

Experiencing God
Believe It or Not
August 22, 2021

Good morning everyone.

Whether you're on campus or watching online, I'm so glad you're joining us as we're almost to the end of our current series, *Experiencing God*.

Only one more week to go after today, which is a slight change to the plan. Originally, I thought it would run through the first Sunday in September but, as it turns out, we'll be wrapping it all up next Sunday.

And I have to tell you that I'm pretty fired up about today and next Sunday ...

... because what we're going to talk about today and next Sunday is where it all comes

together.

This is where the action is in this whole process.

And speaking of “the whole process” for the sake of those who are joining us for the first time, I should probably take a few minutes to review the process that we’ve been talking about over the past month or so ...

A process that actually comes from a book called *Experiencing God* ...

... which was written by a guy named Henry Blackaby who studied the stories of many of the men and women in the Bible who had an encounter with God.

In his research, Blackaby discovered a pattern (or a process) at work that you and I can follow today if we want to be able to discern God’s presence and activity in our

lives.

And I think most of us do. That's why we're here, right?

So, here are the "Seven Realities of Experiencing God" that Blackaby discovered, the first four of which we've already covered in this series.

And if you missed any of those messages, I strongly recommend that you watch, listen to or read the transcript of whatever you missed ...

... which you can find in the media section of our app, website and podcast.

... especially if you're a Christian and you're struggling to recognize God's presence and activity in your life.

#1. God is always at work around you on *His* agenda.

A big reason why we don't sense God's presence and activity in our lives is that we're primarily looking for God to do something about *our* agenda.

We want God to help us accomplish *our* will as we build *our* kingdom – whatever that might be.

But Jesus said that, whenever those of us who are Christians pray, we should say ...

- "May *your* name, God, be glorified"
- "May *your* Kingdom come"
- "May *your* will be done."

Instead of "*my* name and *my* kingdom and *my* will."

That's God's ultimate agenda – the establishment of His Kingdom in the here and now ...

... meaning that people all over the earth would be reconciled to Him and submit themselves to ...

- His rulership
- His leadership
- His way of life ...

... which is far better than any way of life we can dream up for ourselves.

So that's what God is working on around us all of the time.

And if we're going to be able to experience

his presence, we have to become more aware of that.

That's reality number one.

#2. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.

God didn't create human beings to be "worker bees" for him ... which was a radical distinction between the God of Israel and the mythical "gods" – actually "idols" – of the surrounding nations.

Instead, God loves us and wants us to love him in return. He wants a relationship and a friendship with us.

And everything that else happens between us and God is meant to flow out of that which, again, is a radical distinction from how most people think about God.

So ...

- Number one ... God is always at work around you.
- Number two ... God pursues an ongoing relationship with you that is real, personal and based on love.

#3. God invites you – if you're a Christian – to become involved with Him in His work.

... which is also radical because most people – most Christians, actually – believe that God's work is to be done primarily ...

- By "ordained clergy"
- Or "religious professionals"
- Or, at the very least, "really deep" and "really spiritual" people ... sometimes

referred to as “weirdos.”

But the truth is – the reality is – that every person who believes in Jesus and receives Him as their savior is a minister.

If you’re a Christian, you’re in “the ministry” just like I’m in the ministry.

Obviously, we have different roles to play, but God needs *you* as much as He needs me or anyone else on our church staff.

He needs *you to do* what He’s asking you to do as much as He needs *me to do* what He’s asking me to do.

So, how do we know what God wants us to do?

How do we know what it is we’re being invited to do?

That's reality number four, which we talked about last week.

4. God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.

If the Holy Spirit lives within you – and He does if you're a Christian – God will actually *tell* you what He wants you to do and not do.

And when He does – when you become aware of that communication, that's part of "the experience."

That's part of sensing God's presence and activity in your life.

You're experiencing God in that moment.

Now, I'm not going to say any more about this

today because I talked about it in great detail last week ...

... other than to say that the “primary language” of the Holy Spirit is scripture.

And if you’re going to be able to discern what God is saying in the present, you have to know what God has said in the past.

Because whatever God will say to you today – whatever work God will invite you to join Him in today – will be consistent with (not “identical to” but “consistent with”) what He has revealed in the past.

Now, with all of that as foundation, we’re now ready to move to the fifth spiritual reality which is that ...

5. God’s invitation for you to work with Him

always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.

That's what we're going to talk about today.

And next week, we'll look at the final two ...

