

Experiencing God
God at Work
July 25, 2021

When you don't move the mountains

When you don't part the waters

When you don't give the answers

I will trust, I will trust in You.¹

That's such a great and confident declaration of faith and, obviously, very appropriate for a church worship experience.

But when we leave this building or turn off the livestream and have to *actually live in the reality* of those experiences:

- Of mountains not moving

- Of waters not parting
- Of answers not coming

It's hard not to wonder ...

- Is God really there?
- Does God really care?
- And, if so, why isn't His presence and activity in our lives more obvious, more visible, more discernable?

That's a question that came up again and again in the "doubt survey" you all participated in back in May which then led the 12-week doubt *series* we just finished up last Sunday.

If you're new to us and you have doubts and questions about God and Jesus and

Christianity and the Bible, etc, etc ...

... I highly recommend that you go to the media section of our app and our website where you can watch, listen to, and even read the manuscript of those messages.

They may not answer all of your questions, but they'll at least give you something to add into the equation as you process things.

And the key point that we came back to again and again in that series is that Christians are not believers in and followers of Jesus because we have all of our theological questions answered.

We believe and follow because the evidence overwhelming points to the existence of God and the reality of the Resurrection of Jesus ...

... both which mean so many good things for

us ...

... one of the greatest being that even when we don't see ...

- Mountains move ...
- Or waters part ...
- Or answers come ...

... we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is *there*, and God is *for us* and not against us.

But, *even with* that confidence ... it would still be nice to be able to discern God's presence and activity in our lives from time to time.

Actually, that's not right. It would be more than nice.

It would be a fulfillment of a promise that Jesus made to everyone who believes in and follows Him: that we would be able to know His voice and sense His presence and discern His activity.

And that's what this series is all about.

Over the next seven weeks, we're going to discover seven realities about God, ourselves and the relationship between God and ourselves that will, at the very least ...

... get us tuned to the right frequency ...

- ... which will then allow us to *experience God* ...
- ... which is the title of this series ...
- ... which is based on the book of the same name by Henry Blackaby ...

- ... which some of you may have read as I did many years ago.

It was extremely helpful to me in understanding how to sense God's presence and activity in my life so, I decided that instead of doing one message on that issue in the doubt series, I should do an entire series on it.

So here we are.

Why We Don't "See" God

But before we begin this adventure, I think it would be worthwhile to talk for just a bit about why God is *not* more obvious; why God often seems to be *hiding* from us.

In fact, one of the most frequent criticisms leveled at Christianity – actually, at pretty

much any religion – is that ...

If a Supreme Supernatural Being (i.e., God) truly does exist ...

- He or she *could* “just appear” ...
- Or do something dramatic like write it in the sky: “Hello, I’m God! And I do exist!”
- Or do some kind of super-duper miracle that no one could miss.

In the *Bruce Almighty* clip that we saw earlier, that was Bruce’s demand. Remember what he said?

“Smite me, O Mighty Smiter!”

In other words, “show yourself! Do something dramatic – even if its judgment and wrath – to prove You’re there!”

And we can easily identify with that thought, can't we?

... which is why you might be interested to know that Jesus once told a story about people who *ask* for that kind of demonstration.

Not of God as the "Almighty Smiter" ... but for a special display of God's power that would convince people that He's real.

You've probably heard it.

A rich man and a poor man (by the name of Lazarus) each die on the same day.

The rich guy is "in torments" Jesus says, and as he looks over the gulf that separates him from Paradise, he sees Lazarus and the great patriarch Abraham standing together on that

other side.

So, he calls out to Abraham and says:

"I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Clearly before his death, he did not believe.

And he knows that his brothers who are still living don't believe either.

But Abraham replied:

"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." Luke 16:27,29 (NIV)

In other words, God has already revealed Himself in a very direct way. And if they really

want to know Him, they can go to synagogue this week and find out more.

The rich man replied ...

"No, Father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead [like Lazarus] goes to them, they will repent."

In other words, "If God would just do something really dramatic, that'll get their attention!"

"It will prove to them that God and eternity and heaven and hell are real, and they'll change their minds about everything!"

But Abraham said to him ...

"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Luke 16:30-31 (NIV)

... which is hard to believe, isn't it?

But that's exactly what happened – and *still* happens – in the case of Jesus (who, ironically, is telling this story).

Jesus *did* rise from the dead.

- People saw him and recorded what they saw and experienced – and not just of that event but of his whole ministry. And those records were preserved for us in the part of the Bible known as the New Testament.
- And His movement *didn't die out* as happened to so many other messianic movements of the first century when their leaders were crucified by the Romans.

