

Encounter With a Holy God

by Richard Owen Roberts

Richard Owen Roberts' sermon explores the consequences of Israel's unbelief and draws parallels to the spiritual state of modern America, emphasizing the need for humility and a genuine fear of God.

Duration: 50:38

Scripture: Psalm 90:2, Psalm 90:4, Proverbs 3:34, Isaiah 57:15, Isaiah 66:2, Matthew 23:12, Luke 3:16, Philippians 2:3, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:5-6

Topics: "Humility Before God", "Spiritual Revival"

Description

This sermon delves into the reasons behind Israel's continual wandering from God despite witnessing His incredible works, emphasizing the importance of humility, contrition, and brokenness before God. It challenges listeners to reflect on their own spiritual state and the need to maintain a humble and contrite spirit to experience God's reviving presence in their lives.

Transcript

In reading your Bible and observing time after time the way Israel wandered away from God, their inability to stay focused and faithful, did you ever ask the question, what was at the heart of their problem? Obviously they had seen God himself accomplish incredible things. They had experienced things that most of us simply long to experience. And yet time after time after time they departed from the living God.

So I ask you simply, have you asked the question, what was at the heart of their wandering? Well the Apostle Jude spoke to that question in verse 6. He spoke in terms of angels who abandoned their position and their place of reign. In verse 7 he spoke of Sodom and Gomorrah and their departure from the way of truth and the consequence of it. But in verse 5 he spoke of Israel and their continual wanderings and departures from the Lord.

Let me simply read the words of verse 5. Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe. And we know perfectly well when it says he subsequently destroyed those who did not believe. After he saved them out of Egypt, it's talking about well over 99% of the people were destroyed.

We know there was the barest handful who entered the land of Prometh. Now we are taught plainly that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. We know that all Scripture is for our benefit, that it might instruct us, that it might rebuke us.

So if Israel, after seeing what it saw, after feeling what it felt, after experiencing what it experienced, was subsequently destroyed because of unbelief, what hope is there for us? Certainly the time has come when we've got to ask realistically, how could a nation, once so incredibly blessed of God as America has been, turn into virtually the most unrighteous nation on earth? Could the same cause of Israel's destruction be the cause of our destruction? When everything is said and done, how many in America are truly believers? Now we hear estimates, and of course we're in no position to praise them or to know their validity. For years now, Southern Baptist spokesmen have been estimating that in their large number of 16 point some million people, not more than 30% are truly Christians. Others say, oh no, not 30%.

We don't believe there are even 10% of them who are true believers. I don't know the validity of that. I do know that in a typical church, if there are 3,000 in attendance on Sunday morning, it's highly unlikely that there are more than 300 on Sunday night.

And if they still have a prayer meeting, which of course most of them don't, but if they do, it's improbable that more than 30 are in attendance at the prayer meeting. 30 out of 3,000? Those are hardly even startling statistics, they're so average. Somehow, we've got to account for the situation that we find ourselves in the midst of in America.

For our text this morning, I would like to invite you to turn to the book of Isaiah, where we're going to be reading from chapter 57. We'll focus upon one verse in particular, but I'd like to take a few moments to simply read, with comment, the chapter itself. So, Isaiah, chapter 57.

The chapter begins with a question that many have struggled with, even in our day. Why is it so common for the righteous to die young, and for the wicked it seems to live on and on? So, verse 1 of Isaiah 57. The righteous man perishes, and no man takes it to heart.

And devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from evil. He enters into rest.

They rest in their beds, each one who walked in his upright way. But then Isaiah moves from that simple explanation, to a very, very grievous section on Israel's departure from the living God. Look at verse 3. Come here, you sons of a sorceress, offsprings of an adulterer and a prostitute, against whom do you jest? Against whom do you open wide your mouth and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of rebellion, offspring of deceit? What a terrible indictment against the people who had experienced the incredible arm of God made bare on their behalf.

What accusations! Sons of a sorceress, offspring of an adulterer, prostitute. And the question is raised in verse 4. Against whom do you jest? Imagine the people of God sunk so low, that they hold the very God who saved them out of Egypt in contempt. We all, as children, remember what it was like when somebody stuck out their tongue at us.

