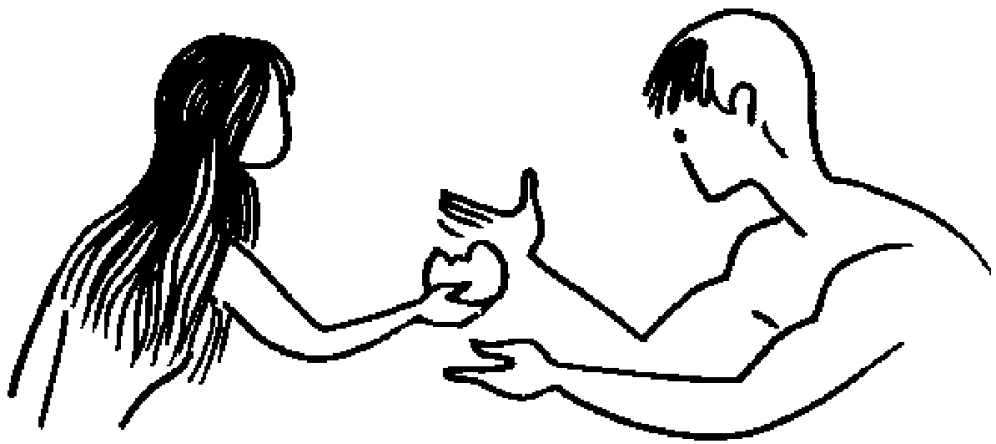
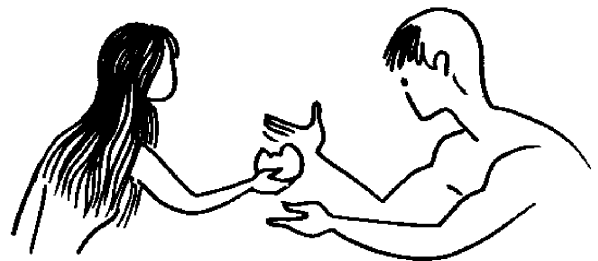


Losing Intimacy with God



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by Brian Johnston



1. Doubting the kind intentions behind God's will for us

I recently visited two Christians in hospital. One was finding consolation in the psalms; while the other had no desire for Bible reading or prayer. Both had led exemplary lives, rarely absent from the gatherings of the local church. Both were respectable people with a good reputation inside and outside the church. Why was there a difference now: one enjoying intimacy with God; while the other apparently not, despite seeming for years to have had it all together? We can appear to have it all together, but still be lacking intimate connectedness with God. The glory of Christianity – what sets it apart from all other world faiths and religions – is the fact that we can know God personally. Why then do we sometimes – maybe often – come short? Why does God sometimes seem far away?

The God of the Bible invites us to draw near to him; but do we? I love the psalms. The heart of the psalmist is a heart in pursuit of God. The psalms are the outpourings of lives which have known what it is to be intimate with God. There's a depth and richness of godly experience on display in them that whets our own appetite for a greater sense of God. Perhaps I should say, if you feel

totally satisfied with your Christian experience, then this booklet is not for you. But if you've known God's power in your life; if he's blessed you with success, and yet you still hunger and thirst after a closer walk with him, then do read.

In order to discover more about intimacy with God, our plan will be to revisit the Garden of Eden. If we can learn how intimacy with God was lost so early in human history, we should be more alert as to how we, too, can fail to experience it in fullest measure in our lives, even as Christians. For we have the same Adversary as our first parents, and we wrestle daily with the influence of the sinful nature. So, let's remind ourselves of what we can read in the Bible in Genesis 3:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'"

The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
(Genesis 3:1-5)

Satan was twisting God's words, wasn't he? He's good at that. He was subtly sowing a doubt in Eve's mind – a doubt that perhaps God was holding back something better from her than all she was currently enjoying. Dissatisfaction had never crossed her mind - until now. There was no reason why it should have. No reason at all. And there was no reason for it, even now. But our great Adversary was creating an impression. Notice the fiendish skill he uses here. The venom of the snake poisoned Eve's mind, making her doubt that the intentions behind God's will were kind ones which had her own best interests at heart. Very craftily, in the way he loaded his opening question, Satan began to stoke the fire of resentment in Eve. Perhaps the path of God's will was too narrow after all? Could it be that God was being unnecessarily restrictive? That, at least, was Satan's insinuation: *'Has God said, "You shall not eat from ANY (emphasis mine) tree of the garden?"'*

Even though Eve correctly clarified the fact that God had only prohibited the fruit of a single tree out of all the trees of the Garden, nevertheless Satan had achieved the effect he'd

desired. The poison was taking effect even as Eve spoke. For, more than likely, Eve has started to think, "What really is the point of even that small prohibition?"

