are we to believe that what we have now is less than what Moses had? The more we read the Bible, the more frustrated we will get by the gaping incongruity between what is promised to us and what we actually have. This will bring us to a crucial junction of decision, and it is here that many people take the wrong turn.

Many people make the mistake of assuming that this tension between promise and reality is something to be avoided, that they must either lower their expectations of God or convince themselves that they have something they clearly don't have. But this very tension is a crucial element in the formation of a spiritual capacity to know God. I will say more about this in the following chapters, but suffice it to say now that the common avoidance of the tension between human reality and divine promise is evidence that we may have adopted inadequate notions of the spiritual life, to say the least. If we feel compelled to lower our expectations or embrace delusions in response to this tension, it is only because the expectations we had in the first place were seriously contaminated. It is not that we can ever have too high expectations of God. The contamination of our expectations is our misunderstanding of the *process* by which we attain what the Bible promises. It is not so much *what* we expect that is the initial problem but *how* we expect to get there. The failure of bad processes so often leads to disillusionment, which in turn leads to severely stunted expectations.

Beyond Token Piety

Read the Bible and pray. That is the nutshell prescription I was given as a young Christian for building my personal relationship

with God. It is simple and achievable. You read God's Word, and you pray for yourself and others. That advice will get us started, but it won't be long before we realize that the spiritual journey, the experience of relating to God, is far from simple.

Due to the complexities of our dysfunctional hearts, we all begin our journey with God in the middle of a vast spiritual labyrinth. There is a sense of simplicity to be gained in the spiritual life, but it is not where we begin. If we make the spiritual life a simple matter of achieving goals using step-by-step processes and daily habits, it becomes more about personal achievement than real relationship. It is so easy, then, for the spiritual life to become little more than a religion of token gestures of piety that only serve to make us feel we have fulfilled our duty toward God. We should indeed read our Bibles and pray, but this advice is just too simplistic to be helpful to anyone who really wants to have a deep relationship with God.

So where do we look for an account of spirituality that is deeply relational, that is congruent with the complexities of life, that affirms the tensions of human existence, and that goes beyond simplistic and pragmatic notions of the spiritual life? To me, the answer is obvious, but not because of any brilliance on my part. It was an accidental discovery and by no means unique. The answer has always been right in front of our eyes and most probably on the tips of our tongues, if we have been a Christian for any length of time. It is contained in the book of the Bible that has been the most utilized part of Scripture (though less so in our time), the one most widely quoted (even in the Bible itself), and the one that successive generations of Bible scholars have acknowledged to be the defining example of biblical spirituality. I discovered it not initially because I was a Bible teacher but because I was a musician. I discovered a book of songs in the middle of my Bible.

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The biblical Psalter, the book of Psalms, attracted me as a creative challenge long before I really came to understand it. It took years to understand the psalms, partly because the spirituality they portrayed is so countercultural to the spiritual environment I came into as a young Christian. With my band, Sons of Korah, I have worked for over fifteen years adapting the psalms to music and touring the world, singing them night after night. As time has gone on, I have found them doing unexpected things to me, and as a result, I have begun to understand what the purpose of this book actually is and how it can perform its function in my life.

The Trodden Path

It is always important, when interpreting a text of any type, to ask not only what it is saying but also what it was intended to *do*. What was its function? When we discover this, particularly with respect to the Bible, we discover the *meaning* of a text. The meaning of any part of Scripture is found when we discover what God is *doing* by having the text say what it is saying.

The Psalter is the most practical book of the Bible. It was not compiled just as a book to be read but as a tool to be used. For most of its history—since its final compilation somewhere after 500 BC—the contents of the book were not read by people or even read *to* people. Rather, the psalms were sung and prayed. This, I believe, is how the psalms yield their meaning. As I have discovered after many years of singing the psalms, it is by *using* the psalms that we begin to discover what they were actually intended to *do*.

The psalms show us what authentic spirituality looks like, and in this sense, they should shape our expectations of the spiritual life. The ultimate purpose of the psalms is not just to portray

authentic spirituality but to draw us into the experience of those who went before us, those whose lives were used by God to create key spiritual precedents for us to base our lives upon. The psalms belong to a corporate spiritual context in which the acts of God in the lives of people were celebrated and commemorated annually. Many psalms were either written for or preserved specifically for commemoration festivals such as the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Firstfruits. In these festivals, the people sought to find God in the present by connecting with his actions in the past. The psalms were seen as something akin to tracks in the jungle cut by those who had gone before. We are not left to work out the way for ourselves. The path has been trodden down, and we are invited to walk in this path and continue where the psalm writers left off.

