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Introduction

Experiencing God in the Small Group Volume One - My Story

This book is my story. It is the story of my journey from phariseeism to true Christianity. I grew up a perfect, well trained pharisee. Of course, I didn't know it. I thought I was a devout believer. But I was of my father the devil (shudder). I preached the Word, shared the plan of salvation, read, studied and memorized (even deified) my Bible and went to church every Sunday. Yet I knew not God. Then I had my Damascus Road experience, where God shone His light upon my starving soul and I experienced God as a living, loving Being, standing right next to me! Immanuel, we would call it—God with us. But I found God was more than a theology. God was actually within me, talking with me, and sharing life together with me! All of a sudden, it was real! Christianity was real! The Bible was real! At last, I was **experiencing** spiritual reality.

Now the question came: Could He be real in the small group also? You see, I was a teacher of the Word. Could the reality I had found in Christ be realized and experienced among an entire group of individuals seeking God together? I didn't know, but I had to try. So try I did. I taught **in a**

Bible school for seven years and found Christ emerging in class after class. Not emerging as a concept, but as the Wind that blows whither it will, as the Pulse of Life that let us all know we had touched God, as Immanuel, the One walking through the room. The One we could all talk to, but more than that. The One who spoke back. We found we could record page after page of what He was telling us individually and corporately as we came together for the small group gathering.

This book tells my story. And more than that, **it** teaches, because I am a teacher at heart. It teaches you what I had to learn. You see, even as Saul on the Damascus road, I was going the wrong way as I sought to serve God. I was going the way of phariseeism. I was devout. I believed I was right. Yet I was wrong! Totally, dead wrong. God took my heart out, turned it around and put it back in again. God ripped my theology to shreds, and threw most of it away. God took me into the desert for a while so I could learn of Him, and the ways of His Spirit. Then God taught me how to lead groups of His children into encounter with Him,

to experience His wonderful healing presence and love. I want to share what I have learned with you.

I write this book after having served as a Christian for 22 years and in a pastoral capacity for 20 of those years. After giving my life fervently to God and the Church for this extended period of time, I have finally become fully convinced that many of the forms of Christianity I have been exposed to are spiritually bankrupt and have lead me away from true encounter with Almighty God, rather than toward Him. I came to the painful revelation that my religion had totally failed me. I was left numb and angry. I wanted to leave the Church and never have anything more to do with it. However, the Lord spoke into my heart and said, "Mark, it is My Church, and I have not given up on it. If I have not given up on it, neither should you. I have called you to it and you are to give your life to ministering to it." I knew He was right. I knew that, like Jonah, I could never run away from the call God had placed upon my life. And so I have come back. Back to write some more, and back to teach, and back to offer my life if need be as a living sacrifice for that which I believe to be the absolute core of truth that must be restored to Christianity.

A Foundation for Progressing in the Spirit

You will see my hurt, anger and frustration as I write. However, I will try not to simply smash and destroy, but to offer a new foundation for spirituality. It is easy to throw stones. It is much harder to build. I pray that you will agree when you have finished reading that we have not only destroyed the faulty foundations, but that we have built new foundations, based on intimacy with God.

As you read, I pray that, if it is necessary, God takes your heart out and turns it around and puts it back in again. Yes, it is painful, but the joy of knowing God far surpasses all things that I used to count as gain. I pray that this book will ignite a fire in you like never before. May you not be the same when you put it down. May you be delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son.

It seems that every move of the Spirit of God quickly degenerates back into form and religion, and God must move again. Why is this? What is there that pulls us back? Can we identify and cut these strings, and replace them with new planking that provides a footing and bridge for us to walk effectively and continuously in the Spirit world? I believe we can and this book is an effort toward doing that. We will identify and cut through the lies that hold us and draw us back to religion, and establish a new practical theological foundation that will allow us to walk confidently and continuously in the Spirit world.

How to Use This Book

1. I recommend that you first study this book yourself.
2. Then I recommend that the entire leadership of your church study this book as a group over a three month period. **This should include all pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, home cell group leaders, junior church workers, and anyone else who leads in any way.**
3. Then I recommend that as your pastor preaches concepts from this book, your Sunday School teachers and home cell group leaders study this book with their groups over a three month period, so that everyone in your church knows clearly what we are seeking to do as we experience God. Unless we all know where we are heading, we are likely never to get there, because of the drag of those who have been taught by religion that this is the wrong way to go. Therefore, Pastor, take your church as a group through this foundational study on Christian spirituality.

This book has questions at the end of each chapter to promote group interaction. Feel free to cover as many chapters per week as your group is able to, although probably one chapter each week is best.

