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ENCOUNTERING GOD FOR SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGH

To Touch God and Be Touched By Him

By
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Presented to

Regal Books

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ENCOUNTERING GOD FOR SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGH

Introduction: Encountering God To Transform Your Life

Chapter 1: Abraham: Becoming A Friend With God.
Encounter . . . based on friendship.

On a hot day, God visited Abraham's tent to fellowship with him. Abraham was so intimate with God that even God wouldn't keep a secret from Abraham.

Chapter 2: Jacob: I have Seen God Face To Face.
Encounter . . . out of fear.

Jacob wrestled all night with God and wouldn't let Him go. Because of his tenacity, God blessed Jacob and changed his name to Israel, i.e., Prince with God.

Chapter 3: Moses: The Servant of God.
Encounter . . . out of frustration.

God said Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth, yet Moses boldly asked to see God's glory. When he saw the backside of God, his face shone for 40 days.

Chapter 4: Gideon: A Reluctant Leader.
Encounter . . . out of weak self-image.

Gideon was at the bottom of the social ladder and filled with self-doubt when he encountered God. Because of that experience, Gideon was able to drive the enemy out of his homeland.

Chapter 5: Elijah: Hearing God's Small Voice
Encounter . . . out of discouragement.

Elijah ran into the desert because Queen Jezebel threatened to kill him. He encountered God, not in mighty force to destroy the evil rule of Jezebel, but God came to him in a still, small voice to send Elijah back into service.

Chapter 6: Isaiah: Prophet for God.
Encounter . . . when dreams are destroyed.

Isaiah put his dreams in a king who died, then he saw the Lord. That encounter, changed him forever, and he became God's prophet who wrote one of the most beautiful books in the Bible.

Chapter 7: Jeremiah: Weeping for God.

Encounter . . . to be built up for service.

God set Jeremiah apart for ministry from His mother's womb. At age 21 God encountered to call him to a ministry of rejection and persecution.

Chapter 8: Ezekiel: Seeing Visions for God.
Encounter . . . for a new calling.

Ezekiel was a priest who was trained for Temple service, but He encountered God in a vision where he saw extraordinary sights. Out of that encounter, he became a prophet who communicated a vision of Israel's future Temple.

Chapter 9: The Woman with the Issue of Blood.
Encounter . . .for healing.

A woman thought a slight touch of the hem of Jesus' coat would heal her, but she was encountered by Jesus to learn that it was her faith that made her whole.

Chapter 10: Mary Magdalene: Taught by Christ.
Encounter . . . to learn spiritual relationship.

Mary came to the garden to care for a dead corpse. When she saw Jesus, she hung on to His physical feet to renew the love she had for Jesus before the cross. In an encounter with Christ, she learned that she would relate to Him in "the Spirit" in the future.

Chapter 11: Peter: A Backslider Restored.
Encounter: . . . to be restored to service.

Peter denied the Lord through boasting and pride. After breakfast on a beach, Jesus restored him to service and he became a bold preacher on the day of Pentecost.

Chapter 12: Paul: Becoming a Follower of Christ.
Encounter . . . to change the mind.

Paul hated Christians, yet encountered Christ on the road to Damascus where his life was transformed. Paul received his commission from this experience.

Chapter 13: John: Writing for Christ.
Encounter . . . to worship Christ.

While imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos, John encountered the transfigured Jesus where he received a message regarding the future of the world. From that encounter, John wrote the book of The Revelation.

Epilogue: Your blueprint for an encounter with God.

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INTRODUCTION

ENCOUNTERING GOD TO TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

The idea of this book came to me on the 39th day of a 40-day fast. In this fast, I was asking God to show me what to write in a book to bless the lives of His church. I met an editor who asked what was the greatest answer to prayer during my fast. I had something better; I answered,

"I've learned to know God . . . I've met God."

"Why don't you write how people can encounter God?" he suggested.

I wrote this book, then sent the manuscript to this editor. He read it, then suggested the book needed one additional item.

"Readers will want to know about your encounter with God," he told me. "Include an encounter you've had with God, it will give credibility to the book."

ENCOUNTERING GOD FOR SALVATION

When I was in the first grade, a door-to-door salesman invited me to Sunday School, he picked me up in his Jewell Tea Coffee truck to take me to Sunday School. I never missed for the next fourteen years. I learned the Bible and each week memorized the Golden Scripture text. I memorized the Children's Catechism. I didn't have the experience of alcohol, drugs, or crime before my conversion. I was a typical southern boy who grew up doing the typical things that American boys do.

All the young people in our youth group joined the church on Easter Sunday, 1944. We were asked if we believed in the great fundamental doctrines of the faith.

"I believe . . ." was my response . I accepted the death of Jesus as fact, just as I accepted all the truth taught me in public school.

I joined the Presbyterian Church, took communion; and did all the things that Presbyterians are supposed to do. The only problem, I did not know Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. In July 1950, I attended a revival meeting in a small Presbyterian church in Bonnabella, Georgia. The atmospheric presence of God was felt in that revival during the singing and

preaching; but especially when the invitation was given. When people experienced the presence of God, they went to the church altar where they prayed to receive Christ.

Revival swept through the community. The rural mailman attended the service, went forward to kneel at the altar and prayed to receive Christ. As the meeting came to an end, he stood before the congregation to say that he knew most everyone present by name. He announced to that congregation,

"I joined a Baptist church, sang in the choir, was a deacon and was the Sunday School superintendent; but tonight I was born-again."

The mailman explained that there were 23 churches on his route, and he didn't feel anything special from them as he delivered mail each day, except he felt something from this church. He confessed,

"About a half a block away, I could feel something special about this church," he claimed it was the presence of God. "As I drive away from this church I could feel it going away." The mailman was describing what some call the atmospheric presence of God. There are times in worship or evangelistic services when people can feel the presence of God.

On July 25—during the second week of the crusade—no one went forward. It was the first evening no one prayed to receive Christ. There was genuine disappointment because they thought God didn't work in hearts that evening. The pastor came down in front of the communion table to announce,

"Somebody here should have come forward this evening . . ." he paused to let his words sink in. He seemed to be speaking directly to me, "You were embarrassed to come forward . . . even though you know God was telling you to become a Christian . . ."

I was dumbfounded because he described my feelings. During the invitational hymn, I felt God telling me to go forward to get saved. But I struggled with the Lord telling him,

"I already was a Christian . . . I had joined the church . . . I had believed *that* Jesus died for me." I didn't realize that a person could have a historical belief about Jesus without possessing Jesus Christ as Savior. The pastor then told us,

"If you were supposed to come forward tonight and were afraid . . ." he paused to tell us what to do, "I want you to go home, kneel by your bed, look into heaven, tell Jesus you have never done it before, then ask Jesus into your heart."

Standing toward the back of the auditorium, I determined to do what he said when I got home, but I changed my mind. Before getting into bed, I knelt to pray the Lord's Prayer; then got in bed. But I couldn't go to sleep because I felt guilty for not doing what I needed to do. I got out of bed to pray,

"Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord, my soul to take."

It was the prayer I had prayed as a child on a number of occasions; the prayer taught to me by my mother. I got back into bed but couldn't go to sleep. God was talking to me, telling me to do what the minister asked. On two or three more occasions that night I got out of bed, each time to pray the Lord's Prayer or, to pray, "Now I lay me down . . ."

In my head I kept saying I was a Christian because I had joined the church and I had historical faith in Jesus Christ. Finally, I knelt by my bed, looked up into heaven willingly prayed what the pastor told me to do. I prayed sincerely,

"Lord, I've never done it before . . ."

When I honestly came to the conviction that I was not saved . . . and told God I was not saved . . . I felt the horror of Hell. It was as though I looked over a wall into Hell and felt its terror. For just a few seconds I felt fear unlike anything I felt before. I felt the fear of Hell. Then quickly I prayed, "Lord Jesus come into my heart and save me . . ." Electricity went through me, I knew that I had put my faith into Jesus Christ, and I knew I was going to heaven. Jesus was real to me, not physically in my bedroom, but He was alive in my heart. I felt peace, like I had never felt security. I also felt excitement. I whispered a shout,

"AMEN . . . HALLELUJAH . . . PRAISE THE LORD_"

I jumped to my feet, lifted one hand to heaven in whispered praise. I couldn't talk out loud because my father was in the next bed drunk, so I whispered my shouts to God,

"I AM SAVED . . ."

I could feel the presence of Jesus, and I talked to Him. I sang a hymn silently,

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found;

Was blind but now I see.

This manuscript tells the story of people in the Bible who encountered God—some of the encounters resulted in their conversion. Saul was an enemy of God until he met Jesus Christ on a road to Damascus. Gideon was probably like me, a person who knew religious language and religious practices, but was converted when he encountered God. But there were other occasions in my life where I encountered God and changed my plans.

ENCOUNTERING GOD FOR DIRECTION

I had been teaching in a Bible college for three years when I woke up violently in the middle of a black night. Something was wrong. I had been comfortably sleeping, but suddenly I began to sweat all over.

"Lord, what is it?"

The Lord was in the room, not physically, nor did I see a vision, nor did I hear an audible voice; but I knew that the Lord was standing by my bed to warn me of something.
I immediately thought of a burglar and that gave me an additional fear. Then I thought perhaps a fire, or someone I knew was in danger or dying. I prayed several times,

"Lord, what are you trying to tell me?"

Then the Lord spoke to my heart telling me not to take the new job I had just accepted. Just a few days earlier, I had resigned my job teaching in a Bible college to join the National Sunday School Association to travel to different denominations and Sunday School conventions to challenge people with a vision of Sunday School. It was a perfect job . . travel . . . influence . .

. ministry in many churches . . . a national influence. But as I lay in bed, I knew God was telling me,

"Don't take the Sunday School job."

I wrestled with the Lord in my bed because I knew the Sunday School job had great potential. It would be exciting, I would be well known, and I would influence a lot more people than teaching at Midwest Bible College, St. Louis, that had only 150 students at that time.

"Don't take the job . . ." God kept saying.

As I wrestled with God in my bed, I reviewed my long-range priorities. I asked myself what were my long-range priorities? I also asked what were my strongest gifts and how I could make the greatest contribution with my life. I confessed to the Lord that I was ego driven. I wanted to be a college president. Ever since I was a freshman in Bible college, I wanted to be a Bible college president. I had rationalized that the fame I would get from the new position of traveling for Sunday School would open up a door into a Bible college somewhere, sometime. But every time I talked to God, I got the same feeling,

"Don't take the Sunday School job . . ."

After a couple of hours of praying, I surrendered before the Lord. I told Him that fame was not important. I surrendered my reputation, and even said, "God if I never become a Bible college president, Thy will be done!"

When I finally surrendered my will to God, I thought I heard God say,

"Don't take the Sunday School job . . . but within a year I will give you a college presidency."

By faith I accepted God's will for my life, I signed a contract at Midwest Bible College for the coming year. I resigned the new position with the National Sunday School Association.

ENCOUNTER WITH GOD FOR A CALL TO MINISTRY

Six months later I had an encounter with God that changed my direction of ministry. Just as Jeremiah had his ministry changed, as did Isaiah and Ezekiel; I heard from God in an unusual way. On a snowy, winter day, I had taken a longer way home from the college, driving past my

church, Hope Congregational Church. I saw tracks in the snow up the front drive, and as I passed the church, I looked back to see that the pastor's car in his usual parking spot. I turned around to go back just to chat. After a few minutes of talking, I told Pastor Robert Macmillan,

"I want to be a Bible college president someday."

Macmillan was very close to the ministry of Midwest Bible College and had served on several committees at the college. He immediately reinforced my life-long goal,

"That's wonderful . . ." he was more vocal than I expected. "A man like you has the drive and ability to be a Bible college president. I think you'll make a wonderful college president."

The phone rang.

Dr. Stuart Boehmer, a pastor in Toronto, Canada, was on the line. Boehmer was a close friend with Robert Macmillan. After they greeted one another with pleasantries, Boehmer asked Macmillan,

"Do you know where we can find a young man to be president of Winnipeg Bible College?"

"Your man is sitting right here . . ." Macmillan said into the phone.

Sometimes in the pre-determined will of God, there is no such thing as a coincidence; all things work together for the purpose of God. The chairman of Winnipeg Bible College, Manitoba, had driven 1,200 miles to Toronto looking for a Bible college president. While I was talking about being a college president, the Bible college chairman, Frank Frogley was asking Stuart Boehmer to help find a college president. So, Stuart Boehmer said to Macmillan,

"I have a man here in my office that is looking for a president. . ." he suggested to Macmillan. "Let's put them on the phone together and see if it's a match."

For approximately 20-30 minutes, Frank Frogley and I discussed Winnipeg Bible College. We discussed strategy, purpose, theology . . . but most of all we discussed the will of God. While we were talking on the phone, I could hear the voice of God whispering in my other ear,

"See . . . I told you that if you wouldn't take the Sunday School job, I'd have a college presidency for you within a year."

Before the conversation was over, I knew God would give the presidency to me. Then as a seal from God, Frank Frogley concluded the conversation,

"You're my man . . . I am getting in my car tomorrow morning to drive to St. Louis to interview you."

The board at Winnipeg Bible College had rejected a number of candidates but when Frank Frogley recommended me; I got the position.

My experience of encountering God is probably not an example that may happen to you. We are all different . . . different personalities . . . different callings . . . different backgrounds . . . different purposes in life. God meets us differently, and God leads us differently. There's not a perfect way to experience God, so be careful that you don't try to emulate my encounter, nor should you try to do the exact things of others who have encountered God.

I've included 13 stories in this book of people in the Bible who encountered God. You can rely on their truthfulness because the stories are from the Bible. Also, you will learn how to encounter God because the stories are from God.

You can know God like Abraham, who encountered God and was called the friend of God, i.e., *el Kahil.* The encounter changed Abraham's life, it was so awesome . . . life-changing . . . revolutionary, . . . you can learn from his encounter with God and walk with God.

EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

A few encounter God,

Most will not,

Will you?

Learn how Moses' face shone for 40 days after he encountered God. Learn how Jacob limped for the rest of his life, after encountering God. Something died when Paul met Jesus

Christ on the road to Damascus. After his encounter with Christ, Paul faced death so many times . . . beatings . . . shipwrecks . . . stoning . . . robbery . . . he lived as though he didn't fear death, because the old Paul died when he encountered Christ. A new Paul unselfishly served the Lord after that experience. Learn how you can fearlessly stare death in the face like Paul?

Would you like to meet Christ in a cool morning garden like Mary Magdalene? Look for biblical principles at the end of each chapter to guide your experience with God.

What does it mean to encounter God?

The best way to describe an encounter with God, is to tell you what it is not. An encounter is not just praying to God. An encounter may happen when you pray, but it's infinitely more, and usually only once—or at least a few times—in a life-time.

An encounter is not just meeting with God for your daily quiet time, although you will meet with God many times in your life. An encounter is life changing, because the presence of God will become so extraordinarily real. The encounter will include some momentous circumstances that will not happen again.

An encounter is not a place where you worship God, such as a chapel, or at the altar during camp meeting. An encounter is not just His anointing on your service. Nor is an encounter an insightful result of Bible study. However, an encounter will happen at some location, you will be anointed because of it, and you will receive great insights from it.

Some encounter God at the beginning of a life of profitable service, i.e., Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Others encounter God at the end of a life faithfully serving God, i.e., John on Patmos.

Some will refuse to read this book because they wrongly think God only encounters the "good guys." They will wrongly think they can't experience God because they don't live close to God. But look closely at the incidents in this book. You may encounter God no matter how unspiritual you are. Jacob was still trying one more "trick" to get out of trouble when he encountered God. Elijah was discouraged, he was running from his enemies when God turned him around. Peter had boasted about his boldness, then denied Christ three times. After being

utterly disgraced, Peter encountered Christ. And don't forget about the Christian-bashing Paul who encountered Christ on the Damascus road. What does this mean?

You can encounter God!

All the encounters in this book were at different places and at different times, and involved different motivations. Study each one carefully to find comparisons and similarity between them. In each experience, God and a person meet. Don't try to duplicate their experiences, rather study carefully the encounters to find principles that will help you encounter God for your personal needs. (The principles of encountering God are found in the Epilogue.)

If you read these stories and think you cannot encounter God in this life—read the Epilogue. There is a prescription for you to encounter God. Anyone may encounter God, even you.

Along with reading these stories, go study the Scriptures where these encounters took place. Look up the geographical places in a Bible dictionary. Study the personality to know their strengths, weaknesses, and dreams. It may be that in your Bible study that you will meet God face-to-face.

These encounters are written in modern dialogue to help you feel the emotions of each experience. While not every conversation and activity are included in Bible narrative, they come out of the historical background of each story. The Bible is interpreted according to evangelical scholars' understanding of each event.

This book was written after the 40-day fast was over, but I learned much of its lessons long before I fasted. I've been studying the Bible diligently since I was converted in 1950. So this book is the result of a life-long pilgrimage to understand what it means to encounter God.

May God bless this book and use what is useful. May God forgive the limitations of this book for they are mine alone. May God bless you as you read and may you "Know God, and make Him known."

Written from my home at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia,

Elmer Towns

Dr. Jack Hayford, Pastor
Church On The Way
Van Nuys, California

We stood in silent awe, sensing God's presence as shafts of sunlight arrowed through the gracefully arched windows high in the vaulted towers of the vacant abbey. The British countryside was welcoming another summer's morn as we ambled through the partially restored ruins of this ancient house of worship . . . For two weeks, my wife Anna and I had been probing the corners of Scotland, Wales and England in our tiny rental car, setting our own pace as we drove from place to place . . . we chose a leisurely pace, visiting castles and cottages at our whim. On a side trip we made into Oxfordshire, an illusive sense of "the grand, the regal and the noble" came by surprise, and included a lesson I hadn't expected and resulted in a song I hadn't sought . . . Blenheim Palace is the massive estate built at Queen Anne's orders in the early eighteenth century. She presented it to John Churchill, the first duke of Marlborough, in honor of his leadership in the military victories against Spain. Two centuries later, Winston Churchill would be born and raised here, frequently retiring to this site for rest from the rigors of leadership during World War II. It was at Blenheim that many of his stirring speeches were written, speeches that successfully inspired the English people to sustain their efforts at staving off Hitler's Luftwaffe . . . after we passed outside and surveyed the sprawling grounds so meticulously groomed and magnificently flowered, the undefined "feel" now surfaced and blossomed into a clear, complete thought. While overlooking the palace and grounds from the southwest and contemplating Churchill's former presence on the paths and fields, I mused aloud: "Being raised in such an environment would certainly make it far more credible for a person to conceive of himself as a person of destiny."

Even as I stood there, millions of common folk of ordinary means were enthused and excited about celebrating one woman's (Queen Elizabeth) royal ascent a quarter of a century earlier . . . it seemed inescapably linked in some mystical way to the fact that each one perceived himself linked with and personally represented by the one who wears the crown and bears the scepter, a national dignity that flows to the general citizenry from the regal office of a single individual who reigns over them, exercising authority as an ennobled friend rather than as a feudal overlord.

Then a second thought exploded: this is the essence of the relationship Jesus wants us to have with His church! He wants the fullness of His power, the richness of His nature, the authority of His office and the wealth of His resources to ennoble our identity and determine our destiny!

Notwithstanding the deep emotion filling my soul, a holy calm and genuine joy possessed me. Standing there, my gaze sweeping the scene once again—

verdant, lush fields, fragrance of roses everywhere, magnificence in architecture with the stateliness of historical bearing—I gently squeezed Anna's hand.

"Honey, I can hardly describe to you all the things which this setting evokes in me. There is something of a ***majesty*** *in all this, and I believe it has a great deal to do with why people who lived here have been of such consequence in the shaping of history. I don't mean that buildings and beauty can beget greatness, but I do feel that some people fail to perceive their possibilities because of their dismal surroundings."*

As we continued our walk, I spoke further of my concerns with which she agreed. She felt, as I did, a pastoral longing for people to understand the fullness of Jesus, to perceive His high destiny for each of them; to see that our self-realization only comes through a real-realization of Him! How completely and unselfishly He invites us to partnership with Him in His Kingdom. How much of His Kingdom authority He wants to transmit to and through us as a flow of His life, love and healing to a hopeless and hurting world.

Now something expanding and deepening that understanding was welling up within me.

Majesty*.*

The word was crisp in my mind.

Majesty*, I thought. It's the quality of Christ's royalty and Kingdom glory that not only displays His excellence, but which lifts us by His sheer grace and power, allowing us to identify with and share in His wonder.*

As Queen Elizabeth's throne somehow dignifies every Englishman and makes multitudes of others partakers in a commonwealth of royal heritage, our ascended Savior sits enthroned and offers His regal resources to each of us.

Majesty*.*

As a nation rose against the personification of evil in the Nazi scourge, ignited to action by a leader who perceived himself a person of destiny created by a childhood identification with the majestic, so may the Church arise.

The crowds were increasing at Blenheim, and the marvel of the moment seemed no less real for becoming less intimate. "Let's go, Honey," I said, and we started for the car. My soul was still resonating to the sound of a distant chord struck in heaven . . . as Anna and I drove along the narrow highway, the road undulating from one breathtaking view to another, I said to her, "Take the notebook and write down some words, will you, babe?" I began to dictate the key, the musical notes, the time value of each and the lyrics (and she still insists that ***she*** *wrote the song!)*:

Majesty, Worship His Majesty!
Unto Jesus be all glory, honor and praise.
Majesty, Kingdom authority,

Flows from His Throne, unto His own,
His anthem raise.
So exalt, lift up on high the Name of Jesus.
Magnify, come glorify, Christ Jesus the King.
Majesty, worship His Majesty.
Jesus who died, now glorified,
King of all kings.[1]

CHAPTER ONE
ABRAHAM - BECOMING A FRIEND WITH GOD

Encounter . . . based on friendship
Place . . . at a tent in the hills of Judea
Scripture: Genesis 18:1-33

The old man sat cross-legged at the entrance to his great Bedouin tent, the flap to the entrance was propped up as shade to protect him from the blistering sun. His eyes were closed to shut out its blinding reflection. It was hot—120 degrees—too hot for even a slight breeze. A fly buzzed around the old man's face, but the heat made it too uncomfortable to swat it away. No one wanted to move.

Abraham was 99-years-old, the frail leader of two dozen servants who watched over his herds and worked around the camp. Since the fury of the sun was taking its toll, the cattle didn't move, the servants didn't move, any thing that needed to be done could wait for the cool evening breezes.

"Look, Master . . ." a servant disturbed Abraham, pointing down the trail, "three travelers are coming this way."

Abraham's camp was set on top of a hill that gave him a view in every direction. He could even see down into the Jordan River valley, and the Dead Sea some 20 miles away. The highway through the valley ran along the sea into the town of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham could see the whole valley.

"Who are they?" old Abraham asked as he rose, shielding the sun with his hands, "no travelers use this mountain trail . . ."

The main highway between Jericho and Sodom stretched along the Dead Sea in the flat valley, that's where the caravans traveled. Abraham lived in the top of the hills making travel difficult, visitors were rare to Abraham's camp.

"Come . . ." Abraham commanded his servant, he walked briskly down the path to greet the strangers. The camp stirred, all the servants gawked at the visitors, women and children came out of the shade because of the excitement. Everyone liked to entertain travelers, they got caught up on news . . . sometimes they traded fresh food for city wares . . . the women wanted to hear any gossip. Visitors in the camp meant a special banquet tonight.

"Greetings . . ." Abraham's voice cracked as he attempted to yell out to the three visitors. They returned his greetings.

Abraham bowed to travelers in oriental fashion, they acknowledged his response. His ancient bones were brittle, yet Abraham knew the custom of entertaining travelers. Even when his back was stiff, he bowed to the three men as they approached.

"If I have found grace in your sight," Abraham smiled as he spoke, "if you will look on me as your host, I will give you water to drink . . . wash your feet . . . a morsel of bread . . ." Abraham broke off his speech, turning to point to a nearby oak tree. He continued his offer,

"Come rest a while . . . cool off . . . let me prepare an evening meal." Then waiting for a response, Abraham offered," Eat with us, then you can continue traveling." The leader of the three men accepted his hospitality.

"We will eat with you . . ."

Abraham made sure his guests found a comfortable place under the spreading oak tree, then he walked briskly toward his tent, barking orders as he walked through the tent.

"Sarah . . ." he said to his wife, "knead some flour for fresh bread." Then pointing to one of the children, "get butter for the bread, and get plenty of cool milk."

"Abimelech . . ." he said to the foreman over his servants, "prepare a table out under the trees for a banquet . . . get the best cups . . . prepare the table exquisitely."

"Young man . . ." he motioned for a servant to follow him. Old Abraham had a gleam in his eye, and a spring to his step. He went to the corral where a young tender calf was kept. Then choosing the largest one, Abraham instructed,

"Kill this one . . ." then pointing to the smoldering coals, "stoke up the fire to roast the calf for dinner."

Abraham's camp sprang to life, no one paid attention to the heat any longer. When a person is consumed with a task, their comfort seems to take a backseat to their passion. Abraham allowed the visitors to recline in the shade; Abraham didn't disturb their rest. Then finally as the sun began to set, a refreshing breeze stirred in the valley. Crickets began to chirp, Abraham called to them,

"Our meal is ready . . ."

The meal was superb, the warm roasted beef was tender, butter melted on the biscuits. It was a meal fit for a king, the only thing missing was a banquet room in a castle. Little did Abraham realize that the surrounding presence of the large oak tree was the location chosen by God—the King of the Ages—to dine with Abraham. The emerging stars beginning to twinkle in the early evening were the canopy for this banquet hall.

The leader of the three strangers offered appreciation to Abraham for the meal. The children were watching and waiting out of sight because as soon as the guests left the table, the little ones swarmed over the food, eating everything in reach. Shortly Abraham and his guests retired to sit around the fire, the one at the door to Abraham's tent.

The hungry children swarmed.

"Tell us of the world . . ." Abraham began the conversation. But the travelers didn't come to share social news, they had another purpose. The spokesman of the visitors asked,

"Where is Sarah, your wife?"

Abraham nodded toward the tent, he knew his wife Sarah did what all wives did, and she was near the tent door, attempting to listen to their conversation for any news. Finally, Abraham said,

"Sarah is in the tent."

The leader of the group nodded in return, then said, "I will return to your wife the ability to have children." The shock effect on Abraham was indescribable. The leader continued speaking, "Sarah will again be able to bear children. She will conceive and deliver a son."

Abraham's emotions went wild. He wanted a son—one he had never had—Abraham wanted his own son. Quietness surrounded the campfire. The spokesman had just predicted that 99-year-old Abraham was going to have a son by 89-year-old Sarah. The spokesman said He was going to make it happen.

Abraham had obeyed God in Chaldea when God commanded him to leave his homeland and come to this land. Abraham believed God when the Lord told him that he would have more children than grains of sand on the beaches. But that was 24 years ago, Sarah had not conceived, and she had gotten older.

Abraham remembered that 14 years ago he took an Egyptian maid—Hagar—they had a son, but that boy was not the spiritual heir God had promised.

Now Abraham was being told that 89-year-old Sarah would get pregnant and have a son. He was being told Sarah's womb would become young again, like a young maiden.

"How can this happen?" Abraham asked, staring at the red coals becoming brighter as the evening grew darker. After a moment the leader spoke,

"I will return her youth," the stranger said. "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

With that question, Abraham turned his attention to the speaker. The frail old man had been so concerned about himself and his son that he forgot about the One who was speaking to him. Abraham knew that only God could do miracles, only God could turn back the inevitable creeping age in all people. He rationalized,

"Only God does miracles, only God can give us a son." Abraham realized he was entertaining deity in his camp. God had sent His presence in a human form to dine at his table. He believed, but didn't understand.

The two new friends talked, it was an intimate conversation. Very few people get an opportunity to talk with God, to open up their heart to their God. But very few have such deep faith in God that He is able to commune with them, for a conversation with God is two-sided talking. God talks, then you listen. God listens, then you talk.

As Abraham talked with God, he forgot that Sarah was listening in the tent. She heard what the stranger said about her conceiving in her old age. She heard the spokesman tell her husband that she was going to have a son. But she didn't believe it. She had heard many wild tales by men around the campfire. She knew that men boasted . . . and bragged. She didn't take the prediction seriously.

"Ha!" Sarah laughed.

It was not a cute laugh of a woman attracting a man. It was not a laugh of enjoyment, nor was it a laugh of humor. It was a laugh of unbelief,

"Ha!" Sarah laughed.

Sarah knew God promised her husband a son, but she had been barren since her wedding day. Sarah knew that God said Abraham's children would be more than the sand on the beaches, but God never promised her a son. She knew Abraham had faith in God to do anything, but not her. Sarah knew old women didn't have babies, and she was 89-years-old.

"Ha!" Sarah laughed.

God heard Sarah laugh because God is omniscient, God knows everything. Even though Sarah didn't laugh loudly enough to be heard outside the tent, God heard Sarah laugh because God is omnipresent, He is everywhere at the same time. God turned to Abraham, His host to ask,

"Why did Sarah laugh?"

God, who knows the thoughts of all, knew what Sarah said when she laughed, "I'm too old to have a child and Abraham is too old to be its father."

Abraham didn't have an answer, he didn't know Sarah laughed. Abraham didn't hear anything. He got Sarah from the tent. As she approached the fire, she still didn't know what had happened. She didn't know that God heard her laugh, and she didn't know God had asked Abraham why she laughed. She was asked,

"Why did you laugh?"

Before Abraham could explain they were in the presence of God, she tried to deny it. She didn't know that her unbelief was uncovered. She did what more people do when they are caught in an embarrassing situation, she lied. She blurted out her defense.

"I didn't laugh . . ."

"Not so!" the Lord said to Sarah, "you did laugh, it was a sarcastic laugh of unbelief."

What could Sarah say? The One who reveals thoughts, had told Sarah about her laughter, even when no one heard it. Then He reminded her,

"With men this is impossible," it was a statement to stretch their faith, "but with God, nothing is impossible."

There was no discussion that evening of Ishmael, Abraham's son with the Egyptian maid. Even though the blood of Abraham flowed in the veins of Ishmael, he was not the son of promise. God had not promised to bless the world through Ishmael.

The next morning the three travelers said they had to go to Sodom. Abraham stood in his tent door to point to the valley below. He pointed out the highway beside the sea and the city of Sodom.

"You can see the city from here," Abraham told them, "but the trail is difficult to follow." Abraham picked up his walking stick, then announced,

"I'll go with you to make sure you don't get lost."

Abraham and the three visitors began descending the hill toward Sodom. When they were out of sight of Abraham's camp, the spokesman spoke to the two fellow travelers,

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am going to do?"

Abraham and the Lord stood in a small field surrounded by oak trees. The other two left them talking and went on their way to Sodom. Abraham was left alone in the presence of God. The Lord then began to share with Abraham what He intended to do.

"I have heard the cry of the city of Sodom," God told Abraham. What God was going to do was so crucial that He couldn't hide it from Abraham. God continued, "The sin of Sodom is so great that I am going to visit the city to determine if I will judge it." God told Abraham that He would destroy the city if their sin were as great as had been reported.

Abraham was grieved at the thought of Sodom being punished. His married nephew Lot had chosen to live in Sodom, and had children living in the city. Sodom was a city of commerce . . . multitudes lived there . . . a trade center. Abraham knew Sodom was wicked, but he had chosen to live a nomadic life in tents because he wanted to live separately from the people of the cities. Out in the hills, Abraham could pray to God, he was surrounded by creation that reminded him of God, the Creator. He wanted to live separated from the sins of the city . . . drunkenness . . . violence . . . debauchery . . . sexual violence.

As Abraham stood alone before the Lord, the two visitors had gone down the path to check out the city of Sodom. Abraham was stirred in his soul. He didn't know what to say so he said the only thing on his heart,

"Why . . .?"

From his vantage high in Canaan hills, Abraham could look down to see Sodom on the bank of the sea. It was surrounded with green fields where crops were grown and cattle grazed.

"Why . . . destroy a prosperous city?"

Abraham came close to the Lord, dropping to his knees, and then he bowed his face to the ground.

"Please Lord . . ." Abraham slowly formed the words. "Please Lord, don't destroy the city."

Minutes of silence passed between them. Abraham was searching for meaning to his emotions. Words are no good if your heart will not tell you what to say. He bowed silently before God, waiting for the right response to surface in his heart. God knew the struggle of Abraham, He let him wrestle with himself.

"No God . . ." was old Abraham's only words. "Please spare the city!"

Abraham bowed prostrate on the grassy meadow before the human theophany . . . the appearance of God in human form . . . he bowed in holy fear. "Please don't destroy the city." He stretched out his body on the ground . . . face down . . . arms outstretched.

Then Abraham remembered how he bargained with other tribal heads—especially when Abraham didn't know what to say—Abraham tried to get the other person to meet him half way. Then the thought came to Abraham, how many righteous people would it take to save the city? Abraham knew God was going to search Sodom for righteous people—how many would God have to find to save the city?

"If you find 50 righteous people in Sodom . . ." Abraham asked his Lord, "if there are 50, will you spare the city?"

God had told Abraham that the prayers of righteous people in Sodom had come up to Him, so Abraham knew there must be some good people there, there must be good grain among the tares. Abraham knew if there were 50 good people in Sodom, the city could survive. God answered Abraham,

"If I find 50 righteous people in Sodom . . ." this was the condition, "I will not destroy the city if there are 50 righteous there."

Abraham began to think of all the good people in Sodom he knew about, he wondered what would happen if the goal of 50 was not met.

"Would you save the city if You found only 45 . . .?" Abraham asked God to reconsider the bargain they just made. "What would you do if you found only 45?"

When bargaining for the life of people, Abraham didn't consider his comfort, nor did he consider it emotionally embarrassing. When praying to God, one must be concerned only with God. Then God answered,

"I will spare Sodom if I find only 45 righteous."

The same thing happened again in Abraham's mind; he again experienced the same doubts. "Suppose there are not 45 good people in Sodom?" Abraham voiced his concern with inner fear. He dared not look up into the face of the One to whom he prayed.

"Will you save Sodom for 40 righteous souls?"

Abraham had sacrificed a lamb to God on a regular basis, he had confessed his sins and prayed to God but on these occasions he didn't hear the audible voice of God. However, on certain other occasions, Abraham talked audibly to God. He heard God speak and God carried on a conversation with him, but he didn't see God. This was different. Now God had visited him. Now he saw God . . . talked to God . . . listened to God . . . he begged God for mercy. Abraham not only prayed to God, he saw a human form that walked, ate and talked. He saw a human expression that had godly characteristics. God answered Abraham,

"I will spare the city if I find only 40 righteous souls."

The ever-present doubt again popped into Abraham's mind. He wondered if there were only 30 in the city, would God spare the city. With great reluctance, Abraham again prayed, thinking he was asking too much. But he asked anyway,

"Will you spare the city for 30 righteous souls?"

"I will spare Sodom for 30 righteous souls," a patient God responded to the persistent request of an aging patriarch that was more concerned with people, than he was about embarrassing himself before God. So Abraham repeated the process asking God to spare the city for 20 righteous people. God agreed.

Abraham realized he knew little about the city of Sodom, but he knew that Lot, his wife and four daughters lived there. If the four daughters were married, there would be 10 family

members in the city, "Surely they will be righteous . . ." the naïve Abraham thought to himself. He would make one more request,

"If you find only 10 righteous in the city . . ." Abraham didn't want to stretch the patience of God to the breaking point. "Will you spare the city if you find 10 righteous people?"

"I will spare the city if I find 10 righteous people," the Lord said to Abraham.

Abraham stopped at 10, he didn't even think of asking again. When Abraham began praying, he asked for God to spare the city if He found 50 people, then Abraham got down to 10. Never in his mind did Abraham think God couldn't find 10 good people in Sodom.

Abraham stopped praying, he drew his hands under his body and used them to push himself up off the earth. His joints creaked and his feeble knees were weak, but with effort he was able to stand.

Abraham returned home thinking he had saved the city of Sodom, but there were not 10 righteous in the city. Later he saw the thick yellow smoke cloud rising from the burning city. He didn't recognize the yellow smoke from burning sulfur, nor did he recognize the stinging acid smell of brimstone that drifted up into the hills. But he did know that God had destroyed the city of Sodom.

Abraham knew the Lord was true to His Word, for His promises to destroy a sensuous city was just as true as His promise that he would have a son. Abraham had sex with his wife Sarah and she conceived and gave birth to Isaac. The name Isaac means *laughter*, to remind them both that God keeps his promises, even when his people laugh in unbelief, God is faithful.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Abraham is the only person in the Bible that God calls his friend. Because of his faith in God, Abraham walked with God and talked with God. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day" (John 8:56). Jesus was probably referring to the day when Abraham interceded before Him. God kept His promises, Abraham became the Father of the Jewish nation, with the children of Israel as numerous as the sands of the seashores.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *God encounters us at unexpected times*. Abraham didn't expect to see God, at least not this way. When God promised him a son, Abraham did it his way. He took an Egyptian maid Hagar, and had a son Ishmael. But Ishmael was not God's promised son through Sarah.

On the top of a hill, off the beaten path, on a hot afternoon; God encountered Abraham. Obviously, Abraham was not expecting God, but he quickly prepared a meal to feed three travelers. Only later did he later find out that one of them was a physical manifestation of God. It was a Christophany; an appearance of Jesus Christ. Later Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad" (John 8:56). Most scholars agree that this encounter with God was actually the experience when Abraham saw Jesus Christ.

> "You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. *Such* knowledge *is* too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot *attain* it (Psalm 139:5,6 NKJV).

2. *God encounters us for a purpose*. It seems that God had a two-fold purpose in this encounter. First, God wanted to remind Abraham of the promise that he would have a son; and for the first time, God included Sarah in the promise. Her response was not of faith; she laughed in unbelief and was rebuked by God.

The second purpose of this encounter was to tell Abraham about judgment on Sodom. Being a godly man, Abraham immediately interceded before God to save the city and the people of Sodom.

> "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18 NKJV).

3. *Sometimes we are in the presence of God and don't know it*. Apparently Abraham met three strangers, thinking they were just travelers. In Oriental style, he graciously prepared a meal for the travelers. Later the spokesman identified Himself as the one who would return to Sarah her time of life, only then did Abraham begin to understand he was in the presence of God.

Sometimes we are in God's special presence, but don't know it. Do you think you have ever missed an encounter with God when He came to you, but you didn't realize it? When we are in the presence of God and don't realize it, it is only God's grace that He reveals Himself to us and encounters us in our weakness.

> "Their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him (Jesus) . . . He took bread, blessed and broke it . . . then were their eyes opened and they knew Him" (Luke 24:16,31 NKJV).

4. *God recognizes our statements of unbelief*. There were two responses of laughter. In the previous chapter when God told Abraham that he would have a son, the Bible says, "Abraham fell on his face, and laughed" (Genesis 17:17). Abraham's laughter was one of faith, he was glad that God was going to give him a son. However, Sarah's laughter was not of faith, it was motivated by skepticism to express the unbelief of her heart. Even the context of her thoughts describe her vacillation, "Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also?'"(Genesis 18:12).

God immediately recognized her hard heartedness, and asked, "Why did Sarah laugh?" (Genesis 18:13). In grace, God called Sarah to accountability for her laughter. Some of us have laughed at God, or at least been motivated by unbelief, and God leaves us alone. We never realized that we missed an encounter with Him.

> "He (Jesus) did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief" (Matt. 13:58 NKJV).

