

Dan: It's wonderful to be with everyone! Today, I have the privilege of being joined on stage by Laura Dingman. Many of you know Laura, as she has been on staff with us for 16 years. Just two months ago our church had the privilege of ordaining her. At The Creek, we ordain people for three different purposes: to set people apart to serve as missionaries and leaders of Christian non-profits, to set people apart to serve as elders or senior pastors, where they are preaching and teaching on a regular a basis and shaping the direction of a church, and to set people apart to serve on a church staff, to use their passions and spiritual gifts to build up a body. We ordained Laura in that third category. She is more than qualified, and it was a wonderful experience for our congregation. Laura serves as the minister over our Spiritual Direction team, and her passion is to help the people of our church know how to hear from God and have a deeper relationship with Him. She has some really incredible things to share with us today as we talk about the theme that God is near.

Laura: Thank you, Dan. The process of ordination was such a sweet experience for our entire family. The highlights for me were being able to lead a worship song with my daughter, Abigail, and to have my husband, Matt, pray over me. This has been our church home for 21 years, so having the blessing of our leadership over the ministry I get to do has been such a gift. Thank you, also, for the invitation to teach today. This is a topic I'm passionate about and I'm excited to share what God's been stirring in me.

Dan: Over the last few weeks we have been filling in the blank to the statement **God is _____** in many ways. God is loving, holy, good, beautiful, faithful, and able. Today we turn our attention to the promise that **God is near**. It's an important time to talk about the nearness of God because we have spent the last 18 months being more distant from one another than at any time in recent history. We are all too familiar with the terms "social distancing," "self-isolation," and "quarantine." And we've seen the detrimental impact that it's had on us. Prescriptions for anxiety and depression are at an all-time high. Workplace culture is near an all-time low. People feel lonelier than ever. I think about the impact it has had on my son. He's only 2 ½ years old but over half his life has been spend in quarantine. He still doesn't really know how to interact in social environments because he hasn't been socialized like normal. I've talked to a lot of other parents of young kids who feel the same way.

Sometimes, even when we are near people physically, they still seem disengaged. How many times have you walked into a room and seen four or five people sitting there, no talking, no interacting, because everyone is doing what? Staring at their phones!

So often, when we think about God, we think of Him in either of those two categories. Maybe He's distant from us, off somewhere else in the galaxy doing whatever it is that God does. Or maybe He's here, because after all, God is omnipresent, so He is everywhere, but He's here in a disengaged way, a distracted way. He's present, but like a friend staring at their phone, not really attentive—you know, because God has so many other important things to be doing, why would He be paying attention at this moment to me? But nothing could be further from the reality we see in Scripture.

Laura: God has longed to be near us since the very beginning. He walked through the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. He was near to them. Even when sin didn't allow His people the same access to God, He continued to find ways to be with them. When the Israelites left Egypt and traveled through the desert, He was *with* them. God's presence led them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When they carried the ark of the covenant, which held the presence of God, He desired to be *with* them. When the temple was built, it housed the presence of God in the Holy of Holies because God longed to be near His people. And even that wasn't enough! So God put on flesh and came and dwelt among us. Jesus

came down so He could be near, so we could see the image of the invisible God in the flesh. As Jesus was crucified on the cross, at His death, the veil in the Holy of Holies was torn so we would have direct access to God through Christ. Now we can boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence. When the time came for Jesus to leave the earth after His resurrection, He promised He wouldn't leave us as orphans, so He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us—so we could know God is near.

Dan: The nearness of God is recognized and celebrated all throughout Scripture:

- “The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5).
- “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:18).
- “The Lord is near to all who call on him” (Psalm 145:18).
- At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel we read, “They will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23).
- At the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). The first book of the New Testament begins and ends with a promise that God is near, that He is with us!
- “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them’” (Revelation 21:3). The picture of eternity in Revelation is all about God being near to us.

Laura: We can see the promise God gives to be near to us repeatedly in His Word. It is a fact that He is near. He is *with* us. As we dig into our main text today, we want to pause for a moment and pray, asking God to lead us:

Loving Father, just as Jesus longed for us to know You, we long for that, too. It's so hard sometimes to fully understand Your presence with us—to feel Your nearness. For all of us today, speak through Your word. Help us to listen to Your voice. For those of us who are struggling to feel You close today, show us something new. For those of us who have simply forgotten You are close and interested in our everyday lives, remind us again. Holy Spirit, speak, for Your servants are listening. Amen.

