

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**

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## **The Immediacy of God**

### **Exodus 20: 19**

Those who conduct surveys on religion in our country continue to be surprised by Americans' enduring belief in God.

Though all evidence suggests that our culture has moved in an increasingly secular direction, people say that they believe in God in roughly the same numbers as they did a generation ago.

I personally don't derive much comfort from those statistics,

for surveys seldom try to identify what kind of God in which most of the public believes.

Indeed, a fashionable theological trend these days is to embrace an essentially Deist concept of God.

Even so-called committed church people credit a Divine Intelligence with having brought the Cosmos into being;

they may even credit this Divine Intelligence with having left a divine imprint upon those creatures we call human beings;

they may even admit that this Divine Intelligence maintains some loose sovereignty over the eventual direction of the universe.

But that is all. To their mind,

the God who fashioned this universe desires no relationship with the human creatures He has authored.

This God who fashioned humankind does not engage individual in a meaningful way.

This God cannot be said to act in our lives, nor can this God be understood as calling us to action.

In truth, this God is fundamentally disinterested in our existences.

Frankly, such a view of God says more about the viewer than it does about God, more about the Deist than the Deity.

For however comforting and reassuring this concept of God is for many modern people, it bears absolutely no relationship to the God revealed in our Scriptures, the God revealed in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Wait a second, you say. People find this concept of a disinterested and uninvolved God *comforting*?

Absolutely. Having a God that is perpetually aloof and absolutely remote is a great relief for many.

If God is disinterested in us, then we are freed from trying to develop a meaningful relationship with the divine. We don't have to worry about listening for God's call to invest our lives profitably.

If God is aloof from us, we don't have to worry about God imploring us to sacrificial action.

Such a cold God means that we can live our lives embracing our own ethic, following our own instincts.

We are freed to live superficial and selfish lives because a disinterested God

is not gladdened by our love, nor saddened by our apathy.

If God is coolly removed from any active role in our lives, we are freed to be our own arbiters of good and evil.

We are freed, in fact, to be our own God.

We think of this Deist concept of God as relatively modern, dating to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where it found prominent adherents in Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

But in truth humanity's desire to insulate itself from a sense of God's immediacy

is as old as the Hebrew people's experience of God.

Ponder for a moment this small, strange passage before us.

Moses has gone up to the mountains to receive those fundamental instructions from God

that we have come to call The Ten Commandments.

From Moses' perspective, his interaction with the living God has the character of an intelligible conversation. However, the Hebrew people see only manifestations of awesome power.

They can feel the presence of God in the air. The very atmosphere seethes with holiness.

But instead of being reassured by God's nearness, the Hebrew people are discomfited. They tremble and cry out unto Moses, "You speak to us, and we will hear. But let not God speak to us, lest we die."

What a strange reaction! What a puzzling request!

If the Bible is to be believed, the Hebrews have enjoyed God's extraordinary intervention on their behalf.

God has acted to bring them out of bondage in Egypt, delivered them through the Reed Sea, provided them manna and quail, guided them with a column of smoke and a pillar of fire.

Yet, despite these vivid displays of God's providence, in truth the Hebrew people have always experienced these manifestations once-removed. They have always come mediated through Moses' intercession.

But now God is uncomfortably near, ready to address these people directly.

This moment should be the consummation and apex of their exodus experience, but instead the aliveness of God makes them quiver unto death.

They feel threatened, not blessed.

They plead, "Moses, you speak to us, but let not God speak to us, lest we die!"

Someone asked me recently, "Has any of your sabbatical been fun?" I responded, "It's all been fun."

To read and write quietly all day without interruption is delightful, almost like heaven.

In fact, one day I simply sat for most of a day and pondered the meaning of this phrase:

"Let God not speak to us, lest we die!"

I tried putting myself in the position of those Hebrew people and tried imagining the basis of their fear.

Did they simply fear that the purity of God's holiness would so overwhelm their guilty psyches that all of them would simply fall down dead in a state of shock? I suppose that's possible.

But the more I pondered that phrase, "Let God not speak to us, lest we die,"

the more it occurred to me that their real fear was less sublime, less profoundly theological, more akin to the fear we might admit to ourselves, if we were brutally honest.

They feared confronting the immediacy of God because they suspected that in the presence of God's holy purposefulness the superficiality of most of their concerns would be laid bare.

They feared that in the presence of God's urgency and fullness of meaning

the shallowness of most of their pursuits would be revealed.

In the presence of God's holiness, even most of their so-called religious activities would be revealed as vain.

The keen, penetrating energy of God's Spirit would surely ask them,

"Do you think that your committee service and your Sunday School teaching and your offering are truly spiritual acts?"

Is your participation in such activities really about God, or is it mainly about religion? About church?

*I suspect the Hebrew people didn't want to experience the immediacy of God's presence*

*because to do so would have made them live forever aware of the seriousness of life.*

*Then they knew they could never be the same people again.*

When you think about it, to say, "Lord, do not speak to us, lest we die," is a prayer of sorts – but it is the perfect antonym to the prayer that we should pray.

It's a prayer that is tantamount to a bird praying, "Throw me not into the air, lest I die,"

or a fish saying, "Throw me not into water, lest I drown."

