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OD IS PRESENT WITH US, EVERYWHERE

Is God really interested in people?

by C. Mervyn Maxwell

G is it really true that the God of the incredibly small and the indescribably large is personally interested in people?

Or did He, as some have thought, set the universe to run in harmony with efficient "laws of nature" and leave men to adjust themselves to the natural consequences of their individual and collective lawfulness and unlawfulness?

When in April, 1970, an explosion crippled Apollo 13 in space, Congress summoned America to a public act of prayer. And after the command module had splashed down safely before the tense gaze of the entire world, astronauts Lovell, Haise, and Swigert joined the chaplain of the *Iwo Jima* in a prayer of gratitude to the Deity. *Time* (April 27, 1970) printed on its front cover a photo of them with their heads bowed.

The reverence of these American explorers—each one a first-class scientist—contrasted strikingly with the confident report of Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut, who, after making the first human orbit around the earth, reported that he had looked for God out in space and had not found Him.

Christians everywhere were shocked by what they called the Communist's blasphemy; and they felt the same repulsion for Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* allegation that God was neither "up there" nor "out there." Yet certainly neither the "cocky cosmonaut" nor the "blasphemous bishop" is unique in doubting the Deity. Indeed, were good Christians thoroughly "honest to God" themselves, many of them would confess that on frequent occasions it seems for the moment that God is neither up there, nor out there, nor anywhere else. It is all too easy, even for an experienced saint, to thrust his fist into the face of heaven and cry out in frustration, "Where are you, God? Why don't you hear me?"

It is part of the purpose of this series of articles to give the Bible a chance to tell its own account about God so that we can decide on the basis of its own evidence if the God of the Bible does exist and if, existing, He is the God we should love and trust.

The Bible not only asserts—with great common sense—that our complex universe was brought into existence at the behest of an all-wise and all-powerful Creator rather than by chance; it also provides one evidence after another that the God of the "up there" and the "out there" is also the constant Friend of the "down here" as well: "Thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in a high and holy place, and also *with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit.*'" Isaiah 57:15, RSV. (Italics supplied.)

**Man, What
a God!—No. 2**



Gideon thought of himself as the least in his father's house, but God made him a mighty man of valor.

JOHN STEEL, ARTIST. © PPPA

One of the earliest historical accounts of God's presence with man comes near the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 28. A man by the name of Jacob, who had just lied deliberately to his father and cheated his brother out of a fortune, was running for his life. Somewhere out in the wilderness darkness overtook him as the sun sank behind the western mountains. "He came to a certain place," the old account says—any place, the place where he happened to be when it got dark—"and stayed there that night, because the sun had set." While he slept, he dreamed that he saw a ladder set up on the earth, the top of which reached into the stars, and that at the top of this ladder stood God, who said to him, "I am with you, and will keep you wherever

you go . . . ; I will not leave you." At this Jacob awakened and said to himself, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. . . . This is none other than the house of God." Verses 1-17, RSV. (Italics supplied.)

Suppose for a moment that this man Jacob had started his journey fifteen minutes later than he did, and sunset had caught him a mile closer to home, would then the celestial staircase have appeared a mile beyond him? Or if he had started out half an hour sooner and traveled a couple of miles farther, would it have appeared two miles behind him?

Of course not!

For God said, "I am with you wherever you go."

So any smooth place among the

rocks where he might have lain down to sleep would have been to him "the house of God." And any place he might rest the next day at noon while he ate his lunch would be the house of God. And the place where he slept the next night—though he should not see the ladder again—would also be the house of God.

And what does this story about a lonely and unlovely sinner have to do with us? What it says about Jacob isn't the most vital thing. It's what it says about God. For what God did for Jacob He is willing to do for us all. "He is not far from each one of us," says the Bible in Acts 17:27, RSV. (Italics supplied.) "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end," God says to us through Christ. Matthew 28:20.

“With you alway.” In the original Greek the word translated “alway” means “all the days,” or “every day.” How beautiful! Today is Tuesday perhaps. I am with you, He says, today—on Tuesday. Yesterday was Monday; I was with you then. And I shall still be with you tomorrow, Wednesday, and on Thursday and Friday and Saturday as well. I am going to be with you all the days from now until the end.

As the Son of God, Jesus tried to impress this fact indelibly on the minds of His disciples. After His crucifixion, when in a special way He prepared them for His physical departure from the earth, He appeared to them at unlikely times and in unexpected places in order to get this point across.

