

Precious Moments

You will never grow spiritually without spending time alone with God. Here's how to make that time special.

My wife and two daughters were still asleep. It was just before dawn—around 4:30—and I was spending time alone with God. Suddenly, beautiful, heavenly worship filled my room. Not realizing what was happening, I rebuked the annoyance. After all, I was trying to focus on my fellowship with my heavenly Father.

In an instant my whole being was captivated by the voices of many angels worshiping, adoring and exalting God. I trembled to the core as I experienced an outpouring of His presence and peace.

Joy filled my spirit, soul and every cell in my body. There is no earthly word that can express the beauty and glory of His presence, which I experienced for about 45 minutes.

Having been born and raised in Indonesia, I am familiar with how witchdoctors communicate with demons and evil spirits. But when I received Jesus some 25 years ago I realized that the God I worship wants to relate to me personally. He wants to have an intimate relationship with His people.

I have had several angelic visitations, and they have made me want more—not more “goose bump” experiences, but more of Him.

On the days following the visitation described above, I prayed and asked the Lord to reveal more of Himself to me. Then I waited. I expected Him to answer by sending another angelic visitation or shining a bright, heavenly light into my room. I

was looking for supernatural manifestations of His presence.

But God didn't respond as I thought He would. In fact, nothing happened, until I heard a still, small voice speaking directly to my spirit, "Paul, I will reveal Myself through My Word."

Throughout history, God has always revealed Himself to His people. His written Word, the Bible, uses phrases such as "God appeared to him," "God sent His angels to him," "God was with him," "God led him," and "God spoke to him" to indicate the many ways in which God does this.

Even before the fall of man, God communicated with mankind. And after the fall, He took the initiative to rebuild the broken relationship between Him and His people.

But His people have not always responded. In Exodus 20:19-21 we see that the Israelites tried to avoid relating to Him. They wanted Moses to be their go-between.

The people of Israel said to Moses, "'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.' And Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin'" (NKJV).

In spite of Moses' encouragement, "the people stood afar off" (v. 21). But not Moses. "Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was" (v. 21). He responded differently to God's presence than the rest of the Israelites.

Worship From Afar

We tend to be like the people of Israel—not out of fear, but out of busyness. We try to justify our overactivity by doing multiple things at once to save time, including spending time alone with God. We drive to work, breakfast in hand, with a cell phone headset plugged in one ear and a sermon going in the other—and we call that our “morning devotion.”

The Bible calls that worship from afar. No wonder we become double-minded! We have the head knowledge but no intimate relationship with the One we worship. What we want is a high-speed spiritual connection that gives us a return even though we haven’t made an investment.

The sad thing is we believe God understands and approves of our busyness and time constraints as long as we tithe. We even boast of the ministries we are involved in at church and the way we serve people. But we continue to stand afar off from the One for whom we do all these works.

Worship from afar is one-way communication; it makes it possible for us to search the Scriptures without allowing the Scriptures to search our hearts. No repentance is needed and no obedience required as long as we stick to our daily religious routines.

When we worship from afar, we go by what we feel and not by what God’s Word says. We believe only selected verses in the Bible—the ones that tickle our ears.

But Moses was different. He was busy serving, leading, judging, strategizing, giving counsel and listening to the Israelites’ many complaints; but he always went to the mountain

to spend time alone with God. No wonder he experienced mighty miracles.

Today many Christians want to have a first-class experience with second-hand spiritual nourishment. They eat the digested Word from their pastor and from Christian books or magazines. They watch Christian television or listen to Christian radio. These are all good resources for growth, but they are not the same as personal time alone with God.

Can you imagine if we had lived in Jesus' time? We would have found it hard to believe that Peter, Jesus' disciple, had denied Him three times. After all, Peter had seen many miracles, witnessed Lazarus raised from the dead, walked on water, seen Jesus transfigured, and much more. How could he turn away?

It was because Peter, long before Jesus was ever taken prisoner, followed Jesus only at a distance. He doubted His Word before he ever denied the Word made flesh.

