

“By all means read this book.”

—DR. MARK RUTLAND, President of the National Institute of Christian Leadership

THE
PRESENCE
GOD
OF

Discovering God's Ways
Through Intimacy With Him



R. T. KENDALL
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *HOLY FIRE*

THE
PRESENCE
OF
GOD



R. T. KENDALL



CHARISMA
HOUSE

Most CHARISMA HOUSE BOOK GROUP products are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchase for sales promotions, premiums, fund-raising, and educational needs. For details, write Charisma House Book Group, 600 Rinehart Road, Lake Mary, Florida 32746, or telephone (407) 333-0600.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD by R. T. Kendall
Published by Charisma House
Charisma Media/Charisma House Book Group
600 Rinehart Road
Lake Mary, Florida 32746
www.charismahouse.com

This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by United States of America copyright law.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Modern English Version. Copyright © 2014 by Military Bible Association. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked *esv* are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked *kjv* are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked *niv* are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked *NLT* are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2017 by R. T. Kendall
All rights reserved

Cover design by Vincent Pirozzi
Design Director: Justin Evans

Visit the author’s website at www.rtkendallministries.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:
An application to register this book for cataloging has been submitted to the Library of Congress.

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-62999-157-3
E-book ISBN: 978-1-62999-158-0

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate Internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors or for changes that occur after publication.

17 18 19 20 21 — 987654321
Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER 1

The Unconscious Presence of God

“Surely the LORD is in this place,
and I did not know it.”

—GENESIS 28:16

“Did not our hearts burn within us while
He talked to us on the way and while
He opened the Scriptures to us?”

—LUKE 24:32

TO *FEEL* THE presence of God is wonderful. I will not even come close to describing what it feels like in this book, for His presence is greater than anything that can be said about it. Any attempt to describe God’s presence will at best be like looking at pictures of a place you’ve never been. When I looked at photographs of London’s Big Ben, Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, the Sea of Galilee, the Mount of Olives, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Hong Kong harbor, the Swiss Alps, the Kremlin, the Eiffel Tower, and inside Yankee Stadium, I never truly understood what being there would be like.

Perception is one thing, but seeing the real thing is quite another.

The same is true when you hear of famous people or seeing their photographs and then meet them in person. In my case, it was like meeting my baseball hero Joe DiMaggio or great theologians and ministers such as Martyn Lloyd-Jones, J. I. Packer, or John Stott. I have even been privileged to meet a few other well-known known people outside the church. I can remember meeting each of these individuals for the first time. My perception in advance of meeting these people was one thing, but seeing them face-to-face was quite another.

People sometimes ask me, “Have you ever met the queen?” Answer: no. But I was invited to be very near her—three or four feet away—when I was at Oxford. You don’t speak to Her Majesty unless she speaks to you. She didn’t speak to me, so I just looked. I was not prepared for how extraordinarily beautiful she is. No photograph does her justice.

What would you expect to feel—or think—if you experienced directly the presence of God? Do you think you would immediately recognize His presence? What if God showed up in more than one way? And what if He showed up in a manner for which there is no known precedent? What if God agreed to manifest Himself to you on the condition you could never tell?

Most of this book will be about the conscious presence of God and the surprising ways He may choose to turn up.

Prayer Covenant

When I was at Westminster Chapel, I introduced a prayer covenant. Over three hundred people signed up to pray

daily for certain requests, including this petition: “We pray for the manifestation of the glory of God in our midst along with an ever-increasing openness in us to the manner in which He chooses to show up.” Why did I word it like that? It is because God may show up in more than one way. I knew something about many reports of the Cane Ridge Revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in 1801. My greatest fear was that God might repeat that sort of thing to the dignified and stiff-upper-lip Brits in Westminster Chapel. People fell to the ground by the hundreds at Cane Ridge and remained that way for hours. I therefore felt it necessary to prepare the way for the most extreme sort of manifestations that might come to us. For some His presence may seem strange, bizarre, and embarrassing. Or perhaps God would spare us controversy and grant us a sense of His presence that would be self-authenticating, similar to seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time.

What I feared—or wanted—never came to pass.

And yet we *did* see the manifestation of God’s glory. God gets as much glory when He does not appear to show up as He does when He manifests Himself overtly. His unconscious presence is as real and orchestrated as when we feel Him.

