

## **RIDING OR ABIDING?**

### **The Priority of Encountering Christ and Abiding In Him**

**By Dr. Steve Daily**

The story is told of Albert Einstein riding on a train in his senior years, and becoming increasingly flustered when he could not locate his ticket as the conductor was coming up the aisle to stamp it. Exasperated he exclaimed, “I feel so absent-minded,” as the conductor patiently waited for him to find his rite of transport. Finally, when the collector could see that the genius was about to have a heart attack, he said, “it’s OK Mr. Einstein, I know who you are, and that you would never try to defraud the railroad, don’t worry about the ticket, I’ll let it pass.” Still looking extremely stressed, Einstein responded, “that is very kind of you sir, and I appreciate it very much. But it doesn’t solve my problem, without that ticket I don’t know where I’m going.”

Too many Christians, today, are riding a “religious train” because that is what they have been taught or told to do. Without their doctrinal direction or denominational identity they don’t know where they are going. They are not on the train because they’ve had a first-hand personal encounter with the almighty God, but because they have accepted second-hand information about God from parents, teachers or ministers who want to see them saved. This path of passively, riding the religious train, is not passive because it necessarily lacks religious activity. Many on the religious train are very active, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School classes, helping in the children’s divisions, studying the Bible, and even feeding the poor or witnessing for Christ. But, they are passive in their hunger and pursuit for encounter with the living God.

As David put it in our opening text (Psalm 42:1-2), “My heart cries out for the living God. As a deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for You, O Lord.” Encounter with God, is it the deepest desire of our hearts? Recently, I had the opportunity to get away for a few days and outline my sermons for the next couple months. But, at our first service after my return we were experiencing some powerful praise and worship and during that time I had an encounter with God. I saw a visual image of Jesus walking to the front of our sanctuary holding a golden seed that I saw as representing life in the Spirit, or kingdom life. He planted it in the carpet and it grew into a marvelous huge tree that had at least 10 or 12 different varieties of fruit, apples, oranges, pears, avacados, etc., which I believe represent different

aspects of pursuing Him. Things like 24-7 prayer, Spirit baptism, and spiritual partnerships or small groups.

I saw the Lord inviting us to taste and see how good He is, by partaking of each type of fruit and letting Him fill us with His presence. As I continued to meditate on the tree, I felt that the Lord was convicting me to preach on a different variety of fruit found on this tree for the next several months, until all 12 aspects of pursuing Him here at Kingdom Life were covered. So I set aside the plans I had prayerfully made before, and begin preparing for this new journey God is calling us to take. And as I inquired about which theme He wanted me to cover first, the clear impression I got was the priority of encounter with Christ and abiding in Him. This is a house dedicated to leading people into experiencing personal life-changing encounters with the living God. We are not a religious train that simply provides people with the opportunity to sit back and ride or cruise on the coattails of encounters that others have had.

I would not be here this morning, as part of this body, were it not for a series of encounters with the living God that have blown my mind. And I know that is true of the other four members of our pastoral staff. I love to hear Garry's story of how God took him from the religiosity train and planted him firmly on the Spirit Express. I love Jason's story of how he challenged God to show up in a garage, with a group of worldly friends, and prove He was real, and how God came through with flying colors. Encounter is the womb of true spirituality, and God calls each of us to it. Each of us, not just pastors. I see this in our worship leaders and our ministry leadership team. These are people who are open to and generally in pursuit of encounter with the living God. As I watch this congregation worship I see a heart for encounter that excites me, and that I believe greatly pleases the Lord. So I know that much of what I say today will be preaching to the choir. But, the Lord has also shown me that there are many here who need to be encouraged in this area of encountering the living Christ.

When talking to people about encountering the living God there are four major barriers that seem to come up in conversation, and we are going to briefly address each of these this morning. **The first barrier that prevents people from pursuing encounter with God is the belief that they are not good enough for such an encounter.** This was the case with the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Exodus 20:18-19 (NCV) reads, "When the people heard the thunder and the trumpet, and when they saw the lightning and the smoke

rising from the mountain, they shook with fear and stood far away from the mountain. Then they said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself, and we will listen. But don’t let God speak to us or we will die.’” These people were aware of their sinful condition and thought it prevented them from having an encounter with God. What they did not understand was that no one is worthy of an encounter with God, and the only way to overcome our sinfulness is through an encounter with the living God.

