

Bill Johnson: Going Face to Face With God

The air is pregnant with possibility—can you feel it? Heaven itself is longing to invade the natural realm. Darkness may cover the earth, but God's glory upon His people is becoming more and more realized, bringing hope to the most hopeless situations.

God is opening up His treasure house of truth and releasing it all over mankind in remarkable ways. The apostle Paul's prayer is being answered before our eyes: "I do not cease giving thanks for you, mentioning you in my prayers, so that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him" (Eph. 1:16-17).

It is a day of divine encounters, at least for those who will pursue what this revelation is making available. The spirit of wisdom and revelation is not given to make us smarter but to make us more aware of unseen realities. It works not merely to increase our understanding of kingdom principles but also to reveal the King Himself. Presence always wins out over principles.

A Heart to Seek God

The heart to seek God is birthed in us by God Himself. Like all desires, it is not something that can be legislated or forced, but rather it grows within us as we become exposed to God's nature. He creates an appetite in us for Himself by lavishing us with the reality of His goodness—His irresistible glory. The realities of His goodness burn deeply into the hearts of all who simply take the time to behold Him.

Paul describes this place of beholding as the absolute center of the new covenant we have been brought into, the place where

“we all, seeing the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, as in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). The impulse that drives the life of the believer isn’t the need to perform for God but to commune with Him. Only when we perceive the face of the One in whose image we were made do we come to know who we are and the One for whom we were made. And because of who He is, to behold Him and remain unchanged is impossible.

The truth is that the degree to which we perceive the face of God corresponds directly to the degree of our yieldedness to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ. The question for every believer is whether we will be satisfied with only a partial transformation or whether we will be so captivated by who He is that we will allow Him to kill everything in us that would inhibit us from becoming a mature manifestation of Christ.

This quest for His face is the ultimate quest. But to embrace the quest for the face of God, one must be ready to die. Thus, this quest is not a journey for the faint of heart.

Still, I hesitate to warn of the cost of fully seeking His face—not because a price doesn’t exist; it costs everything. I hesitate because the reality is that what a person gets in return makes the price we pay embarrassingly small by comparison.

The bottom line is that we give all of ourselves to obtain all of Him. There’s never been a better deal. When we go through with the exchange, we find that what used to matter doesn’t anymore. Not only does everything in our lives that is inconsistent with the kingdom of God start to die the moment we encounter Him, but the superior, supernatural reality of His kingdom starts to come alive in us.

This journey is so sacred, so all-consuming, that very few

respond to its call. Many things work to stifle the desire in us to seek the face of the One in whose image we were created. Whether we are overwhelmed by secular reasoning or religious disappointment, such forces cause us to abandon the ultimate quest and give in to the other impulse that has infected man since the Fall—the impulse to hide from God.

Still, the ultimate quest is quite doable and within reach. Every other journey and every other ambition pale in comparison. One might say this one challenge adds meaning and definition to all of life's other pursuits. Those who respond to the invitation find little else to live for. Those who say no spend their lives looking for an adequate replacement. And there is none to be found anywhere.

My Quest for the Face of God

The quest for deep encounters with God started the moment I said yes to His call on my life. My moment happened one Sunday in 1971 when my dad, who was also my pastor, taught a message from Ezekiel 44 about the greatest honor given to mankind—our ministry to the Lord Himself in thanksgiving, praise and worship. He taught us that there was a difference between our ministry to God and our ministry to people. There was no doubt that our ministry to God was the most important responsibility of all, and it was available to every believer.

As I heard him teach the Word, I was stirred beyond anything I had ever felt before. From the pew where I sat, I bowed my head and said, "Heavenly Father, I give You the rest of my life to teach me this one thing." To say I was moved was a great understatement. I had already given my life to Christ in a way where I held nothing back. But I was now saying that in my surrender to Christ I had one specific agenda that outweighed every other—my ministry to the Lord Himself.

The Lord responded quickly to my lifestyle of abandonment to His presence by confirming, through unfolding revelation, that

this was indeed the purpose for which He had made and redeemed me. Scripture is saturated with the theme that we were made for a relationship that allows us to know by experience the supernatural God who created us, and it soon became evident to me that the encounters that God had with people in the Bible were not reserved only for those of that era. Encounters of that magnitude actually started to look possible, even probable again. While I never thought I qualified for anything extraordinary, I knew that He loved me, and I in turn was increasingly hungry for Him.

