

# *Cultivating the Presence of God*

## **Bringing the Bridegroom Back**



The marriage proposal had been accepted. The date for the wedding had been set. Invitations had been mailed and there was great anticipation as the day for the wedding ceremony drew near. A full dress rehearsal took place the night before. Finally, the long-awaited day had arrived. Especially stunning was the bride in her beautiful, new dress. Everything was in place. Family and friends had gathered. Flowers and candles covered the stage and the auditorium was packed. Initially, the ceremony was delayed because one of the key players, the bridegroom, was nowhere in sight. At length the wedding was called off because the groom failed to show up. He got a bad case of “cold feet,” or maybe in this case, “frozen feet.” The object of the bride’s affection had backed out and she was devastated. Her would-be companion had deserted her. Naturally, her emotions took a nose-dive and she went into a state of mourning and unspeakable grief. How else could she respond, her finance had abandoned her?

When the followers of John the Baptist asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast, Jesus replied, “Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast” (Matthew 9:15). Here we learn that fasting is called for when the bridegroom is not present. The Bridegroom is Jesus Himself. Indeed, Christ was going to be literally and physically taken from the disciples. When that happened Jesus said fasting and seeking God would be in order. But is there meaning and instruction in this text for us today? I believe there is.

Throughout church history there have been times when the Bridegroom has been more active among His people than at other times. Have there not been times when it seemed as if the Bridegroom has removed Himself? Have there not been seasons when God has judged His own by withdrawing Himself? The nation of Israel went through repeated seasons of judgment. Ichabod’s birth signified that *the glory* had departed from Israel. Samson was a unique individual and a tragic character in the Old Testament. He was appointed and anointed by God. Nevertheless he paid a high price for his low living when the glory departed from him and he became as any other man. Did not our Lord seek to regain entrance into the church at Laodicea? If Jesus was knocking from the outside, doesn’t this indicate the glory (the immediate Presence of God) was missing?

Vital Christianity is when God is in the midst of His people. “Glory in the church” (Eph. 3:21) is an apt description when the Bridegroom is actively in charge. When God is on the scene, the church experiences incredible power. The sense of God generates godly fear in the saints. Christians have a God-consciousness that makes them fearful of offending Him. Holiness, purity, zeal, and conversions characterize the life of the church. Unbelievers fall on their faces under deep conviction of sin in the assembled church and confess that God is at work among them (1 Cor.14:25). I ask you, is this a fitting description of most churches today?

Marriage counselors, which are a modern phenomena, have full dockets. Men who can't rule their homes, nevertheless, pastor huge churches. Adultery and divorce is commonplace among church people. In the so-called Bible belt statistics tell us church people are more likely to split up than the unchurched. Well-behaved children are so rare that even Christians perk up and take notice. Hundreds of fundamental churches go year after year with few or no conversions. Discernment has all but disappeared. Salvation has been reduced to "Hell insurance." It has little or no impact on a person's conduct. The world's best-known preacher recently stated that men could be saved without ever hearing the name of Jesus Christ. Church roles are swollen with tens of millions who have no credible evidences of regeneration. Along with their Prayer Lines churches now advertise "Sports Lines" in the Yellow Pages so members can find the time of their ball games. Performances attract far better attendances than prayer meetings. Church is more about entertainment than worship. I have even been in services where the choir leader asked the congregation to applaud their special number! Time magazine critiqued one "Christian rock" group with the caption "Re-born to be Wild." The secular staff writer apparently thought that it was incredulous that one of the vocalists modeled himself after Kurt Cobain, a drug addict who committed suicide. There is nothing so outrageous that would offend the sensibilities of religious America. I say the most plausible explanation for all of this is the Bridegroom has removed Himself. Is this not a likely interpretation for the current low state of Christianity in America?

### **The Presence of God**

Let me suggest three distinct meanings or particular senses of the presence of God. First, there is the **essential** presence of God. By this, I mean the omnipresence of God. If it were possible to hop on a space ship and travel forty light years from earth you would never be out of the essential presence of God, not even for even a moment. This is what David meant when he wrote, "Whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell (*the grave*), behold, thou art there" (Psalm 138:7-8). The immensity of God is such that He is everywhere all the time beholding the evil and the good.

Second, there is the **manifest** presence of God. This is when God makes Himself known in an undeniable way. Such was the case when the Glow of God invaded the Tabernacle and the Temple. God was on the scene and everyone knew it! Like Moses, they were on Holy Ground, gripped with the fear of the Lord. Duncan Campbell defined revival as *an awareness of the presence of God*. Many of us have been privileged to be in services when God so overshadowed the meeting that everyone knew God was there. I recall hearing the testimony of a professing atheist who had sat in on a protracted meeting when God had stepped down in revival. His words were, "I will never again be able to deny the reality of God after tonight."