On the very day of His resurrection He appeared to two of them as they traveled to the village of Emmaus (in the country, in the late afternoon).

Still later in the day He met with others in Jerusalem (in the city, after dark, inside a building, at suppertime).

Once He appeared suddenly while they were fishing (at breakfasttime, when they were at work).

On still another occasion, when five hundred attended a meeting in Galilee, He made His appearance once more. He was teaching them, and us, again and again, that wherever we may be, whatever the time may be, and no matter what we may be doing, He might appear to us at any instant. And even if He does not appear, He is there just the same. “I am with you,” He assures us, “always, even unto the end.”

When you pray, do you notice the face of God bending over you in compassion and love? You may or may not, but it surely is! You don’t feel the pressure of His touch? No matter! The hand of God is resting on your shoulder in love and gracious tenderness.

What God said to Jacob He says to every man, “I am with you, and will be with you everywhere you go—whether you realize it or not.”

In 1965 a bus was returning a

load of teen-agers from a field trip in Mexico to their high school in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. All through the night the bus had wound around mountain curves; but now, with the coming of day, its route stretched out straight ahead, a modern freeway.

At noon Emil, a friend of mine, having completed his shift at the wheel—and having made one more oil check—traded with his assistant and dozed off to sleep in the seat behind him. Just one hour later the new driver had an overwhelming impression that he must stop at once and check the oil again. Since the oil had always lasted two hours, he attributed the feeling to his being overtired and drove on. But the impression persisted, and at last he pulled reluctantly to the side and climbed out. As the traffic roared past, he drew out the stick, checked the oil, and found it all right—no need to add.

Puzzled, he climbed back, took his seat, started the engine, closed the door, glanced into the rearview mirror, and laid his hands on the steering wheel to direct the bus back into the stream of traffic.

But as he turned the wheel it spun around lifeless in his hand! After many years of service the steering column had crystallized, cracked, and sheared off!

As the realization worked its way back through the bus that the steering column had not broken during the night on a dangerous mountain curve, nor yet since daylight as the bus sped along on the freeway, but that it had broken while they were parked safely at the roadside, and that it had happened thus because of an insistent impression in the driver’s mind that he must check the oil *now*, the students began to whisper to one another in reverent tones, “Surely God was in this bus, and we didn’t know it.”

It was not merely the miracle of a disaster forestalled that led those young people to their conclusion that God was with them. Young Christians that they were, they had often studied the evidence in Scripture that God has promised always

to be with us, and that He keeps this promise.

There are many instances recorded in the Bible when God, usually our invisible Companion, has revealed Himself to people to prove His constant concern for our welfare.

God talked to Moses far out on a lonely wilderness plateau. He talked to Elijah hiding for his life in the mountains. He spoke to Elisha in a grainfield. Through His Son, Jesus, He talked to Peter and James at the edge of a lake. He spoke to the diminutive tax collector, Zacchaeus, sitting in a tree. He called to Paul on a crowded roadway. He visited with John as he sat alone on the island of Patmos. Unquestionably He did so to prove that He talks to people wherever they will listen to Him; for that is the kind of God He is.

Of all the places God might have selected for His conversation with Moses, why did He choose a lonely wilderness plateau? Because Moses was a shepherd, and God wanted to talk with him where he worked. Why did He talk to Elisha in a grainfield? Because Elisha was a farmer, and He wanted to talk to him while *he* was at work. He talked to Peter and James at the edge of a lake because they were fishermen and He wanted to visit with them while they were mending their nets. He spoke to Paul in the middle of a roadway because at the time Paul was an itinerant persecutor traveling to arrest Christians and slap them in jail; and God wanted to talk to him while he was busy even with this kind of employment. The God of the Bible wants us to know that He is with us not only in church but also in our work—when we’re washing dishes and changing sheets, or repairing TV sets, or driving pickups, or closing sales, or filling out tax forms, or working at any other task no matter what it may be.

For this is the kind of God He is.

The God who appeared to Jacob, and to Adam, and to Elisha, and to Peter, and John, and Paul, and to many others in Bible times, is the very same God today.

Think what a difference this knowledge could make in your own

life—this knowledge that God is with you. What a lift it could provide when you are disheartened! What conviction it could lend that you ought to do the right thing, and what courage to go ahead and do it!

The Bible gives many illustrations of this. An outstanding example involves Gideon, the hero whose name has been made so famous by the "Gideon Society" that places free Bibles in hotel bedrooms.

