

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DAILY RENEWAL AND JOY



PURSUING GOD'S PRESENCE

ROGER HELLAND

Foreword by MARK BUCHANAN

“Drink from the deep well of wisdom and grace as you read the pages of this book! Roger Helland pastorally offers a robust biblical vision for seeking, experiencing and hosting the presence of God. Helland’s call for a presence-centered life will nourish the imaginations of the weary and saint alike. This book will soon be a classic.”

Tara Beth Leach, pastor; author, *Emboldened*

“This is a wonderful book springing from Roger Helland’s many years of experience as a professor, pastor and prayer leader. It is a joyful, doable message that will revitalize your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and your effectiveness for His glory in the world.”

Pete Greig, founder, 24-7 Prayer International

“Books of this depth and insight can only be written well by those who have experienced the truths of which they write firsthand, and who continue to live them out on a daily basis. This book is a real and practical guide in how to experience God’s presence day by day and be renewed and impassioned for His service.”

Sean P. Campbell, D.D., senior advisor, Samaritan’s Purse,
Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

“*Pursuing God’s Presence* reminds us that our fundamental invitation is to experience the radical transforming presence of the Trinitarian God. Providing glimpses into his own life struggles and ministry experiences, Roger Helland offers hope that we might flourish in the wonders of God’s weightiness and participate more fully in all the dimensions of God’s glorious kingdom emerging in our midst.”

Marilyn Draper, assistant professor of practical theology,
Tyndale Seminary of Tyndale University

“In a world of cheap platitudes and duct tape solutions, *Pursuing God’s Presence* re-centers us on what ultimately satisfies—the presence of the Holy One. *Pursuing God’s Presence* is masterfully written from a place of deep encounter and a life of practice and pursuit. Roger’s stories will have every reader venturing into the depths of God with fresh wonder and joy. Highly recommend.”

Daniel Grothe, associate senior pastor, New Life Church

“*Pursuing God’s Presence* is a masterpiece. Biblically accurate, theologically sound and spiritually alive, it is delightful to read and full of fire and adventure. Roger Helland is a fire starter, a modern-day apostolic prophet. Every leader needs a leader, and he is one of mine.”

Fred A. Hartley III, lead pastor, One Mission Church;
president, College of Prayer

“Roger Helland proclaims the good news of God’s kingdom is presence, connection and communion with a living person who is present

and accessible. Roger kindly reminds us that presence-centered faith is the only way forward for the followers of Jesus.”

Bradley Jersak, dean of theology and culture, St. Stephen’s University

“It is a rare gift to discover a voice that rings with the clarity and sanity of one who not only has academic chops and a gifting to communicate, but is a practitioner. This book cuts through all the chatter with its wisdom—wisdom that can only come from one who has lived what he is espousing.”

David Ruis, national director, Association of Vineyard Churches Canada

“Join me in digesting this plateful of nourishing spiritual food from Roger Helland. A guide to pursuing God’s presence is outlined here in terms of our personal life, church community, home and family, and work life that can permeate our entire being as Holy Spirit-led Christ followers. This guide teaches us how to pursue God’s presence through prayer, awareness, surrender and obedience.”

Rev. Dr. Henry Schorr, senior pastor, Centre Street Church

“If you’ve ever felt a nudge, this book is for you. Roger Helland illustrates how the Spirit moves us into new zones of life and ministry as we recognize these ‘nudges’ from above. Let’s allow his inspiring accounts to replace an oft cynical view of inner tugs and help us accept that our lives greatly matter to Him.”

Brian Stiller, global ambassador, the World Evangelical Alliance

“Roger’s powerful book will aid you in your pursuit of God. Roger is extremely well-read, acquainted with Pietists both old and new. *Pursuing God’s Presence* is thoroughly grounded in Scripture, orthodox to the core and God breathed.”

Rt. Rev. Dr. Trevor H. Walters, bishop, Anglican Network in Canada;
mediator/retreat leader, Anglican Church in North America

“Roger Helland paints a compelling picture of a spiritual life focused not on external practices but on presence of God—a relationship based on 24/7 connection with the Most High. Rooted in his own experience, Helland provides practical steps for readers to move toward this relationship. If you are ready for something more, something deeper, I commend *Pursuing God’s Presence*.”

Angie Ward, Ph.D., assistant director, Doctor
of Ministry Program, Denver Seminary

“Roger Helland provides in a systematic and highly personal manner a picture of what experiencing the presence of God in every dimension of life involves. The combination of instruction, example and passion he provides created a refreshed hunger for a 24/7 experience of God’s presence in every aspect of my life.”

