

# God's Purposes in Manifestations

by John Fletcher

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*God's manifestations are for purposes worthy of His wisdom, and include ordinary, mixed, and extraordinary types, which can be abused if not properly understood and handled.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:14-16, John 14:21, Acts 4:31, Romans 8:9, 2 Corinthians 12:7, 2 Timothy 1:7, Hebrews 4:12, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:8, 1 John 1:7

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Divine Manifestations"

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## Description

John Fletcher explores the reasons behind God's manifestations to humanity, categorizing them into extraordinary, ordinary, and mixed types. He emphasizes that these manifestations serve divine purposes such as awakening the indifferent, warning sinners, protecting God's people, and encouraging believers. Fletcher warns against the dangers of spiritual pride that can arise from experiencing these manifestations and stresses the importance of seeking continual, fresh encounters with Christ. He concludes that genuine manifestations lead to increased confidence in God and active service, while neglecting them can result in spiritual decline.

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## Transcript

I now wish to consider why the Lord manifests Himself to the children of men, since this is the next important point. It is not, as is only too obvious, for the gratification of men's curiosity, but for purposes worthy of His wisdom. However, in order to discover what these are, we shall find it better to place all such divine manifestations in three general classes: extraordinary, ordinary, and mixed; then we shall consider the design and use of each class, as revealed in the Bible.

### EXTRAORDINARY MANIFESTATIONS

I am beginning with manifestations of the extraordinary kind, which means that they are either merely external, or are vouchsafed to a few persons only on special occasions, and are by no means essential to salvation.

Some extraordinary manifestations are calculated to rouse the thoughtless into a consideration of eternal issues. For example, you will remember that manifestation which some were favoured with, a little before our Lord's passion, when as Jesus prayed, there came a voice from heaven, saying, 'I have both glorified My Name, and will glorify it again'. The people, therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered; they looked upon the extraordinary as something common and natural. However, others said

`an angel spoke to Him', recognising the difference between this and thunder; but Jesus said `This voice came not because of Me, but for your sakes'.

Other extraordinary manifestations are intended as a last warning to notorious sinners. The terrifying sight which Nebuchadnezzar beheld, in his second dream, of a Holy One coming down from heaven, crying aloud `Hew down the tree', was of this kind. Likewise, the mysterious hand, which wrote Belshazzar's doom on the wall while he profaned the sacred vessels during his revels, was a last warning.

Some extraordinary manifestations are designed for the protection of God's people, or the destruction and humiliation of their proud enemies. Examples of this might include the story of the humiliation of the armies of Egypt by the Lord; also, when He cast down great stones from heaven upon the armies of the five kings who fought against Israel; or when He manifested His presence in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, in order to quench the violence of the flame, preserve the three hebrews, and convince the raging tyrant that God's kingdom rules over all.

The design of other extraordinary manifestations is to encourage the children of God in dangerous enterprises; or to direct them in important steps. That one in the life of Joshua, before he began the conquest of Canaan, was of this kind; and that in the life of St. Paul, when the Lord stood by him in the prison informing him that he must bear witness also at Rome.

Some are calculated to appoint some persons to uncommon services and trials, or to the prophetic and ministerial office. In this connection, recall how Noah was commissioned to build the ark, Abraham to offer up Isaac, Moses to deliver Israel, Nathan to reprove David, Balaam to bless Israel, and Jeremiah to preach to the Jews.

Finally, there are those extraordinary manifestations which are designed to fulfil providential means for the deliverance of the people of God, as with Gideon; or to answer spiritual ends of reproof, instruction, and consolation to the church throughout all ages, as were most of the revelations vouchsafed to the prophets, and those to John.

## ORDINARY MANIFESTATIONS

The manifestations essential either to the conversion of sinners, or to the edification of saints, and which the Word of God (and the experiences of Christians) show to be common to all believers in the Church, are of the ordinary kind, and their use or design is one of the following

1. To make God's Word spirit and life, quick and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, so that the gospel may not come to sinners in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance.
2. To ease an anguished conscience, and impart the peace of God to a troubled mind-as in the case of broken-hearted David, mourning Hezekiah, weeping Peter, and Paul agonising in prayer.
3. To reveal Christ to us, and in us, so as to make us believe in a saving way, and to know in whom we have believed, according to the experiences of Peter, Lydia, Cornelius, and every living member of the Body of Christ.
4. To open a blessed fellowship, and keep up a delightful communion, with Christ-as appears from the experiences of believers illustrated in the Canticles.

