

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Today's Text: Isaiah Chaps 6-9

Extracts:

In the year that King Uzziah died, *I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And the one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" [Is. 6: 1-5]*

*In the movie, **The American President** (1995), the inspiration for the highly rated television series, **The West Wing**, a widowed American President was wooing an environmental lobbyist. He had a big problem. He needed privacy with her but the people responsible for his security would not give him the privilege. One day, he beat their traps. He phoned a florist shop and ordered a bouquet in his personal name. As he was going on a political speaking tour with his entourage, he ordered his driver to stop. Without any warning, he jumped out into the rain and into the florist shop. The young lady on duty was on the telephone, backing the entrance. The President asked for his order and gave his name. When the lady turned around and suddenly realized that she was face to face with the most powerful political leader on earth, she was speechless; the phone dropped from her hand and she fell flat on her back!*

Before her close encounter with the President, the young lady already knew so much about him; otherwise, she would not have recognized him when he came into her shop. She had read a great deal about him in the daily newspapers. She had seen him on television making political or policy speeches at home or abroad. She had felt his power by the way he had authorized military operations and economic sanctions against hostile nations. But after that close encounter, she could not react the same way as before! The man now had a different meaning to her.

So it is with believers. Most of us claim to know God. Is that really true? Do we know Him or about Him? Have we had a close encounter with Him? Let us find out from Isaiah's experience what difference it can make to our spiritual lives.

1. Imagination is not a fact!

I recollect quite vividly a courtroom experience that I once had in 1978. I was then a lecturer at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, but lived in the university staff quarters in the Ikeja district of Lagos. One night (at about three o'clock), I was woken up by a loud noise on the ground floor of my duplex apartment. I tiptoed to the balcony and looked downstairs. To my surprise, I saw the two young men that I knew quite well, the domestic staff of my neighbour's, carting away my goods. I threw a stone at them and hit one of them on the toes. They climbed over the fence separating their compound from mine without taking away anything but left bloodstains on the wall. I invited the police and the suspects were arrested and arraigned before an Ikeja Magistrate court for trial.

In Nigeria, most litigants would prefer to go to customary courts where you do not need lawyers. However, criminal cases go to the "sophisticated" courts- the magistrate and high courts. In the premises of such courts, we have what are popularly called "charge-and-bail" lawyers. These are young lawyers, recently called to the Bar and who do not as yet have any experience or record to attract clients who can afford to pay them high fees. So, they come into the courtrooms and easily take advantage of a government scheme that pays attorneys to represent poor suspects. One such lawyer came forward to represent the suspects who had allegedly broken into my premises.

While laying the charges, the younger (injured) suspect pleaded guilty and added, "what I did was wrong." Before the judge could say anything, his young attorney rushed forward to ask to consult with his client. Soon after, he requested that the charge be read again to his clients. This time, they both pleaded not guilty. That infuriated the judge who insisted on immediate trial! As the star prosecution witness, I was invited to the witness box where I told it as I *saw* it. Then, it came to the turn of the defence lawyer to cross-examine me.

The first question he asked me was, "Can you *imagine* what time of the night the alleged incident took place?" He actually played into my hands because one of the courses that I was teaching then was "Social Research Methods." So, I simply replied, "Imagination is not a fact!" He fired back, "What is a fact?" Happily, I obliged him the answer, "A fact is an empirically verifiable observation!" The judge became so excited and requested for me to say it slowly so that he could put it down! To cut a long story short, the lawyer could not assail my solid testimony and the two men were ultimately jailed.

Imagination deals in fantasies and beliefs. For example, H.G. Wells' classical science-fiction novel, *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) describes a journey from the earth to the moon even before the airplane was invented. Even with its uncanny near accuracy in describing what was on the moon, it did not prevent the continued use of the English idiom, "reaching for the moon" to describe attempting the impossible. That idiom lost its potency after the Americans landed

a man on the moon in 1969. The lesson? Facts are more convincing than imagination!

