

Paul Lawler: Al, it's so good to be with you today and I'm really thankful not only for a new year, but the spirit in which we have the privilege of entering this new year. And hopefully today what we share will be helpful to those that listen, in terms of how their heart is postured with the opportunities that God is going to bring before us in this new year.

Al Henson: And it's really great to be with you always Paul, as a brother and fellow servant of the Lord, but I'm thinking also how wonderful it is to be with this sister, this brother that's clicked on and listening, and thank you. And as we enter this new year, we want to pick back up on some major subjects and themes that we had in the fall, the theme of transformation and then the understanding of brokenness and how that related to transformation. We'd like to pick up that theme as we start this new year.

This last week I had the joy of sharing some of my story, which is really God's story. It's a story of God's grace, and I'm thankful for the love and grace that God has shown me. And I remember, Paul, in my early twenties I used to think about God's grace and I would think about, "I want God's grace to do this so I can accomplish this or I can accomplish that in the kingdom." And slowly that became secondary because I realized that what God wanted and desired is a man that would love him. And out of that love relationship with God and intimacy with God, then we could work together and walk together and war together and serve together. Just think of doing that with Jesus. Jesus could be the husband of my wife through me, and Jesus could be the father of my children. And so my priorities continued to form and more pure in that I just simply, the main thing I wanted in my life was that God would make me in his image, as that was his purpose, Romans in chapter eight that I would be conformed to the image of Christ.

And I'm excited that as we enter into this new year, we're going to pick back up on this passion that God's given you and I to speak to this sister, this brother that's listening in and maybe say something or some things that might encourage them onto this path of Christ's likeness. From a selfish person to a loving person, from a foolish person to a wise person, from a prideful person to a humble person, to an impure person to a person of purity. And so I'm glad that we can be together and talk about some subjects today that would guide us in that direction.

Paul Lawler: Well Al, so am I. And you know, there's a thought that really comes out of a scripture that's quoted a lot at Christmas, rightfully so, but Matthew 1:23. And as we enter a new year, the awareness that God in Christ is Emmanuel, God with us. And that's a reality that has ongoing implications for us today in doing life and in ministry. And so as we journey together day, and you were sharing about your experience of God's grace last week in sharing your story, I'm aware that there are people who are listening right now who also want to taste God and experience his transformation in a way that's tangible and real, just as you experienced. It's not that people are going to become your story, because all of our stories are unique, but you've given us a signpost in what you shared last week.

Al Henson: It's interesting Paul, even the name Emmanuel, it is God who actually gave us these names or titles. And often, it was God was wanting to say some things, not just one, but maybe several things to us. And as you shared, in the Christmas season and all, we think

a lot about Emmanuel, God with us. We sing some songs about that. And I'd like to dive into that just a moment. What was God trying to say? I think the first thing that God was trying to say is that, "I want to be with you."

You know, sin has marred our souls, and marred our thinking, and marred our emotions and our feelings. And one of the purposes of sin, and fear and shame that it creates, its voices, its tenets that it puts within our soul, is to drive us out of the presence of God. And often we're thinking that, "What do I do to get into God's presence?" And we've got all of these various kinds of things we need to do to get into God's presence. And Emmanuel comes right at the heart of God. It says, I can hear God saying, "Wait a minute. You need to go back and read Genesis. I created you. I created Adam and Eve because I wanted create creatures like you that were in my image that I could be with. I wanted to walk with you in the garden. I wanted to talk with you. I wanted to hold your hand."

So we don't have to convince God that, to be with us. He's told us by his name that he wants to be with us. And secondly, he's saying to us, "Not only do I want to be with you, but I want to remind you who it is that wants to be with you." God, the all loving one, all wise one, all powerful one wants to be with us. So just as you're listening, I hope that encourages you. You don't have to run to God, just turn and he's there waiting to be with you in intimacy and in experience in the fellowship.

Paul Lawler: That's so good. And Al, I'm mindful that there are probably people listening right now who are not only soaking in these words, but also as they soak in these things that are being shared, there is a hunger in their heart to experience God's presence, his manifest presence. And there's a couple of things today that come to mind from scripture, but also intersect some experiences that we've all had that align with scripture. And that's that relationship between loving Jesus and obeying Jesus. You may remember those words that Jesus shared in John 14:21, "He who loves me keeps my commandments." But he also went on to say, "He who loves me and obeys me, that we will manifest ourselves to him." And we see that he's speaking of the fullness of the Godhead. And so we recognize in love relationship with God, that as we obey that there there's also this heightened intimacy, the presence of God, the power of God that Jesus describes in John 14.

Al Henson: And as I listened to you, Paul, my mind goes back to some of my thoughts I had as a young person, as a teenager listening to that which is so true. But it's interesting, we will put the emphasis sometimes upon, "Oh, I have to obey." And notice again what he says. "If you love me, you will obey me. If you love me, you'll keep my commandments." And what I hear him saying there, "Just love me and experience my love. And then out of that love relationship, you won't have to get up and force yourself to obey me, or make yourself to keep my commandments. You will want to." And I put that back in. You know, my wife Susan and I, we've been married... I'd better get this right in case she's listening in. So I have to go back in my mind. It's 2020, right? So this year we will be married 47 years. It's 46 and a half right now. But you know, I've never had to force myself to want to be around her.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: I've never had to force myself to want to be with her, to want to talk to her. And I've never really had to force myself to want to do some things that would bless her. Why? Because love. And I think this is what Jesus is saying, "Experience the love of God, and then we will love each other and that love will move us to obedience." And I think what John will clarify that and say, "If you're not obeying, don't focus on, you're not obeying. Focus on that you're not loving."