5. *We forget that God knows exactly what we have said and why we have said it*. Sarah was hiding in the tent, and she thought no one heard her laugh. But God who is omnipresent knows our unbelief because He is everywhere. And God, who is everywhere present, knows our doubt when we don't trust Him.

> "For *there* is not a word on my tongue, *but* behold, O Lord, You know it altogether" (Psalm 139:4 NKJV).

6. *Sometimes we lie to God, forgetting there are two persons to whom we cannot lie; God and ourselves.* When the Lord confronted Sarah about her laughter, she denied it saying, "'I did not laugh; for she was afraid'" (Genesis 18:15). The Bible teaches that all of us lie (Psalm 116:1). But there is a certain irony in anyone's attempt to lie, because the one person you can't lie to is yourself; you know the truthfulness of what you are saying to others and to yourself. The other person to whom you can't lie is God. Because God is truth, he confronted Sarah with her lie. The most gracious thing God can do for us is to use our conscience to help us correct our problem.

> "Take away my habit of lying, and give me a desire to do God's law" (Psalm 119:29 Author's translation).

7. *Those who are friends with God know His heart*. Three times in the Bible Abraham is called a friend of God (II Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23). No other person in the Bible is called a friend of God. Because of this, the Muslims call Abraham *El Kihil,* a friend of God.

Friends do not hide things from friends, so God opened up His heart and told Abraham what He planned to do in Sodom. And what was Abraham's response? Out of a heart broken for people, Abraham—the friend of God—went into the presence of God to intercede for the city and the people.

> "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14,15 NKVJ).

8. *A patient God responds to persistent intercession*. As we see Abraham on his face before God, two qualities are evident. First, the persistence of Abraham that he didn't stop praying too soon. He began asking for God to save the city if he found 50 righteous people. Then Abraham continues interceding until he got the number down to ten.

The second picture we see is a patient God who allows a human to plead before Him for the souls of others. Rather than being irritated or impatient, God responds to the faith of Abraham as he intercedes for the souls in Sodom.

> "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17 NKJV)

9. *Sometimes we quit praying too soon*. Technically, Abraham quit interceding before God quit answering. We can only speculate if Abraham had asked God to save the city for five righteous people, would God have responded? We don't know because Abraham quit too soon. God was still saying, "Yes" when Abraham left the presence of God.

> "Men ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1 NKJV).

10. *People can influence God when encountering Him*. Usually, we think about God's influence on us when we encounter Him. But don't forget the opposite is also true, we can influence God. God answers our prayers when our motives are for biblical results, our heart is pure and our faith is strong.

> "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the son" (John 14:13 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I can be encountered by God at unexpected times.*
- *I am encountered by God for a purpose.*
- *I don't always realize it when I'm in God's presence.*
- *I can't hide my unbelief from God.*
- *I usually forget that God knows all about me.*
- *I cannot lie to God.*
- *I can be God's friend and know Him.*
- *I can have my prayers heard by God.*
- *I have sometimes quit praying too soon.*
- *I can influence God in an encounter.*

John Maxwell
Pastor of Two Different Mega Churches
Internationally Known Speaker in Leadership Training

FIVE LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCES

God stretched me and changed me with five crucial experiences. The principles by which I now live were hammered out on the anvil of *these five crises.*

<u>The death of a friend—and of a habit</u>. The first crisis was in the early '70s, a time of spiritual formation early in my ministry. The death of a friend changed me

from a happy-go-lucky preacher who wanted to be a friend to everyone, into a concerned man of God.

At the time, I was with my first church, in Hillhan, Indiana. I began with seven people, and although I moved the congregation forward dramatically in terms of numbers, it was not growing spiritually. During this time, I visited a friend in the hospital repeatedly. Looking back, one of my main drives was to get the patient to like me. Then the friend died. During the funeral, I wept openly—not for the grieving family or friends, but for my own barren spiritual condition.

Over the next year I earnestly sought the Lord, repenting of my spiritual callousness. I remember one Saturday night when I was preparing for a sermon. I was lying under the dining room table, praying with my face to the floor begging God for true spiritual power. It was not one instantaneous moment that changed my life; but gradually, over a period of months, I became more committed to the spiritual dynamics of pastoring a flock. Like John Wesley, I obtained perfect love and true holiness. I was filled with the Holy Spirit and received power for spiritual witnessing to lead people to Christ.

Expanding horizons. A second crisis experience happened in February 1973, at a bus conference in Lynchburg, Virginia. Up to this point, because of my ecclesiastical background, I had not been exposed to great evangelistic churches or great evangelistic preaching. At Lynchburg, I saw the great busing ministry at Thomas Road Baptist Church. I heard the testimonies of leaders from massive churches with tremendous evangelistic outreaches. I realized I had limited God by my own unbelief. Under the ministry of Wally Beebe, Jerry Falwell, Bob Gray and others, I realized that I needed to expand my horizons.

Back in my room at the Holiday Inn, I wrestled with God all night. Lying on the floor again, I made a commitment to double my church in Lancaster in one year. The church was averaging 400 in attendance, and I determined to have an additional 400 on the buses within one year. I also committed to go back ad publicly announce my new determination to my church.

Upon returning to Ohio, I rallied the people to begin the following Saturday knocking on doors to invite people to ride a bus to Sunday School. On Sunday morning the bus pulled up to the church and 19 children got off. I remember hugging everyone in the church foyer as we counted the children. "Since we had 19 children on the bus," I announced, "we can use our other bus and get 38 next Sunday." And we did. Within a year we had reached our goal of averaging as many on the buses as in worship attendance. When I began to think big and not limit God, the people began to think big and not limit God.

<u>The barren altar</u>. The third crisis happened in November 1973, at a Sword of the Lord conference under the ministry of John R. Rice. I was convicted about the "barren altar"—the lack of conversions at my church. I wrestled with God in the car all the way home. I prayed, "Lord, let there never be a Sunday when people are not saved at the church." Big attendance was not enough. Upon my return, I again announced to my congregation that in the following year we would do all we could not to have a barren altar, but to make it a great year of soul-winning.

During that year, I invited Elmer Towns to preach for me at the church. Since it was the weekend of the Towns's anniversary, I invited him to bring his wife, and we would join them for their anniversary dinner. When Towns arrived, I told him that it was visitation night, and I had made a commitment to go soul-winning. Even though there was social pressure on me to keep my commitment to Dr. Towns, that evening I visited a lawyer named John Polston and won him to the Lord. For the next several years when Towns visited the church to preach, Polston would remind us how happy he was that I had gone soul-winning that night instead of going out for an anniversary dinner.

In 1974 I made a goal personally to win 200 people to Christ. A great sense of revival broke out among the people when I made that announcement. I did not quite reach my goal that year, but I did lead 186 to pray to receive Christ. I feel this established the credibility of soul-winning among the church members, and established the foundation for all of the changes in the church, including constructing new buildings and instituting new ministries.

Networking and praying. The fourth experience was not so much a crisis as it was a number of rich conversations with successful pastors. I phoned several great pastors and offered them $100 each for an hour of their time in order to discover the reasons why their churches had done so well. As I visited and talked with these outstanding leaders, I asked them to pray with me. And after each interview, I went to my car, bowed my head over the steering wheel and asked for spiritual strength to build a great church.

A crisis of glory. The fifth experience occurred when I received the award for having the fastest-growing Sunday School in Ohio in 1976. The award, a large banner, was presented by Christian Life magazine at the International Christian Education Convention in Detroit, Michigan. The Sunday School at the Lancaster church had grown from an average weekly attendance of 860 to 1,012.

After the award ceremony, I returned to my hotel and again lying on my face, laid the banner out before God. At that moment, I realized that I had been honored for doing only what I should do, for growth was what every church ought to do. I opened the Scriptures and reread the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:18: "I will build my church." The church belongs to Jesus, not to John Maxwell. It is God who is to be honored, not men. In the midst of this crisis, I decided to give God the glory for everything in my ministry. That night I realized I was gifted to serve the Lord, and that God must get the credit for any gift because "Every good . . . gift is from above" (Jas.1:17).[2]

CHAPTER TWO
JACOB: SEEING GOD FACE TO FACE

Encounter . . . out of fear
Place . . . in a tent near the Jabok River
Scripture: Genesis 31:11-32, 32

The two men stared defiantly at each other; a large jagged rock in the middle of the road separated them from physical assault. The roadbed was worn down on either side of the rock; countless animals of many caravans had aimlessly trod on each side of the rock.

The older of the two men, Laban, had chased down his foe and caught him at this rock. His hands were not armed, but they were clenched. It was his dedicated servants that had their weapons ready . . . swords . . . bows . . . and spears. A dozen mean-spirited, dirty and tired men had followed their angry master Laban. Now they were willing to fight at this word, only their aging leader stood silent.

The hot desert wind whipped up sand around their ankles, their tunics flapped around their bodies. The blistering sun burnt their tempers raw. A dirty beard and foul-smelling clothes from a hard chase didn't help old Laban's disposition.

Younger Jacob stared from the other side of the stone at his Uncle Laban. Neither man trusted the other. If anyone had lurched for a weapon, there would have been a battle. Laban's two dozen warriors had worked in the fields with Jacob, they didn't trust him . . . they were ready to kill him.

Jacob had as many herdsmen to tend his large flocks, they were not warriors but they knew if a battle began, they would have to fight for their lives.

Silence . . . except for the hot wind.

"Why did you take my daughters?" Laban's raspy voice finally broke the tension. "Why did you sneak off into the night with my grandchildren?"

"I knew you wouldn't let me go . . ." Jacob the son-in-law sheepishly answered. For the first time he dropped his eyes in guilt.

"They are my daughters . . ." Laban's voice got more powerful. "These are my children . . ." he waved to make sure everyone knew he was referring to the 11 sons of Jacob. "You have gotten rich from my flocks . . ." Laban pointed to the several flocks of animals milling around . . . flocks of goats, rams, camels, cows, bulls, and donkeys. They were the sign of wealth, and if Laban were correct; Jacob had stolen much from him.

"Let this rock . . ." Laban said as he pointed for all to see the gouged rock in the middle of the road, "let this rock be a division between us."

Jacob looked at the rock and nodded.

"You will not come on this side of the rock . . ." Laban's loud voice carried for all Jacob's servants to hear. "I will not come on your side of the rock."

"AGREED . . .!" Jacob quickly shouted for all to hear, "I AGREE!"

"Bring a knife," Laban demanded.

At first, Jacob flinched when he heard the word "knife," then he realized the nomadic tradition. Laban grabbed the knife, then quickly pierced his wrist until blood appeared. Laban threw the knife over the rock to Jacob. Quickly Jacob followed the example of his uncle. Then reaching out, they clasped hands to arms, the blood of one relative mingled with the other. Together they agreed by blood . . . blood touching blood. Together they said,

"May the Lord watch between you and me, while we are separated one from the other."

Laban kissed his daughters and children. Then as he prepared to mount his horse, he again pointed to the rock, "This rock is my witness, I will not cross to your side . . ."

Laban stopped his words in mid-sentence; then turning, he pointed to Jacob, "If you hurt one of my children . . . God is witness what I will do."

With that warning, Laban turned abruptly, still angry but now somewhat pacified; dug his heels into the side of his horse. They bolted down the road. His warriors fell into columns, following Laban eastward towards home.

All that day and the next, the words of Laban haunted Jacob. Even though his uncle promised not to pass the stone—he called the stone Mizpah—Jacob couldn't be sure that his uncle would not attack in the night, killing him, and taking his daughters and grandchildren.

While the memory of an angry uncle terrified Jacob, it made him remember his brother Esau. Twenty years ago, Jacob had sneaked out of his father's tent because his brother Esau had threatened to kill him. Jacob couldn't forget the words of his brother,

"When Father is dead . . . I will kill you."

Jacob believed his brother would kill him. Jacob saw his brother's anger, so 20 years ago Jacob ran away from home and from his brother. Jacob had lived 20 years with his Uncle Laban. Jacob tried to put Laban out of his thoughts, but couldn't stop thinking about his brother Esau and his red beard, his red hair, and his fiery disposition. Would Esau still try to kill him?

Now Jacob was going home. He was a wealthy man . . . two wives . . . eleven sons . . . servants . . . herds of cattle. He left empty, now he led a large nomadic tribe toward the Promise Land. Jacob was leaving an angry uncle, he was heading toward an angry brother.

"Will Esau kill me?"

Jacob had tricked his older brother Esau out of the birthright, which meant Jacob became the family head . . . the family spokesman . . . the family priest. Next Jacob had tricked Esau out of the blessing. Jacob's father had promised him twice as much inheritance as his brother, only he never got any; he ran fearing for his life.

"I'm still afraid Esau will kill me," Jacob mused as he trudged the path back to his boyhood home. Going home was not a happy experience.

Early the next morning, Jacob sent servants to Esau. He gave them directions how to find Esau,

"Call Esau my master . . . tell him I'm returning home . . . tell him how rich I am . . . tell him I want to find grace in his eyes."

Jacob waited two days for their return. He sat mostly in the tent door. He prayed to the Lord, asking for grace. God had appeared to him 20 years ago and promised several things. Jacob remembered the voice of God,

"I am the Lord God of your Fathers Abraham and Isaac . . . I will give this land to you and to your children . . . you will have many children . . . I will make you rich . . . I will protect you."

It was that last part about protection that Jacob remembered. He wanted God to keep him alive. He prayed that God would protect him from Esau his brother, just as God had protected him from his Uncle Laban. While Jacob was praying, his thoughts were interrupted by shouts outside the tent.

"The servants are returning," was the cry through the camp.

The two servants who had been to Esau went directly to Jacob's tent. Jacob had been praying for a friendly message. He hoped that time healed old wounds, surely 20 years would cause Esau to forget. But the message Jacob heard from his servants was worse than his deepest fears,

"Esau is coming to meet you with 400 armed men."

"Enough to kill us all," was Jacob's first reaction.

There was no place to run . . . no place to hide . . . he couldn't return to Laban, the Mizpah rock stood in the middle of the road. Panic seized Jacob, it was difficult to think straight, but slowly a plan developed in Jacob's mind.

"I'll give Esau everything . . ." Jacob thought. "If I give him everything, maybe he won't kill me."

Jacob was quick-witted, he could always scramble out of trouble. He was Jacob the Supplanter, Jacob the trickster. He schemed to give Esau everything, it was an elaborate plan. It was more than just handing over to Esau all his riches, it was a plan that would take all day to unfold. It was a plan to confuse Esau.

Jacob separated his flocks into several divisions, he put some servants over each flock of animals, keeping the flocks separate from one another. Jacob then started the flocks journeying toward Esau, one flock at a time, each flock just out of sight of the other. First,

200 she goats . . . next,

200 he goats . . . next,

200 ewes . . . next,

200 rams . . . next,

30 milkcows . . . next,

40 cattle for meat . . . next,

10 bulls . . . next,

20 female donkeys . . . next,

10 young donkeys . . .

Jacob instructed the herdsman of each flock of animals to say the same thing to Esau, they would immediately recognize Esau by his red beard. Jacob told them to bow to the ground saying,

"This is a present to you from your servant Jacob." He told the servants to tell Esau that "Jacob is coming behind us."

Nine times that day the same thing would happen. Esau would see a cloud of dust approaching. Each time Esau would think the dust might be an approaching army, and each time, he would prepare for battle. Each time Esau would draw his sword . . . and each time his men would prepare for battle.

Each time Jacob tricked him.

Each time it was another gift of cattle to Esau. Each time the herdsman did the same thing . . . said the same thing. The driver bowed to the ground before Esau, offering elaborate gifts.

"These cattle are a present to Esau from your servant Jacob, (Jacob was not called his brother). This present is from your servant."

"If Jacob gives me this much . . ." Esau thought, "he must be very, very, very wealthy."

The herds of Jacob were like a gigantic snake crawling toward Esau, many miles long, and each herd separated from the other. It was impossible to see from the first cloud of dust to the last. All of the herds did not reach Esau before nightfall. Esau camped for the night, surrounded by the moans of the cattle—Jacob's cattle-his herds were everywhere.

"Tomorrow I'll see my brother Jacob . . ." The redheaded Esau tried to sleep. "Tomorrow will climax 20 years of agony!"

Jacob camped for the evening near the small river Jabbok. Still he was up to his old tricks. Jacob pitched his big tent on the riverbank and entered with his two wives and children into the large spreading tent, a flat, white tent that stretched out over the soft Persian rugs, he provided for luxury, even in the wilderness. The servants were dispatched to sleep on the ground around the big tent. The fires were to burn through all the night. If Esau attacked during the night, he would capture the wives . . . and the children . . . and the servants. If Esau attacked that night, he would not capture Jacob.

The trickster still had one last trick up his sleeve.

As soon as darkness surrounded the massive tent, Jacob sneaked out from under the flaps. No one saw him, not the servants, nor his family. The moonless night painted dark shadows, it was easy to escape from the camp unseen. Jacob sneaked the opposite way, away from his brother Esau. The shallow river was ahead, he easily waded across the Jabbok, and in a cluster of tees, he found the small tent he had hidden from view.

"No one will find me here . . ." Jacob whispered to himself.

Inside, he knelt almost immediately. Wild thoughts raced through his mind. He wanted to pray to God, the quicker the better. A cold shutter ran up his back.

"Will Uncle Laban return to kill me . . .?" his mind couldn't forget the hostile encounter with his uncle a few days ago, "or will my brother Esau kill me tomorrow . . .?"

Jacob knelt before God, bowing his face to the ground. There was no soft rug in this small tent. It was not hidden among the trees for comfort or for luxury, it was there for safety. He knew Laban's rage, would he return? Was his uncle in the dark shadows? Jacob wondered if Esau accepted his gifts yesterday? He wondered if Esau had sneaked up to the large tent to attack his family. It is terrifying not knowing whether you sleep in danger or safety!

"O God of my grandfather Abraham . . . O God of my father Isaac . . ." Jacob reverently sought God. "I am returning to my country because you are sending me home," Jacob reminded God he was obedient to the vision God had given him to return to his home country.

"I am not worthy of Thy mercies," Jacob confessed his sins. Jacob knew he had deceived many in his young life. Jacob held his prized walking stick up to God. "I only had this staff when I crossed Jordan 20 years ago."

Tears came to Jacob's eyes as he gratefully remembered, "You have blessed me with a family . . . with children . . . with flocks . . . with servants . . . Tonight I am divided from my family," Jacob didn't know what happened to the flocks he sent to Esau. He didn't know what happened to his wives and children left behind.

Lonely . . . 20 years ago Jacob left his father and mother because he had deceived his family. Lonely . . . tonight he prepares to re-enter the Promise Land . . . lonely . . . because he again deceived his family.

"Deliver me from my brother Esau, because I fear he will kill me, and the children, and their mothers." Jacob could not bear the thought of no sons . . . no seed to Abraham's promise . . . God's promises cut off.

"Lord, You promised to do me good," Jacob reminded God, "You promised I would have more children than the sand of the seashore."

There was no wind that night, the silent trees were too frightening to speak. There was no moon, the dark shadows added to the terror of the evening. The dull gray clouds even blocked out the starlight. The silence was threatening. Then Jacob heard the unmistakable crunch of footsteps in the sand outside the tent.

"What's that?" he thought, but couldn't speak. He listened as the sounds of steps ceased. Silence! Then the steps began again.

His eyes dilated, his heart rate doubled. He yelled,

"Who's there . . .?"

Jacob first thought it may be Esau, he blinked his eyes to see the red beard of Esau, maybe not; he squinted to see the gray beard of Laban.

No one answered!

But Jacob knew someone was there, he could feel the presence of a person outside the tent. The tent flap moved. Next Jacob saw a hand pull back the flap, the figure entered the tent,

"NO!!!" yelled Jacob, he jumped, grabbing the figure, "I'VE GOT YOU!" Jacob yelled again.

The two men wrestled to the ground, Jacob reached for the man's arms, holding them lest he have a weapon. The men wrestled, both trying to hold the other, neither letting the other go free.

"Release me . . ." the man demanded.

"NO!" Jacob answered.

Almost immediately Jacob realized the man didn't have a weapon, it was strength against strength . . . will against will . . . stamina against stamina. The man was persistent, but of all the things Jacob knew about himself, Jacob knew he was stubborn.

"I have come to answer your prayers," the man pleaded for Jacob to listen, but the trickster knew better. Jacob had wrestled many times, and had talked opponents into releasing their grip on him. He had won many wrestling matches against an opponent by using a trick like this.

"How do I know you have come from God?" Jacob grunted as he wrestled.

"You are afraid of being killed!" the opponent said to Jacob.

"That's easy to see," Jacob answered. "I'm hiding in this tent because I'm afraid."

"You've asked God to protect you," the opponent knew what Jacob had been praying.

"All my servants have heard me pray that," Jacob sneered.

Jacob would not believe his opponent came from God, but he didn't dis-believe it either. All he could do was hold on to anything . . . to an arm . . . to a leg . . . to any part of the body . . . Jacob held on because that was the way he lived and fought. Jacob knew if he let go, he would lose. When he couldn't do anything else, Jacob could hang on.

"If you're from God . . ." Jacob refused to release the man, "if God sent you, then bless me."

As Jacob desperately hung on to his opponent, he begged . . . prayed . . . even pleaded,

"If you're from God . . . protect me from Esau . . . save my life . . . save my family . . . save my children . . . please help me."

They wrestled for hours. From the tent came sounds of grunts and groans, but no one was there to hear the sounds. The moon never arose to let Jacob see his enemy. Through the black night he wrestled an unseen figure, one stronger than he. Jacob had finally met a person he couldn't beat and he couldn't trick. All Jacob could do was to hang on.

"If you're from God . . ." Jacob repeated his demand, many times during the evening, "bless me if you're from God."

"Let me go . . ." the figure continued to demand of Jacob.

"I will not let you go unless you answer my prayers," a stubborn Jacob answered.

Then the first light of a new day peeked over an eastern hill. The dayspring appeared over a clump of white birch trees, and with the faint light of morning, a dove spoke its language from the top of a birch tree. Another answered. The silent night was being awakened by the crickets.

Even the Jabbok River that had passed the tent silently in the night, began to bubble over some wet moss stones.

"Let me go . . ." the figure demanded, "for the dawn is breaking."

"NO!" Jacob repeated the answer he had given all night, "I will not let you go except you bless me."

"What is your name?" the figure asked.

"Jacob . . ." When Jacob spoke his name, he knew the name meant Supplanter, one who deceives.

"You will have a new name," the man told Jacob. "God will bless you . . . your name will be Israel . . . your new name means, 'a Prince with God' . . . you will be special to God for the rest or your life . . . and God will bless your children who will continue forever."

"Israel . . ." thought Jacob. "My new name means a new way of living."

"You will be called Israel forever," the voice answered Jacob, "because you have wrestled with God and would not let go . . . because you have always sought the Lord, inspite of your deception . . . because you have prevailed."

The figure touched Jacob's thigh, a wrestling move Jacob had never experienced in all his matches with other shepherds. When the figure touched Jacob's thigh, a pain shot down his leg to his toes, then up his nervous system into his brain . . . he felt excruciating pain.

"Yeeeeiiii," Jacob yelled out. It was a cry he had not yelled since an older man had crushed him as a teen. It was a cry of pain beyond human experience.

"You will limp for the rest of your life," Jacob heard the voice say. "Everywhere you walk . . . you will walk with pain . . . you will remember this night . . . you will remember that you wrestled with God and would not let go."

The pain was so sharp that Jacob released his opponent instinctively without thinking. He shut his eyes to squeeze out the pain. Now his mouth was open, only a sound would not come. It was a silent scream.

"You will limp for the rest of your life," the figure told Jacob, "because you have prevailed with God, because you have power with God."

"Tell me your name . . ." Jacob's pain subsided. His first thoughts centered on the one who disabled him. He had to know who was this person.

"What is your name?" Jacob asked.

"Why do you want to know my name?" he answered Jacob. "You don't need to know my name! But I will bless you," the figure replied. "You have prayed to God for His blessing . . . I will bless you."

Jacob realized this person had heard his prayers, and only God can hear the prayers of men. This person had known his heart, and only God knows that heart of men. This person was going to bless him, and only God can bless an individual.

Jacob knelt before the figure, the experience of pain in his thigh was compensated by the awesome experience of God's presence. Jacob bowed his head, afraid to look up. Even though

he could see traces of the man's face in the early morning light, Jacob was afraid to look. He was ashamed of his unbelief throughout the previous night.

The hand touched Jacob with God's blessing. Whereas the figure had to earlier touch Jacob's thigh to release his wrestling clutch, a touch that would make him lame for the rest of his life, this was a touch of spiritual healing and spiritual health. Jacob would never be the same, he had touched God, and been touched by God.

Jacob would walk with God, no longer relying on his human escapades. Jacob would be Israel, a Prince with God.

Jacob emerged from the small tent, the piercing sun was now shining over the eastern hill through the white birch trees. He blinked his eyes, and rubbed them with the back of his hands to adjust to the bright morning.

"I have seen God," Jacob spoke the words out loud, though no one was present to hear him. "I have seen God face to face and did not die."

Jacob knew that it was impossible to see God, for God was a spirit. Jacob further knew that it was impossible to see God and live. He happily clapped his hands, feeling the slap of flesh against flesh.

"I'm alive . . ." Jacob threw his head back to laugh with holy joy. "I've seen God face to face, and I'm alive."

Jacob knew God was a spirit, that He didn't have hands and feet. He wasn't sure who He had wrestled with all evening, then he concluded, "But I wrestled with God . . . I felt God . . . I held God . . . I touched God and He touched me."

Jacob took a step toward the River Jabbok, pain shot through his hip, it stopped him short. He reached back into the tent for his walking stick, the only thing he had when he left the land of promise 20 years ago. Now he needed the walking stick more than ever. He hobbled down to the Jabbok River to wash his face, then his dirty body from wrestling all night on the tent's ground. A drink of cool water revived his spirit.

"I'll name this place Peniel," Jacob declared. "This is where I saw God. Peniel means face of God."

Jacob had asked for God's hand of protection, but He saw God's face.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Jacob, the one who schemed and lied, became Israel, i.e., Prince with God. He became a man of faith and directed his 12 sons—through whom the twelve tribes came—in worship and obedience of God. He limped for the rest of his life, which reminded him of his encounter with God.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *Different motivations drive us to seek God*. Jacob was running—running scared—running from an angry uncle and running towards an angry brother. Because of his fear, Jacob sought God alone in a tent. But something happened in that tent that changed his life. Once he encountered God, Jacob wouldn't let Him go. The constant thing in Jacob's life until this

experience, was to hang on, so what Jacob always did in the past became the source of changing his life.

Whatever your motivation—fear, bankruptcy, IRS audit, cancer, divorce—whatever motivates you to seek God, hang on to Him. When you get into the presence of God, hang onto Him. When you get into the presence of God, His intimacy will change your life.

> "Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You" (Psalm 56:3 NKVJ).

2. *Concerns for family drives us into God's presence*. Jacob had wives and children, he constantly prayed for their safety. While his own life was his greatest concern, his prayer for his family was utmost on his lips. When God can't get our attention any other way, He reaches us through our spouse or children.

> "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me" (Psalm 27:10 NKVJ).

3. *Family arguments make us seek God*. Jacob was driven by fear of a hostile uncle, he ran from Laban. What Jacob didn't fully know was that God warned Laban not to harm Jacob. Then Jacob faced a brother sworn on revenge. Sometimes we are motivated to seek God because we are disappointed with marriage or our children turn against us. We may even be attacked by our family, but in God's presence there is peace and rest.

> "I have become a stranger to my brothers, and an alien to my mother's children" (Psalm 69:8 NKJV).

4. *We must give up precious things of life to encounter God's presence*. Jacob gave up everything, he was willing to surrender all his cattle to Esau, he was willing to sacrifice his family, he offered to God the only thing he brought out of the Promise Land, the only thing that went everywhere with him—he surrendered his walking stick to God. Only then did Jacob experience God's presence. If you are going to encounter intimacy with God, you must not let anything come between you and God.

> "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:37-39 NKJV).

5. *We encounter God in the blackest of night's experiences*. Sometimes God doesn't come to us when everything is rosy. When we have health, happiness, money in the bank and no threats, we usually don't think much about God. But the blackest nights scare us because we

can't see where we're going, we can't see things, we can't see ourselves; nor can we see God. In those black experiences, we can seek God and He will reveal Himself to us.

> "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" (Psalm 23:4 NKJV).

6. *When everything seems lost, seek God's face*. Jacob thought he was about to lose everything. He even thought the footsteps outside his tent were an avenger. His greatest terror, was the fear in his own heart. When all seemed lost, God came to him. In our lives, God lets us experience the extremities of our hearts, because man's extremities, are God's opportunities. It is in these experiences that God reveals Himself to us.

> "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped . . . nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold *me* by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me *to* glory. Whom have I in heaven *but You*? And *there* is none upon earth *that* I desire besides You" (Psalm 73:2,23-25 NKJV).

7. *God reveals Himself to those who desperately seek Him*. Jacob was not a perfect man, he deceived those closest to himself—his family. He put them at risk to save his hide. So why did God reveal Himself to Jacob? Because above all else, Jacob sought the Lord. He exerted all physical energy to hang on to God. It was only when God touched his hip that Jacob released his grip on God. You will realize God's presence only when you seek it more than pleasure, food, financial security, sex or any other thing in life. We can encounter God when we give up everything to experience Him.

> "One *thing* I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple" (Psalm 27:4 NKJV).

8. *Seeking God is something you must do alone*. Jacob's wives, or children couldn't help him seek God's presence. Laban and Esau were not able to spiritually help him. Jacob wrestled alone with God, and prevailed. He saw God face to face. You can't wait for your spouse to go with you in your journey to God, it is a lonesome journey, and it's a journey you take by yourself. As Abraham interceded alone for Sodom . . . as Moses interceded alone on Sinai . . . as Elijah alone stood against 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel . . . as George Washington knelt alone in the snow of Valley Forge . . . so you must seek God's face alone.

> "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait I say on the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

9. *We are usually surprised by God's encounter*. Jacob didn't expect God's presence in the tent. He retreated there to hide. Jacob didn't expect to wrestle all night with God. Would he have held on to the figure if he knew it was God? Could he have let go if he knew it was God? Jacob was surprised to find himself in the presence of God. Sometimes we go to church, never expecting to meet God, but in the unusual and unexpected places, we are surprised by God.

> "When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to a rock that is higher than I" (Psalm 61:2 NKJV).

10. *After the blackest experiences at the lowest times of life, the dawn comes where we understand our encounter with God in the valley*. For several days, Jacob lived in a dark valley that became progressively blacker. The more Jacob manipulated circumstances, the worst they became. Only in the blackest experiences did Jacob meet God and eventually was blessed by God. When we come to the end of our way, we need to turn to God. He will come to us. There always is a bright shining morning that follows the storms of the night.

> "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy *comes* in the morning . . . You have turned for me my mourning into dancing, You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness" (Psalm 30:5,11 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I can seek God for different reasons.*
- *I can seek God because I am concerned for my family.*
- *I can seek God because of family arguments.*
- *I must give up prized things to encounter God.*
- *I can encounter God in the blackest night.*
- *I can seek God when everything seems lost.*
- *I will encounter God when I desperately seek Him.*
- *I will encounter God alone.*
- *I am usually surprised when God encounters me.*
- *I can expect the dawn after the blackest night.*

Billy Graham
Evangelist

In my own life there have been times when I have also had the sense of being filled with the Spirit, knowing that some special strength was added for some task I was being called upon to perform.

We sailed for England in 1954 for a crusade that was to last for three months. While on the ship, I experienced a definite sense of oppression. Satan seemed to have assembled a formidable array of his artillery against me. Not only was I oppressed, I was overtaken by a sense of depression, accompanied by a frightening feeling of inadequacy for the task that lay ahead. Almost night and day I prayed. I knew in a new way what Paul was telling us when he spoke about "praying without ceasing." Then one day in a prayer meeting with my wife and colleagues, a break came. As I wept before the Lord, I was filled with deep assurance that power belonged to God and he was faithful. I had been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ when I was saved, but I believe God gave me a special anointing on the way to England. From that moment on I was confident that God the Holy Spirit was in control for the task that lay ahead.

That proved true.

Experiences of this kind had happened to me before, and they have happened to me many times since. Sometimes no tears are shed. Sometimes as I have lain awake at night the quiet assurance has come that I was being filled with the Spirit for the task that lay ahead.

However, there have been many more occasions when I would have to say as the apostle Paul did in I Corinthians 2:3: "I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." Frequently various members of my team have assured me that when I have had the least liberty in preaching or the greatest feeling of failure, God's
Power has been most evident.[3]

CHAPTER THREE
MOSES: THE SERVANT OF God

Encounter . . . out of frustration
Place . . . Mt. Sinai in the wilderness
Scripture: Exodus 32:1-34:35

"The ragged mountain peak itself was a problem, as much as all the other problems Moses faced. The mountain was tall—7,550 feet elevation—the mountain was steep—the paths were treacherous with lurking serpents and dangerous cliffs. He faced physical barriers, Moses was old—over 80 years old. Some thought he was too frail to make it to the top and return. As he began his journey to the top of Sinai, a voice had yelled from the mixed multitude,

"Moses . . . will die on Mount Sinai!"

The voice didn't frighten Moses, it was the people who faced danger; they were warned to stay away from the mountain, any person or cattle that strayed onto the mountain would die. Fathers retreated to wait in their tent doors, mothers had gathered up their children to flee inside their tents out of fear. The smell of death drifted over the entire camp of Israel. Those rebellious Jews were dead who polluted themselves by dancing naked before the idolatrous golden bull.

"Whew . . ." Moses paused to catch his breath, the path was steep and his old legs were tired. He stumbled to a rock and sat down.

After a few minutes of rest, he continued his climb. It was slow because his muscles had weakened over the years. He pulled hard on his staff each time he climbed over a large stone. He pushed himself over the rocks with his rod, the one he called "the rod of God."

Again, Moses stopped to rest and think. He remembered throwing down the rod and it became a serpent . . . he remembered stretching out the rod and the Red Sea parted . . . he remembered hitting the rock and out came water.

"No miracles today . . ." Moses said to himself. He continued resting to regain his strength.

Yesterday . . . had been a tough day. Yesterday . . . Moses had to deal with the sin of Israel. Yesterday . . . was the worst day in the history of Israel.

Yesterday when Moses came down from Sinai, he heard people shouting so he mistakenly thought there was a battle. But Israel had lost its moral senses. The people were dancing naked, some were bowing before a golden bull to worship it. The people had turned their back on the leadership of Moses, they had repudiated God.

Yesterday the ringleaders perished. They had to die because they rebelled against God. As the dread of their death drifted over the camp of Israel, everyone fearfully retreated to their own tents . . . to wait.

"Would God kill them too? . . ." Each contemplated his own fate.

Yesterday Moses ran as fast as his old legs would carry him towards the Tabernacle. He yelled to the people as he ran to the center of the camp,

"You have sinned a great sin!"

Everyone knew it, Moses didn't need to announce it. Even though winded, Moses continued to yell as he ran,

"I will make intercession for you . . ." He quickly added, "Perhaps God will not destroy all of us." Moses rushed boldly into the Holy of Holies to intercede for the nation Israel

Yesterday he spread himself out before God on his face before the Ark of the Covenant. With tears wetting his long stringy beard, Moses begged to God,

"Oh this people have sinned a great sin . . ." His voice trembled with strain. "Forgive their sins."

Yesterday Moses pleaded many times until God interrupted him,

"Let me alone," God angrily told Moses. "These people are stiff-necked and rebellious, my anger burns against them for what they did."

Moses wept at the words of God, "Please forgive them," he continued to beg. But God was determined to destroy Israel. The Lord's voice could be heard throughout the large tent—the Tabernacle—where God dwelt.

"I will blot out these people," God announced his judgment to Moses. "I will begin a new nation through you."

Moses didn't want to be the Father of a new nation. Abraham was the Father of Israel. Israel had a wonderful heritage of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph . . . and the elders in Egypt. Moses prayed to God,

"These people are your people . . . You have delivered them from Egypt . . ." Moses reminded God of the miracles that delivered Israel out of bondage.

"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel your servants," Moses reminded God of His promises to them.

"The Egyptians will laugh at You for bringing Your people into the wilderness to destroy them."

Yesterday the black cloud of the presence of God settled over the Tabernacle, more than the Shekinah glory cloud from heaven to the Holy of Holies. The presence of God visited His tent to listen to the prayers of His servant Moses. They talked for a long time, finally Moses put his whole life on the line for Israel. Moses told God,

"Please forgive their sins . . ." then Moses paused to think about how he would phrase his words. He said,

"If you can't forgive their sins . . . blot me out of your book."

The heart of God is broken over the sin of His people, but more than that, the heart of God responds to the intercession of His servants. In tenderness God told Moses,

"I will forgive their sins . . ."

Moses had prevailed and God had forgiven their sins. Israel would not die. But, because of their transgression, God added a condition to His blessing them. God told Moses to lead the people to the Promise Land, but things would not be the same in the future as they had been in the past. God told Moses that He would not go with them, but;

"I will send the Angel of the Lord to lead you . . "

God told Moses that He would not lead them into the Promise Land.

"My angel will go before you!"

That was yesterday. The smell of death permeated their thinking. The news that the presence of God would not go before them left a depressing atmosphere drifting over the tents.

That was yesterday in the valley, but today Moses was going to the top of Sinai to meet God. Today was a new day.

Moses was still resting, thinking of his intercession before God. He looked down the mountain, seeing the tents of Israel. In the center of the camp, Moses saw the Tabernacle. It was a beautiful sight to see all the individual tents of families surrounding the Tabernacle.

A heavy wet cloud drifted toward Moses, and almost immediately enveloped him. He could no longer see down the mountain to the tents of Israel on the desert floor. He couldn't look up to see the top of Sinai. The cloud cover got thicker, Moses couldn't see the path. Then he realized this was not an average cloud, then he felt something different; he felt the presence of God. This was the thick cloud in which God dwelt.

Moses dropped to his knees, and waited a moment. He was listening for the voice of God. All he could hear was the slight breeze of the wind through the underbrush. There were no trees at this height on Sinai. When Moses felt the presence of God, he spread his robe on the ground before Him. Then Moses knelt on his robe, bowing his face to pray,

"Lord God, You have let me bring these people out of Egypt . . ." he looked for words to say what he felt, "but You have said You will not go with us."

Moses wanted more than an angel to guide him to the Promise Land.

"Lord God, You know my name," Moses prayed, "You know I am unfit to be a leader of Your people." Because Moses wanted God to go with him, he continued praying,

"If I have found grace in your sight . . . You must go with us." Then Moses' voice broke with tears of regret. He prayed, "Because these are Your people . . . go with us."

Moses knew God heard him because he felt the presence of God in that cloud. He knew God heard prayers no matter where they were made, because God is everywhere. Moses knew that Sinai was special to God. It was on this mountain that Moses saw the burning bush that didn't burn up. It was on this mountain Moses received the 10 Commandments. Because Moses had previously felt the presence of God on this mountain, he prayed,

"If I have found grace in Your sight . . . go with us. If you consider this people Your nation . . . go with us!" This time Moses added, "If your presence go not with me, don't carry us to the Promise Land."

God answered from the dark cloud, "I will go with you."

Moses wanted to shout! God had heard the request. God had forgiven his people. God had restored His people to their favored position.

Most would have thought that Moses just got the greatest answer to prayer in his life, and that was enough. God had previously said He wouldn't go with the children of Israel. But because of intercession, God listened to Moses and said He would go with His people. For most people, that would have been enough, but Moses asked for something greater. Whereas most would have been satisfied with God's presence, Moses asked for the greatest request of his life. Moses asked for something he didn't need, but he wanted. Moses asked for something not promised by God, and in Moses' request—he reflected why God used him so greatly as a leader. Moses asked to see God.