There’s a Psalm David wrote that illustrates the nearness of God in a clear and beautiful way. Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 139 and let’s look at verses 1-6 together.

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
 you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
 you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue,
 you, Lord, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before,
 and you lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
 too lofty for me to attain.

“*You have searched me and know me.*” The Hebrew word for “searched” here implies an intimate exploration, an investigation and thorough examination which leads to the Hebrew understanding of the word “know.” This means it’s intentional and complete—not a quick glance, but a studious deep dive.

There are four verbs that reflect God’s attentiveness: “to know” (*yada*); “to perceive” (*bin*); “to discern” (*zarah*); and “to be familiar with” (*sakan*). It’s not important that we know all these words specifically, but that we know these four words point to a deeper knowledge than simple facts or intellectual knowledge. Think of the different ways you know people in relationship. There are those who you follow on social media and you know where they went on vacation because they posted some really great photos, or you know what their favorite restaurant is because they shared a post when they last went. Then there is the way you know your friends who you’ve shared more of your life with. You’ve had deeper conversations and shared more of yourselves with each other. Then there is the way you know your children if you’re a parent. While you’ve not been present for every moment of their lives, you know their mannerisms and what certain cries and looks mean. Then there is the way you know your spouse if you’re married. You’ve shared all of yourself with this person and, especially if you’ve been married for a long time, you’ve learned to anticipate their thoughts and needs. Imagine that type of intimacy—where you’ve been an investigative student of another in loving relationship for a long time—and multiply it beyond what you can imagine. That’s the way God searches us and knows us. He is attentive to us. He is aware of everything we are, all that we’ve done, and all that we long for.

Look again at the next few verses:

You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

Remember the Psalms are poetry, so while it is true God knows literally when we stand up and sit down, what David is conveying here is God’s all-encompassing knowledge of every single moment of our lives. There is nothing we do that He doesn’t know about, nowhere we go that He’s not aware, no thought we have that can be kept from Him. In fact, *“Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.”* This is how well God knows us—entirely. Maybe a better way to think about it is there is nothing God doesn’t know!

David then writes, *“You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.”* This is an interesting phrase that can have a dual meaning. The first phrase “hem me in” can either mean “to bind up in a secure way” or “to lay siege to a city,” and the second phrase “lay your hand upon me” can mean “to lay a hand of protection over” or it can signal judgment. David knew of God’s deep love; he would have welcomed God and whatever protection or discipline God wanted to give.

It’s important to think about all these words in the context of relationship. Think of it this way: Dan, if you wake up in the middle of the night with a person lurking in your bedroom, your response will be entirely based on your relationship with that person. If it’s Keren, you’re not going to mind. You’ll probably even feel comforted. If it’s not someone you know, you’re going to have a completely different response!

This is how David can say, *“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain!”*

Dan: It really is an incredible reality to know that God is near! Think about that. David said, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.” The God who formed the mountains and the Milky Way sees me! The God who knows every path that every bird that has ever lived has ever flown, the God who knows the route that every fish that has ever lived has ever swum—that God knows you. That knowledge is so wonderful! And remember—David wrote this later in his life. Most scholars believe he wrote this after he had an affair with a married woman and orchestrated her husband’s murder. God came down hard on

David for his selfishness, his arrogance, and his sin. It wasn't, "God, because of my perfection and moral excellence, You are with me." It was, "God, despite my awful sinfulness and moral abominations, You are with me." There is nowhere you can go, nothing you can do to escape His presence.

Let's keep reading in Psalm 139:7-12.

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

This section of the Psalm begins by saying there is nowhere we can possibly go to escape God's presence. No matter how far I go up or how far I go down, God is there. In modern day terms it would be like someone says, "I tried to get above You, so I climbed to the top of Mount Everest, 29,032 feet above sea level—but at the top of the world, You were there. I tried to tunnel beneath You, so I rented the most sophisticated marine equipment ever invented and descended to the bottom of the Marianas Trench, 36,069 feet beneath sea level, but You were there, too. So I went to the city and You were there, then I went to the countryside and You were there. I went to the beach and found You, to the rainforest and found You, to the Serengeti and to Death Valley and to the most remote island in the middle of the Pacific, and You were there." Even an astronaut would say, "I went to the moon and found You there; I went to Mars and found You there!" No matter where we go, God is always near! And it's not just peaks and valleys on a map; it's the peaks and valleys of life. He's with you on your best day, and He's with you on your worst day. When you are chasing after Him with all your heart, He's right there. When you've been running away from Him with all your heart, He's right there.

