

Encountering God at every turn

ENCOUNTER

E: Enter, eat explore and encounter

N Note God's nearness

C: Cultivate Christ Centredness

O: Observe and obey to turn the ordinary into Encounters with God.

U: Understand utterly uncertain and unstable times

N: Nuach is at the heart of Ruach Ministries

T: Trust Levels: towering or teetering?

E: Establish and enable with exousia Authority

R: Rhema words and regular rhythms

Let me ask you: *how* did you encounter the Lord in the course of 2009?

- Was it by direct encounter with Him? By means of dreams and visions? By the Lord overruling circumstances – with certain doors closing in your face and others opening for you? Through seemingly 'chance' meet ups that proved really important; in your quiet times, when you are out and about; in church; out of church? How did you encounter Him?

E = Enter, Eat and Explore

In a passage of quite exceptional warmth and welcome, the prophet Isaiah calls us to come and enjoy the things we most need in life: drink and food, but without money or price as the Lord's own gift.

"Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
And you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Give ear and come to me;
hear me, that your soul may live. (Is. 55:1-2)

What do these verses speak of to you?

They speak to me of the Father's generosity, of our willingness to come and receive, and of single mindedness focus.

The word '*come*' in verse one is *hoy* in Hebrew. (The KJV translates it "Ho.") It is easy to imagine water vendors coming along to sell precious liquid, but it is more than that. It implies a sense of concern and pity for the person who is in need. It is the heart cry of the Lord as He sees our true condition. It is not at all equivalent to the English 'Hoy, you there!'

Who was Isaiah speaking to? To a people who had grown comfortable and complacent in exile in Babylon. They were settling down and in many cases growing prosperous. In the process, their priorities had turned away from the Lord. The prophet doesn't argue with them, let alone rant at them. Instead he invites them to listen carefully to the Lord's invitation and to buy wine and food without cost and to eat – not just meager thimblefuls but to savour His love and presence to the full.

What he was really saying was, 'What is it that really fills your heart and mind and satisfies you?' Before most people are willing to embrace *all* that God has for them, He usually has to make them in some way dissatisfied with what they already have. Where pride of role or possessions or naked ambition are uppermost, there is no *room* for Christ to enter in. As we sing in the Christmas carol, "Where *meek* souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in." We could add to meek 'hungry and thirsty' souls.

In the context of a banquet at which people were sidling up to grab the places of greatest honour, Jesus said, 'When you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, *Friend, move up higher; come up to a better place. Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Luke deliberately uses passive verbs in passages like this: ("everyone will be humbled . . . will be exalted") but let's be under no illusions: the real subject of this profound passage is God Himself. Whatever the mechanism by which He chooses to do it, It is the Lord who ultimately brings about such humbling and such raising up.

The passage goes on to talk about giving to people who cannot give anything back to us; lending with no expectation of earthly reward in the full confidence that God Himself sees and will reward us accordingly (Luke 14:11-14).

In a similar passage in Luke 6:32, Jesus tells us to *'Be merciful, just as Your Father is merciful'*

It is good to have themes to explore. One that would make a good starting point might be to explore mercy. It is the heart of His heart, and one of the qualities that should most distinguish us.

The Hebrew words used for mercy are rich ones: there is the great word *hesed* – loving kindness, covenant love, but also *chanan* to be gracious, to be inclined to show mercy to an inferior since one feels pity (or not spare accordingly); *racham-rachamin*, to love to have compassion or mercy on; to be soft, a mother's breast, the entrails, the womb; and *nacham*, to be sorry (in a positive sense); to comfort or to receive comfort; to relieve someone, to stop his groans by helping him to breathe, to avenge oneself.

Isn't that how God relates to us? Our need attracts His pity and mercy – just as it is attractive to Him when we demonstrate meekness. That does not mean that He does not sometimes withhold mercy in order to get our fuller attention. Otherwise we would soon begin to treat Him with complacency, or simply as our heavenly need-meeter. He is more interested in developing our character in His image.



There is so much we are called to explore in intercession as we cry out to the Lord for His mercy to be shown. A verse you might like to use as a jumping off point is where Mordecai urges Esther to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. (Est. 4:8) Which people or situations would the Lord direct your attention to as you ponder that verse?