Rev. David R. Wells, M.A., D.D., general superintendent,
the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO DAILY RENEWAL AND JOY

ROGER HELLAND



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Foreword

The great temptation of many writers and thinkers is to find a simple explanation for all the trouble we are in. We want to diagnose a root cause and then prescribe a single cure. We do this with the economy, with education, with politics, with health care and—maybe especially—with the Church. Get this wrong, we claim, and all else falls apart. Get this right, and all else comes together. Monocausal explanations are every guild's holy grail—a beautiful and valuable thing that exists, alas, solely in our imaginations.

I have read, and often been mightily persuaded by, books about the Church that purport to do just this: Posit a single cause for everything that is not working and commend a single remedy. If we only prayed more, preached better, revived our worship, reignited our evangelism, renewed our discipleship—on and on the list goes—the Church would rise up out of its stagnation and come into its flourishing.

It is a powerful vision. Too often, it is a powerful delusion.

But once in a rare while, an author happens along who nails it: He or she writes a book that traces our failures back to a single source. And then holds out the key to turning it all around.

This is that book. Dr. Roger Helland nails it. He is entirely convinced, and entirely convincing, that what ails us is one

thing: we do not dwell in the presence of God—or, as he calls it, the *kāvôd* of God—God’s glory. And so, the remedy is one thing: Come back. Though such a return requires resolve and discipline, it is not a tactic or a technique. It is, rather, God’s immeasurable gift and beautiful invitation. It is God Himself who invites us and empowers us to share fully in His inner life. It is God Himself who desires to be with us and for us in all things and at all times.

It is God Himself who says *come*.

This insight alone is worthy of our deepest consideration. But it is what Dr. Helland does in the rest of the book that makes it so valuable: He shows us what presence-centered living looks like in virtually every realm of existence—in worship, in discipleship, in parenting, in marriage, at work and more. And then he charts a path to help get us there.

Often while reading this book, I found myself saying both *Ouch* and *Yes*. *Ouch* because, well, too often I do not dwell in God’s presence. Indeed, too often I do just about everything else except that. And *Yes* because Dr. Helland’s book has awakened in me a fresh desire and resolve to pursue the God who pursues me.

When I was baptized, a long time ago now, the pastor did an audacious thing: He gave me a “life verse,” a passage of Scripture meant to guide me all the days of my life. It was Matthew 6:33—“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” That was, starting way back, God’s invitation to me to pursue His presence. And I have done my level best to live by it. But sometimes I have lacked the wisdom to know how.

This book carries the explanation for what has gone wrong, and it exposes the cure for it.

Come.

Mark Buchanan, author of *God Walk: Moving at the Speed of Your Soul*; professor, Ambrose University

Acknowledgments

This is my seventh book—a labor of love to articulate the pursuit of God’s presence. There are scores of people who shaped the contours of this project.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to my family, friends, colleagues and students who welcomed my ideas, and permitted me to use some of their stories. I offer special gratitude to my dear wife, Gail, who sacrificially blessed me to isolate for untold hours over the months, so I could write.

I offer a five-star commendation to the superb editorial and marketing staff of Chosen Books and Baker Publishing Group. Honorable mention goes to Kim Bangs and Stephanie Smith, and their teams, who supplied methodical expertise and a careful cover design. And Lori Janke, who supplied numerous improvements to my word-smithing and documentation.

I offer enormous gratitude to Don Pape, my agent, whose self-styled Irish tenacity and belief in me paved the way for this project. And to Mark Buchanan, whose generous foreword reflects his character and capacity as an outstanding author, and who inspires me with his availability and authenticity as a friend and colleague.

Acknowledgments

I offer a supreme salute to a cavalcade of people who directly or indirectly instructed and inspired me, ardent servants who also affirmed me and widened my ministry: Doug Balzer, Sean Campbell, Jeff Edwards, David Guretzki, Fred Hartley III, Sandy Isfeld, Cliff Jewell, Jake and Mavis Klassen, Ralph Korner, Sam Nikkel, Phil Nordin, Rob Parker, Cynthia Pelletier, John Roddam, David Ruis, Dan Slade, Phil Wagler, Kara Wilfley, and the late John Wimber.

And finally, I offer my applause to a roster of people, too many to mention, whose works or names I cite. These fellow travelers champion the journey of pursuing God's presence.

Introduction

From Pagan to Presence

People ask me, “What’s your background?” My reply is always, “Pagan!” I grew up as a non-Christian in Southern California with a sin-infested lifestyle that was devoid of God. Our family never attended church, read the Bible or prayed. And Jesus Christ was a swear word. My stepdad was a realtor, and my mother was a waitress. I groped in spiritual darkness until I was nearly eighteen.

