

Introduction

This is a series of stories of what it looks like to walk with God over the course of about a year.

It is our deepest need, as human beings, to learn to live intimately with God. It is what we were made for. Back in the beginning of our story, before the fall of man, before we sent the world spinning off its axis, there was a paradise called Eden. In that garden of life as it was meant to be, there lived the first man and woman. Their story is important to us because whatever it was they were, and whatever it was they had, we also were meant to be and to have. And what they enjoyed above all the other delights of that place was this—they walked with God. They talked with him, and he with them.

For this you and I were made. And this we *must* recover.

I've spent too many years trying to figure out life on my own.

Reading books, attending classes, always keeping an eye out for folks who seemed to be getting the hang of things. I'd notice that the neighbors' kids seemed to be doing well, and I'd think to myself, *What do they do that I'm not doing? Their kids are in sports. Maybe I should get mine in sports.* I'd walk away from a conversation with someone who seemed to be on top of the world, and afterward I'd think, *She seems so well-read. I'm not reading enough. I should read more.* I'd hear that a colleague was doing well financially, and quickly I'd jump to, *He spends time managing his money. I ought to do that.* We do this all the time, all of us, this monitoring and assessing and observing and adjusting, trying to find the keys to make life work.

We end up with quite a list. But the only lasting fruit it seems to bear is that it ties us up in knots. Am I supposed to be reading now, or exercising, or monitoring my fat intake, or creating a teachable moment with my son?

The good news is you can't figure out life like that. You can't possibly master enough principles and disciplines to ensure that your life works out. You weren't meant to, and God won't let you. For he knows that if we succeed without him, we will be infinitely further from him. We will come to believe terrible things about the universe—things like *I can make it on my own* and *If only I try harder, I can succeed.* That whole approach to life—trying to figure it out, beat the odds, get on top of your game—it is utterly godless. Meaning, entirely without God. He is nowhere in those considerations. That sort of scrambling smacks more of the infamous folks who raised the tower of Babel than it does of those who walked with God in the garden in the cool of the day.

In the end, I'd much rather have God.

You might have heard the old saying "Give someone a fish,

and you feed him for a day. Teach someone to fish, and you feed him for the rest of his life.” The same holds true for life itself. If you give someone an answer, a rule, a principle, you help him solve one problem. But if you teach him to walk with God, well then, you’ve helped him solve the rest of his life. You’ve helped him tap into an inexhaustible source of guidance, comfort, and protection.

Really now, if you knew you had the opportunity to develop a conversational intimacy with the wisest, kindest, most generous and seasoned person in the world, wouldn’t it make sense to spend your time with that person, as opposed to, say, sloggling your way through on your own?

Whatever our situation in life—butcher, baker, candlestick maker—our deepest and most pressing need is to learn to *walk* with God. To hear his voice. To follow him intimately. It is the most essential turn of events that could ever take place in the life of any human being, for it brings us back to the source of life. Everything else we long for can then flow forth from this union.

But how do we get there? How do we learn to live with God, to walk with him each day in conversational intimacy? Over the years I’ve read with longing the stories of early disciples like Athanasius, who had the help of a spiritual giant like Anthony, or the Benedictines with Benedict, or the followers of Columba living with him on Iona, and I found myself wondering, *But where do people get that today?* Those stories feel like Aesop’s fables. Charming, but archaic. I don’t know anyone who lives in the same hut with a genuine spiritual counselor, mentor, father, or director with whom he can process the unfolding events of his life anytime he’d like. I know such fathers exist, and I pray they increase. But in the meantime, they are rare. Most of us haven’t the option.

But we can still learn.

You might not have access to a master fly fisherman, but if you could watch someone cast who has been at it for a few years, you would learn a lot. When Stasi and I first married, we loved to hang out with couples who'd been hitched for a decade or two. There was so much to gain simply from hearing their experiences, the good and the bad. In truth, it was often the tales of their mistakes that helped us most. And so I've found that by describing my experiences and putting words to the things God is showing me, I can shed light on your experiences and put words to things God is showing you. In sharing these stories, I am in no way suggesting that this is the only way to walk with God. But as George MacDonald said, "As no scripture is of private interpretation, so is there no feeling in a human heart which exists in that heart alone, which is not, in some form or degree, in every heart."