Third, there is the **cultivated** presence of God. There are measures men can take to woo the Bridegroom. "Draw nigh to God, and *he will draw nigh to you.*" Drawing near to God is the surefire way to acquire God's presence in our midst. In the old days, people would talk about God being *feelingly near*. No doubt they were referring to those seasons when God was nigh because His people were drawing nigh to Him. In light of the spiritual climate in our day, we must pursue this third sense of God's cultivated presence.

The Lord Jesus was active among the seven churches mentioned in Revelation. Christ referred to His manifest presence among His people when He stated, "Who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks." There is no doubt what He meant by *candlesticks* because He plainly declared, "the seven candlesticks . . . are the seven churches." It is precisely this, the engaging presence of Christ, which distinguishes a true church from other organizations. Once the supernatural influence of Christ is taken away, all you have is dead religion. Remember how the Ephesian church left their first love and Christ threatened to vacate the premises if they failed to repent. So it is clear the Bridegroom can remove Himself from a local church. His manifest presence is conditioned and maintained by humility and obedience. So if the Bridegroom is absent, what can be done to bring Him back?

### **Cultivating the Presence of God**

How do we cultivate the presence of God? I believe the answer is found in James. God said, "Draw near to me and I will draw near to you." God always responds to us whenever we approach Him on His terms. A lot of people are sitting around waiting for the Lord to move while the Lord is waiting for us to make the first move toward Him. Think about it friend; God said He would draw near to you if you would only draw near to Him!

So the primary work of the church in times of declension is drawing nigh or seeking God. Contrary to popular thinking, seeking God is not a one-time event that ends with salvation. Initially, God seeks us and finds us. We then spend the rest of our lives pursuing Him.

I grew up on a farm where every spring we would cultivate our crops. Plowing up the weeds, placing more dirt around the roots, and applying fertilizer were the things we did to promote a better harvest. When people loose touch with God, James gives practical ways to cultivate His presence (4:7-10).

***Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord.*** There can be no point of meeting between a proud heart and a holy God. Since God is repelled by pride, it is our responsibility to humble ourselves *in the sight of the Lord.*

Those who know God will be humble. They who know themselves cannot be proud. Just as pride is the mother of most sin, so humility is the mother of grace. The prophets called on God's covenant people to humble themselves. When Israel was in a repenting mode, they would pull out the sackcloth and ashes and get low before God. On occasion they would convene solemn assemblies for the purpose of corporate repentance.

But how do we humble ourselves before God today? David said he humbled his soul with fasting. Denying his body food was a calculated strategy to starve pride out of his soul. His hunger for God exceeded his hunger for food. Fasting allows one to concentrate intensely on seeking God. Earthly necessities are put on hold for a season so eternal realities can be given their rightful place. Jesus said His disciples would fast when He was taken away.

Only desperate people will deny themselves. The self-righteous will not humble their souls. Neither will the self-satisfied or self-indulgent employ this discipline. But deep spiritual hunger can cause people to become so desperate that they humble their souls by fasting. I know of churches that have called on their people to fast from food, television, and computers for express purpose of diligently seeking God. Pastors have at times led their congregations into seasons of contrition and brokenness before God. These congregations were in dead earnest about the condition of their souls. They longed to have Jesus back in their midst. They realized that no price is too high to pay for a divine visitation. I know of two quarrelling churches that took out a full page newspaper ad to ask the community to forgive them for their poor testimony.

***Cleanse your hands ye sinners.*** We wash our hands when they are dirty. When our lives are contaminated with external sin, God says it's time to take a bath in the blood of Jesus. Outward actions, wrong associations, patterns of disobedience, and sins of commission and omission call for prompt confession and forsaking. Because sin is an affront to God's character and an attack on His holiness, it must be put away. If we are to draw nigh to God we must disassociate ourselves from all known sin.

***Purify your hearts ye double minded.*** A soiled soul causes confused thinking and divided allegiance. Purification of heart refers to the inner, unseen things of a man's soul. Attitudes, motives, and thoughts must be brought in line. Man may look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart. Unclean people can have no commerce with God. Communion with God is dependant on conformity to God, and no man can have fellowship with His Creator without the cleansing that the blood of Christ brings. That which is in the dark must be brought to the light.

***Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep.*** A heart that has strayed from God must face the seriousness of its condition and take appropriate measures. Ecclesiastes says, "Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better." Manton said, "Holy tears are the sponge of sin; a hard heart must be soaked, and a filthy heart must be washed." Godly sorrow, which works repentance that does not need to be repented of, precedes the joy that can only be found in the presence of Christ.

God punishes pride, but He rewards humility. ***Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he shall lift you up.*** The redeemed heart rejoices when God draws near, "In thy presence there is fullness of joy." This lifting of spirit is the result of lowering ourselves in God's sight.

The first step in regaining that, which has been lost, is discovering and admitting you've lost it. The absence of God-consciousness is always a call to draw near to God. This is true both individually and corporately. One day the Bridegroom will come back literally and physically. In the mean time we can, and must, cultivate His felt presence in our midst by drawing near to Him. When we draw near to Him, He promises to draw near to us.

—Harold Vaughan