The Journey Accelerates

I have traveled to many cities where God was visiting in unusual and notable ways in my personal quest for increased power and anointing in my life. Some of my brothers and sisters belittle such pursuits, saying, "Signs and wonders are supposed to follow you, not you follow them." My perspective is a bit different: If they're not following you, follow them until they follow you. God has used my experiences in such places to set me up for life-changing encounters at home.

After one such trip in 1995, I began to cry out to God day and night for about eight months. My prayer was, "God, I want more of You at any cost! I will pay any price!" Then, one night in October, God came in answer to my prayer, but not in a way I had expected.

I went from being in a dead sleep to being wide awake in a moment. Unexplainable power began to pulsate through my body. An extremely powerful being seemed to have entered the room, and I could not function in His presence. My arms and legs shot out in silent explosions as this power was released through my hands and feet. The more I tried to stop it, the worse it got. I heard no voice, nor did I have any visions. This was the most overwhelming experience of my life. It was raw power. It was God. He had come in response to the prayer I had been praying.

As I lay there, I wondered if these experiences would continue and, if so, if they would strike at undesirable moments. I had a mental picture of myself standing before my congregation, teaching from God's Word as I loved to do, but with my arms and legs flailing about as though I had serious physical and emotional problems. Then I saw myself walking down the main street of our town in front of my favorite restaurant in the same condition. I didn't know anyone who would believe that this was from God.

But then I recalled Jacob and his encounter with the angel of the Lord, where he wrestled with Him throughout the night. He limped for the rest of his life after his meeting with God. And then there was Mary, the mother of Jesus. She had an experience with God that not even her fiancé believed was true. It took a visit from an angel to help him change his mind. As a result, she bore the Christ child—although she bore a stigma for the remainder of her days as the mother of an illegitimate child.

Tears began to soak my pillowcase as He reminded me of my prayers over the previous months, contrasting them with the scenes that had just passed through my mind. I was gripped by the realization that God wanted to make an exchange—an increased manifestation of His presence in exchange for my dignity and reputation. After all, I had prayed, “at any cost.”

Trading anything for more of God really is the greatest deal ever offered to mankind. What could I possibly have that would equal His value?

Divine Encounters

In 1996, I became the pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California. I was invited to take that position because the church had been crying out for revival. The church I had been pastoring in Weaverville, California, was experiencing a wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Bethel was the

“mother church” of our church and because of that connection I was glad to accept their invitation to be their senior pastor.

When I first spoke to Bethel’s congregation, I told them that I was born for revival. I said that if they didn’t want the move of the Spirit of God—along with the messes that come with it—they didn’t want me, because revival is not negotiable! They responded positively with close to unanimous support, which was unusual for such a large church.

The outpouring began within a month of our arrival. Lives were changed, bodies were healed, and divine encounters increased in amazing proportions. On top of that, approximately 1,000 people left the church. This wasn’t the kind of revival they wanted.

Because of the grace given to us, not one day was spent in discouragement or questioning God. His will truly strengthened and nourished us. Plus, His presence was the reward. The public criticisms and slander, the humiliation of decreased numbers, the daily calls of complaint to our denomination for close to a year—none of it had teeth to its bite. The need for respectability had all but disappeared on the night of my first visitation.

We didn’t need people’s approval when God gave us His. The fruit of this move of God was undeniable, including an increase of His presence along with the bounty of transformed lives. That was all we needed to make us smile in the face of such apparent loss. To this day we consider that time of our greatest loss as one of the most precious and delightful seasons of our lives.

The Signs of His Favor

When God invades a person’s life, things change. Not only that, but the impact of that life on the world also changes. The measure of God’s glory that rests upon a life following these unusual divine encounters affects every person we touch.

The supernatural becomes natural as God takes center stage in the places where we have influence. When His glory is present, the things that we used to work hard for, such as miracles of healing and transformation in people's personal lives and families, come with little or no effort.

Scripture describes those individuals whose lives are marked by the power and blessing of the living God as those upon whom God's face shines. God's countenance is toward His people, and the result is that their lives are marked by His favor. As Proverbs states: "In the light of the king's countenance is life, and his favor is as a cloud of the latter rain" (16:15).

Now is the season when all who confess Christ must give attention to the role of the favor of God in our lives.

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Bill Johnson preaches on why God chooses to sovereignly heal and visit His people with supernatural miracles at .