Gideon is often remembered as an intrepid warrior who led a tiny army band against an enemy force hundreds of times larger and beat it decisively in a daring night attack. When Gideon first emerges in Bible history, however, he is anything but a brave commando officer! The Bible portrays him as a timid farmer, threshing wheat in a winepress. Judges 6:1-12. Looting bands of the invading Midianites roamed over the land, carrying off all the farm produce they could find. It being the time of the wheat harvest, Gideon supposed that if he threshed his grain in the family's winepress instead of on the threshing floor, he might escape detection. No doubt he wore a sword lest his stratagem be in vain.

All at once a voice behind him declares, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor."

Tingling with excitement and irritated by a greeting he considers sarcastic, Gideon swings about, his hand grabbing for the sword. With amazement he discovers behind him not a leering Midianite but a friendly, if imposing, stranger seated on a rock. The stranger says again, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor."

Gideon fits his sword back into its sheath, and his instinct for combat shifts from sword to logic. What he says amounts to this: "You are

wrong on both counts. If God were indeed with us, He would not permit the land to be overrun by the Midianites. The valley is literally choked with their tents! Sir, *God is not with us*. And as for your remark that I am a mighty man of valor, let me introduce myself: My family is one of the poorest in all Israel, and I am the youngest in my father's house. I have been knocked about from pillar to post since I was born. No, stranger, the Lord is not with us, and *I am not a mighty man of valor*."

How often we talk like Gideon when things go wrong! But God earnestly invites us to believe the opposite, to believe the very truth that He is indeed with us, and that by His power we can achieve great good in the world.

In Gideon's case God gave repeated evidence that He was with him, and at last Gideon believed. He became absolutely certain that God was truly with him—and what a difference it made in his life! He became so much a "mighty man of valor" that he undertook to tackle the vast Midianite horde with a force of only three hundred men—for God was with him—and at the head of such an army as this, composed of good men convinced that the great God of creation was in their midst, Gideon defeated the invading Midianites decisively and delivered his people from oppression.

What a difference a convincing sense of the presence of God made in the life of Gideon! What might it do for you if you would believe in God the same way he did!

A few years ago a friend of mine was asked to take over a run-down parochial school in an underdeveloped rural area. He soon learned how "run-down" it really was. Some of the former faculty had become scoundrels—two of them had even been sentenced to jail! The school accounts were \$150,000 in the red, and so dilapidated were the dormitories that after nightfall snakes slithered in through large cracks in the plaster walls and mother opossums bore their numerous broods on the deserted, broken-down beds. At the very thought of moving to such a place his wife burst into

tears. But Henry, a quiet man of great faith, said that he believed God would help him, that God would stand right beside him.

So he accepted the assignment—and evidently God did stand beside him. For in only two short years the school was completely out of debt, its buildings repaired, its halls once more echoing to student talk and laughter. A sense of God's presence made a difference in his case, measurable in dollars and dormitories and student involvement.

Gideon thought that God lied to him when He called him "a mighty man of valor." Gideon forgot that the same God who spoke these words had also spoken in empty space and effectively commanded the creation of our earth. God had called for dry land, and oceans, and animals, and plants; and at once dry land, and oceans, and animals, and plants had come into existence. Empty space stands at attention, ready on the instant to obey God's voice of command; for when God speaks, there is creative power. When God said to Gideon, "Thou mighty man of valor," He spoke as the omnipotent Creator, and Gideon became just what God called him.

There is of course an essential difference between empty space and a human being. Space cannot choose to resist God. It is compelled to turn into mountains and rivers and plants when God so demands, but to us God has granted the right to choose to refuse. We have the freedom to disbelieve. But if we do not choose to disbelieve and instead choose to take God at His word, what He speaks to us transforms us into new people. See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

When Jesus, the Son of God, said to those famous fishermen, Peter and Andrew, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men," they could have replied, "Sir, we know only how to catch fish and mend nets. We know nothing about winning men to God. We could not possibly do such a thing for Him." But they said nothing of the sort. They chose instead to believe, and all Christendom knows today what soul winners they became, turning

(Continued on page 32)

This article is the second chapter of Dr. Maxwell's latest book, "Man, What a God!" You can get the complete book by writing to Pacific Press, 1350 Villa Street, Mountain View, California 94040. Just \$1.25 postpaid. Mervyn Maxwell is also the author of the popular answers to youth questions. See pages 28 and 29 of this issue.

the Roman Empire upside down for Christ.

