



## **A Promise You Should Take Seriously**

### **How Do You Decide What to Prioritize?**

Recently I saw a report that a celebrity couple who has only been married for three weeks has decided to take some time away from each other. The logic presented in the story was that to keep the marriage alive and vibrant, they needed time apart, time living in separate places. That may make sense to these two and they may be the rare couple who find success in this sort of arrangement, but I am rather dubious, and you may be too. Nearly all marriage ceremonies include some sort of vows where each of the two promises to be faithful to the other and remain that way until death. Generally we think of such promises only on one side of the ledger. That is my "promise to you". I am making a commitment to you. Yet the reverse is just as true. Who I marry is also making a promise to not take apart the marriage through infidelity. That spouse makes a promise to you to be faithful and it is just as binding, just as life changing as yours. Promises and vows have lost their luster, been diminished in value over the past two hundred years or so but perhaps you and I can begin to take back the glory and splendor they once had. It starts I believe by making sure your promises are honest and trustworthy and then beginning to believe the promises of others are just as secure and credible. Let's take a look at one promise that many have lost sight of, even in the Church.

Before considering the promise, first let us examine one of the more fascinating questions in Christianity. Which happens first? Do you approach God or does God approach you. Perhaps you have noticed something interesting about the selection of Jesus' first disciples. In John 1, two unnamed men who were disciples of John the Baptist were with John when Jesus walked past them. John commented immediately, "Look, the Lamb of God!" Straightaway the two started tagging along behind Jesus and the Lord noticed. **Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"** (John 1: 38 NIV) Jesus then invited them to come along with Him. **"Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.** (John 1: 39 NIV) One of the two disciples of John the Baptist was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Convinced of who Jesus actually was, Andrew eventually left and went to go get his brother Peter. **The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.** (John 1: 41-42 NIV) So John indicates that it was Andrew and then Peter who approached Jesus and decided to follow Him. Take a look at what Matthew has to say about the development of this relationship between God and His disciples.

Matthew reports that Andrew and his brother Peter, as fishermen were hard at work. In the process of tossing their nets into the lake, hoping I'm sure for a bountiful catch, Jesus suddenly approached them on shore. **"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."** (Matthew 4: 19 NIV) And so they did! **At once they left their nets and followed him.** (Matthew 4:20 NIV) What is intriguing here is that in the case of John's account, it is Andrew, at the recommendation of John the Baptist who with his friend initiated contact with Jesus. With Matthew, it is Jesus all the way who makes the invitation to Andrew as well as Peter to join Him. So here is the question before you. Who is it that got the relationship going between Andrew and Jesus? Was it Andrew or Jesus? Let's just take John the Baptist out of the discussion for a moment. Did Andrew show interest in Jesus first or was it Jesus who pulled Andrew into the relationship?

Now you may not like this answer or even agree with it but I would suggest it is “yes”. Andrew at the time probably would have told you he decided to trail behind Jesus until Christ invited him and his buddy to go with Him. Jesus however may tell you that He started the thought process in Andrew, or maybe He would point to the Holy Spirit. In any case, for Andrew, with no audible voice or physical prompting by God, he made the first move and so it is with us. It could very well be that there is a supernatural, unconscious prodding by God that leads us to be attracted to Him before the thought ever comes to us to follow Jesus. Yet, in the practical space of the here and now, we don’t have access to that part of the process. All we have is what we know and see and for us, we must decide if we want Jesus in our lives. Listen carefully to what James, the brother of Jesus says to you. **Come near to God and he will come near to you.** (James 4: 8a NIV)

There are two parts to this. First, it is a command! The Greek grammar of the word translated “Come near” has this as an order. The verb “Eggizow” means “to approach, to draw near”. “Come near to God”, says James. “Approach Him!” He means for it to happen now too. Do not delay. Do not wait until a better time. Second, it is something to be done at this moment. We tend to put off what must be done, waiting for a better or easier time, especially when it comes to the things of God. Do you remember the famous burning bush experience of Moses? It is similar to what James is saying to do. God put a burning bush before Moses as he was out in the lonely reaches of the desert tending his flock of sheep. What amazed him as he spied it was that although it blazed with fire, it was not at all consumed. Intrigued, Moses decided something. **So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight — why the bush does not burn up.”** (Exodus 3: 3 NIV) And then he did it. He walked over to the burning bush. He didn’t wait. He did what he thought to do. Did Moses know he would meet God then and there? Of course not. At the moment, it was all Moses as far as he was concerned. He saw something strange, a bush that burned without being incinerated, and he decided to approach it.

It is like that when it comes to approaching God. As far as it seems, it is all on you. You think about it. You are intrigued by the prospect. You decide to approach God. That is all you need to know. You do it. You approach God, just like Moses did the burning bush. The only difference is that there is not a physical entity to approach. It feels esoteric, perhaps even not real in a sense. Moses had a bush all aflame. You have God who you can’t see, touch, smell or hear in any physical sense. So what does approaching God mean for you? How do you actually do it? Jesus said that God is Spirit. Those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth. That is a most profound and amazing statement. Perhaps it is not one we want to hear but it is at least understandable. We cannot expect to draw near to God in some sort of physical way like approaching an icon or a painting or a statue. God is not physical. Approaching Him does not involve getting up close to something physical. That though does not mean that in the approach, there is nothing physical there. It is however supernatural. Let me explain.

In the book of Hebrews, a similar path to take is presented. **...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.** (Hebrews 10: 22 NIV) This is less a command and more a rallying cry. Let’s do this! Let’s draw near to God! Hebrews provides three parts to his invitation and each is straightforward. 1. Hold unswervingly to the faith you have in the salvation of Christ. Grab with all the strength you have the confidence you have developed that God is working perfection in you and eternal life. 2. Encourage others to live a life of love and good deeds. Set an example of this daily and push for it wherever you are. 3. Make sure you are regularly meeting with other believers and encouraging others to do the same. The promise James provides if we are doing this is that God will come near to you. He will present Himself to you and you will know it. It may not happen today. It may not happen tomorrow. It will happen though, and you will know that God is close to you, drawing near to you. The other day, as I was pondering this topic, I thought about something that had not been delivered. It had been four weeks and I suddenly wondered what I should do about the matter. In an instant, in less than a minute, I got a call from the store about the delivery. Was it a coincidence. You might call it that. But I knew that God had drawn near to me, and it was quite reassuring and wonderful. The promise of God stands. Come near to God. He will come near to you!