

BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE PRESENCE OF GOD

by Carter Conlon

Mark 3:31-35: *There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother. (KJV)*

I want you to travel with me for a moment to a scene, as if it were a play, although this actually happened. Go back with me 2000 years. Christ Jesus the Son of God is teaching in a house with people sitting around him. Now outside the house, there was another group of people who were calling to him and calling for him. To those who were present in the house, the people outside appeared to be closely related to him. They were in fact the closest to him. They were his family.

Here was his own family saying, "He is beside himself."

Think back for a moment to those whom Jesus called his family: Mary, his mother, and his brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Jude. Perhaps he also had some sisters, and they were all outside the house, beckoning to him. His family had gathered outside in order to attract Jesus' attention, and they believed their reason for calling him was justified.

The scriptures tell us that Jesus' family had come to take him home. *And when his friends [family] heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself* (Mark 3:21, KJV). These were his own family members who were saying, "He is beside himself," and in the original text, it portrays this more bluntly: "He has lost his mind." Some of the earlier writers had tremendous difficulty with the idea that Mary and Jesus' brothers could actually be outside the house calling to him, not because they were seeking him, but rather because they believed he had lost his mind. These early translators were so troubled by this verse that they made excuses for Mary, saying that even though she was in the crowd, it was the crowd who appeared to think that he had lost his mind. Mary was only there because she was concerned for his physical well-being. She apparently was concerned because he was seemingly obsessed with ministry, going day and night, probably not eating enough, with crowds always pressing around him. These early writers even tried to eliminate this verse from one of the original parchments. But you and I know that you cannot erase the Word of God. The reality is that those closest to him thought he had lost his mind. There is no getting around this.

■ FAMILIARITY PRODUCED A LOSS OF AWE

A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house (Matthew 13:57). Jesus himself said it clearly, and I believe he spoke from experience. He knew

what it was like to be without honor. His family, calling him from outside, appeared to be filled with concern for him, but they had most likely become too familiar with the Son of God. They had lived with him in their house every day and had seen him come home; they had sat at the table and talked with him. He worked in the carpenter's shop in the early years with his father Joseph. He had walked among them and now they had taken his presence for granted. Every day when Mary and Jesus' brothers got up, Jesus was present, but over time, did familiarity produce a loss of awe of who he was? (See John 7:3-5)

People become too casual as they enter into his presence.

This was a problem, not only in their day, but it occurs in our day, as well. People become too casual as they enter into his presence. This is a condition that can affect even those who are closest to him, and have known him for the longest time. Remember when you were first saved? You came to the house of the Lord and were awestruck, right? You would enter his presence with a trembling in your heart. Every time you opened your Bible, it was as if you had dug in the sand somewhere and found this hidden treasure. And every time you opened the lid, you were going deeper and deeper into incredible gems of truth that were revolutionizing your life. There was this deep sense of wonder that God

Almighty would even consider your coming into his presence.

■ PERSONAL TESTIMONY

In the early years when I first knew Christ as Savior, I lived with this sense of wonder. I lived with it from morning to evening. Sometimes I would walk down the hall at my workplace, and I would get this trembling feeling going through my body. I would realize that God had not just invited me into his presence, but that he lived in me and was changing me. In the morning I would wake up and realize that I was not the same man I had been the night before. Others stood in amazement of the outward changes in my life, but I knew it was God who was living inside me, and I was changing from image to image, line by line, step by step. God was changing me from the inside out, and I lived with this daily sense of awe. I remember walking into places that I attended in fellowship, and everyone was so casual in God's presence. They would be talking about things that removed the sense of wonder that they were about to meet corporately with God. Here they were, being invited into the presence of God, but they were talking about insignificant things. I know this is only a simple example, but we need to keep in our hearts the sense of the greatness of the Lord God. We need to take heed, that taking God's presence for granted and getting used to him always being there, leads to a casual relationship and familiarity.

■ WE ARE IN DANGER OF BECOMING FAMILIAR

In Luke chapter one, Mary had a word from an angel, a messenger of God: *And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him*

the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:30-33, KJV). Imagine the incredulity of Mary, a virgin, after hearing that she was to conceive the Son of God, and that he would be given the throne of his father David. He would be a Redeemer for the people of Israel, and eventually for all humankind.