One December Friday night, while I was at home on leave from boot camp in the United States Army stationed at Fort Ord, California, a high school friend and I drove up into the foothills on Glendora Mountain Road to overlook the city. This was the place where in high school we would all land to drink and do drugs. While I was at Fort Ord, however, my friend had shockingly become a “Jesus freak.” Around 10:00 p.m., while I peaked on LSD, he shared the Gospel with me. The Spirit pierced my darkness. I felt this gravitational pull—of *presence*.

I gazed into the winter night sky and prayed my first prayer. “*Jesus, if You’re real, I want to believe.*”

From Pagan to Pastor

Jesus took me up on my offer. Six weeks later, on a frigid, sun-glaring Saturday morning, I sat alone on my bunk in the barracks at Fort Lewis, Washington, my newly assigned Army base. I was reading John’s gospel from a blue leather-covered King James Version Bible my stepdad had given me. An inrush of joy and impeccable light beamed into my heart and soul. As I look back, it was my personal Pentecost—of *presence*—where the Spirit saturated me. That is when I recognized I was a convert who had become a conscious follower of Jesus Christ.

It took several years for Jesus to scrub me of my pagan filth. I lived a double life with my Army buddies, though I felt the fire of my newfound faith. The tipping point came in the barracks one Saturday night in Kitzingen, West Germany, where I was later based. As I tried to talk about Jesus to a guy, he hurled an unforgettable indictment at me.

“Roger, get your story straight. You’ve got a beer in one hand and a Bible in the other.”

Like Nathan, the prophet who confronted King David, that soldier confronted me. I pivoted, raced to my room and wept bitterly over the hypocrisy of my life. But God’s convicting *presence* blanketed me. Two years later, after my military discharge, a pastor baptized my sun-tanned body and shoulder-length hair in the chilly waters of a Newport Beach, California, lagoon.

I enrolled at Mount San Antonio College in Walnut, California, to study forestry in a two-year associate of arts program. I also worked part time as a custodian in the Glendora School District. I was alone one evening midway through my second year vacuuming the carpet at the Goddard Middle School library. I stopped, turned the vacuum off and stood there motion-

less in the center of the room. I had that feeling you get when you think someone is watching you. I was hushed and drawn into a holy place of *presence*. Deep inside (it is hard to explain), I had this inner nudge. I felt a summons to ministry as a profession. This led to several divine appointments in which I left California and headed due north to Canada to attend a small Bible college in Surrey, British Columbia.

After Bible college, I had another nudge toward further study, and I spent four years at Dallas Theological Seminary. I acquired a passion for Bible exposition and teaching. That led to a teaching position at Okanagan Bible College in Kelowna, British Columbia. My first day on campus, two church leaders appeared at the front office to see me. They were following up on a mutual friend's referral and invited my wife and me to join them in a new church plant. That initial group of young Bible-believing Baptist and Brethren leaders eventually became New Life Vineyard Fellowship. We agreed to join. I started as an elder.

Two years in, on December 9, 1987, during a pastors, elders and wives Christmas dinner held at the home of one of the elders, I had this nudge for us to pray together. Since we were about to wrap up and leave, everyone resisted. But I persisted. Eventually, that group of eight couples consented to pray. About ten minutes later, heaven came down and glory filled our souls! We experienced a dramatic visitation of God's presence that ignited razor-sharp prophecy and repentance. This was accompanied by physical manifestations like those you read about in revivals. Four and a half hours later, around 2:30 a.m., we staggered out.

That prayer time unleashed what would become a church-wide river of renewal with local and international impact. God forever altered us. John White's book *When the Spirit Comes with Power* helped us comprehend the energies and effects of God's presence that stampede from revivals. Our vision became "More!"

Four years later, I had that same nudge to leave the Bible college and serve as the senior associate pastor of New Life, then briefly as senior pastor. That completed my journey from pagan to pastor. Like Jesus in the temple, I received a zeal for God's presence that consumed me (see John 2:17). I designed church conferences, a church-based school of ministry and an international ministry school to catalyze spiritual renewal. This inspired my first two books, *Let the River Flow* (1996) and *The Revived Church* (1998).

From Pastor to Prayer

As I pastored, I began to view prayer as the core spiritual practice that activated and sustained spiritual and missional renewal. I noticed we could not preach physical healing into people, counsel demonic oppression away from people, program chronic sin out of people or argue the Kingdom over people. I would watch church leaders like John Wimber gently pray, "Come, Holy Spirit" and witness mind-boggling results. I would emerge from Spirit-inflamed gatherings with a high-definition awareness of God's presence, and I became power-boosted with mountain-moving faith and exhilarating freedom. I adopted James Ryle's motto for freedom that I heard him preach several years ago at a conference: "Nothing to fear, nothing to prove, nothing to hide and nothing to lose."