Fish are made for water, birds are made for air, and we are made for intimate relationship with God.

C.S. Lewis once made the piquant and arresting observation that if you want to realize that God has imprinted all of life with a serious and transcendent dimension, all you need to do is look at our dirty jokes. For what are dirty jokes about? Reproduction and excretion.

What could be more natural activities in our lives?

Yet there is something about being human that gives even our most natural activities a halo of holiness. This dimension of holiness that undergirds our natural activities makes us uncomfortable, a discomfort we express by means of dirty jokes.

We can't imagine a cow being embarrassed by voiding in a pasture or a pig being shy about reproducing in a barnyard.

Yet we are aware that there is something about being human that makes every activity point beyond itself to a serious dimension of life.

Though it might comfort us a one level to deny the immediacy of God's influence, in truth, the relationships around us precisely parallel the impact that God's presence can have upon us.

A famous preacher was once asked about how he was sure of the mercy of God and he said, "I am certain that God is at least as merciful as the most compassionate deacon I've ever known."

There's more theological meaning in that statement than first meets the eye.

That wise pastor was saying that in those moments when the immediacy of God's character was not clear, there was always someone around who embodied the qualities of God for which he was searching.

I once asked Melba Edwards why she was willing to work with the homeless

at the United Baptist Association's Hope Chapel, and she said that when she was a little girl, her father, a minister, would take food out on their back porch to feed the hobos who rode the rails.

Melba would often sit out with him as he visited with those rough men, and she saw firsthand how he treated them with generosity, compassion, love and respect.

His witness communicated to her what the character of God was like

and patterned for her how service unto others was to be lived. She wanted to do the same.

Who among us has not felt the depth and seriousness of God's service

and the immediacy of God's presence through the life of someone around us!

We who might deny the immediacy of God's influence on our own lives cannot in turn deny the immediacy of our impact upon others. I offer but one example.

A parent is doing a little carpentry around the house and hammers his thumb instead of the nail, emitting an involuntary oath in response, an obscenity he regards as permissible under the circumstances.

A few hours later his five year-old stubs his toe in the parent's presence and parrots the same obscenity.

Suddenly what seemed permissible a few hours ago seems foul and destructive. Suddenly the parent realizes that he has placed a crudity in the mouth of an innocent by his lack of discipline.

*Suddenly he senses the seriousness of his life.* Suddenly he senses the responsibility to model for the young lives around him patterns of righteousness and goodness.

Surely, if we can feel our children looking to us in dependence, can we not realize that the God who loves us like a parent desires that same immediacy of influence in our lives?

Among all the churches that I visited over the last four months, one in particular attracted me.

I was drawn to it initially because its members were in the news for passing out shot glasses to patrons at bars and shopping malls in the Ballentyne and Matthews areas.

On the glasses were the church address and this message, "Give us a shot."

I thought, "A church that creative and caring is worthy of my attention and study."

(Incidentally, people not only showed up at that church in response, many of them came bringing their shot glasses!)

What I like best about the church is its name, because its name reflects its mission.

It is known as The Next Level Church.

The stated purpose of the church is to help people move from wherever they are in their pilgrimage with God to the next level of spiritual maturity.

It might mean moving from mere curiosity about God to taking the first steps toward meaningful faith.

It might mean moving from timid belief to some form of commitment.

It might mean moving from intellectual commitment to committed action.

One thing was clear: the status quo is not acceptable: people were always to be about the process of maturing in their relationship with God.

In worshipping among that congregation I made a startling realization:

*Here was a church unconcerned about church!*

*Here was a church dedicated to facilitating a vibrancy in people's relationship with God.*

To this sole concern the church owed its vitality and warmth.

To help people move forward in their relationship with the divine, to aid them in their appropriation of the immediacy of God, was the only reason this church existed.

It is the only reason any church should exist.

“Let God not speak to us, lest we die.”

What those people were really saying was, “Lord, do not let us know of the costliness of your Love.”

But what is Memorial Day all about? Doesn't it stand as a statement about the costliness of love?

One of my favorite movies is John Wayne's depiction of D-Day, *The Longest Day*, which I've probably seen thirty times, as my children will sadly attest.

I have a favorite part in the movie, that bittersweet moment when the US troops are pinned on the beach and the general, played by Robert Mitchem, decides they must blow a hole in a formidable concrete barrier.

Among those he recruits for the job is a young engineer whom he instantly promotes to lieutenant.

This eager young man braves grenades and machine gun fire to blow a hole in the barbed wire, then places a great host of explosives under the restraining wall.

Every time I watch the movie I hope that this time this courageous kid will make it back to safety.

He never does. Every time, he dies, gunned down just before he can reach cover.

But the explosives he has planted with his life blow the wall to bits and create a path for the U.S. soldiers to begin their task of liberated occupied Europe.

Every time I see that young man die I am reminded of the costliness of the freedom that I enjoy.

So, too, our understanding of God is that God has acted in the history of humankind to embody costly love.

Ours is not a remote God.

Rather, our God is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God involved in our lives.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who invites us to draw nigh to God's nearness

and to live with our Creator and Redeemer as friend with friend.

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May 25, 2008, Memorial Day Weekend