

# God, Where Are You?!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

January 10, 2010

©2010 Scott L. Engle

*Exodus 33:12-16*

<sup>12</sup>Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' <sup>13</sup>Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." <sup>14</sup>He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." <sup>15</sup>And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. <sup>16</sup>For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

*Psalms 139 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

<sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

<sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

<sup>10</sup>even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

<sup>11</sup>If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"

<sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

*Too often, it seems as if God is playing hide-and-seek with us, particularly when we are really hurting. We feel lost and very alone. But does God go somewhere? Is God really hiding? How can we be confident of God's presence?*

This study begins a six week series on some of the toughest questions thrown at Christians about our faith. Given the rise of the so-called "new atheists," such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, such questions have been getting more press than usual. And as with all things Christians, the discussions are too often built upon misunderstandings and mistakes.

And even amongst us Christians, certain questions get to the heart of what we really believe about our world, about God, and about ourselves. Yet, even here, we often get off on the wrong foot. What is it that we believe? Why do we believe it? What do we mean by "believe?" A simple intellectual affirmation or a deeply held conviction?

In a recent review of Dallas Willard's new book, *Knowing Christ Today: Why we can trust spiritual knowledge*, John Ortberg points us to Michael Novak's description of three different kinds of convictions: public convictions, private convictions, and core convictions.

"Public convictions are those beliefs that we try to get other people to think we believe whether or not we really do. It is what happens when politicians say, 'This is the greatest nation on earth,' when in reality they are not sure. Private convictions are more subtle. These are beliefs that I may *think* I hold in the abstract, but when circumstances allow them to be tested it turns out that I don't really believe them. For instance, when I am in church listening to a sermon I may think I believe, "it is more blessed to give than to receive;" I give mental and

emotional assent to it, but when I look at the way I live, it becomes clear I do not actually believe this.

Core convictions, then, are what Dallas would call our ideas about the way things really.<sup>1</sup> And he notes that we always live at the mercy of these ideas. I cannot violate, for example, my belief in the law of gravity. My actions are always a result of my purposes and my convictions about the way things really are. . . . Our public convictions may be bogus, our private convictions may be fickle, but our lives will always reflect our core convictions.”

Ortberg’s larger point in his essay is that churches settle for shaping members’ private convictions, rarely helping them to unearth and transform their core convictions. Hence, discipleship programs languish and even worship attendance becomes optional. Get any group of church leaders together and they’ll tell you how difficult it really is to help people become more genuine disciples of Jesus Christ. Rarely however, will those leaders diagnose the problem as well as Ortberg and Willard.

This series gets at those core convictions. I’ll at least try to help you unearth some of your core convictions, and, perhaps, I can help you begin to challenge them. When Paul urges believers to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2), this reshaping of core convictions is exactly what he means.

Here’s the six questions that we are going to tackle in this series. As you’ll see, each one gets at core convictions that shape our response to God, as well as our life with God and one another:

- Why does God seem to play hide-and-seek?
- Why does God allow evil in the world?
- Why is Jesus the only way to God?
- Why do so many Christians give Christianity a bad name?
- Why does God look so much like a bully in the Old Testament?
- Why does Christianity include a hell?

There are three foundational principles in how we’ll go about this.<sup>2</sup> First, we’ll work from the belief that there is a God who reveals himself in his actions and in Scripture. Second, we’ll work from the historically-grounded belief that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected by God in Jerusalem on a spring morning in about 30AD, after having been crucified by the Romans. Third, we’ll work from the belief that Scripture is the inspired word of God, written through humans and uniquely “God-breathed.”

So, with all that, let’s get started.

### *The hide-and-seek God?*

A student in one of my classes once came to me with a question. He began it this way: “I know, of course, that God created everything, is letting things run forward and isn’t involved in the day-to-day, but here’s my question . . .” N. T. Wright tells the story of a student who came to him to say that he didn’t believe in God. When Wright asked him to describe God, the student said, “You know, the god<sup>3</sup> who doesn’t get involved in

---

<sup>1</sup>A related idea is that of “worldview.” Your worldview provides your answers to the most important questions about life. Everyone has a worldview, whether they give it much thought or can articulate it. Have you ever gotten in an argument that seems to go on and on until someone says, “That’s just how things are!” Well, you’ve run right into their worldview, this set of deeply held convictions about how things really are.

