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SEVEN REALITIES OF EXPERIENCING GOD

*Indeed, the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing
His counsel to His servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)*

GOD IS AT WORK!

Angola Prison in Louisiana is one of the largest and most formidable maximum security institutions in the United States. The vast inmate population serving life sentences has no hope for the future. Several years ago, the prison hired a new warden who was a Christian. As he assumed his new position, he had no idea what God intended for that dismal, hopeless place. One day, a prisoner was executed for his crimes. The Holy Spirit convicted the warden that he did not know if the convict had been a Christian, but he had assisted in ushering the man into eternity.

The warden sensed God wanting to use him to bring hope and salvation to the prison residents. His church had been going through *Experiencing God*, and he decided to make the study available to any inmate who wanted to take the course. It was also offered to all those on death row.

God began to transform lives through the study. Many of those awaiting execution became Christians. In fact, so many prisoners were

becoming Christians that seven different congregations were begun throughout the prison with inmates serving as pastors. Violence and drug use in the prison was dramatically curtailed. As the inmates completed *Experiencing God*, they began to do other Bible studies. Some of the men even sensed God calling them into Christian ministry!

Ultimately, a theological seminary began to provide training to the inmates and made the prison an official satellite campus. Some of the residents felt called to missions. As a result, these prisoners asked to be transferred to other prisons where they began leading Bible studies and leading fellow convicts to faith in Christ. These inmates were making such a positive impact on the prison population that wardens from across the country began asking Angola Prison to transfer some of their transformed prisoners to them! God had been working in the midst of one of the most demoralizing places in the country, and He had been looking for someone to join Him in His work. When God invited the warden to join in, this man could not possibly have imagined all God was prepared to do. Such is the case every time God comes to one of His children and invites that person to join Him in His mission.

The Scriptures testify that when God prepares to do something in our world, He reveals to His people what He is about to do. Then God accomplishes His purposes through His people. This is also the way God will work with you. The Bible is designed to help you understand the ways of God. Then, when God starts to use your life in the same way He worked in the Scriptures, you'll recognize that it is God.

WHEN GOD SPEAKS

In examining the Bible for ways God involved men and women in His work, I recognized the three characteristics outlined below. When God spoke:

1. They knew it was God.
2. They knew what God was saying.
3. They knew what they were to do in response.

In examining Scripture, I also see common experiences that I call the seven realities of experiencing God. They do not comprise a formula for knowing God's will. You can't accomplish these steps on your own. They do, however, identify ways God works with a person or group to involve them in His activity. The remainder of this book will focus on these realities to help you understand how God works in and through a person's life. In this chapter, I will give an overview. Reading through the seven realities may raise several questions. For example:

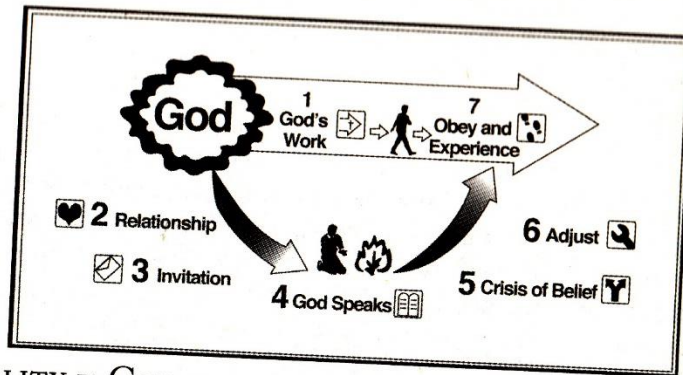
- What is involved in a love relationship with God?
- How can I know when God is speaking?
- How can I recognize where God is at work?
- What kinds of adjustments does God require me to make?
- What is the difference between adjustment and obedience?

As I have worked with groups and individuals in many settings, I have been asked questions like these. I will try to answer them during the remaining chapters of this book.

MOSES' EXAMPLE

The experience of Moses beautifully portrays how God works in a person's life. His early life and call to ministry are described in chapters 2, 3, and 4 of Exodus. You may want to read those chapters as a background for the discussion that follows. Other passages show how Moses came to know and follow God's will. Moses' experience at the burning bush clearly illustrates the way God invites people to join Him in His work. I could have chosen any number of other people, such as Noah, Abraham, Esther, David, Mary, the disciples, or Paul.

The diagram of "The Seven Realities of Experiencing God" on the next page describes the way God worked with Moses. Notice that key words for each of the seven realities are on the diagram. Let's take a look at this process and see how Moses experienced each reality.



