

Spiritual City-Glow

“For millions of Christians, God is no more real than He is to the non-Christian. They go through life trying to love an ideal and be loyal to a mere principle.” Those words spoken by A.W. Tozer still ring true many years after they were spoken. How many truly saved Christians still have the sad experience of a Christian life where God is simply a set of truths, a concept, or at best – a distant acquaintance.

Is God real to you? Is God a reality to you, so real that the truth of who He is affects you all the time? Or is God a concept in your mind, a truth, a set of facts that you believe?

Some, who inwardly know they have no true experience of God, resort to faking their experience of God. They experience the same dull, lifeless religion that others do, they simply take the approach that since the emotions are sagging, they need to artificially pep them up. So they try to use music, songs, lively worship and a crowded atmosphere, to create the emotions they want.

Pretty soon, the emotions are there, much like the excitement that builds on the screaming at a school swimming gala. Are those kids truly in spasms of excitement over how fast their peers are moving through water? No, but the war cries and chants build excitement. Emotions beget emotions.

Sadly, many well-meaning Christians resort to trying to stir up their emotions from the outside in. Once that happens, they are content – the joy which they were seeking has come, and thus they feel they have experienced God. For them, the joy itself is synonymous with experiencing God. They have allowed their desire for genuine emotions to descend into emotionalism.

But this is not necessary. God is awesome. When people behold God in His glory, the reactions do not have to be rehearsed – they are spontaneous – praise, submission, awe, terror, joy, conviction, wonder, desire, and a myriad of other reactions and emotions. We do not have to try and rev ourselves into an emotional state which we hope God will bless. Instead, the solution is to seek to see God in His glory – and allow the reactions to follow.

Other people begin to read their lifeless experience of God back into the Scriptures. They regard talk of experiencing God as a move toward emotionalism, and back away. They’re content to chew on the dry bone facts about a God they truly do not experience in any meaningful way. Like people just reading travel books about foreign destinations, they can increase their knowledge about places – but never go there themselves. Many Christians never experience God in His glory.

Truly experiencing God is in no way a foreign idea to the writers of Scripture. They speak of hearing and seeing God, they speak of the Messiah’s garments smelling of myrrh, aloes and cassia, and the Psalmist tells us to taste and see that the Lord is good. They don’t mean physically see, hear, taste or touch – they’re using the illustration of physical senses that can

apprehend the physical world to teach that God has equipped us in our souls to be able to apprehend the spiritual. God, being a Spirit, must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

This is not mysticism. Mysticism is believing that whatever happens in your experience is the truth. Mysticism makes what it experiences its guide for truth. That is wrong – the Bible is our only and final authority.

However, there is a legitimate experience of the Christian life – knowing God intimately, till His glory is a pressing reality upon all of life. It is when there is a gaze of the soul upon God continually, where there is a continual awareness of God. You could really call it what the Bible calls it: the fear of the Lord. A continual awareness of, dependence on, desire for and submission to God.

For so many Christians, this kind of experience of God is truly far from them. How do we have a closer walk with Him? Part of the answer we find in Hebrews 12:

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Now consider the context in which the writer says these words. He has just finished describing the faith hall of fame. These heroes were exemplary pictures of people for whom God was more real than the world itself. They treated the invisible as visible. They truly regarded themselves as foreigners to this world. Their spiritual eyes were sensitive, and they were walking in the fear of the Lord.

The lives these heroes of the faith led, and the deeds they performed, proved that God was a reality to them, not merely a principle. These people were willing to give up their own wellbeing, indeed their very lives – proof that they were not trying to use religion for their own ends. Rather, they believed in and experienced Someone greater than themselves, and it changed them forever.

They are the cloud of witnesses that surround the Christian in their walk. We look at them, and we see an experience of God is not theoretical, because for these people God was a pressing reality to them. So how do we become such people? The author of Hebrews gives us some ideas.

1. Lay aside the sin

He starts by saying, *"let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us."* There is firstly a negative command. We must lay aside two things – sin, and weights. We must lay

aside the clear disobedience to God in our lives and lay aside anything that will weigh down our pursuit of God. What does this mean, and how does it work?