David and the other writers of the psalms were the pioneers of the Spirit-filled life. The Spirit of God worked in and through them to show us what we can all discover for ourselves now that the Spirit of God has been poured out into our hearts. The psalms were written not to dictate religious habits or to achieve certain ends. They are expressions of the heart written to cultivate in us the very heart that they themselves express. They are given to us to shape our innermost desires and thereby to open up our capacity to live in relationship with God.

The fact that the psalms were written as songs should serve to underline the nature of their purpose. Music is the language of the heart, and it was for this language that the psalms were written. They were written not just to tell us *about* God but to draw us into an encounter *with* God. In this sense, the psalms both exemplify and potentially impart the very thing that the rest of the Bible directs us toward as the ultimate goal of human existence: a love relationship with God in which we glorify and enjoy God forever.

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The biblical faith is not a religion we observe in order to achieve some level of status in God's favor. Faith is a relationship to be enjoyed and cherished. It is a matter of the heart, not to the exclusion of the intellect but flowing from the heart of love to the whole being and life of the individual. And faith is not individualistic. It has as its ultimate goal the reinvigoration of true community, the full expression of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Each of the psalms was selected and incorporated into Scripture by God's providence because it exemplified the ideals and goals of the biblical faith. The psalms became the primary tool by which the ancient faith of Abraham, Moses, and David was to be passed on from generation to generation.

Earthly Spirituality

If there was ever a time to search the Bible for a portrait of authentic spirituality, it is today. Our overentertained modern minds are prone to adopt highly romanticized notions of spirituality that inevitably lead us to disillusionment. A romanticized spirituality is one that creates a context in which we would like to live rather than the situation we actually have. We can tend to think that the expression of our hearts should be just like those of the worshipers in heaven. We can have a taste of heaven now, and, in fact, we are called to be the vessels through which the kingdom comes "on earth as it is in heaven." But, again, this is not a reality we begin with. We don't live in heaven; we live on earth. We live in an imperfect world, and we begin with highly dysfunctional spiritual capacities. Just because we can and should be experiencing certain heavenly realities does not mean that we are.

The wonderful thing about the psalms is that they show us how

to begin where we are. We are not expected to begin with some heightened state of spiritual ecstasy. We can and must begin where we are. What we need is not a heavenly spirituality but an earthly spirituality that captures the present tension between what we have already and what remains unfulfilled. This is precisely what we have in the psalms.

The Purpose of This Book

To get in touch with the reality of God, we must first get in touch with the reality of our own situation. Self-realization is the first step toward any realization of the truth of things outside us. We cannot experience the reality of God while we remain in our fantasy-world cocoons.

The spiritual journey portrayed in the psalms, therefore, begins with the saddest and harshest realities of life. From here, the path winds upward into the embrace of God, and we find here a state of heart that, according to the psalms, is the ultimate state of happiness. From this happiness flows a joy that is both profound and indomitable. This is the shape of the journey we will take in this book. We will begin with a downhill descent into the valley of reality before ascending to the mountain of joy. On the way, we will visit the dominant experiences portrayed in the Psalter.

My purpose here is not to examine the Psalter itself as a piece of ancient literature. That is a valuable endeavor, and many books have been written about the psalms on that level. My intention here is to use the psalms as windows into the experiences of people—experiences that exemplify the life of faith from an inside perspective. The psalms are the expressions of people who had real interactions with a real God, and at their highest points, the psalms

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testify to an unshakable joy that must be desired by every person. But how did they get there? What does that road look like? These are questions that the psalms answer, and, in fact, I would even suggest that when we begin to use the psalms as a guide for this journey, we are beginning to grasp the meaning of this amazing biblical book of songs.

