

What Does it Feel Like to Experience God? (And How Might We Notice It Happening More Often?)

Ken Wilson 2.17.19

I confess, my Episcopal priest wife has lately bringing bowl of granola-fruit to my office when I'm doing my morning coffee-routine. Other day, oblivious: wolfing granola down, absorbed in paper and I think, "How did this get here?"

**If we experience love without noticing it,
we can experience God without noticing it.**

Scripture says, "***In God we live and move and have our being***"
That's one thing. Noticing it is another.

Continuum: the Experience of God Intensity Scale. On one end, intense experiences that make it into the Bible. On other, breathing, being alive (*in God we live, move, have our being*)

Consider visionary experience of Paul on road to Damascus—high end of Scale--draw inferences that apply all along

Negative example: I didn't tune into role anxiety played in my life until I had a panic attack and alarm system went bonkers—made me pay attention to anxiety, notice it in much less intense forms.

This is first of four tellings of same experience in NT: **Acts 9:1–10**

Start with the effect—he couldn't see anything with eyes open. In old days used to think eyes did the seeing, but really, brain does the seeing. Eyes channel light to optic nerve, which send signals to different parts of brain ... and signals reassembled in occipital lobe in the back of the head ... voila! experience of seeing.

Blindsight—one part brain necessary for vision damaged, so person has no conscious awareness of seeing, but can navigate around obstacles, because info flowing thru eyes to other parts of brain involved in vision ... wild.

Paul's whole life centered on God. He had such a reversal in his understanding of God, his brain couldn't trust any of its own perceptions and just registered blank on everything.

What was shocking difference? Not just that Jesus was alive. But that Jesus—as Messiah, mirroring God—approached Paul, from a position of weakness relative to Paul’s strength. Implicit in “Why are you persecuting me?”

Paul expected a Messiah who would wipe out Israel’s enemies.

Jesus disarms Paul by presenting himself to Paul as a disarmed Messiah, representing a disarmed God. A God who is in no way in rivalry with us. Not even when we oppose God.

We may be in rivalry with God, but God is not in rivalry with us.

In Israel’s founding documents, rivalry is sign we are messed up, disconnected from our wellspring. In Gen 2, first humans eat from tree of knowledge of good-evil, in order to be “like God.” They are in rivalry with God. Then, unrelenting rivalry between humans—starting with Cain-Abel, Abraham-Lot, Sarah-Hagar, Isaac-Ishmael, Jacob-Esau, Joseph and his brothers.

In Genesis, rivalry leads to violence and violence fills God’s heart with pain. Only way to end violence for good? Renounce rivalry.

Rivalry. Have you ever been at a job where a co-worker is in rivalry with you? How do you notice rivalry? This person is chronically critical of you ... dissatisfied, you’re never enough. This person points out to others the worst in you, ignores the best in you. You feel anxious around this person.

Often this is how God has been presented to us: Yes God loves us, but he is chronically dissatisfied with us ... always room for improvement ... that was good? You can do better.

We can have thoughts-feelings that we attribute to God that are not God. They are our own funky projections onto God. WE are in rivalry with ourselves, we project that on to God.

In a later retelling of this vision, Paul adds a charming detail. After saying “Why are you persecuting me?” Jesus adds, ***“Its hard for you to kick against the goads.”*** [Jesus presents himself to Paul as persecuted by Paul. Paul has his boot on Jesus neck, metaphor-ically speaking. And Jesus says, “Its hard for you to kick against the goads, isn’t? You don’t seem happy.”

In addition to being funny, it’s psychologically compelling, unexpected, brilliant. Jesus is not in rivalry with Paul.

What if this is **the sure sign** of authentic God experience? God doesn't threaten to torture us with eternal conscious torment if we don't shape up (that's a complete misreading of 7 occasions when Jesus referred to a garbage dump outside Jerusalem—which English translators later dubbed "Hell," only later imagined as a place of eternal conscious torment. Because the God Jesus reveals is not in rivalry with us! The most vivid experiences I have had of God—had this quality, non-rivalry. [Prompt to write LETTER]

Draw a few more inferences about experiencing God from this encounter.

1. Experience of God, even on intense end of the Intensity Scale, is murky around the edges. Not easy to describe with accuracy.

After telling this experience in Acts 9, the author of Acts (Luke) has Paul tell it two more times. All details don't line up. When Luke tells it in Acts 9, bystanders heard voice, but didn't see anything. In Acts 22, Luke quotes Paul telling story, and here he specifically says bystanders did see light, but didn't hear the voice (direct contradiction). When Paul tells it again in Acts 26, he has them all falling down ... and he adds details not in the earlier accounts.

What's this signal to us? Experience is one thing. Memory of an experience is another and memory is "fungible" (substitute one piece with another because they are roughly interchangeable)

And this was a vivid-intense experience. As you move down the God Experience Intensity Scale, the experience gets **more subtle**.

Describing it is like describing the taste of wine. I used to think all the terms used to describe taste of wine BS. Oakey, grassy, fruity, dry, hints of plum, chocolate, coffee. But people taste wine, share their descriptive words, grow a vocabulary, if you learn the language, people will taste same wine and use the same words.

God experiences can be at least as subtle as that and difficult to describe. How would you describe the difference between a good kiss and one that seemed ho-hum?

We use words to describe God experience but the words are more approximate than they are precise. Nature of God experience.

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2. Repetition in noting-telling the experience is helpful.

One experience, repeated 4X in NT (Acts 9, 22, 26, Gal. 1). The memories we repeat to others are the ones we retain, the other ones fade over time. If we don't notice our God experiences enough to write them down, remind ourselves of them, tell them to a trusted person ... they fade over time and we start telling ourselves "I never feel God"

Our culture is as nervous about God talk as it is about sex talk.

Solus Jesus: How hard it was to tell some of our God experiences.

Headspace. End of each session: how do you feel? Noting.

Writing down positive experience with God is helpful. Noting.

3. God experience tends not to come out of thin air. We form habits that give them an opportunity to occur.

Rarely noted that Paul had this experience at mid-day (noon, when sun at it's zenith)
One of the fixed hour prayer times.

So he was probably stopping to say his noon-day prayers. Having a few routines that make space for God provides a landing pad for God-experiences to happen. Like putting out a bird feeder—you can't control when/if birds come, but putting feeder out increases chances that they will come and that you will notice them.

Worship service combines several different bird feeders.

Each song is a bird feeder. Sermon bird feeder. Meditation time is a bird feeder.

Communion. Closing blessing. (Kids in classes)

QUIET REFLECTION

Christine Modey. Morphing experience of God. Started out focusing on one thing, Mary holding adult Jesus just after death. Morphed into Jesus holding Christine.

Begin meditation by calling to mind-memory-imagination a person in your life who was simply for you, not in any sense in rivalry with you. For me, Blanche Wilson. For you, could be someone else. Maybe no one comes to mind, try to imagine ideal sibling.

1. 30 Seconds to identify someone.

2. 60 Seconds to remember; imagine person—feeling you had in their presence. Sitting in a chair in front of you, standing next to you. In kitchen while you're at dining room table.
3. Keep setting in imagination (e.g. chair) but let go of the image of particular person. And let that morph into Spiritual presence of God, holding on to feeling person generated.