

- **Alpha Testimony**
- **Baptism**

Isn't it good to hear stories of God's work among us? May the stories we've heard this morning encourage our hearts and fuel our hope, because Jesus is ever at work, rebuilding His people.

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark, I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance...and I love this church, I love what Jesus is doing in our midst. More than most, I get to hear what Jesus is doing through our Alpha ministry, among our children, Pre-Teens, high students and young adults...I have a window into what goes on in our home groups, in Celebrate Recovery, in our Wednesday afternoon coffee ministry...Jesus is living and active among us, and I am so grateful that He's given me a part to play. If you find yourself on the margins of our church, let me encourage you to get involved; you'll be glad you did.

This morning, I want to direct your attention to theme we've been teaching on over the past 4 weeks: *Pursuing Intimacy With God*. In conjunction with this theme, as a church, we've set aside a 40 day period of prayer in the pursuit of God. Many of you have made use of the prayer room we've set up downstairs, or, have joined us on our Thursday nights for prayer and worship.

With only 11 days left in our 40 day pursuit, I wonder, for those of you who have been taking part: *has your experience lined up with your expectations?* What I mean is, when you determined to spend 40 days intentionally seeking intimacy with God, what were you hoping to experience? What were you hoping He would say, do, or reveal? Has your experience lined up with your expectations?

This morning, I want to speak to anyone who has ever been disillusioned with God, to those who have expected one thing from Him but received another, to anyone who can't seem to find God in the middle of their circumstances. This morning, may God speak to you a word of comfort and hope.

1. Reclaiming the meaning of “intimacy”.

I want to begin by attempting to reclaim this word, “*intimacy*,” but first, it will need to be purged. This word has been conscripted and re-imagined by the values and philosophy of our day.

The dictionary defines intimacy as a “*close familiarity or friendship*”. And yet, if you are like me, you take this broad definition and interpret it narrowly: intimacy = that which is happy, good, easy, romantic, positive, and pain-free. And in one fell swoop, we've eliminated more than 75% of life from the realm of intimacy.

Is intimacy with God, and others, really so narrow? If “yes,” then intimacy will forever be an elusive pursuit, captured only in fleeting moments.

All too often, when we think about intimacy, our minds turn to images of young couples, madly in love. Bouquets of flowers given, poems recited, the perfect weekend away, boisterous expressions of love flowing from a deep well of emotion...we are fed a steady diet of images, movies, and songs that define intimacy along these lines.

But while intimacy can include these things, it is not limited to them. We make a grave mistake when we equate true intimacy with

emotional intensity. Intimacy is something more. It's a deep understanding, a familiarity forged by time spent together, by facing adversity, by choosing submission and trust.

Illus: On a human level, when I think about intimacy, I think about couples who have been married for 40 or 50 years. I think about my father-in-law...he isn't fond of hiking, but he is fond of my mother-in-law, and so he will gladly spend hours following her up a mountain.

When I think about intimacy, I think about my dad. When my mom was really sick with leukemia, she had to live in virtual quarantine because her immune system was at ground zero. He'd go over the house with a dish rag and bleach to make sure every last germ was good and dead. Before and after every blood transfusion at Vancouver General Hospital, dad would call to see how mom was doing. He'd sit out on the patio of a restaurant, in the freezing cold, when every other sane person was inside, just so he and mom could safely enjoy a meal out together. Intimacy.

A few weeks ago, I read a quote from the book "*Sacred Quest*". Doug Bannister writes the following: "Everyone seeks intimacy with God. Ignore this need and you end up...looking for God in the wrong places."¹ But I want to suggest that there is more to it than that...it is possible to actively pursue intimacy with God but miss out because the path to intimacy comes to us in disguise.

We tend to think of intimacy with God along the lines of His goodness; a goodness we expect will lead to our comfort, ease. The truth of the matter is that what God calls "*good*," we often call "*painful*". It's the difference between what a child calls "*good*" and what a parent calls "*good for you*".

When we assume that disappointment, pain, or boredom are obstacles that stand in the way of relationship with God, we might just miss the very vehicle that He will use to lead us into intimacy. Nothing is wasted when it comes to God; nothing.

