

When He Shows Up

by Tony Plummer
February 23, 2005

I used to think that I understood the presence of God. I wish I could tell you that I would feel His presence all of the time, but the truth is that the feeling comes and goes without pattern or consistency. The seeming unpredictable sense of His presence reminds me of what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes ..."

There were (and are) times when I have been practically overwhelmed with knowing that God was both with me and all over me. Preaching seems to be the times when I am most aware of Him. All the great dead guys in the history of the church used to call this the unction of the Holy Spirit. It feels much like what Peter said about the authors of the Scriptures, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (italics mine, 2 Peter 1:21) Being carried along by the Holy Spirit is an amazing experience. I do not mean to imply that preaching under this unction means that what is being preached is revelation on the same level as Scripture. No, my point is simply when He takes over you know it.

I have actually been preaching and said things that I had never planned to say or began preaching on a topic which had never entered my mind the week before. When that happens goose bumps break out all over my body and I always think inside my head, "Oh, this is so good. Keep on Lord!"

There are also those times when I have been talking with someone who is hurting or struggling with life in one way or another. As I listen, I usually pray, "Lord what do they need to hear or not hear? Lead me here, Lord." And there are times when counsel, advice or maybe a word of Scripture comes to my mind and all of a sudden I know He is there.

However, those times when I want to feel and sense His presence seem to be the times when He seems most distant, can you relate? They are the times when I begin to act like a 4 year old in K-Mart, you know the scene: I want, I want now, give me, give me now and then proceed to make a scene. And He still doesn't show up the way I want Him to. His apparent absence almost invariably happens during seasons of suffering and pain. All I want is a divine hug or a sense that He is with me, but there is nothing.

A friend of mine told me a story about his very godly father that helped me with this vacant feeling. He related that when his father had open heart surgery he not only suffered the physical pain of having his chest cracked open but also had to wrestle with deep depression which often accompanies major surgery. When my friend was taking his father home from the hospital, his dad said that God had blessed him by not showing up while he was there. My friend was puzzled at this and asked him how not sensing the presence of God was a blessing. His father told him that God had blessed him because it gave him the opportunity to believe Him and trust Him without feeling Him. It is one thing to rest in Him and trust Him when we feel He is with us. It is something different to do this when He feels distant.

It reminds me of a portion of C.S. Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters*. At one point Lewis writes about hell's confusion over why the enemy (God) withholds His sense of presence from His followers for long seasons. Screwtape, the senior demon, warns his protégé, Wormwood, that believers are never more in danger of serving the enemy's ultimate purpose as when they lose all sense of God's presence and still obey Him. That's something to think about, huh?

Over the last couple of years I have been sensing the presence of God more and more. And as I feel Him show up, I have been made aware that I have missed His presence a lot over the years. You see, I had grown accustomed to that feeling of His presence when He would take over with wisdom that was certainly not my own; those were holy times for sure. But there are so many times each day where He arrives. I have been asking Him to make me more aware or help me to have eyes and ears to sense when He arrives. As I ponder my life as a follower of Jesus, the old adage is true-hindsight is 20/20.

There was that time when, as an associate pastor, our church staff worked in a temporary office location until our building was completed. Upstairs, above our office, was a telemarketing company; yes, those dreaded people who call you during dinner time. One of the employees was a man confined to a wheelchair. He was a Jehovah's Witness, African American and I do not think he had ever taken a shower or used deodorant, you get the picture. The man was a mess and those he worked with upstairs not only disliked him, they could have cared less about him.

He used to ride the elevator down to our floor, wheel in and ask for someone to help him use the restroom. Apparently nobody on his floor was willing to do this. I type this with some embarrassment, but when we would hear him wheeling down the hall we would immediately begin to fuss with each other about whose turn it was to help him relieve himself.

You see, you would have to finagle his wheel chair into the restroom, lift him out of it, help him with his pants and depending upon his need of the moment (I think you get my drift!) you would either help hold him up or help him sit down. When he was finished you would have to help him get himself back together and out of the restroom. May I be frank? He stunk. He was not all that nice or appreciative and it was generally a pretty nasty job.

Now I look back on those times when I helped him as holy, consecrated times. Yes, as I ponder those times in the men's room helping a helpless, stinking, rude man I see them as sacred moments. It was those times when that men's room floor turned into holy ground. "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'." (Matthew 25:40)

Then there was Paul. Paul was a man in his mid-40's who had the mental capacity of an eight year old. I am not sure what his maturity level was, but I would guess about the same age. Paul stood about 6'3" and probably weighed around 140 lbs. sopping wet. Paul loved people (and still does) and loved to be with anyone who would give him time.

Paul got my phone number somehow and would call me-well, let's just say incessantly and always at a very hectic time. He just wanted to talk and tell you what kind of sandwich he had that day. He loved his mom and he would invariably tell me some kind of story about her, even if it was just sharing what her schedule was for the day.

I would always feel frustrated as I talked with Paul. Usually I would pace, roll my eyes and do all I could to be kind, listen to him and pray that I could get off the phone soon. He was a pest. I often thought, "Today?" I look back on all of those phone conversations and time spent with Paul as divine moments; I only wished I would have recognized it then. Rather than feel impatient when I would answer the phone and hear Paul say, "Hey, Tony baby" (that is how he always started our conversations), I wish I would have immediately noticed the arrival of my Lord. He always showed up when Paul called. For me, though, they were times of aggravation and annoyance. For Paul it was an oasis within the desert of his day, a cup of cool water for his heart. "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me ... And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." (Matthew 10:40-42)

I certainly haven't arrived, but I am on the path learning to notice His presence more. He still shows up, most of the time, when I preach and I love that unctonized feeling that comes to my soul. But I have been noticing Him more and more during times like when I just lay across my daughter's bed and talk with her. Or a couple of weeks ago when my son and I went to Sarasota to see a movie; we had such a good talk on the way there and the way back, I am telling you, He was there. And then there are times when a bird catches my eye or when I watch a documentary about the human body or when someone says something to me that I was not expecting but the words land in just the right spot within me. I am beginning to notice and the result is that times like these become divine moments.

Jesus had just fed four thousand people with only seven loaves of bread (Mark 8:1-5). He joined His disciples in a boat in order to get to the other side of the lake. The disciples began to commiserate about only having one loaf of bread. Remember, Jesus had just fed four thousand with seven loaves and when He heard them talking about only having one loaf He said some words which we need to ponder right now, "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?" (Mark 8:18)

You see, it is possible to be in the very presence of divine activity and miss it. It is possible to be right in the middle of what He is doing and overlook it, not see it, not hear it and not remember it. I can assure you that He is present and at work all around you all of the time. We need only to have eyes that see and ears that hear.

Give it some thought, would you?

Tony