5. To silence the residue of self-righteousness in us, and to deepen the humiliation of our souls-as in the case of Job. To make us grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; to bruise Satan under our feet; to bruise the serpent's head in our hearts; to seal the exceeding great and precious promises given to us, that we might be partakers of the divine nature, and to continue immovable, always abounding in the work of faith, the patience of hope, and the labour of love. In a word, they strengthen us with might, by God's Spirit, in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith, and so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

6. To prepare us for great trials, support us under them, and to comfort us after them. This was our Lord's experience before His temptation, after He had overcome the tempter, and when He was at the height of His agony. This was also the situation in the case of David, Paul, and of all the Apostles, when they had been scourged for the name of Jesus; and it is still the case of all true, and deep, mourners of Zion.

7. And lastly, to make us depart in peace, as Simeon did, or to die in perfect love with our enemies, in the full triumph of faith, like Stephen. All who live and die in the Lord, partake-more or less-of these ordinary displays of Christ's powerful presence, and I wish you to remember, that it is chiefly (if not only) in support of these important manifestations that I take up my pen.

#### MIXED MANIFESTATIONS

The third class of manifestations is that of mixed ones; so called, because they are partly extraordinary and partly ordinary. Some are ordinary in their design but extraordinary in their circumstances. The manifestation to the Apostles in Acts 4: 31 was like this; the design of it was merely common, that is to comfort them under contempt, and to encourage them both to do good and to suffer evil; however, the shaking of the place where they were assembled was an uncommon circumstance. The same may be said of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the 120 disciples who were assembled on the day of Pentecost, and later on Cornelius and his soldiers. That they should be baptised with the Holy Ghost and spiritual fire was not extraordinary, since it is the common blessing (which can alone make a man a Christian, or confirm him in the faith), but that the sound of a rushing wind should be heard, and luminous appearances seen to be resting upon them, that they should have been enabled to speak the wonderful works of God in other tongues, were uncommon circumstances attending their spiritual baptism.

Some manifestations are mixed, both as to their design and circumstances. That the iniquity of Isaiah should be put away, and that Saul should be converted, were not uncommon things-they are the common effects of ordinary manifestations-but that the Prophet should be commissioned to preach to the Jews and that Paul should be called to open the eyes of the Gentiles were extraordinary circumstances; as extraordinary as a flying cherub appearing to the one, and an unusually bright light blinding the other.

#### BLIND PREJUDICE

For want of distinguishing properly between what is ordinary and extraordinary in mixed manifestations, those people who are not possessed of a clear head (or of an honest heart) often conclude that none but fanatics speak today of divine manifestations ! If they hear someone preach that they must be converted in the way that Paul was, they perty ask if this means that they are Jews, or if they must be struck to the earth by a voice from heaven ! Such people wilfully forget that our Lord spoke to His hearers as to sinful men, and not as to bigoted Jews, when He said `Except ye be converted, ye cannot enter the kingdom of heaven'. They obstinately refuse to see that the circumstances of the Apostle's falling to the ground were not essential to his conversion, and had no other use than to make his call more remarkable for the Jews

and of comfort to the Christians. When the same prejudiced persons are told that they must be born of the Spirit, and receive the Holy Ghost like Cornelius and his servants, they overlook the ordinary baptism of the Spirit and take hold of the extraordinary circumstances of the gift of tongues, which was imparted for a season in order to remove the prejudices of the Jews and to attract the attention of the Gentiles; with a sneer and a charge of enthusiasm they think that they can overturn the apostolic saying 'If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His'. Reader, be not deceived by these persons ! Acknowledge that, even as you want the regenerating knowledge of Christ, you want the manifestation of His Spirit, without which He can never be known savingly.

So, although I contend only for the ordinary manifestations of the Lord Jesus Christ, I am far from believing that all extraordinary or mixed manifestations have ceased. Such a concession would savour too much of the spirit of unbelief which prevails in the church today. These extraordinary manifestations are more frequent than many imagine ! To show you how far I am from agreeing with the modern spirit of unbelief, let me say that I am so attached to the Bible, as to say of many who pass for ministers of Christ 'Woe to the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing; that say "the Lord says" and yet the Lord hath not sent them.' I think the desire to be styled 'reverend' or 'right reverend', and the prospect of a 'living' or a 'mitre', are very improper motives for assuming the sacred office. Am I sufficiently an enthusiast as to believe that the Church is right in requiring that all her ministers should not only be called, but also be moved by the Holy Ghost, before they take upon themselves the office of Ambassadors for Christ.

