

## Make God Your Best Friend

God's relationship with you has many aspects. He is Creator, Maker, Lord, Master, Father, Judge, and Savior. Our perceptions of God and Who He is can make it difficult to view Him accurately. It may not be that difficult to see Him as the Creator, which He is, or even as Sovereign Lord and King, which He is, but when it comes to looking at God as a friend, and Someone Who desires and longs to be our friend, it becomes much more difficult to conceive. "How could such an awesome Being care about me enough to be my friend?" we may ask ourselves. "I know He loves me, but the Lord of the universe being my friend? I can't imagine that!" But the fact of the matter is that God does want to be your friend. Scripture bears this out.

David wrote in Psalm 34:17-18 [RSV], **17. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. 18. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.** What David wrote here depicts someone who is a friend. When we are crushed in spirit, and when we are facing troubles, what we need and long for is friendship, which is exactly what David described. And in this particular case, that friend is the Lord.

In Eden, Adam and Eve had an ideal relationship with God. Theirs was not a relationship built upon rituals, ceremonies, or even religion. Theirs was a relationship unhindered by guilt and fear, one in which they walked and talked and communed with God openly. It was not until sin entered the world that they feared God, and tried to hide themselves from His presence. **8. And 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. 9. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10. And he said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."** (Genesis 3:8-10 [RSV])

After the fall, that ideal relationship with God was lost. Enoch, centuries later, was a great man of faith who was able to live so righteously that he was said to have walked with God for 300 years. He did not see death, because the Lord took him. Fear of God, and not friendship, however, was more common in the Old Testament.

Jesus taught how intimate and kind is the relationship God seeks with each of us. He taught us to seek God in the privacy of our rooms. **6. "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father Who is in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you. 7. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."** (Matthew 6:6-8 [RSV])

There are a few interesting verses found towards the end of the account of the crucifixion of Jesus in the *Gospel of Matthew* that I believe have a bearing on our current discussion. Jesus changed things when He paid for our sins. He brought God closer to us.

**51. And behold, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the Earth shook, and the rocks were split; 52. the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, 53. and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.** (Matthew 27:51-53 [RSV])

I have always thought and heard that the tearing of the curtain in two was a sign of God's anger over His Son being crucified. But I am not so sure that is correct. I suppose the wrath of God may have played a part in it, but the more I consider it, the less I am inclined to believe this. First of all, it was His will that Jesus be crucified for the sins of the world. So why should He be angry that His will was being done?

Peter declared in his Gospel message said on the Day of Pentecost at the birth of the church in Acts 2:22-23 [RSV], **22. "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know – 23. this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."**

Paul also demonstrated in the *Epistle to the Ephesians* how it was the will of the Father before the world was even created to sacrifice His Son because He loved us so much. **3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4. even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. 5. He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, 6. to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8. which He lavished upon us. 9. For He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ 10. as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in Heaven and things on Earth. 11. In Him, according to the purpose of Him Who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will, 12. we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of His glory.** (Ephesians 1:3-12 [RSV])

We also can see from Isaiah that it was the will of God to bruise His Son in order for Him to be an offering for sin. **"Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise Him;**

***He has put Him to grief; when He makes Himself an offering for sin, He shall see His offspring, He shall prolong His days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand;***” (Isaiah 53:10 [RSV]). So when I see all of these passages that show beyond any doubt or question that it was God’s will to have Jesus undergo the horrible death and agony of the cross, I just can no longer believe that it was because of His wrath that the veil of the Temple was rent in two. No, I believe it was showing that all things had been completed in Christ, and the wall of separation between God and man had been removed by the hand of God Himself, a visible demonstration that Jesus’ work, as He had just said, was finished (John 19:30).

Just what was this veil, this curtain of the Temple, and what was its purpose? Let us take a few moments now to consider these questions.

During the lifetime of Jesus, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious life. The Temple was the place where animal sacrifices were carried out and worship, according to the Law of Moses, was followed faithfully.

***1. Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. 2. For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the Bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. 3. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, 4. having the golden altar of incense and the Ark of the Covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; 5. above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. 6. These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; 7. but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. 8. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing 9. (which is symbolic for the present age).*** (Hebrews 9:1-9 [RSV])

The above verses tell us that in the Temple a veil separated the Holy of Holies – the earthly dwelling place of God’s presence – from the rest of the Temple where men dwelt. This signified that man was separated from God by sin: ***1. Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; 2. but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you so that He does not hear.*** (Isaiah 59:1-2 [RSV])

Only the high priest was permitted to pass beyond this veil once each year (Exodus 30:10; Hebrews 9:7) to enter into God’s presence for all of Israel and make atonement for their sins (Leviticus 16).

The size and thickness of the veil makes the events occurring at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross so much more momentous. **50. And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up His Spirit. 51. And behold, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom;** (Matthew 27:50-51a [RSV]).

So, what do we make of this? What significance does this torn veil have for us today? Above all, the tearing of the veil at the moment of Jesus' death dramatically symbolized that His sacrifice, the shedding of His own blood, was a sufficient atonement for sins. It signified that now the way into the Holy of Holies was open for **all** people, for **all** time, to both Jew and Gentile.

When Jesus died, the veil was torn, and God moved out of that place never again to dwell in a Temple made with hands (Acts 17:24). God was through with that Temple and its religious system, and the Temple and Jerusalem were left "desolate" (destroyed by the Romans) in AD 70, just as Jesus prophesied in Luke 13:35. As long as the Temple stood, it signified the continuation of the Old Covenant. Hebrews 9:8-9 refers to the age that was passing away as the new covenant was being established: **"In speaking of a new covenant He treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away"** (Hebrews 8:13 [RSV]).