"Show me your glory."

Moses' face was bowed to the ground. Even if God had instantly flashed His glory, Moses would have missed it because his face was buried in the dirt.

"No man can see God and live."

The top of Sinai was covered with a black cloud, darker than any thundercloud Moses had ever experienced. Moses was in the presence of God. The cloud was thick black smoke . . . as thick as black mud . . . as thick as clouded olive oil . . . as thick as blood.

Moses was not afraid to ask this request, he had moved beyond fear. He had confronted the thieves and wild beasts of his shepherd days and had lived. He had confronted Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth, and lived. Now Moses was in the presence of God . . . talking to him . . . listening to Him . . . waiting for Him. If he should die in the presence of God, it was nothing because in facing death, he had died many times before. Now Moses wanted to see God.

"Shew me Yourself," again Moses prayed.

"You cannot live if you look upon God," was the answer he heard.

Still Moses wanted to see the God he served. Moses remembered when he saw a bush burning with fire, but didn't burn up. He went closer to investigate the fire—it stood for the fire of God—for God is a consuming fire that judges sin and rebellion.

"I saw the fire . . ." Moses prayed, "now I want to see God."

Moses would not dare lift his head. In humility he bowed to the ground. He remembered seeing the finger of God that wrote the 10 Commandments on tablets of stone. Right before his eyes, Moses saw God write the 10 Commandments.

"I saw the finger of God . . ." Moses paused in his prayer, "now I want to see God."

Moses remembered the power of God. He was there when the wind pushed back the Red Sea. He felt the dry sand crunch under his sandals as he walked across the bottom of the seabed. He saw the power of God in Egypt with the frogs . . . lice . . . darkness . . . and water turned to blood.

"I've seen God's power . . ." Moses continued his prayers, "now I want to see God."

One last thing Moses remembered as he bowed on his face before God. Moses remembered the Passover. He remembered that God instructed him to kill the lamb and anoint the doors with blood. Moses remembered the death angel passed through Egypt to kill the first born.

"I have seen death . . ." Moses prayed, "I've seen the destruction of the death angel that killed the first born . . . but I want to see the glory of God . . . I want to see God."

"No one can see my face and live," God told Moses. "You cannot see my face."

Then God told Moses what He would do. "I will make my goodness pass before you," God explained to Moses. "I will proclaim My name before you, because when you know My name, you know Me."

God told Moses that He would be gracious to whom He would be gracious, and He would show mercy on whom He chose. Then God included Moses in His blessing,

"I will show mercy to you," God told Moses. "Come, there is a place where you can see my glory."

God led Moses to the top of Sinai, to the very top. The cloud was thick, Moses couldn't see the path to walk. He had to trust the leadership of God to guide him to the top.

God took Moses to a great rock, a rock taller than a house, wider than a clump of bay trees that spreads its branches. The rock was the very top of Sinai, it was a split rock, just like a knife splits a loaf of bread. The split from the top of the rock to the bottom was just large enough to hide a man from sight. Moses couldn't tell if the split came from a blinding flash of lightning, or if water had seeped into a small vein, then expanded, when the mountaintop froze. Moses didn't know if the split had grown increasingly wider with time, until it was large enough to hide a man.

"There . . ." God instructed Moses. "Hide in the crevice of the rock."

A sense of dread overcame Moses, death sat on his shoulder to laugh at him. Moses almost felt that death was better than a full-view of God, for finite human flesh cannot reside in the presence of an infinite God. For there must be death to stand in the presence of a pure God.

"I'll die," Moses finally screamed.

"No!" God assured. "My presence will pass before you, but you'll not die."

The God of heaven prepared to pass in review before the top of Sinai. The God of light who lives in a cloud of thick blackness was poised to do what He said. Sinai was covered with night. Down on the desert floor, the Israelites saw the display of a ferocious lightning storm on Sinai. All the families of Israel retreated into their tents—flaps were secured. Families huddled in fear.

The presence of God moved toward the split rock where Moses was hiding. Then in an act of mercy, God reached out His hand to cover the crevice in the rock. The glory of God did not consume Moses. The hand of God protected Moses' life. The glory of God roared by as a tornado in its path, only more powerful. The glory of God flowed by silently as a great river,

only more forcefully. The glory of God was felt, as a mother's tenderness influences everything in a room. The majesty of God was on parade, and when the king passes by, observers see nothing else but the sovereign awesomeness of the king.

Moses huddled in the cleft of the rock. He cared not how the rock was split, but only that he felt safety inside the huge pierced area. He was hidden behind the hand of God, as the God of glory passed by. Then Moses heard God's powerful voice,

"The Lord . . . the Lord God . . . merciful . . . gracious . . . longsuffering . . . abundant in goodness and truth. The Lord keeps mercy for thousands . . forgiving iniquity . . . but the Lord will visit the iniquity of the unrepentant father on His children unto the third and fourth generation."

The glory of the Lord is the name of the Lord. Moses encountered God's presence on the top of Sinai.

The loud voice of the Lord grew silent, as one hears a voice gently fading as the speaker walks away, . . . singing as he goes. Only the voice got more faint as the distance grew greater.

Then God removed His hand, and Moses saw it. He saw the backside of God in the thick black cloud moving down the valley. Moses felt the intimate presence of God, even though it was receding. Then straining his eyes to see . . . Moses could barely make out a form in the thick cloud. Moses strained to see, pondering what he was seeing. What was it?

Moses saw the backside of God.

Moses stayed on Sinai for 40 days, talking to God. He fasted in the presence of God. Just as a person loses his appetite in an emergency, Moses didn't eat and he wasn't hungry. He fed on the presence of God. Moses was hungering and thirsting after God's righteousness.

God again gave Moses the 10 Commandments. The first time God wrote the 10 Commandments with His finger. This time God spoke, and chiseled them on stone tablets.

Moses talked to God . . . God talked to Moses.

After 40 days, Moses slowly began his descent down the mountain. His walk was more difficult than ever before. Not only was Moses old, his 80-year-old knees didn't have the strength of his youth. But Moses had fasted for 40 days, he had lost weight and lost strength. His legs were weak; he rested often. Then too, the stone commandments were heavy. After a torturous trip, Moses saw the tents of Israel between two small hills,

"Not much farther," Moses thought, "I'll be home soon."

The path between the two hills was tedious and the two stones were getting progressively more heavy as he got closer home. The lack of food affected his sight. His feet slipped often on the sandy path.

As Moses appeared between the two hills, the watch spotted him. Aaron, Moses' brother, had posted men to watch for Moses. While Moses was enveloped in the thick cloud at the top of Sinai, all Israel had prayed. Most of them stayed in their tents, leaving only for essential requirements. Everyone felt the threat of death about the camp. Each wondered where judgment

would next strike. Many thought Moses died on the mountain. To them the thick cloud resembled a fierce thunderstorm. They were sure that the frail old man would perish in the elements. Without Moses to lead them, a few wanted to break camp to head back to Egypt. Many thought Moses died on the mountain. To them the thick cloud resembled a fierce thunderstorm. They were sure that the frail old man would perish in the elements. Without Moses to lead them, a few wanted to break camp to head back to Egypt. When the watchers saw Moses descending the mountain, they yelled out toward the camp,

"MOSES . . . MOSES IS COMING."

Aaron was relieved when he heard the good news that Moses was coming. He was not sure how long he could keep the camp of Israel together without Moses' leadership.

"MOSES IS COMING . . ." People yelled as they rushed to the doors of their tents, repeating the glad news. "Moses is coming down the mountain." The news spread through the camp, people were ecstatic, Moses was not dead. They almost spoke as one,

"MOSES IS COMING."

Then they saw it—almost everyone saw it at once. Suddenly their voices chilled, the names "MOSES" stuck in their throats. The yells turned to silence.

A threatening silence!

"What was wrong?" No one had to explain, they all saw it, even from afar.

The face of Moses was shining.

It was daylight, but his face glowed like when someone holds a candle close to their face at night. Even in the sun, his face shone like sunlight glistening off a lake.

"What's wrong with him?" a voice broke the paralyzing silence.

The hushed crowd stood silently . . . gawking . . . doubting. Some mothers rounded up their children and herded them into their tents. They couldn't be too careful. They had never seen a man's face shine.

"Is it the death angel coming to slaughter us?" someone asked.

"No . . . it's Moses."

"Why is his face shining?"

Moses didn't know his face glistened. When someone stands in the light, they forget the experience of darkness. Moses had been in the presence of God, the glory of God passed in front of Moses, only he had not seen the face of God. God shielded Moses with His hand. Moses saw only the backside of God—just a rear view—and his face shone.

Aaron and the other leaders backed away as Moses approached them. They covered their faces with upheld arms.

"WHAT'S WRONG?" Moses yelled out to them.

"Your face . . ." Aaron didn't know how to explain it, but told Moses his face shone like the sun.

Taking a scarf, Moses hid his face from the people. Then the people cautiously approached their leader. Fear of the unknown makes people shun even those they love.

For the next 40 days Moses' face shone—for the same length of time he fasted in God's presence—Moses kept a veil over his face. When he went into the Tabernacle to pray, Moses removed the veil to talk with God; but put it back on when talking to the people.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

After Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, God did not destroy His people and God did lead them into the Promise Land. Moses gave the people the 10 Commandments and established the nation. He set up the Tabernacle and established a code of laws for their spiritual social, economic and family life. Moses is one of the most revered leaders in the history of Israel.

10 PRINCIPLES ABOUT ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *Encountering God has physical results*. The face of Moses shone for 40 days because he saw God, he saw the backside of God. No one can imagine what would have happened if Moses saw the frontside of God. And no one can explain how it happened that his face shown. All we can say is that Moses saw the glory of God and his face reflected God's radiance. As a mirror reflects a candle, as the moon reflects the sun, Moses reflected the glory of God that he had seen.

When you encounter God, there will be physical results, probably our face won't shine; nor will there be phenomenal results. But those who encounter God are healed of cancer, there will be a miraculous supply of money, some will get spiritual power for service. No one can tell what God will do physically when you encounter Him, because God will do what He wants to do.

> "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him" (Ex. 34:29 NKJV).

2. *Fasting may accompany an encounter with God*. After Moses encountered God, he fasted for 40 days. Fasting is altering your diet for spiritual results, but eliminating food is never the issue. Fasting is not effective until you pray and spend time with God. "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21 NKJV). There are several kinds of fasts and several purposes for fasting that are described in the Bible. And when prayer is not enough to get answers from God, go to the higher level of fasting and prayer.

> "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21 NKJV).

3. *There are geographical locations where God desires to encounter people*. Technically, God can meet people anywhere, and the history of mankind shows that He has done just that. However, there seems to be places where God manifests Himself more than others. The altar

was one of those places, God met a person at the entrance to the Tabernacle/Temple when a repentant sinner brought a blood sacrifice to atone for sins.

Obviously, Sinai was another place God delighted to reveal Himself. It was there Moses saw the burning bush, received the 10 Commandments, and saw the glory of God. Later, Elijah would encounter God on that same mountain.

Because of this principle, God met His people at Bethel, Shiloh, Mizpah or any place they sacrificed to him. Today many churches have an altar at the front of the auditorium where people come for dedication, salvation, healing or just to meet God there. God has encountered people at the altar of a camp meeting, revival meeting or after a Sunday morning worship service.

Today you can encounter God any place, but when you need Him . . . need Him right away . . . need Him badly; then go back to the place where He likes to work, go back to where you previously met Him. Actually, re-visit the place at camp where you dedicated your life to God. If you can't do it actually, re-visit it in your mind. If you met God there previously, you can encounter Him there again.

> "He (Moses) led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain peak Sinai, in the Horeb range, the mountain of God" (Ex. 3:1 author's translation).

4. *Any results from encountering God are unplanned*. Moses didn't prepare for his face to shine, nor did he know it happened. Because he encountered God, his face shone. It was an unknown result, something that was not even an objective of spending time with God. Obviously, our face will not shine after spending time with God, but people will know it because the presence of God changes us. We do not go into His presence to impress people with changes in our life, nor do we go into God's presence to get our face to "shine." We seek God for His own presence, we focus on Him because He is worthy of our time and energy.

> "Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony *were* in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded" (Exodus 34:29,33-34 NKJV).

5. *The presence of God is linked to the name of God*. When Moses prayed to see the presence of God, it was the name of God that passed in front of him. How can we get the presence of God in our life? The early church learned there was forgiveness in the name of Christ . . . healing in the name of Christ . . . and power in the name of Christ. Demons quaked

before that name, and martyrs willingly laid down their life for that name. You cannot get more of God's presence than you can through His name.

> "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exodus 33:19 NKJV).

6. *Our passion is God Himself, not an angel or any other human help*. Moses did something very few intercessors have done . . . he stayed in God's presence until God gave him his request. God told Israel His presence would not go with them into the Promise Land. That was intolerable. Moses prayed fervently and continually until God said He would go with Israel. Too many of us settle for the power of God, the blessing of God, or the work of God in our lives. What we need is God Himself.

> "The Lord said unto Moses . . . Behold my angel shall go before you . . ." (Exodus 32:33,34). "If your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here" (Exodus 33:15 NKJV).

7. *We encounter God on His terms, not ours*. Even though Moses begged to see God's glory, he didn't see God the way he expected. Perhaps Moses didn't understand the dangers of getting too close to God. Moses didn't get to see the face of God as he asked, and Moses was placed in a split in the rock to protect him. Even then, God had to cover Moses with His hand, in all probability to save his life.

When we encounter God, it will be on His terms, not ours. He is the giver of that blessing, we are simply the recipients.

> "And he (Moses) said, 'Please show me your glory . . .' But He (Lord) said, 'You cannot see my face, for no man can see my face and live'" (Exodus 34:18, NKJV).

8. *Multitudes will not be there when you encounter God, you probably will meet God alone*. The genius of Christianity is that it's experienced one-on-one. We are saved by ourselves when we call on the Lord; while others may pray for us, share the gospel with us and even encourage us to make a decision for salvation; our relationship to God is person-to- person, heart-to-heart, one-to-One.

When God has a special message for you, or when He has a special task for you; He will encounter you personally. Moses met God alone on the mountain, the people waited down on the desert floor.

There are other ministries where group involvement takes place, such as fellowship groups, corporate worship and even corporate atmospheric revival; but encountering God usually is done personally . . . privately . . . and purposefully.

> "So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle" (Exodus 33:8 NKJV).

9. *God knows those who encounter Him*. When Moses went into the presence of God, he found out that God knew his name, but more than his name; God knew him. When we attempt to encounter God, remember God knows your motives behind your intercession. He knows your strength, your weakness, and the passion you have for Him. The scary thing about encountering God, is that He knows everything about you; you can't hide anything from God. The comforting thing about encountering God, is that if He chooses to encounter you, He won't be surprised . . . because He knows everything about you.

> "O Lord, you have searched me and known *me*. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off" (Psalm 139:1,2 NKJV).

10. *Claim the promises of God when entering the presence of God*. When Moses interceded to God, he reminded God that Israel was His people and that He promised to bless them. Moses reminded God that He promised to go with them into the Promise Land. Because Moses claimed these promises by God, he was able to get the things he asked from God.

> "Then Moses said unto the Lord, 'See you said to me, bring up this people'" (Exodus 33:12 NKJV).

Take Aways

- ☐ *I may have physical results from encountering God.*
- ☐ *I may fast to encounter God.*
- ☐ *I will better encounter God at certain locations.*
- ☐ *I usually cannot plan on the results from encountering God.*
- ☐ *I will find God's names linked to His presence.*
- ☐ *I want to encounter God, not an angel or any other help.*
- ☐ *I encounter God on His terms, not mine.*
- ☐ *I must leave the multitudes to encounter God.*
- ☐ *I am known by God when He comes to me.*

- *I must claim God's promises in His presence.*

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I am not sure exactly how the "germ-thought" that God might want me to preach got into my heart. But I found it there. "Lord, do You really want me to preach?" I would ask Him. As a high-school football player, I was not afraid of much that moved on the gridiron, but the thought of being a public speaker was disturbing. More candidly, it scared me to death.

Yet, this little seed of a thought would not go away. For weeks I would pray like this: "Lord, I think You want me to preach." Then for days I would pray, "Lord, if You don't want me to preach, You had better let me know." Finally it was, "Lord, You are calling me, and I know it."

I made a public commitment, and it was settled. From that point on I did not look back. I was thrilled—and still am—that God would call me to serve Him. My high school sweetheart, who is now my wife, was also thrilled. In her heart, she sensed God calling her into His full-time service as well.

As a would-be preacher, I knew I needed God's might and power in my life. I also knew I was totally inadequate. I had not heard much about the power of God available to the Christian, but I knew I needed something.

Our home was near the field where we practiced football. I went alone to that field one night to seek the Lord. It was a beautiful South Florida summer night. I walked and prayed, "Lord Jesus, I want You to use me." Then, wanting to humble myself before Him, I stretched out prostrate, face down on the grass and said, "Lord Jesus, I am Yours. Please use me." That still did not seem low enough. So I made a hole in the dirt and placed my nose into it. "Lord Jesus, I am as low as I know how to get. Please use me."

Something happened in my life that night. I didn't have ecstasies or a vision of any kind, but there was a transformation. At that time, I knew very little theology. God graciously released His power into my young heart and life. There was a great joy present and a desire to share Christ with everyone.

Shortly after that time, I entered college and was asked to serve as pastor of a small country church. I was nineteen years of age and utterly untrained. I am sure my preaching was greatly lacking in form and content, but God graciously and visibly worked. I was often surprised at His power. There were commitments for repentance and tears of joy from the start in that little congregation. People were brought to Christ in unusual numbers for such a small church and town. There was no mistaking the mighty hand of God.[4]

CHAPTER FOUR
GIDEON: A RELUCTANT LEADER

Encounter . . . out of weak self-image
Place . . . under an oak tree
Scripture: Judges 6:11-24

The frail young man crawled on his hands and knees—not praying as much as he should pray—but he was stooped over a pile of wheat, trying to separate wheat kernels from its husk. He was crouched in a winepress in the bottom of a ravine under a large spreading oak tree.

He looked over his shoulder nervously, like a person expecting danger. He stared anxiously from bush to bush; and when he was satisfied no one was spying on him, he went back to his work.

He rolled a round stone over the wheat heads to loosen the shell from the kernel. He repeated the process two or three times to make sure the kernels of wheat were not attached to the outer protective shell. Then scooping up a handful of crushed grain,

"Whoooooosssh . . ." he blew and a puff of wheat dust scattered in the hole where he was hiding. With the wheat dusk went splinters of stalk, leaves, and chaff.

"There . . ." he spoke out loud, but no one was present to listen. "There is another handful of wheat," he concluded as he poured the wheat kernel into a half full bag.

Gideon had hidden in the bottom of a small valley that was shadowed by the famous oak tree of Orphrah. No one could see him down in this hole because he was afraid, he was hiding among the trees. He was scared of his enemies.

It was harvest time in Israel and each year roving bands of Midianites—raiders from the desert—swarmed out over the Promise Land, stealing crops just as they were harvested. Any men who resisted were killed. Families quickly evacuated their farms when Midianites were reported in the area.

Watchmen were posted on the hilltops each Fall to warn the farmers when the Midianites were coming. The farmers were ready. When a band of raiders were spotted, a call rang out over the area. First the ram's horn sounded over the hills, then a cry echoed from one farmer to the next,

"THE MIDIANITES ARE COMING . . .!"

Families grabbed what they could carry, running to hide in the rocks . . . or in the woods . . . some even left for the mountains, not returning until the Fall harvest was over.

Gideon looked at his large pile of wheat to be threshed and winnowed. This Fall had been a bountiful harvest. He was grateful for God's abundance. But the sack only had a few handfuls of grain, he had a lot of work to do. It would take all winter to finish the task.

Gideon rose from his hands and knees, he needed to stretch his aching back. Closing his eyes, he thought of the past when he was a young boy. He remembered how the family worked together to winnow the wheat.

"We went to the tallest hill on our farm," Gideon thought fondly of his days as a youth. He would beat the wheat with a stick to separate the kernels from its shell. The family worked as a family in the late afternoon that was the time of day when a brisk wind blew across the hilltop. The wind was necessary to winnow the grain. His father took a shovel to toss the heads of crushed wheat into the air, the wind blew the chaff away. The kernels fell into a blanket. Then his sisters swept any stray kernels into sacks. It only took two or three days to winnow the grain for the bread they ate for the rest of the year.

But Gideon was hiding down in a low cool spot where they pressed out olives and grapes. He could winnow only one handful at a time. He'd roll a round stone over the wheat to separate the kernels from its shell . . . one handful at a time. He'd blow the chaff away . . . one handful at a time. He'd pour grain into his sack . . . one handful at a time.

If Gideon were on the tall hill, the Midianites would have seen him. He was hiding because of fear.

Gideon jumped back into the hole to work, crawling around the winepress on his hands and knees. Each puff of breath produced a small handful of grain. Each puff of breath produced enough flour for bread for one day for one person in his family. He knew it would take all winter to winnow the wheat. Then suddenly Gideon's thoughts were interrupted.

"GREETINGS . . ." a voice called to him. There sitting on a rock a few steps away was a stranger who didn't look Jewish, nor did he appear to be a Midianite; the stranger was different.

Gideon flinched, then jumped to his feet. He was scared, but didn't have a weapon. He was not sure if he could use a weapon if one were available. Out of fear, he panicked, nothing logical went through his mind. His thought system shut down in fear.

"Greetings . . ." the stranger spoke again. "You are God's hero . . . you are courageous."

Gideon thought the greeting was absurd. The stranger was complimenting him for his courage but he was afraid of everyone, even the one talking to him.

"This stranger doesn't understand the Midianites invade our land every fall," Gideon thought, "this fellow must be from some foreign country." Then Gideon blurted out in response to the absurd greetings,

"If I am a hero of God . . ." Gideon was young, so he wanted to be respectful, "if I have courage, why am I hiding in this ravine from the Midianites? Why am I groveling on my hands and knees for a few kernels of grain?"

The stranger was not a warrior from the Midianites, nor was he from any other country. The stranger had a message to Gideon from God. The stranger explained,

"The Lord is with you . . ." then he waited to see Gideon's response. "You will be courageous because the Lord will be with you."

The stranger explained to Gideon that he was not a strong man in himself, but he could be strong in his God. Even though he was hiding under an oak tree, God would make him courageous. But Gideon wasn't sure, he answered,

"If God is with me . . ." the scared Gideon halted his speech, "if God is with us, where are the miracles He can do?" Gideon had seen families killed . . . where was God? Gideon had heard the elders in the village beaten . . . where was God? Gideon has seen his father's crops stolen . . . where was God? God had not answered his prayers.

"If God is with His people . . ." Gideon asked, "why doesn't He do miracles for us like when He brought Israel out of Egypt?"

The depressed Gideon was not being disrespectful, nor did he have a bitter heart. But it's hard to believe that the water is hot if you can't see steam rising from the pot. Gideon believed in God and he wanted God to protect Israel, but the suffering of God's people perplexed young Gideon.

"God has forsaken us . . ." Gideon lamented. "God has delivered us into the hands of the Midianites—we can't do anything about our suffering—God is punishing us."

The stranger continued to sit upon the large round top rock as he spoke to Gideon. The stranger explained to Gideon that God had heard the prayers of families from all over the nation.

God knew Israel was sorry for her sin. God heard Israel crying out for deliverance. Then the stranger told Gideon,

"God will use you to deliver Israel from the Midianites." The stranger explained, "You will be courageous in the strength of the Lord . . . you will fight in the strength of the Lord . . . you will drive the Midianites away in God's power."

"NOT ME . . .!" Gideon exclaimed without thinking. He said the first thing that popped into his head. "I can't deliver Israel from the Midianites . . . they are too strong . . . there are too many . . ."

The idea of Gideon leading an army into battle was beyond young Gideon's imagination. He was not a powerful general like Joshua, nor was he a mighty warrior like Caleb. Gideon was flustered at the thought of being a leader. He had a low self-image, if anything Gideon had a negative self-image. Lacking self-confidence he said,

"I am the youngest in my fathers' family . . . my father is the poorest in the Abi-ezrite clan . . . our clan is the smallest in the tribe of Manasseh, . . . and Manasseh is the weakest of the 12 tribes of Israel."

Gideon was convinced he was at the bottom of the social class of all Israel. Whether he was or not, is not the issue. Gideon's pitiful self-image was the issue. The stranger listened to Gideon's excuses, now it was time to build up the young man's confidence.

"I will be with you," the stranger assured Gideon, "and with My power, you will defeat the Midianites."

Gideon knew what he heard, but was not sure he believed what he heard. Gideon had asked the stranger why God was not with Israel to defeat the Midianites. Now the stranger was claiming He would be with Gideon to defeat them. Gideon thought,

"Is this stranger claiming to be God?"

Gideon would not ask his questions out loud, he was even afraid to hear his thoughts in actual words. Gideon didn't know what to believe. He kept asking, "Is this stranger from God?" He almost wanted to ask the stranger if he were an angel, maybe the Angel of the Lord. So Gideon decided to put the stranger to a test. Gideon wanted some proof from the stranger, fearful people always want to be certain. Gideon asked,

"If I have found grace in Your sight, then show me a miracle," young Gideon asked, "to prove to me that You will use me to destroy the Midianites." Gideon was embarrassed by his bold question.

Then Gideon remembered that his family always brought a sacrifice when they went to Shiloh to worship God at the Tabernacle. The only way into the presence of God was to offer a present to God. Gideon thought that if the stranger were God, he should bring a blood sacrifice to Him, just as his father brought a lamb to the priest to sacrifice for sin. So Gideon put together a plan in his young mind. Gideon planned to offer a sacrifice to Him. Gideon was not sure if this person were God, or at least from God. But at the same time, he was not sure that this stranger was not from God. Gideon suggested,

"Will you wait while I run to the house and prepare an offering for You?"

The stranger responded, "I will wait here for you."

Gideon sprang into action. He ran quickly up the ravine toward the family home. As he ran across the wheat field, he decided not to tell his parents about the stranger. He was not sure that his parents would believe him. they may laugh at him.

"I won't tell anyone."

Gideon ran toward the pen where the young lambs were kept. He knew well the requirement of a Passover lamb, it was to be killed. He had seen many times a young lamb sacrificed to God. No one was around. Gideon selected a small lamb, perfect and unblemished. He sacrificed it just the way he had seen others do it. Carefully, Gideon placed pieces of flesh from the slain lamb into a basket. He planned to carry the lamb back to the winepress hidden in a basket, that way no one would know what he was doing.

Then Gideon remembered the other presents his father brought to God. At the annual Passover feast, unleavened bread was brought to God. Bread could have no taste of leaven, because leaven or yeast was a sign of sin. When his father brought a peace offering to God, he always gave unleavened bread to God.

"I'll bring unleavened bread . . ." Gideon thought.

While Gideon was not positive the stranger was God, he still thought he could be from God. "I'll bring lots of bread . . ." Gideon rationalized that if it were God, he wanted to get on the "blessing" side of God.

Instead of one handful of flour, Gideon scooped a whole pot of flour from the sack in the family storeroom. He wanted to have enough flour to make a big offering to God.

Gideon sneaked out of the house, he didn't want anyone asking him what he had in the containers. But if someone asked where he was going, it would be even worse. Gideon crouched behind an old rock wall as he left the house, then running down a ravine, he entered the woods. All the time Gideon was heading toward the Ophrah oak tree where the winepress was located.

Gideon was going to encounter God.

As Gideon returned to the oak tree, he wondered if the stranger would still be there. Would He wait on someone as insignificant as the youngest son in the poorest family of the area? Gideon still doubted if the stranger were from God, or if He were an angel from God. What would he say to the stranger and what would the stranger do? Shortly he would know.

When Gideon returned, the stranger was still sitting on the rock, the large round top rock, its height almost reaching to the lowest branch of the Ophrah oak.

Gideon bowed his head and bent his shoulders, it was the way homage was given to a king. Holding the presents by outstretched arms, Gideon slowly approached the rock and the stranger. He did not look at the stranger, nor did he attempt to make eye contact. No one would look directly into the gaze of their King, it would be disrespectful.

Gideon placed the basket and pot at the bottom of the large rock, and in the same motion, nodded to the stranger that the presents were for Him. Gideon presented his gifts as carefully as he had seen his father offer sacrifice to God. He wanted to do everything right.

The stranger stepped off the rock, then nodded his head in approval—both approval of Gideon and his offerings. The stranger then motioned to the top of the rock, instructing Gideon,

"Take the young lamb . . ." then pointing to the pot, "and take the unleavened bread . . . spread them on top of this large smooth rock."

Gideon obeyed. He had seen his father spread the pieces of lamb out on an altar to be sacrificed to God. Gideon followed the same pattern. He spread strips of flesh on the rock,

arranging the pieces just as he had seen his father . . . his grandfather . . . and the other men of the village. Next, Gideon spread the unleavened bread on the rock, just as he had seen his father make a Peace offering to God.

Gideon was always doubting because he always thought about everything. He realized something was missing. He had seen his father lay out strips of meat and unleavened bread on the wood that was upon the altar. There was always wood to burn up the sacrifice. Gideon knew wood was needed for an offering because as a boy, his father had sent him to gather wood for an offering to God. But there was no wood on the large rock. Gideon worried. He saw no gathered wood anywhere, he wondered, "If this offering is for God, where is the wood?"

Gideon stepped back after he arranged everything in order, it was his nature to put everything in its right place. Then the stranger stepped toward the rock, stopped momentarily, then reached out his staff toward the rock. When the walking staff was extended toward the rock, Gideon thought he would touch the stone, but he didn't. The staff touched the meat and the unleavened bread.

"He accepts it . . ." Gideon momentarily thought. Then before he could think anything else, the miracle for which Gideon asked for happened. Right in front of Gideon's eyes, the rock burst into flames, consuming the flesh and the unleavened bread.

"A miracle!" Gideon thought. He was not the kind of person to shout or yell. He wasn't emotional, rather everything was done analytically. Gideon stared at the fire consuming the meat. He saw the flames, he felt the heat, he heard the sizzle of burning meat, and he could even smell its sweet aroma. Gideon knew it was a miracle from God.

Being a thinker—not a doer—Gideon wondered what this miracle meant? He remembered the stranger told him that he was to lead Israel to defeat the Midianites? Would he become a soldier?

Gideon also wondered who was this stranger? Was He a miracle-worker like Moses? Was He an angel of the Lord? Could He be a form of God?

"Who is this stranger?"

Then without warning, right in his sight, Gideon got his answer. The stranger didn't tell him what He would do, nor did the stranger say anything else to Gideon. The next thing the stranger did, sent a message to Gideon. The stranger disappeared into heaven in the smoke of the offering.

"O GOD . . ." Gideon cried with a loud voice. For the first time, he emotionally expressed feelings he didn't know were there.

"O God . . . at least I know who You are!!"

Gideon knew he had seen God face-to-face; if not God, at least Gideon had seen the Angel of the Lord. The Jewish scribes didn't know who was the Angel of the Lord, but they knew when someone saw Him, it was the same as seeing God. The scribes knew the Angel of the Lord had claimed to be God.

Gideon had seen a person who was the Angel of the Lord, this person had called Himself God. This person had suddenly disappeared in the smoke of the fire that he created miraculously. Underneath the giant oak, Gideon raised his clenched fist to heaven and shaking with fear he cried out to heaven,

"I have seen God face-to-face, I shall die."

Still the pessimist, Gideon expected the worst from God, not good. He expected to be punished by God, not blessed by Him.

The last of the smoke drifted between the oak branches, a few hot coals were cooling. Gideon stood in the reflection of a miracle and shook with fear. Then he heard God speak from heaven,

"Gideon . . . you shall not die." God spoke to Gideon without re-appearing to him. God told Gideon, "Peace . . . I have made peace with you because of this sacrificial offering."

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Gideon was used of God to drive the Midianites out of Israel, but even before doing that; Gideon continued to have self-doubts and lacked confidence in God's Word. He wouldn't destroy his father's grove of trees in the daytime where Baal was worshipped; he did it by night when no one was looking. He sought re-confirmation by putting out a fleece of wool and asked God to make it wet over night. When God did it, Gideon asked for the opposite the next night. He was never sure of God's plan, but eventually obeyed. Three hundred men took pitchers, trumpets, and torches to confuse the enemy where they slaughtered themselves. Gideon was God's leader to drive the enemy from his homeland.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *Oppression from circumstances or by an enemy is God's response to His people's rebellion*. God always wants to give the best things to His children, but many times they refuse to live by His principles that will bring them their blessings. When they rebel, God allows them to suffer the consequences of their sin. Sin is the root cause for the problems of God's people.

> "The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and the elders that outlived Joshua . . . another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the works which He had done for Israel. The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served Baal . . . the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of the plunderers" (Judges 2:7,10,11,14 NKJV).

2. *When God's people cry out for deliverance, God calls a person to deliver them*. God sent the Midianites to punish Israel for their sin. "The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years" (Judges 6:1). God lets His people suffer the consequences of their rebellion until they cry for relief. "The children of Israel cried out to the Lord because of the Midianites" (Judges 6:7). God's deliverance comes through His servant, He must find a faithful person, encounter them with the task and send them to do it.

> "Then the Lord raised up Judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them" (Judges 2:16 NKJV).

3. *God usually encounters those who are faithfully working, even though their task may seem small and their results seem to make little contribution*. Gideon was a coward, hiding among the

trees to winnow a little flour. While Gideon's task was pathetic, at least he was trying to do something and he was faithfully doing it. God saw a small spark in Gideon and used him for a great victory.

> "Not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of this world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of this world to put to shame the mighty" (I Cor. 1:26,27 NKJV).

4. *The Lord encounters people at their level of unbelief or negative self-image*. Gideon had a poor self-image and had trouble trusting God. He was not a courageous leader nor did he lead from boldness. God confronted Gideon's emotional problems when He encountered him to prepare Gideon for service.

> The disciples asked, "Why could we not cast him out?" (Matt. 17:19 NKJV). So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief . . . if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain . . . nothing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20 NKJV).

5. *God encounters people at their point of need to help them carry out a task*. Gideon was filled with self-doubt and weakness. Yet when the Lord met Gideon, He first called Gideon "Thou mighty man of valor," perhaps to build up Gideon's self-esteem. Then God gave him a command, "Have not I sent thee?" Finally, God promised, "I will be with you." We can learn from this illustration that God will stretch us to a larger task than we can do, then He will be with us to get it done.

> "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24 NKJV).

6. *God patiently waits for some people because He understands their weakness*. When Gideon wanted to give God a present, he left the Lord and ran to prepare a sacrifice. God patiently waited while Gideon brought the sacrifice and presented it to Him. On other occasions, God makes the recipient wait, such as Paul who prayed and fasted three days. Also, God cleansed Isaiah with coals from off the altar, but on this occasion, God waits for Gideon.

> "Out of the mouth of babes . . . You have ordained strength, because of Your enemies, that You may silence the enemy and the avenger" (Psalm 8:2 NKJV).

7. *God may encounter a person for service in a crisis, but a life-long relationship with God is based on the blood sacrifice*. Gideon knew that a blood sacrifice was necessary when approaching God. The Scriptures tell us nothing of sin or rebellion in Gideon's life although it reveals his unbelief and reticence to obey God. But we can assume that Gideon knew he was not worthy to approach God without making atonement for his sin. So he ran to prepare a sacrifice, which God accepted.

> "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:7 NKJV).

8. *Although God cannot change His nature, He uses different methods to encounter His people according to their needs*. The obstinate servant may need to be broken and the weak servant may need to be encouraged. But Gideon was a shy person with a weak self-acceptance. His unbelief probably came from his poor self-image as well as his circumstances. The Lord did not break Gideon, but gently dealt with him to encourage him. When Gideon asked for a miracle, God responded after a blood sacrifice was presented Him.

> "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth . . . He also will hear their cry and save them" (Psa. 145: 3,18,19).

9. *What a person gets from an encounter with God, becomes characteristic of their remembrance of that experience*. Gideon thought he would die because of encountering God. God told him, "Thou shalt not die." In that response Gideon learned he had made peace with God. In today's terminology, people say, "They have made peace with their soul, " which is one expression of salvation. Gideon built a permanent altar at the spot calling it "Jehovah-shalom" which means, "The peace of the Lord." Gideon remembered making peace with God at that spot when he encountered God.

> "So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it The-Lord-Shalom. To this day it *is* still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites" (Judges 6:24 NKJV).

10. *Sometimes the place we encounter God becomes reverent and remembered*. Gideon called the place the "oak of Ophrah" and the altar was called "Jehovah-Shalom." Then the writer adds, "Unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abiezrites."

A few have erected chapels or churches over places where they encountered God. Others remember an altar at a camp meeting or place at a church where they knelt to surrender their lives to God. Some go back to the place in a bedroom where they knelt to meet God.

Some like to return to a specific spot to renew their vows to God. Whether we re-visit it in our mind or actually return to the physical location, the important thing to remember is that there actually was a time and place we met God. Then also remember, whether we re-visit it again, or not; we can meet God again . . . anytime . . . anyplace . . . any day.

"But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His habitation; and there you shall go" (Deut. 12:5 NKJV).

Take Aways

- ☐ *I will eventually seek God when oppressed.*
- ☐ *I can be delivered from fear by encountering God.*
- ☐ *I will be encountered by God if I am faithful.*
- ☐ *I don't have to overcome all unbelief for God's encounter.*
- ☐ *I will overcome my unbelief in an encounter.*
- ☐ *I must base my relationship to God on cleansing of sin.*
- ☐ *I will meet God differently than others.*
- ☐ *I will be permanently influenced by an encounter with God.*
- ☐ *I remember the place God encountered me.*

Charles Grandison Finney,
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As I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings.

No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, "I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me." I said, "Lord, I cannot bear any more;" yet I had no fear of death . . .

When I awoke in the morning . . . instantly the baptism that I had received the night before returned upon me in the same manner. I arose upon my knees in bed and wept aloud with joy, and remained for some time too much overwhelmed with the baptism of the Spirit to do anything but pour out my soul to God.[5]

CHAPTER FIVE
ELIJAH: HEARING GOD'S SMALL VOICE

Encountering . . . out of discouragement
Place . . . in a cave on Sinai
Scripture: I Kings 19:1-18

The desert stretched flat in every direction, a dull gray desert. There was no beauty in the desert—called the Nigev—unless you can see beauty in the fine crystal sand or various rock formations that splash their way up from the sea of sand.

A lone traveler stumbled down the road heading south away from the Promise Land. The stranger—without a water bottle—staggered into the teeth of the desert as though he were seeking a miserable way to commit suicide.

Beersheba was the southernmost oasis in the Holy Land, the last drink of water before launching out into the desert. No one ventured south on the highway . . . alone . . . without water . . . no one in their right mind.

But Elijah was God's unpredictable prophet, he never did what people expected. He was God's champion. Last week he unexpectedly faced 400 priests of the false god Baal on top of Mt. Carmel. It was a showdown of power. The false priest prayed for fire from heaven, but nothing came. Then Elijah did the unexpected. He poured water over the wood and sacrifice—three times. Then Elijah knelt before Jehovah, the God of Israel to ask for fire to be poured out from heaven like water from a bucket. Bold Elijah was vindicated when God sent fire from heaven. He immediately turned and pointed to the 400 false prophets and yelled to the crowd,

"KILL THEM!"