#### DANGERS OF ABUSE

Having mentioned the design and use of ordinary manifestations, it may not be improper to touch upon the abuse of them. Their genuine tendency is to humble one to the dust. The language of those who are favoured with them, is 'Will God indeed dwell on the earth'; 'Lord, what is man, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that Thou visitest him'; 'Now that I see thee, I abhor myself : I am not worthy of the least of thy mercies : I am dust and ashes.' But as there is nothing which the heart of man cannot be tempted to corrupt and pervert, so, as soon as the power attending the manifestation is a little abated, Satan begins to shoot his fiery darts of spiritual pride. 'You are a peculiar favourite of heaven' whispers that old serpent 'few are so highly blessed. All your enemies are scattered; you need not be so watchful in prayer, and so strict in self-denial; you shall never fall.' If the believer is not upon his guard and does not quench these fiery darts with his shield as fast as the enemy throws them, he is soon wounded, and pride kindles again in him.

St. Paul himself was in danger from this quarter and so there was given him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him, lest he should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations. Aaron and Miriam fell into this snare, when they spoke against Moses, saying 'Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath not He spoken also by us?' David likewise acknowledged his error in this respect : 'In my prosperity I said "I shall never be moved," Thou hast made my mountain to stand strong, but Thou didst hide Thy face from me, and I was troubled.' The way to avoid danger is to recognise it before hand, to look much to the lowly Jesus, and upon the first approach of a temptation towards pride, to give-with double diligence-all the glory to Him who has graciously bestowed all, and to take-with double care-all the shame of our sins to ourselves. Paul's advice in this respect is excellent : 'Because of unbelief some were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear.'

A genuine effect of divine manifestations is to produce an increase of confidence in the Lord, and of activity in His service. What holy boldness filled the souls of those worthies, who 'through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness ... and turned to flight the armies of the aliens'? See how the love of Christ constrained the disciples to speak and act for God after the day of Pentecost; nothing could exceed their fortitude and diligence! Nevertheless, if you yield to the temptation to be proud, not only is the Comforter grieved, but carnal security, spiritual sloth, and indulgence of the flesh, prevail. The deluded Christian fancies himself to be the same still, though shorn of his strength, like Samson. 'Soul' he says to himself 'thou hast goods laid up for many years, even for ever. Although the Lord does not manifest Himself to you any more, be neither uneasy nor afraid; He changes not'. Sometimes the delusion grows to such an extent that the further this man goes from the Kingdom of God, the stronger he imagines his faith. He even speaks contemptuously of that Kingdom. He calls righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost an immature experience, a low dispensation, beyond which he has now happily passed. He thanks God he can now rest upon the bare Word, without an application of it to his heart; that is to say, he is fully satisfied with the letter without the Spirit, he feeds upon the empty husks of notions and opinions, as if they were power and life.

The end of this dreadful mistake is generally a relapse into gross sin, as witness the falls of David and Solomon; or, what is not much better, he settles into a form of godliness without the power of the same, like the Laodiceans of old. The only way to avoid this precipice, is for us to follow in the light of the first manifestation, and to look daily for new visitations from Christ, until He makes His abode with us, and until we walk in the light as He is in the light. A manifestation of the Holy Spirit last year will no more support a soul this year, than air breathed yesterday will nourish the flame of life today. The sun which warmed us last week, must shine again this week; old light is dead light; a notion of old warmth is a very cold notion; we must have fresh food daily, and though we need not a new Christ, we need-perpetually-new displays of His eternal love and power. The Lord taught us this important lesson when He made the manna in the wilderness to disappear every day, and when He caused that manna which was not gathered fresh, to breed worms and to stink. (\*The critic and the extremist may consider that Mr. Fletcher is here advocating weekly sights of the Saviour. Nothing is further from the truth, as the author is at pains to make clear. However, he does advocate constant close contact with the One who said 'without Me you can do nothing')

Nevertheless, even as the mysterious food continued sweet in the golden pot within the ark, so does the heavenly power in Christ; to whom, every true Israelite will come daily for new supplies of His hidden manna, for fresh manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Thousands, by not taking account of this, seek the living among the dead, fancying that a living Saviour is to be found in dead experiences, and that all is well even though they live after the flesh, and are, perhaps, even led captive by the devil, at his will. However, when their souls awake out of this dangerous dream, they will become aware of their mistake, and will frankly acknowledge 'God is not the God of the dead, but of the living' and that 'if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world, through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.'

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