

## ***CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD, ACTS 4:23-31***

The Church You Always Wanted #7

◆**Intro:** Have you ever longed to get close to someone or something. Bird watchers spend much effort learning where to look for what kind of birds. Hunters long to get close to their targets be it deer, or ducks. They spend hours thinking about the wind direction, the terrain, the placement of food and water. They dress themselves to look like bushes, or reeds, or whatever it takes to get close without startling their prey. Young lovers are the same, aren't they? They find out their hopeful lover's path from class to class, and happen to show up at the right spot at the right time. Each of these longs for a close encounter with the object of their hearts. Isn't that also what God-followers do? We long to meet up with another world; God.

### ◆**1. This is the object of worship; to encounter God.**

◆That is to say, a true seeker of God longs to be with him, to meet him, to know he is as real as the person next to you. This planet-creator, and this DNA engineer is actually a person with whom you and I can interact. We can ask him things and he can answer us! If there is no God, then at most there is no meaning to life. All that which we study, investigate, explore, and admire is but an accident with no significance. But if there is more than what we see and touch...

◆Until you understand this and begin to prepare, you will probably find church a pretty boring activity, like a person not at all interested in a duck, and therefore bored out of their gourd sitting in a duck blind. For church as we call it, is really the act of

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worship. It is truer to say we go to worship, than that we go to church, although many only do the later. Let me read you something.

◆*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" Psalms 42:1, 2, NIV.*

◆I remember reading Ps.42 when a much younger person, and even learning a song about it but thinking to myself "What is that like exactly? Do I pant, long, to meet with God." Frankly at that point in life I didn't even think about him all that much. What was it that the Sons of Korah (the authors of Ps.42) knew about God that I had yet to find out? How about you? Is what you really long for in a church (that's the theme of our 50 Day Adventure) –is it to actually meet with God there?

◆If many of us were writing a poem like Psalm 42 today it might sound more like this:

◆*"As a shopper hunts for something she can't live without, so my soul waits for something at church to please me. I thirst to feel better, to live better. When can I go and find what I like?"*

◆But as Garrison Keillor once said, "We don't go to church to hear lectures on ethical behavior. We go to look at the mysteries, and all the substitutes for communion with God are not worth anyone's time... If you can't go to church and, for a least a moment, be given transcendence; if you can't go to church and pass briefly from this life into the next; then I can't see why

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anyone should go. Just a brief moment of transcendence causes you to come out of church as a changed person.”

◆Of all my experiences I’ve ever had, those that have moved my heart most (even more than getting married; even more than having my sons born into the world) have been the times when I knew for sure that God was near and real. I’ll share just one: years ago I was attending a spiritual formation retreat as I try to do most every year. (Someday I hope to have my spirit well-formed.) I don’t recall just what all we were taught mostly because at the time I was struggling with a personal issue with my own father. Late at night sleep would not come, and I wept over some things I longed to be different. I remember pounding on the mattress with my fist, yelling in frustration on the inside toward God. In the morning I was at my table when the retreat leader walked by, stopped, looked at my face and said, “You look like you need the hug of a father.” And he grabbed me in his arms. In that moment I knew God was present. How could this man know this? It had nothing to do with the conference. I had said nothing to anyone about it. I asked him how he knew. He smiled and said, “God just uses me.” I relish the moments when God “shows up” as they say, not that he isn’t all present already. But in a sinful world, we do not have face to face interaction nearly as it will be in heaven.

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◆ I would suggest to you that direct encounter with God is what made the disciples the courageous people that they were! And the same will be true of us. Lets dig into the text.

◆ In verse 29 they pray for boldness (*παρρησια*/all-commanding) to speak. They just got out of jail and were told not to speak anymore about Jesus! (v18)!

◆ In vs 31 it says they spoke the word of God boldly (*παρρησια*).

◆ In v13 we learn that they were not graduates, but unschooled, ordinary dudes, yet "bold" (courage, *παρρησια*). And why? "*They had been with Jesus.*" What does that mean? Yeah they had been with Jesus. AND they had been with him after the funeral!!

◆ Scan through Acts 4 with me:

◆ v2: *the apostles were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead!* If that's not an encounter with God I don't know what is. These folks had seen the once dead, risen-back-to-life-and-walking-around Jesus!

◆ v10 *Jesus...(you know the one from Nazareth?) whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead!*

◆ v33 *they continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord, Jesus.*

◆ This is why the disciples turned the world upside down. This is why over two millennia later you and I come to a room like this. They encountered God and so have we. Guess what friends.

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There...is...a...God! He is real. We know he is real. He speaks to us. He does things we can't explain at moments we could never engineer. As we come to the end of our Spiritual Adventure I'd like to invite you to long for this more and more.