2. The Different Seasons of Intimacy

I want to introduce you to a concept that has been helpful to me in understanding intimacy with Jesus. We live in a country with four distinct seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. No one season lasts forever; no matter how much I love the Summer, it will give way to the Fall. In the same way, there are seasons in our life with Jesus.

The title of my message this morning was taken from a book that outlines two specific seasons: hiddenness and manifestation. Graham Cooke writes, "manifestation is a time of blessing; hiddenness is a time of building."²

In times of manifestation we experience the joy of God's presence; we delight in Him and we feel His delight in us. In these seasons we

¹ Doug Bannister, *Sacred Quest: Discovering Intimacy With God*, 15.

² Graham Cooke, *Hiddenness and Manifestation: What Is Really Happening When God Doesn't Seem To Be Present?*, 12.

are overwhelmed by the love of Jesus, His presence is palpable, His voice seems constant. We couldn't imagine life with Jesus getting any better; we go from experience to experience wondering if others feel as close to Jesus as we do. If you've ever experienced these times of manifestation, you never want them to end.

Hiddenness is very different. Jesus is no less present, but He is not nearly so visible; He fades from both our sight and our other senses. In these seasons of life, we are invited to walk by faith, not by sight. In seasons of hiddenness, we are invited to take God at His Word regardless of our circumstances, regardless of how we feel. In times of hiddenness, we must remember who He is so that we can walk by faith in His character and His promises.

Now here's the thing...you're not going to find the concept I'm describing in any one chapter and verse, but as you become familiar with the saints found in the scriptures (Abraham and Sarah, Ruth, David, etc), as you read the Psalms, you will see these seasons do exist and are played out over and over again.

Intimacy with Jesus is not a matter of perpetual, mountain top experiences; there will be valleys. And the reason we cannot avoid hiddenness in the Christian life, is because Jesus will not let us avoid maturity. 1 Peter 1:7 reminds us that our faith is "*of greater worth than gold*" and the Holy Spirit is ever at work within us, refining and building our faith so that it "*may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*"

What I want to do now is to take some time to walk through the Scriptures and tease out this concept of hiddenness and manifestation. We'll start with manifestation.

3. Hiddenness and Manifestation In The Scriptures

Psalm 84 says, "*1 How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty! 2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. 10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*"

This is clearly a time a blessing and manifestation: the psalmist encounters the beauty of the Lord, and his heart is stirred to burning desire. The psalmist responds in worship, celebrating the goodness of God: *better is one day in your presence than a thousand anywhere else.*

Psalm 63:1-5 says, "*1 You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. 2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. 3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. 4 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. 5 I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.*"

The psalmist is saying, *Not only have I sought you, but I've seen you! I've found what I've been searching for; my heart is finally satisfied! Your love is better than life. Your presence tastes better than any seven-course-meal. With great joy that I lift up my hands in praise!* Have you ever felt like that? I have, in seasons of manifestation and blessing.

Psalm 34:8 says, “**8** Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” Psalm 90:14 says, “Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.”

Let me state the obvious: the God, who is both one and three, is a blessing God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the source of a love that spills out into every corner of our universe. Romans 8:16 tells us that one of the Holy Spirit’s chief roles is to bear witness, deep within us, that we are loved by God. Joy and gladness are a part of the inheritance we receive from the Father, bought for us through the death of Jesus; in God’s presence there is fullness of joy.

But seasons of blessing and manifestation are not constant. Sometimes we are thrust into hiddenness by way of difficult life circumstances; sometimes God leads us into hiddenness by fading from our sight/senses so that we can learn to walk by faith. Let me direct you attention to Psalm 38; listen for the echoes of hiddenness.

“6 I am bent over and racked with pain. All day long I walk around filled with grief. 7 A raging fever burns within me, and my health is broken. 8 I am exhausted and completely crushed. My groans come from an anguished heart. 9 You know what I long for, Lord; you hear my every sigh. 10 My heart beats wildly, my strength fails, and I am going blind. 11 My loved ones and friends stay away, fearing my

disease. Even my own family stands at a distance...15 For I am waiting for you, O Lord. You must answer for me, O Lord my God... 21 Do not abandon me, O Lord. Do not stand at a distance, my God. 22 Come quickly to help me, O Lord my savior.”³

I’m fading God, I’m exhausted, my heart is in anguish. I’m waiting for you, I’m calling to you...don’t leave me...I need your help. Hiddenness; I’ve been there and so have many of you.