The two men on the road to Emmaus thought they were speaking to a total stranger when the resurrected Jesus showed up to them. It was after they recognized Him and He disappeared that they realized, upon reflection, how they did indeed feel His presence: “Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the way?” (Luke 24:32).

Sometimes I look back on our twenty-five years at Westminster Chapel and conclude that I failed. And yet I can also look back on certain moments when there was an undoubted manifestation of God's presence. There is nothing unspectacular about people being converted or healed or feeling great joy.

What I hoped for—or even feared—kept me from seeing what God was indeed doing before our eyes.

The truth is that God may be at work during the times of His unconscious presence the same as when He clearly shows up!

One may see the Lord and feel nothing at the moment—just as the two men on the road to Emmaus. And yet John wrote, “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though I were dead” (Rev. 1:17).

God has a way of showing up in multitudinous, unpredictable, and unprecedented ways. But we must learn to appreciate His unconscious presence if we are truly to enjoy His conscious presence.

I would do you no favor if I wrote only about the conscious presence of God in this book. Indeed, one of my goals is to make you as appreciative of the unconscious presence of God as His conscious presence. This is the way faith is built. When Peter, James, and John saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain—and they saw His glory alongside the appearances of Moses and Elijah—Peter immediately said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt. 17:4). Quite. Oh yes. When God reveals Himself like that, we want such a moment to go on and on and on. But they had to come down from the mountain (v. 9). They had so much more to learn.

One glimpse of the glory of the Lord here below will almost always be followed by struggle, teaching, pain, learning, suffering, and the pursuit of the knowledge of God. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge,” said an ancient prophet (Hos. 4:6). “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22, NIV). I will never forget the comment of a ninety-year-old woman—one of my mother’s mentors back in Springfield, Illinois—who said: “I have served the Lord so long that I can hardly tell the difference between a blessing and a trial.”

This is why James could say, “Count it all joy” when we face all kinds of trials (James 1:2). Paul said: “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2). Yes. “But we *also* boast in tribulation, knowing that tribulation produces patience, patience produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (vv. 3–5, emphasis added).

Taking the bad with the good is what builds faith. And what we at first thought was bad turns out to be *good* when we become willing to come down from the mountain to see the next thing God wants us to learn. “All things work together for *good* to them who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28, emphasis added).

Jacob

At first Jacob felt nothing. He had just left home and was running from his brother, Esau, who was bent on killing him. He grew up knowing he was the grandson of the

great Abraham, but he was no match for Abraham. He could never live up to the status of a legend like that. Not only that, but Jacob knew he had done everything wrong: he had tricked his brother Esau into selling his birthright, and he deceived his father, Isaac, to get the patriarchal blessing. He was now running for his life.

Where was God in all this? Jacob reached “a certain place” (Gen. 28:11). As we will see below, Jacob prayed. He felt nothing when he arrived there. There was nothing spectacular about this place. There were no signs that said, “You will treasure this place one day.” He was tired and scared. He needed to sleep. Expecting absolutely nothing, he took a stone for a pillow, put it under his head, and lay down to sleep. And then God stepped in—with a dream. It was a dream that revealed that the God of Abraham was now Jacob’s God. The words given to Jacob were almost too good to be true. Jacob would never be the same again (vv. 11–15).

A “certain place” was where Jacob felt nothing at first; he had no sense of God, no hope, and no purpose in life. But that place became pivotal not only for Jacob but also for countless millions over the succeeding centuries. It is called Bethel, which means “the house of God.”

Bethel became a symbol of both the unconscious presence of God and the conscious presence of God. “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it,” he said (Gen. 28:16). This means that the house of God is huge, so big that it has room for all of God that there is—room for both the conscious presence of God and His unconscious presence.

The unconscious presence of God only means that we

feel nothing when He is present. His presence is very real—very real indeed. But a sense of Him is *kept* from us. We feel nothing whatsoever, but He is there as much as when we feel Him.

We must learn to respect God when He does not appear to reveal Himself. We must honor Him when we feel nothing. We must worship Him when we are tired and afraid. In our weakest moment—yes, even in our most embarrassing moment when we feel we have done everything wrong and nothing right—God is absolutely *there*. “I will never leave you, nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5), He promises. Or as Jesus put it, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Can you accept this? Do you believe this? It means that God is with us whether or not we feel Him—twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

We need to remember this in *all* aspects of our lives. It can be in a time of prayer or a time of frivolity. It is true when we are struggling to hear from God or when we are having fun. It is true when we have messed up and our closest friends or loved ones misunderstand us or reject us.