Mary asked how this could be since she had never known a man. The angel said, *The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God* (Luke 1:35, KJV).

Mary conceived this child miraculously. She had been given a word, and that word came to pass. Likewise, Christ came to you and miraculously changed you from the inside out. People close to you may have said, "How did this happen? How did you change?" All you could say was, "I don't know, but I received a word from the Lord, and he made the word a reality in my life." If the knowledge of having the living God, the Creator of the universe, inside us fails to produce a deep sense of awe, then we are in danger of becoming familiar with the presence of God. Growing up in the same household with Jesus, his brothers might have heard of his miraculous birth and his ability to change lives. If so, this should have caused them to continually reverence him. Instead, we find them outside the door calling to him and calling for him. This came from familiarity. They wanted to stabilize him, thinking he had lost his mind. "Jesus, come home with us." It appears to be holy, but in reality, his family had forgotten who he really was—the Son of the living God!

■ THE CONSEQUENCE OF BECOMING TOO FAMILIAR

The adverse effects of familiarity with the presence of God are also portrayed in the Old Testament in the life and death of a man called Uzzah. *And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God* (2 Sam 6:6-7, KJV).

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Uzzah had become familiar with the ark of God, which represented the very presence of God. The ark had been kept in the home of his father, Abinadab.

King David sought to bring the ark from Abinadab's home into Jerusalem because David knew that it was God's desire that his people embrace him right at the very heart of where he longed to dwell amongst them. And David headed toward Jerusalem with the ark of God in an incredible procession. The scripture says they were singing, dancing, shouting and celebrating with all their might. However, David had moved the ark without first consulting the scriptures. Moses had prescribed that only the Levites were permitted to carry the ark, and that it was to be carried in a certain manner. There was a loss of the fear of God and his word.

Undoubtedly, Uzzah had also lost the fear of God and become comfortable with the presence of the ark. He had seen it and possibly passed it daily

while it remained in his father's house. So when the oxen stumbled and Uzzah reached out to stabilize the ark, the Lord struck and killed him on the spot. Think of the presumptuousness of this young man who tried to stabilize that which is only a representation of God, believing that he could put out his hand and give stability to God.

It is incredible to think that in the same way, Jesus' mother and brothers were trying to stabilize the Son of God, calling for him to come home, thinking that he had lost his mind. As noted, some claim that Jesus' family was only concerned about his personal well-being, which may be true in part. But it was much deeper than that. They were hearing claims coming from Jesus that he had power to forgive sins. It was fine to have a Jesus who did miracles, but not one who claimed equality with God. When Jesus declared that a man's sins were forgiven (Mark 2:5), the religious leaders were indignant, accusing him of blasphemy. He had now placed himself on a collision course with the social religiousness that would not tolerate his words. As Uzzah had feared for the safety of the ark, Jesus' family feared for his safety, and knew society would not accept his exclusive claim as the only way to eternal life. Just as many who then desired that Jesus be more palatable and non-offensive to the masses, so it is true of people today.

■ THE WAY OF THE CROSS IS VIOLENT

In the church at large, we have groups claiming to be his family. They come to the house and call to him, but they are ashamed of his words and of his exclusive mission that sent him to the cross. These same groups remove the teaching of the cross from their theology, saying it is too restrictive and violent. There is no longer any talk of the exclusiveness of the shed blood of Christ. But you can't escape

the fact that the way of the cross is violent. In the cross we see the passion of a holy God pouring out his wrath on his own Son so that you and I may be saved. But if you only see the violence of the cross and not the passion, you've missed the real message. It was the passion of God that sent his Son to the cross. It was the passion of God that caused him to become man. It was the passion of God that sent him on a collision course with his own fallen creation, and all because he was not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He did not hold back on the message and he did not try to sanitize it. It was exclusive. He made it exclusive because there was no other way to be saved except through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. We must never be embarrassed by the message of the cross.