REALITY 1: GOD IS ALWAYS AT WORK AROUND YOU.

God did not create the world and then abandon it to function on its own. He has been actively involved in human affairs throughout history. In fact, He is orchestrating history. Because of sin, humanity has been separated from a close relationship with God. God is working in His world to bring about the redemption of those who are alienated from Him and facing imminent judgment and destruction. The Father is working through Christ to reconcile the world to Himself. In God's sovereignty, He has chosen to accomplish His work through His people. As He carries out His mission, He seeks to move people into the mainstream of His activity.

God was already at work around Moses' life when He encountered Moses at the burning bush. God had a purpose He was steadily working out in Moses' world. Even though Moses was an exile in the desert, he was right on God's schedule, in the fullness of God's timing, in the middle of God's will for that moment.

Years earlier, God told Abraham his descendants would be in bondage, but that He would deliver them and give them the Promised Land. God was watching and waiting for the right time to carry out His purposes for Israel. The time came when: "The Israelites groaned because of their difficult labor, and they cried out; and their cry for help ascended to God because of the difficult labor. So God heard their groaning, and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and He took notice" (Exod. 2:23-25).

At the time God was about to deliver the children of Israel, the overriding concern was God's will for Israel, not God's will for

Moses. God was at work with Israel, and He was preparing to bring Moses into the mainstream of His activity to redeem His people. This truth also applies to your life. God is actively working in the lives of people around you. Even when you do not recognize it or see God at work, He is active. However, unless God opens your spiritual eyes to recognize what He is doing, you will remain blind to His presence and work.

REALITY 2: GOD PURSUES A CONTINUING LOVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU THAT IS REAL AND PERSONAL.

God created humanity for a love relationship with Him. More than anything else, God wants us to love Him with our total being (see Mark 12:30). He is the One who pursues the love relationship with us. We do not naturally seek God on our own initiative. Everything we are experiencing from God comes in response to His invitation. In fact, He reached out to us dramatically by sending His Son Jesus (see John 3:16). God clearly demonstrated how valuable the love relationship is to Him when He permitted Jesus to die an excruciating death on a cross in order to make a relationship with us possible (see Rom. 5:8).

This intimate love relationship with God is both extremely personal and practical. This is probably the most important factor in knowing and doing the will of God. *If your love relationship with God is not as it should be, nothing else will be in order.*

God took the lead in inviting Moses into a personal and dynamic relationship with Him. Moses had led the sheep he was tending to "Horeb, the mountain of God" (Exod. 3:1). Moses may have come to the mountain for a time of worship, but God interrupted Moses' plans by encountering him at the burning bush. God told Moses that He would go with Moses into Egypt. Many texts throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy illustrate how God pursued a continuing love relationship with Moses. Here is one example:

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to Me on the mountain and stay there so that I may give you the stone tablets with the law and commands I have written for their instruction." . . . When Moses went up the mountain, the cloud covered it. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount

Sinai . . . Moses entered the cloud as he went up the mountain, and he remained on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. (Exod. 24:12, 15–16, 18)

Time and time again God invited Moses to talk with Him and to be with Him. God initiated and maintained a growing relationship with Moses. This fellowship was based on love, and God daily fulfilled His purposes through Moses. The relationship with God was extremely practical as God guided and provided for His people under Moses' leadership. (For other examples of the love relationship, you may want to read Exod. 33:7–34:10 or Num. 12:6–8.)

REALITY 3: GOD INVITES YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED WITH HIM IN HIS WORK.

God is the sovereign ruler of the universe. He has been working throughout history to accomplish His purposes. He does not ask us to dream our dreams for Him. He does not invite us to set magnificent goals and then pray that He will help us achieve them. He already has His own agenda when He approaches us. His desire is to get us from where we are to where He is working. He leads us from being self-centered to being God-centered. When God reveals to you where He is working, that becomes His invitation to join Him in His activity. When God reveals His work to you, that is the time to respond to Him.

In Moses' story, God's purpose was to rescue the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and to establish them as a nation in their own land. Moses was the one through whom God intended to accomplish His plans. God invited Moses to become involved with Him in His work: "I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them from that land to a good and spacious land. . . . Therefore, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh so that you may lead My people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Exod. 3:8, 10). It would never have crossed Moses' mind to do something like this had God not invited him. Yet suddenly Moses was being summoned to join in a work that God had been preparing centuries for.

REALITY 4: GOD SPEAKS BY THE HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH THE BIBLE, PRAYER, CIRCUMSTANCES, AND THE CHURCH TO REVEAL HIMSELF, HIS PURPOSES, AND HIS WAYS.

