

WHEN GOD VISITS

Some invitations and opportunities are too important to ignore.

Suppose that an ordinary service suddenly turns into the opportunity of a lifetime. Our pastor leans into the microphone and with a million dollar smile points to the bench in front of the church and says, "Come on down!" We get to our feet and the hosts of heaven go wild. When we get to the front, we are met by God himself, dressed in spotless white. He doesn't just shake our hand. He embraces us. The pastor booms out, "Tell them what you have for them!" Tears come to our eyes as God whispers in our ear, "I'll give you a new Father, a new name, a new life, and a home in Heaven. But while you are still here on earth, whatever you have need of, I'll give to you also. And the price is right. It has all been paid for already". We slowly stiffen up, slide out of His arms, and return to our pews. Thanks, but no thanks. It's too good to be true. We are not falling for that. Not even when Heaven brings the gift right to us.

We are not so different from the people of Jesus' time. Heaven came right to them. Jesus stood up in their midst and told them He was the answer to their supplications. They had been praying for God to come and lead them. To be their king. To deliver them. They had been praying this for hundreds of years. Then Jesus came saying, "Follow me!" He was pretty blunt too. He stood up in the temple and read the prophecies of Isaiah concerning the Messiah. Reminded them of all of their hopes and dreams. Told them He was that Messiah and had come to fulfill their prayers. So they tried to kill Him.

It was not that He had failed to demonstrate power. He had been performing miracles all over the land. Some of those present had personally seen Him turn water into wine. They had heard His unearthly wisdom as He taught the people. They had actually watched Him heal the sick with a touch or a spoken word and defeat demons with authority. These were all manifestations of divine power. The problem was that He was simply too good to be true. They knew Him, and no one could trick them into believing otherwise. This man could not be the Messiah. He was only the son of Joseph the carpenter. He had to be a blasphemer. Because of their unbelief, although He was there with power, He could not do many works in their midst.

In the ninth chapter of Luke, we find that there are vastly different consequences that arise out of the visitation of God. In the cities that accepted the message of the gospel and welcomed Christ or His disciples, miracles, healing, and deliverance were their reward. There were also places and cities where the disciples of Christ, then and now, were not welcome. In response to rejection, followers of Jesus were to shake the dust of that city off of their feet. That action would bring judgment upon that city worse than that meted out to Sodom and Gomorrah. The word of God assures us that it will be worse for Capernaum in judgment than for Tyre and Sidon, for if they had seen the miracles seen by the people of Capernaum, they would have repented. The generations that have or had the actual presence of God in their midst will be judged by the men of Ninevah and the queen of Sheba. They had only Jonah for repentance and Solomon for wisdom, yet they repented and sought wisdom. No one comes to the Father unless He draws them, but when the Spirit says come, He is drawing. Now is the day of salvation. When His Spirit ceases to strive with us, there is little left besides judgment

Except for regret. How terrible to have help available and then not realize it or be too proud to accept it. In Isaiah 7:12, an Old Testament king, Ahaz, facing overwhelming defeat, prayed for delivery. When the prophet of God came to tell him that God would deliver him, he refused the help, saying, "I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord." The blind man, Bartimaeus, was

smarter than that. He realized that once Jesus had passed his way and was gone, he would still be blind. So he called out, "Jesus! Thou son of David! Have mercy on me!" What a fascinating prayer! He did not say, "thou son of Joseph." How interesting that one of the first ones to recognize the answer to prayers and to prophecy concerning the Messiah was the only one in the crowd not blinded by the visible. In response to that revelation and the praise it entailed, Jesus answered in Mark 10:46-52, "What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?" He was willing to give him anything he asked for. Then the only one there who recognized the proximity of the divine, asked for still more sight. The others left in the same pain, hopelessness, and despair as when they had come.

The regret is not only on our parts. In Matt 23:37, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not." It was a cry of anguish from a loving father. He saw the storm approaching with its resulting death and both stood, and still stands, ready to shelter them and us from the brunt of the attack. But the children will not come under the protection of the Almighty. Too busy or too proud. Either way, we will die of our own volition. And our Father, who was never willing that any should perish, can only weep.

Are we also too familiar with the carpenter's son? Because He is willing to meet with us on our level, do we now doubt His deity? Has His presence been in our midst for so long that it no longer thrills us? When we first met Him and felt His love, we knew He was God and could do anything. But years have passed and His presence is so common in our midst, it feels natural, rather than supernatural. Now, when we need a miracle and Jesus clamors for attention and a chance to demonstrate His love for us, we disregard Him.

After all, most of us grew up with Him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Does it make you uncomfortable when someone wants to give you a gift? Do you think it is because you are not willing to have an obligation to that person created by the acceptance of the gift?
2. Do you find it hard to believe that God has such good gifts in store for you, when deep down, you know you have done nothing to deserve them?
3. Is it because we can not imagine ourselves loving someone unconditionally, that we can not believe it of God?
4. Do you ever pray for a long time and then find yourself wondering if it is really God speaking when you get an answer?
5. Do you ever become upset with God because the answer is not what you had hoped it would be?
6. When a miracle occurs before your eyes, such as a soul being saved from hell, do you find it hard to believe that God Himself has been near you?
7. What do you think God could do in our services if even a fraction of us truly believed that the God of all power was in our midst and we worshipped accordingly?
8. Have you ever tried to tell anyone about the gospel or your relationship with Christ and been totally rejected? Do you think that those who reject even the hearing of the gospel will still be subject to the judgment mentioned in the scriptures? Why or why not?
9. What do you think the scripture means that tells us now is the day of salvation?
10. Like most people, do you find yourself too proud to accept help that you desperately need?
11. Why do you think, given the circumstances of that day, Bartimeus called Jesus a "son of David?"

12. Have you ever been desperate enough to scream out for help, even to the point of embarrassing yourself in front of others? If you had absolute assurance that He would help you with your most desperate need, would you scream out to Jesus for help? What if all you had was hope and faith?
13. When your heavenly father is desperately trying to get you to safety and you reject that love to go play in the storm, do you think He weeps for you as He did for Jerusalem?
14. Do you find it easy to ignore the presence of God because it is familiar to you? What are the chances that if we do not cherish His presence, He will simply remove Himself from our midst?