If all you see is a Roman gibbet on which a man called Jesus Christ was ruthlessly and violently put to death, you fail to fully see the heart of God for lost humanity. The violence of the cross is like the violence of a man dashing in front of a speeding train to save a deranged individual who believes suicide is his only way out of a life of hell. The passion and violence of the cross is analogous to a person who willingly sacrifices his own life by casting himself into frigid water to save a drowning person. It is the violence of a man stepping out to save a stranger dangling perilously from a narrow mountain ledge, sacrificing the safety of his own son to make it there, not even sure that the one in peril would reach out and accept his help. It is a violence of God-filled passion

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for your soul that the human mind can scarcely comprehend. God purposed his own Son be killed without the assurance that you would respond to his outstretched hand. So great is the love of God for you. His immediate family would have known by Christ's own confession that the end of his journey was a cross. Still, Mary and his brothers feared for his life.

■ MAY WE NEVER BE ASHAMED

Jesus' own family struggled in coming to terms with his prophesied violent end. They feared the final rage of a religious crowd that would rather destroy the image of God than bend their knees to his Lordship. And that's where this religious world is today! They would rather destroy the image of God than bend their knees to the Lordship of Christ. But, I remind you that one day, every knee is going to bow and every tongue is going to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Mary and Jesus' brothers were crying outside the house, "Come to us." Jesus knew why they were there. He knew they had come because they feared that he had lost his mind. He knew they were trying to prop him up, trying to make him a little more appealing to the masses, and trying to create a sanitized Jesus that everybody would find easier to accept. One commentator suggests that Jesus reacted to his family's request with a sense of irritation in his voice when he said, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" And Jesus looked round about them and said, *For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother* (Mark 3:35, KJV).

This is what I believe Jesus is saying: "I am on a journey, and my journey is to do the will of my Father. I am speaking for him and making a clear declaration of the gospel, and whoever is not ashamed to come with me are my brothers

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and my sisters and my mother. They are not ashamed of my words; they are not ashamed of the cross; and they are not ashamed of my claims of exclusivity. They are not ashamed of my shed blood and they are not ashamed of the violence of my Father's wrath displayed at the cross. They are not ashamed of me and feel no need to make an apology for me. In fact, they are on the same journey as I, and will, in some measure, be despised and rejected by a society and even a church age that is ashamed of me—Jesus Christ.”

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16, KJV). May you and I never lose the sense of awe of who Jesus is. May we never become familiar, casual, and careless in his presence. My heart's cry is, "May God help us. God, help us to preach the gospel. Help us to live the gospel. Help us to walk with Christ and present him unashamedly in the marketplace.”

■ DO YOU JUST WANT A SANITIZED JESUS?

Many in the church of Jesus Christ today have missed seeing the true passion of God; they have become bent on trying to eliminate the violence of it. Although Jesus had never before known or experienced God's wrath and separation from the beginning of eternity, he knew that

he was to endure both now. Yet, he did not try to sanitize the message of the cross.

There was only one way that you and I could be saved. He had to endure the wrath of God. Jesus Christ came to fulfill his Father's will, knowing that his life would end violently on a cross. It was a love far beyond our ability to understand. It was a passion that despised the shame so that he would sit at the right hand of God with his own redeemed. It was the passion of a Christ who did not turn one step away in his journey to the cross.

You and I have to ask ourselves some questions: Are we too familiar with his presence? Are we seeking him because we really want to walk with him? Do we answer the call to take up the cross and follow Jesus? Or are we looking for some kind of sanitized Jesus, a Jesus who is a little easier to digest? I don't know about you, but I never want to take the presence of God for granted, like Mary and Jesus' brothers who thought he had lost his mind. I don't want to end up like Uzzah who lost his sense of awe of God's presence. And I don't want to be like the religious zealots who despised who Jesus really was, the Lamb of God who forgives all our sins. I am going with him even if it means being on a collision course with the social religiosity of our day.

Carter Conlon
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TIMES SQUARE CHURCH

Times Square Church was founded in 1987 by Pastor David Wilkerson, author of "The Cross and the Switchblade." It is an interdenominational church located in the heart of New York City.

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WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Sunday	10:00AM	3:00PM	6:00PM
Tuesday	7:00PM	Church Service	
Thursday	7:00PM	Intercessory Prayer	
Friday	7:00PM	Church Service	

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