The testimony of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is that God speaks to His people. In our day, God communicates to us through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will use the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church (other believers) to guide us. When you hear God speak to you through a verse of Scripture, it's always best to verify what you heard through prayer, other believers, and your circumstances. If you hear God say the same thing through each of these sources, you can proceed confidently.

God will draw you into a deeper and closer walk with Him so you can trust Him and have faith in Him. He will reveal His purposes to you so you can become involved in His work rather than merely pursuing your own goals and dreams. He reveals His ways so you can accomplish His purposes in a manner that glorifies Him. God's ways are not our ways (see Is. 55:8–9). You cannot discover these truths about God on your own. Divine truth must be revealed.

God spoke to Moses through the unique experience at a burning bush to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.

Then the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire within a bush. . . . God called out to him from the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

"Here I am," he answered.

"Do not come closer," He said. "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then He continued, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of My people in Egypt, and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors, and I know about their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them from that land to a good and spacious land." (Exod. 3:2–8)

"If there is a prophet among you from the LORD, I make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My household. I speak with him directly, openly, and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD." (Num. 12:6–8)

God came and talked to Moses about His will. God wanted Moses to go to Egypt so He could deliver the Israelites. He revealed to Moses His holiness, His mercy, His power, His name, and His purpose to keep His promise to Abraham and to give Israel the Promised Land, as well as many other things not described in the Scriptures above. When God spoke, Moses knew it was God. He knew what God said, and he knew what he had to do in response.

REALITY 5: GOD'S INVITATION FOR YOU TO WORK WITH HIM ALWAYS LEADS YOU TO A CRISIS OF BELIEF THAT REQUIRES FAITH AND ACTION.

God wants a watching world to come to know who He truly is. He does not call you to get involved in His activity merely so people can see what you can do. He will call you to an assignment that you cannot accomplish apart from His divine intervention. God's assignments have God-sized dimensions. This does not mean God does not ask us to undertake mundane, seemingly ordinary tasks. But when God is involved in anything, there are always eternal, divine dimensions, implications, and possibilities.

When God asks you to do something you cannot do, you will face a crisis of belief. You'll have to decide what you really believe about God. Can He and will He do what He has said He wants to do through you? Can God do the seemingly impossible through your ordinary life? How you respond to His invitation reveals what you truly believe about God, regardless of what you say.

This major turning point is where many people miss out on experiencing God's mighty power working through them. If they cannot understand exactly how everything is going to happen, they won't proceed. They want to walk with God by sight, not faith. To follow God, you'll have to walk by faith because without faith, it is *impossible* to please Him (see Heb. 11:6). Faith is more than just belief. Biblical faith always requires action (see James 2:14). God does not want you merely to *believe* what He says. He wants you

to *obey* what He commands (see Luke 6:4). All of God's promises and invitations will be meaningless to you unless you believe Him and obey Him.

God's invitation for Moses to work with Him led to a crisis of belief that required faith and action. Moses expressed this crisis of belief in the following statements to God:

- "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exod. 3:11)
- "If I go to the Israelites and say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what should I tell them?" (Exod. 3:13)
- "What if they won't believe me and will not obey me but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you?'" (Exod. 4:1)
- "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent—either in the past or recently or since You have been speaking to Your servant—because I am slow and hesitant in speech." (Exod. 4:10)
- "Please, Lord, send someone else." (Exod. 4:13)

Moses offered God numerous objections. He questioned whether God could accomplish such an enormous task through him (see Exod. 3:11), whether the Israelites would believe God had appeared to him (see Exod. 4:1), and whether he was capable of speaking eloquently enough to convince Pharaoh and the people of what he said (see Exod. 4:10).

In each case, Moses doubted God's power more than he was questioning his own ability. He faced the crisis of belief: Is God really able to do what He says? God finally convinced Moses to become involved in delivering Israel from slavery. Moses' faith is described in Hebrews, however, as a model of self-sacrifice and trust in Almighty God. Once God let Moses know what He was about to do, that revelation became Moses' invitation to join Him. The writer of Hebrews describes Moses' faith and action:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and chose to suffer

with the people of God rather than to enjoy the short-lived pleasure of sin. . . . By faith he left Egypt behind, not being afraid of the king's anger, for he persevered, as one who sees Him who is invisible. By faith he instituted the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. By faith they crossed the Red Sea as though they were on dry land. When the Egyptians attempted to do this, they were drowned. (Heb. 11:24-29)

REALITY 6: YOU MUST MAKE MAJOR ADJUSTMENTS IN YOUR LIFE TO JOIN GOD IN WHAT HE IS DOING.