- Instead, it survived and then thrived with an impossible message against impossible odds ... which is why you and I are here today 2,000 years later.

The whole thing is incredible. It's spectacular.

And yet, even with all that, so many people remain unconvinced. Some of *us* remain unconvinced.

Why is that?

1. It's because we tend to rationalize away the supernatural.

Our typical response to the incredible, spectacular, and miraculous activity of God is to look for and embrace an alternative "rational" scientific non-supernatural explanation.

I mean, if God *did* write something in the sky, most of us would probably think there must be some meteorological explanation or maybe somebody goofing around with a drone.

We'd try to explain it away ... which was the point of Jesus' story.

In Moses and the Prophets, God had *already done* something dramatic to reveal Himself. But it was explained away by the rich man and his brothers.

And because of that, for God to do raise the bar and do "something *more dramatic*" wasn't going to change their minds.

So, that's one of the reasons why we don't – and we *can't* – "see" God.

But there are couple of other reasons why God seems hidden at times even to those who

do believe.

2. God wants us to respond to Him *freely* out of love, not out of fear.

And a direct undeniable revelation of God would probably be so overwhelming that we would have *no choice but* to believe and obey ...

... which then would override the freedom He has given us as those created in His image.ⁱⁱ

To put it another way, there are some things God can't do – or has chosen not to do – to respect the boundaries of creation.

Just like there are laws of nature which God does not violate on a regular basis, there are also laws of human nature which God does not violate – which is why God remains at least partially hidden from us.

3. Another reason is that, in this present reality, there is a veil between spirit and flesh.

There's a thin opaque curtain, the result of which (according to the Apostle Paul) is that

...

Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.

Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:12

(NIV)

In other words, now on this side of the dividing line, we're simply unable to see and understand with 100% clarity the world that is *beyond* natural, or supernatural.

Someday – “then” Paul says – we will. But for now, our sight is limited.

We can make out *some* of the details – but many things just are not clear to us simply because they cannot be.

So ...

- Dramatic actions on God's part wouldn't do it for many of us ...
- Others of us would be so intimidated by a direct revelation that we would basically be *forced to believe* which would violate what it means to be human ...
- And, right now, there's a built-in veil between the natural and supernatural world.

But there's another reason why we don't see and perceive God's presence and activity – and this one will get us to what we're going to talk about in this series.

In fact, it's very important that you understand what I'm about to tell you because, of all the reasons we don't "see" or sense God in our lives, this one – in my experience both personally and as a pastor – is the most common.

And if you understand it and take it to heart, I think it might actually change your life because it will open the door to you being able to truly know God and experience God in very personal way.

So, here it is:

God is not "visible" to us ... we can't sense God's presence and activity ... because ...

4. We're not looking in the right places for the right things. <repeat>

Instead, we're looking for God in the wrong places for the wrong things.

Here's what I mean by that.

And, again, try to hang with me on this. It's so important to everything that's going to follow.

15 years ago, Dr. Christian Smith (a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina) did a wide-ranging study on the spiritual views of teenagers in the United States who identified as "religious" – many of whom professed to be Christians.

What he discovered is that most of those teenagers – who are now adults in their late 20s and 30s (i.e., millennials) ...

... what he discovered is that most of those

teenagers believed the following:

- A "god" exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- This "god" wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- "God" does not need to be involved in one's life except when needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to Heaven when they die.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, as to where those kids learned this "systematic theology" some of it came from church youth groups, some of it came from

pop culture, some of it came from parents.

And it all got mashed together into kind of a creed which shaped – and continues to shape to this day – their view of God, themselves and the relationship between them and God.

And a lot of us are quite familiar with this “creed” because ... well, frankly, it’s *our* creed. It’s what we believe about God, ourselves and the relationship between us and Him.

And that’s not meant to be a slam. I only point that out to raise a question.

If that’s who you believe God is – and what you believe God wants and ought to be doing – where are you going to look for evidence of God’s presence and activity?

Well, according to “the creed” ...

- If the world as I see it seems to be good right now and things seem to be going well, then that must be God at work.
- If I see people being good, nice, and fair to each other, that's God at work, too.
- If I'm happy and feeling good about myself then "yay God!"
- If God helps me resolve my problems, well, that's God *really stepping up* for me and blessing me.

On the flip side ...

- When things *aren't* going well ...
- And people *aren't* being nice ...
- And I'm *not* happy or feeling good about

myself ...

- And my problems are getting worse instead of *better* ...