And even at my age, occasionally, somebody will do that. Not in jest, that does occasionally happen, but in contempt. As a means of saying, I don't have any use for you at all.

But then look at verse 5. Who inflame yourselves among the oaks, under every luxuriant tree. Who slaughter the children in the ravines, under the clefts of the rock. So, obviously depicting sexual conduct that is grievously wicked, and the sacrifice of children.

Or verse 6. Among the smooth stones of the ravine is your portion. They are your lot. Even to them you have poured out a libation.

You have made a grain offering. Shall I relent concerning these things? So, not only are they cursed with unbelief, but very readily they turn aside to worship stupid things. Even smooth stone.

Then verse 7. Upon a high and lofty mountain you have made your bed. You also went up there to offer sacrifices. Those of you who have given any careful consideration to the Old Testament Scriptures are aware that time after time, the backsliding of Israel was made clear when they returned to worship in the high places.

And whenever there was a serious movement of God upon them and they were brought back from their backsliding, they then proceeded to destroy those high places and to make it clear that anyone who worshipped in those high places was conducting themselves in a way truly grievous to God. So, here is a picture of Israel in its sin, in its large-scale wandering from the Lord. Verse 8. Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your sign.

Indeed, far removed from me you have uncovered yourself. You've gone up and you've made your bed wide. And you've made an agreement for yourselves with them.

You have loved their bed. You have looked upon their manhood. So, in secret ways and in hidden places they have demonstrated the lewdness of their conduct.

Acting as if somehow not even God himself could see what they were up to in their wickedness. And all of these things parallel what is taking place all around us today in the church and in the world. Verse 9. You have journeyed to the king with oil and increased your perfumes.

You have set your envoys a great distance and have made them go down to Sheol. So, no amount of travel was too much for them to demonstrate the iniquity of their heart. Verse 10.

You were tired out by the length of your road. Yet you did not say, this is hopeless. You found renewed strength.

Therefore, you did not faint. When one sets their heart to do evil it is amazing what strength and fortitude they have in their wickedness. Oh, that such strength and fortitude were part of righteousness instead of wickedness.

But the picture is clear, isn't it? That God is brokenhearted over the conduct of his own people. Verse 11. Of whom were you worried and fearful when you lied and did not remember me nor give me a thought? Was I not silent even for a long time? Yet you did not fear me.

I will declare your righteousness and your deeds but they will not profit you. But the wind will carry all of them up and a breath will take them away. The people of God have reached that place where the fear of God is so far removed from them that they cannot even imagine fearing the Lord.

If one were to ask the question what clearly indicates the backslidden condition of the church in America more than all else, I would say the lack of the fear of God. A while back I was invited in a church in our city to preach three Sundays because the pastor had gone on a long trip. And after a lot of prayer and consideration I decided to speak upon the fear of God for three Sundays.

And I chose three simple matters. Number one, the first sermon. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

The second sermon, the fear of God is the only true preservative against personal evil. And number three, the fear of God is the only guarantee of social justice. When you have judges who do not fear God you have no justice in the land.

And the response of that congregation was almost unbelievable. They kept saying to me, we don't believe in a God you have to fear. For several years after that incident an elderly man in that congregation would drop by my office for a little visit.

And invariably in the course of his visit he would say, do you remember that time you preached for three weeks in my church? Oh yes. He said, do you know that every time your name comes up those people become roaringly mad and they say, that's the man that says you have to fear God. We don't believe in a God you have to fear.

But let me ask a question. Do you believe in a God who is to be feared? And do you personally fear him? Now there are solid reasons why we ought to fear the Lord. After all, it is the finite with the infinite.

Every day, mere flesh and blood is before the eternal holy God. There's never a time in our lives when it's other than that. It's always the finite against the infinite.

It's always the lesser before the greater. The created before the creator. There's always the situation where it's the debtor before the creditor.

I'm always in his debt. He's never in my debt. It's always the situation of the dependent upon the independent.

The source of all strength and power. It's always the undressed before the fully clothed. The one whose tattered garbs of unrighteousness is standing before the only one of infinite perfection.

It's always the matter of the filth before the clean, the pure. It's always the lawbreaker before the lawmaker. There are more than ample reasons to fear God.