This is a second point at which many miss out on experiencing God. To get from where you are to where God is requires significant adjustments in your life. These adjustments may relate to your thinking, circumstances, relationships, commitments, actions, and beliefs. I have been asked if every adjustment God asks us to make is significant. My response is always: To move from your way of thinking or acting to God's way of thinking or acting will require fundamental adjustments. You can't stay where you are and go with God at the same time.

Moses had to make major changes in his life to join God in what He was doing. Moses couldn't stay in the desert and stand before Pharaoh at the same time. God said: "'Return to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead.' So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey, and set out for the land of Egypt." (Exod. 4:19-20).

Moses made the required adjustments to orient his life to God. He had to become convinced God could do everything He said He would do. Then he had to leave his job and extended family and move to Egypt. When Moses fled from Egypt forty years earlier, he had been a fugitive. Returning to the court of Pharaoh could have been tantamount to turning himself over to the authorities who wanted to punish him severely. Moses had to believe God could do what He said or else Moses' life was in grave danger. After determining to move forward, he was in a position to obey God. That did not mean he was going to do something all by himself for God. It meant

he was going to be where God was working. Then God would do what He had purposed through Moses. Moses was a servant who was moldable, and he remained at God's disposal to be used as God chose. God accomplished His enormous purposes through the ordinary shepherd, Moses.

REALITY 7: YOU COME TO KNOW GOD BY EXPERIENCE AS YOU OBEY HIM AND HE ACCOMPLISHES HIS WORK THROUGH YOU.

Once you have determined to follow God by faith and you have made the adjustments, you must obey Him. When you do what He tells you, no matter how impossible or bewildering it may seem, God carries out what He purposed through you. Not only do you experience God's power and presence, but so do those who observe your life.

Moses came to know God by experience as he obeyed God, and God accomplished His work through him. Many Scripture passages in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy illustrate how God spoke to Moses and brought him into a deeper understanding of who He is. As Moses obeyed God, God accomplished through him what Moses could not do on his own. Here is one example where Moses and the people came to know God as their Deliverer: The people were on their way out of Egypt when they approached the Red Sea. They couldn't go forward, and the Egyptian army was blocking their retreat. The people could see no way out. It seemed as if by following God's guidance Moses had inadvertently led his people right into a horrific bloodbath. But then God spoke:

The LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to break camp. As for you, lift up your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I am going to harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them, and I will receive glory by means of Pharaoh, all his army, and his chariots and horsemen. . . ."

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back with a powerful east wind all that

night and turned the sea into dry land. So the waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with the waters like a wall to them on their right and their left. The Egyptians set out in pursuit . . .

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may come back on the Egyptians, on their chariots and horsemen." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal depth. . . .

But the Israelites had walked through the sea on dry ground, with the waters like a wall to them on their right and their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the power of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. When Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and believed in Him and in His servant Moses. (Exod. 14:15-17, 21-23, 26-27, 29-31)

Moses must have felt humbled and unworthy to be used in such a significant way. Yet Moses obeyed and did everything God told him. Then God accomplished through Moses all He intended. Every step of obedience brought Moses (and Israel) to a greater knowledge of God (see Exod. 6:1-8).

SUMMARY

God is at work reconciling a world to Himself. Because He loves you, He wants to involve you in His activity. He begins by pursuing a love relationship with you. He then invites you to become involved with Him in His work. As He relates to you, He discloses Himself, His purposes, and His ways. If you want to experience God's mighty power at work in and through you, you must walk by faith, make major adjustments, and obey whatever God tells you to do.

EXPERIENCING GOD TODAY

Spend some time with your heavenly Father. Pray through the "Seven Realities of Experiencing God," and ask the Father to help you understand how He works with His people.

SEVEN REALITIES

1. God is always at work around you.
2. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.
3. God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.
4. God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.
5. God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.
6. You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.
7. You come to know God by experience as you obey Him, and He accomplishes His work through you.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you believe God is at work around you right now? If so, what do you sense He is presently doing?
2. What has God done lately that provided you an opportunity to come to know Him more personally than you had before?
3. Is God inviting you to join Him in His activity? If so, what is He asking you to do?
4. Have you heard God speak to you recently? If so, what did He say? What have you done in response?
5. Are you presently experiencing a crisis of belief? If so, why?
6. What adjustments in your life is God asking you to make?
7. How have you come to know God more personally as a result of obeying what He told you to do?