And so what I offer here is a series of stories of what it looks like to walk with God over the course of about a year. I'm going to open my journals to you. Or at least part of them. The more helpful part, I hope. When Ernest Hemingway wrote *Green Hills of Africa* in 1935, he felt he was taking a worthy risk: "[I have] attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination." How much more valuable might this be if we could share with one another the stories of our true encounters with God—not the mountain-top ones, but the everyday encounters, as they are lived out over a year.

Some of these stories will open up new horizons for you. That is certainly my hope. Learning to hear the voice of God may itself be a new frontier, and an exciting one, with unexpected joys

around each new turn. You will no doubt come across lessons you've already learned, probably some better than I. But, you may have forgotten. We do forget even the most precious encounters we have with God. Perhaps I will help you to remember and recover what you might have lost. I may also help you to tell your own story as well, give you eyes to see what is unfolding and help you to set it down so that it doesn't slip away.

You'll notice that there aren't any chapters in this book. Life doesn't come to us that way, in neatly organized sections with helpful subheadings and footnotes. We don't get an outline for each new day, with summary points at bedtime. Life comes to us in a series of stories, over the course of time. There is something to be learned in every story. And there is something to be learned from seeing it unfold through the seasons—see the repetition of themes, the recurring attacks of the enemy, the hand of God in seemingly unrelated events. I think this format will allow you to pause along the way at those points where God is speaking to you, shedding light on your story, or teaching you something new. Pause there. Let that be the lesson for the day. Don't just plow through! Take your time, and let him speak.

I believe a deeper walk with God is available. I believe we can learn to hear his voice. But I'm well aware that it takes time, and we all need help *interpreting* the events of our lives, and what we are experiencing. So I have added another dimension to this book. At certain pivotal junctures along the way you will find references to the website www.walkingwithgod.net. On that site I provide further guidance, clarification and counsel through video. It's not exactly sharing a hut with Anthony or Benedict, but it will help a great deal in your walk with God.

I take some comfort in this quote from Frederick Buechner:

There is something more than a little disconcerting about writing your autobiography. When people have occasionally asked me what I am working on, I have found it impossible to tell them without an inward blush. As if anybody cares or should care. . . .

But I do it anyway. I do it because it seems to me that no matter who you are, and no matter how eloquent or otherwise, if you tell your own story with sufficient candor and concreteness, it will be an interesting story and in some sense a universal story. . . .

If God speaks to us at all other than through such official channels as the Bible and the church, then I think that he speaks to us largely through what happens to us, so what I have done in this book . . . is to listen back over what has happened to me—as I hope my readers may be moved to listen back over what has happened to them—for the sound, above all else of his voice. . . . [For] his word to us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling. (*Now and Then*)

prelude

summer
fall
winter
spring

learning to hear the voice of God

Listening to God

If only I had listened.

We have a family tradition of going out into the woods each year after Thanksgiving to cut down our Christmas tree. It's something we started when the boys were small, and over the years it became the event to help us inaugurate the Christmas season. We bundle the boys up and head off to the snowy woods on a Saturday morning. Stasi brings hot cocoa in a thermos; I bring the rope and saw. Inevitably, I think there's a better tree "just over the next hill," which is always one more hill away, and family members start peeling off and heading back to the car while I cut down a tree that's always three feet too tall and drag it a mile. It's all part of the tradition.

Now, you get a pretty funky-looking tree, sort of a Charlie Brown tree, when you go out to find one on your own. But it's

our tree, with a story that goes along with it. We love it. Most of the time.

