

REACHING OUT TO SEE THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Rev. Philip Parker
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Years ago there was a TV show called "Name that Tune." If you had been a contestant on that show, could you have identified this top ten melody from the 1970's? (Melody is played.) How about if a few words are added? (Words are sung.) If you are a Beatles' fan you probably remember the name of this song. It's "My Sweet Lord." Written by George Harrison, one of the Beatles, shortly after the group broke up. The song is a prayer, expressing George's desire to reach out to God. His understanding of God may have been a little confused, somewhere between Christianity and Hinduism, but the desire to reach out to God is clearly expressed in the song he wrote. Listen, for example, to the first verse. "My sweet Lord, I really wanna see You, really want to be with You. Really want to see You Lord, but it takes so long, my Lord."

While we may not be too comfortable with Harrison's theology, one thing comes through loud and clear. He wants to see God, to really know Him, but realizes that accomplishing that goal isn't going to be easy, or as he says in his song, "Really want to see you Lord, but it takes so long." Looking back into the pages of the Old Testament, there is another individual who felt the same way. He too wanted to see the Lord. He too desired to have a personal encounter with God. His name was Moses and the biblical account depicting his request to see and know the Lord can be found in Exodus, chapter 33, verses 12-23. Let me share it with you this morning.

Looking over this passage of Scripture, several things come to mind. Although the word prayer is not used, this was clearly a prayer like request, something that Moses was asking God to do for him. It was composed of two parts. First of all, Moses was asking God not to desert His people when they left the Mountain of God and began their journey to the Promised Land. Because the children of Israel had been such a rebellious people, including that disastrous affair with the golden calf, Moses needed to be reassured of God's blessings and guidance. Otherwise, they were going to stay right there at the mountain. They were God's people. Without the Lord's abiding presence they would be indistinguishable from all the other nations around them.

The second part of the prayer was more personal in nature. Moses had come to the realization that God knew who he was, dating all the way back to that moment when he was placed in a little reed basket in the bullrushes of the Nile River. But what did he know about God. Yes, the Lord had spoken to Moses at the burning bush and had given him great power over

pharaoh and the Egyptians. But who was this God? What was He really like? The time had come for Moses to know the Lord just as fully and completely as the Lord knew him. So he had made this second request, "Show me your glory. Show me who you really are. Show me the depth and the breath of your divinity." To say the least, it was an audacious prayer. Moses was asking God to reveal Himself in the same way that two friends really get to know one another. Wow!

How did God respond? Did He say, "Out of here! You have no right to make such a request. I'm going to obliterate you." Quite the contrary. He said, "I will reveal a portion of my nature and personality to you. I will show you my goodness, My desire for you and your people to experience the very best in life. I will share with you My personal name "I AM WHO I AM," the One who exists without beginning or end. I will also let you know that I am a merciful and compassionate God for those whom I have chosen to bless. But there is one thing I cannot do. I cannot let you see My face. I cannot let you be exposed to the complete and absolute majesty of My divine presence. It would overwhelm you and bring your life to an end. Instead I will shield you. I will take you to a place near Me and place you in the cleft of a rock covering you with My hand until My glorious countenance has passed by. Then you can catch a departing glimpse of who I am.

Now what does all of this say to us with regards to our prayer lives, especially if we want to see, to experience the presence of God? There are three things that I would like to call to your attention. First, Moses' encounter with God was a Protected Experience and the same is true for you and me. We serve an awesome God. To encounter God in the fullness of who He is would be like having a face-to-face encounter with the brilliance of the sun. We would be consumed by the intensity of His light. We would not survive. For that reason God shields us, protects us from the full weight of His glory. Years ago I read this account about Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist of the nineteenth century. Speaking of a divine encounter in which he was filled with the Holy Spirit, Moody said, "God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand." Near the end of his first letter to Timothy, Paul described the Lord in this manner, "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:15-16). I cannot help but wonder if these two verses of Scripture were the inspiration for that beloved hymn, the first verse of which declares, "Immortal, invisible God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed most glorious the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise."

Here's the second thing that I want to share with you about Moses' encounter with God. It was a Personal Encounter. Much like Dwight L. Moody's encounter with the Lord, God enabled Moses to experience a moment of divine intimacy. He could see and feel God's presence. Such

was also the experience of another of the Lord's servants, a man by the name of Jonathan Edwards. A well-known pastor and theologian in colonial America, he recorded a personal narrative describing his own personal encounter with the Lord. This is what he wrote:

Once, as I rid out into the woods for my health, anno 1732, and having lit from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer; I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace, that appeared to me so calm and sweet, appeared great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception. Which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me, the bigger part of the time, in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt withal, an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, than to be emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love Him, and to be totally wrapped up in the fullness of Christ; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity.

The language may be a bit flowery to modern ears, but I hope you can appreciate what he experienced? Jonathan Edwards saw and felt the presence of God in that New England forest as he prayed. It was a personal encounter with the Almighty.

Now here's the final thing I want to share with you. When we meet the Lord through prayer, it is always a Positive Experience. I was reminded of this as I listened to the personal testimony of Sylvia Glover during the second session of our video series on prayer this past Wednesday afternoon. She was headed down a one-way street towards alcoholism and drug abuse until she met the Lord and became one of His most powerful prayer warriors. Moses and the other two men I spoke about this morning were also blessed with a positive outcome after meeting the Lord. Even though he was over eighty years of life, Moses received the strength and guidance he needed to lead the people of Israel to their promised destination. Dwight L. Moody's evangelistic ministry was transformed. He preached the same sermons as before, but now thousands responded because he was a person filled with the Holy Spirit. Jonathan Edwards was blessed with one of the keenest intellects this nation has ever produced and is known today as the Father of the First Great Spiritual Awakening.

I can't help but wonder what God can do in our lives when we reach out to see and encounter the presence of God through prayer? Speaking on the Lord's behalf, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, continues to remind us, "You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all of your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13)