We're all susceptible to feeling as though we're missing out on something. But if we accept the Bible as the Word of God, and God as totally wise and good and powerful, then it follows that ultimately his will and way is best for us – even when, to us, the indications are contrary. The psalmist, by the Spirit, expresses this realization with wonderful clarity in Psalm 16:2 when he declares to God: 'I have no good beyond you'. That's amazing. David, the writer here, was going through a tough time, for he begins by asking God to preserve him – hardly the thing you say when everything's fine in your life.

He then affirms that he's taking refuge in God, followed by his testimony:

I said to the Lord, "You are my Lord;

I have no good besides You."

David is triumphing where Eve failed. He's affirming the total goodness of God. He may not understand whatever trouble he's going through, but he bows his heart to acknowledge God's will for him is best: he can find all he needs and wants in God. There can be no good thing outside of God's will for him. It's a great example for us, as contained in this truly Messianic

psalm, but in all the messiness of our lives in a world that's spiritually out of orbit, we don't always appreciate this truth like we should, other than, perhaps, through gritted teeth.

If only things were different, we say. But, let's stop for a moment, and think of Paul's words to the Romans at the beginning of chapter 12:

... by the mercies of God ... present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

(v.1,2)

God's will is good and acceptable and perfect, but this verse is about us proving to ourselves that God's will is indeed good and acceptable and perfect – and doing that perhaps in the midst of trying and challenging circumstances, just like David. The world doesn't think that way, of course. It lies in the control of the same evil one who poisoned Eve's mind. We need to be sure it doesn't succeed in squeezing us also into its mould. And it will, unless we allow the Word of God, the Bible, to constantly adjust our perceptions away from the world's point of view, and away from its own way of thinking. That's the solution presented here at the opening of Romans chapter 12. True worship is a life of rational choices, where every

decision is based on spiritual logic – a logic consistent with the Word of God which nourishes our reasoning ability ('logikos'; Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:2). Eve made the wrong choice; David, and his greater son, made the right one.

Eve had a truly idyllic situation, but she still couldn't resist wanting what she didn't have. So what chance have we got, except for the fact, of course, that we have the Holy Spirit within us if we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The temptation to think that God is holding out on us, or to think that he is keeping something good back from us, is a sure path away from intimacy with God.

For intimacy is built on trust, trusting that God knows best - always. David trusted in God even in his victories. That's the mark of greatness. Here's a classic case in point from the life of David when in Second Samuel 5 he:

... came to Baal-perazim and defeated [his enemies] there; and he said, "The LORD has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters." Therefore he named that place Baal-perazim. They abandoned their idols there, so David and his men carried them away.

Now the Philistines came up once again and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. When David inquired of the LORD, He said, "You shall not go directly up; circle around behind them and come at them in front of the balsam trees. (2 Samuel

2. Believing we need more than God to satisfy, sustain & secure us

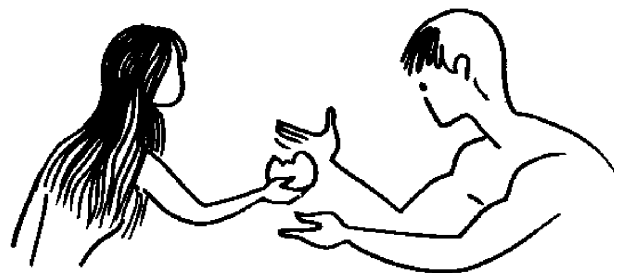
In this booklet we're revisiting the Garden of Eden, and the earliest history of the human race so as to learn how not to lose intimacy with God. We're aiming to learn wisdom from the mistakes of our first parents, for the very same issues confront us that also confronted them. The great enemy of the human race still uses the same strategy. Why should he change it, when it continues to be successful, impacting the lives of Christians as well as those of people who don't believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son?