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.

And, as I said earlier ...

- This is where the action is.
- This is the pressure point.
- This is where God either comes through or He doesn't.

An Example

And to help you see this a little more clearly, I want us to look at part of the story of Moses (although, as I said, we could look at lots of stories of lots of Biblical persons because this pattern is common to all of them).

Now, in case you don't know who Moses is ...

- Moses is the guy through whom God delivered the ancient people of Israel from captivity in Egypt.
- And Moses is the guy who God used to create the unique Hebrew culture which has endured for almost 3,500 years and gave rise to Christianity which has endured for over 2,000 years.
- Moses is the guy through whom God delivered the Ten Commandments which, up until recently, pretty much shaped the

Western world – perhaps nowhere more strongly than in our own country.

Moses is a pretty big deal in the overall history of the world.

But *the story of Moses* reveals that he had no idea of the influence he would have, nor would he have believed you if you could have told him.

In fact, when God spoke to Moses and invited him to join in what God was about to do, Moses was probably at the lowest point of his life ...

... which is part of what led to the “crisis of belief” he experienced.

So, let’s pick up the story from Exodus chapter three, which says that ...

Moses was tending the flock of

Jethro his father-in-law ...
Exodus 3:1 (NLT)

Now why was this great influential leader, Moses, hanging out with a bunch of smelly animals?

It was because 40 years earlier, Moses had discovered that, even though he had been raised as an Egyptian in the household of the Pharaoh of Egypt, he was really an Israelite.

And after that revelation, every time he witnessed his people suffering as slaves of the Pharaoh, it upset him more and more until one day, he couldn't take it anymore.

When he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite slave, he killed the guy and buried his body in the sand ...

- ... which the Pharaoh soon discovered ...

- ... which led to Moses fleeing to the desert
...
- ... which led to him eventually marrying
Jethro's daughter ...
- ... which led to him becoming a shepherd
...
- ... which is what he had been doing for
almost 40 years.

So, Moses is out in the wilderness where he had been pretty much every day for a long, long time.

And he sees something he had never seen before – a burning bush, which actually is something he *had* seen before because, in the dryness of the desert, it wasn't unusual for brush to catch fire.

But this bush was different.

Though the bush was engulfed in flames, it didn't burn up.

"This is amazing," Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go see it."

Exodus 3:2-3 (NLT)

When the Lord saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush.

Exodus 3:4-5 (NLT)

"Moses, Moses!"

"Here I am Lord."

"Do not come any closer," the Lord warned. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground."

"I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Exodus 3:5-6 (NLT)

... which is another example of the fourth reality of experiencing God: that whenever God speaks, part of what He reveals is Himself – who He is and His character.

And now, He's going to reveal His purposes and his plans to Moses.

"I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering."

Exodus 3:7 (NLT)

"So, I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead

them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey.” Exodus 3:8 (NLT)

Now, if you're Moses at this point, you're at least a little bit stunned ...

- First of all, by this bush that's on fire but doesn't burn up ...
- And then by this voice that comes from within the bush ...
- A voice which actually calls him by name ...
- And a voice which identifies the speaker as God ...

But then the voice – God – tells you, of all people, that He's been paying attention to what's going on down in Egypt. And He's

already at work on a plan to deliver them.

Now, the Bible doesn't say this, but you have to think that, if you're Moses – with all that he's been through – you're probably thinking ...

"Wow, that's really good news. That's great to hear because I saw the same thing 40 years ago – the oppression and the suffering."

"So, yay God. You go get 'em."

"And let me know how it turns out. You know where to find me. I'll be right here ... in this desert ... tending this flock."

Now, again, I don't know that Moses actually thought that. I think I would have.

But I *do* know that Moses had to be shocked to hear what God said next.

*"Now go, for I am sending you
to Pharaoh. You must lead my
people Israel out of Egypt."
Exodus 3:10 (NLT)*

"Wha - what? Wait a minute. I thought you said that YOU had come down to rescue them."

"Yes, Moses, that's exactly what I said. You heard correctly."

"Now go, for I am sending you to lead my people out of Egypt."

... which is an example of that third reality of Experiencing God: that God invites us to join Him in the work that He is already doing.

And not only that: it's also a great illustration of the fact that God invites ordinary people to partner with him.

See ...

- Moses might have been born in Egypt ...
- And he might have had the education and training and privileges of the Pharaoh's household.

