

Pictures of God #4

As Elgin Staples bobbed in the Pacific Ocean in his unconscious state, all that stood between him and death was his life jacket his small, inflatable life jacket. You see, Elgin Staples, signal man third class in the U.S. Navy, had just been blown off of his ship, the Astoria. The Astoria had been the first U.S. ship to engage the Japanese in the battle of Salvo Island. In the heat of the battle, a shell shot from the Japanese vessel had exploded near Elgin, and had literally blown him off the deck into the Ocean. Even though he was severely wounded with shrapnel in both legs, Elgin had the presence of mind to pull the trigger mechanism on his life jacket before he passed out. So here he was, at 2:00 in the morning, unconsciously bobbing farther and farther away from the Astoria in the Pacific Ocean. Hours later, Elgin finally came back to consciousness. It was only then that he felt the severe pain of his wounded legs. He couldn't see his ship later he would learn that the Astoria had been sunk in the battle. But now, Elgin was concerned only with somehow staying alive. He tried to keep his mind occupied to sustain his consciousness. The only thing around was that life jacket, so he examined it over and over again. It had the name Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. imprinted on it. On another section the manufacturing numbers were printed on it. He kept reading them and focusing on them until they were finally etched in his memory forever. And finally, Elgin's patience paid off. For the U.S.S. President Jackson spotted Elgin Staples out in the water, and brought him on board. Elgin would find out that he was among the 500 survivors of the battle of Salvo Island as he was immediately evacuated to receive medical care. When Elgin Staples finally recovered from his leg wounds, he was discharged from the Navy and sent back to his home in the Midwest. He told his family of his skirmish with death and all about the life jacket that had saved his life. Elgin wondered as tears welled to his mother's eyes as he began to recall the manufacturing number. For, you see, Elgin's mother was employed by the Firestone Rubber and Tire Co. She was a product inspector. The part of the manufacturing number that was the inspection number revealed the fact that Elgin's own mother had tested and approved the very life jacket that would eventually save her own son's life in the Pacific Ocean. Even though she was literally thousands of miles away, in the presence of the life jacket that she personally had tested, Elgin's mother was surrounding her son with support and help in his greatest time of need.

How often have we wished that we could be with one of our loved ones who is going through a special time of need, when an accident suddenly occurs. But this is impossible except in the most coincidental circumstances as happened in Elgin Staple's life, for we are limited to these earthly bodies. We can only be in one place at one time, and we can't possibly know when and where emergencies will strike.

But there is one who has the ability to be everywhere at the same time. There is no where where his

presence can be avoided. He, of course, is God, the one who is both omnipresent in his created universe and also imminent within his created beings.

During the past several weeks, we have been looking at pictures of God seen in David's 139th Psalm. We have already seen the God who knows all things in verses 1-6, the God who is everywhere all the time in verses 7-12, and the God who has created all things in verses 13-16. Now this morning, we would like to focus on the God who is imminent, the God who is continually with us. And how appropriate it is for us to consider this picture on the morning when we give our Missionary Christmas offering. For one of the names given to Jesus on that first Christmas day was Immanuel – God with us.

Notice David's awareness of the imminence of God in verses 17,18. READ Psalm 139:17,18.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

Now our first thought as we read these verses might be haven't we already covered this area of God before? I mean, we have already seen the omnipresence of God in verses 7-12. If we can't go anywhere to flee from the presence of God – the heavens or Sheol, the wings of the dawn or the far side of the ocean, in darkness or light – certainly God is going to be with us when we wake up from our sleep. And in a real sense, this is true.

But there is another sense in which the omnipresence of God is distinguishable from the imminence of God. Just because God fills the universe with his presence doesn't necessarily mean that he is with us personally. It is very easy for us to become overwhelmed at the greatness of a God who is omnipresent who fills the entire universe with the fullness of his being – but to at the same time miss the reality of an intimate personal relationship with Him. I like the statement of A.W. Tozer in his book entitled "The Pursuit of God": "The omnipresence of the Lord is one thing, and is a solemn fact necessary to His perfection; the manifest presence is another thing altogether, and from that Presence we have often fled, like Adam, to hide among the trees in the garden." There is great truth in that statement. God is an omnipresent God – that is a fact of his being. Whether anyone was even aware of it or not, God would still fill the entire universe with his presence all of the time. But to realize God's presence, his manifest presence as Tozer states it, that is quite another matter. And that is what we are talking about when we speak of God's imminence. It is not just that God is out there abstractly in the universe. It is also that God is with us in a very personal way, and we can have a continual awareness of this presence in our lives.