And yet the majority of those in our churches do not fear him. And some of us who have had seasons when we have genuinely feared the Lord have forgotten and have wondered. We're always in danger that our self-interest might violate his sovereign rights.

We're always the ignorant before the all-knowing. We're always faced with the possibility that when we truly come to repentance it will be too late. That our day of opportunity will be passed.

We always live with the realization that we are fit only for the wrath of God. Never for the grace of God. Israel had forgotten who God was.

They did not fear him. They lived in the midst of their sin. So we read, starting in the middle of verse 13, He who takes refuge in me shall inherit the land and shall possess my holy mountain.

And it shall be said, Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstacle out of the way of my people. So an incredible call for repentance. But tragically, Israel didn't hear the call and didn't heed it.

And thus were carried away in time to captivity and spiritual oblivion for centuries. And the question before us, will we continue in the same pattern or will we set our hearts to seek the Lord? Some of you remember the story of Rehoboam. And you remember these summary words spoken about him.

Rehoboam did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the Lord. And that is the story of multitudes in the church. But now, we come to verse 15.

For thus says the High and the Exalted One who lives forever, whose name is holy. I dwell in a high and holy place and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. That's the text for this message.

We shall return to it momentarily. But let's finish reading the chapter. For I will not contend forever, neither will I always be angry, for the spirit would grow faint before me and the breath of those whom I have made.

Because of the iniquity of his unjust game, I was angry and struck him. I hid my face and was angry. And he went on turning away in the way of his heart.

I have seen his ways, but I will heal him. I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners, creating the praise of the lips, peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near. What a glorious truth! Although Israel persisted in its wanderings, in its backsliding, in its unbelief, God said, I will step in and change them.

I won't go on forever punishing them for their evil. The time will come when I will intervene and I will be their savior. And then the last two verses, summarizing the plight of the never-repenting, lost, but the wicked, are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud.

There is no peace, says God, for the wicked. But in that setting, let's focus then upon the words of verse 15. Let me read them again.

For thus says the High and Exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy. I dwell in a high and holy place, also with the contrite and lowly spirit, in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. Let's wave each phrase.

Thus says the High and Exalted One. God is not only the High and the Exalted One, but exclusively the High and the Exalted One. None of us come anywhere near that.

The most famous, the most wealthy, the most successful, are nowhere near being high and exalted. Oh, they're stupid enough to think themselves to be something they are not, just as all of us have the capacity to think foolish thoughts about ourselves and to pretend to be something we are not. But God and God alone is the High and the Lofty One.

When we forget that He is exclusively the High and the Lofty One, when in unbelief we deny His majesty, His glory, then we fall into that silly state of supposing ourselves to be something we are not, which is the condition of millions and millions of Americans who think they're Christians, but God knows otherwise. And it's always necessary for us each and everyone to pause and to be sure that we're not in that number of those who suppose themselves to be what God Himself knows they are not. But would there not be great value this morning in our reminding ourselves that we are not anything like the High and the Lofty One? We have never come anywhere even near to His exalted position.

Most of us are aware that the Scriptures place great stress upon humility. And often in a prayer meeting, I will hear someone pray, Lord, humble me. Now, that's a pretty stupid prayer, a terribly dangerous prayer.

It's not that God cannot, but there's something grievously wicked about asking God to do what He has commanded you to do. He has commanded us to humble ourselves, to then turn around and ask Him to do what He has plainly told us to do, is sheer wickedness. But as I've said, it's also very dangerous because if God brings a low, He can bring you a whole lot lower than you ever thought it possible to go.

But the question is urgent. How does one humble themselves? God makes it clear. He holds the proud in heart at arm's length.

And we need to remind ourselves of the length of God's arm. I mean, if God is holding you at arm's length from Himself, it's an infinite distance. But how does one humble themselves? Well, the words of verse 15 are wonderfully helpful.

God is the high and the lofty one. Some of you are familiar with the Gospel of Luke in chapter 3, when John the Baptist makes this statement. As for me, I baptize in water for the remission of sins.

But when He comes, whose sandals I'm not fit to untie, He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. Now let's notice something of great consequence in those words by asking the question, who was John the Baptist? A silly, worthless creature? Well, the Lord Jesus Christ said, of those born of women, there's none greater. Now here is something all of us need to be frequently reminded of.