I can sympathize with these people because I thought the exact same way, growing up in Adventism. I had been thoroughly schooled in the writings of the church prophet and believed that God only speaks to those who are on the verge of translation or who are His hand-picked prophets. Such thinking led me ultimately to pursue the god of sports and to worship passionately at that altar. My friends were jocks and in the tenth grade at Napa Junior Academy, they would have voted me the least likely to go into the ministry, due to my profane tongue, interest in pornography, and generally rebellious spirit. Most of our particular click were of the opinion that after your sixteenth birthday there was no excuse for being a virgin. So I had planned a special liaison with a cute party girl at school who was hosting an unsupervised midnight New Year’s Eve bash, on my sixteenth birthday, at her families’ barn. Their farm was within walking distance of our house, so after our family went to bed, I snuck out the door and headed for the party.

As I was walking through the orchard seeing the lights in front of me and beginning to hear the music, I had my first encounter with God. I heard His voice speak to me and say, “If you go in there you will never be the same.” There was no question in my mind about whose voice it was, I turned around, walked back home, prayed like I hadn’t prayed before, went to bed, and my life began to change because of an encounter with God. He had blown my mind. He had spoken to a rebellious, messed-up kid who wasn’t even trying to be spiritual. My theology changed because of an encounter with God, an experience that I would never forget. Having it together spiritually is not a prerequisite for having an encounter with God. In 1 Timothy 1:13-15, Paul writes, when I was the “chief of sinners” God through His grace and mercy encountered me. Does hungering for and desiring encounter with God, help to facilitate it? Yes, Jeremiah 29:13 says, “You will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart.” I don’t want to give the impression this morning that God just randomly breaks into human experience, and that we have nothing to do with it.

I believe my mother's prayers, even when I was in her womb, had everything to do with God encountering me in that orchard. And I've heard people say, if God knocked me to the ground the way He did with Saul – who became Paul as a result – I'd take Him seriously too. But, this was not a random event either. It's not like God suddenly said to Himself, "I think I'll blind somebody today, and knock him to the ground until he becomes my disciple." Why did God encounter Saul in such a powerful manner, when he was such a sinner? You may be thinking, because he was so sincere and passionate, though misguided. Yet, I know a lot of very sincere passionate people that never receive this treatment from God. I was intrigued by the documentary *Erllys and I* saw on James Earl Ray recently, who was influenced by the very sincere Bible thumping leader of the KKK, and who was very sincere in his belief that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. needed to die. But, God never blinded or knocked them down.

So why did this happen with Saul? I believe it was because Saul was public enemy number one of the post-Pentecostal church, and Jesus had taught this newly anointed group of believers to intercede for their enemies, and to pray for those who hated them. They had no greater enemy than Saul, no one who hated them more than this self-righteous Pharisee. So Saul became the target of such concentrated prayer that it released God to intervene in human history in a manner that was somewhat unprecedented. As John Wesley said, "God does nothing in this world except by prayer." This is why He wakes His intercessors at three in the morning. Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given." Does this mean that God is helpless apart from our prayers? No, Isaiah 59:16 tells of God looking for someone to stand in the gap and being amazed that He could find no one, so He took care of the situation Himself. As Jesus put it, if necessary "the rocks and mountains will cry out" and God will ultimately have His way. However, He tells us that asking is essential.

So, we must not allow God's omnipotence (His all powerful might) to detract from our calling to be faithful in prayer. For in Ezekiel 22:30 we're told of another occasion where God looked for an intercessor and because He failed to find one, tragic things happened. Where there is much prayer there will be much power, and where there is little prayer there will be little power. Generally speaking, the more we seek Him the more we will find Him and have powerful encounters with Him. But, it is also important to recognize that sometimes our encounters with Him have absolutely nothing to do with us, because they are the products of the prayers of others. AMEN!

**The second barrier that prevents people from pursuing encounter with God is their own life experience.** I was talking to a life-long Adventist recently about Kingdom Adventism, and the priority we place on encounter with God. He brought up a past situation in his life where he was having a major crisis and cried out to God for specific direction. He said that it never came, and that this experience just kind of convinced him that it wasn't realistic or even healthy to expect such encounters. Why does God intervene in our experience at certain times, but not at others? Why do we recognize God's interventions at certain times and not at others? I don't care how much we love God, or how many encounters we've experienced with Him, His timing will often frustrate us, and His silence, especially at critical junctures in our lives, can be very difficult to bear. But, you can't read the Psalms and not recognize that this is universal in human experience. How often does David cry out, "How long O Lord will You remain silent?" As he does in Psalm 28:1-2. He's even more graphic in Psalm 69:3, where he says my throat is parched, raw and dry from crying out to you, without response. All God's children experience the dark night of the soul. That's why Scripture places a premium on patience, endurance and waiting.