1

THE RICHNESS OF COMPLEXITY

You have made known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

PSALM 16:11

The Complexity of Relationship

Relationships are complex. The more personal and intimate a relationship, the more complex it becomes. On the other hand, the less personal a relationship is, the simpler it becomes. The relationship between an employer and an employee is simple because it is definable in terms of an objectively formulated performance criteria. It is desirable in the workplace to keep relationships “professional” to avoid the complexities of the personal dimension. Simple equals efficient. The last thing you want in the workplace is to get bogged down in personal complexities.

We sometimes say that a couple has a “complex relationship” if we observe certain peculiarities in the way they relate to each other. And it is true that our emotional and spiritual dysfunction adds another layer of complexity to a relationship that compounds as the relationship deepens. However, quite apart from this consideration, complexity is the very essence of personal relationships. In personal relationships, people develop soul ties in the deepest part of the human spirit, and thus the relational connection becomes as mysterious as the human spirit itself.

To many people, the complexity of personal relationships is annoying, exasperating, and tiresome, and often these relationships are abandoned in a desire to return to a simpler form of relating. From this perspective, relationships are a kind of bog that obstructs the way forward.

The most fundamental implication of the twofold “love commandment” Jesus identifies as the summation of all God’s commands (Mark 12:28–31) is this: Relationships are to be valued and enjoyed above everything else in life—first our relationship with God and then our relationships with others. Relationships,

in other words, are to be treated as the highest of all ends. If we truly value relationships above everything else, then complexity will no longer be an annoyance. On the contrary, we will experience complexity as *richness*, something we delight in. When the highest desire we have is to enjoy a relationship as an end in itself, the mysterious complexity of the relationship creates more room for us to express and enjoy the relational experience.

The Nature of Relationship

Biblical faith is not a religion to observe or a code of ethics to follow. It is not even primarily a task to fulfill. Biblical faith is a *relationship to enjoy*. It is as simple as that. And yet, because it is a relationship, it is complex in the sense described above. The idea is simple: God wants to have a relationship with us. The experience, however, is complex, and it is this complexity that gives the experience its inexhaustible richness.

If we regard our relationship with God as a means to some other end, then, of course, as I have said, the complexity of the relationship will be an annoyance, and we will find ourselves trying to reduce the relationship to a simpler pragmatic form. We will want to simplify it down to *doing* certain things. We will want to feel we have fulfilled our spiritual duty by spending half an hour reading the Bible and praying each day and by serving in the church. We will begin to regard these spiritual exercises as we regard physical exercise.

Every second day I go for a run for about an hour. Afterward, I feel a sense of achievement. I feel satisfied that I am keeping myself fit, and I feel really good physically. I have made the mistake of treating my “spiritual health” in the same way. The idea of spiritual

health is not particularly helpful because it makes it sound as though we can make ourselves spiritually healthy by doing certain things and bypassing relationship. But spiritual health cannot be divorced from healthy relationships—most crucially, a healthy relationship with God. The question is not “Are you spiritually healthy?” but “Do you have a healthy relationship with God and healthy relationships with other people?”

We cannot create a healthy relationship just by doing the right things. A relationship is not a task or an exercise. Relationship is a mode of life in which we choose to open ourselves to another person to be known and to know. It is therefore also a choice to become vulnerable to another person and to become, in a sense, dependent upon that person.

Imagine a woman says to her husband, “I just don’t feel like you love me,” to which the husband replies, “Well, just tell me what you want me to do!” I realize this is a common conversation between couples, which is why I use this example. The man, in this case, has completely missed the point, and, in fact, his reply would only compound his wife’s concern. The woman wants a relationship with her husband and feels that their personal connection is waning. The man just wants to keep his wife happy so that he can get on with things that have become more important to him than the relationship itself. Hence, his wife’s concerns are valid.

Implicitly, our response to God can be much like the response of the man in this example. We feel compelled to respond to the reality of God as we sense the weight of his claim upon us, but we tend to want a quick pragmatic answer to the situation. It is as though we are saying to God, “Just tell me what to do!” We tend to want our relationship with God to be as simple and pragmatic as that between an employer and an employee. We want a simple criteria

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by which we can feel satisfied that we have fulfilled our duties and kept God happy. This is how we get *religion*. Religion is our intuitive response to God's absolute claim upon us. It is what comes naturally, but it misses the point. God wants to have a relationship with us; he doesn't just want us to try to make him happy.