In a sense, the veil was symbolic of Christ Himself as the only way to the Father (John 14:6). This is indicated by the fact that the high priest had to enter the Holy of Holies through the veil. Now with the new covenant Christ is our superior High Priest, and as believers in His finished work, we partake of His better priesthood. We can now enter the Holy of Holies through Him without fear and full of confidence. The writer of Hebrews said it so very eloquently in Hebrews 10:19-22 [RSV]. **19. Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20. by the new and living way which He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, 21. and since we have a Great Priest over the house of God, 22. let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.** Here we see the image of Jesus' flesh being torn for us just as He was tearing the veil for us.

The veil or curtain in the Temple was a constant reminder that sin renders humanity unfit for the presence of God. The fact that the sin offering was offered annually and countless other sacrifices repeated daily showed graphically that sin could not truly be atoned for or erased by mere animal sacrifices. Jesus Christ, through His death, has removed the barriers between God and man, and now we may approach Him with confidence and boldness. **14. Since then we have a Great High Priest Who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15. For we have not a High Priest Who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one Who in**

***every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*** (Hebrews 4:14-16 [RSV])

The veil which separated God from man had been removed by the sacrifice Jesus made for our sins. Jesus, not a high priest, was now the Mediator between God and man. All who seek forgiveness of sins must confess Jesus as their Lord. He is the One that paid the price of sin for all mankind, and only through Him can we access the Father.

The veil reminds us that we are excluded because ***"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"*** (Romans 3:23 [RSV]). However, just as the Passover lamb was slain for the redemption of the children of Israel in Egypt, and the goat was slain so that its blood could obtain God's forgiveness for the Israelites on the Day of Atonement, so Jesus ***"Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree"*** (1 Peter 2:24). As Jesus was hanging there on the cross, God ***"laid on Him the iniquity (the wrongdoing) of us all"*** (Isaiah 53:6 [RSV]). The final pangs of death came as Jesus cried out, ***"My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?"*** (Matthew 27:46). Seconds later ***"He cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His Spirit"*** (Matthew 26:50). He cried, ***"It is finished!"*** (John 19:30), and then He died.

So here are some secrets for developing a deep friendship with God:

1) Know God by having constant conversation with Him through prayer. You will never grow close to God simply by attending church once a week. Friendship with God is built by sharing all of your life's experiences with God. Now a daily devotional time is important, but God wants to be more to you than an appointment in your schedule. God wants open-ended conversation throughout the day about whatever you are thinking or doing at the moment. In the book *Practicing the Presence of God* written in the 17th century a man by the name of Lawrence talks about how he turned menial tasks, like preparing meals, into acts of praise and communion with God. The key to friendship with God is not changing what you do as much as changing your attitude toward what you do. Whatever you do for yourself (eating, working, etc.) you begin to do it for God and praise Him for that opportunity. You become more aware of God in each step of your day's life. Lawrence said the reason "retreats" are so important (to get away to worship and fellowship) is that we have not learned to practice God's presence in our lives all the time and worshipping God through all the common tasks of the day. In the Garden of Eden, worship was a constant walk with God, and because God is with you all the time, no place is any closer to God than where you are right now!

2) Pray shorter, conversational prayers rather than long and complex prayers. Choose a brief sentence to be repeated during the day like, "You are with me" or "Your grace is enough," or "help me trust You more," or "You are my God!" By

praying these short phrases you will embed them into your heart with practice. Just as great musicians practice scales in order to play beautiful music with ease, so you must force yourself to think about God at many and different times of the day. You must train your mind to remember God more often so you can be His friend. If you seek God's presence just to make you feel good, then you have missed the point. We do not praise God to feel good but to do good.

3) By continual meditation on God's word, establish friendship with God. It is impossible to know God without knowing what He says. What God says is what God is like. You cannot love God unless you know Him and you cannot know Him without knowing His word! Now I realize that none of us can spend all the time studying the Bible, but you can recall verses and mull them over in your mind at just about any time at all. Meditation was never meant to be some mysterious ritual, it is simply supposed to be "focused thinking!" For instance, if you think about a problem you have and you worry about it, you are meditating. Just switch your attention from your problems to Bible verses. The more you meditate on God's word, the fewer problems you will see fit to worry about.

4) Lastly, remember that friends share secrets. God will share His secrets with you in the same sense, (secrets in His word, such as I believe He did with the meaning of the tearing of the veil with me, as well as His Spirit's influence over your mind and your thinking) as God shared His secrets with Daniel, Paul, Abraham, and His other friends down through time. Read the Bible, listen to a sermon, pray continually, think about God's desires and renew them over and over again in your mind. The more time you spend reviewing what God says, the more you will understand the secrets of this life that most people miss! ***"The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He makes known to them His covenant"*** (Psalm 25:14 [RSV]). So go ahead, dare to be a friend of God! You will be glad you did!

***"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind."*** (James 4:8 [RSV]) We can only draw nigh to God through Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ***"No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends"*** (John 15:15 [RSV]). And this is what God wants for us. God wants you to know Him intimately. He planned the universe, H orchestrated the Gospel plan of salvation, and He is even concerned with the details of our own individual lives, in order that we would be His friends (Acts 17:26-28 [RSV]). ***26. "And He made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the Earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, 27. that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find Him. Yet He is not far from each one of us, 28. for 'In Him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed His offspring.'"*** Knowing and loving God is our greatest privilege, and being known and loved by God is God's greatest pleasure.