If we're honest and self-aware as Christians, we'll accept that we're not always as close to God as we'd like to be. Perhaps we settle for what we're comfortable with. If you sometimes sense a stirring in your heart for more – for a greater sense of God, for a richer experience of life with him now – then continue with me in this exploration. The longing that even the Apostle Paul expresses in God's Word encourages me to go deeper. There's an intensity of desire compressed into Paul's words 'that I may know him' (Philippians 3:10). This was expressed by a man who earlier wrote that he longed after his brothers and sisters in the Church of God at Philippi 'with the affections of

Christ Jesus' (Philippians 1:8). His heart already beat as one with his Lord, we could almost say, but the nearer he got to the Lord in daily experience, the more he appreciated there was still further to go.

However, let's get back to the Garden of Eden. Genesis chapter 3 verse 6 takes up the story from where we left off in the last chapter:

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)



What's this, but only the desire for some material thing? A longing after some consumable item that's stronger than the desire to obey God's Word. Do you know that feeling? We've all experienced it in degree, and it's a step taking us away from intimacy with God.

Many in an unbelieving world view material things as a replacement for God – as a kind of God-substitute. The Apostle John in the Bible warns against 'the love of the world' (1 John 2:15) – and the different aspects he identifies can be seen in the temptation that confronted Eve.

The advertising industry plays on those same themes. Eve assessed the fruit as 'good for food'; 'a delight to the eyes'; and 'desirable to make one wise'. You can see these same tactics repeated in the advertisers' sales pitches to us every day of our lives. They tell us that we'll only find the satisfaction that eludes us if we buy their product; and for us to be seen with it will excite admiration and respect and even envy from our peers; and finally they imply that their product will cause us to be perceived as sophisticated and even fascinating. There's really nothing new in their tricks – as today they tempt us with the latest 'must have' consumables – these tricks were all employed in the Garden of Eden. But it's so easy to fall for them. However, whenever we buy into all this, we erode our intimacy with God – just like Eve. Love of the world and love of the Father have no overlap, as the Apostle John warns.

But in the Bible book of Job we're introduced to a man who, even when he had nothing, still had everything. There are a lot of people in this world who seem to have everything – but in reality they have nothing. To establish Job's integrity – and his own

– God allowed Satan to take away Job's wealth and his health. He was left with nothing. But then he turns round and says those breathtaking words: *'The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD'* (Job 1:21). This was spoken by a man who had everything even when he had nothing! He had everything because God was still the centre of his life. Job never denied God. At the end of his extreme experience, Job says:

*"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You."
(Job 42:5)*

His relationship with the Almighty was even more intimate as a result of all he'd been through – and, more importantly, as a result of how he came through it.

But we return to Eden again, where we left Eve with her attention riveted on a material object. Before we jump to criticize her, let's take a moment to reflect on just how easily the 'stuff' we have in our possession gets in the way of true hungering and thirsting after God! Eve was deceived into believing she needed more than God to satisfy, sustain and secure her life.

On the other hand, intimacy, and what it looks like in real life, is wonderfully described in the psalms, showing us the heart of a man or woman of God – a heart after God. Time and time again we find the psalmists talking about the experience of being satisfied,

sustained and secured. The difference is that the psalmist found these things in the intimacy of his personal relationship with God.

Let's take some impressive examples.

The first is from Psalm 3, where David says:

*I lay down and slept;
I awoke, for the LORD sustains
me. (Psalm 3:5)*

That was a psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom, who for a while seized his father's throne. It was a heart-breaking time for David, but he depended on the Lord to sustain him, and because of that he could sleep at night.

Next we come to Psalm 27. It's another Psalm of David.

*The LORD is my light and my
salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the defense of my
life;
Whom shall I dread?
When evildoers came upon me to
devour my flesh,
My adversaries and my enemies,
they stumbled and fell.
Though a host encamp against
me,
My heart will not fear;
Though war arise against me,
In spite of this I shall be confident.
(Psalm 27:1-3)*

It's very clear that, for David, safety was not to be found in numbers. His stronghold was not a castle, but it

was the Lord himself. He looked to the Lord to secure his life against his enemies. True, he had an army and a stronghold, but they were not what he relied on for defence.

Finally, from the psalms of David, we come to Psalm 63. It's ...