Incidentally, nearly everything I say in this book **about** experiencing God personally and in **the**

small group, can and does apply to the large group. So, Pastor, please adopt these principles and techniques as readily as you can to the Sunday morning service.

What about my previous book on this topic called Transmitting Spirit Life In the Classroom?

Some of you may be aware that I have already written on this topic in an earlier book entitled *Transmitting Spirit Life In the Classroom*. The following may help you understand the difference between these books. My earlier book is written more for intellectuals and philosophers. Therefore, if you consider yourself one of these, you may want to read that book first. Also, in writing my earlier book, I was testing the waters theologically **in** my own life. I was for the first time putting down some truths that I felt I wanted to live by. Now I have tried to live them for several years. This book is the fruit of that effort. It is the fleshed out story of one who has consciously sought to live out the concepts expressed in the book *Transmitting Spirit Life in the Classroom*. This book is more of a story. Even though it covers all the salient points, it tells the inner drama that brought me to these points. This book is more right brain. And it is designed to be used by the masses to bring them to a new place in their walk with God. Blessings as you read.

At the close of most chapters or sections, I will provide a brief list of key points found in that chapter. This will serve as a brief academic review. There are also action sections at the close of many chapters. These may be discussed and applied in your small group meetings.

Follow-up Book for Leaders of Small Groups

If you are a leader of a small group, there is a follow-up book that I recommend you read, en-

titled **Experiencing God In the Small Group - Volume Two**, It is based on the premises of this book, and in it we lay out standards for Lamad curriculum, standards for Lamad teachers, and standards for a Lamad teaching style. We also give you a pattern lesson plan, and a work sheet that helps you incorporate the key dimensions of personal encounter and Holy Spirit encounter in each lesson you prepare for either a small or a large group. It has chapters on "The Place of Discussion" and "The Use of Questions," and suggestions for personal touches. It is recommended that a pastor take all his Sunday school teachers and home cell group leaders through this book either **on a weekend** or in a several week mini-series.

Review of Some Key Points from the Introduction

1. The teaching of this book flows out of a life story, because I believe that teaching is best done in the context of story.
2. This book is the story of one learning to experience God in his heart and then learning to make this to happen in a group setting.
3. **It is a story of moving from legalism and phariseeism to true Spirit encounter.**
4. This book will help you remove the lies in your heart that bind you to legalism and phariseeism, and continue to pull the Church back away from ongoing Spirit encounter.
5. This book will lay a foundation of truth that will be a platform for you to walk in continuous Spirit encounter.
6. **It is recommended that if a church wants to make this shift to a more thorough, ongoing Spirit encounter, they take everyone through this book in their church's small group setting (over about a 15 week period), and utilize the Sunday morning preaching as a **time to** "flesh**

out" some of the central ideas. This will cause the entire church to become focused in the same direction, and help it progress harmoniously and more quickly toward their desired goal.

Chapter One

Experiencing God

I leaned back against the cold damp wall. Anguish filled my heart. How could I go on believing? I had believed, and believed, and believed, for weeks and weeks and weeks, and yet nothing. Nothing at all. Only the cold damp walls of this room surrounding me. I was not alone. There were others in the room with me. Others who were praying and hoping and believing and waiting. How long could we wait? If God was God, why didn't He move? Why did He take so long? With so much to do, with so many to save and heal, why were we sitting here waiting?

We were to wait "for power," He had said. "Power from on high." I understood the need for power, but I also understood the need for action. I was a man of action. I loved action. And yet here we sat, doing nothing but waiting upon God. I thought my heart would break. I was totally at a loss. I knew I could rush out and just begin proclaiming Christ crucified for the sins of the world, but without divine power, what would it accomplish except to soothe my fractured heart by getting me back into action again?

No, I must wait. And wait I did, for what seemed like an eternity, forty days and forty nights. For more than a month I sat in that room, doing nothing

but calling upon God. At first I thought nothing was happening. But gradually I was beginning to see that things were happening in the periods of alone-ness that God left me in. First, my self-will was broken, because there is nothing I can do to bring forth the kingdom of God. Oh, yes, I can run around and scream and declare that He is King, but does that do anything other than satisfy my frantic flesh? I doubt it. It may turn some people off, but I doubt it does much in bringing forth the kingdom of God.

So I wait, and as I wait, I realize that I am being driven to the core of my being and to the roots of my faith. Who am I? Am I a believer? Do I believe that He is the risen King, the risen Lord of this universe? Do I believe that it is "not by might nor by power but by My Spirit" as the Lord said? Do I believe that "the arm of the Lord is not so short that it cannot save?" Yes, I believe! So I worship the King that I see with the eye of faith and do nothing but believe and wait for the empowering which He said would come. Did I really have any other choice? Not unless I wanted to forsake all that I held dear, all that I had come to believe in during the years, all that I had worked so earnestly for.