Then, through a series of those inner nudges during inquiring prayer, the Lord led my wife, Gail, and I to pastor in a Mennonite Brethren and a Christian and Missionary Alliance church in British Columbia. I also served as a district minister of the Baptist General Conference in Alberta.

I love the Church and various theological traditions, but I grew frustrated and dissatisfied with the Church's condition. I saw prayerless pastors and churches grind out human life and leadership. I left many church and denominational meetings

that felt hollow, crowded with words, devoid of prayer and *rûah* (Hebrew for *Spirit*). Jack Deere has a point when he says, “The biggest difference between the first-century church and the modern church in the Western world is that the first-century church was a praying church. We are a talking church.”¹

The Lord hauled me into an expedition of devotion to prayer. Some guides along the way were Mike Bickle, Jim Cymbala, Daniel Henderson and Ray Duerksen. Others included E. M. Bounds, Andrew Murray, Henri Nouwen and Ruth Haley Barton. I welcomed God’s invitation and impartation for devotion to prayer and the ministry of the Word (see Acts 6:4). I also obtained a passion to pray for the sick inside and outside of religious settings. It became a natural supernatural part of my ministry as a spiritual leader. I trekked from pastor to pray-er.

In the spring of 2020, near the end of thirteen years as a district minister, the Lord lodged a sentence into my mind. As I prayed one morning in my home office, He nudged, “You’ll be praying for leaders.” That became primer guidance for what was ahead. I was in the throes of organizing and participating in prayer gatherings for revival as Pentecost Sunday loomed in late May 2020. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada invited me to lead four weekly one-hour Zoom prayer gatherings. We prayed for holiness, healing, the Spirit’s outpouring, and revival across Canada and the nations. God’s presence was palpable in those Zoom prayer times. Those prayer sessions spawned an invitation for me to join the EFC as their prayer ambassador to develop prayer with and for its affiliates and other prayer initiatives. At the heart of all this, I was resolved to seek and host God’s presence—from pray-er to presence.

From Pray-er to Presence

You will discover in chapter 1 how God seized me to pursue a presence-centered life. I love the Spirit and Scripture.

Charismatics embrace a robust Spirit theology. Conservatives embrace a rich Scripture theology. Empowered evangelicals embrace both. Dallas Seminary taught me how to exegete Scripture, and the Vineyard taught me how to experience the Spirit. The Spirit partners with the Scripture like breath and voice. I consider with theology, and I cultivate with practices to explore what biblical Hebrew calls the *kāvôd* (pronounced *kaw-vode*) of God—the glory of God—His manifest presence. You may be familiar with the term *shekinah*. Its Hebrew root means “to dwell” (see Exodus 25:8). Although the Bible does not use it, rabbis have used it to identify God’s localized dwelling presence—His *shekinah* glory.

To pursue God’s presence, His glory, is to seek God’s face and His person through prayer, awareness, surrender and obedience by Scripture-informed faith. In this New Testament age of the Spirit, God graces local churches with the manifestation—appearance—of the Spirit’s presence (see 1 Corinthians 12:7). The key to fervent prayer, effective Bible study, intimate worship, anointed preaching, authentic fellowship, active churches and flourishing families is God’s reverberating presence. Marvelous results occur when His localized presence moves in closer than a tight hug—holiness, healing, transformation and joy. Habakkuk 2:14 fuels my vision. “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory [*kāvôd*] of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” May you foster a firsthand, experiential, intimate knowledge of God’s glory as full and vast as the sea!

Like a captivating movie, I have been on an adventure from pagan to pastor to pray-er to presence. When we meet God’s *kāvôd*, nothing on earth can duplicate or replace it. We will explore how to seek, experience and host God’s presence. Let Psalm 105:4 regulate your pursuit. “Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!”

PART 1

SEEKING GOD'S PRESENCE



1

The Search That Strengthens

Pursuing God's Presence

The sobering truth is that the greatest hindrance to the growth of Christianity in today's world is the absence of the manifest presence of God from the church.

Richard Owen Roberts¹

A few years ago, a pastor colleague invited me to speak at a renewal conference sponsored by his Baptist church. As we chatted, he painfully recalled how his drive for over twenty grinding years had been to run and grow his church, study leadership and *do* the ministry. Fatigue and frustration choked his energy, and his methods of ministry strangled and failed him. In his early fifties, he burned out while Parkinson's barged in. He descended into an abyss to navigate the "dark night of the soul" with

stiff and shaking muscles. Traumatized by disappointment and despair, like a jettisoned booster rocket, this hammered pastor nearly ditched the ministry and his hope in God.

