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Chapter XXIX
Our Personal God: God Interacts With Us

Orthodox Christianity has always held that God is personally involved in the lives of believers. But what are the indications that this is really so? How does everyday life reveal this great truth? How about those moments when we wonder if this is really the case? Do you sometimes puzzle over this subject, questioning what you have to do to "get hold" of God? Could there be more to practicing the Christian life that we've previously experienced, something that allows us to be more aware of God's presence?

In the previous chapter we attempted to put a related concern in perspective. We maintained that it is not a fair assessment to say that God answered more prayers in biblical times than He does today. The truth of the matter is that there is no proof that this issue has changed significantly since earlier times. God frequently answers prayers just the way we petition Him and sometimes does not. But times of silence have been reported throughout Scripture as well, literally from Genesis to Revelation. Sometimes these times are lengthy. On the other hand, countless numbers of believers attest that God has answered their prayers, and often very specific ones.

In this chapter, we propose a twofold approach. We want to offer both classic and contemporary indications that God is involved in our lives, making Himself known to us. We only caution the reader that we will not be able to remain long on any of the topics, but will point the interested student to extended treatments.

A. Classic Indications of God's Involvement

Throughout Scripture, God revealed Himself in several important ways. There never seems to be any question that He was involved in the lives of His people. We will briefly list a number of means by which He showed Himself to be personal.

1) We should not lose sight of the fact that Scripture Itself is an indication that God is interested in us. A few chapters ago, we addressed the subject of the reliability of the New Testament. If we additionally discover a basis for the inspiration of these texts,(1) then we have ascertained that God has sent us His personal instructions for our lives (II Tim. 3:16). According to II Peter 1:21, the nature of the inspiration process involves direct interaction between God and the writer. In the words of John Wenham:

So then, starting with belief in the incarnation and a very general belief in the historical truth of the Gospels, we have found ourselves apparently compelled to accept our Lord's view of Scripture. According to his teaching God so guided the authors that the words they wrote were his words. We have seen that this applies not only to the Old Testament, but also in principle to the New.(2)

2) Fulfilled prophecy is another indication that God is particularly involved in the process of human history. That He not only predicts the future but also brings it to pass shows that He is interested in both daily occurrences on earth and the long term direction of history.(3)

3) Another type of intervention involves the times God worked miracles in history, both corporate and personal. Cases of the former include the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14) or Elijah's confrontation with Baal's prophets (I Kings 18:16-40). It is sometimes said that the three great periods of miraculous intervention in Scripture are during the lives of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus and His apostles. Many of the personal healings occurred in these instances. In general, the purpose of a miracle is to teach or confirm a message, further indicating God's interest in our existence and needs.

4) Other times, God visited His people directly, again displaying His attention. He walked with Abraham (Gen. 18) and revealed Himself to Moses (Ex. 3-4:17). The entire nation of Israel perceived His presence in the pillar of cloud and fire (Ex. 13:21-22), and again at the giving of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19:16-20). King Nebuchadnezzar watched as Daniel's three friends were unharmed by his fire, being joined by a fourth Person (Dan. 3:19-30). Although such occasions were not common, they were nonetheless retold throughout the centuries, providing a basis for the belief that God periodically intervened in a very personal fashion on behalf of His people.

5) Without question, the major indication that God is personally involved with us is the Incarnation of Jesus. We have already pursued a number of the relevant details in two previous chapters. Briefly, how could God show His intentions any more clearly than by becoming a Man, identifying with the human condition and needs? Jesus walked on the earth for more than thirty years, experiencing human life, including its suffering and its temptations (Heb. 2:18; 4:15). His tortuous death by crucifixion graphically portrays the heights of God's interest in us, sharing our pain for the purpose of providing

the possibility of redemption. His resurrection foreshadows the future state of the believer. This is the all-time, prime example of love and concern (Jn. 15:13). In no other religion has God become man in such a unique, one time embodiment, identifying with our needs.

These are some of the chief indications from Scripture that God is personal, continually involved in the plight of human existence. Some erroneously think that clues such as those above are limited to Scriptural times alone. But we will now point out ways in which God is still active today, never ceasing to relate to us personally.

B. Contemporary Indications of God's Involvement

It seems that many Christians conclude that God is basically inactive today, at least compared to biblical times. Such an opinion is potentially dangerous, affecting our world view at several points. For example, this is one of the avenues to Christian doubt. Further, why wouldn't God continue to show His interest in such a manner? Doesn't Scripture say He still controls the future and will answer prayers? In this section, we will propose a number of ways in which God is still actively involved with us. Some correspond to the biblical categories we have just discussed. Once again, we will only be able to outline our responses.

