

MIKE AND EMMA'S MONDAY MORNING

Sunday morning. As Mike sings he is filled with joy. His pastor has just preached on God's love to us in Christ. Mike has felt afresh that he is unworthy, but Christ is worthy. Now, as he lifts his voice in praise, his love for Christ feels strong. He has no doubt God is present in this moment. Besides, there are tears running down Emma's cheeks.

Monday morning. The day had started so well. Still buoyed by yesterday's experience at church, he'd sat down to a bacon sandwich. The kids were playing quietly in the front room. He took Emma a coffee to drink in bed and kissed her gently on the cheek. Outside the sun was shining and the birds were singing. Could life be any better?

Mike arrives at the station to find his train has been cancelled. Two train-loads of passengers are now crammed onto the next train and Mike is having to stand. He's given up any hope of reading his book. The guy pushed up against him has clearly not heard of deodorant. The next 40 minutes are not going to be fun.

Meanwhile Emma is wiping up milk from the kitchen floor. Sam and Jamie are arguing about socks. And little Poppy... Where's Poppy? Emma looks up to see the box of

cornflakes topple off the kitchen table. “How can a day go so wrong so quickly?” she thinks.

Ten minutes later Emma takes a bite of toast and opens her Bible. She reads a few verses and then she closes her eyes to pray. “Father, may Mike have a good day at work. Please bless...” Jamie bursts into the room. “Where’s my school sweater?” Sam’s not far behind. “Have you seen my homework?” And Poppy... Where’s Poppy?

Mike closes his eyes again and heads off in his imagination to a place far away from this crowded carriage. He’s just about to dive into the blue water of a tropical lagoon when someone spills tea down his shirt. He swears. Immediately he flushes. And not just because warm tea is spreading across his stomach. He’s embarrassed. “I’m so sorry. Really sorry. It’s the delay, the standing. I’m not normally so grumpy.” The young woman holding what remains of her tea is just as embarrassed. “No, no, it’s my fault,” she says as she squeezes past and disappears.

Back at home Emma is ushering the children out of the door. One, two, three. She thinks of Rosie. Four. Every day she thinks of Rosie, their fourth child, born with a malformed heart and dead at three months. Absent and yet always present. Two years on, Emma still feels the loss. It hurts. Here on the doorstep it hurts. “Time will heal,” people had said. She knows they’re trying to be positive. But she doesn’t want to “be positive”. Sometimes she just wants to weep.

Yesterday God had felt so present to Mike. But today... today is different. Today is over-crowded trains, sweaty passengers, a wet shirt and the all-too-present void left by little Rosie. Today God is... What is he? Not absent—Mike doesn’t doubt that God is everywhere. But God doesn’t exactly feel present either. Not in a way he can touch or see.

Emma’s standing in the playground, chatting to other mums while Poppy pulls on her shirt. “Have you heard

about Roxanne? You know, Jamal's mum? Well, I've heard..." Emma's not heard. She wants to. A bit of gossip to spice up her morning. A bit of scandal to make her feel superior. She moves in so she can hear better.

"No," she says to herself. "Don't go there. Bad idea." She turns round. Was it a bad idea? What harm would come of a little gossip? It would distract from the tedium of the day. But Emma thinks of God's word. She thinks of Christ's grace to her. She wants to show the same grace to others. "Sorry," she shouts over her shoulder, "I need to dash." Nobody notices. They're all huddled round the latest rumour.

The train is slowly coming to a halt. Mike ducks down to look out the window, hoping to see the station platform coming into view. But all he sees is a wall of graffiti. "As a result of signal failure we'll be subject to a 15-minute delay. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause." Mike lets out an audible groan. He's not the only one. The carriage comes alive with shared grumbles.

Mike closes his eyes. He tries to recall yesterday's sermon. What had his pastor said? Something about Christ being our righteousness. Nothing new. Mike had heard it many times before. But it was such a comfort to hear again yesterday. And it is a comfort to remember it again this morning.