But victory was short lived. When Queen Jezebel heard that Elijah had killed them, she sent a royal decree to Elijah by messenger,

"I will kill you by this hour tomorrow!"

That's when Elijah ran away. He could stand against 400 false prophets of Baal—he was bold—but a woman sent him running. He ran almost 100 miles from Mt. Carmel to Beersheba. Elijah was able to evade the soldiers of Queen Jezebel. He by-passed every village and town. He avoided people and lived off the land. He slept in caves, escaping to Beersheba.

"They won't look for me in the desert . . ." he said to himself as he launched out over the sandy wastelands. He walked into the desert to die. Then he saw it, among the rising heat vapors on the horizon; like a
hallucination that fades then re-appears. Elijah thought he saw a tree, a Juniper tree. Sure enough the tree was real. One day's journey south of the oasis, he found one tree, and more importantly, he found shade. Instead of enjoying the cool relief from the blistering sun, he realized the futility of his situation. If he returned to the Holy Land, he'd die. If he went into the desert, he'd die. In utter frustration, Elijah looked to heaven and prayed,

"Kill me, God," he was serious, "I don't deserve to live."

Perspiration dampened his tunic, his head became dizzy, and he passed out into sleep. He slept fitfully in the hot late afternoon sun. Hours later, the cool night desert air chilled him. He had gone from heat exhaustion to bone-shaking chills. He pulled his robe tightly for comfort. He was trying to sleep when he felt something. Someone was poking him.

"Who's there?" he jerked awake.

"I'm an angel from God," the stranger had to touch Elijah several times to arouse him.

Sitting up, Elijah looked around under the tree. He saw red coals glowing in a campfire, he smelled the unmistakable aroma of baked cake. There was a water bottle—full of crystal water—waiting for him.

"Get up . . ." the angel instructed him. "Eat and drink—you have a long journey before you."

Elijah drank first, his bodily fluids were depleted; he needed water. With every swallow, he could feel life surging through his empty body, like water pouring into the dry dirt rows on the farm. Tearing at the cake, Elijah shoveled huge chunks into his mouth. It didn't bother him that he swallowed sand from his beard with the cake and water. He no longer wanted to die, he was glad to be alive; even though his situation was precarious. Within minutes, Elijah was stuffed—uncomfortably stuffed—within minutes he was back asleep, a loud snore drifted out over the desert floor.

Elijah hovered under the shade of the Juniper all the next day. He was sick from overeating and sick from the heat. Not knowing what to do next, he hovered under the juniper tree to escape the torment of the sun. He longed for a breeze to cool his body, but he knew the wind would blow sand in his eyes . . . mouth . . . and fill his ears.

That night the cold desert wind again chilled his sleep. He tried to find protection behind a sand dune. Again, the second night the angel had to poke Elijah two or three times to awaken him. Coming out of a deep sleep, Elijah could barely discern the words,

"Rise and eat . . ." the angel had prepared another meal. Again, Elijah saw the glow of red coals against the backdrop of a black night. A milky drape of stars covered the sky. The cool water awaited him, and another cake as enjoyable as the previous night.

"Eat plenty and drink well . . ." the angel instructed him. "You have 40 days of fasting ahead of you, it will take you 40 days to get to your destination."

Elijah immediately knew the destination, he knew where the angel was sending him. Every Jew knew there was only one place south of Beersheba where God would send a person.

"Horeb . . ." Elijah whispered the location, "Horeb is the mountain of God." He nodded approval. He would go to Horeb, a range of mountains 40 days away. Sinai was the highest peak in the Horeb range where Moses talked with God in the burning bush. Sinai was where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments. Sinai was where Moses saw God, and his face shone for 40 days.

"Will I see God at Sinai?" Elijah thought of the 40-day fast ahead.

"Now sleep . . ." the angel instructed him. "The journey is great, you'll need all your strength."

40 DAYS LATER

Elijah stood at the bottom of Sinai, it was tall—7,550 feet—steep and dangerous. The journey had depleted his strength, he hadn't eaten for 40 days, and the water bottle was empty. Looking almost straight up, he knew God met Moses at the top, so he had to go up there, too.

"If I want to see God," Elijah thought, "I'll have to go to the top."

Elijah knew he couldn't stay at the bottom of the mountain. There were springs of water among the rocks. There was some cool shade in the small ravines. He was close to his destination, but he didn't want to remain at the bottom of the mountain. He had to go all the way to the top.

"Since God has helped me get this far," wiry Elijah resounded, "He will help me climb to the top."

Slowly and painstakingly Elijah followed the path. It was a steep climb straight up, never a slow winding path. His wobbly knees demanded rest every few yards. The only good relief about climbing higher, the weather got cooler.

Then Elijah passed the tree line, there were no more pine trees this high up. He rested for awhile, then turning he looked back down on the desert floor. Elijah wondered what Moses thought when he looked down on the tents of Israel, a million people on their way from Egypt to the Promise Land.

A cloud brushed up against Sinai, obscuring his view of the desert floor. Elijah was covered with white, snowy fog. It was wet and invigorating. The momentary cloud cover gave him impetus to climb higher. When the cloud passed, he could see a trail, so he began climbing again.

Toward evening, Elijah saw a large cave, protected from the cold evening wind. He slept in the cave that evening, it was the first time in many nights the stars hadn't been his covering. The next morning God spoke to him,

"Elijah . . ." he recognized the voice of God. "What are you doing here at Sinai?"

At first Elijah didn't know how to answer the question. God had provided food and water to save him in the desert. God had led him to Sinai. Now God was asking why he was here. He responded,

"I've been very jealous for Your glory, O Lord God of Israel," Elijah answered. "Israel has rejected her covenant with You, Israel has destroyed Your altars, and Israel has killed Your prophets."

Discouragement was evident in Elijah's voice. He raged against the sin of God's people, then concluded with finality,

"I'm the only one left who is true to You," Elijah reminded God of his faithfulness to stand bold against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. He complained,

"I've run away because they tried to kill me."

God didn't want to carry on this conversation with the scared prophet. He didn't want to hear excuses, nor was the Lord interested in giving pity to Elijah. God had some things to show Elijah. God instructed him,

"Go stand on the top of Sinai."

It was only a short distance to the peak—to the very top. God wanted Elijah to go to the highest point of the mountain because it was His mountain. God said,

"Go stand on the peak for Me."

His weak legs were motivated with anticipation of seeing God. Elijah knew it was here that Moses saw God, he pushed his body upward. He wanted to see God just as Moses. The last words of God were ringing in Elijah's ears.

"Stand before Me!"

On the peak of Sinai, Elijah could look down in every direction. He was higher than he'd ever been in his life, he felt closer to God than he'd ever been in his life.

Elijah could feel the presence of God as he stood . . . a solitary thing on the top of Sinai—no trees—no other sturdy object on the peak . . . only Elijah standing before God.

A few months ago, Elijah had felt the atmospheric presence of God on another mountain. He remembered feeling the presence of God on Mt. Carmel where fire whooshed down from heaven. Now two months later, Elijah felt God on Mount Sinai. He could feel the presence of God, but couldn't see anything.

Suddenly a storm began forming off to the right. It was a snarling black cloud . . . a rain cloud . . . a hurricane. The storm began moving toward Elijah and passed right in front of him. The gray early morning turned dark, black like midnight. A powerful wind and rushing clouds swept before him, faster than any rushing storm he'd ever seen, faster than any wind he'd ever experienced.

But the wind didn't touch Elijah. He saw it but didn't feel it. the wind gushed over the rocks before him, it was so vicious that rocks—larger boulders—were dislodged. They bounced easily down the cliff, splitting as they plunged over other rocks. The sound of smashing rocks and howling winds was deafening. Suddenly the wind ceased and the clouds were gone. Then Elijah experienced . . .

Silence.

Elijah didn't see the Lord in the wind. He knew God was there, but he couldn't see Him.

Then the earth began to quake, but Elijah wasn't afraid; an earthquake shook Sinai. The top of the mountain shook like never before and no one was there to see it except God and Elijah. Great crevices opened in the side of the mountain, and more rocks began tumbling down the steep slopes of Sinai. Suddenly the earthquake stopped, just as suddenly as it started. Then Elijah experienced . . .

Silence.

Elijah didn't see the Lord in the earthquake, but he still knew God was there.

Then off to the left, Elijah saw fire, like the fire of the Shekinah Glory Cloud, but brighter. It was like lightning, but brighter. The fire roared with a burning noise, flames dancing in the sky. Elijah observed the fire burning across the sky, similar to what he had seen as a boy. His young eyes saw fire race across a wheat field, the flames eating everything in its path. The fire raced across the sky in front of Elijah. Then suddenly, it disappeared. Elijah again felt . . .

Silence.

Elijah didn't see God in the wind . . . in the earthquake . . . or in the fire. He questioned, "Where is God?"

Off in the distance he heard it. Turning his ear to the right, he strained to understand the noise he heard. The breeze made it difficult to hear, no matter how hard he tried to listen. Elijah turned and retreated down the path, he wanted to get out of the breeze, and he wanted to hear. All was still and quiet in the mouth of the cave. Cupping his hand to his ear, he listened intently.

Elijah heard a still, small voice.

God was not shouting nor did God demand attention. The Lord whispered to Elijah in a still small voice,

"What are you doing here at Sinai?"

This was the second time God asked Elijah this question. Was God wanting to know why he was in this location at Sinai? If so, was God asking a question of geography, or was there another point that God was making? Was it a question about motivation? Was God asking why was he not in the Promise Land ministering to the people in Israel? Elijah gave the same answer he gave when God first asked the question,

"I have been very jealous of Your presence, O Lord God of Israel," Elijah explained, "Israel has rejected her covenant with You. Israel has destroyed Your altars and killed Your prophets."

Again Elijah answered the same thing as before. "I am the only one left who is faithful to You." Perhaps that's why he was isolated here in the desert with no one within miles. That's why he ran away. He thought he was the only faithful one left. Then Elijah added,

"They seek my life to kill me!"

God knew that sympathy was not what Elijah needed. A discouraged person exaggerates his troubles, because the more a discouraged person talks about his troubles, the more discouraged he becomes. A discouraged person doesn't need to hear, he needs to put his hands and feet to work. God had a task for Elijah.

"Go to Damascus . . ." this was a trip that would cross three or four countries. This was a trip that would take a long time. God was sending Elijah far to the north of Israel. God told him,

"Go to the capital city of Damascus and anoint Hazael king over Syria."

Surely this task was a death sentence to Israel—God's people—Hazael would try to destroy God's people.

But God wasn't finished, He had other terrifying news for Elijah,

"Go to Israel . . ." God had another task, "anoint Jehu king over Israel."

Jehu was a general in the army of God's people. Jehu too had a reputation of being unrelenting and demanding. He too was vicious in battle. Also, Jehu would murder anyone who tried to take his kingdom. God did not listen to the complaints of Elijah. Jehu was to be the next anointed king over Israel.

God still had other tasks for Elijah. The old prophet would get discouraged sitting around with nothing to do, so God had another person to anoint, but this one was personal, it involved his successor.

"Go anoint Elisha to take your place," God told old Elijah, "young Elisha will be a prophet in your place."

God was reminding the fiery Elijah that he would be replaced. While no one seeks death, everyone must eventually plan for it and be willing to accept its inevitability. The future was not rosy, it was black. Then God explained,

"Those that escape the sword of Hazael, will be killed by the sword of Jehu." War was coming. "Those that escape the sword of Jehu, will be slain by the sword of Elisha, the prophet."

Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon, destruction was coming. Elijah felt safe in the wilderness of Sinai, because no one was there, but he couldn't stay in the desert. God was sending him back to the land of Israel, back tot he people of Israel. Then to further equip Elijah, God corrected him,

"There are 7,000 persons in Israel that have not bowed their knee to Baal." This was good news. "There are 7,000 persons who worship Jehovah and serve Me."

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Elijah sent the prophet Elisha to anoint Hazael, who was much more vicious toward God's people than his predecessor (I Kings 8:12 ff) and then another prophet anointed Jehu, again a king more vicious than his predecessor. Finally, Elijah anointed Elisha in his place. But Elijah had some time and ministry left. Before Elijah was taken to heaven, he did other miracles and influenced the kingdom in other ways.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. God will encounter those who are running from Him. When Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah, he began running for his life, crossing through Israel, Judea and then venturing out into the desert. He ended up at Mount Sinai where God encountered him; sending him back into ministry.

"Go, return on thy way" (I Kings 9:6).

2. *God asks questions when He encounters us, not because He wants information, but to teach us something.* Notice in Scriptures how God came to Adam asking, "Adam, where art thou?" And then God asked Cain, "Why are you angry?" When God encountered Elijah he asked, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" God did not ask the question to get information, God knows all things. God wanted Elijah to face his conscience and motivations. Elijah had run away from the people to whom God had called him to minister. He was running for the wrong reason. God asked a question to make him honestly face his unbelief.

> "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if *there is any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23 NKJV).

3. *Sometimes we must take care of our physical needs before a spiritual encounter with God.* Elijah had wandered into the desert, he needed rest, food, and water. God sent a messenger, i.e., an angel, to bake a cake and to provide water and then instructed Elijah to, "rise and eat." Then the angel told him to sleep because the journey was going to be difficult.

Perhaps Elijah was not physically able to deal with spiritual issues. It's very hard to tell a man to repent and accept Christ as Savior when a man is so hungry he can't pay attention to your words. That is why there are humanitarian agencies that use food programs, housing, and other social ministries to help people as a basis for preaching the gospel.

> "An angel touched him . . . 'Arise and eat.' . . . *there* by his head *was* a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water" (I Kings 19:6 NKJV).

4. *Sometimes a physical fast from food is associated with an encounter with God.* Actually a fast can come before meeting God, or after meeting God. Some people meet God and then begin fasting as Saul fasted for three days after seeing Jesus the Damascus road. In this case, Elijah fasted for 40 days before he encountered God on Mount Sinai.

Fasting is a time when you refrain from food so that you give all your attention to seeking God. You fast from food, but hunger and thirst after righteousness, seeking a spiritual answer from God. Sometimes prayer is not enough. You take your intercession to a higher level through fasting.

This could have been a forced fast, Elijah may not have had food available between the juniper tree and Mount Sinai; so he had to fast. Whatever the case, he fasted before he encountered God.

> "Is not this the fast that I have chosen . . .That ye break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6).

5. *Sometimes God encounters us in quiet ways, not with extreme physical manifestations.* When Elijah stood before the presence of God, first he experienced a mighty rushing wind, but God was not in the wind. Next Elijah experienced an earthquake that shook the rocks, but God was not in the earthquake. Then Elijah saw a fire that might remind us of the Shekinah Glory Cloud; but God was not in the fire. God revealed Himself to Elijah in a still, small voice.

I married a gentle woman, one who has never raised her voice. I've never seen her get angry, and I've never heard her yell at me or the kids. When she expresses disapproval, she begins whispering. The kids have always said, "Watch out when Mom whispers!" My wife doesn't need to raise her voice to get her way. And in the same way, God doesn't need to yell to get our attention. He doesn't need to do awesome physical manifestations to get our attention. God spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice, and He may encounter us in the same way.

> "*But* the Lord was not in the wind; . . . *but* the Lord was not in the earthquake, . . . *but* the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice" (I Kings 19:11,12 NKJV).

6. Sometimes we won't like what we hear when God encounters us. Elijah had run away from Queen Jezebel, fearing for his life. But God encountered him and sent him back to his homeland with a three-fold task. He is to anoint Hazael King of Syria, anoint Jehu King of Israel and anoint Elisha a prophet to replace him. The kings that Elijah anointed were vicious men, probably a task that Elijah didn't want to do. Also, when he anointed Elisha to take his place, he had to deal with his own humanity and frailty. No one likes to step aside to allow someone else to take his place. Yet, Elijah encountered God and from that experience, received enough strength to do tasks that were unenjoyable.

> "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14 NKJV).

7. Action is the best thing to break discouragement or emotional collapse. Often we try to get discouraged people to rationalize why they are discouraged. We try to deal with an emotional problem by academic means; but that doesn't always work. The best way to get the attention of those struggling with an emotional problem, is to put them to work. Put their hands, feet, their total body into service. God gave the discouraged Elijah a task; but not just any task. The task involved the future. Many people are discouraged because they have no future—no hope. You can help someone who is discouraged by getting them to look to the future. Elijah needed to look beyond the present kings of Israel. Surely King Ahab and Queen Jezebel wanted to kill him, but God told him to anoint Jehu in their place, i.e., look to the future. The greatest enemy that God's people had at the time was the king of Syria, and God told him to anoint the

next king of that nation. Then God wanted him to look beyond his own life; God told him to anoint Elisha. In this way, God was assuring Elijah that His work would continue after Elijah's death.

"Whatever He (Jesus) says to you, do *it*" (John 2:5 NKJV).

8. *When you encounter someone who lowers his or her voice, you must become still and quiet if you want to hear and understand them*. God did not just use miracles to speak to Elijah, God lowered His voice to get his full attention. Sometimes you must be still and listen if you want to encounter God.

"Be still, and know that I *am* God" (Psalm 46:10 NKJV).

9. *God solves depression by giving people hope, focusing them on the future, and putting them to work*. One of the reasons for depression is the person can't see the future and especially, they can't see themselves in the future. Usually just talk will not help a depressed person. God broke Elijah's discouragement by putting him to work. If you are discouraged, perhaps when you encounter God, He will put you to work. That way, you'll have something to plan for, you'll have a future.

"Go return on your way . . .anoint Hazael . . . anoint Jehu . . . anoint Elisha" (I Kings 19:15,16 NKJV)

10. *You can get encouragement in an encounter with God*. Elijah had been used greatly of God, there was an anointing upon his life. For three and a half years at the brook Cherith, God supernaturally provided for his food by ravens. Then he went to the town of Zarephath where Elijah miraculously provided for his needs by a widow with a cruse of oil and a barrel of meal that did not run out during a famine. Then when the widow's son died, Elijah raised him from the dead. There was the famous confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah prayed and God sent fire from heaven. In spite of all that God did for him, Elijah got discouraged. This means that perhaps you have been used of God in the past but now you are discouraged. Like Elijah, God can break your discouragement by encountering you for future ministry.

"Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (I Kings 19:18 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I may be encountered by God even when I run from Him.*
- *I must answer questions about my motivation.*
- *I sometimes have to solve physical problems before encountering God.*
- *I can fast to prepare for an encounter.*
- *I can encounter God without extreme physical manifestations.*
- *I won't always like what I hear in an encounter.*
- *I can break discouragement with actions.*
- *I will pay better attention when God lowers His voice.*
- *I will get hope and vision from an encounter with God.*
- *I will return to service after an encounter with God.*

Oswald Chambers
Author
My Utmost For His Highest
(one of the best known and best selling devotional books in history)

I was in Dunoon College as a tutor in philosophy when Dr. F. B. Meyer came and spoke about the Holy Spirit. I determined to have all that was going, and went to my room and asked God simply and definitely for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, whatever that meant.

God used me during those years for the conversion of souls, but I had no conscious communion with Him. The Bible was the dullest, most uninteresting book in existence, and the vileness and bad-motivedness of my nature, was terrific.

The last three months of those years things reached a climax, I was getting very desperate. I knew no one who had what I wanted; in fact I did not know what I did want. But I knew that if what I had was all the Christianity there was, the thing was a fraud. Then Luke 11:13 got hold of me—"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children. How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?"

But how could I, bad motivated as I was, possibly ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit? Then it was borne in upon me that I had to claim the gift from God on the authority of Jesus Christ and testify to having done so. But the thought came—if you claim the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Word of Jesus Christ and testify to it, God will make it known to those who know you best how bad you are in heart. God brings one to the point of utter despair, and I got to the place where I did not care whether everyone knew how bad I was; I cared for nothing on earth, saving to get out of my present condition.

At a little meeting held during a mission in Dunoon, a well known lady was asked to take the after meeting. She did not speak, but set us to prayer, and then sang 'Touch me again, Lord." I felt nothing, but I knew emphatically my time had come, and I rose to my feet. I had no vision of God, only a sheer dogged determination to take God at His Word and to prove this thing for myself, and I stood up and said so.

That was bad enough, but what followed was ten times worse. After I had sat down the lady worker, who knew me well, said: "That is very good of our brother, he has spoken like that as an example to the rest of you."

Up I got again and said: "I got up for no one (else's) sake, I got up for my own sake; either Christianity is a downright fraud, or I have not got hold of the right end of the stick." And then and there I claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit in dogged committed on Luke 11:13.

I had no vision of heaven or of angels, I had nothing. I was as dry and empty as ever, no power or realization of God, no witness of the Holy Spirit. Then I was asked to speak at a meeting, and forty souls came out to the front. Did I praise God? No, I was terrified and left them to the workers, and went to Mr. MacGregor (a friend) and told him what had happened, and he said: "Don't you remember claiming the Holy Spirit as a gift on the word of Jesus, and that He said: 'Ye shall receive power . . .?' "This is the power from on high." Then like a flash something happened inside me, and I saw that I had been wanting power in my own hand, so to speak, that I might say—Look what I have by putting my all on the altar.

If the four previous years had been hell on earth, these five years have truly been heaven on earth. Glory be to God, the last aching abyss of the human heart is filled to overflowing with the love of God. Love is the beginning, love is the middle and love is the end. After He comes in, all you see is "Jesus only, Jesus ever."[6]

CHAPTER SIX
ISAIAH: PROPHET FOR GOD

Encounter . . . when dreams are destroyed
Place . . . in the Temple in Jerusalem
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-13

The king's funeral had lasted longer than everyone expected, the crowd was much larger then expected, and there were more speakers than usual. But the most shocking event of all, King Uzziah was buried among the kings of Judah.

After the funeral was over, Isaiah, a young member of Uzziah's court, waited at Uzziah's tomb longer than anyone else from the official funeral delegation. Young Isaiah loved old Uzziah, he believed in the dreams of Uzziah. He had believed Uzziah could restore the glory of David to Jerusalem. Now the king was dead, Isaiah's dreams were gone. Isaiah wept silently at the grave of his dead hero. Not only was Uzziah gone, but an ugly fight had broken out over his burial place. Some didn't want King Uzziah's vault to be located near the burial place of David and Solomon. One rabbi had argued,

"Uzziah sinned . . ." the rabbis announced to the Great Sanhedrin—a meeting where religious matters were settled—"because Uzziah sinned, he had disgraced the office of king. He shall not be buried with the great kings . . . with David and Solomon."

Uzziah was a great king—greater than any king in recent memory—he served longer than any, 52 years. Uzziah captured territory that the Philistines had stolen from Judah, he built fortresses, a harbor city on the gulf of Aquaba and strengthened the walls of Jerusalem. Another rabbi defended the burial of Uzziah.

"Uzziah has made the walls of Jerusalem stronger . . . higher . . . and he invented new weapons to protect us. We are a stronger nation because of Uzziah."

The entire Sanhedrin agreed that Jerusalem was more secure from attack than before. Under Uzziah, the army had invented a catapult to hurl huge rocks at the enemy, rocks as large as a horse could be heaved over a wall to crush enemy fortresses. The army also invented a machine to shoot multiple arms—raining mass destruction on an attacking enemy. The defender of Uzziah who wanted him buried with the great kings, argued,

"Uzziah has given us more security . . . more prosperity . . . more prestige . . . than any other king."

Yes, Uzziah had reigned well for 52 years, but one last arrogant act destroyed the memory of his accomplishments. In defiance against God, Uzziah walked into the Holy Temple where only God's priests could go. He brought a lamb to sacrifice, a task only God's priest could do.

Uzziah took the golden sensor into the Holy Place to offer prayers to God; again, a duty only priests could do.

"Treason . . ." a young priest yelled at King Uzziah. He dashed off to get the Temple guard, yelling to all as he ran through the Temple, "The King is mad . . . the King is mad . . . the King is mad."

No one believed the young priest dashing through the Temple, because a young priest should not be running in the Temple. But the young priest returned with the High Priest, the inner council and over fifty temple guards and over 400 priests surrounded the king. It was an angry mob yelling at the king. The confrontation exploded at the table of incense in the Holy Place. The shouts were heard throughout the Temple, but no scuffle,

"UZZIAH . . . YOU SINNED AGAINST GOD," the High Priest tried to grab the golden sensor from the King.

"HOW DARE YOU STOP ME," King Uzziah yelled back at the High Priest. "After all I've done for our nation . . . now I want to pray for our people." He clutched the golden senser to his chest.

Uzziah's success had gone to his head, he had accomplished more than any other king in recent memory. There was more wealth in the treasury than at any time since Solomon. He was a good king; he had strengthened Temple worship. Uzziah had forgotten that God had separated the office of king and priest. No one could cross that line . . . no one, not even a successful king. Their offices were determined by birth, the kings came from the line of Judah, the priests from the line of Levi.

"STOP . . ." the High Priest demanded, he tried again to yank the golden sensor from the king. Then suddenly the High Priest's hands went limp, his mouth opened but no sound came out. What he saw silenced him. Fear gripped him. As the other priests saw it, they too stopped . . . becoming silent . . . afraid to move . . . afraid to speak. The King's entourage was still yelling, they couldn't see the King's face because they were behind him. Then the King's valet looked at what the High Priest's were seeing. He could only say one word, the one word was what a good Jew was commanded to say when he saw the feared disease,

"LEPROSY!"

A large patch of white leprosy suddenly broke out on the King's forehead, its red infection streaked onto the rest of his face. The High Priest jumped back in horror, repeating the warning,

"LEPROSY!"

The jostling crowd of priests, guards and King's entourage, were frozen in fear. God had commanded no leper could enter the Temple, but here in the Holy Place, God struck Uzziah with leprosy. Everyone knew the disease meant certain premature death, leprosy was a sign of inner secret sin. Uzziah's inner rebellion was now evidenced on his face.

"UNCLEAN . . .!" yelled the young hot-head priest who first encountered Uzziah. He yelled for all to hear, "UNCLEAN . . . UNCLEAN . . ."

No one reached out to Uzziah, no one touched the King. They too would become unclean if they touched a leper, unclean if they touched any part of his clothing, unclean if they touched anything he touched.

Uzziah resigned his office as King, his son Jotham became King in his place. Uzziah lived the rest of his short life in a house separated from society as prescribed by the law. Called a "Separate House," it was there shortly he died.

In spite of his last act of rebellion that snatched the office from him, Uzziah was buried in the vaults where the great kings of Judah were buried. He was laid to rest only a few feet from King David and King Solomon.

Now the funeral was over. The dreams of Uzziah were gone.

Young Isaiah was the last to leave the vault, he was emotionally attached to King Uzziah. Isaiah felt the nation couldn't go on without the powerful King Uzziah. His world was collapsing around him. He had never given up hope, even until the last he prayed,

"God, heal King Uzziah," but God didn't answer. God in His providence allowed a swift death for Uzziah. Life had to go on, a new King had to take over the leadership of the nation. But Isaiah couldn't accept his death, his young world collapsed. Isaiah stood before the burial crypt thinking,

"Our nation was so close to returning to the glory of David . . . so close . . . we almost made it."

Every Jew had a dream of living in the kingdom of David, feeling the security of David's protection, enjoying the prosperity of David. Isaiah thought Uzziah could have returned the past glory to Judah.

The new king Jotham was not as strong as his father . . . not as wise . . . not as godly. Isaiah prayed to God,

"What will happen to us now?"

Where does a person go when his dreams are crushed? The sun, golden like a freshly baked roll, was setting over the western hills. Soon the first evening star could be seen in the east. Isaiah couldn't stay at the grave of Uzziah all night, he couldn't bring him back from the dead. Isaiah walked toward the Temple. He thought,

"Perhaps in God's presence I can understand . . ."

Isaiah was recognized in the city as a bright young rising leader, even though arrogant. The old leaders knew Isaiah had a keen mind, was articulate and they expected him to sit on the Great Sanhedrin one day. But everyone knew Isaiah had a strong ego. "Who can break his pride?" the members of the Sanhedrin discussed behind his back.

As Isaiah walked through the Golden Gate into the Temple, the priests nodded, but Isaiah was too haughty to return their greetings. Isaiah walked passed the brazen altar, no one was

there; it was past the hour of sacrifice. He strolled aimlessly into the Holy Place, again the hour was late, and no one was there. The Holy Place was the center of prayer, but it was also the place where Uzziah's leprosy broke out. Isaiah was mysteriously drawn to the place where his dreams were destroyed.

"Why . . .?" he asked God as he looked to heaven through tear-blurred eyes.

Then Isaiah saw what he had never seen before. The skies opened and clouds were folded back as a white blanket is turned back on a bed. He saw past the Temple . . . past the moon and stars . . . past the atmosphere.

Isaiah looked into heaven.

Extremely high in heaven, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on the throne. As a young scholar, Isaiah knew that no one could see God, no one could see God's face, then live. But there in heaven, Isaiah saw the form of a man sitting on a massive throne, larger than a city, larger than a mountain. He saw a rainbow around the throne, and flashes of lightning came from the throne. But Isaiah didn't focus on the throne or the things around it. Isaiah focused his attention on the One sitting on the throne.

"I see the Lord," he said quietly. "I see the Lord, sitting high upon a throne in heaven."

Immediately, Isaiah fell on his knees with his face to the ground. He had seen God, yet was alive. Then he heard the sound of wings fluttering, like hundreds of pigeons flapping their wings against the air to lift themselves into the sky. Looking up to see what made the sound, Isaiah saw angels—shining men flying in the clouds—their wings lifting them into God's presence. Then he heard them singing,

"Holy . . .Holy . . .Holy . . ." they were singing praises to God. Only their bellowing music moved him unlike the Levitical choirs in the Temple that never touched his heart. As Isaiah heard their anthem, he sang with them,

"Holy . . . Holy . . . Holy . . ." Isaiah praised God with them as he never sang before. The angels continued singing, "Holy is the Lord of Host . . . Holy is the God of the angels."

Never had Isaiah seen beauty as he saw in heaven, nothing on earth compared to what he saw. The angels continued their worship, "The whole earth is full of His glory."

Isaiah thought Uzziah's court was magnificent. Vicariously Isaiah took pride in identifying with the King of Judah's entourage. Isaiah felt power in Uzziah's accomplishments, he gloried in his earthly King's accomplishments, almost as though Uzziah's accomplishments were his own. At least, Isaiah felt Uzziah couldn't have done it without him.

Now God was showing Isaiah a greater throne . . . a greater glory . . . a greater power . . . God was telling Isaiah that His glory was much greater than any earthly king.

Whereas Isaiah's vision of an earthly kingdom was crushed with the death of Uzziah, God was giving the young courtier a new vision of what He could do. Isaiah needed to look at the future of God's people through God's eyes, not through his discouraged eyes, and not through the eyes of Uzziah.

High in heaven, God sat on His throne. His robe and train flowed from His shoulders down to earth . . . down to the Temple . . . down into the Holy of Holies. Never had Isaiah seen a royal train this long, surpassing anything Isaiah had ever seen on Uzziah or other visiting royalty. The train was more than fine cloth, it was the Shekinah Glory Cloud. The train from God's shoulders was the cloud that extended from heaven to earth, all the way down to the Mercy Seat that covered the Ark of the Covenant. The Shekinah Glory Cloud was the presence of God Himself in the Temple, a cloud of glory by day and a cloud of fire by night.

"Holy . . . Holy . . . Holy . . ." the angel again cried out. At the sound of the voice, the door to the Temple shook, then its frame shook. An earthquake shook the building. Isaiah felt the tremors and was afraid. He thought inwardly, "Just as his dreams had collapsed, would the Temple collapse around him?"

The cloud of Shekinah Glory spilled off the mercy Seat and from the Ark of the Covenant which it covered. Like fog covering a low-lying river on a cool morning, so the cloud covered the floor of the Temple. The cloud spilled out into the whole Temple, covering the floors in every room like water seeking its own level. The experience was too much for Isaiah, he cried out,

"I'm scared . . ." he exclaimed. "I'll die . . . I can't stand it."

Isaiah began to shake all over with fear, his mind panicked, and his mouth dried. His words were shaky because he felt danger.

"I'm a sinner . . . don't send me to hell." Isaiah put his hands to his face and began to cry. "My lips are too unclean for God, I live among a people that are too unclean to be God's people . . .." Isaiah began to sob,

"I know I'm unclean because I've seen the King of Heaven, I have seen the God of the angels."

Isaiah had boasted to his family of Judah's greatness when he attended King Uzziah's throne room. But now he could no longer boast of an earthly king's greatness, or was he proud of his identification with Uzziah's accomplishments. He was broken with a vision of God's glory and his own sinfulness. He could only cry,

"I'm an unworthy sinner."

An angel flew to the brazen altar at the entrance to the Temple. This was the altar where lambs were killed and blood was sacrificed for the sin of sinners. The death of a lamb became a substitute for punishment of the sinner. The blood became the basis of cleansing.

The angel took a burning coal off the altar with long handled tongs, these were the tongs the law prescribed to be used in sacrifice. The angel flew from the altar to Isaiah, bringing the red glowing ember with him. The angel touched the mouth of Isaiah with the hot coal, saying,

"This coal has touched your mouth to take away your sin." The angel informed Isaiah, "Your sin is forgiven."

Isaiah surrendered to God, all of his presuppositions of serving God in the court of Uzziah were gone. He felt ashamed . . . he felt broken . . . but more importantly, he felt clean. For the first time the Lord spoke from His throne, Isaiah heard God ask,

"Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"

Isaiah knew God was speaking to him, it was not an idle question. Isaiah knew the question was directed at him. Isaiah had prepared himself to serve in the court of Uzziah, but that was now impossible. Now he was invited to serve in God's court. The question God asked was simple . . . direct . . . demanding,

"Will you go for Me, will you serve Me?"

It didn't take Isaiah long to respond. It was more of an invitation than a question. Isaiah immediately responded,

"Here am I," he answered without hesitation, "send me."

God told Isaiah that he would be sent as a spokesman—God's mouthpiece—to the people of God. God gave Isaiah a command that confused him, not because Isaiah didn't understand what God wanted him to do, but Isaiah didn't understand why God would send him to fail. God told Isaiah,

"Go tell my people that they will hear this message, but not understand it."

God had further instruction to Isaiah," Tell them they shall see My work, but not understand it." God was telling Isaiah that he would speak for Him, but no one would listen. God was telling Isaiah that he would fail because the people would reject him. God said,

"The people will reject your message." God explained that the nation was prosperous, but was spiritually bankrupt. Even though Uzziah encouraged Temple worship of Jehovah, he allowed people to grow groves of trees to Baal where they offered sacrifices to carved idols. Because God's people had leprous hearts, God was going to use a foreign nation to punish them. God explained to Isaiah,

"They will reject your message of coming punishment . . . they are blind to see it . . . they are deaf to hear it . . . their heart is too hard to receive it."

God's people believed they were above punishment. They believed the Temple made them invincible. They believed the covenant automatically protected them from danger. They believed the God of Israel would fight for them. They felt untouchable, not realizing they were only outwardly obeying rituals, but inwardly had rejected God. They worshipped Baal, and behind closed doors broke the commandments of God. Their sin blinded their eyes to the true meaning of the law. Their iniquity prohibited them from understanding the true meaning of Scripture when they heard it.

Isaiah understood his impossible task, but he had one question for God, "How long shall I speak?" Was it futile to continue in his ministry when the people rejected him? Isaiah wanted to know if the people would eventually listen to him. Should he should quit speaking to the people because they rejected his message?

"Keep speaking . . ." God told him. "Don't stop giving the message of punishment until the land is punished . . . until the enemy drives the people from their houses . . . until the land is entirely desolate."

"But Lord, . . ." Isaiah pleaded for understanding. "If you drive your people out of their land, what about Your promises that Israel shall dwell in the land?"

God gave to Isaiah a message of hope for the distant future. God told him Israel would return to the Promise Land. "When a tree is cut down, new life will sprout from the roots." God told Isaiah that the nation would be a new shoot that will grow out of the roots and the tree will live again." God's message to Israel through Isaiah was,

"I will judge My people, but they shall return from the four corners of the earth to dwell in the land of promise in the future kingdom of David."

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Isaiah's encounter with God was the beginning of his prophetic ministry. He went on to preach that the Assyrians were going to be used by God to judge Israel (Ch. 1-35) and that Babylon would be used by God to judge Judah (Ch. 40-66). God used Isaiah to help King Hezekiah pray for God's protection when Assyria, i.e., Sennacherib, attacked Jerusalem. Isaiah predicted that Babylon would capture God's people almost 100 years before it happened. Isaiah is called the Prince of Prophets because his writing represented the most beautifully penned messages in the Old Testament.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. God can encounter us when our dreams collapse. Often our dreams are involved in self-interest, things we want to do, things we want to become and things we want to control. However, when our dreams collapse, where can we turn? When we come to the end of ourselves, that is when we can encounter God. Therefore, when your dreams collapse go to the house of God as did Isaiah where you can encounter God. See God high and lifted up in His church. Listen for the voice of God and what He would have you do. When your day seems darkest because your dreams are farthest away; it could be the beginning of the brightest moment of your life. God may be right around the corner.

> "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6 NKJV). "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18 KJV).

2. Don't confuse financial prosperity with spiritual prosperity. Isaiah put his dreams in a successful king and a glorious kingdom. He wrongly thought spiritual prosperity was identified with financial prosperity. When Isaiah's dreams collapsed, God had a task for Isaiah to do. God showed him that He was going to give Israel a much greater kingdom than what Isaiah envisioned.

"And he gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:15 NKJV).

3. We are never so important that we can break God's rules in serving Him. Uzziah was a great king who accomplished much, but he felt he was more important than his office. His problem was that he thought he was more important than the rules by which he served God. God punished him with leprosy and removed him from the office. Although he was buried with the kings in the tombs of Jerusalem, he lost his days of influence because of his sin.

"I keep my body in submission, so that when I preach Christ to others, I don't become a castaway" (I Cor. 9:27 author's translation).

4. *When we have an inflated opinion of our self-importance, God breaks us in an encounter to prepare us for service.* Isaiah was a successful courtier in the kingdom of Uzziah when God encountered him to show him his sin. As God had to break the pride of Isaiah, in contrast God had to encourage Jeremiah and Gideon because they had a weak self-worth. In God's encounter, He meets us where we are, deals with us according to our needs, and lifts us to where we can serve Him.

"Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28 NKJV).

5. When our dreams fall apart, God will encounter us to give us a new task and vision. Isaiah had a vision of being a successful courtier by serving a successful king, however God gave him a new task which was to speak to Israel a message of failure. Isaiah would preach to the people but they would not respond. He was to preach to those who had ears to hear, but would not hear; eyes to see, but would not see; and a heart that was so hard that they could not believe in God.

"Write the vision plainly so that those who run can read it" (Habakkuk 2:2 author's translation).

6. God is concerned about our sin, when He encounters us. God saw the success of young Isaiah, but that did not qualify him for divine service. God had to deal with the sin of Isaiah first, before He could use the service of Isaiah. When God showed Isaiah his sin, he said, "Woe is me." Then God had to cleanse Isaiah, and so an angel took a coal off the altar to cleanse his mouth and cleanse him for service.

"But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden *His* face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2 NKJV).

7. *When we are cleansed of sin, we are equipped for service*. Isaiah was a servant of the human king, but he was not qualified to be a servant of the divine king. God had to cleanse him first, by dealing with his sin. Then Isaiah was qualified to serve the Lord.

> "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13 NKJV).

8. *When we see God more clearly in an encounter, we see our sin more clearly than at any other time*. Most of the time we go about our life unconcerned about our sin, except when we get caught or we suffer severe consequences from our sin. When is a person most concerned about their sin? When they see the holiness and righteous standard of God. Nothing else convicts us like the perfect standard of God. Therefore when we see God more clearly, we also see our sins more clearly; then we can deal with our sin and equip ourselves for service.