Psalm 88 is another Psalm that testifies to the reality of hiddenness; it’s the darkest Psalm in the entire Bible. And it’s the last line of the psalm that sums up everything that comes before. The psalmist concludes saying, “*The darkness is my closest friend.*”⁴

When we turn to the New Testament, we see these same seasons at work (hiddenness and manifestation) in God’s people. **Consider John the Baptist.** Filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born⁵, John was set apart for great things; he would prepare the way for God’s own Son.

Before Jesus came on the scene, John was out in the desert, by the river Jordan and people flocked to hear his preaching. But they did more than listen, they responded in droves and he baptized them. When he baptized Jesus, he had a front row seat as heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and God the Father spoke words of blessing over His Son. Incredible!

³ Psalm 38:6-11, 15, 21-22; New Living Translation.

⁴ Psalm 88:18.

⁵ Luke 1:15.

This was a season of intense manifestation in John's life. The Holy Spirit had anointed him, God was using him, and people were being transformed. The Lord was near in every sense of the word. With his physical eyes he saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus. With his physical ears, he heard God the Father speak both to, and about, Jesus.

Not long after, things began to change; a season of hiddenness began to set in. The crowds began to shift their attention from him to Jesus; Jesus' disciples began to baptize more people than John. To his credit, John brushed this aside saying, "*He must become greater; I must become less.*"⁶ But some time later, John was disillusioned and he sent a few of his disciples to ask Jesus: "*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*"⁷

Coming from John, this is a strange question. After what he saw and heard, you wouldn't think he would need any more convincing. But at the time, John was alone in a prison cell, nearing his execution, forgotten by the world, and no doubt feeling forgotten by God. *Jesus, if you are who I think you are, what am I doing in here?*

Jesus was no stranger to hiddenness and manifestation. He knew what it was to feel close to the Father; He also knew what it was to walk by faith when the Father felt far away. Throughout His life, He enjoyed a deep sense of the Father's presence; His baptism and

transfiguration stand out as times of the Father's manifest presence, power, and glory. But in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus in anguish. And on the cross, Jesus cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"⁸ What do we do when God feels far away?

As strange as it might sound, hiddenness and manifestation share something in common: both are a gift from God. And in the time remaining, I want to talk about what happens when we embrace the gift of hiddenness.

4. Opening the Gift of Hiddenness.

I want to begin by saying that there is no point in which your life is ever hidden from God's sight. He is always present, everywhere; He sees us and knows us completely, inside and out. In hiddenness, He may not be visible, but He is present. In hiddenness, we may not feel His presence in the same way, we may not hear His voice as frequently, we may not understand what He is up to, but He is present.

So what is God doing in hiddenness? More often than not, hiddenness is all about revelation. I want you to chew on that thought for a few moments: *hiddenness is primarily about revelation*. In order to reveal, there are times when God chooses to hide. In hiddenness, God exposes what lies within us.

⁶ John 3:30.

⁷ Matthew 11:2; c.f. vs. 1-6.

⁸ Matthew 27:26; these words are not unique to Jesus, they were first prayed by David in Psalm 22:1.

Maybe we find ourselves in a difficult circumstance, and God hasn't provided an immediate solution. He's gone silent, and we can feel the anxiety and fear beginning to rise within us. Hiddenness...what lies within is being brought to light, we're being exposed, our faith is being revealed.

Or maybe we've been asking God to open a door for us, because we really like what's behind door #1...a new business opportunity, a new relationship, a new adventure...but the door is welded shut. We ask God to explain Himself, but it feels as though we are talking to the ceiling. We find ourselves getting angry...how could God do this to me? Doesn't He have my best interests in mind? How can I trust Him? Hiddenness = Revelation; what lies within is being revealed.