Meanwhile, and a little late, Emma's walking up the path to Amanda's front door. They meet most weeks to read the Bible together and pray. Emma tries to remember what it was they looked at last week. Something in Philippians. Something about knowing Christ. Whatever it was, she remembers feeling excited about it at the time.

"Sorry about the mess," says Amanda. Emma smiles. It's always messy in Amanda's house. She moves a pile of laundry off the chair onto the table so she can sit down. Amanda hands her a rather strong cup of tea. Emma doesn't know how Amanda copes with the chaos.

Half an hour late, Mike is finally sitting at his desk. “How was church?” Bob had asked. Bob is Mike’s only Christian colleague. How was church? The truth is it seems a long time ago. Yesterday his pastor had spoken of a relationship with God. And on Sunday it had seemed like a real possibility. But that was Sunday and this is Monday. Today it feels so much more elusive. If only he had more time to pray, then maybe he could enjoy God. Maybe he could recreate that feeling he had enjoyed on Sunday morning. Or maybe he will just have to wait until next Sunday. Next Sunday? It is still only Monday morning.



I believe in more. More of God. More to come, to be sure, but also more now. We can know God more. *You* can know God more.

I've always enjoyed pictures and posters of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. But seeing the paintings themselves in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris blew my mind. Their colour and movement was extraordinary. I've always enjoyed recordings of *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. But when I heard it performed live in the Sheffield City Hall by the English Chamber Orchestra, I had to wipe the tears from my eyes. My heart was carried up on the soaring notes of the violin.

I was delighted to read recently that my football team, Sheffield United, had beaten our local rivals (a team whose name I forget). But when I was there, in the stadium, as they put goals past their opponents—that was different. Grown men hugged each other in delight. I love watching TV shows about the British countryside. But when I set off on a walk, I literally skip with joy and giggle to myself. That's not an exaggeration!

In the same way, I've always enjoyed reading about God. But to experience God himself blows my mind, brings tears to my eyes or makes me skip. And sometimes all three.

This book is about how you can experience more of God.

EXPERIENCING GOD

To help us get there, let me ask you a question. With which member of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son or God the Spirit—do you have the strongest sense of a lived, experienced relationship? I'm not asking what you think should be the case. I'm asking you to reflect on your own experience. Why not do that now before reading on?

Over the last few years I've taken every opportunity to ask this question to lots of people in many places and among different church traditions. It's been a fascinating exercise. It's always met with a variety of responses. Some people say the Father, others the Son, others the Spirit, and others some combination. And, before you ask, there doesn't appear to be any correlation between people's answers and their church background—it's not that charismatic Christians always point to the Spirit while conservatives prefer the Father.

This book started with the realisation that for me it was the Father and the Spirit with whom I have a clear sense of a living relationship, but not the Son. I have a keen sense of the Father as the One to whom I go in prayer. I know what it is to ask him and receive from him. I don't always receive what I request, but I'm happy to trust him to organise the circumstances of my life—good and bad—for my good. And I have a strong sense of living through the Spirit's power. That's not because I'm zapping out miracles all over the place or getting tingling sensations down my spine. It's because I'm convinced that any good I do is done through the prompting and power of the Spirit. It's certainly not done in the power of Tim Chester. So I feel my dependence on the Spirit.

But I realised I had less of a sense of a present experience of the Son. I felt detached from him. I'm aware that he lived, died and rose for me so I could be reconciled to God. That's gloriously true and I'm profoundly grateful. I'm convinced all the blessings in my life flow from his work. But that was 2,000 years ago and now he's up in heaven. That's a long time ago and a long way away. What does it mean to *know* Jesus personally? And what does it mean to relate to him right now in the present?

Why does this matter?

Because I believe in more.

TWO PRINCIPLES

This book is driven by two key principles—principles that will help you enjoy God more. They're not complicated. They're not skills you need to master or achievements requiring great willpower. Yet I suspect that many Christians don't have a strong sense of relationship with God, or enjoy more of that relationship, because they don't fully appreciate these two principles. Here they are:

1. God is known through the three Persons, so we relate to the Father, the Son and the Spirit.
2. Our unity with God in Christ is the basis of our community with God in experience.