To illustrate this, I want you to consider the stars. I love astronomy. I love pictures of galaxies, supernovas, comets, and planets. I think the study of the universe is one of the most enriching things to broaden your view of God. You see how big the universe is, how small you are, and how mighty and glorious God is.

Unfortunately, living in the city means you see very few stars at night. They're but a handful to the city stargazer. In more secluded places, one of the first things we remark on at night is how many stars there are. But here's the thing: the number of stars stays constant. Indeed, the amount of light emitted by those stars remains pretty constant. But one person in one location sees thousands, another sees less than fifty.

The problem is not with the stars. The problem is here on earth, with the individuals' different locations. Here is the parallel: God's glory, and knowing God, is much like the stars. It does not change. God's glory has not diminished one bit over the years. Yet we find one man in one place for whom the glory of God is like that huge array of stars, and we find another man who can barely pick out two or three.

Some people are, spiritually speaking, like city-dwellers and the stars. The relationship is hazy. One person seems to glow with their experience of God like the heroes of Hebrews 11. For them, God is so real that they can hardly stop telling you about it. For another, God is so far away as to seem like a distant, long-lost relative. Some Christians have got to the point of despair where they wonder, is God real at all? Or am I truly saved?

Just like the stars, the problem is not up above, but here on earth. The same light is available to be seen. But one person does things and acts in a way that places themself in a situation completely antagonistic to seeing God's glory, and another does things that place them in a situation where they can see God clearly.

Of course, God is not static like the stars. He is a Person who chooses to reveal Himself. If God didn't want to be found, you wouldn't find Him. If God was hiding Himself, you could just forget about trying to know and experience God. But the Bible truth is that God wants to be known by His children: *"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart"* (**Jeremiah 29:13**); *"Draw nigh unto God, and He will draw nigh unto you"* (**James 4:8**).

The point is: God wants us to know Him. He wants each child to be filled with the knowledge of His glory, like a stargazer who sees the multitudes of stars, and not the city-dweller with his dull navy-blue sky, with a few stars here and there. If the problem is not God hiding Himself, and the problem is not that God's glory is brighter here and dimmer there, or that some people are just lucky, and others are just unfortunate, what is it that causes some to have such a dim view of God?

The two things that the writer of Hebrews mentions: sin, and weights. The first key is to remove the sin that clouds our vision. Sin is like a big smudge on the lens of your glasses. Sometimes,

it's like having the lens caps still on the telescope. Sin is the biggest and most obvious way of blocking the knowledge of God.

What is sin? It is anything that is unlike God – in word, in thought, in deed, in motive, in attitude. We sin by doing such things or omitting to do the opposite. Sin is being un-Christlike. So, if we are seeking to be like Christ, to know Him as He is, then when we sin, we are looking in the opposite direction. You might as well be trying to count stars by gazing at the ground.

Sin is essentially trying to glory in something other than God. **Romans 3:23** tells us, *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”* You will not go anywhere towards making God's glory a reality to you if you are making no effort to sin less. No, we won't be sinless in this life, but we can aim to sin less.

Don't set your aims low, saying 'I'll never be sinless,' set them high: *“Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (**Matthew 5:48**). Set them as high as God lets you – and by His grace, He can set them extremely high.

God will always seem somewhat far away to the Christian who loves their sin and refuses to give it up. It's just that simple. You can't want to see God's glory, and experience the opposite of God's glory, at the same time. Now the thing about sin is that it is like dirt on your glasses. Sometimes, you are just not aware of how dirty they are. You have to take them off and hold them up to the light to see where the smear lies.

In the same way, to get a clear look at your life, you need to hold it up to the light of the Word, to see where you fall short. You might say, 'Where do I look?' Well, if you are truly interested in doing some spring-cleaning, start with the passages where the Bible gives extensive lists of sins: **Ephesians 5:3-5, Colossians 3:5-8; Galatians 5:19-21, Mark 7:21-23**. If that's not enough, read the book of Proverbs, and see the multitudes of sins we commit.

If that's not enough, consider all the positive commands that we omit to do. Basically, we need to have the attitude of David in **Psalms 139:23-24**: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”* In other words, 'Lord, clean my eyes that I might see You. Show me my sin.' When we identify the sin in our lives, we must put it off, renew our minds, and put on the new man.