Back in 1956 I made decisions that would change my life totally. Those decisions meant a different perspective, a different theology, a different denomination, and a different set of friends. My family—my dad, my grandmother, my aunts and uncles—were distraught; they were convinced I had gone completely off the rails and was headed for certain disaster. Only one of my relatives stood up for me—Grandpa McCurley (for some reason he was always my favorite relative)—saying, “I’m for him, right

or wrong.” That is what I needed. I needed someone who would stand up for me.

God is like that. He is for us—right or wrong.

Therefore, we must not panic when we don’t feel God’s presence. We must not give up when we feel nothing. For when we feel nothing, God is at work. When we don’t feel His presence, He is there—the unconscious presence of God. Learn to recognize this, and honor such a moment, no matter how long it lasts.

The unconscious presence of God may be the best explanation for any number of occurrences: when you are praying and reading your Bible alone; when you are doing all you know to do to please Him; when you are busy and conscientious in the work of the Lord—in any kind of ministry, for example, law, nursing, medicine, parenting, accounting. In my case, preaching.

This experience has happened to me more than once. In one particular instant, instead of enjoying great liberty and a sense of the anointing of the Holy Spirit in preaching, I struggled. My mouth was dry, and I could feel beads of perspiration on my head. But I continued, sticking it out. I was relieved when the sermon was finally over. I then walked down the steps of the historic pulpit at Westminster Chapel, hurrying to the vestry to be alone. I said to myself, “If this is the best I can do, I should get out of the ministry,” feeling deserted by the same God who, I thought, called me to be the minister there.

But God in His infinite mercy stepped in moments later. After the service, there was a knock on the door of the vestry. One of our deacons said someone wanted to see me. A man walked into the vestry. Lo and behold, he had

just been converted through my pitiful sermon moments before! He had no idea how I felt about my preaching that day; he also had little idea how joyous I felt that God overruled my lack of faith and saved this man.

Over twenty years ago, I preached in a large auditorium in Bournemouth, England. The event was put on by a group called Easter People, and I felt honored to be there. I preached to perhaps two thousand people what I thought would be an appropriate sermon. But when I finished, no one said a word. Every preacher I know in this world *loves* a cheerful word after he has preached his heart out. At least “Thank you for your word” (which may camouflage the person’s true feelings), “That was good,” or something similar. But on that night? Nothing. Embarrassed, I hung around for ten minutes even though I had a two-hour drive back to London. I wanted just *one* encouraging word that I had not messed up. Nothing came, and I left for London.

A few weeks ago—just before beginning this very book—a woman came up to me to say she heard me preach at an Easter People event in Bournemouth and had been converted on that very night. I was not prepared for that pleasant word. She had no idea how distraught I was that night—twenty years prior.

The Lord was there, but I felt nothing.

Have you ever felt deserted by God? The biblical expression for this feeling is the *hiding of God’s face*. “Truly You are a God who hides Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isa. 45:15), a common occurrence that we will look at chapter 2.

Two Ways of Understanding the Presence of God

As I have already said, God's presence may be understood in two ways: His unconscious presence and His conscious presence. Many of us tend not to appreciate God's unconscious presence; rather, we long for His conscious presence—when He clearly shows up.

The theological term that is relevant to both ways we experience God's presence is the *omnipresence* of God. God is everywhere; there is no place where He isn't:

Where shall I go from Your spirit, or where shall I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell at the end of the sea, even there Your hand shall guide me, and Your right hand shall take hold of me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light shall be as night about me," even the darkness is not dark to You, but the night shines as the day, for the darkness is like light to You.

—PSALM 139:7-12

Theologians speak of the "three big Os": God's *omnipotence* (that He is all-powerful), His *omniscience* (that He knows everything) and His *omnipresence* (that He is everywhere). His omnipresence not only means that God is everywhere—His glory fills the universe and all He has made—but it also means that we cannot run from God. Jonah found this to be true. God told him, "Go to Nineveh." Jonah said, "No." He rose to flee "from the presence of the LORD" (Jon. 1:2-3) but found such a

notion impossible to fulfill. Wherever Jonah went, there was God!

Are you trying to run from God? Give up! It is a hopeless venture.