Let's look at Peter's record. He did not believe Jesus when He quoted the Scripture, "'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Matt. 26:31). And when Jesus prophesied that he would deny Him three times, Peter boldly proclaimed his loyalty (see vv. 34-35).

While Jesus spent time alone with the Father in Gethsemane, Peter slept (see v. 40). When Jesus faced the Sanhedrin, Peter sat outside in the courtyard (see vv. 57-58)—where he ultimately denied Jesus.

What a tragic story! But thank God it didn't end there. Peter

regressed, for sure, but then he progressed through repentance and obedience.

Have you ever thought that what happened to Peter, the disciple of Jesus, could happen to you? You may still be in church doing your daily routine of ministry, but you lose site of the purpose for which you are serving.

The Bible tells us the story of a man and his nephew. For quite some time the nephew was blessed abundantly, but he didn't realize it was because of his uncle's relationship with the Lord that he was blessed. The blessings caused him to compromise and stay away from God. Little by little he began to worship from afar, until one day his life ended tragically.

On the contrary, his uncle, though he was not perfect, continued to seek the Lord. That's how his character was molded. He was purified and tested, and even in his old age he kept on spending time alone with God. These two men were Abram and Lot.

Lot looked around and made a decision about the land he wanted based on what he could see (see -11); then he began to compromise by pitching his tent as far as Sodom (see v. 12). He wanted to know how far he could stretch God's grace. Before long he actually lived in Sodom (see v. 14:12).

When God decided to destroy this wicked city, He sent angels to save Lot and his family. So Lot did experience angelic visitation. But his spiritual life degenerated to such a point that even his sons-in-law would not heed his words. His wife became a pillar of salt for disobeying God, and his daughters caused the first incest recorded in the Bible.

But Abram was different. Abram spent time alone with God continuously. As he did, he was changed.

God changed his name from Abram, which means father, to Abraham, the father of multitudes. Through the promise God gave them for a son, as well as through their material circumstances, Abraham and Sarah were blessed.

Do you want to be like Abraham—close to God, and blessed in your life? Then begin now to set aside time to be with God. Here's what that involves:

A childlike approach. Spending time alone with God is simple. God is good, and He wants to have relationship with us. In fact, He has taken the initiative. We should not be discouraged from pursuing what He so longs to give us.

Jesus Himself told us, "'Seek, and you shall find'" (Matt. 7:7). James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

A time commitment. We need to set aside time to be alone with God on a regular basis. Whether early or late, it is best to make it around the same time each day so that we will develop a habit and begin to look forward to it with anticipation.

A choice. This has nothing to do with personality or whether you are a morning person or a night person. But it has everything to do with choosing your priority. Mary chose the better part by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to Him (see Luke 10:39-42). However, it is not a question of spending time with the Lord or doing the work of ministry. We can—and must—do both.

Focus. Even when we are set apart in a quiet place to spend time with God, we can have difficulty maintaining our focus. Because of the busyness we are accustomed to, with so many things going on at once, our minds are unused to concentrating on God alone and on His Word. We will have to practice regaining our focus regularly until it becomes second nature to us.

The Word of God. Studying God's Word is essential to our growth as Christians. The Bible says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" ().

The way we renew our minds is through the Word. It is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (see), helping us to discern God's plans for us, understand His nature and overcome the enemy. When Jesus was tempted He didn't fight the devil with emotions or positive thinking, but by quoting to him the Word of God.

Obedience. Why did God tell Moses not to draw near to Him? (See Ex. 3:5.) It was because the place of His presence is holy ground. If you seek the Lord and yet are unwilling to stop sinning, you will not find Him because you are seeking Him in a place where He is not. But if you sincerely forsake your sins and draw near to Him, you will surely find Him.

God is not distant, and He does not want us to worship Him from afar. He wants us to draw near to Him in intimacy so that He can have fellowship with us and reveal Himself to us. But it's up to us to respond. When we do, we will find in His presence "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11).

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