1) God has predicted the future (see above), and any fulfillments that occur today are relevant to our topic. This is not the place to discuss the intricacies of various schools of prophecy, but we will simply draw a single important conclusion. Even the different approaches to eschatology customarily share the sense of significance concerning key events like the nationhood of Israel in 1948.(4) So our point is that, depending on the viewpoint taken, the contemporary fulfillment of prophecy evidences God's ongoing involvement with humankind.

2) Both in Scripture as well as today, countless thousands of believers attest to God's answers to prayer. God's replies to Moses (Ex. 8:8-13) and King Hezekiah (II Kings 20:1-11) provide examples of this phenomenon. Contemporary answers to prayer also reveal that God often hears us, and acts in accordance with our requests.

3) Further, and often in conjunction with the previous point, God healed needy individuals in biblical times.(5) Even today, there are numerous documented (and actually quite extraordinary) cases of healings.(6) Although there are various conceptions of how this ought to occur,(7) these methods are not contradictory. Such activity shows that God still concerns Himself with the needs of individuals.

4) In recent evangelical writings,(8) there has been a new interest in pursuing the "Christian disciplines," which are various kinds of practices in the Christian life performed in order to bring the believer into closer fellowship with the God of the universe. Dallas Willard explains the purpose of the disciplines:

We need an understanding that can guide us into constant interaction with the Kingdom of God as a real part of our daily lives, an ongoing spiritual presence that is at the same time a psychological reality . . . . we will establish, strengthen, and elaborate on this one insight: Full participation in the life of God's Kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ comes to us only through appropriate exercise in the disciplines for the life in the spirit.(9)

A number of the disciplines, such as meditation, prayer, fasting, solitude, and worship aim especially at our relationship with our Lord.(10) Meditation, in particular, seems to be most suited to our purposes. After speaking of the Lord's desire to commune with us in the deepest confines of our heart, Foster says: "Meditation opens the door . . . the aim is to bring this living reality into all of life . . . . you will see meditation as communication between the Lover and the one beloved."(11)

Perhaps Christians don't experience the presence of the Lord as much as they would like because they don't take the time to practice the spiritual exercises commanded in Scripture. Meditation, along with the other disciplines, teaches us to cultivate a living relationship with the God of the universe.(12)

5) If C. S. Lewis is right, God even woos unbelievers to Himself with joy, a technical term which Lewis defines as an intense inward longing or desire where the craving itself is a delight. This sensation "in the pit of the stomach" often surfaces as we hear a moving piece of music, read a poem or a piece of mythology, or see an emotionally moving photograph. Lewis expresses his view that this longing is not for anything on earth, although many mistakenly think so. Rather, we want something beyond--joy betrays our desire for heaven (cf. Ecc. 3:11).(13) As Lewis states: "There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else."(14)

6) For the believer, God also speaks to our hearts in another manner--by the witness of the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult subject to pursue briefly, but various New Testament texts(15) seem to declare at least this minimum: the Holy Spirit provides direct confirmation that the believer is a child of God. This testimony is not a feeling and it cannot be proven; neither is it an evidence for Christianity. Yet, proof is not the point here at all. We are interested in the value of the Holy Spirit's witness in terms of the Christian's sense that God is personal. We might say it this way: apologetics establishes the truth of Christianity; the witness of the Holy Spirit persuades believers that they are participating in that reality.(16)

7) We mentioned above that God has, on a number of occasions in Scripture, intervened directly in human affairs. Some argue that this remains the case today, as well, while others will question these claims. No doubt, this is a enigmatic question and it is difficult to know how to "classify" the information. There is certainly room here for differing opinions. But some interesting data exist, nonetheless.

For instance, Don Richardson has recorded numerous accounts where missionaries have encountered peoples who seemed to be specially prepared for the gospel by what they claimed was a revelation from God. In one case, a Gedeo man of Ethiopia prayed that God would reveal Himself to his people. He began having visions that "two white-skinned strangers" would come and build shelters like his people had never seen before within sight of a sycamore tree near one of their villages. He was informed that these two men would bring a message from God. Several "soothsayers" in the tribe added other details. The missionaries appeared eight years later, coming to the exact town the visionaries had predicted, stopping under the same sycamore tree! Thousands of the Gedeo people turned to God as a result.(17)

Another sort of example comes from the literally thousands of people who have reported near-death experiences. A number of Christians claim to have seen Jesus personally during one of these episodes.(18) While we cannot verify the heavenly scenery reported in such sightings, there is an incredibly large amount of data for NDEs in general, and for the reality of human consciousness extending beyond clinical death.(19) Is it still possible that some of these Christians really saw Jesus, remained in His presence for a short while, and even communicated with Him?

So whether believers speak about the classic or the contemporary indications that God is personal, there simply are a number of manifestations of His interaction with and care for us. This is the case even if one has differences over some of our suggested categories.(20) God meets our needs and sends direction for our lives.