Two people trying to manipulate each other's emotions is not a relationship. It is not a surprise, however, if we think it is because we humans are constantly trying to create relationships with other people by impressing them, attracting them, and appealing to their desire to be "made happy." It is all highly dysfunctional and delusional. We sense the need for relationships, but in classic human fashion, we try to *make things happen* rather than seek to cultivate genuine, personal connections. It is no wonder, then, that we apply our dysfunctional interpersonal habits to God.

Healthy Relationship

So what does a healthy relationship with God look like? How does it express itself? The Sunday school response would be that it expresses itself in *obedience*. Obedience is the *fruit* of a healthy relationship with God. On the other hand, *disobedience* is a sign that there is something wrong with our relationship with God. The solution to disobedience, therefore, is not simply to start "doing the right things." If the fruit is bad, we don't focus on curing the fruit; we cure the tree. This is why so many Christians go around and around in circles when trying to deal with personal sin. They deal with it by trying harder not to sin. It never works. Something has to change in the heart. Inevitably, the problem comes down to some kind of *relational breakdown*, often between themselves and others, and always between themselves and God.

In one sense, our relationship with God is never entirely what it should be, as indeed is the case with all our relationships. For all our good intentions, we enter our relationships with a deeply corrupted nature. We are naturally selfish, defensive, and competitive. We inherited these inclinations from generations of our human ancestors who, following the first human beings, rejected God and tried to be gods unto themselves. This inherent spiritual dysfunction, as I said before, adds immeasurably to the complexity of relationships. We begin with a nature that is essentially disinclined toward good relationships. In light of this, it is not helpful to try to act out ideals. We can't enter a relationship as though we began from a state of complete spiritual flawlessness. When we begin a relationship, we bring with us a vast array of complex spiritual dysfunctions.

It's amazing how idealistic young, engaged couples can be about their relationship, and the same is true of young Christians. In the midst of their joy over the newly kindled relationship, these young romantics find it difficult to believe that everything isn't perfect. Deep down they know there are issues, but they are afraid of breaking the romantic facade by voicing the issues. *Conflict* therefore becomes the necessary growth pain.

I have spent a lot of time with young couples in premarital counseling, trying to prepare them for conflict without dampening their romantic joy. They hate hearing that conflict is inevitable, and they find it even harder to understand that constructive conflict is part of having a healthy relationship. This would not be the case if everything was ideal, but everything isn't ideal. So we need to conceive of healthy relationships in a way that takes our unfortunate personal/spiritual issues into consideration.

In this context, a healthy relationship is not a relationship without conflict; it is a relationship in which conflict is dealt with honestly

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and constructively. In a way, as strange as it sounds, we have to put right and wrong aside for this to happen. We know things are wrong; that's a given. The question is how to make things right, and we can't do this by pretending that things are right already. Often in premarital counseling, when I ask one person how he or she feels about the way the other person acts in this or that situation, the response is about how the person thinks he or she *should* feel, not how he or she really *does* feel. The intention is good, and they both want to honor their partner, but in a healthy relationship, we have to be able to express our feelings truthfully and constructively. For this reason, I spend a great deal of time teaching couples how to communicate. A lack of good communication is one of the key things that leads to unhealthy relationships.

Let's now apply these relational principles to our relationship with God. What does a healthy relationship with God look like? It looks like honest communication. It even looks like constructive conflict. We must take the idealistic boundaries out of our communication with God and allow for a range of expression that is congruent with the complexities of life. What does this look like? It looks like the psalms. Everything I have said so far is, I believe, necessary context for understanding the complexities of the psalms. There are many aspects of the psalms that people love and cherish, but many other aspects people find perplexing. This is because we come to the text with our ideals, and we analyze the psalms with questions such as, "Can you say that to God?" and "Are we allowed to pray that sort of thing?"

The psalmists were operating under completely different criteria. They were operating in the context of a relationship, and their expressions are *relational expressions*. Apart from the obviously didactic psalms, the psalmists weren't trying to give a theology

lecture. They were just expressing how they felt, and that is not only valid but also a necessary part of a relationship. Psalm 74 is a good example of this. The psalmist makes a theologically outlandish statement: “Why have you rejected us forever, O God?” (v. 1). This is a little like my son crying out, “You don’t love me anymore” when he is being disciplined. Of course, he knows this isn’t true, but he wants to communicate his grief at having to sit alone in his room for a while. Apparently, God wants us to communicate as honestly and forthrightly as any child would with a parent. That is the disposition the psalms are implicitly inviting us to take before God.

