

# Attentive to God

**Being aware of God's presence  
in daily life**

**Tony Horsfall**

‘For anyone who desires to go deeper with God and live closer to him, this book will be a great blessing. It is biblical, practical and really helpful. It can be used individually or in a group and I warmly commend it.’

**Bishop Ken Clarke, former Church of Ireland bishop of Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh**

‘This is a warmly written, profoundly insightful and richly practical book. Tony’s words have left me with a real hunger to be watchful for all the ways that God reaches out to me in my days; it’s stirred up in me a greater longing to be responsive to God’s touch so that I can know him more intimately, love him more deeply.’

**Mags Duggan, retreat leader, spiritual director and author of *God among the Ruins* (BRF Ministries, 2017)**

‘Like a loving mentor, Tony uses the stories of six Bible characters to remind us of how to tune in to God most effectively. He adds some great practical exercises and useful questions for group discussion. Written with Tony’s usual warmth, the book draws on the reality of his own experience. I heartily recommend it.’

**Jack Telfer, retreat leader, coach and mission member care provider**

‘There is something here for everyone – from the newest believer to the seasoned disciple. Drawing on the examples of God-followers in the scriptures, Tony encourages us to learn to be attentive to God’s presence, listen to his voice, understand what he is saying and wait for the fulfilment of his promises. Use this book on a personal retreat or use it in a group setting with others – and be encouraged.’

**Pauline Wilson, biblical counsellor and retreat facilitator**

‘This book is perfect for those seeking to grow in attentiveness to God. Tony shares humbly from his own experience as well as that of others in his unique, accessible writing style. He grounds the practice in scripture and draws on voices throughout history. His reflective questions will inspire personal growth and reflection, making it an ideal book for both beginners and those wanting to deepen their faith journey.’

**Ruth Turner, member care coordinator, Latin Link, Peru**



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# Introduction

One day at school I dreamed a dream. I dreamed I was a professional footballer, leading my team out for the World Cup Final and scoring the winning goal. My mental reverie, however, came to an abrupt end when the teacher's voice broke into my consciousness, loud, insistent and challenging:

‘HORSFALL LAD, SIT UP STRAIGHT AND PAY ATTENTION!’

For a moment I was in shock, rendered speechless by this public humiliation. Somehow, I managed to stammer a muted response of ‘Sorry, sir’, and with great effort began to refocus my mind, trying to get to grips with the lesson.

Teachers know the importance of attentiveness in the learning process and are quick to remind their young charges of its necessity; pupils are generally much slower to grasp its significance, and often need reminding. Maybe it never happened to you quite like that, but we all know how easy it is to lose concentration and let our attention wander. In the middle of talking to a friend, you suddenly realise you have not been listening at all and have lost the thread of the conversation because you were miles away. Or you are driving a familiar route, but your mind is elsewhere, so you miss your turn-off and are forced to make an unwelcomed detour simply because you were not concentrating on the road. It happens so easily, and far too frequently, this problem of inattentiveness.

It happens too in the spiritual life. God is speaking to us, but we fail to recognise his voice. He has things to teach us, but our minds are elsewhere and we are not attuned to his whisper. He wants to lead



us and guide us, but we miss his gentle promptings. He is present all around us, yet we don't notice his approach or register his nearness. Like Israel of old, we seem to be both blind and deaf to the overtures of God: 'You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen' (Isaiah 42:20).

Not only does our inattentiveness frustrate God, it also robs us of a greater depth of relationship with him. We would enjoy a deeper intimacy with God if we were more attuned to him in our everyday lives. Moreover, we would have a clearer understanding of what he wanted us to do and be able to discern his will more easily. The purpose of this book is to help you become more consistently aware of God, to train your ear to hear his voice and your eye to see what he is doing. Not that this is easy, I have my own struggles with spiritual attentiveness, but I want to grow and improve so that I can serve God more effectively. I'm sure you do as well, which is why you are reading this book.