Humility is not sham. It's not pretense. It's not making believe that I'm nobody.

John would not dare to pretend he was nobody. He was the forerunner. He had a purpose that was divinely ordained that he should prepare the way of the Lord.

He could not sneer it back any more than we can. But when John made reference to Christ's sandals, and at the same time made reference to his baptism over against the baptism of Christ, he was drawing two immensely consequential comparisons. The comparison of his person with the person of Christ.

And the comparison of his water baptism with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. So how does one humble himself by comparing yourself continuously with the only one who really matters? As important as John was by human standards, he was nothing in comparison with Christ. It could be said of everyone in the room now, no matter what your role, no matter what your place, no matter what glorious things God has done through you, you're not the high or the lofty one.

One maintains a spirit of humility by holding the facts of who they are in proper relationship with the greater facts of who God is. Have you learned to walk day by day with a full realization of who you are and of who Christ is? Look at the next statement in verse 15. Thus says the high and the exalted one who lives forever or who inhabits eternity.

In Psalm 90 we notice, Before the mountains were born or thou didst give birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Now how do you compare a person like yourself or like me with the one who inhabits eternity? I've lived longer than most of you and no doubt know a great many things that many of you don't know. But does that make me equal to God? How can a person of 80 years be compared with the God who inhabits eternity? We humble ourselves by walking in continual realization that God is always infinitely above us, infinitely greater than we are.

We are but figures in a moment of time. He is the God who inhabits eternity. The next phrase, Whose name is holy? Now I've been called a lot of things by a lot of people.

And my wife, even from time to time, says some very sweet and nice things about me. But never, never has she called me holy. She could not.

She knows that I'm attracted by the beauty of holiness. She knows that I think it's perfectly glorious to be holy. But God alone is holy.

And no matter what strides forward any of us might make in the light of righteousness through the shed blood of Christ, we are still sinners and He is still and forever has been and will be the Holy One. But notice what follows. I dwell in a high and holy place with one single exception.

Let's take careful note of this. God says, I dwell in a high and holy place with this singular exception. I dwell also with the contrite and lowly of spirit.

Now that is a truth that the American church desperately needs. God does not dwell with those who pray the sinner's prayer. God does not dwell with those who respond to the altar call.

God does not dwell with those who have been baptized. God dwells in only two places, the high and the lofty place and with the contrite and lowly of spirit. If you are not contrite, God is not dwelling with you.

If you are not lowly of spirit, God is not dwelling with you. He makes no exceptions. He dwells in only two places.

And what a huge stride forward the church would take if it believed what God says. So I ask you, do you believe that God does not dwell in the haughty? That he has no place for the proud? That he dwells only in the broken and the contrite. And the way to brokenness and contrition, I trust, has been clearly stated.

As I compare myself with God, I end up broken and contrite. Now just think of it in a very realistic way. Let me speak in a personal vein and hope it will not be offensive to you.

I made my first public confession of faith when I was 12 years of age or 68 years ago. I was earnest and sincere in that public statement. But my earnestness and my sincerity does not guarantee brokenness and contrition.

Brokenness and contrition must be maintained at all times. And how is it possible for a thinking person to do otherwise? Let me lay it out this way. I have had the privilege of knowing personally many of the greatest preachers of the last 80 years.

I have often preached in the same pulpit with them, been in prayer meetings with them. I have had the joy of studying under some of the grandest believers in our recent history. I have myself an incredibly wonderful library.

I have been reading and studying the Bible for decade after decade. But I find myself a midget when I should be a child. And I have never amply redeemed the opportunities that were given to me.

I have no reason to feel anything with contrition and brokenheartedness because I am so totally unlike the Savior. Now this particular text closes with an incredibly wonderful statement. I dwell in a high and holy place and with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart

of the contrite.

Isn't that beautiful? As we walk in brokenness and in contrition, as we earnestly humble ourselves by comparing our nothingness with his greatness, then he, in his marvelous grace, brings reviving to our hearts and to our souls. Have you not found in your own personal experience that when you began to think more highly of yourself, then you ought, you lost the sense of God's presence and power in your life? The desperate need of the hour in which we live is a fresh encounter with the living God who is high and lofty, who does inhabit eternity, whose name is holy.

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