The Complexity of the Psalms

If we understand the relational context of the Psalter, we are in a good position to understand the wide range of expressions within the psalms. The range of expression is indicative of the richness of the relationship. It is also congruent with the range of experiences we will inevitably have in life. To have a relationship with God is to share life with God. At the center of this sharing of life is a constant flow of communication: expressing joy when we are happy, showing gratitude when we are blessed, complaining when we feel let down, crying out when we feel abandoned, supplicating when we are in need, raging at injustice, delighting in goodness, lamenting hardship, and celebrating bounty.

The book of Psalms was not given to us to show us what angelic worship looks like. The psalms are an expression of what an authentic relationship looks like between human beings and God. They will therefore express all the complexities inherent in a relationship. From our perspective, they express the desire to feel loved, to be affirmed and validated, to feel secure, and so forth.

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This earthly spirituality, as I have called it, is also seen in the psalms in the ample expression they give to the complications of our human dysfunction. Human dysfunction does not guide these expressions, but our dysfunction does cause a constant tension in our relationship with God that must be brought to the surface with honest communication, as it must be in any relationship. This is what we see in the psalms.

God gave us the psalms for the same reason he gave us every other book of the Bible: to show us what he wants. The difference with the psalms is that, whereas other parts of the Bible may prescribe what God wants, the psalms *demonstrate* what God wants. He wants relationship. God wants to love and be loved. This is the summation of what the Bible tells us about God's will (Mark 12:28-31). As I said at the outset, relationships are complex, and the more personal they become, the more complex they become. We should embrace this complexity, which in turn means embracing honesty, which in turn means embracing diversity of expression.

Back to the Map

Popular Christian spirituality has tended to focus on just a few expressions, namely, the expressions that give voice to how we think we *should* feel. We tend to neglect expressing what we actually do feel. The ideal spiritual state is a state of devotion and joy, and so these become the dominant expressions in our spiritual vocabulary. These expressions are always appropriate in themselves. There will always be a part of us that can sincerely concur with these expressions, and we should indeed make these expressions our central theme. The problem here is not so much with what we do as with what we think we should *not* do. The issue expresses itself

in our public worship, where it has become inconceivable that we would ever say something like, “O Lord God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?” (Ps. 80:4).

I use this example from Psalm 80 because it is an overtly *communal* lament. All the psalms belonged in one way or another to the community expression, but some did so more explicitly, and this is the case with Psalm 80. The person who wrote this psalm was evidently so comfortable with expressing every kind of feeling to God that he was more than happy for these expressions to be made public and even to become a part of the public expression of the community. The words of Psalm 80 express how I often feel, but I cannot conceive of ever praying something like this out loud in a prayer meeting, let alone singing it in church as a congregational song. Is this a sign that we have moved from relationship into religion? Whatever the case, it is certainly a sign that we need to intentionally rethink how we understand Christian spirituality.

When it comes to rethinking the spiritual life, we may be inclined to look primarily and even exclusively to the New Testament writers. The psalms are clearly more directly poignant to the issue, but there is a tendency to view the psalms as outmoded expressions of an inferior type of relationship with God. This is an unfortunate view that prevents us from being informed by the psalms as we should. The difference between the Old and New Testament periods is not that the writers had a different sort of relationship with God. David, who wrote many of the psalms, was filled with the Spirit and understood himself to be a child of God by the grace of God alone. The difference between the Old and New Testament periods is that what was the experience of a privileged few (i.e., David and the prophets) under the old covenant is now available to everyone under the new covenant.

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David's experience of a relationship with God, as expressed in his psalms, is therefore to be read as a kind of map for what this relationship can look like. We are given this map so that we can explore every part of the relational territory. Just as the Israelites were given the boundaries of the Promised Land so that they would know what they should take possession of, so we are given the psalms so we can know the extent of the relational experience we should possess. My concern is that we tend to settle for far less than what is actually given to us. We limit ourselves to a space so small that it is actually impossible for us to grow as God wants us to grow. If we are to grow in our relationship with God, we must revisit the map and move out into a full experience of the relationship with God that is portrayed for us there.