C. Summary and Conclusion

Life provides many hints that the God Who exists is personal. In biblical times, He inspired numerous writers to compose Scripture, predicted the future, and performed miracles. Once in a while He even intervened directly. But His greatest self-revelation was the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ.

To hear some Christians talk, however, the days of God's activity have ended. One can almost get the idea that God is seldom very involved with us any longer. But we have argued that this view does not accord with either the biblical prescription for the Christian life or Christian experience. Most believers think that prophecy is still being fulfilled today. Answers to prayer and healing show God's interest in daily affairs. Practicing the other disciplines taught in Scripture, such as meditation, increase our realization of God's continuing presence. Unbelievers are wooed by God, while believers receive the witness of the Holy Spirit. Some even think that God continues to communicate in other personal ways today, as well.

To be sure, not everyone will agree that each of the categories in our contemporary list is a legitimate avenue in which to see God's involvement in human lives. But given the biblical context, these are certainly defensible, as are others. Our list was not exhaustive. Although it is not our point in this chapter to argue in any detail for these signs of God's activity, several of them are accompanied by evidence on their behalf.

God has left a number of hints not only that He exists, but that He both has been and continues to be interested in our lives and needs. Then why do believers constantly wonder about this subject? This ongoing inquiry indicates that there are still several practical lessons for us to learn.

1) As we saw in the last chapter, we often phrase the problem incorrectly. Even in biblical times, we learn that God did not always answer prayers the way believers sought. Some of the best-known saints struggled with this. Then we are surprisingly told on a number of occasions that there were times when God was silent, often for long periods.

In cases where we don't understand, the truths learned by Job (Chapter 22) and Abraham (this chapter) are also instructive: we know enough about God to trust Him in the things we don't understand. This is a message that involves both reason and faith. What we do know is based on a solid foundation--far more than Job or Abraham had. But when we don't understand, we still ought to trust the God we know. After all, we are not omniscient and we should recognize our own limitations.

But there are more answers for our questions. 2) Our classical and contemporary lists above reveal a wide variety of "clues" that God has left for us, indicating some of His personal activities. We have no good reason to conclude that God has left us alone in the universe. So it must be that we have the very human tendency to exhibit selective memory. Sometimes we remember what we think God hasn't done, while conveniently forgetting the many things we have witnessed that He has done. Or maybe it is just the case that we have never before realized how many ways God acts in our lives. Further, we need to open our eyes to His works in the lives of others, too.

But there is at least one other conclusion we should draw. 3) The lists we have presented do more than just answer a common question about God's interest in us. It might become obvious that believers need to cultivate their relationship

with the Lord. Examples are not difficult to find. We must correct the false impressions that we have about God's concern for us. Periodically listing answers to prayers, or even keeping charts of our requests, are excellent ways to remember how God has acted. We really do need to meditate deeply on the truths we are taught in Scripture. Practicing some of the other biblical disciplines provides a means of obeying God's call to such tasks, besides cultivating additional avenues to fellowship with God.

We will close with a question to help us focus. Where would our relationship with our husband, wife, or another loved one be if we gave them as much time and attention as we do our Lord? We must frankly acknowledge that we are responsible for our relationship with the Lord, too. What have we done to deepen our fellowship? Correcting our misconceptions, reviewing what God has done throughout history, and cultivating our present walk with the Lord might provide part of the answer we seek.

