

GOD'S WAYS

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The Bible says that God showed Israel His acts, but He revealed His ways to Moses. Which would you rather know: the acts of God or His ways?

The fact is, people can see God's acts and remain spiritually unchanged, but those who perceive His ways get to know His heart—they are God's friends.

I want to take you on a journey today—from the Old Testament to the New Testament—to discover a principle (i.e., a common way) by which God works. I believe that if you will take this principle to heart, your confusion will give way to peace, your frustration will give way to hope, your fear will give way to courage, and your gloominess will give way to joy!

I am saying that you can experience a fresh wave of hope, courage, peace, and joy as you pursue God's plan for your life!

Hitting the Wall

Have you ever had concern that your spiritual life was stagnating? Have you ever felt like your spiritual advancement was dismally slow or embarrassingly meager? Worst of all, have you felt at the same time that you had been doing all you knew to do to fuel your spiritual growth, yet with little apparent effect?

Yearning to understand what was hindering your development, I'll bet you've wondered if you were secretly cursed, abandoned by God as a hopeless case, or not even really saved.

If you were sincere, you probably tried increasing your dose of Bible reading, or dropped into a prayer meeting to see if one of those would kickstart your fruitfulness.

Such a scenario is not as uncommon as you might think. Many Bible personages have experienced similar dark nights of the soul (David, as he fled from the murderous frenzy of King Saul; or John the Baptist, as he was left in prison to be executed). In this very room, if they will be honest, many people—perhaps all—have hit a similar wall (some of you are there today).

I Believe

On another wall, in a dank cellar in Cologne, Germany, in 1943, these words (believed to have been scrawled by a Jewish youth who was hiding from the Nazis) were discovered:

*"I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining
I believe in love, even when there's no one there.
And I believe in God, even when He is silent."*

The modern Christian singing group, BarlowGirl, adapted those words in a song titled, "I Believe in Love." Let's listen...

*How long will my prayers seem unanswered?
Is there still faith in me to reach the end?*

*I'm feeling doubt I'm losing faith
But giving up would cost me everything
So I'll stand in the pain and silence
And I'll speak to the dark night*

*I believe in the sun even when it's not shining
I believe in love even when I don't feel it
And I believe in God even when He is silent
And I, I believe*

*Though I can't see my story's ending
That doesn't mean the dark night has no end
It's only here that I find faith
And learn to trust the One who writes my days
So I'll stand in the pain and silence
And I'll speak to the dark night*

*I believe in the sun even when it's not shining
I believe in love even when I don't feel it
And I believe in God even when He is silent
And I, I believe*

*No dark can consume Light
No death greater than this life
We are not forgotten
Hope is found when we say...*

Even when He is silent

*I believe in the sun even when it's not shining
I believe in love even when I don't feel it
And I believe in God even when He is silent
And I, I believe.*

Now, let's discover that principle I mentioned...

Small Beginnings

Zechariah's prophetic ministry took place in the time of Israel's restoration from the Babylonian captivity. Approximately 75 years had elapsed since Habakkuk and Jeremiah had predicted the invasion of Judah by the Neo-Babylonian army of King Nebuchadnezzar. When their "hard service" (Isa 40:2) in Babylonia was completed, and the Persians had conquered Nebuchadnezzar, God influenced Cyrus, the Persian king, to allow the Hebrews, including Zechariah, to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple (Isa 44:28).

As a young man, Zechariah was called by God to encourage Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem, and the Jewish people to complete the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem and to be spiritually renewed in their devotion to the Lord Jehovah. Neither of these vital projects could be accomplished by themselves.

It was the prophet Jeremiah who asked, "Can an Ethiopian change the color of his skin? Can a leopard take away its spots? Neither can you start doing good, for you have always done evil" (Jeremiah

13:23). For all the knowledge and abilities within the human race, there is no power in man to transform his own nature, to make himself right in the eyes of God.

We cannot even do the work of God in the world apart from the immediate empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. They could not rebuild the Temple without His help; we cannot remodel this church building without His help.