Mark Buchanan once said, "Bad theology always leads to bad living." Often, in hiddenness, our flawed thoughts about God are unmasked, and our expectations of God are exposed. Isn't Jesus good? Revelation leads to repentance, and repentance leads to revelation. God reveals what lies within us, so that we can repent, and then He replaces our faulty thinking by revealing what is true about Himself: that He is loving, present, sovereign, strong, trustworthy, holy, eternal, and wise. Revelation leads to repentance, repentance leads to revelation, and revelation leads to our rebuilding. We might prefer an instant download over a season of hiddenness, but God savours process, and He has our maturity in mind, not simply our comfort.

So don't make the mistake I made for so many years. Every time I found myself in a season of hiddenness, I blindly asked for God to

make it end; I was praying against the deep work He wanted to do within me. I wanted different circumstances, and I missed seeing how God could make me different in my circumstances. What I've learned along the way is that we don't have to understand everything that God is doing in hiddenness, what's important is that we trust God in everything.⁹

Conclusion: I want to conclude this morning by sharing a few of my own experiences from our 40 days of prayer. I'll start by saying that I've been enjoying these days, but not in the way that I imagined. I was hoping to be ushered into a deeper experience of God's love, or maybe into a greater sense of His presence...but that's not been the case. Instead, there's been a revealing going on inside me.

It started at home. At a few different points, Naomi has expressed frustration with me. Like many of you, we're trying to juggle two different jobs, kids, work around the house, and our marriage. But I've been checking out when it comes to helping around the house. My selfishness has got in the way of honouring her. As I've been praying during these 40 days, Jesus has been holding up a mirror and allowing me to see what's going on. When we pursue intimacy with Jesus, every part of our life is in play...we pursue Him, so we can become like Him...that includes honouring my wife and being a servant in my home.

A couple of Thursday nights ago, I was at the church for our time of corporate prayer and worship. As I was praying before the evening began, I felt prompted to pray for those people who were wrestling with fear in their lives; I prayed that fear's grip would be broken.

⁹ Cooke, 24.

As Mike and Anne Thicke led us through the evening, they had us wait quietly before the Lord, asking Him to reveal anything that we needed to surrender to Him. Like everyone else, I waited before the Lord, asking what I needed to surrender, and the word “fear” came to mind. And the Spirit reminded me about the prayer I had prayed at the beginning of the evening for those whose lives were subject to fear.

He said to me, *Mark, you are that man! Your fear keeps you from adventure, you're afraid to fall, afraid to risk boldly, afraid to look the fool.* I was struck to the heart, and I began to repent. Not long afterwards, we were led to begin to pray out loud, and I had a sense that the Spirit wanted me to share with everyone, what He had just revealed to me. But not wanting to look foolish, I tried to bargain with Him: *you don't really want me to share that with everyone do you?* And the Spirit replied, *it depends on what kind of a leader you want to be.* I was struck to the heart again, and found the courage to open my mouth.

The revealing has gone deeper since. God has been bringing me face to face with an internal restlessness that has kept me from deeper intimacy with Him. Like a restless child, refusing to be stilled on its parent's lap, there is something in me that is avoiding a deeper embrace of God. Now...can a pastor admit these kinds of things? I suppose it depends on what kind of a pastor I want to be.

I'm just like each of you...well-intentioned but broken, and in need of Jesus' healing touch. Do you long to be transformed? To be mature and complete, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Jesus? This is my desire, and for this reason, I am so thankful for the gift of hiddenness...I could not pursue true intimacy without it.

We may not understand everything God is doing in, around, and through our lives, but we don't have to; He knows what He's doing, and we can trust Him to finish the good work He's begun.

As I invite Linda and the band to come, I want to call you to worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is good. He is faithful. He is all-knowing. He is orchestrating all things for His purpose, including the details of our lives.

As we sing, I want to open the altar to any and all who want to come to pray, or to be prayed for. Our elders, our staff, our prayer ministry teams would love to pray with you this morning. If there is something you want to offer up to the Lord, then come. If you are feeling tired and weary, then come. If you want to embrace the hiddenness you find yourself in, and find God in the middle of it...then come. Don't be shy...come, and you'll find a willing brother or sister who will pray with you.