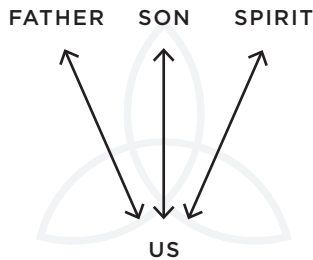
We'll come back to the second one in a moment. The first explains why relating to the three Persons of the Trinity is key to enjoying God more.

1. WE CAN KNOW GOD: THE PRINCIPLE OF THREE AND ONE

When we pray, it's all too easy to think we're praying to a thing or a force. It can seem a bit abstract. We try to imagine God, but God is invisible. How can we see the

invisible God? How can finite people know the infinite? The answer is we can't! We don't have a relationship with "God" in a general sense. We can't know the essence of God—the "god-ness" of God. His nature is beyond our comprehension.

But we can know the *Persons* of God. God lives in an eternal community in which the Father, Son and Spirit relate to one another in love. And when God relates to us, he relates to us in the same way—as Father, Son and Spirit. So when we talk about having a relationship with God, that's really shorthand for having a relationship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.



The practical implication of this is simple: your relationship with God will be deepened and enriched if you think about how you're relating to the Father, to the Son and to the Spirit. Think how each member of the Trinity is relating to you and how you're responding to them.

When you pray, for example, think of addressing your words to the Father through the Son with the help of the Spirit. Or when you read the Bible, think of the Father revealing himself in his Son by the Holy Spirit, or think of the Son communicating his love to you through the Holy Spirit.

Stop and think about this now for a moment. How does the Father relate to you and how do you relate to him? What about the Son? And the Holy Spirit?

In this book we're going to tease out how each member of the Trinity acts towards us and how we should respond. We'll discover that the triune God—the God who is Father, Son and Spirit—is interacting with us in a thousand ways each day.

So the first step in relating to God is to relate to each distinct Person of the Trinity—Father, Son and Spirit. But we must never think of the three Persons without at the same time recognising that God is *one*. The unity of God matters because it means that to know one of the Persons is to know all three. You never relate to them on their own. This means we'll find our thoughts constantly moving from one to the other. It also means this book will be delightfully “untidy”. We won't be able to talk about relating to the Father without talking about how we're loved in the Son or how the Spirit enables us to cry, “Abba, Father”. We won't be able to talk about the presence of Jesus without talking about the work of the Spirit.

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her companions set out to find the wizard of Oz, thinking he's a godlike figure who can grant them a brain, a heart and courage. Except he turns out to be a fake. There's an intimidating façade, but behind it all is a pathetic old man. The magnificent image is just a front.

People can sometimes think of God as a bit like the wizard of Oz. Jesus is the attractive face of God, but it's a façade behind which lurks a grumpy old man. Nothing could be further from the truth. The unity of the Trinity means that when we see God in Christ, we're not seeing a mask or a front. There are no surprises behind what we see in Christ. Jesus is the perfect Word of God and image of God because Jesus is God. To see the Son is to see the Father. “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1 v 3). The Father and the Son

are one being. There's not another God lurking behind the scenes. Jesus really is what God the Father is like. To relate to the Son is to relate to the Father and Spirit.

The fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus put it like this: "I cannot think on the one without quickly being circled by the splendour of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one".¹

True Christian spirituality involves a constant movement from the one to the three and the three to the one. We need to train our hearts to think of the three Persons and how we relate to each of them distinctly. But at the same time we need to train ourselves to think of the three as one, so that to relate to one person is to encounter the other two.

2. WE CAN KNOW MORE OF GOD: THE PRINCIPLE OF UNION AND COMMUNION

The life of Moses was far from exemplary. But for one moment alone he's my hero.