*A Psalm of David, when he was in
the wilderness of Judah.
O God, You are my God;
I shall seek You earnestly;
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh
yearns for You,
In a dry and weary land where
there is no water ...
My soul is satisfied as with marrow
and fatness,
And my mouth offers praises with
joyful lips. (Psalm 63:1,5)*

Is that impressive, or what? Get this. David's in a desert. But it's not physical thirst that's uppermost on his agenda. No, it's the thirst of his soul after God that takes priority. Tasting of God's power, glory and loving-kindness was more than a feast for David. Even the delicacies of the palace banqueting hall couldn't compare with the satisfaction David tells us that he finds in God. So there we have it. David certainly didn't believe he needed more than God, and God's provision, to sustain, secure and satisfy him – even when negotiating life's challenges.

Another Bible character who, like David and Job, found his everything in God, was Moses. Hebrews chapter 11 tells us that Moses endured 'as seeing him who is unseen' (Hebrews

11:27). The treasures of Egypt were in his grasp. Reared by the daughter of Pharaoh, what position might not have been his if he'd wanted it? But he turned his back and walked out on all of it, assured that his destiny lay with the God of the Hebrews. He bore 'the reproach of Christ', as the Bible puts it, and his subsequent personal history shows that his sense of satisfaction, sustenance and security was in God – the God he came to know intimately. God publicly announced that his communication with Moses was 'face to face' (Numbers 12).

Face to face. That brings me back to David – and Psalm 17. There David talks about:

... men of the world, whose portion is in this life ...

They are satisfied with children, [he says]

And leave their abundance to their babes. [Then he adds]

As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness;

I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake. (Psalm 17:15)

Two very different sources of satisfaction are on display here. Worldly satisfaction, and godly satisfaction. We often apply the last verse to what will be the Christian

believer's future experience of standing with Christ in glory, but spare a thought for its original context. David has been meditating through the night hours. God had visited him in the night, he said earlier in the psalm – and found no cause of offence in David. As a result, David anticipates the dawn and another day on this earth lived in intimacy with God. There's nothing between – no sin clouding God's face from him in daily life. In righteousness, David anticipates another day of service, beholding God's face, and being transformed into his likeness. That's what brought him satisfaction – in stark contrast to those whose satisfaction in life was in accumulating wealth to pass on to their children.

Is this not the intimacy described as the Christian's experience in Second Corinthians 3:18? With unveiled face – that's intimacy – beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed into the same glory of his own likeness. None but Christ can satisfy, sustain and secure us. No material 'must have' consumable item dare apply! – that's what we can learn from Eve's tragic mistaken loss of intimacy with God.

3. Placing meaningful relationships above loyalty to God

The young man insisted his new relationship was one of which he was confident God approved. His church leaders counselled him that it was in conflict with the Bible's teaching. How do we resolve issues like this? And what's at stake?

In this booklet about intimacy with God, we're trying to learn lessons from how intimacy with God was lost at the very dawn of human history. Not that we want to lose it, of course, but so that we might learn to avoid the pitfalls.

So far, we've focused on Eve's experience in the Garden – how she began to doubt the kind intentions behind God's will for her; and how she came to believe she needed more than God and his provision to satisfy, sustain and secure her life.

Now I would like us to switch our focus to Adam, as once again we revisit the Garden of Eden.

By way of introduction, we should make the point that it can hardly escape the notice of even a casual reader of the Bible that time and time again it illustrates for us the impact that our human relationships can have on our relationship with God. One extreme example is Ahab, king of Israel. He married the notorious

Jezebel, daughter of the king of the Sidonians (1 Kings 16:31). This was a type of relationship which God's Word had declared to be off-limits to an Israelite. It's a principle running right through the Bible that the people of God are to marry only the people of God. Ahab blatantly defied that. Naturally, this disastrous relationship was to have a major influence on his life and on that of the nation – as she led him away to the worship of foreign gods. And so he incurred the wrath of God.

By contrast, Adam's relationship with Eve was perfect. It was the only human marriage truly made in heaven. Adam really loved his wife, she was his perfect companion. It was just great that he was no longer alone! God had seen his need, and provided the most wonderful companion for him in Eve. But then came that fateful day when Satan deceived Eve into eating the fruit of the tree which God had commanded them not to eat. What was Adam to do now? Here was Adam's great dilemma. Let's read about what happened next:

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she

took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."

And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate."