<sup>2</sup>We can’t deal with each of these three in this series. Nonetheless, it is always important to state clearly one’s starting points.

<sup>3</sup>You’ll notice when I write that I reserve the capitalized “God” for the God revealed in Scripture. All the other “gods” get lowercase treatment. I find this to be a clarifying practice.

the daily muck of our lives, but keeps a list of what we do wrong.” Wright replied, “Well, I don’t believe in that god either.”

In both cases, we’re seeing the students’ core convictions – that there may be a god, but this god is pretty much an absentee landlord, who created the universe but who stays out of the picture except, perhaps, on those rare occasions when this god intervenes in what we call a “miracle.”

Sadly, I think that God as the Absentee Landlord is a core conviction held by many Christians. They may not articulate in that way, but they just don’t see God as being involved in our day-to-day lives. Instead God is a superhero who shows up once in awhile. Why sometimes and not others? Who knows? . . . The truth is that this was once among my core convictions. Christianity was about stuff that happened in the past and a set of beliefs I affirmed, but not the reality of an ever-present, ever-caring ever-loving, ever-faithful, ever-personal, ever-relational God.

But when I began to take Scripture seriously, really listening to some wise teachers, I began to see just how wrong I had been. “Absentee” is the last label you’d pin on God based on even a cursory reading of Scripture. God is everywhere and deeply involved. This is why I am such an advocate of regular Bible reading, study, and engagement. If all we work from is our own feelings, what we learned in Sunday School as a youngster, and what can be gleaned from the latest History Channel special, we will never dislodge the mistaken core convictions that lurk in our minds and hearts, including the Absentee Landlord.<sup>4</sup>

Take the story of the Exodus for example. God has led his people out of Egypt. God is present with them in a way that God has not been present with any other people. God is present with them in the pillar of fire that led them through the wilderness. God is present with them in the clouds that settle on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses ascends the mountain to talk with God, as he had spoken with God at the burning bush.

During Moses’ absence, the people make a religious idol, a golden calf, and begin to worship the hunk of gold, giving it credit for rescuing them from Pharaoh. The above excerpt from Exodus 33 is part of the conversations between God and Moses. God has told Moses that God can no longer be present with his people as he had been. But Moses tells God that he must remain with them, present with them. And God relents. God will remain with his people. God’s dwelling place will be inside the tabernacle the people will build and there Moses will be able to talk with God.

God’s presence, his empowering presence, is a major theme throughout the Old Testament. There is even a Hebrew word, *shekinah*, for God’s presence, though “spirit” and “wisdom” are also images of the God-who-is-present. . . . Never absent, always present.

This same God is present with us now. Just as the psalmist knows that there is no escaping God, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?,” so God is present with us now.

We talk much of the Holy Spirit in church, but, sadly, I think the Spirit is absent from many Christian’s core convictions. They don’t grasp that the Spirit is simply God-present-with-us. That’s who the Spirit is. God involved in all the daily muck of our lives, in ways seen and unseen. The Spirit is both the evidence that the kingdom of God, promised by Jesus (Mark 1:15) at the beginning of his public ministry, has arrived and the guarantee that God will bring his work in this world to its glorious conclusion.

---

<sup>4</sup>For those more familiar with the jargon of theology, the Absentee Landlord is pretty much a synonym for Deism, the belief system of some of our founding fathers, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

### *The Spirit as Evidence*

The Holy Spirit (a.k.a. “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of Christ”) is not a what but a who. The Spirit is God. Not the Father and not the Son, but still God. Fully and completely God though not all of God. The Spirit is every bit as personal and genuine and God as Jesus is personal and genuine and God. In Acts, we are told about people who lie to the Spirit (Acts 5). Who lies to electricity or even to their dog? We lie to other persons.

Paul refers to Jesus as the “first fruits of those who have died” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). “First fruits” is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus’ resurrection and the arrival<sup>5</sup> of the Spirit marked the coming of God’s kingdom, which has arrived already but has “not yet” been consummated.<sup>6</sup>

Like Jesus’ resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God’s new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul’s own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, God’s work had come to its climax.

### *The Spirit as Guarantee*

Though Jesus’ resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit are the first fruits of God’s harvest, we want to know when it is all going to be consummated. When will suffering, sickness, sin, and tragedy be swept away? Paul is no fool. He knows that there is much wrong in the world. But he sees the Spirit as the guarantee that all will be put right – that, not only will God’s victory be won, it *has* been won!