As one studies the lives of godly people in the Bible, he immediately sees that they were not at all alike

in personality. How different was Moses from Joseph, Elijah from David, Paul from Peter, Ruth from Esther. Not one of these people was very much alike any of the others. Yet there were certain characteristics that they all shared in common. And among the most vital of these qualities was the fact that they all shared a spiritual receptivity. Something inside of them was open to heaven. They all fostered an inner drive that urged them Godward. They all had an awareness of a relationship with God, that God was with them all of the time, and they all worked throughout their lives to develop and deepen that relationship with Him. We see that immediately in the words of David here in this Psalm. "When I awake, I am still with you." As David woke up in the morning, his first thoughts were of the presence of God, and this awareness helped him to realize God's imminence in a very real and practical way.

What practical values come into our lives from an awareness of God being with us? I would like to discuss 3 with you this morning.

1. Realizing the truth that God is with us gives to us the possibility of greater fellowship with Him.

Too often in life we are like Jacob of old. He had run from his home because of the threats of his brother, Esau. Esau was angry and bitter towards him because of Jacob's deception, taking away the birthright first and then later the blessing of his father, Isaac. And now Esau was consoling himself with the thought that he would kill his brother, Jacob, just as soon as his father, Isaac, passed away. Rebekah's advice to her favorite son, Jacob, was to run, run for his life. So Jacob had run, and now he was out in the wilderness, away from home, not knowing exactly where he was going or what he would find when he got there. He was afraid and felt very much all alone. And it was in this setting that God gave a dream to Jacob that first night as he lay on the ground sleeping with a stone for his pillow. In this dream, there was a staircase connecting the earth with heaven. On the stairs were angels ascending and descending. On the top stair was the Lord himself assuring him "I am the Lord, the God of your father, Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Gen. 28:13 15.

Verse 16 then records these amazing words, "When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." Now these words are amazing because if you would have asked Jacob the night before concerning the attributes of God, He would have affirmed the omnipresence of God. Jacob was one of the O.T. patriarchs, schooled in theology. He knew as David and every other good O.T. theologian about the omnipresence of God. But at the same time, he didn't really know it. He had been overwhelmed by his feelings of loneliness. Whereas God was still omnipresent, Jacob didn't have any

awareness of that presence in his life. So it was necessary for God to remind Jacob of his imminence, that he was with him, that he desired fellowship with him, that he wanted to walk with him and be with him continually. And this dream so impressed Jacob that he made an altar and called the place, Bethel, the house of God.

God created us to have fellowship with him. There is a place in each of our lives that will not find total fulfillment unless we are walking in fellowship with God. We all know that God is everywhere in the universe, that he fills space with his presence, that he is omnipresent. But the question is: are we aware of that presence of God when we wake up in the morning? Are we aware of that presence of God as we walk throughout the day? Are we living our lives fellowshiping with God?

One of the great values of the imminence of God is that it allows for the possibility of continued fellowship with Him. He is always there in his omnipresent being. But we only fellowship with him when we are aware of that imminent presence.

David knew of this kind of fellowship with God, and he wrote often of it. He concluded his great statement on the Lord being his shepherd in Psalm 23 with the thought Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

2. But there is also a second value found in the fact that God is always with us that is the potential of continual communication with God. Since God is imminent within his creation, He is always there, ready and willing to communicate with his people.

God desires to speak to us. The major way he does this today is through his word, the Holy Scriptures. In a day of prolific books, it is sad that so many times we lose the wonder and uniqueness of the one book which is God's word, the Bible. It is so easy to begin to look at the Bible as just words written upon paper pages, like any other book. But when we do, we overlook the presence of God himself in our lives, and the Word of God loses its power. The Bible claims to be the living, powerful word of God himself. As we accept it as such, and as we recognize the fact that the Bible is the God who is with us, speaking to us, there is limitless potential for the power of God to be unleashed in our lives. And we find in a very literal sense that God is communicating, speaking to us.

Great people of God have been those who have consistently allowed God to speak to them through His word. Martin Luther once said, "I study my Bible as I gather apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest might fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb, I shake every branch and every twig. Then I look under every leaf." It is that very attitude realizing the presence of God in our lives, the fact that God speaks to us through his word and wanting to know every single bit of that communication that contributes to growth of Christian character.

Those who believe the Bible to be true and practice that truth in their lives realize God's blessing in many different ways. We all realize that the middle east is one of the great suppliers of oil today and that the oil reserves found there have dramatically changed the world economy. Few remember, however, that those oil reserves were first discovered when a Christian executive working for the Standard Oil Company was studying God's word, as was reported in an article from the Chicago Daily News. The executive was reading in the second chapter of Exodus in his yearly practice of reading the Bible through. The fact that Jochobed daubed the small basket in which she placed Moses with slime and with pitch to waterproof the basket before setting Moses afloat in the Nile River caught his attention. With his geological background, he immediately began to think where there is pitch there very likely might be oil reserves. So he immediately sent Charles Whitshott, Standard Oil's geologist in charge of finding new oil reserves, on a trip over to the Egyptian area and out of that decision, oil was discovered in the Middle East. Now in many ways, it didn't make much logical sense to look for oil in an arid, desert region. Geologists believe that petroleum is a fossil fuel formed over long periods of time by vegetation and other forms of life decomposing under pressure in the depths of the earth. Desert regions don't have large quantities of vegetation and life. This would logically be the last place that one would look for oil reserves. But one Christian got an idea as he was taking the Bible seriously, he acted upon that truth and soon everyone was looking for oil throughout the middle east.