But that was "a long time ago ... in a galaxy far, far away."

And whatever advantages and skills might have been acquired and developed had long since faded ...

... which is why Moses – once he realizes that God is serious – responds in the way he does.

Moses protested to God, "Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of

Egypt?" Exodus 3:11 (NLT)

"And furthermore ... let's just say that I actually do this crazy thing you're talking about. Let's say I go to the people of Israel ...

... **"and tell them ..."**

"The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they will ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?"
Exodus 3:13 (NLT)

"I mean, I'm no theologian. I'm not a preacher or a teacher."

"And if I go and do this thing ..."

"What if they won't believe me or listen to me? What if they say, 'The Lord never appeared to you'?"
Exodus 4:1 (NLT)

What if they say, "You've been out in the sun too long Moses! You're seeing things."

"Furthermore, Lord – and you already know this because you know everything ...

"But let me remind you that ...

"I'm not very good with words. I never have been, and I'm not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled." Exodus 4:10 (NLT)

"I guess what I'm saying Lord, just in case it isn't clear ..."

Bottom line ...

"Lord, please! Send anyone else." Exodus 4:13 (NLT)

Now, there's a lot more to this conversation than I just took you through.

God actually responded to all of Moses concerns and complaints, but I just wanted you to get a sense of how strong – and how negative – his reaction was.

And the reason I wanted you to see that is because a lot of people say, "if I could just see God *literally*, if I could just hear God's voice *literally*, then I'd believe and I'd do whatever He said."

But what we see in Moses' experience argues for just the opposite.

What we learn from his experience is that hearing God speak – whether it's audible as in his case or spiritually through the Holy Spirit ...

Hearing God speak leads to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action ...

... which, again is the fifth of the seven realities of how we experience God's presence and activity in our lives.

And from this point on, you'll have to decide what you really believe about God. And the way you *respond* will reveal what you *do* believe, regardless of what you say.

So, let's talk about that crisis of belief.

Questions in Crisis

As I thought about this – as I reflected on Moses' experience and also on my own experience and the experiences of others ...

I thought of five questions that typically occur as part of the "crisis of belief."

In other words, when you've heard from God, and these questions come to you (in one form or another), that's a sign that you're in this critical stage of the process.

And you might be confronted by all of these questions or maybe just a few. And those "few" might be different from one situation to another depending on what it is that God is inviting you to do.

But I think all of them together capture the essence of the crisis.

1. "Did I hear God correctly (and what if I didn't)?"

In other words, "I think God told me to do something but I'm not sure if it was God or it was just my own thoughts."

This is where it's more difficult for us than it

was for Moses.

Moses *knew* it was God speaking but sometimes we hesitate because we're not sure it was God we heard.

So, what do you do in that case?

You ask God to confirm what you think He said by doing what we talked about last week.

You go back to scripture, you pray, you run it by other people who know you and know God.

And then you look for God to open or close a door, knowing that just because something is hard to do doesn't necessarily mean it's a closed door.

- Sometimes it's hard to do because you have a spiritual enemy who is against you.

- Sometimes it's hard to do just because not everything is easy.

When Moses went back to Egypt, the Pharaoh didn't just roll over and play dead. He didn't just say "oh, OK, I'll be happy to let all of you go."

It was a long and drawn-out battle.

And there were times when Moses was discouraged in spite of the fact that he had truly heard from God.

Anyway, if you question whether or not you heard from God, you try to confirm it and then you trust that God will direct your steps, even if you get it wrong initially.

Remember, this is *God's* agenda. He's in charge.

And this is God's invitation, which means ...

- It's on Him to make sure you know what to do.
- It's on him to guide you to where you need to be, even if your first step is wrong.

Here's the second question ... and Moses struggled mightily with it ... and so do we.

2. "Who am I to do this? I'm not <fill in the blank>"

In Moses' case it was ...

- "I'm not qualified. I've messed up big time. I've blown my credibility. I murdered a guy!"
- "I'm not spiritual enough. I don't know all the answers to all the questions people

will ask.”

- “I’m not gifted enough. Leaders need to be good at speaking and that’s not me.”

I think a lot of us have the same exact “I’m not.”

God speaks to us and invites us to do something, and we respond, “But Lord, I’m not qualified or spiritual enough or gifted enough.”

I remember when I was working for Bell Labs many years ago as a software developer and I knew that God was calling me to change careers and go into full-time vocational ministry.