Last year we headed out for the tree the weekend *after* Thanksgiving weekend. There was new excitement to the adventure—we'd bought some land way out in the mountains, and this would be the first time we'd ever been able to cut a tree down on our own property. I envisioned a family hike on snowshoes up through the forest, hot drinks by the fire afterward, board games, rich memories. That's not exactly how it turned out.

A blizzard came upon us during the night and dumped about two feet of snow on the back roads. We decided we'd better get out while we could, but in the first five minutes of our journey home, we slid off into a ditch. It took us more than an hour to dig out. We had no shovel. We used the boys' plastic sled, with repeated failures. Finally, the only way we could get the Suburban to climb up onto the road was to have the whole family on the right side of the truck, outside on the running boards, riding it like a catamaran while I gunned it for all it was worth.

Slowly we made it back out to the highway. I got out to check the tree (we did get the tree, three feet too tall) and discovered that we now had two flat tires. Not one, but two. It was ten degrees outside, and the wind was howling down from the north, bringing the windchill to minus ten—as in ten below zero. I knew I had one spare tire, but not two. (Who carries two? Who gets two flat tires at the same time?) I did have a can of Fix-A-Flat—maybe that would get us into town. Nope, it was frozen. When I got out to deal with the situation, I left the flashers on to warn oncoming traffic of our condition. Now the battery was dead.

The word that comes to mind is *ordeal*. It was an ordeal.

And now here is my confession: we weren't supposed to go.

We'd prayed about the weekend, asking God when would be a good time to head out. This was the day after Thanksgiving (Friday), and both Stasi and I sensed God saying we were to go up the following day. But it didn't make sense to us. We were tired, and the boys wanted to see their friends. There were all sorts of "reasons" not to go, but more so there was that lingering unbelief that often passes for weariness, that thing in us that sort of whines, *Really? Do we really have to do this now, God?* So we ignored the counsel and went the following weekend. Now, the weekend God told us to go was a gorgeous weekend—no snow, sunny skies, no wind. The whole event would have been delightful.

But no. We had to do things our way.

How does the old hymn go? "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." The whole ordeal could have been avoided had we simply listened.

The Power of Assumptions

I ran into an old acquaintance at the bookstore today.

Actually, I was nearly out the door when he called my name, so I turned back in to say hello and chat for a few moments. He seemed . . . not well. Half the man he used to be. I wondered why. I expected him to say that he had suffered some major loss. A loved one, I feared. Or maybe it was a prolonged illness. Not that he was visibly deteriorating as some do in the late stages of cancer. But there was something about his countenance, a loss of some essential part of himself. You know the look. Many people have it, actually. It's a confused and disheartened look. As we talked,

it became clear that he had simply been eroded by a number of confusing years strung together by disappointment.

As I left the store, I found myself thinking, *He held such promise. What happened?*

It has to do with assumptions.

He assumed that God, being a loving God, was going to come through for him. In the sense of bless his choices. His ministry. Make his life good. He looked sort of dazed and hurt that it hadn't happened. He was trying to put a good face on it, but you could see that he had lost heart. This may be one of the most common, most unquestioned, and most naive assumptions people who believe in God share. We assume that because we believe in God, and because he is love, he's going to give us a happy life. $A + B = C$. You may not be so bold as to state this assumption out loud—you may not even think you hold this assumption—but notice your shock when things don't go well. Notice your feelings of abandonment and betrayal when life doesn't work out. Notice that often you feel as though God isn't really all that close, or involved, feel that he isn't paying attention to your life.

Now, it's not fair to diagnose someone else's life without having some intimate knowledge of their situation, the story leading up to it, and what God is after. But I *do* have enough information to say that this man assumed the Christian life was basically about believing in God and doing good. Be a good person. That's good. That's a beginning. But it's just a beginning. It's sort of like saying that the way to have a good friendship is not to betray the other person. That will certainly help. You certainly want to have that going. But there's a whole lot more to friendship than simply not committing a betrayal, wouldn't you say? I know this fellow also holds the assumption that God doesn't really speak to his

children. And so, when he found himself assaulted and undermined by all that had unfolded in his life, he had no source of guidance or explanation. It was sad to see the toll it had taken.