Even the most dedicated intercessors know the difficulty of waiting on the Lord for years for things that we expect to happen much sooner. I was moved when Meri Crouley was here a few weeks ago and spoke prophetic words over us as intercessors concerning the years of prayers that have ascended in this valley, but are yet to see their fulfillment. When you've prayed so long for something, even the most faithful intercessor can begin to wonder, "will I ever see these prayers answered in my lifetime." I'm sure Elizabeth and Zechariah were feeling that way after decades of praying for the Messiah and seeing no evidence that their prayers had been heard. In fact, it had been so long, that when God did begin to answer their prayers, the High Priest was overcome with fear and doubt. Turn with me to Luke 1:12-13. The Lord had to strike him mute, so he wouldn't speak in fear or unbelief. How many of us who have been praying for revival in this valley for decades are ready to believe, now that the time is at hand. Or will we be like Zechariah, inclined to doubt the "now" prophetic words, because it has been so long.

Disappointment with God is a major reason why many Christians give up on seeking encounters with God. I'm sure some of you have read Philip Yancey's excellent book, *Disappointment With God*. He found that this was almost a universal theme among Christians and former Christians alike. The

most common reason people lost their faith in God, was tragedy, especially the loss of a child. But, close behind was the feeling that God was distant and unavailable, particularly in time of need. The Bible writers, themselves, express this concern repeatedly. Not just in the Psalms, but the prophets are continually crying out, “where are You God, why have You deserted us?” Even the book that most scholars believe was the first written in Scripture, Job, focuses on this theme. Why so much unfair suffering? Why do the wicked prosper? M. Scott Peck, in his amazing best seller, *The Road Less Traveled*, summed up the thesis of his book in three words: life is difficult. The book of Job can also be summed up in three similar words: life is unfair.

Would we really expect it to be otherwise in a sinful world? What would it say about sin, if life were fair, in this fallen world. As Isaiah 59:2 says, sin separates us from God. In a sinful world we do not have Edenic access to the presence of God. Yes, He is always with us through His Spirit, but our ability to discern His presence and His willingness to reveal His presence is not predictable or determined by formulas. You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker which says, “If you feel far from God, guess who moved?” But, many of us know that God often hides or seems to remain distant, to test our faith. He is not a Cosmic Bellhop who jumps at our every call. Learning to wait on Him is one of our greatest challenges. The devil knows this and continually seeks to discourage and depress us. This is why Jesus says, “Let not your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1). Belief is the key. He has given us each a measure of faith (Romans 12:3), but we choose whether to exercise it or not. Don’t be betrayed by your own experience.

**The third barrier that prevents people from pursuing encounter with God is doubt and fear.** What if God were to ask me to do something I don’t want to do? How can I explain this to my family, who are Christians, but who don’t believe in this supernatural stuff? Fear of losing relationships that are important to us, and fear of losing control of our own lives, are probably the two biggest fears I see and experience. But, as Jesus said, it is impossible to move in love through the Spirit and to move in the flesh at the same time (John 3:6). It is impossible to operate in love and hold on to fear at the same time (1 John 4:18). “There is no fear in love because perfect love casts out all fear.” We all choose to function in faith and love or in doubt and fear. The more we doubt, the more we will fear. That is why we keep coming back to what James 1:6-7 says, the one who doubts is double-minded and receives nothing from God. Doubt and fear generally serve to cut us off from encounter with God.

Whereas, bold, radical, faith opens the door to one encounter after the next. I love that verse in Matthew 11:12 where Jesus says, “from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” Let’s unpack this verse one phrase at a time. *From the days of John until now* – In the previous verse Jesus stated that no one born before John was greater than John. This was unthinkable to the Jewish ears who heard it because His statement included every great hero of the Old Testament – Moses, Elijah, Joseph, Daniel, Abraham, you name it. But, then He says something that is even more unthinkable, that anyone here in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven had only been revealed since the time of John, when he introduced the Messiah as the Lamb of God. The kingdom becomes reality where God’s will is done (Matthew 6:10). God’s will was never perfectly done in this sinful world until Jesus came in human flesh and revealed the kingdom.