◆**2. The more you prepare the more you encounter.** This by the way, is why we at least annually have a Church-wide series with daily devotional guides, etc. It's all to give us a chance to renew our work at encountering God. The Bible tells us God is everywhere, acting, speaking, doing. But tell me, how often do you encounter him in a week? That is, unless you seek him on purpose, like the deer, the ducks, the lover...? Couple of things about encountering God:

◆A. Practicing God's presence takes time and prayer. And prayer is so much more than requesting. We can take an example from the disciples' prayer and their accompanying encounter with God when he shook the room. Their very first action after getting out of jail, and getting lectured by the authorities was to go home and pray! You have to wonder if that's what you and I would have done, don't you? Would we not perhaps go and assess our financial status, maybe retain a lawyer? Think about moving outta state? But prayer is direct turning to God!

◆1) Prayer is meditating on the truth of who God is. We ponder him just like we look at someone we're talking to. It focuses attention. Comedian Ken Davis tells of his little daughter wanting to talk on her bed at night. She began to

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confide in her dad when she stopped and asked in the dark, "Are you listening. Look at me!" In prayer we are looking at God. The disciples do it, don't they.

◆ When in verse 24 they begin to pray, it is with a recognition of who God is to them. *"Sovereign God... you made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything..."*

◆ v25 says essentially, "we know who you are. You are way above nations of men." They quote Psalm 2. If you read it you'll see that part they don't quote:

◆ *"The kings of the earth take their stand, And the rulers take counsel together Against the LORD and against His Anointed:... He who sits in the heavens laughs, The Lord scoffs at them." Psalms 2:2-4, NASB.*

◆ and later

◆ *"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron sceptre; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth." Psalms 2:8-10, NIV.*

◆ So they ask! They quote God's words to God! George Mueller, a giant of prayer and leader of an orphanage would always search the Word for fitting truths from

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God on which to base what he requested from God. You can do the same. So when you seek to encounter God, pray. And when you pray, meditate on who Scripture say he is...

◆2) Prayer is interacting with God. I suggest asking God specific questions because it pushes us into interaction rather than trying to carry on a monologue that doesn't require another persons response. In one of the Harry Potter stories Harry comes upon an enchanted diary that writes back when he writes in it. Words appear on the blank page in response to a question or statement from the writer. Now, aside from the fantasy of magic and wizardry, that scene struck me as an allegory to what pray actually could be; interaction with the unseen God. Of course God answers in many ways; leading us to a place in his Word; speaking to us through other people, and so on. There is no equation by which we can force a sovereign God to tell us what we want. *But everywhere in the holy Scriptures, worship and prayer are the way to encounter God.* Jesus did not say that the church or temple was a place of sacrifice, or a place of singing, or a place of teaching, good as these elements are. He did reminded us that the Father said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." Church/worship is going to meet and talk with God.

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◆3) Prayer is aligning yourself with God. You will notice that the disciples prayer here was not about their own protection but about power to do what God intended. A lot of times our prayers are just selfishness asking for what we want or wish for, but completely ignoring the person we are talking to. And if we decide a course of action, isn't it often only that which we could accomplish without God's help? Where in our lives are we attempting that which could not happen without the work of the Holy Spirit? This is a helpful frame of reference because if we don't need the Holy Spirit, what is the likelihood that he will have to show up?

◆Think it over. Of all that goes on around here in the church, how much of it is horizontal (between us, what we want, what we like, our ideas) and how much is vertical (between God and us, seeking to know what he wants, what he likes, what he commands, thanking, praising, confessing, interceding, etc)? It would seem that in the church the vertical ought be prominent.

That's why steeples point up!

◆**Conclusion:** A newly self-proclaimed do-it-yourselfer arrived at the hardware store looking for a saw. The salesman pulled the latest chainsaw off the shelf and said, "This is one of the finest saws we have. Guaranteed to enable you to cut ten cords of wood in a day."

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◆“Ill take it!” replied our fresh new property owner. Later he returned however haggard and exhausted. “Something is definitely wrong with this saw” he said. “I was lucky to get one log cut up all day.”

◆“Let me see that saw” said the salesman. He pulled the cord and a loud roar filled the room.

◆“Wait a minute,” exclaimed the customer! “What’s that noise?”

◆Poor fellow was trying to operate on his own power. Certainly he had good intentions. He owned a saw but wasn’t utilizing it’s power. Is that the way you are living when it comes to God’s Holy Spirit? Is the church we always longed for indeed a place where we encounter God, a power beyond our own. I know I long for that and many of you do to. Take heart friends for God has said

◆“You will seek me and find me if you seek me with all your heart. Jer.29:13

◆At the same time remember that God so much desires encounter and life with you that he came to seek and to save those who were lost (Lk.19:10). Jesus has come looking for friendship with us! His love, his forgiveness of our sin, his death, his resurrection, his ascension to heaven again –it all points to his desire for us to encounter him, to know his love. You want to encounter God, call on the name of Jesus! Yes call daily. Stop everything else for a time to look vertically. Listen closely for he has promised to listen and to save.