Though he exuded integrity as a faithful spiritual leader, that did not influence God's fairness calculus. Like Job, who suffered without solutions, this tenacious pastor chose to hang on and haggle with God. He evaluated his life and leadership for over a year, the landscape of which was like a tornado-torn Oklahoma town. He exemplified what Rabbi Abraham Heschel observed, "Faith like Job's cannot be shaken because it is the result of having been shaken."²

He emerged surrendered, liberated from his old drive, resolved to seek God's presence. And invited his congregation along to pursue God's presence with him.

Friday morning, I arrived at the church to meet with him and his staff and pray for the conference. The theme was God's presence. As I entered the auditorium and stood at the rear, we began to chat. I sensed instantly God's presence. It was so strong that I whispered, "I need to sit down." I sat on a white bench in silent reverence and looked around. A holy hush permeated the auditorium. As I choked back tears, I commented, "God's presence is here." The pastor replied, "Yeah, I know. Many people say that when they come here." That sacred presence lavished the weekend conference.

The Presence-Centered Life

Here is a series of philosophical but practical questions. What is your center? Where are your priorities and practices? How do they reflect your center? What do you think a lot about? What is your focus? I do not intend to corner you, but rather to challenge you. You might announce, "God is my center!" Good start! Well, maybe. Can you be more specific? You will see what I mean.

Parents focus on their children, students on their studies, professionals on their careers, owners on their businesses and pastors on their churches. Not necessarily bad. Some people focus on their pain, their looks or their limitations, while others focus on their past, their rights or social media. Not necessarily good. Most of us focus on our jobs, lives and livelihood, and I hope our relationships with God and loved ones. Our behaviors advertise our center, and they might shift with the seasons of life.

I will ask this another way. What do you seek continually? Your answer reveals your center—your supreme search. Before my wife and I bought our current house, we diligently searched the internet for multiple listings. Like all home buyers, we had specific priorities and values in mind. Escorted by our patient realtor, we viewed over forty houses in Airdrie, a city in Alberta, Canada. We searched for three months and discovered the new home that we bought. After all that searching, the home we bought was only two blocks away from where we were renting.

Similarly, in two situations when I was unemployed for six months, I scoured the internet, contacted friends and colleagues, prayed, emailed resumes and searched for every opportunity for work that aligned with my vision. I found a job each time. These continual searches occupied our focus and fortunately ended well.

Let me suggest a supreme search that both ensures constant discoveries and strengthens you.

The Search That Strengthens

Ponder this pungent command: “Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually” (Psalm 105:4). The first Hebrew word for *seek* means “to beat a path toward, try and reach, and inquire,” and the Hebrew word for *strength* means “might” or

“power.” The second Hebrew word for *seek* means “to discover, obtain, and look for.”³

At times we may feel like a Boston marathoner who is running the race of his life on the verge of collapse near the finish line. It is tough to go the distance as a student, as a parent, as one who is disabled or depressed, as a widow or as an employee with a stressful job. While multitudes beat a path to alcohol, shopping, counselors or pop psychology to cope with stress, the psalmist advises us to beat a path to the Lord and reach for His supernatural strength. That is what troubled David did, and it is what I try to do. He “strengthened himself in the LORD his God” (1 Samuel 30:6).

If there were an Oscar nomination for a top catastrophe in our lifetime, the COVID-19 pandemic would surely win. Millions of discouraged people suffered from isolation and loss and were seized by anxiety and fear. Companies, churches and entire countries required innovation to survive the medical, economic and social impact. Most of us felt like modern-day hermits confined to caves of home-based, online worlds forced to work our jobs, educate our children and lead our churches through Zoom and YouTube. Introverts like me felt more at home, at least temporarily, while extroverts like my wife felt more like hostages.

COVID-19 and its variants tested our centers. Did it force you, as it did me, to face your limitations and embark on a search that strengthens? “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Psalm 84:5). Here is my interpretation of that verse: Enriched with God’s favor are those who find their strength in Him, whose centers are journeys to God’s presence. Zion means Jerusalem, the temple site that housed God, where Jewish worshipers sought His presence. There are no spiritual supply chain issues with God.

COVID-19 not only tested my center, but it aggravated my anxiety, a lifelong battle for me. It also tested my issues of con-

trol. Can you relate? When Russia's savage attacks on Ukraine rampaged in late February 2022, the world staggered with unnerving instability and crippling inflation. It felt as if the mountains would collapse into the sea (see Psalm 46:2).