> "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead" (Rev. 1:17 NKJV).

9. *The church is the body of Christ and God encounters us where His presence is manifested in His sanctuary.* Isaiah was in the Temple when he saw God, high and lifted up. Whereas God can reveal Himself to His servants at many places, such as an Isle of Patmos, under an oak tree, on top of Sinai, or on a hill in Judea when God met Abraham. However, God has set apart certain places where he usually reveals Himself, and that is His Tabernacle/Temple in the Old Testament; and His Church in the New Testament. While some people attend church but miss God, it is probably because they have looked for Him wrongly, or their eyes were blinded. However, the church is still the best place to find God when we search for Him properly; i.e., when we search for Him with our whole heart.

> "My soul has a deep desire to be in the courts of the Lord's house, because I meet God in the sanctuary" (Ps 84:2 author's translation).

10. *We must faithfully carry out our task whether or not we are successful.* God told Isaiah that he would fail, i.e., the people would not understand his message and would not respond. But fear of failure did not deter Isaiah from his task. His faithfulness did not depend on the effectiveness of his ministry but upon his vision of God.

> "Shall the clay pot say to the potter, why are you making me like this?" (Is. 45:9 author's translation).

Take Aways

- ***I can get a fresh dream of ministry by encountering God.***
- ***I get a new vision of God when I encounter Him.***
- ***I must worship God's holiness when I encounter Him.***
- ***I get direction for my life by encountering God.***
- ***I understand my sinfulness by encountering God.***
- ***I must deal with my sin before God will commission me for service.***
- ***I will not understand all the things God asks me to do.***
- ***I get the content of my preaching from an encounter with God.***
- ***I am prepared for failure by hearing from God.***
- ***I can encounter God in His house of worship.***

John Wesley
Founder of Methodist Movement
1703-1791

In 1735 John Wesley, along with his brother Charles, journeyed to the colony of Georgia as a missionary of the Propagation Society. On the ship, John saw Moravian missionaries praying calmly in a storm while he feared for his life. This experience was influential in his later conversion to Christ. He had never appropriated Christ as his personal Savior but had been a High Anglican churchman, rigidly adhering to ritual and law with a tingling mixture of mysticism. John Wesley left Georgia a failure in his ministry to the colonists and Indians.

January 24, 1738 - From the Journal of John Wesley —

> *I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me? who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, 'To die is gain!'*
>
> *I have a sin of fear, that when I've spun*
> *My last thread, I shall perish on the shore!*

On a spring evening, John was still searching for salvation. He attended a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate where he was converted. He always looked back on this experience as his conversion.

May 14, 1738 — From the Journal of John Wesley -

> *In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change, which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*

The following spring after hearing the account of Jonathan Edwards' success in New England and of George Whitefield's successes at outdoor preaching, he began preaching in the fields. Wesley saw multitudes saved. The Methodist Revival was launched, and he remained at its head for more than fifty years. He spent the rest of his life preaching in the fields, the streets, and in the Methodist preaching chapels. He was up each morning before five o'clock for prayer and Bible study, and rode on horseback fifteen to twenty miles a day,

preaching four or five times daily. During his lifetime Wesley traveled two hundred and fifty thousand miles preaching a total of forty-two thousand sermons. He died at the age of eighty-eight and preached up to the very month of his death.[7]

CHAPTER SEVEN
JEREMIAH: WEEPING FOR GOD

Encounter . . . for a call to a new service
Place . . . in his hometown 3 miles NW of Jerusalem
Scripture: Jeremiah 1:1-19

The High Priest adjusted his scepter, he wanted his headgear to be at the right angle. Hilkiah was wearing the high priestly clothes—all of the official wear—he wanted to impress the young king. He was only one among many standing in line for an audience with the new king. Everyone was trying to get the ear of the boy King. Hilkiah thought as he stood in line,

"The king's advisors were all evil," Hilkiah prayed that his scheme to bring revival to Israel would work. "The king's advisors will make this eight year-old king as evil as his father.

"NEXT," the royal page announced.

Hilkiah stepped next to the pink marble coronation column, in the Great Hall, the place where visitors to the king waited for an appointment with the king. The wise High Priest waited until he got the young king's eye . . . then Hilkiah bowed his head in reverence to the king . . . but all the while begged God,

"Lord, stop the evil counselors now."

Before the boy king could respond, a friend of the king's father whispered to the boy king.

"Don't talk to the foolish priest," he sneered, violently shaking his head negatively, "religious people only want more money."

"I want to hear him," the eight-year old Josiah was an opinionated lad, he waved off the disagreeing counselor.

"What can I do for you?" the boy king asked as he held out his scepter for Hilkiah to approach the throne.

"You cannot do anything for me . . ." Hilkiah again smiled at the boy king. Josiah smiled back.

"HA!" the advisor snapped, scowling all the time. "Religious people always beg for something." The boy king lifted a hand toward to silence the critic. The High Priest kept smiling at the boy and Josiah kept smiling at him.

"I can help you become a better king," Hilkiah grinned to get approval. "The better you can read and write . . . the better you can lead your people."

Hilkiah explained that kings who could read and write were smarter than the brutish kings of surrounding nations.

"Israel is not the largest nation so we cannot defend ourselves with the largest army, Israel must defend itself with wisdom and brilliant leadership . . . the king of God's people must be smarter than the kings of our enemies . . ."

"AGREED," the young king jumped to his feet. The impulsive boy waved his arms to the evil counselors of his father. "DON'T YOU AGREE?"

With reluctance the counselors approved, who can be against education? The vocal critic put his hand to the ear of a close friend, "Let the priest teach the boy king, but we'll tell the lad what to do."

Hilkiah explained to Josiah that God commanded that each king copy the Word of God, then keep their personal copy of the Scriptures at their side to guide them in making decisions and leading Israel.

"You will learn as you copy," Hilkiah explained. "You will become skilled with the meaning of words so you can persuade other kings of your plans."

The evil counselors liked Hilkiah's reasoning that would make the king a better debater. Hilkiah continued to tell the king,

"You will learn to think like God."

The evil counselors didn't like this twist, but would live with the compromise. The spokesman asked,

"Who will be the king's teacher?" the questioner was sarcastic, "many of your priests cannot read or write."

Hilkiah didn't answer the questioner. Again he smiled at the boy king and waited for a return smile. When Josiah grinned at him, the High Priest spoke.

"I will be the king's teacher." Then Hilkiah smiled at the evil counselors standing stiffly. "Don't you think the best priest should serve the best king?"

"AGREED," the enthusiastic boy king yelled to his court.

Hilkiah had a strategy. He was one godly man against a whole culture that had turned its back on God. There were Baal altars in the Temple; he couldn't remove them because a former king's order had put them there. The same edict applied to the grove of trees to Baal and Astaroth and high places to sacrifice. When Hilkiah ordered them removed—they laughed at him.

There were altars to foreign gods in the Temple that had been placed there by Solomon. When he ordered them removed—they laughed at him.

Next to the Temple was a house for male prostitution. When he ordered it removed—they laughed at him. Hilkiah felt powerless as High Priest so he prayed,

"God help me bring revival to our Lord, Israel has forsaken You and I cannot remove sin." As he begged God for an answer, he remembered the admonition of Proverbs,

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he shall not depart."

Hilkiah's strategy was simple. Day-after-day, he would train young Josiah in God's way of righteousness and when the boy king grew older; he would lead the nation in revival.

Each morning as Hilkiah read carefully from the Scriptures, Josiah sat at a writing stand meticulously copying the Law. Hilkiah would complete a sentence, then ask,

"Let me see what you've copied," the High Priest would carefully read the young king's words. "Every word must be spelled correctly . . . every jot must be in place . . . every tittle must be exact." Hilkiah was teaching the impressionable king that God was concerned about every small detail of His Law, and every tiny detail of life. When Hilkiah found a mistake, he commanded the king,

"Copy it again,

Hilkiah was not afraid to correct the king because God was sitting on the young boy's shoulder, whispering in his ear what was right and wrong.

Hilkiah lived in Anathoth, only three miles northwest from Jerusalem. Each day the High Priest walked home, he could have stayed in special quarters in the Temple, but he walked the round trip each day, using the time to pray for the young king.

"Lord . . . open his spiritual eyes. Lord . . . give him a desire for righteousness."

But there was another reason why Hilkiah walked home; he had a son at home. Jeremiah was the same age as Josiah. Hilkiah had the same prayer for his son Jeremiah,

"Lord . . . open his spiritual eyes. Lord . . . give him a desire for righteousness."

Each afternoon Hilkiah watched his son Jeremiah copy the same Scriptures that the young king copied in the morning. Hilkiah trained his son Jeremiah as carefully as he taught the king. His plan to rid Israel of sin was a double-edged sword, it involved preparing a king and preparing his son.

Josiah and Jeremiah were the same age physically, but were entirely different in personality. Hilkiah noticed the domineering, strong personality of Josiah from early days. As the young king was copying the Scriptures, he broke a quill. He commanded, "STOP . . . I'VE BROKEN MY PEN." He commanded a valet standing nearby,

"Get me a new quill immediately!"

On the same afternoon Hilkiah was observing his son Jeremiah copying Scriptures as a he read to the students. There were other boys in the schoolroom. The boy next to Jeremiah broke his quill. Jeremiah quickly got up to get a new quill for his fellow student, and in the process marred his own copy. Jeremiah did not have a commanding personality like young King Josiah. Young Jeremiah was quiet-spoken; he let people run over him. That concerned Hilkiah because his son could never be the High Priest if he were not more assertive. Jeremiah was too sensitive, shy . . . almost too withdrawn to be a leader. Hilkiah had doubts about Jeremiah joining up with Josiah to turn around the nation to God.

"Can my son every become the High Priest?"

Determined to make his son more assertive, one morning Hilkiah made Jeremiah sit in the lead desk to copy Scripture. When he returned that evening, Jeremiah had given his position to another. Jeremiah was sitting in the rear of the room. Hilkiah thought,

"How can Jeremiah lead the nation, if he won't lead a class of scribes?"

Hilkiah tried to give his son a vision of being High Priest. Each day when the father returned home from Jerusalem, he shared the new developments in the Temple with his son. Technically, Jeremiah would be a priest-in-training till age 30, when he was anointed into office and dipped into the golden laver as a symbol of his cleansing. Hilkiah told Jeremiah,

"When you become High priest," the aged father told Jeremiah, "you will help Josiah do exploits for God."

"Yes, Father . . ." was Jeremiah's only response.

Hilkiah looked for fire in his son's eyes, but it was not there. He wanted to see a passion for leadership . . . for power . . . for office, but Jeremiah was too passive.

Hilkiah took pride in the accomplishments of young King Josiah. His strategy was working. The old High Priest had trained the king to bring revival—God was beginning to transform the nation through King Josiah.

Twenty-one year old Jeremiah was at school practicing his letters. The room was empty and he was more concerned with the message of God's Word, than the correct letters. He wanted to know what God's Word meant. Then he heard a voice. It was God speaking to him. It was not an inner impulse; but Jeremiah heard the audible voice of God. He did not see visions as Isaiah; he heard the audible voice of God. He did not actually see God as Moses, who saw the backside of God, he heard the actual voice of God. He did not touch God as Jacob who wrestled with God, nor did he engage in physical communication as Abraham who ate with a Christophany, a physical manifestation of God. Jeremiah heard the audible voice of God,

"Who's there?" Jeremiah was startled. There was no one in the room. He went outside and walked around the building. No one was there. Then he heard the voice again,

"I have a special call for you," God told Jeremiah. "This call is not to be a priest, but to be a prophet."

God did not want Jeremiah to fulfill his father's desire of becoming the High Priest. Jeremiah would not follow his father's example into the priesthood. God told Jeremiah,

"Before you were conceived in your mother's womb," God told Jeremiah, "I knew you and had a plan for you."

Jeremiah knew about his father's plan for both him and Josiah, but God's plan was greater.

"Before you came out of the womb at birth," God explained to Jeremiah, "I planned for you to be a prophet to preach My Word."

God's plan is always greater than our parents' plan, but that is sometimes hard for parents to conceive. God told Jeremiah,

"I have ordained you to be a prophet to the nations."

Jeremiah didn't want to be a prophet that required boldness. A prophet had to challenge people. That was not Jeremiah's way of doing things. Also, he didn't want to minister to the nations. He loved Israel. He loved the sight of Jerusalem—God's city.

"I'm a Jew . . ." Jeremiah thought. Being born into the priestly tribe of Levi meant he was "A Jew among Jews."

"I'd be giving up so much . . ." Jeremiah questioned the idea of becoming a prophet. "I'm not trained to preach in public. I'm trained in sacrificing . . . in intercession . . . in serving in the Temple."

Jeremiah was only 21 years old; he still had nine years of training to be a priest. He wouldn't become a priest until he was 30 years old. But God reminded him,

"I've ordained you . . ."

There was no greater ordination than being called into service by the actual the Word of God. God had chosen Jeremiah to be His spokesperson. But Jeremiah had doubts,

"I'm a child," referring to his young age by Jewish standards. "A child cannot speak, no one will listen to a child."

But God doesn't sympathize with our excuses, nor does God respond to our level of response.

"Do not call yourself a child," God had a command for Jeremiah to obey, "you will go to all the people where I send you."

Jeremiah had no idea that he would speak to the kings of Judah and the leaders of the surrounding nations. Because of his faithfulness, Nebuchadnezzar would offer him a special stipend to live in Babylon, but Jeremiah would refuse to live in the luxurious city of Babylon and live among the poor in a devastated Jerusalem. God added,

"What I command . . . you will speak."

God's call to Jeremiah terrorized him. He was afraid and felt he couldn't do it. He had grown up in a protected home; the son of a powerful father, growing up in a community of priests. He was not trained in hard-nosed bargaining like a businessman, nor was he taught to argue like a lawyer or scribe. He was only a meek son. Jeremiah objected.

"I am a child."

"Be not afraid of their faces," God encouraged Jeremiah. "I am with you to deliver you."

The Lord reached forth His hand and touched the mouth of Jeremiah. With that touch, the Lord told Jeremiah,

"I have put My words in your mouth with this touch."

Jeremiah read the book of Isaiah where God touched the mouth of Isaiah to cleanse it. Isaiah had to be made aware of his sin, but Jeremiah was aware of his childlikeness. Jeremiah did not need cleansing, he needed strengthening. He needed God's help. Isaiah was an arrogant young courtier who needed his selfish will broken, Jeremiah was an introverted young man who was not sure of himself. He needed God's encouragement.

"Behold . . ." the Lord said to Jeremiah. "My words are in your mouth . . . My words will be a hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces . . . My words will be a fire that purges away sin."

God was going to use His words in the mouth of Jeremiah to destroy evil and to purge sin. He told the young prophet,

"I have set you this day over kingdoms to pull them down and to destroy them."

That was an awesome task for a scared young man with little self-confidence. But God promised that He would put His words in his mouth to do that work.

But it was not just a message of judgment. God had a message of hope to Jeremiah. God also gave him the commission,

"To build and to plant."

With the audible voice of God came a second part of the call of God. God showed young Jeremiah a vision. He saw in the sky an almond branch. It was an early spring branch off an almond tree; the new leaves were developing and the flowering buds were in bloom. Of all the trees in the forest of Israel, the almond tree was the first to bloom. The leaves began to appear in late winter even before Spring arrived. God showed Jeremiah the almond branch then asked,

"What do you see?"

"I see an almond branch . . ."

God told Jeremiah that the branch was a whip that He would use to punish Israel, just as a parent takes a switch to a disobedient child.

Even though God's people were beginning to experience revival under young King Josiah, no one knew yet that the young king would instigate a misguided battle with Egypt, where he would be killed. The next kings would all be weak . . . sinful . . . rebellious . . . and lead Israel to destruction.

Then God showed Jeremiah a second vision. The Lord asked,

"What do you see Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah saw a large cooking pot that was boiling over, the broth in the pot was spilling out from the North. Jeremiah studied the pot a long time. He couldn't understand what it meant. Then God told him,

"This pot stands for a nation." God had told Jeremiah, "Out of the north an evil nation will pour out its wrath over Judah to punish her for her sin." Then to make sure he understood the enormity of the problem, God explained,

"I will call this nation from the North, it will enter Jerusalem and set its throne there. That nation will destroy all the cities of Judah."

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Jeremiah's encounter with God began his prophetic ministry. He warned the Southern Kingdom that Babylon would destroy them. After King Josiah, the Kings of Judah put their trust in an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. Nevertheless, Jeremiah's predictions were right, it was not Egypt or Assyria that captured God's people. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated Assyria and quickly repelled an invasion by Egypt allowing Babylon to become the world ruler.

Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem but treated Jeremiah kindly because the prophet spoke the truth about Babylon.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *God prepares a person to deal with a spiritual crisis, long before it develops*. God places kings in their office and allows them to accomplish their intended purpose. He knows those who are evil and those who are righteous, long before they assume office. Since God usually deals with issues by a person, then He would prepare a person to deal with a spiritual crisis. In this chapter two young men are prepared to intervene against evil. Josiah was the son of an evil father and a more evil grandfather, but in the mercy of God, He raised up Josiah—with the influence of Hilkiah—to be a revival king. The other young man was Jeremiah, from the godly home of the High Priest.

> "God can judge our hearts, He puts down one person and lifts up another" (Psalm 75:7 author's translation).

2. *Some people give their greatest service to God by training a child for future service*. While the story of Hilkiah actually training Josiah and Jeremiah is an application of the Bible text, it is based on the influence he had through the two young men who followed his example. While some cannot do exploits for God, they can equip their children to do them.

> "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 26:6 NKJV).

3. *Our personalities determine how we will respond to an encounter with God*. Jeremiah's tenderness is seen in his self-description as a child and his fear of public speaking. This weakness led to his tears, Jeremiah was the weeping prophet. He says "that I might weep day and night" (Jeremiah 9:1 NKJV) and "my eyes will weep bitterly . . . because the Lord's flock has been taken captive" (Jeremiah 13:17 NKJV).

> ". . . to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some" (I Cor. 9:22 NKJV).

4. Our personalities determine how we will minister for Christ. The tenderness of Jeremiah was used to communicate to Israel the mercy of God—He loved them even when He was punishing them. Jeremiah brought a message of judgment, but did it with a broken heart.

"Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (II Cor. 12:9 NKJV).

5. *God's calling for our ministry is greater than our choice or the choice of our parents*. Jeremiah was born in the priestly line, but God had a greater calling for his life. God's calling is greater than our choice or our parent's choice. Our best choice is to submit to Him.

"You should walk worthy of God's calling" (I Thess. 2:12 author's translation).

6. *Sometimes God encounters us to encourage us, not to confront us with our sin*. Isaiah was a brilliant prophet, this is the opinion of most present day scholars because of Isaiah's word choice, grammatical construction and vivid imagination. But God had to break him to be able to use him. Jeremiah was the opposite, God had to encourage him before He could use him.

"Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I *am* a little child; I do not know *how* to go out or come in. Therefore give to your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (I Kings 3:7,9 NKJV).

7. *Sometimes God encounters us only with His Word , not with visions or other physical phenomena*. God used visions to call certain people to service, to others a physical representations of God appeared to them. But to Jeremiah, it was the Word of the Lord. One of the key phrases in the book is "The Word of the Lord came to me" (Jer. 2:1).

"These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11 NKJV).

8. *An encounter with God stretches us beyond our culture and background.* God directed Jeremiah away from ministering only to the Jewish people and away from Temple ministry. God

wanted him to be a prophet and minister to the nations. Susannah Wesley went to the Archbishop of Canterbury to seek ordination for her son John Wesley. In those days, a man was ordained to the ministry of a particular church and no churches were open when Wesley's mother sought it for him. Knowing John Wesley was interested in mission work in the land of Georgia, the Archbishop proceeded to ordain him "To the world." No one understood the providence of God for John Wesley fulfilled the words of his ordination. He truly influenced the world.

> "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NKJV).

9. We have no idea how much we may suffer because of our encounter with God. some people are called to a life of peace and prosperity, while others are called to a life of sacrifice and suffering. No one knows God's will for them when they respond to his call.

> "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23 NKJV).

10. Our encounter with God can influence the destiny of nations. Jeremiah influenced Judah, Babylon, Egypt, Moab, plus other surrounding nations. He had no idea how extensive his influence would be when he submitted to God's call.

> "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I may encounter God in my lifetime, but He planned it before I was born.*
- *I may do my greatest service to God through my children.*
- *I will encounter God according to my personality.*
- *I will serve God according to my personality.*
- *I realize God's choice for ministry is more important than my choice.*

- *I may be encouraged through an encounter with God.*
- *I may be encountered by only God's Word and not His visual presence.*

- *I may be stretched beyond my culture and background by an encounter with God.*
- *I can influence the destiny of nations after encountering God.*

Richard C. Halverson
Former Chaplain
United States Senate
Washington, DC

I did not go deeply into sin in the grosser sense, yet from the standpoint of pride and self-determination I was certainly rebellious and insubordinate toward God, to say the least.

Six months of careless living, economic difficulty, and professional disappointment in Los Angeles helped me to see that the direction I was taking could easily lead to self-destruction. Accordingly I 'dropped in' to the church nearest my residence, was readily and warmly received and soon blessed with a group of new friends whose lives were centered in the church and quite the antithesis of what I had known for many years.

Three months after I entered the Vermont Avenue Presbyterian Church, the Reverend L. David Cowie candidated for its pulpit. Listening to him two Sundays awakened in me a deep desire to possess the indefinable quality which was so obviously in him. I questioned him about this with the result that he led me to faith in Christ.

Following my conversion, there were three very definite crises which have decidedly marked my life and ministry. The first occurred five months after I received Christ as my Savior. There was no doubt of the new birth following my talk with Cowie. Within two weeks my life had unconsciously undergone a radical adjustment of which I became aware in retrospect. My motivation, affections and affinities switched 180 degrees. I was literally a new person. Very shortly the implications of faith in Christ began to grip my heart and the conviction crystallized and deepened that God had a very definite plan for my life. Though I was not willing to admit it even to myself, I felt this involved the mission field, evangelism, or the pastorate.

Awareness that God had a plan for my life became increasingly urgent upon me. The second crisis came at Mt. Hermon conference near San Jose. My burden and bewilderment increased steadily during the first three days of the conference until finally I requested my pastor's permission to return home. The wise preacher consented on the provision that I would try just one more day at the conference. To this I agreed, and was inwardly preparing to leave on the morrow. That evening, there were about 800 young people present I recalled but it seemed to me that Dr. McCune spoke directly to me throughout the message. The decision seemed to involve me alone.

The issue was very clear: Christ wanted my life in full surrender. I literally broke out in a cold sweat as I realized this. At that moment surrendering to Christ seemed to mean the end of everything I'd ever dreamed of for myself. To me it meant turning my back on everything I had wanted to be and do.

I left the meeting that night in a terrible condition, having refused to yield to Christ. However I was rushed from there into a cabin prayer meeting during which time God met me in an unusual way. I surrendered to Him as completely as I knew how; and of course experienced the deepest peace and happiness I had ever known . . . when I returned to Los Angeles my church friends were aware of great changes in my life.

After I completed seminary, I was assigned to a church in Coalinga, Kansas (my first assignment). I entered into a period of disillusionment that became so acute I felt I must leave the ministry unless something happened to alter the situation. This was resolved when after two weeks of intense aloneness and spiritual wrestling accompanied by the feeling that God had put me aside for any further useful service, I finally told the Lord I was going to continue to serve Him the rest of my life whether there were any fruit or blessing in that service, and whether or not He would finally accept me in heaven. Furthermore I was willing to be "buried" for the rest of my life in Coalinga and serve in obscurity there or anywhere. This was a tremendous hurdle for me for I had become very ambitious. When this was settled, I took a completely new lease on life.

One month later I accompanied a group of our Sunday school teachers to Forest Home Bible Conference in the San Bernardino region of southern California for a training conference. This is where the third crisis occurred. Following the evening meeting I left the group to return to my cabin. However, the way led past Miss Henrietta Mears's cabin; and here I was strangely constrained to enter and pray. As I approached the door, though the cabin was darkened, I realized some were inside praying. Not wishing to disturb them, I waited outside for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes when the absurdity of my position overtook me. It seemed logical that I should join whoever was praying inside. So I opened the door, crossed the room through the darkness to a chair I could see was empty and knelt beside it.

A long period of silence ensued and I began to feel that they were waiting for me to pray. I began to pray, others followed, and God came down into that cabin. There was no unusual ecstatic or cataclysmic experience, but God visited us in a way none of us had known before. There was weeping and laughter, much talking and planning. What is most clear from that experience is the fact that upon the hearts of us who were in that prayer meeting was laid a burden for the world and a world-wide vision that persists to this day. Through the years that vision has been fulfilled in many respects in detail as we saw it that evening; and the vision remains as fresh and vivid as ever to us.[8]

CHAPTER EIGHT
EZEKIEL: SEEING VISIONS FOR GOD

Encounter . . . for a new calling
Place . . . on a riverbank in Babylon
Scriptures: Ezekiel 1:1 - 3:27

The young scribe sat at his desk stroking his black wavy beard. It was his task to make copies of important messages for the Jewish leadership. He had to copy each letter accurately. He was not yet a leader—but shortly he would become a priest—yet he had no temple to do his priestly functions. The young scribe lived in Babylon, almost 800 miles from Jerusalem and the Temple of God.

"When will you become a priest?" a fellow student in the next desk asked him.

"Shortly . . ." young Ezekiel answered.

"When will you become 30 years old?" the persistent questioner kept asking. Young men were inducted into the priesthood at age 30. Today was Ezekiel's 30th birthday. This should have been the most glorious day of his life. This should have been the day when he should have been taken into the Temple and first anointed with blood for cleansing, and next anointed with oil as a sign of wisdom. He should have been dipped into the water of the golden laver as all other Levites are inducted into office.

Ezekiel knew this day was the day of his birth, but he wouldn't tell anyone. How could he celebrate . . . he was in exile . . . he was a prisoner living among the heathen Babylonians . . . he had been brought as a captive from Jerusalem. Ezekiel was dreaming of this when his thoughts were interrupted by an announcement:

"Here is a letter from Jeremiah . . ." a messenger entered the classroom. The classroom stirred, the voices of all the students whispered to one another. The students were scribes, learning the Word of God by copying it. They were all studying for the priesthood.

"A letter from Jeremiah?" Ezekiel's eyes glistened. He loved to copy the letters of Jeremiah. Some of his classmates said he even developed Jeremiah's style. When classmates compared Ezekiel to Jeremiah, Ezekiel smiled . . . he admired Jeremiah because Jeremiah was a prophet of God.

"Read Jeremiah's letter to us," the teacher gave the letter to Ezekiel to read it out loud. Ezekiel quickly surveyed the scroll, unrolling it to glance at the next panel.

"No . . ." Ezekiel quietly said to himself. He disagreed with what he read. His classmates saw the furrows quickly forming on his forehead. Ezekiel's happy countenance turned sour, they all knew the letter contained bad news.

"It's impolite not to read out loud . . ." the teacher clapped his hands sternly correcting Ezekiel for not reading out loud. Ezekiel stood beside his desk, cleared his throat and read the salutation,

"To the captives carried to Babylon . . ."

Members of the class muttered, none of them liked being held prisoner in Babylon. Heathen idols were everywhere, their food was sacrificed in heathen temples, and the dress of the Babylonians was different. Ezekiel again cleared his throat to get their attention. Then he read what Jeremiah told them to do,

"Build houses . . . live in Babylon . . . plant gardens . . . get married . . . begin your families . . ."

"No . . .!" a stern young student's voice objected. "We will not live in this heathen land, we are to fight, we must escape . . ."

"Quiet . . ." the teacher chastised the hot head. Then nodding to Ezekiel he motioned, "Listen while Ezekiel reads the rest of the letter."

Ezekiel waited for the class to settle after the eruption, then he continued reading the instructions from Jeremiah. "Seek the peace of the city where the Lord has sent you . . . pray to the Lord for His peace upon your city . . . only as your captors have peace, will you have peace."

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" again the hot head interrupted Ezekiel's reading. Some of the class voiced agreement. Everyone muttered. Some rebuked the outspoken youth.

"Do not react . . ." the teacher warned the young class of scribes, "hear the whole letter from Jeremiah before you respond."

"YES!" the class shouted down the hot head. Then they turned to Ezekiel to continue reading. He unrolled the scroll further and read,

"You will be in Babylon for 70 years, then the Lord will visit Israel and cause His people to return to the Promise Land."

The news of 70 years in captivity shocked the class of young students. Most of them were in their 20s. They all wanted to go home as soon as possible and not wait 70 years. They would be over 90 years old—if they lived that long—before they could return to the land of their birth. Their smiles dropped, all laughter was gone. Hope is a good medicine that makes suffering easier. But now there was no hope, their dreams of going home were snatched from them.

"A prophet said we'd be going home soon," a teen voice said from the rear of the room. The youngest sit to the rear. The young scribe told of a prophet that appeared in their village to predict all Israel would soon return to Jerusalem.

Ezekiel shook his head negatively in response to the young teen that mentioned a prophet. Ezekiel lifted his hand to get silence, then explained that Jeremiah wrote about false prophets in his letter. He read Jeremiah's warning,

"Don't listen to false prophets in Babylon who predict that Israel won't be judged . . . there are also false prophets in Jerusalem that predict God's city will not be destroyed . . . false prophets in Babylon will also predict the captives will come home."

The room was silent at Jeremiah's depressing words. Students shifted their glance from eye to eye. No one dared smile. No one knew what to say. Ezekiel continued reading,

"After 70 years the Lord will visit His people to bring them back to Jerusalem."

Jeremiah's letter pointed out the rebellious heart of Israel . . . they were stiff-necked . . . lusting after idols . . . whoring after other religions . . . seeking protection from foreign nations. There Ezekiel read the beautiful words of Jeremiah,

"When God's people call upon Him, He will listen to them." For the first time since reading, Ezekiel smiled at what God said, "My people shall seek me and find me when they search for me with their whole heart."

Ezekiel was the last student to leave school that day. His tunic fluttered in the afternoon breeze, there was a storm brewing on the northern horizon. Since Ezekiel was not from the area, he didn't know storms usually came from the west, not the north. He had to walk about a mile to his home along the man-made canal. It was always an interesting walk, there were sailing ships and barges to be seen. There were all kinds of ships he had never seen before coming from the north, from Persia and Assyria.

Ezekiel lived on the banks of the Chebar Canal, the largest man-made canal in Babylon—stretching from the Tigris to the Euphrates River. He gloried in its engineering feat, yet was saddened that a thousand slaves a mile had lost their lives digging this canal that linked the two greatest rivers in the world.

"I'm at the center of civilization . . ." Ezekiel thought as he saw a large white sailing ship approaching on the horizon. Then he felt guilty for his enjoyment, "Jerusalem is the center of my faith . . . Jerusalem is the City of God."

Up ahead was his small mud-walled home. Its flat roof and small windows resembled his home back in Jerusalem, because the talent he used to build a home in Jerusalem, is the same talent he used to build this house.

July was hot, hotter here in the desert of Babylon than living in the mountains of Jerusalem. The heat was unbearable in the summer, the late afternoons were the worst.

"The storm will cool things off," Ezekiel thought, "but it's a long way off."

When he arrived home, the storm was still lurking on the horizon. After the evening meal, Ezekiel went into the yard to pray. His wife was busy putting away the dishes and uneaten food. He noticed the white caps on the water slapping up on the rocks. Because of the approaching storm, there were no ships in sight, all his neighbors had gone inside to escape the sand blown against the stalwart houses. Ezekiel was alone to face the storm.

"A whirlwind . . ." he said quietly as he saw the desert sand whip up into a funnel that sucked the hot drafts into the cool thunderclouds.

The tornado danced across the desert floor, then sucked up water into a waterspout as it crossed the Chebar Canal.

The black storm broke around Ezekiel, only there was no rain . . . only wind . . . and lightening . . . and thunder. The clouds continued to darken.

Then Ezekiel saw it. From the center of the thick cloud he saw smoldering red fire, lightning flashed out of the clouds to the earth. In the center of the clouds Ezekiel saw the dark red fire, darker than amber coals of fire. The red was almost black. The dark clouds appeared to be smoke from the fire.

Only it didn't smell like smoke.

Then Ezekiel saw four persons in the clouds, each one looked like a man, only they had wings and were flying. They were flying straight at him. Ezekiel had never seen angels, but he knew immediately the men in the sky were angels. Humans didn't fly.

Ezekiel tried to see everything, trying to remember what he saw, trying to describe the dazzling scene that was playing out before him.

"What are you telling me?" he prayed to God.

The Lord didn't answer yet, there were other things for Ezekiel to see. The four men had the bodies of men and the wings of an angel, yet their faces were strange. One had the face of a lion, the next had a face of an ox, the third had the face of a man and the last had a face of an eagle.

"What are you telling me?" Ezekiel prayed again.

The Lord didn't answer yet.

Next Ezekiel saw giant wheels, like a chariot wheel, only the wheel was so gigantic, it was scary. Ezekiel had never seen a wheel that large, taller than the height of a tree. Each wheel was within another wheel, both turning, both rolling, both coming toward him.

Then Ezekiel realized the wheels were following the four men with wings. Wherever the men went, the wheels followed them. When the angels turned to one side, the wheels followed them.

Next Ezekiel saw the cloud turned to a crystal sky. It was no longer a dreadful storm, but an inexpressible beautiful sky. Ezekiel was not afraid of what he saw, or of what he felt. The experience was exhilarating. He knew it was from God, he knew God was talking to him.

Then Ezekiel heard it—a mighty roar—an approaching noise that was growing louder each moment. It sounded like storm waves beating on the shore—only louder. It sounded like the stomping of angry soldier's feet as they entered battle—only louder. It sounded like running horses—only louder. It sounded like the roar of God—but it wasn't God. Ezekiel heard the beating wings of the angels against the sky as they flew overhead. Ezekiel looked up to see them pause overhead, then he saw it.

It was exactly like he expected it to be. Everyone has an idea of what the throne of God looks like, but Ezekiel saw it. High in the sky above him, was the throne of God, it appeared to be made of a sparkling blue sapphire.

What appeared to be a man, sat upon the throne.

A beautiful rainbow—perfect in colors—all the seven colors of the spectrum made the rainbow more beautiful then Ezekiel had ever seen. Like rays from the sun, the rainbow reflected the glory of God.

No longer did Ezekiel ask God anything. He fell to his face before God in response to the majesty of God.

"Stand on your feet!" the Lord aid to Ezekiel. "I have a message for you."

Ezekiel slowly arose, trying to take in all that surrounded him. Then the Lord spoke to him,

"I am sending you as my messenger to Israel, a rebellious nation . . ." God told him, "my Spirit will enter you and my Spirit will speak through you."

Ezekiel understood God was calling him to be a prophet, not a priest, but a prophet. Even though he was born in the Tribe of Levi, he was born to be a priest. Ezekiel knew God had an unusual task for him to do. God told him, "You will give my message to this rebellious people."

The Lord explained that the people would not listen to him, but he should not be afraid of them. The Lord explained, "At least they will know a prophet has been among them."

Then God reminded Ezekiel, "My people are rebellious . . . you should not be rebellious."

Then the glory of the Lord began to leave. He heard a rumble, the sound of rock crushing rock, sand grating upon sand—it was the noise of a tremendous earthquake. The presence of God was leaving.

Then Ezekiel heard another familiar sound, it was the noise of the angel wings—flapping against one another—fluttering against the air as a mighty bird lifts itself into the sky by lifting its wings toward heaven. The noise was the angels leaving, as the glory of God departed.

The Spirit picked up Ezekiel from his house next to the Chabar Canal and took him to the village of Tel Abib, several miles away. It was a village of Jewish captives, they too had built homes that resembled the houses of Jerusalem. The village also was near the Chebar Canal.

Ezekiel entered a house, no one refused the young prophet a room. They recognized he was the young priest intern who was training as a scribe. But now they knew he was from God. No one asked what God said to him, no one asked what he wanted. No one asked him a question.

For seven days Ezekiel sat in the room. In silence . . . in prayer . . . in meditation . . . alone. He couldn't speak, so he didn't attempt to speak. The people of Tel Abib knew he couldn't speak so they didn't attempt to talk to him. The people were afraid. At the end of seven days, God spoke to him,

"Son of Man . . ." a new title given by God, "Son of Man, you are a watchman to my people Israel." God explained how the watch is responsible for the safety and protection for the people in a city. God told Ezekiel,

"If you refuse to warn the people of coming judgment, I will require your blood because they are innocent."

Ezekiel understood his responsibility. Then God further explained,

"If you warn the people, but they will not listen to you, their blood will I require of them, because they are guilty. You did what I required of you." God paralyzed Ezekiel so he couldn't go out to the people. A prophet usually went into the streets and markets to announce his message. But Ezekiel was different. The elders and leaders were forced to come to Ezekiel to hear God's message.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

After the life-changing influence of this vision, Ezekiel prophesied to the people in Babylon. He used symbols, sermons and warnings to communicate God's message to them. God used Ezekiel to remind "the whole house of Israel" of the sins that brought them into captivity. He predicted destruction of Jerusalem and the surrounding nations that fought against God's people. He predicted national restoration of Israel to the Promise Land, and judgment upon the oppressors of God's people. He predicted the restoration of the national glory under the Davidic monarchy and the restoration of the Temple. Although Ezekiel was not able to minister in the Temple for which he was born, he saw it in visions and described its future glories. His prophecies contain more about the future Temple in the coming Millennium than any other prophet.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *An encounter with God can come after our dreams fail and we don't know what to do.* The Jewish captives were exiles in a foreign land. Most of us don't understand the experiences of exiles, nor have we experienced the culture shock of being prisoners in prison. Recently a lady was giving a testimony to her family in Texas, trying to tell them the difference between her new home in a small town in Virginia and her former home in Texas. No one empathized with her until she said, "Imagine living in a town with no Mexican restaurants." Her family gasped, "That's terrible!" God's people were living in Babylon where there were no kosher restaurants, nothing was like the comfortable surroundings back home in Israel. Everything was Babylonian and God's people yearned to go home.

Then Jeremiah's letter came telling them to settle down in Babylon, build houses, and have families. Jeremiah's letter told them it would be 70 years before they could go home. They knew Jeremiah was a prophet of God, so what he said was true. They would have to make their homes in a foreign culture. Most of them would die abroad.

Out of that disillusionment, Ezekiel encountered God and learned he was to be a prophet to Israel. God gave him a message of both judgment and hope.

"Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance" (Psalm 43:5).

2. *An encounter with God can give us new visions or direction for life*. Ezekiel got a vision of God in his encounter with Him, and received a two-fold message. First, to warn Israel of her "stiff-neckedness" and second, to write the predictions about the new Temple of God that would be built in the future. The First Law of Leadership is the Law of Vision; when followers buy into a leader's vision, they buy into his/her leadership. Ezekiel led people through a vision of what God wanted to do through them. Ezekiel gave them God's vision.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Pro. 29:18 KJV).

3. *An encounter with God may result in a new task in life*. Ezekiel had prepared for the priesthood and at age thirty he was at the doorway of his life-long goal. But at the last minute Ezekiel met God to embark on a new ministry. He would become one of God's Major Prophets; no longer would he be a priest. Out of his encounter with God came a new task.

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9 NKJV).