I left the store thinking about assumptions—how they are either helping us or hurting us, every single day of our lives. Our assumptions control our interpretation of events, and they supply a great deal of the momentum and direction for our lives. It's important that we take a look at them. And life will provide hundreds of opportunities to take a look at our assumptions in a single week. Especially as we walk with God.

I'll tip my hand to one assumption I am making. I assume that an intimate, conversational walk with God is available, and is meant to be normal. I'll push that a step further. I assume that if you *don't* find that kind of relationship with God, your spiritual life will be stunted. And that will handicap the rest of your life. We can't find life without God, and we can't find God if we don't know how to walk intimately with him. A passage from the gospel of John will show you what I'm getting at. Jesus is talking about his relationship with us, how he is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. Listen to how he describes the relationship:

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.” . . .

“Whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal

and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:1–4, 9–10)

The sheep live in dangerous country. The only way they can move securely in and out and find pasture is to follow their shepherd closely. Yet most Christians assume that the way to find the life God has for us is to (A) believe in God, (B) be a good person, and (C) he will deliver the rest. $A + B = C$. But Jesus says no, there’s more to the equation. I *do* want life for you. To the full. But you have to realize there is a thief. He’s trying to destroy you. There are false shepherds too. Don’t listen to them. Don’t just wander off looking for pasture. You need to do more than believe in me. You have to stay close to me. Listen to my voice. Let me lead.

Now there’s a thought: if you don’t hold the same assumptions Jesus does, you haven’t got a chance of finding the life he has for you.

Does God Still Speak?

I was talking on the phone yesterday with a young woman who was interviewing me for an article of some sort. She asked what this book was about, and I tried to explain it in this way: “This is a sort of tutorial on how to walk with God. And how to hear his voice.” I told her several stories (including the one about the Christmas tree ordeal). There was a long pause, that pregnant sort of pause that tells me I’ve just hit upon a great need and a great doubt. Finally, she asked, “What do you say to people who say, ‘God isn’t that intimate with us?’” I had a hunch—it was

something in the tone of her voice—that she hadn't experienced the Christian life in the ways I was describing. Maybe because she'd never been told this is available; maybe it's as simple as the fact that no one had ever shown her how.

Is God really that intimate with us? That's a good place to begin.

It might seem trivial that I'm bothering the God of the universe with a family outing for a Christmas tree. Does God really care about that kind of stuff? Is he really that intimate with us? Let's start with this much—God certainly knows *us* that intimately.

O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.

You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand.
When I awake,
I am still with you.

(Psalm 139:1–18)

Whatever else we might believe about intimacy with God at this point, the truth is that God knows us *very* intimately. He knows what time you went to bed last night. He knows what you dreamed about. He knows what you had for breakfast this morning. He knows where you left your car keys, what you think about your aunt, and why you're going to dodge your boss at 2:30 today. The Scriptures make that very clear. You are known. Intimately.

But does God seek intimacy *with* us?

Well, start at the beginning. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, knew God and talked with him. And even after their fall, God goes looking for them. "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:8–9). What a beautiful story. It tells us that even in our sin God still wants us and comes looking for us. The rest of the Bible continues the story of God seeking us out, calling us back to himself.

The LORD is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you. (2 Chronicles 15:2)

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart. (Jeremiah 24:7)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Return to me," declares the LORD Almighty, "and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. (Zechariah 1:3)

Come near to God and he will come near to you. (James 4:8)

Let us draw near to God. (Hebrews 10:22)

Intimacy with God is the purpose of our lives. It's why God created us. Not simply to believe in him, though that is a good beginning. Not only to obey him, though that is a higher life still. God created us for intimate fellowship with himself, and in doing so he established the goal of our existence—to know him, love him, and live our lives in an intimate relationship with him. Jesus says that eternal life is to know God (John 17:3). Not just “know about” like you know about the ozone layer or Ulysses S Grant. He means know as two people know each other, know as Jesus knows the Father—intimately.