No, I must be a believer. I must believe! Without believing there is nothing to live for. Besides, hadn't He proven Himself faithful in the past? Yes! Over and over and over and over again. Therefore I will believe! I will not cast away my hope that has such a great reward. I will keep myself unto Him so that He may use me in whatever way He desires in the building of His kingdom. I will listen to His voice and seek to obey **it** with all that is within me (i.e., through His in-working power). Yes, I present myself to Him.

It is **His** kingdom. **He will build it according to His power** and in **His way**. It is beyond our thoughts as to how He will do it because His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. Therefore I will rest in Him. I will celebrate Him. He is my Lord. He is my King. He is the one I worship. He is the one I wait for. Blessed be the name of the Lord most high!

* * *

As the group reassembled, we began to share the experiences we had had with the Lord. Anyone in the circle was free to tell what God had done in his heart. When it came to me, I shared that as we had separated for a time of journaling, the Lord had taken me to Acts chapter one. He had directed me enter the passage and "become" one of the disciples (Peter) waiting in the upper room for the release to go forward in ministry. He had taken me there because in earlier journaling God had told me that He had me in a holding pattern. He had reminded me over and over to "watch and see the salvation of the Lord." He had told me it was a summer of positioning moves, as He took me through transition from one job to another. He was positioning all people and situations **to** release the next stage of my life and ministry.

Oh, how, in the natural, I hate transition times! I feel so lost and unsure of myself and where I am going. I feel totally out of control. I have lost control. Yes, I can rush ahead and grab control and do it my way. But I have preached that that is only dead works. Who needs dead works? They amount to nothing but grief and anguish and missing the will and way of **God**.

So I was in the midst of waiting upon the will of God to be unfolded in My life. How I hate waiting! I am a man of action. But God reminded me that in Acts 1 they waited. Waiting **is** an appropriate response to God, and **it does lead** to a time of fantastic fulfillment (i.e., Acts 2). I shared with the group that once again God had healed my heart of its fear and anxiety, and ministered to me deeply through the Word and by His Holy Spirit.

As we went around the group and others shared their own experiences, it was evident to all that many deep things were happening in the hearts and lives of those who were involved in the small group Bible study that evening. We closed with a song of worship and prayed a bit for one another with the laying on of hands. We ministered the appropriate grace of God into each heart that was needed for that night, and we went on our way celebrating the goodness and life of God in our midst once again.

Bible studies sure are fun! Recent ones certainly are some different than I had experienced in my earlier years. Back then, all we did was learn about God. Now we were experiencing Him on an ongoing basis. Every time we gathered together, we found a new way of experiencing the risen Christ in our midst. I had never known it could be so good. Christ is alive in the midst of His Church! He is ministering to hearts and changing lives as He said He would, and at last I am experiencing Him. Glory to God!

Review of Some Key Points from Chapter 1

1. Bible studies can be more than studies. They can be experiences with Almighty God through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.
2. An example is given in this chapter of experiencing God through Scripture in a small group setting.

Think and Discuss

1. Is my focus "experiencing God" or simply "learning about Him?"
2. Record a time you experienced God in a small group setting.
3. Do I believe Spirit encounter is for today, or am I simply to live out of the Bible in this day and age?
4. As a small group, enter a Bible story. You may choose the story that seems best for your group. It could be Acts 1 or Acts 2. Or it could be the Sermon on the Mount, or the miracle of feeding the 5000.

First read the appropriate passage from Scripture. Then you may want to break up into groups (circles) of four and join hands. Everyone closes his eyes and goes back into his memory, recalling the story just read, beginning to meditate on it, visualizing the scene. (Meditation, scripturally speaking, involves visualization.) Someone should be chosen to begin the group interaction. He will simply share what he is seeing and feeling as he experiences the scene. He may share just a sentence or two, or a paragraph or two. When he has finished sharing, he squeezes the hand of the person on his right, and that person shares. You continue around the circle for 10 to 15 minutes, at which time the main group leader will call you back together as a large group. If a person does not want to share one of the times around the circle, he or she can simply squeeze the hand of the one on their right.

You will find that as you "become" one of the characters in a Bible scene, it often comes alive and God begins moving within it, and ministering directly to you. It becomes a precious, precious experience. Do not let fear put you off. Try it. You'll like it!

When you come back as a large group, several of the people may want to share their experiences with the entire group.