So as we take the Word of God seriously in our own lives and act upon that word, we will find our lives being changed for the God who is with us speaks to us through his living and powerful word.

But God also desires for us to speak to him, and we can do that anytime because of the fact that God is imminent, he is always with us. What a difference it makes in life when we realize that we are walking through life with God by our side and when we are continuously in communication with him in prayer. It can become a natural habit for us to immediately speak to him about concerns that we might have in life, to bring people who are in need before his throne as He brings them to our minds, to seek his counsel and blessing before our decisions. This pattern of life results in the difference between a harried, anxious lifestyle and one which is under God's perfect control.

Basically, this was one of the major areas of difference between the disciples early in their walk with God and Jesus Christ himself. You will recall one of the traumatic boat scenes in which the disciples were toiling and rowing against the waves while Jesus was sleeping in the back of the boat. It did not even occur to the disciples to communicate with God and ask for his help. No, they just continued to toil in their own strength until they were faint with exhaustion. And finally, in utter frustration, they shook Jesus Christ awake. "Don't you care that we are all going to drown in this storm?" they accused. Do you remember what Jesus Christ did? His immediate response upon waking was to lift his eyes to heaven and communicate with the Father. The result a peaceful sea, and many peaceful hearts. Happily, the disciples learned the

secret of living in communication with God from their master. Later, the Apostle Paul would sum up this style of life by commanding the church at Thessalonica to "pray continually". Praying continually doesn't mean living one's life in a prayer closet. It means living one's life in the realization of an imminent God, a God who is always with us. It means living one's life with the lines of communication constantly open towards the manifest presence of God in our lives.

David learned to live this kind of life. Not all of the time, but generally. He says here when he woke up in the morning, he was aware of the fact that he was still with God.

3. Finally, there is a third practical value that one realizes when living his life in light of the imminent presence of God and that is the value of always having direction in life.

One of the primary ministries of the indwelling Spirit of God according to the very words of Jesus Christ is to lead us and to guide us through life. "But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." John 16:13

Now, God the Spirit gives us direction in many ways. He gives us moral direction as he convicts us of sin. He gives to us spiritual direction as he illuminates our hearts to God's truth. He gives to us physical direction as he leads us in the path that God would have us to take for that day. The very steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, the Bible says. God desires to walk with his children, leading them and guiding them through life. He can do this because his manifest presence is always with us. We only need to be sensitive to that presence and allow him to be our guide.

She was just a young girl making her first train ride. As she looked ahead out the window, she noticed that the train was heading towards a large river. Noticing her nervousness, her mother sitting beside her assured her that there would be a bridge to carry them safely across the river. And sure enough, the train shortly crossed safely over the river on the bridge. But what if we come to another river along the way, the young girl asked anxiously? Don't worry, dear, her mother assured. Somebody has put bridges up for us all along the way.

That's the way life is for the Christian who is following God's will. God has built bridges for us all the way, and he desires to lead us over those bridges through life as we are sensitive to his presence in our lives and as we are willing to follow his leading.

God is an imminent God. He is not just the all powerful God who has created all things and who is great enough to fill the universe with his presence out there. He is also a God who is constantly with us, and one who desires for us to be sensitive to his presence in our lives. An awareness of his presence allows us to maintain fellowship and communion with him, it allows us to maintain communication with him as he speaks to us through his word and as we speak to him through prayer, and it allows us to have the confidence of his daily direction in our lives.

Are you living your life in an awareness of God's presence? Do you find yourself generally living with a spiritual receptivity?

Let me just conclude here with a very practical suggestion. Living our lives with a continual awareness of God's imminent presence is a lifestyle, a way of life, a good, continual habit if you will. Sometimes we need to help ourselves initiate and set this kind of habit in life. Try this for this next week, and see if it will not make a difference in your life. Set up different check points in your day to remind yourself of God's presence with you. Start when you wake up in the morning. By your alarm clock, put a card which simply says God is with me right now. And when you see that card as you are waking, acknowledge the presence of God with you. Speak to him, thank him for watching over you through the night, and invite God to guide you through the day. Then at various other check points thru the day, put reminders of God's presence with you. Perhaps a card on the visor of your car, perhaps a card in the locker at work, perhaps a card on the machine that you use, perhaps if you use a time management system regular entries in your day-timer or Palm. In my Palm I have put a daily entry at the top that simply says "God is with me". Every time I look to see the next appointment on my schedule I am reminded of that fact and I can just whisper a sentence prayer for guidance or help. The fact that God is an imminent God is more than just a theological truth, it has the power to change our lives.