But does God speak to his people?

Can you imagine any relationship where there is no communication whatsoever? What would you think if you met two good friends for coffee, and you knew that they'd been at the café for an hour before you arrived, but as you sat down and asked them, “So, what have you been talking about?” they said, “Nothing.” “Nothing?” “Nothing. We don't talk to each other. But we're really good friends.” Jesus calls us his friends: “I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father” (John 15:15 MSG).

Or what would you think about a father if you asked him, “What have you been talking to your children about lately?” and he said, “Nothing. I don't talk to them. But I love them very much.” Wouldn't you say the relationship was missing something? And

aren't you God's son or daughter? "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Now, I know, I know—the prevailing belief is that God speaks to his people *only* through the Bible. And let me make this clear: he does speak to us first and foremost through the Bible. That is the basis for our relationship. The Bible is the eternal and unchanging Word of God to us. It is such a gift, to have right there in black and white God's thoughts toward us. We know right off the bat that any other supposed revelation from God that contradicts the Bible is not to be trusted. So I am not minimizing in any way the authority of the Scripture or the fact that God speaks to us through the Bible.

However, many Christians believe that God *only* speaks to us through the Bible.

The irony of that belief is that's not what the Bible says.

The Bible is filled with stories of God talking to his people. Abraham, who is called the friend of God, said, "The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land and who spoke to me . . ." (Genesis 24:7). God spoke to Moses "as a man speaks with his friend" (Exodus 33:11). He spoke to Aaron too: "Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron about the Israelites" (Exodus 6:13). And David: "In the course of time, David inquired of the LORD. 'Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?' he asked. The LORD said, 'Go up.' David asked, 'Where shall I go?' 'To Hebron,' the LORD answered" (2 Samuel 2:1). The Lord spoke to Noah. The Lord spoke to Gideon. The Lord spoke to Samuel. The list goes on and on.

I can hear the objections even now: "But that was different. Those were special people called to special tasks." And we are not

special people called to special tasks? I refuse to believe that. And I doubt that you want to believe it either, in your heart of hearts.

But for the sake of the argument, notice that God also speaks to “less important” characters in the Bible. God spoke to Hagar, the servant girl of Sarah, as she was running away. “She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me’” (Genesis 16:13). The God who sees even me. How touching. In the New Testament, God speaks to a man named Ananias who plays a small role in seven verses in Acts 9:

The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. . . .”

“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go!” (vv. 10–15)

Now, if God doesn't *also* speak to us, why would he have given us all these stories of him speaking to others? “Look—here are hundreds of inspiring and hopeful stories about how God spoke to his people in this and that situation. Isn't it amazing? But you can't have that. He doesn't speak like that anymore.” That makes no sense at all. Why would God give you a book of exceptions? *This is how I used to relate to my people, but I don't do that anymore.* What good would a book of exceptions do you? That's like giving you the owner's manual for a Dodge even though you

in return is *My love*. Every time I've stopped to listen, I've heard, *My love*. Over and over again, *My love*. And I've wondered why. When there are so many things going on in the world and in my life, so many things I know I need to hear from him, still he says to me, *My love*.

I haven't really known what to do with this. At first it was a comfort. What a wonderful thing to hear. My heart would sort of soften and say, Yes, your love. Thank you for your love. But after several weeks of this—we're talking months now—it began to bug me. That's it? The same thing? Your love? What, am I an idiot or something? Am I even hearing right? Why are you saying the same thing over and over?

After I got through that phase, God's words began to be a great source of comfort and orientation. They have brought me back again and again to his love. Right. This is all about your love. If I get nothing more, no further explanation, I'm okay with that. I can just sit with *My love*. But to be honest, I still don't think I'm getting it. God is repeating this for a reason. I do get that. But I'm not really sure why. It seems he's after something.