That fact that you may not *feel* God does not mean He is not there. The fact that you don't even *believe* in God will not cause Him to go away. If we believe not, said Paul, God "remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). Let's look at some Scripture pertaining to God's omnipresence:

Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I do not see him? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD.

—JEREMIAH 23:24

The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.

—PROVERBS 15:3

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? See, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You."

—1 KINGS 8:27

Never underestimate how near God is to you when you feel nothing. When I first met missionary Jackie Pullinger in Hong Kong, she described how she decided to pray in the Spirit for fifteen minutes every day "by the clock." She added: "I felt nothing. But those were the days when I began to see conversions in the walled city."

Jacob was no match for his grandfather Abraham. He could not have known that one day the phrase "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" would become a cliché in

Israel—and that Jacob’s new name, *Israel*, would become the name of a great nation. It all began at Bethel, where Jacob at first felt nothing, only to realize that God was there and he did not know it.

Jacob became a symbol of the sovereign grace of God in more ways than one. He was an example of a scoundrel who was loved by God. “I have loved Jacob” (Mal. 1:2; see Rom. 9:13). There was absolutely nothing in Jacob that deserved to be loved by God. He had done everything wrong. He knew it and was running scared. The last thing he expected was for God to show up and then reveal wonderful plans for Jacob.

Are you running scared? Are you afraid for God to show up? Do you fear that if God were to show up He would certainly judge you?

Bethel Yesterday, Ramallah Today

One day when I visited Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, it hit me as I entered the city that I was in ancient Bethel! Yes, Ramallah today and Bethel of biblical times are very near the same geographical location. I said to Arafat, thinking I might be telling him something he did not know: “Do you realize this is Bethel?” He did in fact know this and was very pleased about it.

There I was—literally—at Bethel, the very place where God manifested his glory to Jacob; indeed, where Jacob at first felt nothing insofar as the presence of God was concerned. I tried to take it in. “Yes,” I said to myself, “I am exactly where God first met with Jacob.” It was also the exact place Jacob had been commanded to return to when

his heart had become cold and detached from God's purpose. Jacob obeyed and announced to his family, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you. Purify yourselves and change your clothes. Let us arise and go up to Bethel, and there I will make an altar to God, who *answered me* in the day of my distress and has *been with me* wherever I have gone" (Gen. 35:1-3, emphasis added). Note the two phrases I have italicized in Jacob's words. The first is "who *answered me* in the day of my distress." That is how we know Jacob was actually praying when he came to the previously mentioned "certain place." The second phrase, "[who] has *been with me* wherever I have gone," is Jacob acknowledging God's presence with him. This includes the times when Jacob was mistreated by Laban (Gen. 31), when he demonstrated how he still feared that Esau was bent on killing him (Gen. 32-33), and when his daughter Dinah had drifted into the world and lost her purity (Gen. 34). His family was disunited, and Jacob seemed to have lost control of them (Gen. 34:30-31). But when God told him, "Go up to Bethel," those words were music to his ears (Gen. 35:1). His family obeyed, and as they set out, "the terror of God was on the cities that were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob" (v. 5).

This tells me that if the church today would go back to Bethel, a sense of the fear of God would fall on the world, which at the moment does not respect the church as it might.

God demonstrated to unworthy Jacob the truth of His sheer mercy and grace. The faithfulness of God seems too good to be true. I sometimes say, "Unless the gospel you heard preached seemed 'too good to be true,' you haven't

heard it yet! But when you say to yourself, ‘That’s too good to be true,’ that is when you heard it.” This means we are saved apart from works and kept apart from works (Eph. 2:8–9). Yes, we are loved with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3).

A man came to see me in the vestry at Westminster Chapel one evening. He was an admitted backslider. He told me he had been saved many years before, but he knew he was no longer a Christian because of the depth of the sin in his life. I said to him, “What hope do you have of going to heaven?”

He replied, “No hope at all.”

I asked him, “If you were to stand before God—and you will—and He were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?”

He answered, “I have no hope whatever—only that Jesus died for me on the cross.”

I looked at him and asked again, “Are you saying that your only hope of heaven is the blood that Jesus shed for you two thousand years ago when He died on the cross?”

“Oh, yes,” he said again.” But I have wandered so far from God.”

I said to him, “What if I were to tell you that you are as saved as I am?”