2. Lay aside the weights

Now the second thing the writer tells us to get rid of is weights. This is like a runner, running with unnecessary weights on their ankles. The word weight suggests something that has prominence – it takes up space on us that it shouldn't. To keep with the astronomy illustration – what we need to do is to switch off competing lights. Do you know why you cannot see stars as clearly in the city? It's actually not because of pollution. It's what we call the city glow.

See, the city, with its millions of street-level lights, generates so much light that it brightens the sky. The sheer amount of light means you cannot see the stars, for the same reason you can't see them during the day – too much light. Are the stars still there? Yes! Are they still emitting

light? Yes! But the amount of competing light means they cannot be seen – like a torch that seems dim during the day. It's not brighter at night, it's just that there's less light surrounding it.

The same is true of our walk with God. God's glory is constant, but we who do not see Him clearly are like those in the city – we have too many competing lights. We have too many other things in our lives that we look to for joy, for fulfilment, for peace, for excitement. I'm talking about things that are not even necessarily sinful. That's why the author separates them – lay aside sin and the weights.

The weights can be things like a human relationship, a sport, a hobby, food, entertainment, music. Sometimes, there are just things in our lives that we use as substitutes for the satisfaction we are to only find in God. How do I know when something has become a weight? When you are using it for joy outside of God. When you are enjoying the gift apart from the Giver. When you love it for its own sake, rather than loving it with God, loving it in God.

Only you know what there is in your life that borders or is idolatrous. Only you know what harmless, neutral things have become lights in themselves, things that create a glow which dims the glory of God. The Bible says – lay them aside. It's the same Greek word used in **Ephesians 4:22** to say, 'put off' the old man. Get rid of them. When it comes to sins, we repent of them; when it comes to weights, we simplify.

We generally have far too many things going in our lives, far too many things to do, places to be, appointments to keep. Simplify. Switch off some lights. We have bought the world's lie that sophistication is a virtue. They even use the word that way – 'a man of sophistication.' The more complicated your life – seemingly, the better. And people pour contempt on the idea of a simple life – 'he is a bit of a simple fellow.'

But God says, "*Thou shalt have no other gods before Me*" (**Exodus 20:3**). Christ tells us to return to our first love. It's always harder to place things in order when you're dealing with a million things. Simplify. Cut out the things you don't need, go without some things, even to just test if they have a spiritually dulling effect on you. See, the reason we have so many of these things is that they are easy, and they require no faith. Watching TV is a lot easier than meditating on Scripture.

So we gravitate to what is easy, we always take the path of least resistance. By nature, we seek joy, fulfilment, love, meaning, happiness – and we seek these things in things that can never bring them. We keep that bedside lamp on, instead of going out to behold the stars, because it is easy, cosy, and within arm's length. But sadly, our bedside lamp has no real glory compared to the stars, just like the things we turn to in life have no real final ability to fulfil and bring peace and joy.

What does it mean to switch them off? Go without some of them. Try no TV for 10 days. Cut out some unnecessary activities that you find are neither fulfilling nor useful. See, sometimes we need the darkness to cause a desire in us for light. The problem we create for ourselves is that we are feeling a desire for God, to see and know Him, and we end up filling that void with TV, with friends, with games, with sport, with outings, with music, with even 'Christian activities.'

And so, we never feel the deep desire to drink nowhere else but at the fountain of God Himself. It's rather like filling your hunger pangs with sweets. You fill yourself up with what does not satisfy, taking up the space of food that would have satisfied you. You need to sometimes create a hunger in your soul for nothing but God, and refuse to fill it with anything else. Switch off the lights that block out His light.

Sometimes we are afraid that if we do that, we'll be joyless, alone, and feel purposeless, bored, unfulfilled. But the truth is, we are often feeling like that anyway – even with the things to distract ourselves with. You need to trust God. You need to switch off the lights that block out His glory, you need to switch off the sounds that drown out His still small voice.

It's amazing how we fight to keep our worldly things. We have so many arguments as to why we must be allowed to keep this or that. You know, I have never met an astronomer who fought to have his observatory remain in the city. Astronomers are only too happy to have their observatory in a place with no lights, for that is what they need.