I reset my heart on a pilgrimage to His presence, and I sensed those artesian rivers of the Spirit dwelling inside me flow with the Niagara's power (see John 7:38–39). I am fortified when I surrender my insecurity and deeply draw from God. Unceasing prayer and repentance, Scripture living and the renewing of my mind, worship and the discipline of awareness are essential services for me.

Psalm 105:4 towers as a Mount Everest text. "Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually." Did you notice the sequence? Seek the Lord and His strength—in that order. Too many Christians seek God's power over God's person, His hand over His face. I follow Mike Pilavachi and Andy Croft's wisdom, "The key to living a life full of supernatural power is to understand that the power is in the presence. As we are close to Jesus so we will see him move in us and through us. The power is in the presence. And his presence is in us."⁴

In his book *Addiction and Grace*, Dr. Gerald May declares that one hundred percent of us are addicted to something. He notes that the word *addiction* comes from the French word *attaché*, which is a junior government member who is attached to an official. If we attach to something to which we cannot say no, we have created an addiction, a center. It does not matter whether it is alcohol, television, work, recreation, money, food, shopping or social media. It becomes idolatry that does not strengthen.⁵

I taught a course on spiritual formation at Alberta Bible College. When we discussed addictions, I asked the class, "Why do people who are addicted to alcohol or drugs keep going back to them when they don't satisfy?" One astute student replied, "Because they don't satisfy."

Consider the compact word *seek*. What comes to mind? If you lost your wallet or purse, laptop or smartphone, would you seek it? How would you feel? How would you focus? If you lost sight of your child in a store or at a playground, what would you experience? Would your heart pound and your mind race with panicked focus? If you incurred enormous debt or contracted an acute disease, would you seek a solution or a cure? How focused would you be? When the COVID-19 virus invaded the globe, to what extent did that drive infectious disease scientists to seek a vaccine? That which has enormous importance can fuel our all-out searches.

Is not the act of seeking a common practice in our everyday lives? And crucial in our spiritual lives? A concordance study on *seek* could incite your imagination. Ponder these samples (emphasis added):

- O God, you are my God; earnestly I *seek* you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water (Psalm 63:1).
- With my whole heart I *seek* you; let me not wander from your commandments! (Psalm 119:10).
- But *seek* first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).
- And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who *seek* him (Hebrews 11:6).

Did you notice the words *earnestly* and *heart* and their connection to *seek*? And God rewards those who seek Him. Compelling? There is a final Hebrew word in Psalm 105:4 to interpret for the presence-centered life. The psalmist trumpets the call to seek His presence continually. The Hebrew word often translated as *presence* is *paneḥ*, which means “face.”⁶

In the Bible, God's face refers to His entire being as one who eyes us with full attention, in proximity with His personal and relational presence. An alternate translation would be "seek His face always"—or the paraphrase, to look for God without interruption. To seek God's face is to come before Him into full view. Peter Greig comments:

In his great work *The Trinity*, Augustine repeatedly cites one particular verse, Psalm 105:4: "Seek his face always." The eminent historian Robert Louis Wilken says of this verse, "More than any other passage in the Bible it captures the spirit of early Christian thinking." In other words, if you want to understand how the early Church Fathers and Mothers successfully constructed a new intellectual and spiritual landscape for their age, the essence of their thinking and motivation was a perpetual search for the presence of God.⁷

Seeking God's Face

What is in a face? Consider your grandparents or parents, your children or grandchildren, your spouse or friends. My wife's face is lovely, charmed with grace and goodness. My grandchildren's faces are radiant, bursting with wonder and wildness. Some faces are stern while others are soft, some are worried while others are winsome, some are expressionless while others are expressive. What is in a face, a countenance? Is it not the person and their presence? The supreme search is to "seek his presence continually," or to "seek his face always" (1 Chronicles 16:11 NIV). To explore this more, let's review Psalm 27.

Imagine an Old Testament worshiper at the temple in Jerusalem. Listen to him shout a praise declaration, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (verse 1). He informs other worshipers of his prayer request. "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that I will seek after: that I may dwell

in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (verse 4).

Back then, God's house was His temple—the place of His presence. Imagine living in God's house your entire life! Further down, the worshiper lets us in on his conversation with the Lord. “You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, LORD, do I seek’” (verse 8).

Imagine you received a three-word text message from the Lord that read “Seek My face.” A brief but stunning invitation! It is similar to one Jesus issued centuries later: “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). Picture God's face as revealed in Jesus Christ—relational and radiant. He is friendly, smiles and listens well. His eyes beam affection and attention your way. He bends down and gestures, “Seek Me, look for Me, chase Me.”

When my grandchildren want me to chase them, they holler, “Papa, come get me!” They also love to play hide and seek, where we look for and find each other. When they succeed, they yell, “Found you!” The Lord invites us to seek and find Him.