Although Jesus carefully chose his first disciples, the twelve often proved to be slow learners and as slow to catch on as we are. On one occasion, shortly after the feeding of the four thousand, they were crossing the lake by boat when they realised they had forgotten to bring bread with them. They seemed unable to make the connection between the miracle they had just seen happen and the ability of Jesus to meet their present need. Jesus rebuked them with these words: 'Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?' (Mark 8:18). The significance of what had taken place had been lost on them because of their failure to see, to hear and to understand what had happened right there in front of them.

The disciples needed to wake up to the spiritual dimension all around them and to tune in to what God was doing in their midst. We contemporary disciples are no different. As Ben Campbell Johnson has said: 'To be awake means to have our eyes opened so that we see, to have our ears opened so that we hear, to have our reason alert so that we understand. This is the biblical way of speaking about spiritual awareness.'<sup>1</sup>

This book is built around six Bible stories in which we meet six individuals encountering God. Each story has something to teach us about moving from a lack of awareness of God to a place where we more readily recognise and respond to his presence. We will learn what it means to see with our eyes, to hear with our ears and to have our minds opened to understand. Interspersed between the stories are some classical spiritual practices that can help us to develop and nurture our awareness and some insights from church history that remind us that the desire to be more mindful of God is nothing new.

The chapters are deliberately short enough so that you can read them on a daily basis as part of your devotional practice, perhaps over the course of six weeks. This steady reading for a period of time will produce better learning than dashing through the book as quickly as possible. Read slowly, thoughtfully and prayerfully. Above all, seek to put into practice what you are learning.

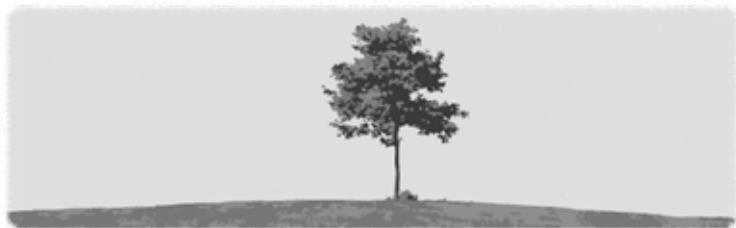
Additionally, there are questions for a small group setting. These follow the six sections of the book and the idea is that you can share your journey of spiritual discovery with others if you wish. This is a great way to enhance your learning and deepen your experience. You will need to read the relevant chapters before your meeting and then be willing to share your findings with others. A group could meet weekly, fortnightly or even monthly.

So, now, with the help of the Holy Spirit and a prayer that God will make himself known to us more fully, we can begin our journey together into a greater awareness of God.

## Reflection

Before you begin, pause for a moment and offer your own prayer to God. What do you want him to do for you as you read? If you have time, write out your prayer so you can turn to it again when you have finished reading, or even pray it at different moments as you read.

# Part 1



## Jacob and the problem of inattentiveness

### **GENESIS 28:10–22**

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants

will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.'

## 1

## Jacob's story

Jacob was part of what can only be described as a dysfunctional family, a family made dysfunctional by a passive, father (Isaac) and a mother (Rebekah) who favoured one son more than another.

Jacob had his own issues. He and his twin brother Esau were born in answer to prayer when it had appeared that Rebekah was barren (Genesis 25:21–26). Even in the womb there was a jostling for position between them, a rivalry that would intensify as they grew up. Jacob was born grasping his older brother's heel. His Hebrew name carries a reminder of this (Jacob means 'He grasps the heel') and a suggestion that he was a grasper by nature, someone who would do whatever was necessary to get his own way and fulfil his ambitions. This is why Jacob is often described as a supplanter, a person who dispossesses another by dishonourable or treacherous means.

The two boys were as different as chalk and cheese. Esau, so called because of his red hair, loved the outdoors and became a skilled hunter, winning his father's admiration. Jacob was much quieter, a home bird who was closer to his mother and the apple of her eye. As the older son, Esau had the greater birthright and stood in line to inherit their father's blessing, something Jacob coveted.