And He's not there the way a referee is there during a basketball game, watching over the players, always ready to blow a whistle, call a foul, or give someone a technical. He's not there the way an overbearing boss is there, watching over us, micromanaging every project in a hyper critical way. It's much more like God is watching us the way I watch my son on the playground. I'm always watching, delighting in, and enjoying being with my son as he climbs and explores, but I'm also making sure he's safe, helping him to play well with others. God is always near. And He's near with love. There is nothing we can do to shake His presence or His love. Psalm 139:12 says, "Even the darkness will not be dark to you." How many of you have done cave diving or spelunking at some point in your life and have been in total cave darkness? It's an eerie feeling, isn't it? Pitch black. Can't see a thing, not even a hand an inch in front of your face, so dark you can feel it. Sometimes there are days of our lives, or seasons of our lives that spiritually feel that dark. Psalm 139 says, as dark as you think it is, even though you can't see a thing, to God, the night shines like the day. He is always with us, He is with us with love, and His presence illuminates the darkest corners of our lives!

A lot of people, when they think about God, focus on his transcendence, meaning He is higher, above and beyond, surpassing material limitations. And the God of the Bible is no less than that! But He is also more than that. The Bible highlights His imminence, which means in addition to being transcendent He is also

present, always near, engaged in the material world, personal. In all the other religions of the world, there is no other god like the God of the Bible. And that's the sort of God we all want and need.

Laura: Dan, I think this is one of the most difficult things for us to really learn to live out in our everyday, ordinary lives. It's easier to feel a person's actual presence when they are right in front of you. We live on 14 acres and I'm keenly aware of when my husband, Matt, is present and when he's not. When he is home, even if I can't see him, I feel safe. Secure. A bit more at ease. But he's also able to stand right in front of me. It's harder with God because we can't see Him in the same way.

I wonder what it would be like to really be keenly aware of God's presence with us all the time. He's told us He is there—promised us even. We've seen the evidence of it in Scripture even this morning. There are things we can do to cultivate a greater awareness of God's presence with us. After all, if we don't make space even to be with God, how will we know He is near? But even if we spend time with God in His word, it can still be difficult. A.W. Tozer explains a bit of why this is so hard for us.

We habitually stand in our now and look back by faith to see the past filled with God. We look forward and see Him inhabiting our future; but our now is uninhabited except for ourselves. Thus we are guilty of a kind of temporary atheism which leaves us alone in the universe while, for the time, God is not. We talk of Him much and loudly, but we secretly think of Him as being absent, and we think of ourselves as inhabiting a parenthetic interval between the God who was and the God who will be.

Maybe you can easily look back and see where God has been present and you can even look ahead with hope, trusting that He will be there, but right now, it's hard to even know that He's present. That He's with you. That He's near. Tozer goes on to tell us what this view produces in us:

We are lonely with an ancient and cosmic loneliness. We are each like a little child lost in a crowded market, who has strayed but a few feet from its mother, yet because she cannot be seen the child is inconsolable. So we try by every method devised by religion to relieve our fears and heal our hidden sadness; but with all our efforts we remain unhappy still, with the settled despair of men alone in a vast and deserted universe. But for all our fears we are not alone. Our trouble is that we think of ourselves as being alone."

— from *God's Pursuit of Man: Tozer's Profound Prequel to The Pursuit of God*

Do this resonate with you? It does with me. I can look back on certain times in my life now and see that God was so very present, but at the time I sure didn't feel it. There were times when I felt distant from God because of the choices I had made to sin and to distance myself from Him. And then there were other times when God just felt distant. In fact, it felt like He was so very far away. Unaware of my situation. Not even close to being with me in what I was facing.

Almost seventeen years ago, my husband and I went through an entire season where everything felt so dark and God's presence was hard to find. I had just quit my job as a high school music teacher to come work here at the church. About a month after I started in my role on the worship staff, we had an "unexplained" infertility diagnosis. Those are the best, right? "We don't know why," which also means, "We don't know how to fix it." We were devastated, but we leaned into God to see what He might want us to do in response. After some prayer, we decided we'd love to adopt, something that had been on both our hearts for a while anyway.

Very quickly, God seemed to be answering our prayers. We were approached by a woman in our church who was passionate about adoption. She had met a Russian woman who had a connection at a hospital in

Russia where there were multiple babies who needed to be adopted. We couldn't believe this was happening so fast! We thought we would have to wait for so long and God seemed to be moving quickly.