The psalmist replies, “My heart says to you, ‘Your face, LORD, do I seek.’” Our hearts speak from a dimension our minds cannot. What language does our heart use? Is it not the language of love and literature, of music and movies? Is it not the language Shakespeare crafted for *Romeo and Juliet*, and Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams acted for *The Notebook*?

The command center for a presence-centered life is the heart engaged in prayer as ongoing two-way communication and communion with God. Like using FaceTime with Him. Henri Nouwen reminds us, “The crisis of our prayer life is that our minds may be filled with ideas of God while our hearts remain far from him. Real prayer comes from the heart.”⁸

In his book *Transforming Prayer*, Daniel Henderson fuels my prayer to seek God's face. Absorb his account as a young college student alone in his dorm room one Friday night.

I found myself flat on my face, pouring out my passionate gratitude and worship to the Savior who knew me, walked with me, guided me, taught me, and loved me with a tender and attentive heart. In those moments, the presence, provision, and power of God in my life became real. Truly, I felt that if I had opened my eyes, I would have been looking at the Holy One. . . . A “new normal” had occurred and my soul was re-calibrated to move beyond perfunctory prayer lists and to set my heart to seek His face. . . . Once you have tasted this kind of prayer experience, nothing else satisfies and everything else is seen in a new light.⁹

I identify with this report from my firsthand times in private and public settings. They glow with an unmistakable holy ambiance that is impossible to counterfeit or conjure up. Throughout this book, I will share some of my God encounters. This account describes the weight of God’s manifest presence that can settle on individuals or groups with the *kāvôd* of God.

The *Kāvôd* of God

When people ask, “What is your book about?” I reply, “It is about what it means to pursue God’s presence and experience His *kāvôd*.” After strange reactions, I explain what the Hebrew word *kāvôd* (pronounced *kaw-vode*) means.

As I love ice cream, powder skiing and Los Angeles Dodgers baseball, I love this word! Similar to the Hebrew word *shālôm* (peace) it is packed with meaning no English word can fully express. *Kāvôd* comes from *kābēd*, “to be heavy.”¹⁰ It can refer to substantial honor or position (see Genesis 45:13), power (see Isaiah 8:7) and wealth. So, Abraham was very “heavy,” translated as “very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold” (see Genesis 13:2).

The *kāvôd* of God is the weight and density of His honor, radiance, majesty, power and presence—His *glory*. It is displayed through brilliance, cloud and fire. The Old Testament Greek

version, the Septuagint, uses the word *doxa* (root of doxology or orthodoxy). It carries the meaning of *kāvôd* into the New Testament with *doxa*. Feel the weight of this text:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:17–18

The word *glory* appears over 350 times in the Bible. It became a way to speak of God Himself. God is present everywhere, always. His *omnipresence* is where He is distant and transcendent. Note David's sense when he asks God, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol [the abode of the dead], you are there!" (Psalm 139:7–8).

I showed the dusty Mars landscape to seminary students with a video panorama beamed to earth from the Perseverance rover when Mars was 130 million miles away. I also showed them the most distant galaxies ever seen—nine billion light-years away—from photos the Hubble telescope shot. I declared, "God is as present on Mars and in the distant universe as He is in your room right now!" They sat stunned. Jeremiah asks, "Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:24). Baffles your mind! We are usually not conscious of His omnipresence.

There are also times when God's presence is vivid and intense—His *manifest presence*—where He is localized and immanent. We are conscious of Him and His influence. Electric times can occur, like in the *Velveteen Rabbit*. In this story, a boy so loves his stuffed rabbit that it becomes real. When God

is involved, there are times in which you become real, buzzing inside, aware of God's unmistakable nearness of love and inner glow. "Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."¹¹ The weight of God's *kāvôd*, His glory, has an impact on you.

Like the surging sun, God's glory surges in His Person. Like the sun's light, God's brilliant glory is manifest or shown. God is light (see 1 John 1:5). He illuminates, warms and guides us. Jesus experienced God's eternal presence and glory. "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:5).

We recognize the weight of presence. Extraordinary leaders such as Billy Graham, Michelle Obama, Martin Luther King Jr. or Queen Elizabeth II radiate a confident presence to millions of people through their words and personalities. You know ordinary people whose influence can stir you at times. Perhaps you have had those situations where the worship, preaching, teaching or prayer entered another dimension and became dense with awe, peacefulness, serenity, euphoria or quickening.