As we face growing natural and man-made terrorism, there is a growing search for human meaning. For most believers, their knowledge of God is based more on imagination than fact. They know the Bible inside out and can quote the verses effortlessly. They can fast and pray more fervently than the average person. However, from their fruits, you can easily know that they still have a conceptual problem. Yes, they have faith in God, but which God? Is it the God of their imagination or the God that is real, “tangible” and true? The word of God says, “The people who *know their God* shall be strong, and carry out great exploits” [Dan. 11: 32]. To know God means much more than to believe in Him because “even the demons believe- and tremble!” [Jam. 2: 19]. The believer should seek to know God to the point where faith and fact intersect and blend. That point is most enhanced if you have a close encounter with God. Let us study Isaiah’s experience.

2. Isaiah’s close encounter with God

Isaiah is one of the most powerful prophets in the Bible. He recorded precise prophecies concerning the conception and birth of Jesus [Is. 7: 14-15], His suffering and death on the cross [Is. 53] and His glorious reign as King [Is. 9: 6-7]. His prophetic ministry in Judah stretched over sixty years, from the tail end of the reign of King Uzziah [2 Chron. 26:3] to that of Hezekiah [2 Chron. 29: 1-2]. What is the secret of his bold ministry? I suspect that it had to do with his close encounter with God very early in his ministry. Let us study the story as recorded in the 6th chapter of the book of Isaiah.

a) *The timing of the encounter*

It occurred “in the year that King Uzziah died” [v. 1]. Uzziah became the king of the kingdom of Judah at the age of 16 and reigned for 52 years [2 Chron. 26: 3]. He started quite well and “as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper” [v. 5]. Consequently, he was a military genius and inventor who brought prestige and prosperity to his people [v. 15]. However, towards the end of his long reign, he became proud and refused to listen to spiritual guidance [v. 16]. In one case, he took the censer into the temple and wanted to do the work of the priests. God struck him with leprosy and he died a leper [v. 20].

The encounter came at a crucial moment in the history of God’s chosen people. Jotham, then 25 years old, was about to take over from his father [2 Chron. 27: 1-2]. God needed to make a strong point to His people that His promises to Solomon about His perpetual presence in the temple had not expired. Therefore, NOBODY, no matter how highly placed could mess around in His holy house.

Every one of us has a threshold right now that invites a close encounter with God. Your faith is seriously on trial because doubts are growing longer as deadlines are drawing closer. Your prodigal child has not returned home after several years of your prayers and fasting. The church is facing a major attack from secular values and standards. For example, a major denomination in America recently voted to allow same-sex marriages among its fold. In multi-religious societies in Africa and Asia, the church is facing persecution and there is pressure to accommodate a concept of God that flies in the face of basic Christian beliefs. How can we hold on much longer if we do not have a close encounter soon enough?

b) *What did Isaiah see?*

Isaiah was inside the temple and in a vision saw God and His entourage in full glory [**vv.1-4**]:

- ❑ The Lord was sitting on a throne, high and lifted up
- ❑ The train of His robe filled the temple
- ❑ Above the throne stood angelic beings called seraphim, each with six wings
- ❑ The seraphim cried one to another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!”
- ❑ The posts of the door of the temple were shaken by the voice of the angelic being that cried out
- ❑ The whole temple was filled with smoke

You will find similar descriptions in the close encounter with God of Ezekiel as a captive by the river of Chebar [**Ezek. 1: 4-28**] and John as an exile in the island of Patmos [**Rev. 4: 1-8**]. Can you imagine the entourage of the President of the United States when he visits a developing country anxiously seeking American aid or trade? The sirens alone can cause deafness! The number of vehicles; the electricity of excitement as government officials and units try to outdo one another; the dust and smoke that will be raised, depending on the quality of the roads and fuels! You can then imagine Isaiah’s situation when he saw the entourage of the King of kings and the Lord of lords! It was awesome.