Paul Lawler: That's good.

Al Henson: "And if you're not loving, focus on that maybe you have not yet received the love of God." And this is what the beloved apostle John, the way he would carry us through our thinking. So if we're talking about transformation and intimacy, we have to go back to, "Oh, what I really need to do is to get with Emmanuel, a God who wants to be with me, and say, 'God, show me your love.'"

Paul Lawler: Yeah. That's so good. You know, it's one of those passages, again, where it's important that we not just hear the words, but the spirit in which the words were expressed. And I'm with you. I agree that Jesus may have said it like this: "If you love me, you'll obey my commands."

Al Henson: Yeah. I like that. Yeah.

Paul Lawler: Yeah. It's a fruit of love relationship, of being in the presence of God who is with us.

Al Henson: Yeah. You know, love is, at its heart it's a decision. It's a commitment. But it's very emotional. You cannot deny the passion and emotion of love, even God's love as well as human love and filial love. And so this passion drives us, but I might say also it fulfills us.

Paul Lawler: That's good. Oh, that's so good.

Al Henson: When you're experiencing God's love, your desire for so many other things wanes down and becomes small comparatively. And this is what Jesus was meaning. And just to repeat, so people hear that. Here's what the apostle John, if he were sitting with you, I think this is what. "Are you obeying God?" John, no, I'm not. "Oh. Then you don't love. And that's okay." Oh, I don't love. And then John would say, "Yes. And you know why you don't love? Because you've not yet experienced the love of God." And I would take a step back from that. What I understand about the nature of sin and the operation of sin and the mysterious work that powerful sin had against our souls, the shame of it and the fear of it is driving us out of the presence of God. Sometimes I like to say, I look at a brother and I just sweep. I say, "He is shamed out of God's presence." So sin is trying to keep us from a God who created us, who is Emmanuel, who declares by his very name, "I want to be with you."

Paul Lawler: That's so good. And as you cited, desires, he had desires to be with us. And then what about for the person who's listening, who wants to deepen their love relationship with

God? How might we encourage that person today? And you mentioned sin and its effects around fear and shame, but how might we encourage that person who says, "I hear this, this makes sense to me. Now how do I posture my heart in a way that my love relationship with God deepens, in his presence deepens in my life?"

Al Henson: That's a great question. Faith certainly is required at the heart level. We see that all in scripture. But some people think that faith is the absence of fear. And it's not. I think of David coming against Goliath. There's no doubt David was shaking in his boots. But even though he was shaking in his boots, he did not let fear prevent him from having the faith to obey God and to go against Goliath. And so sometimes intimacy with God, or drawing near God, is like a Goliath in our lives and we're afraid. And so I would say to this brother, sister listening in, it's okay to know, "God, I understand theologically that you love me, but there's a part of my soul that is actually afraid of love. And the reason why my soul is afraid of love is because people have said they love me and then they hurt me. And life has somewhat taught me that love to be afraid to love or to be loved. And so God, I'm afraid."

Just say it to God. And that goes back to one of the podcasts we had about coming before God with an unveiled face and having enough faith to trust God. And this is why I started in my early twenties, is I really was hungering and thirsting after the Lord. I came before God and I just got honest. I said, "God, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm actually sitting out here under this tree alone and I'm sure glad nobody's watching me because this feels a little awkward, God. This feels like I'm sitting out here talking to the wind. But by faith, God, I believe you're here. I believe you are Emmanuel. I believe you are God with me. And so I don't know what I'm doing. I feel awkward, I'm uncertain, I'm afraid. I'm actually afraid that if you did show up, what you might not do, but I'm going to trust that your love and grace and mercy..."

And so my advice, then is to do that. Whether it be what we would term prayer or what would it be in with the Bible. And I remember, sometimes I would fast and then in prayer and the Bible trying to get along with God. But he did say this, Paul. He said, "If you seek me, you'll find me. If you seek me with your whole heart, and if you seek me with an unveiled face." And what happens is I did begin to find him some. A little, and then that got me hungry enough and my faith grew a little to continue this. And until sometimes my wife would say to me, "You need to come out of the woods every once in a while," because it became such a wonderful, quiet place before the Lord.

Paul Lawler: You know, as you share that, there's a story that I'm reminded of, Al. And it's really a great commission story. Now before I share it, I want to validate this, that I'm not about to say that the only way to experience God's presence is to go fulfill the great commission. I realize that the scripture has much more broad band around the topic of experiencing God's presence than only fulfilling the great commission. But there was a woman in our church, she taught middle school. And aside from teaching middle school students, her personality was shy, timid. And she became a Christian. She got saved, born again. And in her quiet time, she began, as she's reading the scripture, began hearing the voice of God leading her to take a mission trip into Asia to share the gospel with a team there. And she met with me several times and was really struggling because

in her own strength, she was afraid. But yet she would get alone with God and pray and really sense God's leading.