(Genesis 3:6-12)

It says Eve gave to 'her husband with her, and he ate'. Perhaps we can't be sure if Adam was passively and silently present while Eve was being deceived, but it seems that way. Certainly he didn't intervene to stop her doing what she did. So Eve ate, and then came Adam's dilemma. If he ate also, then he was disobeying God's clear command. If he didn't, what would happen to his relationship with Eve? Would it have

a future? Surely it could never be as it had been before? As we've read from the Bible, Adam ate so that he might join his wife in disobedience to God. Perhaps he couldn't bear the thought of losing her - which is very noble and commendable until you realize that he was deliberately choosing to disobey God and go against God's plain command.

Adam valued his relationship with Eve more than his relationship with God, or so it would seem. Adam couldn't live with the idea of losing her and returning to being alone again without her. What he did, in effect, was to place a meaningful relationship above loyalty to God.

What Adam did has been repeated countless times since. A man or woman puts a relationship with someone else before their relationship with God. God's Word, the Bible, might put that relationship off-limits to them, but the strength of human attraction wins out. The relationship in question seems so right, but all the time God's Word is being devalued. Many in the world think nothing of people having affairs: relationships which tear apart lifelong marriage vows made before God. Rather than work at a troubled relationship, the trend is to 'move on'. Marriages are just another casualty in a disposable society where nothing has lasting value any more.

Tragically, it's no longer uncommon to hear reports of Christian leaders involved in such immoral

relationships. Life can, at times, seem unfair for some people, but no amount of compassion can justify relationships which are outside of God's declared will for us – and God's will is set out in the clear principles of the Bible.

While some may say, "We couldn't help falling in love," this can never be admitted as a defence. God holds us accountable for our emotions. The Bible simply doesn't permit us to fall in love with our neighbour's wife (or husband). No matter how meaningful we claim a relationship to be, valuing it above our personal walk with the Lord is always going to be a step away from intimacy with God. And how dare we claim that the Lord led to the forming of a relationship which he speaks against in his Word. Whenever we treat God's Word like that, we leave God behind.

Abraham, whom we are introduced to in the very first book of the Bible, was someone who prized God's word – the word of promise made to him by God. Abraham's example is the exact opposite of the contemporary trends we've just been mentioning. When God asked the unimaginable of him – to sacrifice his only son whom he loved – what must Abraham have thought? The struggle within him must have been immense. Had God turned into a monster? A God who demanded human sacrifice was not the God Abraham had known previously. What's more, this was the son he'd waited 25 years for, a



miracle baby, conceived in the nineties of his age. Isaac meant more than life to him. God was touching the tenderest relationship in Abraham's life. On the slopes of Beersheba he must have passed through a night of anguish, before we read, rather matter of factly, in Genesis 22 of how he got up and saddled his donkey and made all the preparations to do what God had asked of him. There could in reality have been nothing 'matter of fact' about it. His heart was breaking as he travelled with his treasured son to the place of which God had spoken. It was the place that was to become the place of sacrifice – where Abraham would surrender to God the most precious thing in his life. Abraham's even greater devotion to God is breathtaking. Later, the Bible reveals that Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac up back from the dead. And so he followed God's instructions, and would have gone all

the way, but God stopped him! He had passed the test with flying colours – and this has become one of the most touching pictures in all the Bible of God not sparing his own Son, but giving him up for us all on the cross (Romans 8:32).

So far in this booklet on intimacy with God, we've reviewed how we can lose that sense of nearness to God as we travel through life whenever we begin to doubt the kind intentions behind God's will for us; and whenever we begin to believe that we need more than God and his provision to satisfy, sustain and secure our lives. We learnt those lessons by studying the recorded actions of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Now, by turning our attention to Adam, we've discovered another thing that can destroy the precious intimacy with himself which God invites us to so enjoy. It's when we begin to place meaningful relationships above our loyalty to God - a loyalty we express through being faithful to the teaching of God's Word, the Bible.

By its plain teaching, and by recording for us real human examples, the Bible clearly demonstrates that neither commodities nor companions can satisfy or sustain us like the Lord - in

whom security is also to be found. The Book of the Psalms opens a window for us on the response of a godly man when fortunes are reversed and when trusted relationships break down. Despite these difficult experiences, which sometimes we, too, have to encounter, time and time again we find the psalmists talking about the experience of being satisfied, sustained and secured. The difference is that the psalmist found these things in the intimacy of his personal relationship with God. As useful as material possessions are, and as precious as even the most God-honouring relationship is, ultimately these things must be eclipsed by our personal relationship with God.