The encounter may not always take that form. For example, while Moses was in exile among the Midianites where he tended the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, God appeared to him in a flame of fire and spoke with him, concerning the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt [**Ex. 3: 1-6**]. On Pentecost day, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples like a rushing wind which filled the whole room where they were staying and appeared to them in the form of “divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them” [**Acts 2: 2-4**]. Saul was on the way to Damascus,

armed with a warrant to arrest believers when “suddenly a light shone around him from heaven” and Jesus Christ spoke to him saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” [Acts 9: 1-4]. The encounter can also be in a still small voice, as experienced by Elijah when he was fleeing from the threats of Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, whose 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah had defeated and killed [1 Kgs 19: 9-13]. When you have a close encounter with God, you will know!

c) *How did Isaiah respond?*

Immediately, Isaiah fell on his knees and wept, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; *for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts*” [Is. 6: 5]. Isaiah’s concept of God had moved from imagination and belief to reality and truth. Immediately, he recognized that he had been using a relative concept of righteousness to measure his “holiness.” When you have had a close encounter with God, your standards of conduct become absolute and unchanging and human righteousness becomes as “filthy rags” [Is. 64: 6].

Armed with such new knowledge of God, Isaiah became bolder. So, when the Lord subsequently asked, “Whom shall I send, and who shall go for Us?”¹ Isaiah answered, “Here am I! Send me” [Is. 6: 8]. God gave him a new commission to call the people to repentance [vv. 9-13]. With a fuller knowledge of God, Isaiah prophesied with confidence about the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

A close encounter with God changes your life *forever*! The disciples who had holed themselves into an upper room after the ascension of Jesus Christ came out boldly to preach the gospel of Christ and baptized three thousand new converts in just one day [Acts 2: 5-41]! Saul the persecutor of Christ’s followers became the key prosecutor of His doctrine [see the book of Romans, for example]. Armed with his intimate knowledge of God, Paul could say with authority, “*I know whom I have believed* and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” [2 Tim. 1: 12]. Fact and faith had met and merged! His faith became like granite.

3. Lessons for us

We should note the following key points:

- The *initiative* for an encounter comes from God but the *hunger* for it comes from us. Isaiah was already speaking to his people about the need

¹ Note the triune nature of God demonstrated here. “Who shall I send?” indicating one God; “Who will go for Us?” indicating the Trinity of God.

for spiritual revival but God needed to let him know whom he was speaking about. Paul was zealous to keep the purity of the Law of Moses but God needed to show him its true meaning.

- When the encounter occurs, you cannot miss it because you will not remain the same. You are awed by the experience and submission to God's will is the only thing on your mind. Isaiah confessed his sins and offered himself for service. Without knowing who spoke to him, Paul asked, "Who are You, Lord?" [Acts 9: 5]. As soon as Thomas knew that the risen Christ was face to face with him, he fell on his knees and said, "My Lord and My God!" [Jn 20: 28]. This point is important because many believers who claim to have been spoken to by God have not changed from their wicked ways. I wonder which God spoke to them? *Absolute obedience and unwavering commitment to His service are the hallmarks of your new relationship with God if in deed you have had a close encounter with Him.*

4. Conclusion: Jesus is our closest encounter with God!

Our closest encounter with God came when Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth of Immanuel, God with us [Is.7: 14-15] was fulfilled by the birth of Jesus through the Virgin Mary [Lk 1: 26-33; 2:1-7], for "no one has seen God at any time (but) the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" [Jn 1: 18]. When you refuse to accept Him as your personal Lord and Saviour, then you have rejected the generous offer to be called sons and daughters of God [Jn 1:12; Rom. 8: 14-17]. *From our conclusions above, that is hardly how to respond to a close encounter with God!*

I do appreciate that some believers are not interested in a close encounter with God because it makes new demands that they are not prepared to deal with right now. What a risk to take! Sooner than you may know, we all shall face a closer encounter, *whether we like it or not*. One of these days, the sky will split open and "this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" [Acts 1: 11]. If you have accepted Him already, you will be caught up (raptured) with Him in the air and remain with Him always [1 Thes. 4: 17]. Otherwise, you will have to face His judgment.

The choice is yours!