Guess what my number one question about God is?

It's "where the heck is He?" It's "why isn't God doing what God *ought* to be doing?"

Or, more accurately "Why isn't God doing what *I* think God should be doing?"

And that's the problem: my evaluation of God comes down to *me* and *my opinion* of "God's job" so to speak.

And when that happens ...

When we evaluate God's presence and activity based on what we think "God ought to be doing," we're likely to look in the wrong places for the wrong things and

completely miss God.

Let me say that again – it's just so important to understand.

When we evaluate God's presence and activity based on what we think "God ought to be doing," we're likely to look in the wrong places for the wrong things and completely miss God.

God's Agenda

So, the very first thing we need to do – the corrective that needs to be applied – if we're going to encounter not "the god of our own making" but ...

- The God who created everything
- The God of Abraham and Moses and Rahab and David and Mary and Joseph

...

- The God who took on flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth

If we're going to encounter THAT God, the very first thing we need to change in our thinking is to understand that ...

God – the real God – has His *own* agenda which may not be the same as mine.

This is so critical to understand.

In fact, I'm going to ask you to read that out loud with me.

"God has His *own* agenda which may not be the same as mine."

And, frankly, often it *is not* the same as mine, which is why so often ...

- The places where you and I are looking for God to show up ...
- And the things that we're looking for God to do ...

... are *not* where God is present and active!

And right now, some of you are thinking: "wait a minute, Rick. So, are you saying that God doesn't care about our happiness? That God doesn't care about our problems?"

Nope, not at all. Jesus made it very clear that God cares about those things because He cares about us.

What I'm saying (actually, Jesus said it – as we'll see) ...

What I'm saying is ...

- There's a much bigger picture than most of us are aware of.
- And until we get that right in our minds, we're going to be confused and frustrated and maybe even discouraged and demoralized enough to walk away from our faith.

See, the imagery that a lot of people have when they become Christians – and this came to me many years ago and clarified how I was misunderstanding my relationship with God ...

The imagery many of us have when we become a Christian is that *we're adding God to our life.*

See ...

- I've got my family
- I've got my career

- I've got my friends
- I've got my hobbies
- I've got my investments and my house
- I've got my plans and my dreams

But at some point ...

- It feels like something's missing.
- Or something bad happens in one of those areas and it breaks me.
- Or *I* do something bad, and it breaks one of those areas.

And suddenly, I realize "I'm a mess, my life's a mess, I need God."

So, we turn to God.

We say, "Jesus, I'm a sinner. I need a savior. I believe you died for me and rose again."

“And I receive your grace and your forgiveness. I invite you to come into my life and help me be a new person.”

And you know what?

He does.

God answers that prayer. Jesus forgives us and supernaturally comes into our lives through the Holy Spirit.

And, by the way, some of you actually need to experience that today because *you're* at the point where you realize *you're* a mess, *your life* is a mess, and *you need God*.

And if you're ready to do that, come talk to me at the end of the service and I'll pray with you.

But that's the mental picture that most of us

who are Christians have of what's happened to us and of our relationship with God.

We've added God which means ...

- God is part of our lives now – and maybe even the biggest part – along with everything else.
- And God's job – God's agenda – is to help us manage all those other things in our lives: to step in and fix things where we can't and to leave us alone where we can.

But – and again, this is so important to understand ...

That's not the *right* picture ... because that's not the picture *God* has in mind ... because that's not the *agenda* God has in mind.

- God does not want to be just an add-on

to your life and mine.

- And God does not want to be merely “the fixer” of the problems you and I aren’t capable of solving on our own.

What God wants to be ... what God actually *is* ... what God is actually *doing* ... is so much greater than that!

... which brings us to the first of those seven realities about God, ourselves and the relationship between God and ourselves ...

... which, if we can embrace it, will allow us to discern God’s presence and activity; to actually *experience God*.

Reality #1. God is always at work around us on his agenda. <repeat>

Even when God is doing something in your life and mine; even when God is working in

our lives, it still comes back to his agenda.

This is why Paul wrote ...

*In all things God works for the
good of those who love him,
who have been called
according to his purpose.*

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

We always stop at the end of that first part –
“God works all things (even the bad things)
for the good of those who love Him.”

So, “yay God, it’s all gonna’ turn out grand for
me in spite of how it looks right now.”

But that’s not where Paul stops because what
God is doing and will do for your good and
mine is bigger than us.

It somehow contributes to and fits within
God’s greater purpose *to which we have*

been called if we're Christians.

See the shift in focus there? It's a God-centered view not a me-centered view.