Of course, to the degree that these things are God's provision for us, they are meant to assist us in a closer walk with God. After all, doesn't God instruct us in the Bible book of Proverbs to:

*Rejoice in the wife of your youth ...
Be exhilarated always with her
love? (Proverbs 5:18,19)*

This is talking of a relationship God endorses. A life-partner who encourages us to draw nearer to God is one of life's greatest blessings from God!

4. Thinking we can draw near to God in any way that best suits us

You sometimes hear it said that some people have faith; while others believe in nothing. It would be more accurate to say that there's true faith and there's false faith – and you either have one or the other. It is not our sincerity that distinguishes them, but whether or not what we believe corresponds to reality.

We've been revisiting the Garden of Eden and that's where so-called false faith first began. Eve chose to substitute her true faith in what God had said with false faith – in other words, she chose to believe a lie. Satan deceived her into believing that God wasn't totally generous – that he was holding back something good from her. That was false faith, as opposed to true faith. In the language of Romans chapter one, she became the first to exchange the truth of God for a lie – but she believed that lie, and acted on it.

Central to God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34, which comes after Moses has asked God to show him his glory, is the idea of God as a generous God. For God proclaims his name at that time: he declares his attributes, and central to them all is the idea of his supreme goodness or generosity. That's what makes Satan's lie so galling. Whenever we

allow ourselves to entertain wrong thoughts about God, our intimacy with him is seriously hindered, as we've seen in the case of Adam and Eve.

But now we move on to Genesis 4, and our attention turns to Adam and Eve's first son, Cain. Chapter 4 of Genesis tells us that the first man who was actually born in this world became a murderer – he murdered his brother, Abel. Let's refresh our memory on why their family relationship went so disastrously wrong.

Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD."

Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his

countenance fell. (Genesis 4:1-5)

We can read a little more between the lines here if we notice what it says in Hebrews chapter 11:

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. (Hebrews 11:4)

Cain and Abel offered different types of sacrifices to God. Cain was a tiller of the ground and he brought an offering from the fruit of the ground to present to God; while his brother, Abel, who was a keeper of flocks, brought one of his lambs to offer it to God in sacrifice. You might say, well they were simply giving what was natural for them to give in each case. Was God being unreasonable or somehow arbitrary in approving Abel's offering and not Cain's? Of course not. And the clue is found in Hebrews. 'By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain'. The fact that he offered it by faith is very significant. For true faith is always based on God's Word (Romans 10). This would clearly imply that God had given definite verbal instructions on how he was to be approached in worship. So there's nothing at all fickle or arbitrary happening here. Abel was following God's instructions in faith; while Cain was disregarding them and substituting his own thoughts. His mistake was in thinking he could draw near to God as suited him best. That kind of thinking

comes from a heart that's far from God. And such was the way of Cain (Jude 11).

But, perhaps we can venture a little further in our reconstruction of events. After we read of God passing judgement on Adam and Eve for their disobedience – and before the record of them being expelled from the Garden itself – we come across these words:

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them. (Genesis 3:21)

This would seem to inevitably imply the very first animal death, at least in sacrifice. Before God used the skin of the animal victim to provide clothing for our first parents, it's a reasonable assumption that he introduced the animal, very possibly a lamb, as their substitute: its life given for theirs – their life being forfeit as a result of their sin. Later in the Bible, God would explain that blood-shedding was a virtually indispensable factor in any offering for sin (Hebrews 9:22) – for the life was in the blood (Leviticus 17:10), and this was one life being substituted for another, namely the offerer's. By faith, Abel was following this pattern. It's that likely Cain had done so previously – for the Bible does say 'in the course of time'. So it could have been that Cain usually asked his brother for a lamb, and perhaps bartered grain for it. But after a while he grew to resent this state of affairs. What was wrong with the fruit of his own labours after all?

Why could he not just give God some of the fruit of the ground which he had cultivated? The rest, as they say, is history, and results in Cain going out from the presence of the Lord (v.17) – clearly with all intimacy lost.

That's an extreme example, but it does illustrate that when we conclude that we can suit ourselves about how we come to approach God, then we're walking away from intimacy with God.