So I'm going to move quickly to her time in Asia. So she's with a team and she goes into a village and she shares the gospel with the translator. And she watches persons who've never heard the name of Jesus before come to Christ as she's serving alongside indigenous pastors. And God uses her. And when she got back to the States, she said, "I can't stop weeping." And I said, "Tell me why. Tell me why." She says, "It's God's presence and his heart for these people, and I've been so awakened."

And her name was Sandra. I have permission to use her name. And I said, "Sandra, did you notice in Matthew 28, that this is one of the places where the great commission is listed? Not the only one." I said, "Did you notice that the scripture says that as you follow Jesus in fulfilling the great commission, that he is with you? And do you not think that if God is going to be with you, you're going to know it? It's not just going to be a theological concept, but he would make his love, his presence known to you as well as people who are being birthed into the kingdom." Now I share that, again, not to say that that's the only way we experience Emmanuel, but I do say it to illustrate this wedding between what you described in prayer and fasting and knowing him through his word, wed with our following him, in joining him to be with him in fulfilling his mission, and knowing joy in him, his person, really experiencing him as we do so. Does that make sense?

Al Henson: Absolutely. Yeah. It's good, Paul, that it's not an either or. One leads to the other, which leads to the one, which leads back to the other.

Paul Lawler: Oh, I like that.

Al Henson: Yeah, love leads to obedience, and obedience leads to more love, and more love leads to more obedience. It's interesting, to strengthen what you've just said, is that Jesus' commandment is, "Go." And as you said, "Lo, I am with you always." So the commandment is for us to go with him. That's the secret. Go with him. And I would say that most of the things I've learned about God and understood about God, apart from praying and Bible study and those kinds of things, has been while I am going and walking with him. And I know our time is coming toward an end here. And one of the things we shared in some of the earlier podcasts, back in answering the question to this brother that's listening or the sister that's listening, I like to give some kind of structure to something. And Paul and are calling this highway of transformation, this highway of spiritual growth, we're calling it the grace highway.

And so if you could picture in your mind with me a highway, and Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." So this grace highway, grace is all that Jesus is available, all that I need. And this is a two lane highway that you've got to walk on with Jesus. One lane is the transformation of your heart, the willingness to be able to be with God and to see your heart. The beautiful, glorious being that you are created in his image, but also that marred part of your heart. That part that's so full of pride that needs to be pride taken away and filled up with humility and brokenness, part of your heart that is

selfish, that needs to be taken away and filled up with love. That part of your heart that is foolish, where it needs to be replaced with wisdom, and impurity that needs to be placed with a pure heart, and an unbelieving heart full of lies and bondages that needs to be replaced with a believing, free heart. That's one lane that as you walking with God on this grace highway with Emmanuel, God with us, he wants you to see your heart in the power of the gospel. He wants to change that.

The other lane is the lane of disciplines. As you study through all of church history, read of all of the men of God, they talk about the needs for disciplines. We have to be careful there, because they can become works. This is not a works highway-

Paul Lawler: So good.

Al Henson: This is a grace highway. So the disciplines of prayer, the disciplines of fasting, the discipline of Bible study and reading and memorization, the discipline of obedience, as you ever so emphasized well, in the teachings of Jesus, and then the discipline of community, of being in unity and oneness and fellowship with our brothers and sisters serving God together, through obedience together. Those five disciplines. Those five don't change us. Those five disciplines bring us into proximity to Christ. That's what you were talking about. This lady, she obeyed and it brought her into more of experiential proximity of Christ and his heart and his ways, and that with the coupling of seeing where we need to be transformed in our heart, these two highways, then the power of the gospel, the gospel of grace changes us and transforms us.

And I would like our listener to maybe even write that down or get out and draw your highway out and put the two lanes there. And this is the grace highway, and put in each lane what needs to be there as they follow us through in the podcast into the future.

Paul Lawler: I so appreciate that analogy, because it gives us handles of appropriating the very presence of Christ Emmanuel, God in us. And so it's with that in mind that perhaps we could take some time to pray for the listener today as we wrap up.

Al Henson: Yes. Before I pray, I always like take away. Take away the thought of Emmanuel and what God meant by that. Two things he meant. "I really, really want to be with you." Secondly, remember who it is that wants to be with you, and this powerful, beautiful creature that wants to be with you. And then thirdly, remember the grace highway, the two lanes. And remember those things.

Our father, we thank you that you're not limited. And through this recording, there's this brother now that's been listening, there's this sister that's been listening, and we asked now in the name of Jesus that you would give them clarity and understanding of the things that have been shared about you God, Emmanuel, God with us. And we pray that you would revelate this into their hearts. And bless them, we pray, with a knowledge of you and the peace that you are leading and guiding them. And that transformation is your work, they just need to trust you and walk with you in it. In Jesus' name, amen.

Paul Lawler: Amen. Amen.