It also tells us that the picture God has in mind is of our relationship with Him is not Him becoming a part of our lives.

It's *us* becoming part of *His* life (*He* is adding *us*, so to speak) ... The imagery is *us* becoming part of *His* life and joining Him in accomplishing *His* agenda on which He is always working.

One of Jesus' closest friends – John – tells us of a time when Jesus healed a man ... which was great, but He did it on the Sabbath which was not so great.

He writes ...

Because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath,

the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.

In his defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." John 5:16-17 (NIV)

John adds that ...

For this reason, they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 5:18 (NIV)

But pay close attention to what Jesus says next.

"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the

Son also does."

*"For the Father loves the Son
and shows him all he does."*

John 5:19-20 (NIV)

Now, guess what Jesus is describing here.

He's describing what it is to experience God; to not only sense God's presence and activity on *this side* of the veil – on this side of eternity – but to participate in it.

- Jesus says that He is looking at the Father so that He can do what the Father is doing ... because it's His agenda that matters.
- And He says that the Father *shows* Him what He is doing. He reveals it to Him because ... and this is so important ... because He – the Father – loves Jesus.

- And then Jesus – out of that loving relationship and in spite of the pushback against him – does whatever the Father has revealed.

Seven Realities

Now, that little snippet from the life of Jesus illustrates the seven realities of experiencing God that we're going to dive into more deeply in the rest of this series.

And, actually, these seven realities appear again and again in the stories of people in the Bible who experienced God.

Furthermore – and this is why we're talking about them in this series – these seven realities are the pattern by which “regular followers” of Jesus like you and me experience God.^{iv}

At some point, I'll tell you the story but, quite frankly, the reason you're sitting in here today or watching online is that 28 years ago, I personally experienced all seven of these realities ...

... which led to the launch of this church.

And I want to give them to you now, in advance, so that you can see where we're going.

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.

Now, notice that this pattern is very practical.

It's not super-spiritual.

And it's not limited to people who are super-expressive in a worship service or who people are able to spend gobs of time in

prayer, though those *certainly* are times when we can experience God.

And I say that to encourage you because the temptation when looking at these realities is to think, “oh, that has to be for someone else. I could never do those things. I could never experience God through that pattern.”

But you know what’s interesting – every person (except for Jesus maybe) in the Bible who followed that pattern thought the same thing.

I thought it, too.

And I was wrong.

And so are you.

So, I hope you stick around for the rest of this series because you can do this – or, I should

say, God can do this in you.

Closing

Now, at this point, some of you are thinking, "Rick, you made a really big deal about ...

- God's agenda not being the same as our agenda
- That we aren't adding God to our lives as much as God is adding us to His ...
- So that we can join him in accomplishing His agenda ...
- ... on which he is always at work.

"But you didn't tell us exactly what that agenda *is*! You didn't tell us what God is working on!"

You're right.

I did that intentionally so maybe you'll come back and find out.

Not really.

Actually, I did it this way because before we talk about getting more involved with whatever God is working on, we need to talk about getting more involved with *God* personally – the relationship side of things.

And that's what we'll look at next week.

But as we close today, we're going to sing a song that we sing a lot because we love it and because it's so encouraging ...

... especially when we think about the problems in our lives that are too big for us; problems that really do require God to

intervene on our behalf.

And as I said earlier, God does do that for us.
God does work for us.

As the prophet Isaiah once put it ...

*Since the world began, no ear
has heard, and no eye has
seen a God like you who
works for those who wait for
him! Isaiah 64:4
(NLT)*

But today, as we sing this song, and you think
about ...

- The mountains that need to be moved
- The waters that need parting
- The answers we're looking for

I want you to think about those things in a different light. I want you to remember that ...

- God does not want to be just an add-on to your life.
- And God does not want to be merely “the fixer” of the problems you aren’t capable of solving on your own.

And to remember that what God is doing and will do for your good and mine is bigger than us; that it somehow contributes to and fits within God’s greater purpose *to which we have been called* if we’re Christians.

Endnotes

ⁱ Trust In You, Lauren Daigle

ⁱⁱ This and many other excellent reasons are described more fully here: <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/where-is-god-the-problem-of-divine-hiddenness/21445/> and <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/quick-shot-if-god-exists-he-wouldnt-be-so-hidden/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2018/july/toxic-belief-of-moral-therapeutic-deism.html>

^{iv} Blackaby, Henry T.; Blackaby, Richard; King, Claude V.. *Experiencing God (2021 Edition)* (p. 69). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.