Then He says, that during this period *the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence*. There were two ways that this could happen, from outside His professed followers, and from within His professed followers. The outside attack came from the most concentrated demonic activity the world has ever seen, funneled through every evil human agent available – with Jesus as the full blown target. The inside attack came from His own followers, who loved Him, but often moved in the flesh rather than the Spirit, like Peter, when Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan, you are an offense to Me” (Matthew 16:23). Which leads us to the final phrase, *and the violent take it by force*. Do the “violent” here refer to something positive or negative? There are two interpretations. It could be referring to the spiritually violent who rise up and take the kingdom to victory through Spirit-led faith, prayer and spiritual warfare. Or it could be referring to those like Peter, who do violence to the kingdom, by professing to love and follow God, but who fail to wait on Him, and attempt to force their own will upon the kingdom through the desires of their flesh. This is why we keep stressing the need to encounter Him, to be Spirit-led, and to abide in that “In Christ” connection, which leads us to our last point.

**The fourth barrier that prevents people from pursuing encounter with God is the idea that it is not Biblical to trust our experience.** I grew up with this teaching, never put your faith in feeling or your trust in experience. The Gospel is all about fact. It is all about the historical fact that Jesus lived, died and rose again. When we accept that fact by faith, we will be saved,

and we will keep the 10 Commandments as a result. This is a very rational and formulaic view of salvation, similar to the four spiritual laws. When we were doing street ministry last Thursday night, we were giving our words right across the road from a booth, with a huge sign that read, “Are You Going To Heaven Or Hell?” I’ve talked to the people in the booth before and they actually believe they can tell you if you are going to heaven or hell based on how you answer a few questions. Does Scripture tell us that we can know if we are saved or not? Yes, absolutely, that is one of its major purposes according to 1 John 5:13 “These things have been written to you who believe ... that you may **know that you have eternal life.**”

But, I don’t know of a Scripture that says that we can know if someone else is saved or not. In fact, Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1). If I tell someone that he or she is saved or not saved, am I not judging that person? We judge, as human beings, on “the outward appearance,” Scripture says, only God knows the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Paul is even more explicit in 1 Corinthians 2:11, when he says “Who knows what a man is, except the spirit of a man that dwells inside him. Even so, no one knows the things of God, except the Spirit of God.” We cannot judge the eternal status of another because it is based on a personal relationship between that person and God. Scripture knows nothing of the once saved always saved mentality that is so pervasive in Christian circles today. A mentality that says, I got saved in 1978, haven’t pursued or experienced much of God since, but that’s when I got saved.

First John 2:28, “Little children, abide in Him, so that when He comes, you may be found in confidence, and not shame.” What is this text, and so many like it, saying? It is saying that abiding in Him is essential, and that if we fail to do so, we will be found in shame at His coming. Jesus says, “If you abide in Me” you have life, and if you don’t, **you don’t** (John 15:4-7). Salvation is not about head knowledge, passing a spiritual questionnaire, or wearing an “I got saved at the beach” T-shirt. It is not even believing that Jesus, the God-man lived, died and rose again. James 2:19 tells us that even the devils do that. Salvation is not just about accepting a historical fact, but experiencing a relationship. Words like encounter, relationship, abiding, and knowing are experiential words in Scripture. So the saying, “you can’t trust your experience” is not necessarily trustworthy. First John 2:3 tells us that we know that we know when we walk in His will, and obey the commands He gives us.



This is not possible in the flesh, but it is the natural result of walking in the Spirit (read Romans 8, if you are unsure about what this means). The first fruit on our kingdom tree is encountering Him and abiding in Him. Every encounter we have with Him should make us more and more hungry to abide in Him. I loved what Meri Crouley said, a few weeks ago, about encountering Him in various ways, that are described in the Song of Solomon. He encounters us in His vineyard, in His wineceller, at His banqueting table, in His bridal chambers, but these encounters are not to make us spiritual junkies. They are to empower us to go out for Him and to be His knights, throughout His kingdom. We are called, appointed and anointed to share His gospel of the kingdom, out of hearts that are passionately in love with Him. Love cannot be separated from feeling, passion and emotion. These cannot be separated from the fact of who He is. Encounter is the key to answering the question, are we riding or abiding?