Paul writes, “When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . .” (Ephesians 1:13-14 (TNIV)). Again, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30, TNIV). And, “But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NRSV).”

In the ancient world, letters were sent on a piece of rolled up papyrus that would often be marked with the seal of the sender. If the sender’s seal arrived intact, then the recipient could be sure of the sender and confident that no one had opened the letter. The Holy Spirit, who is God’s gift to everyone who has faith in Jesus, is God’s seal on each of his people, marking us out as belonging to God.

But the Spirit is more than a seal, the Spirit is a down payment, a first installment on all of God’s promises. It is a bit like the old lay-way plan. The store would hold the merchandise as payments were made, guaranteeing that the item would one day belong the customer.

The experience of Pentecost was not limited to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. Every Christian experiences a Pentecost of his or her own, for all Christians are

---

<sup>5</sup>Huh? Did God go somewhere. Not long before the destruction of the temple, God’s dwelling place, in 586BC, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision of God’s presence leaving the temple. After all, how could the Babylonians destroy the temple in Jerusalem if God was still present there? The NT writers’ perspective is that God’s Spirit returned to his people after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). And, indeed, God returned to the temple, only now the temple is (1) the Church, the body of Christ and (2) individual believers.

<sup>6</sup>Every time I come to this topic, I get a bit nervous. The kingdom of God has come already, but not yet?? Really? In a word, yes. Both are true. How do we know this? Because God resurrected Jesus and the Spirit has returned (already), though we still live in a world marred by sin and suffering (not yet). The June 29, 2003, Sermon Background Study has the basics on this including a couple of helpful diagrams. The study can be found at [www.standrewencounter.org](http://www.standrewencounter.org).

empowered by the Spirit of God. Some Christians have a very powerful experience of the Holy Spirit while, for others, it is a quiet experience. But the Holy Spirit seals us *all* for God.

### *God never hides*

Our feelings can fool us. We all feel separated from God from time to time. Indeed, such feelings can linger for long periods. We wonder where God has gone, why he isn't listening to us, why our prayers seem to go unanswered.

This is where those core convictions come into play. If your core convictions are grounded upon a god who is an absentee landlord, then, of course, you'll be convinced that just when you need him most, God is nowhere to be found. He'd just be absent, leaving you to make your own way forward as best you can, leaving you to be the master of your fate, the captain of your soul.

But if your core convictions are grounded upon the God whose ever-presence is revealed by his actions with real people in this very real world, as told in Scripture, then you can move through the sense of separation confident that God hasn't gone anywhere. If anything, you have. Trust me, it makes all the difference.

Being confident that God is always present with you, in the person of his Holy Spirit, doesn't mean that all will go as you hoped or that all that all your prayers will be answered in the way that you wanted. But it does mean that you are never alone, that nothing can separate you from God. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

And the love of which Paul speaks is not some sort of distant affections from a remote god, but the active, caring, faithful, in-the-daily-muck love of God. If you were to say to Paul, "But I just don't feel loved," I'm confident his reply would be along these lines: "But you are loved, you are loved, you are loved . . . look at that cross. That's real love. On it hung the God who loves you and is never apart from you."

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. You might begin by talking about the three types of convictions: public, private, and core. How well do you think this three part scheme describes the way convictions and beliefs work in us? What are some examples you've seen where public, private, and core convictions don't line-up? Do you think that we tend to know what our core convictions are? How could we come to understand better our core convictions?
2. When have you personally experienced God's presence with you? How about those times when it seemed that God was somewhere else? Discuss how a n affirmative core conviction of God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit would help to reassure you that God is always present with you? Can our head really help us to overcome feelings of being separated from God? How do you strive to connect with God?

## ***Daily Bible Readings***

**Monday, Psalm 22** You'll never feel more abandoned by God than this psalmist felt.

**Tuesday, Isaiah 63:9-14** There are four references to the Spirit here, the presence of God

**Wednesday, Exodus 33:12-23** The entire passage re Moses' intercession with God

**Thursday, John 14:25-31** Jesus is leaving his disciples, but he promises that Gdo will send the Spirit to be with them.

**Friday, Romans 8:1-17** Our life in the Spirit; i.e., with the ever-present God

**Saturday, 1 Corinthians 12** God, in the person of the Spirit, hard at work in the church.