Whether cultivated or spontaneous, there are occasions when God makes Himself known to us in dramatic or subtle ways. Some people have physical or emotional reactions or experience healing or deliverance, filling of the Spirit, or the fear of God and repentance. At other times the effects are less detectable. I have witnessed scores of church gatherings and Zoom prayer times where the aura of God's *kāvôd* was tangible. When they were drawn into a sacred zone, people became speechless and motionless and left the meetings with an "afterglow."

In fact, a mature leader told me that even a few hours after a Zoom prayer meeting ended, he continued to weep and felt the lingering effects of the Spirit. I led a Zoom prayer gathering with over one hundred leaders for the Canadian federal election in September 2021. A woman pastor remarked in an email to me later, "I could feel the power and the Holy Spirit's

presence as we were gathering and waiting for the meeting to start! Like burning coals were being heaped together, ignition and a blazing, with a passionate sense of unity and power. So good!”

The *kāvôd* of God and the face of God manifest the personal presence of God with us. What marks God's people is God's *presence*. The Bible reports how Israel so incited the Lord's wrath that He decided to inflict disaster on them (see Exodus 32). They built a golden calf idol when they grew impatient waiting for Moses to return from Mount Sinai. Moses appealed to the Lord on their behalf, and the Lord conceded.

God commanded Moses to leave Sinai but threatened not to go with His stiff-necked people. When Israel heard this disastrous word, they mourned while God decided what to do with them. Imagine the anxiety you would feel if God fumed at you, “I am not going with you!” Moses asked the Lord who He intended to send with him and this nation as His people. God softened and offered Himself. Their final conversation injects needed relief and confidence to pursue the presence-centered life.

And he said, “My presence [face] will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence [face] will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Please show me your glory [*kāvôd*].” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’”

Exodus 33:14-19

Consider the word *with*. Short and substantial. May joy rush through you as you recognize that God races down from His holy mountain to grant us His personal presence. Here is a stunning revelation: God's glory contains His dazzling goodness! God said He would make all His goodness pass before us. The Hebrew word is *tub*. It depicts unparalleled beauty, moral excellence and spectacular quality. All God is and does is supremely good (see Psalm 119:68). And may we succeed like Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Jehoshaphat, John the Baptist and the men of Cyprus and Cyrene as the hand of the Lord's favor was *with*, *upon* or *on* them.

The Path and Gladness of God's Presence

There is an voracious and ever-increasing hunger and desperate need for God's manifest presence today. As we study Scripture, we have two options: We can either lower Scripture to match the level of our experience, or we can raise our experience to match the level of Scripture. Let's hear and do God's Word and not hear it only (see Luke 11:28; James 1:22). Let this energize your walk: "Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence [face], LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness" (Psalm 89:15–16 NIV).

Jesus announced, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21). The Greek word for *manifest* is *emphanisō*. It means to "make present or visible, appear, evident to experience or the senses."¹²

How would He do this? He and His Father would come to us and make their home with us (see John 14:23). I will address some thorny issues and cheer you on to pursue a presence-centered life as a hound pursues a hare.

In *Toward a Perfect Love*, fourteenth century English author Walter Hilton wrote about the mixed life of contemplation and action. He remarks:

A hound that runs after the hare only because he sees the other hounds running will, when he grows weary, just sit down and rest or turn around and head home. But if he runs because he actually sees the hare, he will not spare himself for weariness until he has it. Whoever can most intensely desire God shall most intensely experience him.¹³

The last session of that weekend renewal conference I referred to earlier occurred on a Sunday morning. I arrived an hour early to join the pastor and the staff in his office for pre-service prayer. As we prayed, God's presence settled in as a morning fog. For about half an hour, the Spirit led our Scripture-fed prayers. I did not want to leave, but I had to. I was the speaker that morning. As I ventured into the auditorium, a familiar quality permeated the people. When several people greeted or prayed for me, I felt laser-pierced. They were hosts of God's presence. I teetered some and sat down.

An *unction* carried our worship and my message and shuddered our souls. While there, we anointed the pastor with oil and prayed God would heal him of Parkinson's disease. Unfortunately, God has not healed him yet. And two years later, to make matters worse, as he was out for a bike ride, a truck stopped to let two deer cross the road. He careened into a ditch to avoid the truck. He suffered injuries to his neck, ribs and lungs that required traction to brace him upright for several months. He recovered. He and his church are rugged presence pioneers on a mission to clear a path as a people of His presence, led by His presence.

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter cites David, who points to Jesus in Psalm 16:8–11 from the Greek Old Testament (the Septua-

gint). May this text point you to an unshakable life in the Lord that luxuriates in presence-centered gladness and joy:

For David says concerning him, “I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

Acts 2:25–28

On Monday afternoon, I flew home resolved to seek God’s presence. And I invite you along with me to pursue a presence-centered life.