4. *God may give you a special message by an encounter with Him*. Ezekiel was trained to be a priest, a special type of priest. Ezekiel appears to have trained to be a scribal priest or a teaching priest. It took many different tasks for the vast operation of the Temple and its related ministries. There were many different ways for a priest to serve God, but Ezekiel was not going to fulfill any of them. He encountered God and got a new message to deliver to God's people. He was commissioned to be a prophet for God. Actually, Ezekiel had an on-going encounter with God, and out of these encounters, he received many messages from God that he wrote in his book.

"And go, get to the captives, to the children of your people, and speak to them and tell them, "Thus says the Lord God" (Ezekiel 3:10,11 NKJV).

5. *God can prepare us for an encounter with Him*. When Jeremiah's letter (Jeremiah 29:1-21) arrived in Babylon, it probably produced gloom and pessimism. Probably many rejected the news of Jeremiah's letter. However, even in his letter, Jeremiah warned against false prophets

who predicted prosperity for Israel. God used the message from Jeremiah to prepare Ezekiel for an encounter with God.

> "Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive—to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jeremiah 29:1 NKJV).

6. *God uses political and cultural conditions to prepare us for an encounter with Him*. When Nebuchadnezzar brought 10,000 Israelis captives to Babylon, he brought the cream of the crop. They were warriors, statesmen and spiritual leaders, all young and impressionable. The Babylonian leader wanted to train the young Jews in the ways of Chaldean culture, language and business. Nebuchadnezzar wanted these young Jews to administer his government among the Jews. Ezekiel was one of those captives that was brought to Babylon. In a similar move, Fidel Castro did the same thing when he took office in Cuba in 1959. Castro sent his best young Cuban adults to Russian universities so they could return to administer a communist system for him.

God's larger scheme was to use Babylon to punish the Jews for their sins and rebellion against Him. One little peg in that large picture was Ezekiel, God was preparing that young Jewish adult to write a book about the future millennium where Israel would be returned to the land and the Temple would be restored.

> "When all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, . . . then ye shall call them to mind . . . and shall return to the Lord thy God . . . that then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity and have compassion on thee" (Deut. 30:1-3 KJV).

7. We don't understand all we see and experience in an encounter with God. Ezekiel saw many phenomena in his vision of God, i.e., a whirlwind, four angels, wings flapping, glowing clouds, a vast crystal atmosphere, and a wheel within a wheel. Scholars disagree what they are and what they mean. Probably, even Ezekiel didn't understand everything he saw. But in his encounter with God, he understood to Whom he talked, it was God. He understood what he was to do, and what he was to say.

> "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those that love Him" (I Cor. 2:9 KJV).

8. *An encounter with God is private*. While God spoke to all the Jews in Babylon by a letter from Jeremiah, God met Ezekiel privately. There are some things in life that are done in public

and other things that are done as a group. But, there are certain things that are always experienced alone. Ezekiel met God individually, and alone.

> "When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek'" (Psalm 27:8 NKJV).

9. *When it seems as though our birth family and birthplace has predetermined our lot in life, an encounter with God can change everything*. Most born into the tribe of Levi were predetermined to serve in some capacity in the Temple. A few Levites were called to the highest office, i.e., ministering priests, "No man taketh this honor to himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron" (Heb. 5:4). Ezekiel met God one day and gave up his family ministry and professional preparation. Encountering God is such an awesome event, that nothing in our life or vocation is the same thereafter.

> "He who calls you *is* faithful, who also will do *it*" (I Thess. 5:24 NKJV).

10. *Just because we don't understand everything about our encounter with God, doesn't mean there is no interpretation to the events*. Surely Ezekiel didn't understand everything he saw. Most Bible commentators interpret the whirlwind out of the north as the nation Babylon sweeping down on Israel from the north to destroy the Temple and tear down the city of Jerusalem and bring the remainder of the Jews to Babylon. The four creatures were probably angels and their four faces stood for the four gospels, i.e., the four different emphasis of each gospel, i.e., four pictures of the Messiah of the Jews. The face of the lion was Matthew, the ox was Mark, the man was Luke and the eagle was John. There are many other symbols in Ezekiel's encounter with God, they are there to challenge us to study so we can understand God's purpose with His people.

> "O this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (I Peter 1:10,11 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I can find God after my dreams have failed.*
- *I can get fresh dreams by encountering God.*
- *I get a new task from fresh dreams that come through an encounter.*
- *I may get a personal ministry from God when encountering Him.*
- *I will be prepared to serve God by an encounter.*
- *I may understand political and cultural crisis after encountering God.*
- *I may not understand all my experiences when encountering God.*
- *I usually encounter God privately.*
- *I can overcome the conditions of my birth by encountering God.*
- *I don't need to understand everything that is happening in an encounter with God.*

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I began missionary service in the high Andes of Ecuador. We had been married a little over a year when I was stricken with typhus fever, and given up to die.

I knew I was dying.

How can a person know that he is dying? He has never felt that way before, nor has anyone from the point-of-no-return come back to tell of his experience. Nevertheless, I knew I was dying.

I was entirely unaware of the immediate. I did not remember that a few days before I had been in little aboriginal villages in the high Ecuadorean Andes helping the children of the Incas who were dying of some mysterious malady. I did not recall the long and painful trip on horseback down mountain trails to our home in Riobamba, nor the onset of typhus fever, nor the periods of delirium, nor my being found by a fellow American who got some Indians to carry me to the railroad, nor the all-day trip to Guayaquil in a baggage car.

I did not know that my wife had been advised to prepare for the funeral and with the help of a friend had dyed black the weddings dress she had used a year before; nor that her hosts, the Will Reeds, on advice of the physician, Dr. Parker, had purchased a coffin and arranged for a brief service at three o'clock that afternoon (since, in the tropics, burial must be made soon after death).

I did recall what my mother had told me when I was a lad. Not infrequently, when people come to die, she said, in the last few moments before they slip out into eternity they experience a complete, detailed review of their life.

That happened to me.

With no effort on my part, nor any thought for that matter, I remembered the old homestead in Illinois and childhood playmates before school days began; Miss Grace, the first-grade teacher in McKinley School, and the other grades in succession; high school friends and scenes; soldiering days overseas.

As the flashback from memory's chamber faded I felt all alone in a vast world. If there were other human beings in that quiet little hospital room, I was not conscious of them. I was utterly alone and acutely aware that in the next instant or two I would be in eternity.

Then it was that I began to be cognizant of something strangely arresting in that place—an atmosphere, an influence, a Presence. It seemed to be on the floor but it covered the area of the room, and was slowly rising to the level of the bed. I could not turn my head to see if it was real or only imaginary; but I was

sure it was now reaching me. In just another moment it began to surround me, to engulf and to cover me.

Then I knew what it was, for in those moments I experience a sweet sense of the love of God in Christ such as I had never known before in all the years of my life. So overwhelming and stupendous was that love that the Life Beyond became ineffably beautiful and infinitely better than any possible condition in this present existence. There followed moments of such sacred, intimate fellowship with Him that it is impossible to attempt to retell it.

After the day when I waded so far out into the River of Death that I was closer to the other side than to this, there were about two weeks of which I have no recollection and can give no account. As I began to be conscious of being in the Parker Clinic, of the Ecuadorean nurses who cared for me, of my wife and the eight-week-old son who had come into our home, then it was that I was told the story back of my story.

Near Attleboro, Massachusetts, a rather small group had gathered in a Bible conference. In the course of their morning study they were interrupted by the conference director, Rev. E. Joseph Evans of Newton, Massachusetts, who told of a deepening burden of concern that had come upon him for the missionary in Ecuador, and he requested that they share the prayer burden with him. It was during those hours that, unknown to them, Mrs. Edman had dyed her wedding dress black, and Mr. Reed had bought a native coffin for me.

Since then I have met friends in New England who were present at that meeting. They have told me that if they should live to be a hundred years old they could never forget their kneeling to pray and their agony of spirit in their intercession for me. In the urgency of their petitions they forgot the lunch hour; but by the middle of the afternoon they experienced, they said, a lifting of spirit with the quiet assurance from heaven that their prayers for the desperate need thirty-five hundred miles away had been answered.[9]

CHAPTER NINE
THE WOMAN WITH THE ISSUE OF BLOOD

Encounter . . . for healing
Place . . . the city of Caperneum
Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

She was pathetically emaciated, her sad eyes were sunk deep in black holes and she smelled like rotten eggs. Long ago she stopped washing her clothes, because the sores on her body oozed all the time.

"STAY AWAY!" a housewife yelled at her when she sat on a bench in front of a house. "STAY AWAY!" the pudgy body of the housewife stalked to her front door to shoo away the woman with the foul smell. "You'll contaminate us . . ." the fat housewife yelled with finality.

The dirty woman continued her trek through the small hamlet. No one offered her water . . . no one offered her rest . . . no one cared.

"Maybe in the next village . . ." she hoped.

Twelve years ago the disease suddenly struck, sores appeared. She tried everything to heal them . . . special powder . . . lotions . . . alcohol . . . nothing stopped the pus. Nothing stopped the blood.

She was heading toward Caperneum to see Jesus. When someone first told her that Jesus could heal her, she said He was another quack, just like the others.

She had sold all her clothing to pay an Egyptian doctor to soak her in mud, then massage the impurities from her body. It didn't work.

She had sold all her furniture to pay an Assyrian for a sweet smelling lotion from India. It didn't work.

Another doctor told her to roll in snow at wintertime, next she baked her skin black the next summer. She didn't get better, but rather grew worse.

She had seen a blind man being led through her town. He kept saying, "Jesus will give me eyes . . . Jesus will make me see." She was skeptical, why shouldn't she doubt, look what the healers did to her. She was financially destitute . . . a social outcast . . . no friends . . . and she smelled.

"LOOK AT ME!!!" the blind man came running back through her town a day later.

"SEE A BLIND MAN WHO SEES!!!" He yelled to everyone.

"Hold up fingers," he giggled with delight. "I'll tell you how many fingers I see."

Hope was planted in her heart, she began to think about going to Jesus.

Then she heard about the little boy in Nain whose body was being carried to the graveyard. She heard that Jesus stopped the funeral to raise the boy from the dead.

"Maybe Jesus can heal me . . ." she pondered. She began walking toward the city of Caperneum on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus lived, a long walk with no one to accompany her. The blind man had family to guide him to Jesus. A palsied man had friends who let him down through the tiles of Peter's house to be healed by Jesus. She had no one.

"GET AWAY!" Some farm boys threw stones to keep her from a family well. No wonder . . . her filthy clothes were ragged, patches upon patches. She stumbled down a rocky path toward her destination—maybe Jesus could stop the flow, maybe Jesus could heal her.

She came over a mountain and saw the Sea of Galilee down in a valley, there were boiling storm clouds rolling across the small lake, but it was dry up in the highlands where she descended toward the white houses and green trees of Caperneum, the town where Jesus lived.

She quit trying to talk to people, just as she had given up any more attempts to stop the blood and pus that flowed from her sores. She drank from streams. When no one was looking, she pulled a few heads of wheat from the stalk, then rubbed them together to make flour and added water to make paste. It was her only food.

She tried to stay out of public view as she entered the market of Caperneum. She crept behind the stalls so she wouldn't be seen. Looking everywhere for a crowd of people, she thought Jesus would attract a crowd, but there were no crowds. She spotted a blind beggar, he was as wretchedly dressed as she was. She thought,

"I WON'T GET CLOSE ENOUGH FOR HIM TO SMELL ME, AND SINCE HE CAN'T SEE ME . . . MAYBE HE'LL HELP ME FIND JESUS."

The storm had blown out of the valley and the wet roads were now giving off steam in the early afternoon sun. She leaned against a tree out of the sun. She spoke across the road to the blind man,

"Where can I find Jesus?"

"You're too late . . ." the gruff blind man answered without turning his head. "Jesus was here this morning . . . he preached on the seashore . . . thousands listened to him . . . then he got into a boat to sail to the other side . . . the last they saw of Him was when the storm struck . . . of course I didn't see him . . . I'm blind."

Her heart sank, she had just missed Jesus. He was here and the Healer could have healed her, but now He was gone to the other side of the lake. Through the discouragement she thought,

"ANOTHER FAILURE . . .!"

She had given up praying, it hadn't done any good. She had asked God to help her find a doctor. Each time a different doctor tried a different remedy, she asked God to stop the flow. She had wept but nothing happened. Because nothing worked, she gave up hope. She quit trying.

Now that she heard about Jesus, she wanted to pray. However, she felt she couldn't pray. She felt dirty before God because her body was filthy. She felt like an outcast because no one would talk to her, no one would help her. Still . . . she felt an urge. Like a candle being lit that begins to burn faintly, she felt a glimmer of hope. Therefore, she bowed her head as she leaned against the tree.

"Lord Almighty . . . I need Jesus . . . He can heal me . . . I need to be healed."

It was the first time she asked God to heal her . . . without lotion . . . without mud . . . without any of the other things she thought would heal her. She had always asked God to use something to heal her. But this time she asked God to do it just by Himself and inside she felt God was listening. There was sunshine in her heart. She almost smiled, then realizing what was happening, she blushed at her response.

"THEY'RE COMING BACK," a boy by the city dock yelled as he pointed to a white sail coming toward Caperneum from the coast of the Gadarenes. Little boys prided themselves on

recognizing every sailboat on the sea. Quickly other boys recognized the billowing white sail heading straight toward them. Another yelled,

"JESUS IS COMING BACK."

"You don't know that," a fisherman corrected the boy. "Jesus sailed away in the boat, but He could have stayed on the other side."

"DEAR GOD . . . I NEED JESUS," the foul smelling woman prayed. She couldn't recognize one boat from the other. She had never seen Jesus. She wouldn't recognize Him if she saw Him, and she couldn't see that far into the lake. But she knew He was on the boat because she had asked God to heal her. She knew Jesus was coming to do it.

"Thank you, God! . . ." she whispered.

A crowd began gathering at the pier long before the boat arrived. People wanted to see Jesus. She gathered with others at the water's edge, now she was almost smiling in anticipation.

"Phew . . ." a little boy complained to his mother about the woman with sores. The mother drew her tunic tightly around her waist; she didn't want to touch the foul smelling woman. She pulled her son to the other side of the crowd.

As the woman with sores approached the beach, the fresh breeze that was blowing the boat to shore also blew away her odor. Now it was easier for her to blend into the crowd. All eyes were straining to see if Jesus were in the boat. A boy perched high in the top of a tree could see down into the boat. He yelled,

"Jesus is asleep," then he whispered as loud as possible, "He's sleeping on the nets."

The boat scraped on the sandy bottom. Peter jumped out with a rope to pull the boat the rest of the way onto the beach. Others helped him. The buzz in the crowd awakened Jesus.

As Jesus stepped on to the shore, a vast crowd surrounded Him. Everyone was talking . . . everyone was excited . . . everyone was eager to be with Jesus.

The crowd pressed upon Jesus. Those in the back pushed to get closer, crowding those in front into Jesus' face.

"STAND BACK," a loud voice rang out from the Roman centurion in charge of the local garrison.

The crowd grew silent at his command. They recognized the Roman accent and the Roman arrogance behind the command,

"STAND BACK," the Roman centurion again commanded, "LET THE RULER OF THE SYNAGOGUE THROUGH."

An elderly man in exquisite clothing stepped through the opening.

The ruler of the synagogue had influence in the community, so Romans soldiers knew they could keep control of the people through the Jewish leaders. So the Roman centurion was helping the aged Jairus—ruler of the synagogue—the wealthiest man in town—to see Jesus. But what the people saw surprised them. As the crowd was moved back by the Romans, Jairus ran to fall at Jesus' feet crying,

"Please come heal my little girl," his red eyes and trembling voice revealed his sincerity. "She's about to die."

Jairus clutched the robes of Jesus as he begged. His passion quieted the crowd. The expensive tapestry robes were dirtied in the mud left by the afternoon storm, but Jairus didn't see the mud. He pleaded,

"Her fever is so hot . . . if you lay your hands on her . . . she'll live."

Jesus didn't say what He would do, but everyone saw in His eyes what He would do. They saw Jesus' concern. Jesus nodded His head in approval to Jairus' request,

"Let's go."

Jairus led the way toward his home. The wealthy had moved to Caperneum because of its cool breezes off the Sea of Galilee and the tall eucalyptus trees that protected the town from the burning sun. The Romans had built a wall around the city for protection, making it even more desirable for the rich, and Jairus was the wealthiest of the wealthy. Now he was leading Jesus to his beautiful house.

She was in the crowd following Jesus, but no one paid attention to her rags because they were looking at Jesus. No one paid attention to her odor because of the strong sea breeze. She began to lose her faith.

"JESUS WILL HEAL THE RICH," she thought, "BUT WHAT ABOUT POOR PEOPLE? WHAT ABOUT ME?"

She remembered her prayer in the marketplace, she remembered how good it felt to smile again. She remembered hope . . . a little while ago she had hope. She determined not to lose it.

She pushed her way through to the back of the crowd, then squeezed between people toward Jesus, getting closer all the time. When Jesus stopped . . . the crowd stopped . . . but she continued to squeeze between people until she was directly behind Him.

"IF I SPEAK OUT . . ." she thought, "THE CROWD WILL LAUGH AT ME."

She was afraid to get Jesus' attention. He might shun her as everyone else had shunned her. They had thrown rocks at her and laughed at her. She knelt down to reach toward the hem of His tunic. No one saw her. She reached out with one finger, she just wanted barely to touch the hem . . . to make the slightest contact. Then just as she touched the edge of his clothes, the crowd surged . . . pushing her away. Abruptly Jesus stopped, looked at those behind Him, then asked,

"Who touched Me?"

The crowd was dumbfounded at the question. People were jostling Him from every direction. They were pressing upon Him. Peter blurted out,

"How can you ask a question like that?" Peter's tone gave away his perplexity. "With people pressing upon You, how can You ask who touched Me?"

Jesus knew the difference between the press of the crowd and a touch of faith. Jesus knew that something had pulled power out of Him. Someone had touched His power and Jesus wanted to know who it was. He didn't know it happened until it happened. Then He stopped.

Jesus had asked one question. He didn't need to ask it again, everyone knew what He asked, and everyone knew it wasn't them, except one person. She knew what she did.

Jesus stood motionless, so did everyone else. Because Jesus wouldn't move, neither would they. Jesus looked from eyes to eyes, looking for the one who did it.

The instant she touched Jesus, she was healed. She knew it, she could feel it in her body. The bleeding stopped. It was something she hadn't experienced in 12 years. She was healed.

Now she didn't dare move because everyone was looking at Jesus as He gazed from person to person.

Still no one moved except Jairus. He wanted Jesus to hurry to his house before his daughter died. Jairus was fidgeting on the edge of the crowd. But Jesus wasn't finished. He kept staring into each pair of eyes.

When Jesus looked deep into the woman's eyes, He knew what had happened because He knows all things. And she knew that the Master knew. She brushed through the people in front of her, falling at Jesus' feet crying,

"I kept telling myself I'd be healed if I could touch You," she explained. "All I wanted to do was touch your clothes so I'd be healed."

Jesus waited for her to tell the whole story. She told of her misery and pain. She told about the healed man that gave her hope. She told of her trip to find Him.

"I had to touch You to be healed."

Jesus told the woman, it was her faith that healed her, not a touch. Jesus corrected her thinking. "You thought that a touch would heal you, but you were not healed with a touch."

Jesus explained to the crowd that it was not a physical touch that had healed the woman. He didn't want her to think that He was magical to be touched. Jesus explained to the woman,

"Your faith hath made you well," Jesus commanded her, "go in peace because you are healed of your disease."

Even before Jesus had finished telling the woman she was healed by her faith, a cry of anguish scared the crowd. It was Jairus. He was not yelling out of impatience, nor was he angry. A servant had met the crowd to whisper in his ear,

"Your daughter just died," the servant explained. "Don't bother Jesus any further."

"Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a- . . .!" Jairus' wail stilled the crowd. Their momentary happiness over the healing of the woman was galvanized by Jarius' cry.

"Don't be afraid," Jesus' calm words to Jairus got everyone's attention. He told Jairus, "Only trust Me."

Jesus and Jairus walked together toward Jairus' home, Jesus' arm around the aged rich man to strengthen him. The subdued crowd followed behind them toward the row of wealthy homes.

When they arrived at the gate to the courtyard, Jesus wouldn't let anyone follow them into the property. After Jesus and Jairus went inside the gate to the courtyard, He motioned Peter, James and John to follow them. No one else was allowed inside.

In the courtyard Jesus met the mourners, they were already on the job. Because they were paid for moaning at funerals, they knew that pay for a rich man's family was profitable so they got there before the father could return home. When they saw Jairus, they cried all the louder.

"Why are you weeping and making this commotion?" Jesus demanded they stop their outward show. "The daughter is only asleep."

The mourners laughed at Jesus, but He demanded they leave the facilities. Then Jesus motioned to the father and mother to show Him where the little girl was located. They led Jesus into an inner bedroom where the three disciples followed Jesus into the darkened room.

Jesus walked to the body to take her by the hand. There was no life in her little body, the flower of life had been snuffed out. She was dead. Jesus spoke,

"I say to you," Jesus spoke naturally to her as to any other person. "Get up."

She lifted her hands to her eyes as a little girl waking up in the morning. As naturally as rubbing sleep from her eyes she moved, then sat up in bed.

Jesus took her by the hand and she walked around the room. The parents were astonished, words were lost; no one could say anything. The parents hugged their little daughter.

"Don't tell anyone what happened here," Jesus instructed those in the room. The parents and disciples nodded their heads in approval. Then Jesus instructed,

"Give her something to eat," He smiled. "Little girls like to eat."

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

This miracle took place on what is called "The Long Day," a busy day in the life of Jesus. The day began in Caperneum where Jesus talked to family members, then preached the well-

known sermon by the sea that included the parable of the Sower and other parables. Jesus left Caperneum to cross the Sea of Galilee where he stilled a storm. On the other side, Jesus cast the devils out of the man from Gadara and in response, the residents drove Jesus from the area. When Jesus returned, he healed the woman with the issue of blood and raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. This day in the life of Jesus is included to reveal the different types of miracles done by Jesus in one long day of ministry.

TEN LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. *Because God can do anything; He can heal anyone, at any time, at any place*. In one sense we will all die. The Scriptures tell us, "And as it is appointed for men to die once," (Hebrews 9:27 NKJV). All people will die because no one lives forever. But many put God in a box suggesting He can't heal because aging is inevitable, and the progress of certain diseases is inevitable. The frailty of our human flesh, makes us think that God can't heal in certain situations. But Jesus who raised the dead, cleansed lepers, and gave sight to the blind; can do miracles today. Certainly there are limitations to medicine, and there are restraints from our frail human bodies; but let's make sure the limitations are not on God. For God can do anything and just when we think He can't; remember what He told ninety-nine year old Abraham and eighty-nine year old Sarah about giving birth to a child, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14 NKJV).

"Behold, God *is* mighty, but despises *no one*; *He is* mighty in strength of understanding" (Job 36:5 NKJV).

2. *Some people will try anything except God to be healed*. The woman in the story had been sick for twelve years. The physician Luke was kind in his description of the events, "Who had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any" (Luke 8:43 NKJV). But Mark goes a step further, pointing out that physicians could not help her, but left her in a worse condition, "and suffered many things from many physicians. She spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse" (Mark 5:26 NKJV). There are different ways that God heals today. Obviously when we pray, God heals by physicians through medicines. Sometimes, God

heals by faith in response to prayer; on such occasions God is glorified. At third is a blending of the two, through faith and prayer plus the use of physicians and medicines, some are healed. But in the story, the woman had tried everything and did not get better but rather grew worse. The fact that Jesus told her, "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34 NKJV) shows us that when she was finally healed, it was by faith; not by medicine or by physicians.

> "Then Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well'" (Mark 10:52 NKJV).

3. *We can be healed by an encounter with Christ*. There are many stories in the life of Jesus where He encounters a sick person to heal them of their infirmities. Whether it was palsy, blindness, leprosy, or other diseases; they were healed when they met Jesus.

> "A certain blind sat by the road begging . . . he cried out saying, 'Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!' . . . Jesus stood still . . . saying, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And he said, 'Lord, that I may receive my sight.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has saved you'" (Luke 18:35-42 NKJV).

4. *An encounter with Christ gives more than physical healing*. The woman came to be healed of her flow of blood, but she received a new purpose in life. Jesus commanded her, "Go in peace" (Mark 5:34 NKJV). Those who want only healing from God usually don't get it; although sometimes in God's mercy He will heal just for the sake of healing. Most who encounter God, do so first spiritually, second there are life-changing results in other areas of one's life; and third, there is the by-product, which may be physical healing.

> "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Luke 7:50 NKJV).

5. *Some people are not healed when they want it*. Obviously, God has a greater plan than healing for every person, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28 NKJV). Sometimes God is glorified in the death of His saints. In the story, the little girl was allowed to die before Jesus did anything. There will be other times when good

people die, we do not understand it; and friends have difficulty accepting it. But in God's plan, some are not healed. Think of the many sick at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5) but only one was healed.

"Precious in the sight of the Lord *is* the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15)

6. *Healing comes from God, not from things*. Technically, the physician does not heal us when we are sick. A physician removes the cause of the disease such as germs, disease, or infection. The physician may do this by surgery, medicine, antibiotics, cleansing of a wound or modification of a diet. The physician changes our circumstances, but in the final analysis, the body heals itself. However, God who created the body is the second source of healing, He can directly touch the body and make it healthy and whole.

In the story of this chapter, the woman had placed her faith in physicians and all kinds of medicines, but she had not been healed. If anything, she had been left penniless and in worse physical condition than when she began with her disease.

"For I am the Lord who heals you" (Ex. 15:26 NKJV).

7. *There is a prayer of faith that will heal a sick person*. James asks the question, "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14 NKJV). This verse means physically sick persons, and is not a reference to spiritually sick people. The sick person was to call for the elders of the church because they are the spiritual shepherds of people; they know a person's walk with God and they may know if there is any sin in their life that may have caused their disease. Spiritual leaders are to pray over sick people. James tells us, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up" (James 5:15 NKJV). This is the only place in Scripture that refers to "the prayer of faith" indicating that when you ask in faith, God will heal the sick. On many other occasions we are told to, "trust" and to "believe" and to "ask in faith."

But only here are we told that "the prayer of faith" will heal the sick. Since God has said it once, we ought to believe it and practice it.

> "Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*" (Mark 11:24 NKJV).

8. *We can initiate an encounter with God*. The woman in the story apparently surprised Jesus by touching the hem of His garment. He was not aware of her actions until "immediately knowing in Himself that power had gone out of Him, turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched My clothes?" (Mark 5:30 NKJV).

On some occasions God has initiated an encounter, such as God coming to Abraham, Gideon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Paul. However, there are other occasions where people lay hold of God and initiate an encounter with Him. Such was the faith persistence of Abraham and Moses. This woman also displayed such faith-persistence, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. God in peace and be healed of your affliction" (Mark 6:34 NKJV).

> ". . . pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17 NKJV).

9. *A public confession of a healing is sometimes necessary*. In this story, the woman apparently tried to remain anonymous by touching only the hem of His garment. Jesus didn't allow her to remain unknown, "He looked around to see who had done this thing" (Mark 5:32 NKJV). Some churches practice the altar call, asking people to come to the front to receive Christ, or they are invited to an altar for prayer; a few churches invite people to come to the altar to pray for healing. While this practice is probably more widespread than some think, people will criticize the experience saying it focuses undo attention on reluctant or fearful people. However, Jesus focused attention on a reluctant woman, knowing she needed His pronouncement for three reasons. First, the legalistic Jewish society that had ostracized her because of her disease, needed to give her full acceptance back among people; and Jesus did that by telling them she was healed. Second, He needed to correct any false thinking in her mind.

She thought she was healed because of her touch, when actually it was her faith that healed her. Thirdly, she needed an improved self-image and self-acceptance. He did this when He told her to go in peace.

> "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction" (Mark 5:34 NKJV).

10. Others can be encouraged by our encounter with Christ. As Jesus was talking to the woman, Jairus was standing on the edge of the crowd waiting for Jesus to go heal his daughter. Then he received word that she was dead. When Jesus heard the commotion, He told Jairus, "Do not be afraid; only believe" (Mark 5:36 NKJV). Jairus had just witnessed a miracle, the cleansing of the woman. Therefore Jairus had to return to his home, trusting in two things. First, he had to trust in the command of Jesus that told him to "only believe;" and second, he had to trust in the miracle-power of Jesus that he had just seen in cleansing the woman.

> "If you can believe, all things *are* possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I can be healed by God; any time, any place.*
- *I need faith to be healed by God.*
- *I can initiate an encounter with Christ for healing.*
- *I can be healed in various ways by Christ.*
- *I will receive more than physical healing when encountering Christ.*
- *I may not always be healed.*
- *I can encourage others because of my encounter with Christ.*
- *I may have wrong thoughts about healing that need to be changed.*
- *I can come to Jesus just as I am, without being rich or poor, young or old, with a crisis or a lingering problem.*
- *I need to encounter Jesus by faith, not by doing outward religious things or by physical response.*

Amy Carmichael
Fifty-five years a missionary in India
(Because of her vast work with children in India, she was the Mother Teresa of the 1800s)

It was a dull Sunday morning in Belfast. My brothers and sisters and I were returning with our mother from church when we met a poor pathetic old woman who was carrying a heavy bundle. We had never seen such a thing in Presbyterian Belfast on Sunday, and, moved by sudden pity, my brothers and I turned with her, relieved her of the bundle, took her by her arms as though they had been handles, and helped her along. This meant facing all the respectable people who were, like ourselves, on their way home. It was a horrid moment. We were only two boys and a girl, and not at all exalted Christians. We hated doing it. Crimson all over, we plodded on, a wet wind blowing us about, and blowing, too, the rags of that poor old woman, till she seemed like a bundle of feathers and we unhappily mixed up with them. But just as we passed a fountain, recently built near the kerbstone, this mighty phrase was suddenly flashed as it were through the grey drizzle:

> *"Gold, silver, precious stones, wood hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide . . ."*

I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. The fountain, the muddy street, the people with their politely surprised faces, all this I saw, but nothing else. The blinding flash had come and gone, the ordinary was all about us. We went on. I said nothing to anyone, but I knew that something had happened that had changed my life's values. Nothing could ever matter again but the things that were eternal. That afternoon I shut myself in my room, talked to God, and settled once and for all the pattern of my future life.

She was called by the Lover of little children to the rescuing of girls from the temple, and later of boys in danger. Few missionaries or Indian Christians were in sympathy with her. Of this she wrote: "Sometimes it was as if I saw the Lord Jesus Christ kneeling alone, as He knelt long ago under the olive trees. The trees were tamarind now, the tamarinds that I see as I look up from this writing. And the only thing that one who cared could do, was to go softly and kneel down beside Him, so that He would not be alone in His sorrow over the little children."[10]

CHAPTER TEN
MARY MAGDALENE: TAUGHT BY CHRIST

Encounter . . . to learn spiritual relationship
Place . . . in the garden early Easter morning
Scriptures: John 20:11-18

The dew had dampened the leaves in the garden, making it difficult to walk between the bushes without getting wet. The shadows were still black, the eastern sky was just beginning to lighten the coming daybreak.

"Don't drop the vessel with the oil," one of the women whispered, she was afraid of being overheard; but also afraid of spilling the sweet smelling mixture of herbs and spices.

"The oil is expensive," the other answered. Then added, "Nothing but the best for the Master."

Four women were creeping through the dark shadows of the garden toward the tomb where Jesus had been buried. They knew they were in the right garden, the women had watched them take the dead body of Jesus down from the cross. They followed Joseph of Aramethea and Nicodemus as they carried the corpse into the garden where they laid the body of Jesus in a new tomb.

From a nearby hill, they kept watch until the Roman soldiers arrived. When the soldiers sealed the tomb, the women couldn't get in to anoint the Master's body with oil and spices.

When the sun fell behind the horizon, the women had to rush home. The Sabbath began at sundown, they couldn't travel on the Sabbath. They waited at home until Saturday was done, and now it was Sunday morning. Now the Sabbath was over.

"Who will roll away the stone?" the talkative woman asked. "Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh," the first woman put her finger to her lips, trying to keep the others quiet.

"We are too weak to roll away the stone," the talkative woman kept up her chatter.

"Sh-sh-sh-sh," again the first woman wanted silence. "The soldiers will hear us."

"The soldiers can roll the stone away," the talkative woman kept up a steady stream of chatter about the stone.

"You know what soldiers do to women who are alone in the countryside . . ." the first woman didn't want to discuss it any further.

"I'm afraid," one of the women whispered to the other three as they sneaked toward the rendezvous location.

"Sh-sh-sh-sh," the first woman again put a finger to her lips.

Three of the women shook with fear. They knew there were Roman soldiers up ahead. All of them believed the vicious rumors about Roman soldiers, but one of the group didn't care. She had been a woman of the streets, she had been possessed by devils, and she had drunk deeply at the cup of iniquity. Mary Magdalene didn't care because she had lived in sin. Her three friends were chaste and pure . . . they were afraid. Knowing their fear, Mary Magdalene said to the three,

"I'll go by myself . . ." she suggested a plan of action. "You three stay back in case there is danger, I will ask the soldiers if we can go in the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus."

Mary Magdalene left the three women hiding behind a large rock, near the path into Jerusalem. If trouble erupted, the three women could run for help. Mary crept silently to the edge of the camp of the Roman soldiers. She listened for human voices.

Nothing!

A bird chirped, welcoming the early Sunday morning, but no human sounds . . . no scraping of breakfast pots . . . no fires crackling . . . no men snoring . . . silence.

Mary separated two branches to observe their camp. Nothing was there . . . no weapons . . . no clothing . . . no soldiers.

Mary stepped into the clearing, then she checked her bearings to make sure this was the correct garden. It was. Then she thought about the gigantic stone at the mouth of the tomb,

"Who will roll the stone away?" Obviously four women couldn't do it. Now the soldiers were gone, she couldn't get them to do it. Again she thought,

"How can we remove the stone?"

Mary looked toward the stone to see how much it actually weighed. Then she saw, but didn't believe what she saw. But this was the place. She saw them bury Jesus in this tomb late

Friday afternoon. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief, but even then she it, or at least; what she didn't see upset her.

The tomb was open, the stone was rolled away.

She ran to the tomb to search for the body. Although it was still dark, she could see enough to know that the body of her Lord was not there.

"It's gone," she spoke out loud to no one. "They've taken the body."

Mary began a wild dash to the city, she forgot about her three friends hiding behind the big rock. She ran another way to the city, she kept saying to herself,

"I must tell Peter and John . . ." She thought of them because they are leaders. "Peter and John can find the body of Jesus."

Within a few minutes it had been done. Mary Magdalene ran to awaken Peter and John, telling them someone had taken the body of Jesus. The two disciples raced through the early morning toward the garden. She produced a lot of excitement when she told them the body of Jesus was gone. Peter was especially agitated, he was more excitable than John. When they ran off, Mary had to sit down to catch her breath. Running from the tomb to John's house had winded her. She drank some water, then waited for her hands and legs to quit trembling.

What Mary Magdalene didn't know was that while she was resting and catching her breath, two incidents occurred at the tomb. The three women came out of hiding to see the stone rolled away, except they saw an angel sitting on the stone who told them,

"Don't be afraid," the angel said to the three women. "I know you are searching for Jesus. He is not here, come see the empty place where His body was laid. Go quickly to tell his disciples that He is risen from the dead."

When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb before her three friends, she didn't see the angel.

The second event at the tomb was the arrival of Peter and John. When they ran to the tomb, they didn't see the angel nor did they see Jesus. But they did examine the shroud in which he was buried. Then they determined He arose from the dead. No One could have left grave clothes as intact as they found them.

But Mary Magdalene didn't know anything about these events. She was alone in the house with her thoughts. She had put all her trust in Jesus. She believed He was the Messiah that would drive Rome from the Holy Land. She deeply believed Jesus could rally the Jewish remnant to re-establish the greatness of David's Kingdom. She put all her dreams in Jesus, then three days ago he died. She saw the mangled body on the cross. She saw them bury a dead corpse in the tomb. That was the end of her dreams. Now she kept thinking,

"Someone has stolen His body."

Mary kept asking herself the question, "Where have they taken the body of Jesus?"

After Mary was rested, she walked aimlessly into the street, not heading anywhere. But subconsciously she found herself on the street toward the tomb. Merchants had their stalls set up, the market was alive with shoppers. It was the first day of the week. No one was allowed to sell anything yesterday on Saturday. But Mary was not interested in buying anything, she found herself unexplainably drawn to the tomb. As Mary arrived at the garden, she stopped to listen for sounds of life.

Silence!

Mary looked for anyone, anywhere. No one! The garden was still and empty.

Mary wept tears of desperation. She didn't know what to do. They were also tears of loneliness. She loved Jesus and missed Him. What would she do?

Mary walked over to the tomb, she had looked into the open grave earlier, but saw nothing. She didn't expect to see anything this time, so she carefully looked into the gaping hole in the hillside. That's when she saw them. There were two men sitting inside the sepulchre. One was sitting where Jesus' head had been laid, the other was sitting where His feet had been located. The men's clothes were white.

She didn't know they were angels, for they didn't shine, they didn't fly and they didn't have wings. She thought they could have been soldiers, but they were not in uniform. They were dressed in white. Also, they could be workers, but their white clothes were spotless. Could they have removed the body of Jesus? They didn't scare her, she was drained of emotion. She didn't feel anything.

"Why are you crying?" one asked.

"Because someone has taken away my Lord," was the pressing question on her mind. "And I don't know where they put Him."

She didn't ask who they were, Mary was dazed. As one blindly walks through a crowd bumping into people, but not seeing anyone, Mary was bound up in her grief. Turning around, Mary noticed a third person at the tomb, but she didn't recognize Him. She thought inwardly,

"Who is this?"

Then thinking this man may be the gardener who may have seen where the soldiers moved the body of Jesus, or even he may have moved the body; the man asked the same question as those in the tomb,

"Woman . . ." He paused, waiting for Mary to recognize Him. She didn't. Then He asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

"Where have you taken Him . . ." was the only thing on her mind. "Tell me where you put the body, I will take it away."

Mary knew the tomb belonged to someone wealthy, maybe the rich man moved the body because he wanted the grave for himself. It was not a cave, where the poor are buried, but the tomb had been chiseled out of rock. She thought the gardener moved the body, so she said,

"I'll take care of the body . . ."

Mary was still crying, tears made it difficult to see. She wiped away the tears that blurred her sight. It was Jesus talking to her, but she didn't recognize Him. She was blinded by her disillusionment but also, her weeping blinded her. Jesus spoke her name,

"Mary . . ."

His voice was electrifying. The sound of her name "Mary" caught her attention, but it was more than someone calling her by name—she recognized the voice—she knew the speaker. The One calling her by name was,

Jesus.

"Rabboni . . ." she called Him by her favorite name for Jesus.

When Mary spoke, just saying "Rabboni" aloud was transforming; there is power in His name. Her speech awakened her heart—the one convinced the other—she knew it was Jesus . . . not a spirit . . . not someone who sounded like Jesus . . . not someone who looked like Jesus . . . it was Jesus.

Instinctively, Mary fell at Jesus' feet in relief. He was not dead after all; Jesus was alive. She lunged for His feet, grabbing them, holding on with all her might. She would not let Him go again. She would not go through an emotional battle again, a struggle she had during the past three days. She clung to Him even tighter.