Jesus speaks again about this theme by means of a standard rabbinical formula: "Go and learn." *Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matt. 9:13)
He is warning against teachers who have focused on the shell surround and have forgotten the heart of the matter. (cf Micah 6:8, 7:18-19)

Jesus knows what is really going on, and He knows how best to apply mercy. He washed away the sins of the woman caught in adultery, and of Zacchaeus, and Peter when he betrayed him, and even the thief on the cross, who had presumably done something seriously wrong. But He reveals the stern face of God's justice to those whose hearts are not soft, and who do not forgive from the heart. (See Matt. 18:23-35)

Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly, and neither should we. Indeed, it is precisely because He is a God of such compassion and mercy that He cannot possibly accept as His those devoid of compassion and mercy. (NIV Study Bible)

As Augustine said, 'one of the thieves was damned; don't be presumptuous; but one of the thieves was saved, don't despair!' The Lord is the Shepherd who delights to rescue straying sheep and to melt hard hearts, but there are sobering verses about a hardening of the heart that leads to sin that is mortal, (1 John 5:16-17, cf Heb. 6:4-6).



It is good to explore the eternal context that underlies every part of our relationship with the Lord. In the room where you are reading these words there will be light. Not just natural light, but, if you had the right equipment to perceive it, infra red, ultra violet and x ray light spectrums. Ask the Lord to enlarge your ability to "read" the dynamics

of what is going on in situations, whether personal or wider. May He expand your capacity to discern more “spectrums” of lights, and to see more in keeping with how He sees.



There was a form to fill out in *The Times* recently to help people discover how happy and contented they are. Here’s a clue for doing well in it: The Psalmist says,

I will give you thanks, O LORD , with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
I bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name
for Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness,
for you have exalted above all things Your name and Your word.
(Ps. 138:1-2 ESV)

Cultivating the gift of Gratitude not only honours God but is the best antidote to all dark thoughts. Selah: Pause and pray!



The gods we are facing may not take the tangible forms that they do in certain parts of the world. First of all there are the obvious demands of a very highly developed consumerist society, with all their attendant pressures, but then there are the mounting spiritual pressures against following Christ that remain as strong as they ever were, pressures that can mould us into hiding our faith and making ever more compromises.

Think of Christians in Iran who are unable to get a job and whose marriages are considered nul and void because they had a Christian ceremony. The Iranian Government is desperate to close the gospel down. The biggest church in Tehran has just had to close its Farsi speaking services down. May the Lord continue give them wisdom

when to speak out. There is a powerful testimony in the excellent prayer booklet Iran 30 (www.iran30.org) of how a Christian was driving alone when he felt the Lord showing him that he needed to give the driver of another car a New Testament. Hassan jumped out of the car and knocked on the man's window. "I am a Christian and would like to give you a copy of the Gospel of Christ." Startled, the man, who was called Babak, replied, "This morning I said, "God, show me how I can get to know you!" He gave his life to the Lord. Praise God that Hassan was willing to take the risk and share the word of God!

By the way, Maryam and Marzieh have recently declared concerning their long months in prison:

We didn't feel it was us, it was the Lord's intense love for us that kept us going. We felt like He was our lover all the time. There were some very special moments when the Lord was particularly close to us, like when we were very sick. We weren't allowed to have the Bible with us, but we felt He was there."

They again wish to thank believers for interceding for them and would be grateful for continued prayer.

"Our freedom is conditional and we have to wait for a court hearing. It's wonderful that we are out, but the feeling that we might have to go back in hangs over us. Please pray for us."

You'll have your own countries that you are concerned about and want to pray for.

Ponder again these verses from Psalm 138:1-2

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;

I bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name
for Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness,
for you have exalted above all things Your name and Your word.

What thoughts and associations come to your mind as you read these
words?

Pray to enter the Lord's presence as a conscious choice, rather than
allowing the 'gods' of our society to dictate your agenda, or the
discouragements of others to cause you to hold back from exploring
your vocation.



People said that nobody would want to listen to Billy Graham, but he
packed out our biggest football stadia. People told Brother Andrew that
China was closed to the gospel – but he smuggled over a million Bibles
into the country!

There are many courageous Christians who still have the courage to
overcome the spirit of fear and to share the gospel in places like Iran,
where it is illegal for Muslims to become Christians. God is using those
of His servants who are open and available to be used to point people to
Jesus. May we be of their number!