

The Nearness of God

M. W. Bassford, 1-6-13

For most of us, the recently-concluded holidays are a time for family and friends. We take time off of work and spend that time with our loved ones instead. However, sooner or later, the time away from reality ends. We have to put our vacations behind us and go back to work, even though it may mean spending time with those we DON'T particularly want to be around. This can lead to some difficult partings until the next holiday season rolls around.

This morning, though, I don't want to focus on being close to the people on earth we care about. I want to talk about being close to our Creator. This shouldn't be a once-a-year or once-a-week vacationy thing. It should be an always thing. For those of us who are still hunting for a New Year's resolution, might I suggest drawing closer to Him. However, this closeness isn't something we can achieve effortlessly. Let's look this morning at the nearness of God.

How Not to Find It

Even though this is a positive topic, we're going to begin by considering it in a negative light. We're going to look at how NOT to find nearness with God. One of the simplest ways to ensure that we aren't close to God, nor He to us, is by **ASSUMING IT'S THERE**. Peter brings up one of the problems with this assumption in 1 Peter 3:12. God has an extremely close relationship with the righteous, but He is NOT close to the wicked. God loves all of us, but His nature prevents Him from having fellowship with us if we reject His commandments. This is not something that most Americans appreciate. Instead, they assume that they can live however they want, and whenever they feel like turning to God, He'll be waiting there, like some downtrodden housewife who waits at the door to welcome home her philandering husband. This perspective, though, fails to appreciate the reality of who God is. It's not an option to Him for us to be unfaithful to His commandments, any more than it's an option to be unfaithful in our marriages. God has the same kind of emotional disgust toward sin that a wronged spouse has toward adultery. When we choose to abandon Him, we hurt Him in the same way. As with any relationship, if we want a relationship with God, we have to live like it.

It's equally wrongheaded to assume that nearness with God has something to do with **LOCATION**. God Himself explains the problem with this view in Isaiah 66:1. Today, there are millions of people who believe that they can draw near to God by looking for Him in the right physical place. They go on pilgrimages all over the world because they think that if they go to some special site, where a Biblical event may or may not have happened, that God is more present there than anywhere else. Even if we recognize the problem with that, it's still easy for us to fall into the trap of practicing churchianity rather than Christianity. The only time that God crosses our minds is when we're within these four walls, as though He isn't available to us at any other time, as though we shouldn't always be available to Him.

Sure; it's important to assemble with the saints. It is a way that we draw near to God, and we can't walk with Him unless we do. However, our worship services aren't the end-all be-all of our closeness with Him. Instead, they're supposed to be the beginning, so that we seek the nearness of God no matter where we are.

Likewise, others believe that nearness with God is about **EMOTION**. They sincerely feel that God is with them, so He must be. Paul points out a difficulty with this way of thinking in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4. It's not up to us to decide whether we're pleasing to God. It's up to Him. However, all kinds of people don't see this. Instead, they assume that if they're happy with God, He must be happy with them. Often, they assume this in flagrant disregard for what the Scripture says about what God actually wants. This seems very reasonable to them, but in reality, it's mindboggling. In what other relationship in our lives do we get to dictate the terms like that? Saying, "I feel that God is pleased with me, even though I'm ignoring all kinds of things He told me to do" is akin to saying, "I feel that my wife is pleased with me, even though I just bought her a vacuum cleaner for Christmas, despite having been carefully instructed not to." No relationship can endure if we do whatever we feel like doing, and, in the face of all the evidence, assume that the other person likes it. We wouldn't stand for that treatment from another human being. Why would God tolerate it from us?

We should also remember that we can't induce God to be near to us through **BRIBERY**. He Himself presents the fallacy here in Psalm 50:10-12. We live in a capitalist, egalitarian society, and in many ways, that influences the way we think about spiritual matters too. In nearly every other area of our lives, we look at things from a bargaining perspective. We go to work in exchange for being paid every two weeks. We go to Wal-Mart and give up some of our hard-earned cash in exchange for bananas and socks and whatever else we want to buy. Naturally, we want to import the same bargaining outlook to our relationship with God. We give up some of what we have, and in exchange, He gives up some of what He has. The problem is that we don't actually have anything we can bargain with. The TV preachers will tell us that if we send God 500 dollars today, we can bargain with Him and make Him send us 5000 dollars a month from now. Sadly for us, God is the sole owner of the physical universe, and He has no interest in our money. For that matter, He isn't impressed when we try to bargain with Him over our lives, and the sins that we still want to commit. Brethren, we all belong to God too, and He is not about to strike a deal over something that is already His! That would be like if a thief broke into our house, and we caught him with a bagful of our possessions in the middle of our living room, and as we

threatened to call the cops, he started offering to sell us back our own stuff. There's no way we'd strike that kind of a deal, and when it comes to getting God in our lives, we don't have room to strike deals with Him either.

Finally, we can't bring God near to us through a process of **EXTERNAL SHOW**. Isaiah explores this concept in Isaiah 29:13. It is possible for people to build up a whole scheme of religion that doesn't have a thing to do with God. I think we would all agree with that, but let's take it one step further. It is possible for us, right here, right now, to practice a whole scheme of religion in the Joliet church of Christ that doesn't have a thing to do with God. We can faithfully attend services, say the right things, do the right things, and yet in none of it be motivated by love for our Father. That will have a corrosive effect on every area of our spiritual lives, but most of all, it will have a corrosive effect on our relationship with God. He doesn't want us turning the Christian life into an elaborate ritual that we faithfully observe. He wants us. He doesn't merely want obedience. He wants obedience from the heart, and only that obedience will do.