Mary broke into tears. But they were different than the tears of grief in the tomb. These were not tears of sadness. Now, she wept loudly . . . continually . . . profusely. Jesus understood her emotional collapse because He knows all things. He knew that her concern was outward, she was concerned about the body not losing Him.

"Don't hang on to Me," Jesus told her.

She continued to cling to His feet; Mary was happy that He was there in the flesh. But Jesus didn't want her faith to be based on His physical body, He knew things would be different once He returned to heaven.

"Don't hang on to my body," Jesus told her. "I'm just here in this physical body for a few days. Then I will ascend to heaven. I will return to heaven to be with the Father."

Jesus tried to explain to Mary they would have a new relationship in the future, she would talk to Him in the Spirit and worship Him in Spirit. Jesus was trying to tell Mary that they would have a spiritual relationship.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

In the future, Mary would need a spiritual relationship with Jesus, not to follow Him bodily as she did before the cross. Jesus encountered her to explain their new relationship. She returned to tell the disciples about seeing Jesus, and she becomes one of those who gives credibility to the resurrection (Mk. 16:9). Although Mary was not mentioned by name, she probably is one of those women praying in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit fell on the

church at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The story of Mary Magdalene's clutching the feet of Jesus is probably included to remind all of us to have a spiritual relationship with Jesus.

TEN LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. Jesus encounters people even though they have a wrong understanding of Him. Mary came to the tomb expecting to anoint a corpse, but she met a living Jesus Christ. She did not recognize Him, she thought He was the gardener; because she was expecting to see a dead body. Sometimes we go to church or we go about our duties, not expecting to encounter Jesus Christ; and when He is there; we miss Him because we don't expect Him.

> "Their eyes were spiritually blinded and they did not recognize Him (Jesus)" (Luke 24:16 author's translation).

*2. Our wrong perceptions drive us to say and do unusual things. W*hen Mary came to the tomb, she thought He was dead; so she said to the person she thought was the gardener, "Tell me where He is and I will take Him away." She was willing to take the dead body away and give it a proper burial.

> "Out of the expectations of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34 author's translation).

3. An encounter with Jesus brings out our strongest emotional response. When Mary finally recognized that Jesus was talking with her, she grabbed Him around the feet in worship. Mary's emotional response was probably reflective of her previous attachment to a physical Christ. So she expressed her devotion and worship by grabbing Him around the feet.

Even though her emotions were spontaneous and sincere, Jesus corrected her emotional response by telling her to not touch Him. He wanted her to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) which would be the relationship to all believers to Him during the Church Age.

> "As the young deer being chased by wild dogs pants after a drink of water, so pants my soul for You, O God" (Psalm 42:1 author's translation).

4. *Our love for Jesus drives us to great sacrifice and dedicated service.* Because Mary had such love for Jesus, she was willing to face danger by going to the tomb early on Sunday morning, even though Roman soldiers were present. She knew the body had to be anointed, and she was prepared to give herself to anoint His body.

"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die *is* gain" (Phil. 1:21 NKJV).

5. *Sometimes Jesus comes to us but we miss Him because of wrong expectations.* When Mary returned to the garden, she looked in the tomb for His dead body. She encountered angels, but perhaps didn't now who they were. She was searching for the corpse. When she met Jesus, she thought He was the gardener. Perhaps Jesus' countenance had been changed because of His intense sufferings on the cross, or His facial features were changed because of the resurrection; in any case, Mary did not recognize Him. Perhaps Jesus has come to us and we have missed Him, maybe because of a wrong perception or there was sin in our life. Whatever the reason, we should be sensitive to Him and not miss His presence when He comes to us.

"When they heard that He (Jesus) was alive . . . they did not believe" (Mark 16:11 NKJV).

6. *Because Jesus knows us, He comes to us in our need and calls us by name*. As Mary was in the garden searching for the corpse, she met Jesus, but thought He was the gardener. When Jesus called her by the name "Mary," she immediately recognized Him. It is this place that she fell at His feet and worshipped Him. When Jesus encounters us, He knows our emotional nature whether it is upset or not; He knows our thought processes. He knows our name, and when He comes to us He will minister to us in our need.

"He calls His own sheep by name" John 10:3 NKJV).

7. *Today Jesus wants us to encounter Him spiritually, not physically*. Perhaps God is using the encounter between Mary and Jesus to teach all Christians what should be their response to Jesus Christ. Many are like Thomas, who will not believe unless they can place their finger into

the wounds in His hands, and place their hands into His side; that is not the basis for our relationship to Jesus Christ today. His body sits at the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 7:24) and we relate to Him because He is in our hearts, because He is in the Church, because He is in the world; we relate to Him spiritually. While we would like to grab His feet in worship and adoration, we can do that only spiritually in prayer and worship of Him. He wants us to worship Him with all our hearts, just as Mary worshipped Him with all her heart.

> "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (I Cor. 2:9 NKJV).

8. An encounter with Jesus produces a task to go and tell others. After Mary met Jesus Christ and was corrected concerning her response to Him, He told her to go and tell the brethren what she experienced. Later in Scriptures (Mark 16:9), Mary's encounter with Jesus became one of the proofs of credibility of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Because Mary was faithful in carrying out the task Jesus gave her after the encounter, we have another demonstration of proof that Jesus, in fact, did rise from the dead.

> "The angel answered and said . . . come see . . . go quickly and tell" (Matt. 28:5-7 KJV).

9. *Our obedience helps others to believe the credibility of Christianity and the resurrection.* After Mary encountered Jesus, she obeyed what He told her to do. She went to tell the brethren that she had seen Jesus. When we meet Jesus Christ, we should carry out His commands and do what He has told us to do. As the Lord works in us, others will see our "anointed" ministry and have greater confidence in Christianity.

> "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and *that* He had spoken these things to her" (John 20:18 NKJV).

10. *Jesus comes to us in our hour of need and encounters us with His person*. Mary was willing to do anything and to go anywhere to serve Jesus Christ. The Lord knew that, and when she returned to the garden; Jesus encountered her. At her moment of deepest need, the Lord

came to give her a reason for living and serving. In the same way, God knows our deepest needs and comes to us and helps us through our problems.

"He who has my commandments and keeps them it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21 NKJV).

Take Aways

- *I can encounter Christ even though I don't know everything about Him.*
- *I say and do unusual things when I encounter God.*
- *I have the strongest emotional response when encountering Christ.*
- *I make my greatest sacrifices to Christ because of my love for Him.*
- *I sometimes miss an encounter with Christ because of a wrong interpretation of events.*
- *I am known personally by Christ.*
- *I will encounter Christ spiritually, not physically.*
- *I will want to tell others because I have encountered Christ.*
- *I will tell others about encountering Christ so they will believe Him.*
- *I can have my needs met by encountering Him personally.*

Dwight Lyman Moody
Evangelism

I can myself go back almost twelve years and remember two holy women who used to come to my meetings. It was delightful to see them there, for when I began to preach, I could tell by the expression of their faces they were praying for me. At the close of the Sabbath evening services they would say to me, "We have been praying for you." I said, "Why don't you pray for the people?" They answered, "You need power." "I need power," I said to myself; "why I thought I had power." I had a large Sabbath school and the largest congregation in Chicago. There were some conversions at the time, and I was in a sense satisfied. But right along these two godly women kept praying for me, and their earnest talk about "the anointing for special service" set me thinking. I asked them to come and talk with me, and we got down on our knees. They poured out their hearts, that I might receive the anointing of the Holy Ghost. And there came a great hunger into my soul. I knew not what it was. I began to cry as I never did before. The hunger increased. I really felt that I did not want to live any longer if I could not have this power for service. I kept on crying all the time that God would fill me with His Spirit. Well, one day, in the city of New York—O, what a day! I cannot describe it; I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to me. Paul had an experience of which he never spoke for fourteen years. I can only say, God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand.

I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you would give me all Glasgow.[11]

CHAPTER ELEVEN
PETER: BACKSLIDER RESTORED TO SERVICE

Encounter . . . to be restored to service
Place . . . on a beach of the Sea of Galilee
Scriptures: John 21:1-17

His red beard fluttered in the breeze off the lake. The heavy clouds over the Sea of Galilee blocked any afternoon sun. The gray day reflected Peter's attitude, he had not had many sunny days since Jesus arose from the dead five weeks ago.

Peter sat on rocks to look out over the waters of Galilee. He had sat there as a boy . . . dreaming of the future. This favorite perch was next to the pier for the fishermen of Caperneum. As a boy from the poor village of Bethsaida, he dreamed of owning a fishing business with his family . . . he did that. As a boy he dreamed of having a home in the wealthy town of Caperneum . . . he did that. As a boy he dreamed of serving the Messiah who would bring His people deliverance from Rome . . . but had blown it. He had followed Jesus, but when a crisis developed, Peter denied ever knowing Jesus.

"I failed . . ."

Peter had left his fishing business with his father, and followed Jesus for almost three years because he believed in Jesus. He saw the miracles, heard the sermons, he fellowshipped with Jesus, asking Him questions, learning from His example. He planned to be the leader of the 12 disciples who followed Jesus . . . he was strong . . . quick . . . and the others followed him.

Sitting on the rock, he thought back to that awful night when Jesus died. The wind stiffened, his red hair blew into his eyes, but they were closed. Peter thought of his terrible failure,

"I failed . . ." Peter thought. "My life is a failure!"

Peter remembered the Last Supper with Jesus in the Upper Room; he made a deep vow—deeper than the others—Peter promised he'd be the last one to deny Jesus or leave Jesus. He grabbed a sword to boast to Jesus,

"I will die for You," Peter meant every word. He told Jesus, "When others leave you, I'll give my life for You."

Jesus looked deep into the sincere eyes of Peter, but the Lord knew better. Because He was the Lord, Jesus knew what Peter would do. Jesus told him,

"Before the rooster crows, you'll deny Me three times."

To the utter amazement of Peter, Jesus was right. He tried to follow Jesus into the courtyard where they were going to have Jesus' trial. But he was intimidated by the crowd. He was influenced by public opinion. Sure enough, he denied Jesus three times. The last time it

was just an obscure maid who accused him of being a follower of Jesus. As soon as he denied Jesus, the rooster crowed . . . then he remembered what Jesus did. Then Jesus looked at Peter.

"His look made me ashamed."

Peter had gone over the event in his mind a thousand times. After denying His master, Peter sneaked out into the dark shadows to hide, there he wept bitterly.

That was three weeks ago, now Peter sat on his favorite rock on the beach at Caperneum thinking about his future. The clouds lifted just enough for Peter to see the dark amber sun setting in the west. Another day was through, the red wafer disappeared over the Galilean hills, he thought,

"Is my life through?" Peter meditated. "Will I get another chance?"

Peter thought about the resurrected Jesus. He was one of the first to the empty tomb, he ran there with John. But he didn't see Jesus or an angel. Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room, but Jesus said nothing to him about the three times he denied Him. Peter wanted to tell Jesus, but he didn't get the opportunity. There were too many people there. Peter had cried till his eyes no longer could water. He prayed over and over,

"I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry."

Peter was sure that God had by-passed him because of his sin. He knew God forgave sin. He believed what the psalmist said, "God forgiveth all thine iniquities."

Sin was not Peter's concern, it was service. Could he ever serve the Messiah again? Peter knew he was not worthy, but he wanted to be Jesus' disciple. Peter turned in the evening dusk to see the beach where he first met Jesus. He remembered he was casting a net by hand into the shallow water over by the reeds. Jesus called him,

"Come after Me," was His simple invitation. "I will make you a fisher of men."

The crickets began their concert for the evening. Shadows appeared in the crevices of the rocks. Peter was not thinking of nature's beauty, he was still thinking of the invitation by Jesus to him on this beach. "I will make you a fisher of men."

"That's it . . ." Peter said out loud, but no one was there to hear him. "That's it . . . I'll go fishing."

He jumped from the rocks to the path that led into Caperneum. He headed straight for his house, several disciples were there. His walk reflected a new spirit. He had sat discouraged around the town for several days, now he walked briskly with purpose. He burst into the room where everyone was finishing the evening meal.

"I'm going fishing," he announced boldly to everyone's surprise. "The clouds are covering the sky, the fish will come to feed at the surface." Peter's red beard bounced with enthusiasm as he asked the disciples, "I'm going fishing, who wants to go with me?"

Some of them were fishermen—Andrew, James and John—they decided to go with Peter to help provide food because money was short. Also from the area—Nathaniel, Thomas, and

Philip—decided to go with them, these three had worked on the fishing boats as boys. They wanted to lend a hand.

The lake was dark when the seven disciples pushed off from shore. The grinding of sand on the boat's bottom was therapy to Peter's frail ego. But it seemed the hand of God was against the seven fishermen. They did not catch anything. Since God speaks with "no!" as well as God blessing with an abundant catch, God had other things in mind besides fish that evening.

They tried all the good fishing holes, places they learned in previous years, but caught nothing . . . not one fish. They tried all their tricks, but caught nothing . . . not one fish. They tried casting deep or shallow, but caught nothing . . . not one fish.

"I don't understand it," Peter moaned to the others as the eastern sky began to lighten. "The cloud cover was perfect to catch fish, but we didn't catch one."

The sky grew lighter, a gentle mist formed over the lake, hugging the water. The breeze was gone. The Sea of Galilee was without a ripple—a mirror. Then the discouraging thoughts of the seven were interrupted by a shout from the shore. Through the mist Peter could make out the outline of a man waving at them. He shouted,

"Have you caught anything?"

Fishermen are embarrassed with failure, sometimes they just ignore such a question. They want to brag about their catches. But for reasons unknown to them, Peter put his hands to his red beard and yelled,

"No!" he added. "We haven't caught anything."

The voice yelled back to Peter, "Cast your net on the other side of the ship." It was an inviting command. "You'll catch fish on the other side."

The chords of Peter's mind remembered a similar melody three years earlier. They had fished all night, but caught nothing. The Master told them to launch out into the deep to cast their nets. The Master filled their nets when they obeyed. Peter barked orders to the fishermen,

"Quick," he grabbed the nets to pull them into the boat. Almost as quickly they were thrown into the water on the other side. Peter obeyed the command . . . perfectly . . . instantly.

As the nets submerged into the dark water on the other side of the boat, the water churned with fish, a whole school of fish. It was as though they were fighting for an opportunity to get into the net.

"Pull . . ." Peter yelled as he pulled on the rope with all his weight. "Help me . . .!" he commanded, resorting to the authoritative leadership ways of the past. All seven of the fishermen put their backs into their effort, but they couldn't get the net into the boat. The fish in the net were struggling with the men in the boat, and the fish were winning. Suddenly the youngest of the disciples let the rope go. He pulled himself up to the mast in the boat to search for the individual on the shore. Then pointing toward the man who yelled at them, John said,

"It's the Lord!"

There on the shore was the Man, sitting by a small fire, He was no longer standing on the beach. The inviting fire was hidden between two sand dunes for all the seven fishermen to see. Jesus was no longer looking for them, now they must come to Him.

"Quickly," Peter again commanded, "get to the oars," he pointed to two disciples to begin rowing. The other disciples held the rope to the net of fish.

"I can't wait," Peter said reaching under a seat to get his tunic. He had been stripped to a loincloth to work with the wet nets all evening. Peter tied the sash tightly around his waist then dove into the water. With strong strokes, Peter swam swiftly through the water to the shore. The boat, dragging the heavy net, was left behind.

Peter reached the shore; then wading through the shallow waves, ran to the fire where Jesus was waiting. The six disciples in the boat continued to row toward the shore. When they reached shallow water Peter returned to help them, grabbing the rope to the net to drag it onto the beach.

"Bring some fish," Jesus told the disciples. "We'll have breakfast together."

When the disciples got to the fire, they saw a small fish being roasted. Jesus motioned to their catch, it was a tremendous number of fish and they were extremely large fish. Jesus had bread waiting for them.

"Add your fish," He instructed. "We'll eat together."

As the sun came over the hills of Gadera, the disciples ate with their Lord. None of them had to ask who He was, they all knew it was Jesus.

Peter ate heartily, he ate as heartily as he worked. As the meal ended, the disciples remembered the many times when Jesus instructed them. They would sit around a table, and on this occasion, a fire; and Jesus taught them. If Jesus were going to use this situation to instruct them, Peter was ready. He found a prominent place near the Lord, then waited for a lesson or sermon. But an instructive lesson didn't come in the way of a sermon. Rather, Jesus would use this occasion to penetrate the heart of Peter. He turned to ask Peter a question,

"Do you love Me, Peter," Jesus pointed to the catch of fish. "Do you love Me more than these?"

Peter was grieved, Jesus didn't ask anyone else. He questioned Peter's love and loyalty. But why shouldn't Jesus question Peter's love, it was the red headed fisherman who denied Him. Jesus used the deepest word for love, He asked if Peter loved Him as a mother loves her child, or as God loves His people.

Peter felt the penetrating gaze as the Master waited for an answer. He would not brag about his love, no boasting this time. Peter carefully chose his answer, he used the word for love that meant partnership. Peter wanted to tell the truth this time. He dropped his eyes and said,

"You know I like you."

Jesus, seeing the honesty of Peter's heart answered, "Feed my sheep."

Peter didn't know what that command meant, but he was willing to do whatever Jesus said. His heart was yielded to the Lord. Then Jesus asked the same question again,

"Do you love Me, Peter?"

Again Peter was embarrassed by the question. He was embarrassed because Jesus asked only him, and not the other disciples. Also, he was embarrassed because Jesus used the deep word for love. Jesus wanted to know if Peter loved Him enough to sacrifice all to Him. But, Peter was embarrassed because he didn't use the deepest word for love in his last answer.

But Peter was being honest, he knew his efforts were only superficial at best. He would not boast as he did at the last supper. Peter responded with the same answer as before,

"You know I like you."

The six disciples sat silently. They intuitively knew they were to be quiet. They knew Jesus was carefully leading Peter to a conclusion. Jesus was trying to make Peter see something imperative. After Peter answered the Lord with the shallow word for love, all eyes instinctively switched to Jesus. They wanted to see what the Master would do now. Jesus waited because He is patient. Then Jesus asked,

"Do you really like Me?"

Jesus came down to Peter's level. Jesus used the shallow word for love with his question. Peter had said he liked Jesus, so the Lord wanted to know if he really *liked* Him.

Peter was convicted because Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him. But Peter remembered he denied the Lord three times, so it was right for the Lord to ask three times. Peter's eyes lowered, he couldn't look at the other disciples, he couldn't look at the Lord—he dared not look at the Lord. Even though Peter wanted to tell the Lord he loved Him with undying love, Peter knew honesty was his only answer. He finally looked up to say,

"Lord, you know all things because you are God, you know by my experience of denying you what I can only say." Then Peter smiled with confidence because he spoke the truth of his heart,

"You know I like you."

The Lord was pleased with the heart of Peter, more than with the words of Peter. Jesus had looked deeply into the soul of His disciple to see his sincerity in this encounter, Peter was honest . . . brutally honest with himself. He was broken and ready for service. Jesus renewed the commission that was originally given to Peter.

Jesus told Peter,

"Feed my sheep."

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Peter was restored to his previous place of leadership. He preached the sermon on Pentecost that became foundational to building the church. Peter was the leader of ministry to the Jews, while Paul was leader of ministry to the Gentiles. Peter had a profitable life of ministry. Tradition says he died in Rome sometime between 64-66 AD

Peter's reported last words to his wife, "Remember the Lord," are certainly consistent with his message to Christians in difficult times (I Peter 2:21; II Peter 3:1). When believers find themselves in the midst of difficult circumstances, taking time to consider the faithfulness of the Lord in His suffering is often enough to help one continue to faithfully endure his problem as he completes the task which is his.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING God

1. Good intentions are not enough to keep us faithful to Christ. Peter told the Lord that he would never deny Him. He even boasted, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee" (Matt. 26:35). Yet human strength alone was not enough, Peter denied the Lord three times.

> "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (I Cor. 10:12 NKJV).

2. Being sorry does not automatically restore us to service. Peter was sorry after he denied the Lord, "And a second time *the* rooster crowed. And Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him" (Mark 14:72 NKJV). Obviously, God forgives us after we confess our sin and ask for cleansing. But that doesn't necessarily restore us to our previous place of service.

> Then I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull *them* down, and I will plant them and not pluck *them* up" (Jeremiah 24:7 NKJV).

3. Some return to their old ways in backsliding. Peter told the other disciples "I go afishing" because that is one thing that he could do. However, God sovereignly moved upon the waters, "that night they caught nothing" (John 21:3 NKJV).

> "My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt *Him*" (Hosea 11:7 NKJV).

4. Sometimes we don't realize when Christ is calling to us. The disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing. In the morning Christ came to them. The disciples heard his call to them and they saw him on the shore, but they didn't recognize Him. This was not the first post-resurrection appearance of Christ, they should have recognized Him; but they didn't. Perhaps it was their sin, or their pre-occupation with their nets, or some other reason. Perhaps we have missed Christ when He came to us because we were pre-occupied.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Rev. 3:20 NKJV).

5. *Christ asks questions to get us thinking about our failure*. When Christ appeared on the shore, He asked, "Have you caught anything?" It was a question to reveal that their efforts didn't work when done apart from Christ. Then after breakfast, Christ asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Again, it was a question that made him think about his failure. We have to think about our backslidden condition before we will do anything about it.

"I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NKJV).

6. *We do impetuous things when encountering Christ*. When Peter realized that Jesus was standing on the shore, Peter first put on his tunic, while most would remove heavy garments when attempting to swim a long distance. Then he dove into the water to swim to shore. He probably didn't think about what he was doing, if anything, he was not thinking about his actions. He just automatically did what was natural. It was an impetuous response of love and excitement.

"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water. So He said, 'Come.' And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus" (Matt 14:28,29 NKJV).

7. *We do extraordinary things when we are excited about Christ*. Peter swam to the shore wearing his long tunic, Then when the boat reached shore, Peter ran to pull the net filled with fishes to shore. This was an amazing feat, because previously seven men in the boat, "were not able to draw it in for the multitudes of fish" (John 21:6 NKJV). Some say this was a miracle, others think it was simply Peter being so excited that he pulled the net to shore with a sudden burst of energy.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13 NKJV).

8. *We must serve Christ with our talents, even though He could perform our task without us*. The Lord obviously created the fish in the net by a miracle. There were 154 large fish where previously there were none. When the disciples got to shore, they found a charcoal fire with fish cooking for their breakfast. Jesus told them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught" (John 21:10 NKJV). Jesus had them add their fish tot he ones already on the fire. Christ could have provided enough fish on their fire so the disciples didn't need to add theirs.

Jesus could have waited to eat their fish without providing His on the fire. Why fish from two sources? Perhaps the answers is in the law of the division of labor. God will do His part to assist us in serving Him, but we must properly use our talents in service.

> "We then, *as* workers together *with Him"* (II Cor. 6:1 NKJV).

9. *We must honestly express our love to Christ*. Jesus knew Peter's heart when He asked Peter, "Do you love me?" The Lord used the deepest word for love, a word that meant sacrificial love. The Lord wanted to see how honest Peter would answer. On this occasion Peter answered with a shallow word, in essence Peter said, "I like you." While Peter's response will not impress those who like to brag of their entire devotion to Jesus, whether or not it is so; Peter's response was honest. Three times Peter responded, "I like you." While we might wish that Peter would have used the deeper word, at least we know he was honest.

> "He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep'" (John 21 16 NKJV).

10. *We can be restored to service after we honestly submit to Jesus Christ*. The Lord asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" When Christ got the right answer, He told Peter, "Feed my lambs." Most people believe this was Peter's restoration to his former place of leading the disciples. Because of his restoration, Peter was able to preach the powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost.

> "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from him" (Hosea 14:4 NKJV).

Take Aways

- ☐ *I need more than good intentions to be faithful.*
- ☐ *I need to do more than be sorry for my sin.*
- ☐ *I realize the pull to return to my old ways.*
- ☐ *I don't realize all the times Christ comes to me.*
- ☐ *I know that Christ asks me questions to get me to think about my failures.*
- ☐ *I may do impetuous things when encountering Christ.*

- *I can do extraordinary things when I am excited about Christ.*

- *I must fish for Christ even though He could do it without me.*

- *I must be completely honest in expressing my love to Christ.*
- *I can be restored to service by being honest before Christ.*

Joe Focht
Pastor, Calvary Chapel
A church of 10,000 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I was playing guitar in a rock band traveling throughout the East Coast in the early 80s. I was dropping acid, smoking pot, and living like most of the youth who were characterized as "hippies." I was deeply into Eastern mysticism when a good friend witnessed to me about Christ, asking me to be converted. I didn't understand what my friend meant. Occasionally I picked up a Bible and read it but Eastern mysticism had gripped me. I was searching for God. I would drop LSD, sit in front of an open window in the winter time without a shirt, breathe deeply, and read my Bible"

I saw what I thought was a loophole in Christianity; I saw a difference between Jesus as a Savior and Jesus as a Teacher. But I still sought reality in the Eastern religions. I'd put a blanket over my head and go into deep meditation. I went to see the Maharaja who was on a whirlwind tour of the United States. The Maharaja was nothing but a fat little kid from India that "blew in my ear." He was supposed to be blowing meditative thoughts in my ear about God.

I was playing a gig in the Pocono Mountains at Skinner's Fall, Pennsylvania, when Harris Gordon a friend talked with me about Christ until 3:00 AM one morning. He asked me to pray. The presence of the Lord fell upon the room and we both wept unashamedly before the Lord. I experienced the personage of the Holy Spirit in the room. Jesus was not visible but I knew He was there. I hung my head and cried, feeling ashamed for all my sins. I repented of all my sins. I felt wave upon wave of God's grace, washing upon me That night I got my soul right before God, was forgiven of my sins, and Christ came into my life.

The next morning I saw the sky bluer than ever before, my total life was absolutely transformed. Some friends called and asked me to come to a Pentecostal church and pray at the altar to receive Christ, but I told them it had already happened in my life.

Joe Focht later began Calvary Chapel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in a catering hall and 17 years later the church was the largest in Northeast United States with over 10,000 children and adults in attendance weekly.

CHAPTER TWELVE
SAUL: BECOMING A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST

Encounter . . . to change the mind
Place . . . on a road near Damascus
Scripture: Acts 9:1-25

The scene was chaotic. Curious spectators came running to see him die, young zealous Levites quickly picked up rocks to join the fracas; the crowd was screaming for blood. The women were chanting,

"STONE HIM . . . STONE HIM . . . STONE HIM . . ."

Stephen, a leader in the new sect of the way, was a follower of Jesus. Blood trickled from his mouth. His arms were raised to ward off the rocks. An open gash on the back of his head was throbbing.

The crowd was not punishing him because he was a Christian, they hated him because he had debated the teachers of the Law and won. Stephen was a Jew from outside the Holy Land, he was learned in Gentile logic, and the Sanhedrin had not previously faced the arguments of Stephen. He interpreted the Old Testament from a Gentile point of view, so the defeated Levites beat him with their fists. As they were dragging him out of the Temple, one yelled,

"DRAG HIM TO THE VALLEY OF HINNON AND STONE HIM!"

"YEA . . ." was the mob's reply.

At first they were going to punish him, but the smell of blood in the nose of a predator spurs it to the kill. By the time they yelled to stone him, death was the assumed conclusion in the minds of everyone.

Saul, a young member of the Sanhedrin, was not at the debate, he could have answered the logic of Stephen. Saul was a Jew from Tarsus in Asia, a city of liberal education and a center of the arts. Saul was brilliant in debate because he brought a fresh interpretation to the Law. Saul heard the clamor of the crowd; he came running.

"HERE . . ." Saul yelled to the stone-throwers, "I'll hold your tunics."

Saul watched the punishing stones smashing Stephen, some missing. But no one defended the martyr, no one quieted the crowd, no one came to his rescue. The leader of the Sanhedrin arrived, the action stopped momentarily when the elderly entourage got there. Everyone looked to the leader for permission to continue, the old Jewish leader had been hastily summoned; he did not have on his official garments. He asked those assembled,

"Has this man done something worthy of death?"

It was a question that would not be answered, at least not out loud. Saul thought,

"Kill these Christians because they won't observe the Sabbath . . . because they won't bring a sacrificial lamb to the Temple . . . because they preach in the streets . . . because they do miracles by magic . . . because they claim Jesus arose from the dead."

Saul wanted to kill this bloodied man kneeling in a rock quarry, just as Jesus was killed; but no cross to make Stephen a hero, as they made Jesus a hero.

The crowd stood sober . . . waiting . . . ready. Then the leader of the Sanhedrin asked again,

"Has this man done anything worthy of death?"

"YES!" the old members of the Sanhedrin yelled first.

"YES!" the other members joined in the vote.

"YES!" shouted young Saul, he was glad to see a Christian die.

One stone was thrown, Stephen put up a hand to divert it away. Then three or four stones were thrown at the same time, he couldn't divert them all. A rock thrown from the rear hit Stephen in the head.

Thud.

Stephen knew it was over. Already on his knees, he looked to heaven to pray,

"Lord Jesus . . ." peace came over his face, "Lord forgive their sin . . . I pray for them . . . save them."

The prayer convicted even the hardest stone-thrower. Even those who hated him most, momentarily stopped their assault to hear what he was saying. Stephen looked into the sky . . . he saw Jesus, but the crowd thought he was just looking up. Saul didn't see anything in the sky,

but he was interested in the last words of this man before he died. Most historians analyze the last words before death, for they usually reveal what a man truly believes, and how he lived.

Stephen looked into heaven. He saw Jesus sitting at the right hand of the throne of God, and Stephen recognized Jesus. Although he had not seen the Master with his physical eyes, he recognized him in death because he had prayed to him so many times. Jesus began walking toward Stephen as a person goes to meet a friend, Stephen reached out to Jesus. Saul heard his prayer, so did everyone in the rock quarry, although no one saw Jesus but Stephen. Saul looked up to see what Stephen was staring at, he saw nothing. Stephen cried out,

"Lord Jesus . . . receive my spirit."

Stephen died a martyr's death, but rocks did not smash the breath from his lungs. The Lord Jesus took him.

Later that day, Saul was still at the rock quarry. He saw Christian men come with water to wash the dirt and dried blood from the corpse. They tenderly anointed it with oil, then wound the body of Stephen in a shroud. Saul was impressed with their boldness, they exposed themselves to danger. They could also be stoned by the crowd. But Saul was also touched with their tenderness, they loved Stephen.

A few days later Saul went to the Sanhedrin. He had a plan to stop the spread of Christianity to other cities. When they stoned Stephen, they had stopped the street preaching of Christians; they no longer gathered publicly for prayer. Jewish spies reported Christians were leaving Jerusalem for other cities . . . Alexandria, Babylon, and Damascus. They chose these cities because of the large Jewish populations there. Saul was furious,

"Christians are going to proselytize their relatives . . ." he announced to the Sanhedrin. Saul spoke from the back row to the assembly of 70 men. With his fist clenched, the blood vessels on his temple popped out and the tempo of his voice raised to a speedier pitch.

"We must stop the spread of Christianity . . ." he paused to look from face to face, they agreed. "We MUST stop them." They all nodded approval, anticipating his plan.

"I'll go to Damascus," Saul suggested, "arrest the Christians, then get a letter of extradition to bring them to Jerusalem."

"You can't do that," an old Rabbi stroked his beard to embarrass young Saul. "We have no legal rights in Damascus." Several of the older members of the Sanhedrin muttered their agreement. Another member spoke against Saul, "We have no legal authority outside the Holy Land."

"Yes we do," Saul snapped at the old man. Saul was a student of Gamaliel, which meant he did his research well before speaking. "Yes, we have legal authority . . . in Damascus . . . in Alexandria . . . in Babylon." Saul stopped to make his point, then continued, "We have a legal authority over Jews anywhere in the Roman Empire."

Saul explained some history to the hushed assembly. He revealed how the High Priest supported Julius Caesar in his battle to defeat Pompeii in Egypt in BC 68. In return, Caesar gave to Hyreanus II, the High Priest and all succeeding High Priests spiritual authority over all Jews in the Roman Empire. Then Saul concluded,

"These Christians are Jews . . . legal-born Jews . . ." The group of men smiled at the brilliance of the young Saul. Then Saul smiled back at the Sanhedrin when he saw they were on his side. Then Saul said, "This is a spiritual matter of the highest urgency. It threatens the faith of Jews everywhere."

The group broke out into applause to show appreciation and agreement. But Saul didn't want their gratitude yet. He had one last thing to add,

"We can't let the authorities in these other towns deal with these Christians. They won't stop the Christians. They won't punish them as we dealt with Stephen. We must arrest the Christian leaders, bring them back to Jerusalem, and let them feel the fury of the stones."

"YES," the Sanhedrin shouted. "Yes . . . Yes . . ."

Saul had not gone to the High Priest privately with his plan for fear of rejection . . . rejection because he was so young. So Saul used the public platform of the Sanhedrin to intimidate the High Priest. Saul wanted the Sanhedrin to pressure the High Priest. Saul carried the day, the Sanhedrin agreed, now would the High Priest agree? All eyes looked way from Saul to the High Priest.

The room sensed tension between young Saul and the old High Priest. It was a generation gap between a young hot head and the older, wiser leader. The eyes of the Sanhedrin darted from Saul's face to the High Priest's eyes. Would the old man approve the bold initiative? He slowly opened his lips to speak,

"I will give Saul a letter of authority."

With one ingenious plan, young Saul—not yet 30 years old—became one of the leading forces in the Sanhedrin. Saul achieved authority that some members never get in a lifetime. Saul became the representative of the High Priest and a powerful voice of the Sanhedrin.

Several weeks later a caravan of camels, donkeys and weary travelers reached the mountain of balsam trees west of the Baca Valley. They could see Damascus in the distance from the top of the hills. Looking back they could see the cedars of Lebanon across the Baca Valley and to the south they could see Mt. Hermon, the snow-covered mountain of the Holy Land.

Saul not only had a letter form the High Priest to arrest and extradite Jews to Jerusalem, he had a letter of credit. Saul was riding a horse, the most luxurious of all ways to travel. He was not being bounced on the back of a donkey, nor was he being jerked about on camel back. The rich rode horses, as did Army officers, so Saul used his letter of credit to secure a fine horse, one that called attention to the importance that he thought his new office demanded. His luggage was being brought by porters, again an opulent show of wealth. From time to time, Saul would ride out to high observation points, there he sat like a Roman Army officer surveying a battlefield. It gave Saul a sense of self-worth.

But all he got from his porters was the empty obedience that comes with money. They cared not that he was a Jew, even less that he was a dignitary who represented the High Priest. They obeyed him for money, but didn't respect him. Saul remembered the tender love that Christian men had for the dead corpse of Stephen, Saul didn't get that type of love from anyone . . . not the porters . . . not the Sanhedrin . . . not his fellow-students at Gamaliel's school.

"Who will care when I die?"

The caravan descended the green fertile hills onto the flat plain of Ghuta. Shortly, they would drink from the Barada River, then follow the river to the city of Damascus. They would enter the "East Gate" to the city. Saul planned to ride his steed triumphantly down the street called Straight that ran east and west, straight through the city. They would reach the city at high noon, the time to make the greatest entrance.

Saul's horse drank deeply in the Barada River, he paused for a rest while the caravan went before him. When he finally caught up to the caravan, his luggage handlers were walking at the rear of the caravan. It wasn't a place Saul wanted to ride for very long, he was eating the dust of the other animals.

Saul took a white cloth to wipe the perspiration from his face and neck. Then for a moment he looked into the sun, directly into its blinding rays. The light of the sun exploded brighter than any sun Saul had ever seen. He was blinded with its brilliance, for it was not the noon sun that blinded Saul. The intense light—the light that blinded Saul—was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The brilliant light blinded Saul. The horse, sensing fear, began kicking wildly. Saul was not a trained horseman, he couldn't handle a kicking horse. Blinded by the searing light and losing his equilibrium, he fell to the ground. The light was so intense, Saul covered his face with both hands; sandy hands he had used to break his fall. Covered his face with his dirty hands, he couldn't look at the sun; he couldn't look at Jesus Christ. Saul couldn't see anything.

Saul was blind.

The luggage handlers saw the intense light. They dropped their burden to the ground, and cowered in fear. They didn't know what was happening, but they knew it was supernatural. They heard a voice from heaven, it was noise to them; they couldn't make out the words. But they knew someone was speaking to Saul. A voice spoke to Saul in the Hebrew language,

"Saul . . ." his blinded eyes looked skyward, but were unable to see, "Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

"Who are You?" Saul stammered an answer.

"I am Jesus . . ." the voice from heaven answered. "You think you are persecuting Christians, but you are persecuting Me."

Saul quickly processed everything in his mind. He hated Christians and was willing to kill them, just as other Jewish leaders killed Jesus. He knew Christians claimed Jesus was not dead, but was alive. Now Jesus was talking to him. Saul heard the voice,

"I am Jesus . . . it is hard to kick against the truth." Saul lay groveling in the dirt, thrown by a kicking horse. Instantly, Saul knew his whole legalistic approach to God was wrong. Christians didn't just have a better system of religion, they believed in a person. They followed Christ. Saul answered,

"Lord . . ." it was the first time Saul acknowledged the deity of Jesus Christ. "Lord . . . what do you want me to do?"

In that statement, Saul yielded himself to a person. It would take awhile to sort out his theology, and he would have to think his way through all the changes that would be required in his life style. But lying on the ground, Saul made one monumental change—he recognized the person of Jesus Christ. Even though blinded, Saul had seen the light. Even though blinded by the light, Saul had seen the brilliance of Jesus Christ. In yieldedness, Saul asked,

"What do you want me to do?"

The Lord gave him instructions, "Arise . . ," Saul was to get up off the ground. "Get up, go into the city; you will be told what to do."

The horse had run away, the luggage carriers didn't go after it for the horse was not their concern. They had seen the blinding light and heard a voice speaking from heaven. Now working for a blinded employer, they had to get him to the city if they wanted their money. The city gate was right ahead. Taking Saul by the arm, they led him on the street called Straight, to a house of a Jewish man named Judah. What a spectacle, Saul did not have a triumphant entrance upon a fine white horse. He was being led by his luggage handlers . . . blinded eyes . . . dirty robes . . . God had humbled Saul.

Saul was ugly, because his eyes were ugly. Not only was he blinded, but also rubbing sand into his eyes had irritated them and bloodied them. The more he tried to open his eyes, the

more intense his pain, like needles pushed into the eyeballs. Any light was unbearable. Saul squeezed them shut to keep out any light, then rubbed them until they bled. The more his eyes bled, the more Saul rubbed them creating huge ugly blood crusted scabs in place of eyes. Saul had been blind spiritually, now he was really blind; he was physically blind..

Saul had fasted many times, a good Pharisee abstains from food every Tuesday and Thursday. He had fasted to demonstrate his obedience to the Law. But now fasting was different. Saul couldn't eat or drink, like people losing their appetite when a sudden death occurs in the family, there was a death in Saul's life. The old Saul had died when he met Jesus. He thought,

"I am crucified with Christ . . . when Jesus died, I died . . . when Jesus was buried, I was buried."

For those days Saul experienced the cross. As a young theological student, Saul had heard a sermon by Jesus. He remembered Jesus saying, "If any man will come after Me, deny yourself, die with Me, take up your cross daily, follow Me." The old Saul died . . . completely.

Across town God spoke to a trusted Christian, one who followed Christ. The Lord appealed to him, calling him by name,

"Ananias."

"Yes, Lord," was his answer. "What do You want me to do?"

The Lord told this humble believer to go to the house where Saul was located, lay hands on Saul, and pray that he receive his sight. The Lord told Ananias that Saul had been blinded. But Ananias was not sure. He objected.