Endnotes--Chapter xxix

1. The most common argument proceeds from a trustworthy New Testament text to a study of the words of Jesus, to determine the proper notion of inspiration. See John Wenham, Christ and the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), Chapters 1, 5; Robert P. Lightner, The Saviour and the Scriptures (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1966); Geisler, Christian Apologetics, Chapters 16, 18; Guthrie, New Testament Theology, Chapter 10.
2. Wenham, p. 187.
3. For example, the city and nation prophecies throughout many of the prophetic books of the Old Testament reveal numerous details that were minutely fulfilled, sometimes against great odds. For examples, see the predictions concerning Tyre (Ezek. 26:1-16), Gaza and Ashkelon (Amos 1:6-8; Jer. 47:1-7; Zeph. 2:4-7; Ezek. 25:15-16), Babylon (Isa. 13:1-22, 14:4-23; Jer. 51:1-64), Samaria (Hos. 13:16; Mic. 1:5-9), Edom--Petra, Dedan, and Teman (Isa. 34:5-15; Jer. 49:17-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; Obad.), and the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome (Dan. 7). For details on the fulfillments of these prophecies, see Floyd E. Hamilton, The Basis of the Christian Faith: A Modern Defense of the Christian Religion (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964), pp. 308-324; Peter W. Stoner and Robert C. Newman, Scientific Speaks: Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), Chapter 2. There is also the entire topic of Messianic prophecy, but that point will overlap with our discussion of the Incarnation below.
4. For overviews on this, as well as related issues (including differing eschatological perspectives), see John F. Walvoord, Israel in Prophecy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962); Charles L. Feinberg, Editor, Focus on Prophecy (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1964); Guthrie, Chapter 8.
5. Of the dozens examples, see I Kings 17:8-24; II Kings 4:8-37; 5:1-19; Matt. 9:1-8; Mk. 6:30-44; Acts 3:1-10.
6. Rodney Clapp describes himself as one who has never been successful getting answers to prayers for extraordinary sorts of healing. Still, he records a couple of amazing, documented examples. See Clapp's article "Faith Healing: A Look at What's Happening," Christianity Today, Volume 27, No. 18, December 2, 1983 and Volume 27, No. 19, December 16, 1983. In the latter issue, also see his article "One Who Took Up Her Bed and Walked."
Compare the incredible account in Mark Buntain, with Ron Hembree and Doug Brendel, Miracle in the Mirror (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1981), especially Chapters 18-19. Pat Robertson has compiled a number of remarkable miracle accounts, some of which are documented with film footage and medical records. See Robertson (with William Proctor), Beyond Reason: How Miracles Can Change Your Life (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984).
A former professor of philosophy has recently written an unpublished manuscript on apologetics. After establishing a strict definition of "type A" miracles where the events are "so immediate and extraordinary" that they will only admit of a supernatural explanation, he documents quite a number of contemporary cases of such clearly documented events.
7. Some prefer quiet church meetings or private times where the needy are remembered in specific prayers. Others send elders to anoint the sick with oil and pray over them. Still others, however, call the sick to the front of the church. Our point here is that God is not limited by our methods and still works in various situations.
8. Some of the best known volumes on the subject are as follows: Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988); Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, Revised Edition (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988); Richard J. Foster, Freedom of Simplicity (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981).
9. The italics are Willard's, Ibid., pp. xi, 26. Foster agrees, speaking about the disciplines: "We have only one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God . . . ." (Celebration of Discipline, p. 4).
10. For details on these practices, see Foster, Celebration of Discipline, Chapters 2-4, 6, 11; Willard, Chapter 9. For most believers, this is probably new territory and the reader could well disagree with some of the assertions made in these writings. So one needs to interact prayerfully and biblically with the various ideas.
11. Foster, Ibid., pp. 20, 23.
12. We should carefully note, however, that biblical meditation differs markedly from varieties found in Eastern religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The Bible teaches that we should fill our minds with God's truth, as opposed to attempting to empty it. Further, biblical methods do not teach believers to deny oneself in the process, as is common in the Eastern traditions. For more on meditation, see: Calvin Miller, Transcendental Hesitation: A Biblical Appraisal of TM and Eastern Mysticism (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977); Thomas McCormick and Sharon Fish, Meditation: A Practical Guide to a Spiritual Discipline (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983).
13. For two of the places where C. S. Lewis comments on the subject of joy, see his volumes Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955), pp. 16-18, 165-170, 238); The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism (New York: Bantam Books, 1943), Preface to the Third Edition, pp. ix-xiii. Cf. Peter Kreeft's excellent development of this theme in Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980).
14. C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain, p. 145.

15. The chief passage is Rom. 8:16; compare Gal. 4:6-7; I Jn. 3:24; 4:13.
16. For details concerning both this point and the larger issue, see Bernard Ramm, The Witness of the Spirit (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959); Habermas, Dealing With Doubt, Chapter 8 ("The Testimony of the Holy Spirit").
17. Don Richardson, Eternity in their Hearts, Revised Edition (Ventura: Regal Books, 1984). This account is found on pp. 54-56.
18. One such personal account is by psychiatrist George G. Ritchie (with Elizabeth Sherrill), Return from Tomorrow (Waco: Word Books, 1978). Other examples include Petti Wagner, Murdered Heiress . . . Living Witness (Shreveport: Huntington House, Inc., 1984); Weldon Metcalf, "I Saw Christ's Face," The United Brethren, Volume 90, Number 9, September, 1975, pp. 15, 20; Coral Ridge Ministries, "From Death's Door to Heaven's Gate," Impact, November, 1992, p. 1.
19. Four categories of evidence for NDEs are presented in Habermas and Moreland, Immortality, Chapters 5-6. For world view considerations inevitably raised by such accounts, including our reasons for claiming that we cannot evidentially determine the nature of the heavenly portion of such encounters, see pages 90-94. But this hesitancy on the other-worldly segments of the reports should not be confused with our conclusion that other aspects of the NDE data do present strong evidence for what we term minimalistic life after death.
20. There are even some variations here between the two authors of this volume. But our point is that this is fine. We think that part of the job of Christian philosophers and theologians is simply to present possible scenarios, multiplying the potential options that believers have, even if they are not always accepted by everyone.