God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. Now in the wilderness they make a calf out of gold and worship it instead of God (Exodus 32 v 1-6). Even so, God reiterates his promise to give them the land of Canaan. "But," he adds, "I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way" (Exodus 33 v 3).

Think about that offer for a moment. The people can have the blessings of God without the demands of his holy presence. Imagine you were offered a ticket to heaven without the need to be holy. Would you take that offer?

This is what Moses says in response:

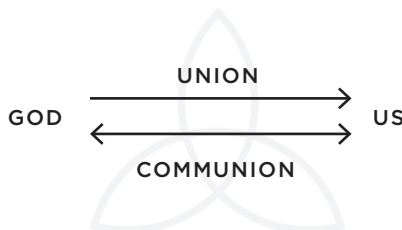
If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What

else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? (Exodus 33 v 15-16)

It's an extraordinary response. In some ways Moses is offered the goal of his life's work and he can have it without the obligation of being God's distinctive people. But knowing God and being his people is what really matters to Moses. God offers Moses everything without God, but Moses doesn't want everything. He wants God. And so he declines the offer. The blessings of the promised land are secondary to the true blessing which is God himself. We are not only saved *from* sin; we are saved *for* God.

The Christian life involves a living, felt experience of God. There is a real relating: a two-way relationship with giving and receiving, being loved and loving. Christianity is not just truths about God that we should believe, or a lifestyle that we should adopt. It's a real two-way relationship—a relationship that we experience here and now. In the past Christians spoke of this relationship as “communion with God”. Today we normally use the word “communion” just to refer to the Lord's Supper. But they used it more generally to talk about our experience of God (including at the Lord's Supper).

This is where our second principle comes in: our unity with God in Christ (which is all God's work) is the basis of our community with God in experience (which is a two-way relationship). Or more simply, our *union with God* is the basis of our *communion with God*.



This principle protects us from two contrasting dangers. The first is thinking that our relationship with God is something we achieve. If we devote ourselves to prayer or learn techniques of meditation or work hard in his service then, we might suppose, we can truly know God. But union with God is one-way traffic. It's based entirely on God's grace. It starts with the Father's loving choice. It's achieved through the work of the Son. And it's applied to each of us through the Spirit. So it's not something we achieve at all. It's not even something to which we contribute. It's a gift God gives us in his love. The action is all one-way.

Maybe you've never had a sense of relating to God. That could be because you've never entrusted yourself to Christ. Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14 v 6). There's no way of relating to God other than through Jesus.

The second danger is settling for little—little of God.

My mother has been a Christian for almost 60 years. Recently she told me, "Jesus is more precious to me than ever before". The month before she had said, "Your father and I have had more times of blessing reading the Bible this year than at any other point in our lives". Sixty years on from her conversion, my mother is enjoying more of God than ever.

You, too, can know more of God. God has saved us so that we might enjoy a relationship with him—and this relationship with God is two-way. God relates to us and in return we relate to God. So we contribute to the relationship. What we do affects our experience of God.

Imagine two sons. Jack makes breakfast for his father every day and they chat for half an hour while they eat it together. Later in the day Jack and his father hang out together—flying a kite, playing football, reading a book. Meanwhile Jack's older brother, Phil, is embarrassed by his father. Phil stays in his room all day with his music turned up loud. On the

rare occasions when Phil communicates with his father, it normally takes the form of dismissive grunts.

How many sons does the father have? The answer, of course, is two. And what did they do to become sons? Nothing. They were simply born as sons. But only Jack enjoys being a son. Only Jack experiences a good relationship with his father.

Praying and reading your Bible won't make you more Christian. And not doing these things won't make you less of a Christian. Somewhat like Jack and Phil, we become children of our heavenly Father by being born—the difference being that Christians are born *again*. We're saved by grace alone through faith in Christ. Our status as God's children is a gift. But how much we enjoy that communion depends on what we do. Paul neatly captured this dynamic when he said, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Philippians 3 v 12).

