GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK
The story of the Bible isn’t primarily about the desire of people to be with God: it’s the desire of God to be with people.

John Ortberg
QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. It is one thing for us to talk about how much we want to experience God, but how much do you think God wants to be with us? In what ways do you know God desires a close relationship with you?

2. The Bible says that God reveals himself to us. In what ways can we see, hear, feel, or otherwise recognize God’s presence? When does God seem most real to you? What seemingly ordinary things in life have made you aware of his presence?

3. Is it possible for God to be with us here on earth, every day, at every moment — and for us not to be aware of it? Explain your answer.
VIDEO OBSERVATIONS

How close is God?

God looks at us through the eyes of a father

Jacob’s story — God shows up where you least expect him

The message of the “bear” story: God is always with us

May the Lord’s face shine upon you
VIDEO DISCUSSION

1. How did you relate to the scene of John Ortberg speaking from the top of the tower as being a visual image of the way many of us view God? What other visual images or word pictures would you use to describe the ways in which we view God?

2. When we think of God as being far away, how does that view impact our relationship with him?

3. What did you think or feel when John Ortberg talked about God looking at each of us with the loving eyes of a father, like the father with his son’s photograph on his screensaver?

4. What if God is really all around us — and we don’t realize it? What might we be missing if God, like the adult bear snarling at the mountain lion, really is closer than we think?
5. Michelangelo’s fresco of Adam and God in the Sistine Chapel represents the perspective that the Bible is about God’s desire to be with people rather than our desire to be with God. In what ways does this perspective change your perception of your relationship with God? What practical difference might this new perspective make in your life?
GROUP EXPLORATION

1. The story of the Bible is the story of God’s desire to be with people. He extends himself, reaching out to us today just as he has since the day he created Adam. Let’s explore together God’s desire to be with us and the impact it can have on our lives.
   
a. What does the psalmist David say about God’s knowledge of us and his actions toward us? (See Psalm 139:1 – 10.) What does this reveal about God’s desire for relationship with us?
   
b. Psalm 89 gives us a picture of the kind of relationship God can have with his people and his people can have with him. Read verses 15 – 17 and 19 – 28 and note some of the qualities of a close relationship with God. Part of this psalm refers specifically to David, who had a remarkable relationship with God, but use the images in this psalm to discuss what a close relationship with God might look like in our lives today.

2. In the video, John Ortberg shared stories that illustrate the heart, character, and commitment of a loving father — the father who kept his son’s photograph on his screensaver, the story about the bear cub. In what ways do the following Scripture passages show us that God is our ever-present, loving Father?
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<th>SCRIPTURE PASSAGE</th>
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3. God’s most frequent promise in Scripture is “I will be with you.” Let’s consider several situations in which God gave that promise and discuss how God’s promise to be with us applies to us in similar situations.

a. Note the survival challenge Isaac faced, what God told him to do, and what God promised (Genesis 26:1 – 6). What kinds of external circumstances can cause us to be afraid? What changes when we realize that God is with us in these situations?

b. Twice in Joshua 1:1 – 9 God tells Joshua he will be with him! What monumental task did Joshua face? What were God’s instructions and promises related to that task? What impact can God’s presence have on our feelings of insecurity when he gives us a seemingly overwhelming assignment?

c. What threatening situation did the apostle Paul face in Acts 18:5 – 11? What did God tell Paul to do, and what did God promise? When we face painful challenges or uncertainty, what reassurance do we need from God to press on? How might we view sharing our faith differently if we know God stands with us?
4. No matter how often we read that God will be with us, there are
times when we may not be able to see him, times when we are
convinced that he is nowhere to be found.

   a. Read 2 Kings 6:8 – 18 to see how the prophet Elisha’s servant
      found out that God is indeed closer than we think! Talk about
      how this experience can help open our eyes to God’s presence
      in our lives — even in the most unlikely circumstances.

   b. If you have time, consider two other instances in Scripture
      when God was far closer than his people realized: Gideon in
      the winepress (Judges 6:1 – 16) and the two disciples on the
      “show up” in your life in unexpected ways.