Jacob's calculating nature expressed itself early on when he tricked his brother into selling him his birthright. Esau had returned from the fields starving, and in a moment of madness swapped his birthright for a bowl of Jacob's stew. While the incident shows that Esau did not value or appreciate his birthright (Hebrews 12:16–17), it also shows

that Jacob was an opportunist ready to take whatever he wanted when the chance came.

Much later, when Isaac was an old man whose eyesight was failing, Jacob contrived with his mother to win his father's blessing. Urged on by Rebekah, he dressed as his brother in order to deceive Isaac who, having ate and drank, unwittingly prayed his prayer of blessing over the person he supposed was Esau. It was, in fact, Jacob, who had robbed his brother a second time. Esau was understandably furious, weeping for what he had lost and swearing vengeance on his brother. Rebekah, realising the danger that Jacob was now in, urged her son to leave home and seek refuge with her brother Laban in Harran. So it was that the home-loving Jacob was forced into exile, fleeing for his life into the desert: 'Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran' (Genesis 28:10).

This is the place where we meet Jacob in the story we are looking at, and he arrives there lonely, afraid and unsure of his future. He has deceived his father, robbed his brother and yet – scoundrel that he is – is still under the watchful eye of God and destined to become an integral part of the divine purpose. Such is the grace of God. It is impossible to think of the story of Jacob without being reminded of the vastness of God's mercy or the depths of his love. We are reminded too that whatever our own family history, and whatever our past mistakes or wrongdoing, God waits to make himself known to us and to change and transform us even as he did the rascal Jacob. There is hope for us all.

## Reflection

In what 'place' do you find yourself as you begin reading? Remember that the God of Jacob – the God of grace – welcomes you into his presence whatever your situation and need.

## 2

## God's presence

In the mystery that is the providence of God, Jacob finds himself in the back of beyond, a place with no name and nothing to commend it, a desolate wilderness place where there are no people, no buildings and nothing is happening (v. 11). Yet this is the place to which God has brought him so that it may be a place of encounter and the beginning of personal transformation. To add to his sense of isolation and aloneness, the sun has set and darkness has descended. Enveloped in the gloom, Jacob stops to rest for the night, his surroundings representative of the bleakness within his inner landscape.

But where to lay his head? No shelter is available, so it will mean a night in the open, exposed to the elements and prey to wild animals. There is no comfort to be found either, and the only pillow available is a stone on which to lay his weary head. Ouch! Exhausted and drained, he manages to fall asleep and dreams a dream that will open up for him an understanding of the divine purpose for his life. He sees a stairway resting on the earth and reaching up to heaven, where angels are ascending and descending. In the dream God speaks to him with promises about the future, for himself and all the descendants of Abraham. God has many ways by which he can reach us, and the subconscious is one of them. Dreams are often used by God to tell us what we fail to hear when we are awake. Stirred by what he has seen, Jacob wakes with the dream still vivid in his mind – ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it’ (v. 16).

Wherever we find ourselves, God is already there, for there is no place where he is not. The psalmist believed in the omnipresence of God,

not as a philosophical idea or theological concept but as the reality behind his relationship with the divine.

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to heaven, 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.

PSALM 139:7–10

And perhaps most tellingly of all, given that we are thinking of Jacob's exile and his night spent in the desert, he continues:

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.

PSALM 139:11–12

We can neither escape from God's presence nor inadvertently step out of it. Wherever we are, God is there and is waiting for us.

No matter where we find ourselves on planet Earth we can say with certainty, '*Surely* the Lord is in *this* place.' Like Jacob, we may find ourselves in an unpromising geographical location that is without indication of God's presence or activity. It may appear to be a truly God-forsaken place, but it is not. We may, for example, be living in the midst of a culture that does not honour God, where demonic powers are strong and spiritual darkness rules, yet even there, God is aware of us. To the church at Pergamum, a city drenched in paganism and idolatry, Jesus said, 'I know where you live – where Satan has his throne' (Revelation 2:13). God is mindful of us wherever we live: in a noisy,



crowded high-rise apartment block, in a shanty town on the edge of a slum, in the high-pressured world of a metropolis. Wherever we are, God is there, and we are never lost to his sight.