So we, along with five other couples, rushed through our home studies. We framed photos we were given of these sweet babies. We bought a crib, bottles, blankets, and some baby clothes because the babies were coming any time and we wanted to be ready to welcome this baby girl into our home.

We waited. And waited. And waited. The plane bringing them to the States was delayed in Hurricane Katrina clean up. They were rerouted through Canada and there were issues with customs. So we waited some more.

And then early one morning there was a knock on our front door. Matt ran downstairs to see who it was. There stood two FBI agents—an investigative agent and a victim's specialist. For over an hour we sat at our kitchen table listening to them tell us how they had been investigating this Russian woman. Matt kept asking about our money and where it was. I kept asking about the babies and if they were safe. The response we kept hearing over and over was, "At this time there is no evidence there are any babies."

And there weren't. There never were any babies. The photo on our dresser that we prayed over every night was this woman's grown daughter when she was an infant. Everything she told us had been a lie. All of it was a fraud. She had taken our money and gone on vacation with her family to Barbados while we waited with empty arms.

During that season, my grief, my anger toward this woman, and my broken dreams clouded my ability to see and feel the presence of God with me. What I was feeling made it impossible to feel Him with me. In the middle, sometimes it's impossible to see God's presence. But as I look back, it is absolutely unmistakable. He was there when we prayed every night over that baby, knowing what was coming, preparing us for it in ways only He can. He was sitting at the kitchen table when we both fell apart. He rode in the car when I had to go back to work in the weeks that followed and cried all the way there. He was there when we returned the crib and cleared out the nursery. And He was grieving too. He was holding us together when we were falling apart. He was working amid the mess.

I came to truly understand Psalm 34:18, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and he saves those who are crushed in spirit." Maybe, like we heard from Michael DeFazio last week, you have trouble believing God is able to do something about your circumstance, because you've asked and He hasn't done what you wanted. Maybe you've asked Him to show you that He is with you and all you hear back is silence.

The gift He gives us isn't always a shiny outcome, but it is His presence in the midst of the chaos. In the middle of everything falling apart, the gift He gives is Himself. His presence. He is *with* us when everything falls apart.

Psalm 46 says it like this:

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

What would change about our lives if we began operating like God is near? That He is *with* us in the present moment regardless of what the present moment looks like? That He's not judging us, but loving us, guiding us, covering us, protecting us, teaching us? Even in the chaos. Even amid everything falling apart. When mountains quake and fall into the sea. When waters roar and foam and we feel like we're drowning. Even when we can't be still. Even when we can't feel Him. The Lord Almighty *is* with us, the God of Jacob *is* our fortress.

Dan: Thank you for sharing that part of your story with us. The reality and the promise that God is near is so practical, so relevant—especially in moments of great need. One of my favorite stories in the Bible of someone who learned that God was always near, that God was loving, aware of her, and attentive to her, is the story of Hagar. Hagar was the maidservant of Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah couldn't conceive, she told her husband to sleep with her servant, so that an heir could be produced that way. They carried out the plan, and the maidservant conceived, but then Sarah grew jealous. She hated and mistreated a servant who was only doing what she was commanded to do. She drove Hagar away from their home. And while Hagar was running away, in the middle of the wilderness, an angel from the Lord appeared to her, and told her that God was not unaware of her situation and hardship. He knew everything that had happened and was going to pour out His blessing on her and the son she was pregnant with. After Hagar met with the angel, "She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me'" (Genesis 16:13). (In Hebrew the name is El Roi, "the God who sees.") I think God wants to have that same sort of interaction with every one of us today. Maybe you are on a mountain top right now and everything is wonderful in your life—God wants to meet you there and let you know that He sees you and rejoices with you. Maybe, like Hagar, you are in the deepest valley you have ever been in your entire life—God wants you to know that He sees you, too. You are not alone. He is with you. He is the God who sees. And He wants to open your eyes so that you can see Him!

Laura: We're going to end today with some space for you to grow in your awareness of God's presence in your own life. Maybe today you're in the middle of some chaos of your own and need to know God sees you. Maybe your corner of the world feels overwhelming, and you need to be reminded the Lord Almighty is with you. Maybe everything is ok, but there have been times you in your history where it has seemed God wasn't there. Ask Him to show you how He carried you in those times.

So, if you would, close your eyes and get comfortable. Breathe in his presence. Breathe out any distractions. Invite the Holy Spirit to speak through the words of this Psalm 46.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
Come and see what the Lord has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
The Lord Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.