

IS GOD REAL IN YOUR LIFE?

A great concern of mine is the number of young people that have left the ranks of the church in recent years. In God's mercy He has kept me ministering to young people and young adults. Besides my responsibilities in our church pulpit, my free dates in the summer are usually taken by youth camps and youth conferences. I do not take this honor for granted. As I have preached to Christian colleges in the past two years, the presidents often asked me what is my chief concern among our youth and I gave the same reply, "the leavers."

In the November 19, 2010 issue of *Christianity Today*, Drew Dyck wrote an alarming article entitled, *The Leavers*, subtitled, *More than in previous generations, 20 and 30 somethings are abandoning the faith. Why?* He says, "There has been a corresponding drop in church involvement. According to Rainer Research, approximately 70 percent of American youth drop out of church between the ages of 18 and 22. The Barna Group estimates that 80 percent of those reared in the church will be "disengaged" by the time they are 29. Barna Group president David Kinnaman described it in stark terms: 'Imagine a group photo of all the students who come to your church (or live within your community of believers) in a typical year. Take a big fat marker and cross out three out of every four faces. That's the probable toll of spiritual disengagement as students navigate through their faith during the next two decades.'" Toward the end of his article, Dyck remarked about an unsettling pattern that emerged in his interviews of former professing Christians: "Almost to a person, the leavers with whom I spoke recalled that, before leaving the faith, they were regularly shut down when they expressed doubts. Some were ridiculed in front of peers for asking 'insolent questions.' Others reported receiving trite answers to vexing questions and being scolded for not accepting them. One was slapped in the face, literally. At the 2008 American Sociological Association meeting, scholars from the University of Connecticut and Oregon State University reported that 'the most frequently mentioned role of Christians in de-conversion was in amplifying existing doubt.' De-converts reported 'sharing their burgeoning doubts with a Christian friend or family member only to receive trite, unhelpful answers.'" "

There are answers to stem the tide. I am praying and believing God for a revival and resurgence of the "...faith once delivered unto the saints..." (Jude

verse 3). I am convinced we must follow the command of the Scripture which tells us, *"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear"* (I Peter 3:15). God has the answers; I shall not pretend to have them, unless I, like any open-minded person, receive them from God. While recently meditating on why people and especially youth make an exodus from the church and Christian worldview, the Lord impressed me with this thought: people leave because God is not real to them. This then begs the question, why is God not real to people? Allow me to share three thoughts concerning this:

1. God loves you as much David, Daniel, John or Mary.

We have a tendency to look at Bible characters as super paranormal people. This is not true, for instance the Bible says, *"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are..."* (James 5:17). The Bible speaks of David as, *"...a man after Mine own heart..."* (Acts 13:22). The Bible mentions Daniel as *"...a man greatly beloved..."* (Daniel 9:23;10:11,19). John is so overwhelmed by the fact that Jesus loves him that he repeatedly says he was the disciple *"...whom Jesus loved"* (John 13:23; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20). These precious words were given to Mary, mother of our Lord, *"And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women"* (Luke 1:28).

I admonish you to see yourself as loved by God. Furthermore, picture yourself loved as much by God as He has loved any of His servants. *"Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons"* (Acts 10:34). Do you realize you can put your name in the place of "whosoever" in John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever..."* Whosoever means you! In truth you can be as close to God as you want to be. Martha was cumbered and hassled by her much service for the Lord. She even complained that Mary was not helping her because she was caught up in the presence of Jesus and sat at His feet. Jesus said, *"But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her"* (Luke 10:42). Mary was as close to Jesus as she wanted to be and Martha was being challenged by Jesus to do the same.

Our Lord was told that Mary and his half-brothers were looking for Him and he responded, *"And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of*

God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother" (Mark 3:34, 35). Again, I wish to inculcate this truth in your heart: you can be as close to the Lord and know He loves you as much as anyone who has ever lived. *"And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love..."* (I John 4:16). God is real to the people that know they are loved by Him!

2. God will talk with us as clearly as He talked with Abraham, Moses and Elijah.

The verse that called me to prayer while I was still in my teens was Genesis 17:3, *"And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying...."* It was not even a complete sentence but as I read it, I fell out of my seat and on to my knees in worship to the God who not only loves His people, but longs to communicate with His people. I knew at that moment I would not be satisfied with anything less than a lifetime of communication with Almighty God. The Bible says of Moses' interaction with God, *"And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend"* (Exodus 33:11). The Word of God records that when Elijah was in the cave on the run from Jezebel, God talked to him with *"...a still small voice"* (I Kings 19:12b).

Do you feel like God only talks to the patriarchs in the Bible and not to you? Let us take heed to the challenge from the Lord Jesus: *"If any man have ears to hear, let him hear"* (Mark 4:23). This similar phrase is found sixteen times in the Scriptures. God will talk with us. Paul said, *"For there is no respect of persons with God"* (Romans 2:11). God wants to talk to you as surely as He talked to Abraham. He wants to talk to you like a friend as He talked with Moses. Keep in mind we might need to find a quiet place because like Elijah who was very anxious and bothered, you may have to get still enough to hear that still, soft loving voice of God. This leads us to the third and final thought.

3. We must wait on the Lord until He becomes real to us.

God never reveals Himself to those who approach Him casually. If you have a take-it-or-leave-it, ho-hum, nonchalant attitude about living for and serving Christ, then He will always seem far away. In the listing and defining of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Paul adds a most arresting phrase in Romans 12:7, *"...let us wait on our ministering...."* The word "ministering" is "diakonia" in Greek and means "attendance as a servant." The word "wait" is "anameno" and means "to await one whose coming is known or foreseen, with the added notion

of patience and trust.” Another verse where this word is used is in I Thessalonians 1:10: *“And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.”* The idea is that one should know his or her gift, then work on it as tenaciously as a server at a very nice restaurant waits on customers he or she deems important.

The problem with a lot of people is they look at “waiting on the Lord” as something passive. They expect God to knock them out of their proverbial seats and reveal Himself to them. When we treat God as though He is real and wait on Him with fervor, He will manifest Himself to us. Jesus said, *“...Occupy till I come”* (Luke 19:13). The word “occupy” is from the Greek word, “pragmateuomai,” which means, “busy oneself with or to trade; do business.” We get our English word, “pragmatic” from this word, which means to deal with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations. Live like God is real and you shall experience His reality!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in black ink and features a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.