When later on God said to Paul, "I am going to send you to the nations as My ambassador," Paul could have refused to believe; but he did not. He chose instead to go out in faith, and as he went he became indeed the great apostle to one ethnic group after another in one country after another.

When a woman who had been caught in an act of sexual deviation was brought to Jesus, Jesus said, "I do not condemn you; *go and sin no more.*" See John 8:3-11. The woman might have responded to His words with a sneer: "This is the only way I know to make a living. Do you want me to starve?" It is more reasonable to believe that she accepted His words as invested with regenerative creativity and that they became to her the beginning of a new life of dignity and service.

The Lord is with us all, saying, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor," only He adapts the words to our particular time and place. For instance, to a young mother He says, "The Lord is with you, you wonderfully successful mother."

She is tempted to reply, "No, God, I can't believe it. All my children have runny noses, and the milk is boiling over. I am not a wonderful mother. I am little more than a dumb animal going round and round on an endless treadmill—and God doesn't seem to care about me at all." But God insists, "I *am* with you. Your kitchen is the house of God, and you are a wonderfully successful mother."

This time the mother chooses to believe what God says, and her home becomes indeed a place of prayer; her nerves relax so that she can think more clearly, and the rest of the day is entirely different because of it all.

You are terribly irritated by something that has just gone wrong. All at once God says, "The Lord is with you, you man of patience and self-control."

"Oh, no, Lord," you reply in surprise, "that's quite wrong. The Lord is not with me, and I am *not* a man of patience. I am just about to explode."

But the Lord *is* with you, and He

says, "Come unto Me, . . . and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28. You believe it, the irritation subsides, and you find out what Paul meant when he said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Philippians 4:13.

If you would like to keep the realization of God's nearness fresh and effective in your life, there are many ways by which you can help yourself to do it. The most important, of course, are to read the Bible, pray, and review God's promises every day.

There are some other ways too. Next time you are kneeling down to pray, perhaps just a few moments from now, you might try moving slightly to one side as if to allow God room enough to sit beside you.

Does it seem foolish? You don't have to do it. Try it only if you wish to. You actually do not need to move your body very much; merely flexing your muscles slightly toward one side will give the desired effect. You are not trying to give God room; you are only trying to help your imagination grasp the reality that God *is* there with you as you pray.

Next time you are walking—anywhere, even along the hall of the office or the school where you work or study—reach out your hand and take hold of God's hand. If you are outdoors and there is no one around, talk to Him out loud.

I had a friend once who, when starting out on a trip in his car, *apparently* alone, would open the door on the passenger's side as if to let God in. Then, closing the door on that side, he would go around to the driver's side and get in himself and take off, preparing himself in this way for many a wonderful conversation with God as he drove along.

But the Bible says something more wonderful about God than even the glorious assertion that He is with us. According to the Bible, it is our privilege to believe that if we will but permit Him, God in some wonderful but unexplainable way will not only be *with us*, but will even be *within us!*

God of course never forces Himself on anyone. He says, "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone . . .

opens the door, I will come in." Revelation 3:20, RSV.

God stands outside waiting to enter; and if we permit Him, He comes in! The Bible says of those who thus invite Him in that their bodies are now temples of God. See I Corinthians 6:19. Jacob learned that every place can be a house of God. Paul taught us that every person—if he chooses—can be a house of God. What marvelous companionship!

What a transforming friendship!

How foolish for us to forget it! Jacob forgot it, though. Years after he had seen the heavenly ladder, he journeyed back toward home. Frightened by the warning of a danger that faced him the following day, he spent all night in prayer in a grove by a river. Suddenly a stranger seized his arm, and a fight was on. Jacob wrestled, as he supposed, for his life, until as the sun arose the stranger revealed Himself to be God in human form. For hours on end Jacob had clung desperately with naked faith to a God he supposed to be far away in heaven, not realizing all the while that he was clinging with his bare arms to God right there in the thicket—the God who was most assuredly keeping His promise never to leave him.

How often when we think God has forgotten us and is far away in the realms of space, He is in reality nudging Himself up against us and offering to make Himself known! All the time and everywhere, whether skies are blue or black, we can count on it. God is where we are. Separated though we may be from all earthly friends, if we but desire His presence, nothing can separate us from our heavenly Friend. "Neither death, nor life, . . . nor things present, nor things to come, . . . 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, RSV.

The great God who made heaven and earth, Creator alike of island universes and minute neutrinos, assures us that He is not far from every one of us. He is with us; and if we will allow Him, even within us, ready, eager, and able to change our lives for the better, completely.

Man, what a God! □