Why fight to include the very things in your life that will likely rob you of the thing you really want to see – God's glory? If you mean business with God, then be willing to drop some things. Don't be the double-minded man, wavering between two opinions – God's glory, my glory.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Matthew 16:25-26

3. Run with endurance, looking unto Jesus

The writer then moves to the positive. He says we are to run with endurance, looking unto Jesus. To paraphrase this, we could say – obey the word of God continually, with the Lord Jesus central to your thoughts. So the third thing you need to do is concentrated imitation.

See, you can clean the lens of your telescope by progressively sinning less. You can even live a surrendered life where you are switching off other competing lights. But now it will all fall to pieces if you do not march into the woods of God's word and stare into the starry sky of His glory through the telescope of His Word. It will be senseless if you do all that to behold the glory of Christ, and then when you do see Him, you do not do anything about it. No, the goal is a persevering imitation of Jesus.

The idea behind the word 'looking' fits well with our astronomy theme. It means to turn away from looking at other things and fix your eyes on something else. We are to turn the focus of our lives off ourselves, off the world and off temporal things of no eternal value, and fix our continual gaze upon Jesus.

The first two stages are preparatory – making sure you remove what hinders. Now you need to do the staring at Jesus, and the patient imitating of Jesus. I use those words because we need

to understand that beholding and obeying God is something that takes time. It takes patience – being willing to fail and try again. The writer of Hebrews uses the illustration of a long-distance race, not a sprint, for a reason.

This is the age of a one-minute devotional. It's the age of instant everything. It's the age of prayers that only take 20 seconds to pray. And very often, we expect God to conform to the business of our lives – we demand that the Ancient of Days manifest Himself to us impatient 21st century Christians, because we are pressed for time.

If God doesn't become clear to us after three days of 10-minute devotions, then it's clearly not working. If we can't get our obedience right after one week of trying – we give up. If we cannot find ourselves thinking about the Lord frequently during the day, we resign ourselves to the fact that it will never happen. Now that is simply the opposite of the patience **Hebrews 12:2** is instructing us to have.

Everything of value takes considerable time. Good marriages, good families, strong churches, things of great beauty, music that is God-glorifying – these things take time. In fact, the amount of time taken reflects the value of the object sought after. We must know that we need to take copious amounts of time to read, to meditate and to reflect what we see.

It takes time and patience to consider truth about God, and to be willing even to wait for God to illuminate our minds as we read and re-read. Impatience in this regard is so often the crucial difference between the nominal Christian and the one who walks closely with Him. When people say, 'I don't have the time,' they're saying, 'I didn't want to persevere.'

See, I've never heard someone say they didn't have time to eat in three months, or they didn't have time to come home in a year. We make the time to do what we want. Ultimately, though our lives are stretched for time (that's another reason to simplify), if we think that we don't have time for God, we are committing spiritual suicide. We're signing ourselves up for the spiritual dullness of the average Christian, we're giving the very reason for our spiritual insensitivity.

See, God must be sought. He must be sought with the whole heart. I think we know what it means, in truth, we shrink away from it. It means work – hard work. In fact, the hardest work of our lives – and yet the easiest in God's typically paradoxical Christian life. We know it will take the discipline of rising earlier, the discipline of studying when we'd rather not. It will take continually trying to discipline our minds to look unto Jesus at all times during the day.

We know there will be sacrifice, giving up what is easier and convenient for the often-frustrating search through God's Word. We know it will take hours of humble prayer, and we'd rather do what comes naturally and easily to us. How sad that we give up on the most wonderful thing due to laziness, to a lack of discipline.

Isn't it sad that we lose out because we are willing to settle for less – for that bedside lamp, because seeing God's glory means effort, sacrifice and work? You want to see the most

magnificent thing in the universe? Everyone says yes. Are you willing to put in an effort that will exhaust you to see it? Most of the crowd disappears.

But those are God's terms. You can't see Me with sin in your life. You need to every day be seeking to sin less. You can't see Me clearly with competing lights, with things you are using as a substitute for My light. You need to turn a lot of them off. You can't see Me unless you come into My presence regularly and look. Look hard. Look long.

Then when you go into your day to run the race of life, you discipline your spiritual eyes to keep looking. Practice doing that, till it becomes the way you run. Run with patience – looking unto Jesus. May we find the simple joy of the fear of the Lord by laying aside the sin and the weights, and then running with patience, while beholding Jesus through meditation of His Word.