Let's look at this more positively, having learned from Cain's disastrous mistake. The Psalms teach us to draw near to God as those who are delighting in him. Psalm 37 tells us to trust in the Lord, do good, feed on his faithfulness, and so delight in him. This is surely the pathway to intimacy with God, expressed in the idea of absolutely delighting in God.

At this point, I'd like to share with you something Eliphaz said in the book of Job. Some of his remarks were mis-applied in the case of Job, whom he was supposed to be comforting, but there's a great deal in what he does have to say:

*"Yield now and be at peace with Him;
Thereby good will come to you.
"Please receive instruction from His mouth
And establish His words in your heart.
"If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored;
If you remove unrighteousness far*

*from your tent,
And place your gold in the dust,
And the gold of Ophir among the stones of the brooks,
Then the Almighty will be your gold
And choice silver to you.
"For then you will delight in the Almighty And lift up your face to God.
"You will pray to Him, and He will hear you; And you will pay your vows.
"You will also decree a thing, and it will be established for you;
And light will shine on your ways.
(Job 22:21-28)*

This reminds me of the words of our Lord: "... where your treasure is there will your heart be also." If we place our gold in the dust, and make God our gold – if he truly is to us more desirable than fine gold, then as we've seen from the psalm, we'll be found to be delighting in him. And describing the intimacy of relationship into which that brings us, it goes on to speak of our face being lifted up to God.

I suspect this refers to the same custom as we find referred to in Genesis chapter 19 where very similar words are used. God there assures Lot that he's granted his request (v.21) – but the Hebrew is literally, 'I have lifted up your face in this matter also'. The ancient custom was for a suppliant to make request with his head bowed low. If his potential benefactor did decide to

grant him favour and satisfy his request, he would reach out – or his servant would – and raise the enquirer's head up.

So then, if we put God in the place of gold, and delight in him with all our heart, we'll find that our desires are

really his desires, and so our prayers will be answered – or in other words, God lifts up our head.

This is the recipe for intimacy with God – and it's very far removed from the way of Cain.

5. Resisting his reproofs

In this booklet we've been trying to learn lessons from how intimacy with God was lost at the very dawn of human history. Not that we want to lose it, of course, but so that we might learn to avoid the mistakes our first parents made.

So far, we've learned from Eve, Adam and then switched our attention to Cain, their eldest son. We complete our study by taking another look at Cain. This time we'll focus on his refusal to allow himself to be turned aside from what would turn out to be a murderous course of action. Let's remind ourselves what led up to Cain's murder of his brother, and God's judgement upon him. We're reading from Genesis chapter 4:

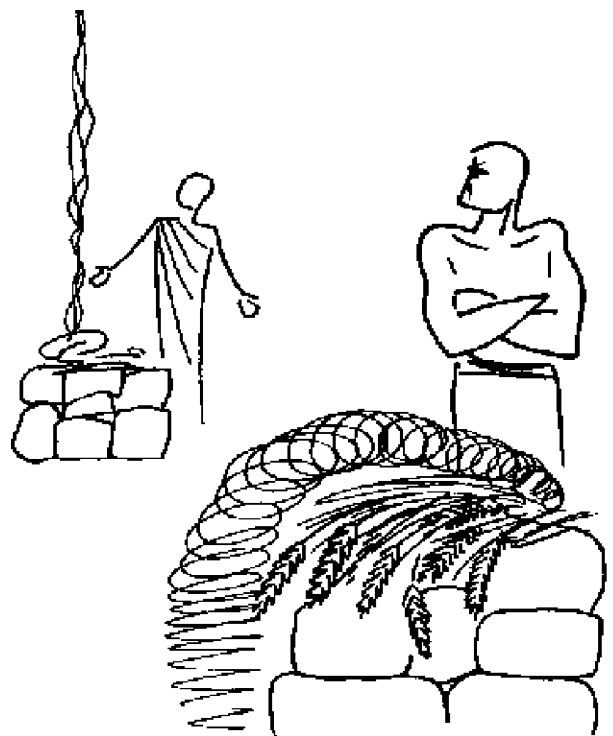
So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth."



Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to bear! Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from Your face I will be hidden." (Genesis 4:3-14)

This tragic story didn't need to end in the way it did. If only Cain had responded to God's counselling – but Cain refused to respond positively and the whole thing escalated from there. Remember, God had reasoned with Cain:

"Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

But Cain refused to listen to this reproof, and instead silenced his righteous brother. Which brings us to another thing really – for surely his brother's righteousness had always been a reproof to Cain and his ways.

This is showing us that another way of losing intimacy with God in our lives is just to go on ignoring the reproofs he brings against us in his Word, the Bible. By resisting the reproofs God sets before us, we deny ourselves the opportunity for intimacy with himself which God intends for us.

The Bible itself declares that God's Word is a profitable source of reproof to us (2 Timothy 3:16). Here are the Apostle Paul's words to Timothy in

one of the last letters Paul wrote. He says to Timothy:

... continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (1 Timothy 3:14-17)

'All Scripture is ... profitable ... for reproof'. The Psalmist who wrote Psalm 119 had discovered this long before. Let's have a closer look at the eighth stanza of that psalm, the one belonging to the Hebrew character 'heth'. Apparently, a possible meaning of 'heth' is a 'fence' or 'surround'. And the shape of the Hebrew character does look rather like a three-sided enclosure. Anyway, if we're to assume that's the meaning of the name 'heth' at the head of this stanza; we might ask: "What's the relationship between a fence and the theme of the verses which follow - if any?"

Let's read those 8 verses in this psalm (there are 8 verses for every one of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet):

You are my portion, O LORD; I have said that I would keep Your

words.

I entreated Your favor with my whole heart; be merciful to me according to Your word.

I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies.

I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments.

The cords of the wicked have bound me, but I have not forgotten Your law.

At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments.

I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts.

The earth, O LORD, is full of Your mercy; teach me Your statutes.
(v.57-64 NKJ)

Maybe we could say that in this stanza, with the title 'heth' or 'fence', the psalmist is thinking about the business of 'getting fenced in with God.' It's clear the psalmist has taken time out here thinking over God's Word and relating it to his ways and any need for lifestyle adjustments. In other words, he's taking its reproofs to heart.

But let's go back to the first part of verse 58:

I entreated Your favor with my whole heart.

That can be translated in different ways. Listen to how the same verse reads in the New International Version of the Bible:

I have sought your face with all my

heart.

Let's think a bit further about this matter of 'entreating God' or 'seeking God's face' as we have it in this verse. We find that one of the basic ideas in the word used here for entreaty is the thought of 'to stroke'. That has led some people to say that what this writer was doing as he meditated here upon God's Word was like 'stroking the face of God'! In terms of the word itself, it may be stretching the laws of grammar too far, if we try to claim that's what the word really means here. But, as an illustration of the kind of intimacy with God which is very definitely the *context* of these verses (in which the psalmist gets fenced in with God) the picture it conjures up may indeed be of some help. For imagine having a sense of closeness to the Almighty like that! So close it's as if you could reach out and touch him. That's real intimacy. Not inappropriate familiarity, but the reverent approach of one of his children.

Down throughout Bible history there have been men and women who have apparently enjoyed such a special closeness with God. For example, God himself describes his encounters with Moses in the Bible book of Numbers, chapter 12 verses 6-8:

Then [God] said, "Hear now My words: if there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My

servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face.

Face to face. That's intimacy. Moses was the prophet 'whom the LORD knew face to face' (Deuteronomy 34:10).

If we want intimacy with God, we'll have to beware of any diminished appetite for what was the psalmist's joy – the Word of God. We'll have to allow the Bible to search us, to reprove us for our failings and to correct us so that we can get back to walking in step with our God. If, like Cain, we ignore the Bible's warnings, as God speaks to us today through his Word, then we, too, will be outward bound from God.

So, as we draw this study to a close, let's remind ourselves how we were

focusing first of all on Eve's experience in the Garden – how she began to doubt the kind intentions behind God's will for her; and how she came to believe she needed more than God and his provision to satisfy, sustain and secure her life. Then we turned our attention to Adam and saw how it would seem that he valued his relationship with Eve more than his relationship with God. Finally, we turned the spotlight on Adam and Eve's first son, Cain – and saw how he wanted to draw near to God as best suited him, and what's more, refused to respond positively to God's reproofs.

By contrast, we've learned that if we want to enjoy intimacy with God, we'll need to avoid those five things.

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