Like Jacob, we may find ourselves in an emotionally desolate place, cut off from friends and family, feeling unloved and abandoned, alone in the world. We may have suffered loss, felt the sting of bereavement, seen our dreams shattered and our hopes dashed, but even there, God is present. Whatever our stage in life, whatever transition we may be going through and whatever circumstances may befall us, we remain within the sphere of the divine nearness.

We may feel we are at a bad place spiritually, having failed yet again to live the life we are called to or to follow the spiritual practices that give us life. Our faith may be weak, our witness poor and our zeal flagging. We may have more doubts than certainties, more questions than answers. We may feel abandoned by God, and that we have lost the sense of his presence and favour, that our prayers are no longer heard. Yet however dark things seem, even there, God is present. We are never cut adrift or left to our own devices.

The truth is, it is impossible to avoid the presence of God because there is no place where he is not. Where I am, God is already. Whether I realise it or not, I am always in his presence. The apostle Paul found wisdom in an ancient poet to underline his conviction that God is not far from any one of us: 'For in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). Our very existence takes place within the presence of God. Every breath we breathe, every word we speak, every movement we make, every word we utter – everything happens within the parameters of God's presence. We are encircled by the divine, surrounded by the boundaries of grace.

C.S. Lewis wrote of this all-encompassing presence of God:

We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labour is to remember to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more to remain awake.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, there is sometimes a hiddenness about God. He does not always announce his presence with a fanfare of trumpets. He feels no need to broadcast his arrival or give notice of his coming. The Son of God himself entered our world incognito, as a babe born in the stable at Bethlehem – overlooked by most people despite ancient prophecies, angelic choirs and a wondrous star. Only those with eyes to see and ears to hear, like the shepherds and the wise men, understood what was happening; the majority missed the moment of his appearance. It is still the same today.

What we need then is, like Jacob, to awaken to God's presence, to develop a sensitivity to his nearness and become more aware of his activity. The prophet Isaiah called to the people of his day: 'Awake, awake, Zion' (Isaiah 52:1). The psalmist exhorted himself: 'Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn' (Psalm 57:8). And the church at Sardis was challenged with these stirring words: 'Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die' (Revelation 3:2). If we are to know God more deeply and be more effective in his service, we must stir our souls from slumber. We must come awake, and then stay awake.

The belief that God is all around us is foundational to our knowing him more fully. Wherever we find ourselves we can say, 'Surely the Lord is in *this* place', whether we are aware of it or not. With the conviction that the world is crowded with God firmly rooted in our hearts, we can begin to look for him in the ordinariness of our daily lives, knowing that he does not play hide-and-seek with us.

As Lewis says, we can remember to attend and awaken to his presence. God's promise remains true: if we seek for him with all our heart, then he will be found by us (Jeremiah 29:12–14).

## Reflection

'There is no place where he is not.' Ponder this truth and remind yourself that you can say with Jacob concerning the place you are in today: 'Surely the Lord is in this place.'



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Mindfulness is not new, and God's people down the centuries have always been encouraged to practise 'the sacrament of the present moment' – that is, to notice God in the events of everyday life and become attentive to that presence.

Tony Horsfall explores six Bible stories that describe individuals encountering God, showing how we can learn how to notice the presence of the divine for ourselves. He also unpacks key spiritual practices that anyone can follow, and introduces insights from influential writers on the awareness of God in the ordinary.



*'A warmly written, profoundly insightful and richly practical book'*

**MAGS DUGGAN, AUTHOR OF *GOD AMONG THE RUINS***



**Tony Horsfall** is an established author and well-known as a retreat leader in the UK and internationally. With a background in mission, he regularly speaks at events and conferences. He has written a number of other books for BRF Ministries, including *Deep Calls to Deep*, *Knowing You*, *Jesus* and *Resilience in Life and Faith*.



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