He looked at me and said, “Could that possibly be true?” I said to him, “It is true. You are as saved as I am, for the only hope that I have is the shed blood of Jesus Christ.”

I never saw anything like it. He came alive. His face lit up. It was the greatest news he could possibly hear.

“I can’t believe that God loves me that much.” He added, “This makes me want to serve Him, live for Him. I am so

sorry for my sins. I want to give my life back to Him.” He then said, as if double-checking on what he thought he heard, “You are saying to me that I have been a saved person all these years?”

“That’s exactly what I am saying.”

The man walked out as happy—I would have thought—as the day he was first converted.

I will not be surprised if some readers will disagree with what I said to him. I do understand. I myself was brought up to believe that if I sinned in any way, I lost my salvation and was then on the road to hell. I had an epiphany one day through the sweetest and most glorious manifestation of the presence of Christ I have ever experienced. With it came an infallible assurance that I was eternally saved. I have never looked back.

Here’s the important point I want to make regarding this man who came into my vestry. I knew I could easily lead him back to the Lord. That was why he came in. He was clearly being dealt with. He was *so* sorry for his failure. I could have given him the sinner’s prayer and he would have prayed it eagerly, no doubt about it. But then he would have based his assurance on his good works instead of the mercy of God.

The thought that the unconscious presence of God had been with him all those years blew his mind away. I quoted the psalm to him, “If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there” (Ps. 139:8, kjv). The overwhelming sense of God’s mercy made him want to straighten his life out far more—in my view—than if I treated him as a person who needed to be saved.

Does this mean that all people who pray the sinner’s

pray or make a profession of faith are eternally saved? No. This is because such a prayer can be prayed in a cerebral manner and not from the heart. The promise of salvation is to those who believe in their *hearts* (Rom. 10:9–10).

When Billy Graham preached at Westminster Chapel in May 1984, some eighty people went forward, including a famous businessman who had been brought to hear Dr. Graham by a friend. All rejoiced when they saw him walk forward. A chapel member was asked to follow him up. The man did not want to be followed up with—not at all. He thought walking forward saved him. Wrong. In my opinion this man was not converted.

We cannot always know for sure who is saved and who is lost. But one thing is for certain: we are saved by grace, not works. And the heart, not just the head, must be at the bottom of any profession of faith if it is to be valid.

Martin Luther said he expected heaven to have three surprises in store: people will be there he did not expect, some people he expected to see will not be there, and—the greatest surprise—“That I’m there myself.”

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say that a Christian is a person who is “surprised” that he or she is a Christian. Moreover, if they are not surprised, he would question whether they were truly converted!

Jacob was thrilled to get a word from God: “Go back to Bethel.”

Do you need to return to Bethel? Have you wandered far from God? Do you feel that God has deserted you? Is God calling you back to Bethel?

Bethel is a symbol of hope. It symbolizes the manner in which God shows up when you feel absolutely nothing.

Bethel symbolizes the God who surprises, the God who will never leave us. Many think there is no hope, but there is—there is hope for you.

God is calling you home.

A woman came up to Arthur Blessitt in South America. When she saw him, she said, “I have wanted to find you for years. I came to your coffee shop in Sunset Strip many years ago. You prayed with me. I immediately went to the phone and called my parents to say, “I’m coming home.” She went home. She became a missionary to South America.

On the day I first visited Yasser Arafat, as Canon Andrew White, Lyndon Bowring, Alan Bell, and I were walking away from his compound, Arafat was waving good-bye to us. At that moment the sound of the Muslim call to prayer could be heard in ancient Bethel—now Ramallah—from several directions. It was one of the strangest and most memorable moments of my life. I have thought about this many times.

It is my hope that one day the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will again be the focus at the historic place once known as Bethel. It is my prayer that Muslims—even the Palestinian leaders, some of whom I still pray for daily and who live in Ramallah today—will discover the God of the Bible and will come to know Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God who died on the cross for all people. It is my prayer that the ancient promise that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the seas” will be fulfilled soon—very soon (Hab. 2:14).

When Jacob first prayed when coming to that “certain

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

place” called Bethel, he felt nothing. He only knew that he prayed. But in a few hours he could say, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” He added, “How awesome is this place!” (Gen. 28:16–17).

Jacob’s experience shows that when we don’t feel God, He is nevertheless here, and it demonstrates the awesomeness of the unconscious presence of God.

Order Today