DOES WHAT WE DO MATTER?

Grasping this distinction between union and communion protects us from thinking our actions make all the difference on the one hand and thinking our actions make no difference on the other hand.

- Our actions don't make us Christians or make us more of a Christian or keep us as Christians—for our union with God is all his work.
- Our actions do make a difference to our *enjoyment* of God—for our communion with God (our enjoyment of our union with God) involves a two-way relationship.

This is why, even if you're a Christian, your relationship with God can feel weak when you neglect that relationship. And yet at the same time, this is why you can always affirm that your *union* with God is based on the rock-solid ground

of Christ's finished work. However much you mess up or neglect your communion with God, you can always start again because you're always united to God in Christ.

We're going to focus on our *communion* with God—on how we can enjoy a living relationship with God. But we must never forget that the foundation of our communion with God is our *union* with God in Christ. The wonder of God's grace is that our relationship with him is not something we have to achieve. It's a gift from beginning to end.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

When I was young I used to practise batting. I was practising to play cricket, but I'm sure it's the same for baseball or tennis. I would throw a ball against a wall and then hit it with a stick as it returned. Sometimes I used a proper bat, but that was too easy. I was stretching myself so that when I went back to a normal cricket bat, I would be hitting the ball from the centre of the bat. I did this again and again and again. I'm sure it drove my mother mad.

Each chapter of this book ends with a simple step you can take. Think of these steps as the equivalent of throwing a ball against a wall. Some of these actions might feel a little strange at first. But they'll strengthen your spiritual muscles and develop your spiritual instincts.

Or think of it like this. If you're driving at 100 mph, and then you cover your speedometer and try to decelerate to 20 mph, what speed would you actually level out at? For most people the answer would probably be 40-50 mph. Driving at 100 mph alters your perception of "normal" speed.

None of these steps are complicated or hard. But some might feel a little strange or somewhat intense. They might feel like driving at 100 mph. But the aim is that when you stop doing them in a focused way, your normal spiritual "speed" will be 50 mph instead of 20 mph. Talking to God

as you drive to work, for example, might feel strange. And doing it during every journey every day for a week will definitely feel intense. But afterwards, it will hopefully become a more natural thing for you. You may find it's much more normal to talk to God or think of God in situations where once you would not have done so.

The action for this chapter is to pray each day for a week to the Father and then to the Son and then to the Spirit. In the New Testament, prayer is normally addressed to the Father through the Son with the help of the Holy Spirit. Normally, but not always. Since praying to the Father is the norm in the New Testament, this should be the norm for our prayers. But Jesus and the Spirit are no less God than the Father, and therefore they can hear and answer prayer. Although there are no clear examples of people praying to the Spirit in the Bible, Stephen prays to Jesus in Acts 7 v 59. So Christians throughout the centuries have also prayed to Jesus and the Spirit as well as to the Father. A famous ninth-century hymn begins:

*Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come
From thy bright heav'nly throne;
Come, take possession of our souls,
And make them all thine own.*

It was translated by the Reformer Martin Luther to be sung on the Day of Pentecost. Likewise, the Puritan theologian John Owen says, "The *divine nature* is the reason and cause of all worship; so that it is impossible to *worship any one* Person, and not worship the *whole* Trinity".² So he argues that we can pray to the Son and to the Spirit. And praying to the Son and the Spirit is a helpful way of reflecting on their distinctive roles in our lives.

ACTION

Each day for a week spend some time praying to the Father and then to the Son and then to the Spirit. In each case, offer praise or make requests that are particularly related to that Person's distinctive role in your life.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- With which member of the Trinity do you have the strongest sense of a lived, experienced relationship?
- What happens if we think of God's oneness to the exclusion of the three Persons?
- What happens if we think of the three Persons to the exclusion of God's unity?
- Do you ever find talk of spirituality or communion with God intimidating? What comfort is there in the principles of union and communion?
- What happens if we think our union with God involves our activity? What happens if we think our communion with God doesn't involve our activity?