5. Jesus came to earth as “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.”
   His life gives us an incomparable example of a life lived in the pre-
   sence of God. The following verses reveal how the presence of God
   impacted the daily life of Jesus — his thoughts, actions, and atti-
   tudes. Read each passage and discuss how our daily lives would be
different if we also sought to live in the presence of God.

   a. Everything Jesus did was a result of God’s power. (See John 13:3.)
b. Jesus was committed to doing God’s work on earth. (See John 5:17.)

c. Jesus said what the Father told him to say. (See John 12:49 – 50.)

6. Read Matthew 28:18 – 20, often called the Great Commission. What were Jesus’ instructions and his promise to his disciples? What difference did that promise make in their lives? What difference should it make in our lives today?
PERSONAL JOURNEY: TO DO NOW

1. The story of the Bible is the story of God’s desire to be with people. He is determined that each of us be his friend, his companion, and his dwelling place. He is stretching out to reach us and fill our lives with his presence. All it takes is the barest effort — the lifting of a finger, the whisper of a prayer — for us to reach him.

   a. Michelangelo’s portrayal of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel illustrates God’s determination to reach out so that every human being can experience life in his presence. He longs for us to respond to him and close the tiny gap that remains between us. When in your life have you become aware of the gap between yourself and God? What was your response to God, and what was the result? What may be keeping you from “lifting a finger” in response to God?

   b. Think about times in life when you have felt God’s presence with you, then consider times when his presence seemed elusive. How did your thoughts and feelings toward God differ during those contrasting circumstances? In what ways might you have thought or felt differently if you had a clearer picture of God’s desire to reach out to you (as in Michelangelo’s portrayal of God reaching out to Adam)?
2. God is closer than we think — amazingly close. The most frequent promise in the Bible is, “I will be with you.” That promise, that God is always present, always watching, and always protecting makes all the difference. It gives us the courage to face life in a rocky, stormy world.

   a. Life hinges on the promise of God’s presence with us — courage, guidance, and hope all reside with him. As you interacted with Scripture and other group members during the Group Exploration time, which particular aspect(s) of God’s presence made the greatest impact on you? Why?

   b. How might your life be different — your view of yourself, your thoughts, your relationships, your actions, your hopes, your fears — if you truly believe that God is closer than you think, if you live life knowing that God has you on his screensaver and is watching your every move with pride and joy?
3. Spiritual growth is the process of learning to increase our capacity to experience God’s presence. It is learning to partner together with God during the ordinary moments of our ordinary lives. There are guiding principles that will help us practice God’s presence in our daily lives.

a. We long for the reality that Moses prayed for: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you” (Numbers 6:24 – 25). How might your life be different if you actually lived in the reality that God’s face is turned toward you?

b. What are your expectations concerning this study? What would you like to experience, learn, or feel in relationship to God’s presence in your life? Prayerfully consider what may be limiting your ability to see him and ask him to open your eyes to his presence in your everyday life.
PERSONAL JOURNEY:
TO DO ON YOUR OWN

It is possible for each of us to learn how to recognize and experience God’s presence — right now, every moment, wherever we are. There’s no better time than right now to begin living with an awareness of God’s presence in your life. Set aside time during the next few days to read each of the following guiding principles for practicing God’s presence every day. Between now and the next session, think about them, pray about them, and ask God to open your heart and mind to his presence.

• God is always present and active in my life, whether or not I see him.
• Coming to recognize and experience God’s presence is learned behavior; I can cultivate it.
• My task is to meet God in this moment.
• I am always tempted to live “outside” this moment. When I do that, I lose my sense of God’s presence.
• Sometimes God seems far away for reasons I do not understand. Those moments, too, are opportunities to learn.
• Whenever I fail, I can always start again right away.
• No one knows the full extent to which a human being can experience God’s presence.
• My desire for God ebbs and flows, but his desire for me is constant.
• Every thought carries a “spiritual charge” that moves me a little closer to or a little farther from God.
• Every aspect of my life — work, relationships, hobbies, errands — is of immense and genuine interest to God.
• My path to experiencing God’s presence will not look quite like anyone else’s.
• Straining and trying too hard do not help.