"Lord . . ." a natural objection, "I have heard what many evil things Saul has done to Christians in Jerusalem. He has come to Damascus to do the same thing!"

The Lord answered Ananias' fears. "Saul is praying." Then God told him, "Saul is a chosen vessel to preach to the Gentiles. He may have persecuted the church in the past, but he will be persecuted in the future because of his preaching."

The small room in the house was just a few steps off the street called Straight. The shutters barred out any light, the door was kept closed, but light was not necessary. Saul was

blind. Ugly brownish red scabs covered his eyes. The servant brought a basin of water to wash them, but Saul refused any help.

The darkened room had only a simple chair and table with a cup of water and some bread, but Saul refused them. He lay prostrate on the floor, praying . . . sobbing . . . repenting. He thought he'd be blind for the rest of his life, it wasn't his physical eyes that needed healing, it was the eyes of his soul that had been blinded that needed healing. He prayed for spiritual sight.

After three days, Ananias knocked on the door. Gaining entrance to the room, he explained to Saul,

"You are my brother . . ." the Lord told Ananias what happened on the road to Damascus. "I know you are my brother, because the Lord Jesus appeared to you."

Saul couldn't answer, he could only nod his head in agreement that he had seen Jesus. Ananias continued to explain,

"Jesus told me to lay hands on you and pray that you might receive sight." Then Ananias added, "And that you would be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Saul arose from lying on the floor, and knelt. Just as he promised, Ananias placed both hands on Saul's head to pray,

"Lord . . . heal his blindness . . . fill him with the Holy Spirit . . . use Saul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles."

Instantly, Saul could see. The intense stinging pain was gone. He knew something happened because he could see in his mind . . . he could see in colors . . . he could see in motion . . . he could see inside his heart. Then Saul tried to open his eyes, something he couldn't do because of intense pain and the scabs. Those ugly blood-encrusted scabs kept his eyes closed. He tried to open them,

Instantly, the scabs broke apart, and fell to the ground. The scabs released their grip on Saul's eyes and he could see. What he could see in his heart, he could now see with his eyes.

Saul was saved, healed of blindness and called of God to preach, but physically he was weakened. His intense praying for three days left him weak. He shook with exhaustion. For

the first time in three days, Saul took some water and a small morsel of bread. He needed strength.

Believers had gathered at the house to support Ananias and pray for Saul. In reward for their faithfulness, they witnessed the water baptism of Saul.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

Saul the Jewish member of the Sanhedrin became Saul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Whereas Saul persecuted Christians, after his conversion, the Jews tried to kill him in Damascus and then in Jerusalem. He went everywhere planting churches, and Jews followed him to criticize . . . arrest . . . stone . . . and attempt to assassinate him. Without a doubt, the man who encountered Christ on the road to Damascus became the most influential name in the spread of Christianity. The encounter with Christ motivated him to sacrificial service. He preached the gospel, wrote letters, trained disciples and influenced the future direction of Christianity.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. A lost person can encounter Christ and be transformed. When Saul undertook the trip to Damascus, he was not converted. But in a transforming experience he met Jesus Christ, and was transformed. Not only was his personality changed, his theology was changed, and his purpose in life was changed. A conversion experience can be an encounter with Christ that starts us on the Christian life. Others have encountered Christ who were converted for a long time, such as John encountering Christ on Patmos, and Abraham encountering God after walking with Him for twenty-five years.

> "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (II Cor. 5:17 NKJV).

2. The basis of encountering Christ is not grounded in logical explanations or empirical proofs, but rather in an experience with Jesus Christ. Saul who was trained in logic under Gamaliel, apparently could argue against Christianity, and had rational arguments to defend his faith. However, Saul didn't have any defense when he met Jesus Christ. In the same manner, many atheists and skeptics who doubt the Word of God become believers when they meet Jesus Christ. No one has to prove to them that the Bible is the Word of God, nor are they interested in arguments for the existence of God. When they encounter Jesus Christ, they inwardly know that God exists, and that His Word is true.

> "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20 NKJV).

3. *Jesus wants us to know Him for who He is*. When Jesus encountered Saul on the road to Damascus, He did not give reasons nor did he try to re-interpret Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus simply told Saul, "I am Jesus Whom you persecute" (Acts 9:5). Meeting Jesus was enough to transform Saul's life.

> ". . . that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil. 3:10 NKJV).

4. *After an encounter with Jesus, our life is pointed in a different direction.* Obviously, Saul was coming to Damascus to arrest Christians. But after encountering Jesus Christ, he began preaching, "Christ in the synagogue, that He is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). Saul did the opposite in Damascus for which he came.

> "Then He said to *them* all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me'" (Luke 9:23 NKJV).

5. *People around us don't understand what is happening when we encounter Christ.* The people with Saul did not understand what Saul heard or saw. "They that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they did not understand the voice of Him that spake to me" (Acts 22:9). When we meet Jesus Christ, we march to a different drumbeat. Our friends who do not know Jesus Christ do not understand our motives, or our objectives. Perhaps that is why so many encounters with God took place privately, God knew that people wouldn't understand, so He met His servants privately.

The people with Saul heard a voice, but they didn't understand the words; perhaps because God spoke to Saul in the Hebrew language. Perhaps, they heard a noise like those in the Temple who thought it was thundering when God said, "I have both glorified *it* and will glorify *it* again." (John 12:28 NKJV).

> "And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision; but a great terror fell upon them, so that they fled to hide themselves" (Daniel 10:7 NKJV).

6. *An encounter with God should take away our pride and humble us*. Every person wants to sit upon the throne of their own life. We are all driven by selfish or egotistical goals. However, Jesus Christ wants to sit upon the throne of our life. The arrogant Saul who met Jesus Christ, and could say for the rest of his life, "Not I but Christ" (Galatians 2:20).

> "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I *do*, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in

Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13,14 NKJV).

7. Sometimes we can't explain the experience of what happened in an encounter, we can only testify to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. On two other occasions in his life, Saul gave testimony of his conversion on the Damascus road. In neither of those testimonies did he try to explain what happened in the experience. He emphasized the radical transformation in his life. Before he was converted, he was a Christ-hating Jew who wanted to persecute the Church. After he met Jesus Christ, he became a preacher of the gospel. (Study Acts 22:3-21; Acts 26:2-23).

"For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain" Phil. 1:21 NKJV).

8. In an encounter sometimes God gives us a task that is unpleasant. Before meeting Jesus Christ, Saul testified that he was, "circumcised the eighth day of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, and Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee" (Phil. 3:5). But in meeting Jesus Christ, he was directed away from ministering to the Jews to become the apostle to the Gentiles.

"But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake'" (Acts 9:15,16 NKJV).

9. Our friends and fellow workers may turn against us because of our encounter with Jesus Christ. As a spokesman for the Jews, Saul carried a letter to Damascus for the arrest and the extradition of Christians to Jerusalem. After Saul encountered Jesus Christ, those with whom he worked tried to kill him; as he had tried to kill Christians. In Damascus "the Jews plotted to kill him" (Acts 9:23 NKJV). He fled to Jerusalem and there, "but they attempted to kill him" (Acts 9:29 NKJV). Perhaps many of our friends don't love us for who we are, they love us for what we can do for them and their cause.

"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (I Peter 4:12,13 NKJV).

10. God has some people who will help to explain to us our encounter with Christ. There was a believer in Damascus called Ananias that was not previously mentioned in Scripture, nor is he ever mentioned again. Apparently, Ananias is raised up for one shining moment in life, Ananias was to help Saul in his crucial encounter with Jesus Christ. Even though Ananias was

initially afraid because he had heard about the reputation of Saul, he obeyed, laying hands on Saul, and praying for his healing. God used Ananias to deliver a message to Saul that he was to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

"So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him" (Acts 8:30,31 NKJV).

Takes Aways

- *I know lost people can encounter Christ to be converted.*
- *I get proofs for my faith from Christ, not from logic or feelings.*
- *I need to encounter Jesus for who He is.*
- *I will have a new direction in life after encountering Jesus.*
- *I can encounter Christ when surrounding people don't know what is happening.*
- *I gain biblical humility by encountering Christ.*
- *I may not be able to explain an encounter but I can testify to its transforming power.*
- *I sometimes get an unpleasant task by encountering Christ.*
- *I may lose friends after encountering Christ*
- *I may get help from other believers to understand an encounter with Christ.*

Charles Spurgeon
Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle
London, England

I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I wanted to know how I might be saved, and if they could tell me that, I did not care how much they made my head ache. The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed; but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was—

"LOOK UNTO ME, AND BE YE SAVED,
ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH!"

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: "My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pains. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.' Ay!" said he, in broad Essex, "many on ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the Father. No, look to Him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto Me.' Some on ye say, "We must wait for the Spirit's workin'.' You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, 'Look unto Me.'"

Then the good man followed up his text in this way: "Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "and you always will be miserable—

miserable in life, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! You have nothin' to do but to look and live." I saw at once the way of salvation.

I know not what else he said—I did not take much notice of it—I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, "Trust Christ and you shall be saved." Yet it was, no doubt, all wisely ordered, and now I can say—

"E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die."

An obscure child, unknown, unheard of, I listened to the Word of God; and that precious text led me to the cross of Christ. I can testify that the joy of that day was utterly indescribable. I could have leaped, I could have danced; there was no expression, however fanatical, which would have been out of keeping with the joy of my spirit at that hour. Many days of Christian experience have passed since then, but there has never been one which has had the full exhilaration, the sparkling delight which that first day had. I thought I could have sprung from the seat on which I sat, and have called out with the wildest of those Methodist brethren who were present, "I am forgiven! I am forgiven! A monument of grace! A sinner saved by blood!" My spirit saw its chains broken to pieces. I felt that I was an emancipated soul, an heir of heaven, a forgiven one, accepted in Christ Jesus, plucked out of the miry clay and out of the horrible pit, with my feet set upon a rock, and my goings established. I thought I could dance all the way home.[12]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
JOHN: WRITING FOR CHRIST

Encounter . . . to worship Christ
Place . . . in a cave on the Isle of Patmos
Scripture: Revelation 1:1 — 5:14

His eyes popped open, but he didn't move his head. There was faint light at the mouth of the cave. His ancient body ached; he knew death was close, but he wanted Jesus to return but his young heart prayed,

"Even so come Lord Jesus . . ."

The damp black rock floor of the cave chilled his bones, but it was better than sleeping outside in the dew. His parishioners had insisted that he sleep in the cave.

"Today is Sunday," the old man pushed the cobwebs out of his mind. "Today I will preach to my flock."

The cave was cut out of Mt. Elias, a ragged rock that reaches 800 feet out of the Aegean Sea, the highest peak on the Isle of Patmos. The Roman Caesar Domitian chose this isolated bastion for political prisoners in the 14th year of his reign and sent John the Apostle to Patmos in an attempt to destroy Christianity.

This tiny island—10 miles long and 6 miles wide—can't imprison a person Christ has set free. So aged John didn't fear the island, nor was he alone. He was approaching 90 years of age and had walked with Christ ever since he left his fishing nets to follow the Master. So he was not alone on Patmos, Christ was with him; Christ lived in his heart.

"Don't come to get me," John told the young assistant who brought a cup of water and morsel of bread. The young man nodded then put the cup on the crude table. He covered the bread with a clean scrap of cloth. Even in the cave there were flies. Old John told his assistant, "God is calling me to pray . . . I don't want to be disturbed."

Each Sunday the converts would gather in the cove, waiting for John to emerge from the cave. Protected by the rocks from the ocean's wind, John would sit in a chair to preach to his church of roman prisoners—free from sin, but prisoners of Christ and Rome. But the church didn't just anxiously wait for John each Sunday morning, they knelt in prayer for John and the

message God would give him for them. Sometimes their wait was short and at other times it was long; but no one minded, the longer they waited, the more God had to say to them through His servant John.

"Don't disturb me," John repeated his instructions to the young man. "When the Lord tells me what to say," there was a twinkle in his eye, "I'll come out of the cave, but don't come for me until the Lord finishes talking to me."

They loved John; he was close to Jesus. John was the youngest of the 12 disciples and the one whom Jesus especially loved, he leaned on the Lord's breast. When Jesus was betrayed, all the other disciples ran away—but not John. He was present during the trials. He was present at the foot of the cross; Jesus told him to take care of Mary His mother. He was the first disciple to the tomb, now he was the only one left. The other disciples who ran away from the dangers of the cross . . . because they were afraid of dying . . . all died martyr's deaths. But the believers on Patmos believed the tradition that John would die a natural death. No Roman emperor would kill him.

"John is alive and awake," the young attendant emerged from the cave to yell to the young church.

"AMEN . . .!" they all cried, then returned to quiet prayer.

All week long, John had been fasting and praying. God had burdened his heart, he was seeking the presence of God . . . to worship God . . . to fellowship with God . . . to wait for a special message from God.

This morning John arose earlier than usual. John didn't have trouble sleeping on a hard floor. He didn't pick up the cup of water awaiting him on the crude wooden table, nor did he lift a clean white cloth covering the bread. He wasn't hungry for food, he hungered for God. He knew departure was near, by death or by the return of Jesus. John's thought each morning,

"This might be the crowning day." John staggered to the mouth of the cave to gaze at the eastern sky, but not too close so the church could see him. He remained in the shadows, looking east and . . . praying . . . hoping.

"Maybe today . . ." he closed his eyes and again prayed, "even so come Lord Jesus . . ."

A rooster crowed in the distance, then John listened for the waves breaking over the rocky coast. Only in the winter when the whole sea became foggy was there any mist on Patmos; today was going to be another sparkling clear day.

The fresh morning breeze invigorated John. God was going to do something special for him today. He dragged his frail body back into the cave, again by-passing the bread and water. He knelt at the usual spot. The Spirit of God filled the room—the atmospheric presence of God—John could feel God. The room felt just like Pentecost when the Spirit of God fell on them.

"When are You coming back?" John asked in prayer. "When are You coming to deliver Your church?"

John didn't mind imprisonment, he had no family left. But believers on Patmos were separated from their family and homes. Rome was persecuting believers for their faith. . . thrown to lions . . . burned at the stake . . . beatings . . . tortures, just because they believed in Jesus Christ. Again, tears came from his closed eyes,

"Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

With that prayer, John felt an inner urge, almost an inner compulsion. It was the same inner drive he felt when he wrote the gospel, the one they call the gospel of John. John quickly obeyed, as quickly as a man over 90 years can react. Going to the table, John pushed aside the bread and cup. Taking papyrus paper the other prisoners had made for him from the reeds found in the small inlet between LaScala and Merika, he dipped a feather quill into ink,

"I will write what the Spirit tells me."

"Write what's on your heart," the Spirit told John.

His first waking thought was . . . Jesus. His last thought before sleep was . . . Jesus. More than anything else, John wanted to be with Jesus. John remembered what the Master promised the night before He died,

"I will come again and receive you to Myself," John wept again at the memory because Jesus assured him, "where I am, there you will be with Me."

"That's it," John spoke, but no one was there to hear him. "I know what I will write." He would write a book about the return of Jesus Christ. He would encourage believers everywhere about the Second Coming of the Savior.

How would he begin? What would be the first word of this final book? John thought about believers going to heaven . . . about unbelievers thrown into Hell . . . about tribulations . . . about vision. "That's it." John knew how he would begin. So he penned the words,

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ . . ." he would write about Jesus, even though it would describe the end of the world.

John was pleased with his first sentence, it focused the reader on Jesus . . . not on judgment . . . not on tribulation . . . not on miraculous signs in the sky when stars would fall and battles would be fought all over the world.

John wrote, "From Jesus Who is . . . From Jesus Who was . . . and From Jesus Who is to come."

Next John wrote, "From Jesus our faithful witness . . . Jesus, the First Begotten from the dead . . . Jesus, the Prince of all kings on earth."

The Spirit of God came upon John as he wrote the book. He was borne along as he etched words on paper, writing from his heart, writing what the Spirit of God told him to put on paper.

"Unto Jesus who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood."

Every time John wrote the name Jesus he stopped, put down his quill to praise his Master. The aged apostle enjoyed praising Jesus more than anything else in life. There would be no sermon today; he'd be writing all day . . . all week . . . all month, for he was writing a long book.

And while John wrote, his small church of prisoners waited . . . watched . . . prayed. Though raggedly dressed and malnourished, their greatest desire was for John to get a message from God for them. Patiently, they prayed for John as he wrote,

"Jesus . . . the Alpha and Omega . . . Jesus the Almighty . . . Jesus the Beginning and the End . . . the Lord Jesus Who is, the Lord Jesus Who was, and the Lord Jesus Who is to come."

John heard someone speak in the cave, it was a voice he recognized . . . not the voice of a fellow-prisoner who waited on him . . . not the voice of a Roman guard. The voice played tricks with his memory, for it sounded like the One who said,

"Follow Me, I will make you fishers of men."

John turned to the voice. It was the Lord Jesus standing in the shadows of the damp cave, but Jesus was not as he remembered. John recalled a physical Jesus with human characteristics. The aged apostle could still remember the facial characteristics of Jesus . . . his height . . . his size . . . his smile. The voice spoke to John,

"I am Alpha and Omega," John recognized the voice of Jesus who told him, "write in a book what you see."

John saw Jesus glorified, shining and glorious. His tunic glistened like it was woven from pure gold, reflecting the sun. John shielded his eyes with his arms the clothes were so bright.

John remembered leaning on His breast at the Last Supper, but this time the aged apostle instantly fell to his face in worship; he recognized the presence of deity.

"Beautiful . . ." John thought. "He is wonderful . . ."

His hair was pure white, not gray like elderly people, but white like the snow.

His feet were a golden yellow flame.

Light glistened off the walls of the cave, His presence filled the room. The glory of Jesus transformed the cave into a sanctuary, a place where God lived. The flickering light of the small candle was overwhelmed by the magnificent light of Jesus Christ. It was no longer another Sunday to worship the Lord, this was truly the Lord's Day, for the Lord had come to John. A thought rushed through John's head,

"Is today the crowning day?" John let himself think. "Am I going to heaven?"

John knew that Jesus left the glories of heaven to be born a baby at Bethlehem. He knew God became flesh to dwell among people on earth. And he also saw Jesus go back to heaven. John knew that Jesus was glorified, but he didn't expect anything like this.

Just as a person can't stare into the sun without losing sight, John couldn't stare at Jesus. His brightness was painful to the eyes.

John could not write . . . he could not worship . . . he could not respond. The glory of Jesus' purity stunned John; he fell at the feet of Jesus as if he were dead. But John was not like other humans who might have been destroyed by the presence of God. John was the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Jesus touched John with His right hand saying, "Don't be afraid, I have a task for you." It was the job that God put upon his heart earlier that morning. Jesus had another book for John to write. Jesus motioned to the table and quill. Again the Master said to him,

"Write the things you see . . ."

"I see an open door to heaven, " John responded. Then with a hushed voice, "I see a door that is opened into heaven ."

John was not sure if he saw the real door into heaven, or "Am I dreaming?" he asked. But John didn't get an answer. He heard a commanding voice—a voice he couldn't ignore.

"Come up here."

John knew he was seeing a vision because he was carried toward the door. As he was lifted up, John heard,

"Come up into heaven, I will show you what is going to happen in the end time."

Entering heaven, John saw a throne. He saw the brilliant throne of God . . . it radiated the beauty of rare gemstones, a multi-color rainbow circled from the throne. The throne was so brilliant that John couldn't see the One sitting on the throne.

Lightning flashed from the throne, brighter than John had ever seen on earth because heaven has no walls. Lightening flashed out into eternity. Thunderclaps boomed from the throne, louder than John ever heard on earth. Thunder rumbled into the distance.

Twenty-four saints were seated before God. John didn't have to ask who they were because the Holy Spirit told his heart. Twelve were Old Testament saints, symbolic of Israelites who believed before the cross of Jesus Christ. Twelve were New Testament saints, representing tribes, tongues, and nationalities in the Church. Then John heard a mighty anthem,

"HOLY . . . HOLY . . . HOLY . . ."

John couldn't keep silent, his voice blended with those in heaven, "HOLY . . . HOLY . . . HOLY." Then the voices cried even louder,

"HOLY . . . HOLY . . . HOLY . . . Lord God Almighty, Who was, Who is, and Who is to come!"

The 24 saints arose as one person, then removing their crowns, they held their crowns in outstretched hands to God on the throne. John didn't have to ask what the crowns were, the Holy Spirit again told his heart. He knew the crowns were their rewards for faithful service to God. Some had crowns because they died a martyr's death . . . some crowns represented the sacrifice of pleasure . . . some crowns represented ridicule . . . other crowns were received for long, hard hours of ministry. The crowns represented all they did for God on earth. Then with outstretched hands,

They cast their crowns before the throne!!!

After one look at God upon the throne, nothing could compare to the Lord. All they did for the Lord, they did with His help, and they did for His glory. Then the 24 saints praised God with one loud voice,

"Worthy . . ." they cried in unison. "You are worthy to receive glory . . . honor . . . and praise; because You created the sun, the stars, the earth and everything in it. You created everything for Your pleasure."

John gazed about the scene of heaven; he drank in what he saw, not wanting to forget anything. He wanted to write an accurate description of the door . . . the throne . . . the majesty of lighting and a beautiful rainbow. Then John saw the focus of heaven, at the very center stage of heaven, John saw drama unfold.

The One who sat on the throne held a book in His hand, but it was no ordinary book. Those in heaven were staring at the book. John thought,

"What now" the aged apostle wondered what was in the Book. Then he heard a loud voice throughout the throne room. The voice echoed out into other corridors and out into the

vast space of heaven. It was a voice that commanded all to listen. The angel with the loud voice spoke,

"WHO IS WORTHY TO OPEN THE BOOK?" the angel asked, "WHO IS WORTHY TO LET US KNOW WHAT IS IN THE BOOK?"

John waited for someone to step forth to open the Book and read from its pages. As a small boy, John remembered old saintly men stepping forth in the synagogue to open the Scriptures and read to the people of Bethsaida. Only a few saints in his boyhood town were worthy to read the sacred books. But in heaven, no one stepped forth.

None of the 24 saints sitting before God stepped forth, they were not worthy. None of the angels came forward, they were not worthy to open the Book in God's hands or read from it. John knew he was not worthy.

He wept.

"Don't cry . . ." someone told John. "The Lion from the tribe of Judah has prevailed, the Lamb is worthy."

John saw the One he had previously overlooked. In all of his gazing of heaven, John had missed the central figure. Right in the middle of everything stood Jesus.

When John saw the Master, so did every other eye in heaven. They saw Jesus, not as He was glorified, but their eyes saw Jesus as a lamb before Pilate who opened not his mouth. They saw Jesus as He died for the sins of the world. Jesus was the Lamb of God that has taken away the sins of the world. John realized because of His death,

"Jesus is worthy . . ."

Jesus stepped to the throne, taking the Book out of the hand of Him that sat on the throne.

John knew instinctively what was in the Book, he knew the Book explained the purpose of God for creating everything. The Book explained God's plan for the life of His people on earth. The book explained why some believers and why the enemies of God hated Christians. John knew the Book told about the future . . . his future . . . the world's future.

Jesus took the Book from God and stepped to the center of heaven. John understood that everything was going to work together for good because Jesus had the book, He had the future in His hand.

As Jesus stood in the center of heaven with the Book in His hand, John looked around to see everyone worshipping Jesus. The apostle saw the multitudes he had not previously seen. John saw angels.

"How many?" he wondered.

In his limited estimate, John thought there must be 10,000 times 10,000, plus thousands of thousands. There were so many angels, they staggered his mind.

"I can't count them," he gasped.

Then beyond the angels, John saw every person who ever believed in Jesus, plus those who would believe in Jesus in the future. John saw them all. Even though he was imprisoned in a cave, and trapped on a tiny island 10 miles by 6 miles; John saw the future for which he prayed. He had a vision of all believers surrounding the throne of God.

From the drab limitations of a cave in the rocks, John saw the glories of heaven. He tried to grasp how many followers of Jesus were there, millions times million; black skinned, brown skinned, plus the fair skinned ones of Greece, Italy and Spain. They came from the East; Chinese, Japanese, and from the islands of the sea. They all spoke a different language, but together they sang,

"WORTHY . . ." the music was awesome. "WORTHY IS THE LAMB."

John joined in with their song, "WORTHY." They sang,

"He is worthy because He was slain for us." They worshipped the One on the throne and the Lamb, "He is worthy to receive our praise . . . our riches . . . our all."

Then suddenly heaven was silent, a silence that demanded John to stand motionless. He dared not move. The moment was filled with anticipation. John knew what he wanted to do, he knew what everyone in heaven wanted to do. Then with no one giving a signal to begin, and no one resisting, John along with everyone in heaven responded to their heart,

We fell on our faces to worship the Son of God.

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

History tells us that John was released from Patmos after the emperor Domitian left office. John returned to Ephesus under the Emperor Nerva in 96 A.D. Apparently, writing the book of The Revelation was the final great task that God had for John to accomplish. The other disciples died violent martyr's deaths, but not John. He faced a martyr's death by following Jesus to the foot of the cross, so God rewarded him; he died peacefully in bed in his sleep.

10 LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD

1. An encounter with Christ can come at any age in life. Remember Gideon was a young man starting ministry when he encountered God and the elderly John encountered Jesus at the end of his ministry. While some may think that an encounter with God is a call to vocational service, sometimes it comes at the end of life for one task. Perhaps God wants worship from the old, or perhaps God is glorified when He uses weak vessels because all the glory is given to Him. John was given the task to write the book of The Revelation.

> "I am old and you are young, so I didn't tell you my opinion, for those who are older are wise, but it is not mere age that makes a person wise. Rather, a man has to want to learn and the Spirit of God will make him intelligent" (Job 32:6,7 author's translation)

2. *An encounter with Christ can come to the immature believer or the most godly saint*. Obviously, John had spent an entire life of walking with Christ before Christ encountered him on the Isle of Patmos. At the same time, others encountered God in their spiritual infancy such as Isaiah and Gideon.

> "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (I John 2:13 NKJV).

3. *An encounter with Christ can come at any location*. Many people think that prisoners are separated totally from the stream of daily life, but John encountered Christ on the barren forsaken Isle of Patmos. Even in prison, God encounters His children. Abraham sat in his tent door, Gideon threshed grain under a tree, Jacob tried to hide from his enemies, Ezekiel couldn't

return to his home in Jerusalem and Isaiah encountered God at the very center of His dwelling place, i.e., in the Temple.

> "'Am I a God near at hand,' says the Lord, 'and not a God afar off?' 'Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?'" (Jer. 23:23,24 NKJV).

4. *An encounter with Christ is usually unexpected*. John indicates he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when he was surprised by a voice behind him. It was the voice of Jesus Christ.

> "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 2:40 NKJV).

5. *There is special grace to Christians who are being persecuted*. No Christian should be surprised when they suffer opposition because of their faith. Jesus promised, "If they persecute Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20 NKJV). Instead of complaining, the believer should "rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings" (I Peter 4:13 NKJV). Therefore, all believers should expect persecution.

> "If anyone suffers as a Christian . . . let him glorify God in this manner" (I Peter 4:16 NKJV).

6. *Even though we think we know Christ well, we learn new things about Him when we encounter Him*. Of all the disciples, John knew Jesus best; for John was the one whom Jesus loved. John was always faithful, he did not run away while Jesus hung on the cross as did the other disciples. He spent his life walking with Jesus Christ yet on the Isle of Patmos he learned new things about Jesus Christ, i.e., new titles, new descriptions, and he received a new task from Him.

> "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (I Cor. 5:17 NKJV).

7. *Our enemies think they can throttle our witness by putting us in limited circumstances with little prospects of serving Christ; but an encounter with Christ gives us an expanded*

ministry. The Roman emperor thought he could silence Christianity by imprisoning John on the Isle of Patmos. But on this small rocky island, one of the most significant books in the Bible was written, i.e., the Book of The Revelation. The Emperor Domitian was best known for trying to eliminate copies of the Scriptures; but Christ encountered John to give Him the task of writing the final book of the Bible.

> "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it" (Acts 4:13,14 NKJV).

8. *An encounter with Christ can be so consuming that we lose perspective of time, people, and other responsibilities.* Obviously, when we meet Jesus Christ we forget about everything else in life. Why? Because Jesus Christ is the First and the Last, He is the most important person in the universe. When you truly worship Him, you lose sight of everything else because you give total allegiance and love to Jesus Christ.

> "And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only" (Matthew 17:8 NKJV).

9. *An encounter produces greater insight of Christ*. When you come to the first chapter of Revelation, it is not just a story of John meeting Jesus Christ. It is not just the introduction to the book of The Revelation. In the first chapter we see one of the greatest listings of the many names of Jesus Christ that is found in the Bible, i.e., Jesus, Jesus Christ, (4 times) Who Is, and Who Was, and Who Is To Come, The Faithful Witness, The First Begotten of the Dead, The Prince of the Kings of the Earth, Him That Loved Us, and Washed Us, His Own Blood, He Cometh, Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, Lord, the Almighty, The First and the Last, The Voice, The Son of Man, His Hair Was White As Wool, His Eyes Were Aflame With Fire, His Feet Likened Unto Fine Brass, His Voice As A Sound of Many Waters, His Countenance Was As of the Sun, I Am He that Liveth, I Am Alive for Evermore, and the One Walking in the Middle of the Churches.

". . . that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil. 3:10 NKJV.

10. *An encounter with Christ produces greater worship of Him*. When John saw Jesus Christ on the Isle of Patmos, the Bible describes the encounter, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead" (Rev. 1:17 NKJV). Today, visitors to the Isle of Patmos are shown a cave where tradition says that John received his visions and where he saw a revelation of Jesus Christ. Tradition claims he wrote the book of Revelation in that cave. Whether he did, we don't know. Many religious pilgrims to the island want to worship in the same spot where John knelt, because they think that is when John worshipped Jesus Christ. We don't have to go to that cave or that island. We can worship Christ anywhere. We don't have to have the visions of John, we can read them in Scripture to worship Christ. We can encounter Christ and worship Him anywhere.

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Cor. 3:18 NKJV).

Take Aways

- ☐ *I can encounter God at an advanced age.*
- ☐ *I can encounter God no matter what my spiritual level.*
- ☐ *I can encounter God at any location.*
- ☐ *I usually don't expect an encounter with Christ.*
- ☐ *I learn new things through an encounter with Christ.*
- ☐ *I overcome obstacles by an encounter.*
- ☐ *I see Christ better in an encounter*

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- ☐ *I block out everything else during an encounter.*
- ☐ *I better understand Christ by encountering Him.*
- ☐ *I worship God because of an encounter.*

EPILOGUE

YOUR BLUEPRINT FOR AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

You are on a journey called life. As you travel from day to day, you come to many forks in the road and some intersections. These are *turning points* that will transform your journey into a higher level of living or will point you downward. You expect some of the *turning points* such as marriage, the birth of a child or a new job. Some of these *turning points* will be unexpected, such as an accident, a divorce, or your job is terminated and you are out on the street.

You can meet God at some of the *turning points*. These are encounters with God that can solve a problem; point you to a new job or enrich your life by meeting God in the secret place.

Do you need an encounter with God?

Suppose you say "yes?" Suppose you agree that "I really need God!!" Suppose you are at a crisis and you are desperate, "I must find God!!!"

How can you find god? How can you recognize God at one of the *turning points* of your life? How can you benefit form an encounter with God? Let's answer these questions with six handles, which will help you get a better understanding about encountering God.

SIX HANDLES

- You may think that only people in the past encountered God; that God met people in the Bible, but He doesn't do it today. But Jesus told John on the Isle of Patmos, "I am the One Who was, Who is and Who is to come." This means Jesus will live in the future, He lives today! Christ can meet you today; that's why this book has testimonies of living people who encountered God in their lifetime.

Handle One: You Can Encounter God Today.

- An encounter with God is available to all people—that means you. The young encountered God—Gideon and Jeremiah—as well as the old Moses on Sinai and John on the Isle of Patmos. Therefore, no matter how old you are, you can encounter God. People had an encounter with God for many purposes. Some unsaved were converted as was Saul. Some

godly people encountered Christ to worship Him. Others were encountered for a call to vocational service . . . for a new task . . . to encourage them . . . to break their pride . . . or to restore them from backsliding. So no matter what problems you have in life, you can encounter God to solve your problems.

Handle Two: You Are Not Excluded from an Encounter With God.

- You may doubt if the testimonies are real. Some may think these stories are made up. However, in a trial, the testimony of witnesses are introduced as fact, especially when the witnesses testify of a personal experience. Whether you agree with the content of the testimonies, the judge accepts a testimony as a fact to be compared with all other evidence presented in a trial. Sometimes testimonies are thrown out of court if there is a "collusion of witnesses," i.e., they agree together to tell the same story. There is no "collusion of witnesses" in the testimonies of this book. Those who encountered God were separated by time, geography, culture and language. They all met God, but the circumstances are different and the results are different. What is constant is their encounter with God. The testimonies in this book all witness to the same thing, i.e., they experienced God. Therefore, the testimony should be accepted as true.

Handle Three: Your Encounter With God Can Be Real.

- The answer to your problems is not in an experience, nor is your focus on an encounter the important thing. It is not a "fix" nor is it a "feeling." You must meet God; it is Him that you need. He has the ability to help you through your problem when you hurt, or when you yearn for some glue to hold your life together. God *is* your answer. But almost no one recognizes their need of God. Yet, St. Augustine, an early Church father correctly analyzed the problem best. "Thou hast formed us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."

Handle Four: You Must Seek God.

- God has promised you a better life. Look in the Bible at these promises. Jesus said, "You shall have life, and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). Paul wanted believers to be "rooted and grounded in love" (Eph. 3:17). He also promised we can be "more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:37). The Bible says God will "open to us the windows of heaven and pour us out a

blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:10). Peter said we could have "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (I Peter 1:8).

Handle Five: An Encounter With God is for Your Good.

- You will find a pattern in all these encounters. Out of deep discouragement (Elijah) came a new spirit of service. Out of broken dreams (Isaiah) came a new purpose in life. Out of rebellion (Paul) came one with an obedient will. Out of an ordinary dull life (Ezekiel) came a new level of power. Out of captivity (John) came freedom of worship. Many people in the Bible meet God, but not every meeting is an encounter that changes their life. An encounter with God in this book is defined by seven steps. Look for these seven principles or steps as you plan to meet God. The next section examines these seven principles.

Handle Six: You Can Follow These Principles When Encountering God.

PRINCIPLES OF AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

An encounter with God occurs when (1) He intentionally meets with you, (2) in a time of great personal need, (3) through unexpected circumstances, (4) telling you something about Himself, (5) and you learn something about yourself, (6) preparing you for a specific task, (7) even though you don't fully understand all the mysterious elements of the encounter

1. *Intentional*. Some encounters are planned by God, when the person least expected it. At other times individuals were so fervent in prayer that they wouldn't back off, God came to them. Jacob wrestled with God all night, refusing to release his wrestling "hold' on God. Moses would not let God send an angel to guide him into the Promise Land, Moses said in faith, "If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence" (Ex. 33:15).

> "For thus says the Lord God: 'Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.'" (Ezekiel 34:11 NKJV).

2. *Time of great need*. Elijah met God when backslidden and discouraged. Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel encountered God when they saw their nation collapsing around them. When Jacob was afraid to face a vengeful brother, he encountered God. These problems motivated these men to search for God. But some others were encountered by God, even though they were in rebellion to God; Paul hated Christ when he met Him on the Damascus road, Peter had denied Jesus three times. The wonderful thing about these encounters, when people needed God, He came to them.

> "Yet there is one ray of hope: his compassion never ends. It is only the Lord's

mercies that have kept us from complete destruction. Great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3: 21-23 LB).

3. *Surprised*. Some did not expect to encounter God. Mary came to the garden to carry away a dead corpse, but talked to a living Christ. Others prayed for God to bless them, and were surprised by the magnitude of the encounter, such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Some wanted God to do something for them, but the encounter was beyond what they expected.

> "The secret *things belong* unto the LORD our God: but those *things which are* revealed *belong* unto us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29 NKJV).

4. *New message from God*. When God encounters us, He has a purpose, usually it is a particular message for us. God wanted John to write a book, i.e., the Book of the Revelation. It was a simple task, "Write the things which thou hast seen, the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" (Rev. 1:19). Others needed a personal message, such as Mary Magdalene in the garden; Jesus comforted her disappointment and re-affirmed her faith.

> "Many, O LORD my God, *are* Your wonderful works *which You* have done; and Your thoughts *which are* to us: cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak *of them*, they are more than can be numbered (Psalm 40:5 NKJV).

5. *To intimately know God*. God wants us to intimately know Him. He encounters us so that we will meet with Him and worship Him. "The Father seeks people to worship him" (John 4:23 author's translation). When we worship and adore God, we learn more about Him so we can better serve Him.

> "Thus says the LORD: Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, let not neither let the mighty *man* glory in his might, nor not the rich *man* glory in his riches: But let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I *am* the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:23,24 NKJV).

6. *To be changed*. After we encounter God, we will be different. Meeting with God will change our lives. Jacob physically limped, an outward reminder that he saw God face to face, an inward reminder to walk humbly before God. Moses' face shone, Abraham received a son, Paul was called to ministry, and Peter was given a new commission for ministry.

> "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil" (Jer. 29:11 NKJV).

7. *Mysterious in circumstances*. There are many things about our encounter with God that we will not understand. Why would God wrestle with Jacob all night before touching his thigh? How could the angels touch the mouth of Isaiah with hot coals? What was the wheel within a wheel that Ezekiel saw?

We do not understand everything about the infinity of God, because we are limited humans. There is something mysterious in the things God does. We still have a sin nature that blinds us spiritually to some of the things happening around us. Paul reminds us, "We see through a glass darkly, but then face to face, now I know in part; but then shall I know" (I Cor. 13:12).

There is mystery in every encounter with God, perhaps God doesn't explain everything that's happening around us because He is testing our faith. He wants to know if we will trust Him and obey Him. He just wants us to bow before Him in worship.

> "For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, nor *are* your ways My ways, says the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9 NKJV).

CONCLUSION

I have a pastor-friend in the Episcopal Church who offers an unusual Invocation at the beginning of his worship service. You need this prayer as a Benediction after reading this book. He greets his congregation with uplifted hands,

> *"Today you can touch God . . . right here . . . right now . . . you can enter His presence and touch God."*

Then my Episcopalian friend smiles at the audience and offers them the greatest hope any pastor ever promised a congregation,

"But more importantly than you touching God . . . God can touch you."

FINIS

"Do not expect the same experience that you had two or twenty years ago. You will have a fresh experience, and God will deal with you in His own way."

Dwight L. Moody

ENDNOTES

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[1]Jack Hayford, *Worship His Majesty*, (Waco, Texas: Word Books), 1987, p. 9-13.

[2]Elmer Towns, *10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches,* (Ventura, California: Regal Books), 1990, pp. 23-26.

[3]Elmer Towns, *Understanding the Deeper Life*, (Old Tappan: New Jersey), 1988, pp. 214-215.

[4]Ibid., pp. 227-228.

[5]Ibid., p. 209.

[6]V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House), 1984, pp. 33-34.

[7]Elmer Towns, *The Christian Hall of Fame*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House), 1971, pp. 74-76.

[8]Edman, *They Found the Secret,* pp. 55-59.

[9]Ibid., pp. 143-146.

[10]Ibid., pp. 24-25, 28.

[11]Towns, *Understanding the Deeper Life*, pp. 224-225.

[12]Bill Freeman, *How They Found Christ (in their own words),* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Ministry Publications), 1998, pp. 160-164.