There was a period of about 18 months from the time God made that clear until we were able to sell our house and move here to KC.

And during that time, I was a horrible person.

I was so critical of Jetta and so impatient with our kids that I seriously wondered if I was even a Christian.

I even stopped going to church for a while because I felt like such a hypocrite.

And so many times, I thought, "who in the world are you to even think about going into the ministry? You're such a screw-up. You have nothing to offer. No one should ever follow your example."

And at some point, God spoke to me through a book I "just happened" to come across.

And through that book, He said, "yep, Rick, it's true. You are a far worse sinner than you ever believed. But my grace is far better than you ever imagined."

“And if you accomplish anything at all, it’s because of my grace and what I will do in you and through you.”

As the Apostle Paul once put it:

*We have this treasure in jars
of clay to show that this all-
surpassing power is from God
and not from us. 2
Corinthians 4:7 (NIV)*

It was like a light went on and I understood probably for the first time that it’s not about how good we are but about how good God is, and that we just need to rest in that.

I also remember being terrified at the thought of seminary because I was a tech guy and seminary is a lot of literary stuff and a lot of writing. And that wasn’t my background or training.

God said “yep, that’s true. But don’t worry about it. I’ll help you.”

When I graduated, three years later, I actually won the award for being the top student in religious education!

There IS a God. 😊

Here’s the point. God doesn’t “call” the qualified or the gifted. God qualifies and gifts the “called.”

If God speaks to you and invites you to do something, He will build you up.

His strength will be enough, His grace will be enough, and He will make you enough.

When you read the full conversation between God and Moses, that’s what God told Him again and again.

And it works the same way with us.

Here's the third question ... and the Bible doesn't say that Moses wrestled with this one but, given that he was a fugitive from justice, it's not a stretch to think that it at least went through his mind.

3. "Will I (and my loved ones) be safe?"

It's pretty amazing how often we use this question to determine God's will.

- If it's safe, then it probably is, and we should do it.
- If it's not safe, then it's probably not God's will, and we shouldn't.

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying. God obviously wants us to be wise.

But it's so easy to "spiritualize" our fear by saying, "well, wouldn't God want us to be prudent?"

Maybe. Maybe not.

Because what God *really* wants us to be is obedient.

Sometimes prudence *is* obedience, but too many times we leverage prudence to stay put and not have to risk anything.

Again, way back when I was living in NJ and thinking about changing careers, it took a long time for Jetta to come to the same conclusion because she was concerned about the safety of our children.

“If you give up your job and your income ... if it doesn’t work out ... then what will happen to them?”

One day our church had a guest speaker – a guy and his wife who had moved to downtown Manhattan to start a church.

They had lived in a small town somewhere in the Midwest and the wife talked about how every day she put her young daughters *on the subway* – not on the bus – to go to school.

Jetta was blown away by that. How could she do what seemed to be such a dangerous thing?

So, after the service, Jetta went up to the woman and asked her.

And her response was, in essence, “Which is safer? To be where God wants you to be and doing what God wants you to do? Or to

be somewhere else that you *think* is safe?"

She said, "it's not easy to put my girls on the subway. But God called us to live in downtown Manhattan."

"And if that's where we're supposed to be, that's where *our kids* are supposed to be, too.

"We just have to trust that *God* can take better care of our children *here* than we could *somewhere else*."

That was so powerful that, afterwards, Jetta said, "Ok, let's go for it. Let's move."

It was powerful because it's true.

Look, you cannot be in a relationship with God and never take a risk. You just can't do it.

Instead, you have to trust that God can take better care of you and the people you love when you're in the center of His will than you can take care of you and them anywhere else.

And there so many applications of that we could chase down given our current situation these days, but we don't have time so let's move on.

Fourth question that typically occurs in the crisis of belief ... and again, Moses struggled with this one, too ...

Fourth question is ...

4. "What if I fail?"

"What if I go and do what you say, and no one

listens to me? What if it doesn't work out as planned?"

Now, in Moses' case, it did – obviously. It wasn't easy but people *did* listen, and God *did* deliver them from slavery in Egypt through Moses.

But sometimes it doesn't work out and that makes us very apprehensive.

When Park Hill Baptist decided to invest \$100K in the planting of this church back in 1994, no one knew if it would "work out."

In fact, I had a guy pretty high up in the denomination come and meet with me to tell me that it *wouldn't* work out because ...

- First of all, I wasn't Bill Hybels (the guy who started the movement we were part of at the time)

- And, secondly, because churches that prioritize reaching those who aren't "church people" don't last.

He said we'd go under in less than a year and I and everyone who helped me would be wounded (if not ruined) by the experience.

He begged me to start a more traditional church.

Fortunately for me – and I think, I hope, for all of you ... he was wrong.

But again, sometimes it doesn't work out.

In fact, there's a whole chapter in the NT book of Hebrews that describes people for whom following God's leadership didn't work out as they hoped.

You know what they're called? *Heroes*.
Heroes of the faith.

Because here's the deal: what if it doesn't work out? What if God invites you to join him and it doesn't go like you thought it would?

So what? You would have done what God told you to do.

And that in and of itself is a success because God measures our success by our obedience, not by our results.

His commendation is "well done good and *faithful* servant" not "good and *successful* servant."

Ok, final question ... and this really is the question behind all the other questions.

5. “Will God do what He promised to do?”

In response to all of Moses' questions, God told him exactly what He (God) would do on Moses' behalf.

- “You're not good at speaking? Ok, we'll get your brother Aaron to help.”
- “They're going to ask you tough questions? Ok, I'll tell you what to say.”
- “You think they may not believe that I sent you? Ok, I'll some miraculous things that leave no doubt about it.”

God had an answer for every question that Moses asked.

But it came down to ...

- Whether or not he believed God could be trusted
- Whether or not he believed that what God told him to do would bring about a better result than any other option.

It really was a crisis of belief for him ... just like it is for you and me.

Faith & Action

And to experience God's presence and activity in your life, you have to get through that crisis.

You have to move beyond the questions.

You have to trust His answers to your questions, which is *faith*. And then you have to *act* because faith without action is dead.

Literally.

That's what the Apostle James said. "Faith without action is dead."

Of course, a lot of us say, "I just don't have the amount of faith that it takes to do what God is inviting me to do with Him."

But Jesus said you don't really need all that much.

In fact, He said ...

"If you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible." Matthew 17:20 (NLT)

Now, sometimes people take that out of context and turn it into a "name it and claim it" kind of promise.

“Whatever you want, just believe that you’ll get it, and you will!”

But Jesus isn’t saying that.

Instead, if you look at the context, He’s talking about doing what God has told you to do; doing what God is already doing and is inviting you to be a part of.

In *that* case, when you’re confronted with the questions ... when you experience the crisis of belief ... all you need is just enough faith to take first step.

And then just enough faith to take the next one.

And then the next one, and the next one.

And with each step, God will do what He

promised to do, what only *He* can do. And you will get to experience that.

I think the greatest example of that is the morning that Jesus' disciples were in a boat crossing the lake of Galilee.

Matthew tells us that Jesus went out to where they were by walking on the lake.

When the disciples saw it, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Then Peter replied ...

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." Matthew 14:28 (NIV)

He might as well have said, "Lord, I want to join you in what you're doing. I want to experience God."

Of course, as the story goes, Jesus said, "Ok, come on out."

And Peter did.

Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. Matthew 14:29 (NIV)

Of course, we know – Matthew tells us – that Peter got distracted by the winds and the waves and started to sink, and Jesus had to pull him out.

But for a few moments Peter did what none of the other disciples were willing to do. He walked on water one step at a time ... one mustard seed at a time.

Closing

Now, I tell you that story because some of us are standing at the edge of the boat and God is saying to us, "come on out."

But not into the water.

Instead, God is saying things like ...

- Quit your job and go to seminary
- Quit your job and stay home with your kids
- Go back to work and get out of debt
- Stop running around with that person or that group of people
- Sell your house and move

And maybe it's not all that dramatic ... maybe the Spirit is saying just what the scripture says:

- Love your enemies; pray for them and do good to them
- Give – be generous with your money and your stuff
- Forgive – let go of the demand that they suffer for what they did to you
- Reach out to that person who needs an invitation to church

Whatever it is, I don't need to tell you because you already know it. You've heard the Holy Spirit speak to you.

But now we're facing the crisis of belief.

- Who am I to do such a thing? I'm not qualified, spiritual or gifted enough.
- What if I fail?
- What about my safety?
- Will God actually do what He promised to do?

Listen, friend, all you need is just a mustard seed worth of faith; just enough to take the first step and move beyond the crisis of belief into the experience of God that God wants you to have.

So, let's pray to that end.

Endnotes