So, God spoke to Zechariah...

Zechariah 4.6-10

⁶ Then he said to me, "This is what the Lord says to Zerubbabel: **It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.** ⁷ Nothing, not even a mighty mountain, will stand in Zerubbabel's way; it will become a level plain before him! And when Zerubbabel sets the final stone of the Temple in place, the people will shout: 'May God bless it! May God bless it!'"

⁸ Then another message came to me from the Lord: ⁹ "Zerubbabel is the one who laid the foundation of this Temple, and he will complete it. Then you will know that the Lord of Heaven's Armies has sent me. ¹⁰ **Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand.**"

When men start a project, they often like to start with a bang! Invite the press and throw a gala event to say, "Look what we are starting!" Groundbreaking. Ribbon-cutting. Highlighting our plans. Herald-ing our achievements.

God, on the other hand, who actually has something enormous to announce and celebrate, usually begins without any fanfare at all. According to the Amplified Bible, "*The kingdom of God does not come with signs to be observed or with visible display*" (Luke 17:20). Jesus was not born in a palace, but in a barnyard cave, and laid in a feeding trough to sleep.

The lesson is this: although the thing God is doing is GINORMOUS, He will do most of it in stealth. He will sneak around, behind the scenes, quietly doing what no man could ever do. He doesn't need to parade His works; He is not insecure. He is not trying to impress anyone; He's just doing what He naturally does.

So He tells us, do not make light of the small things that God does at the start, for this is the way the Spirit works, and they lead to great things.

A Little Cloud

Here's another clue, from the record of Elijah's life. Elijah was probably the most famous prophet of the Jews, a rugged man of stern character, zealous for the Lord. The story of his being caught up to heaven in a whirlwind while he was still alive, forever imprinted his name in the minds of the Jewish nation.

Elijah was also a notable man of prayer, for he knew that nothing significant could be accomplished apart from God's direct involvement.

On the occasion before us, the nation of Israel was experiencing extreme drought, with not a drop of rain for three years. King Ahab blamed Elijah for this situation. Elijah retorted that it was Ahab and his family who were responsible for the situation because they led the nation to worship the demon god Baal instead of the true and living God, Jehovah. Elijah engineered a contest between himself and 450 prophets of Baal, in which they were thoroughly humiliated, while Jehovah was vindicated.

We'll pick up the story right after this astonishing competition...

1 Kings 18:41-46

⁴¹ Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go get something to eat and drink, for I hear a mighty rainstorm coming!"

⁴² So Ahab went to eat and drink. But Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and bowed low to the ground and prayed with his face between his knees.

⁴³ Then he said to his servant, "Go and look out toward the sea."

The servant went and looked, then returned to Elijah and said, "I didn't see anything."

Seven times Elijah told him to go and look. ⁴⁴ Finally the seventh time, his servant told him, "**I saw a little cloud about the size of a man's hand rising from the sea.**"

Then Elijah shouted, "Hurry to Ahab and tell him, 'Climb into your chariot and go back home. If you don't hurry, the rain will stop you!'"

⁴⁵ And soon the sky was black with clouds. A heavy wind brought a terrific rainstorm, and Ahab left quickly for Jezreel. ⁴⁶ Then the Lord gave special strength to Elijah. He tucked his cloak into his belt and ran ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way to the entrance of Jezreel.

Elijah's servant saw a little cloud—the size of a man's hand—and that was all the confirmation Elijah needed to know that God was at work. "Do not despise these small beginnings."

Seven is regarded as the number of fullness or completion. And you cannot get to seven without walking through 1-2-3-4-5 and 6. There is a process, even to get to the beginning of God's work!

You might think that the servant's first six trips to scan the horizon were wasted, but they were not. Nor are your six initial efforts to hear from God what He wants you to do. In fact, his scanning the empty horizon six times actually helped the servant ultimately to recognize God's sign—the single change in the vast scene: a small cloud, no larger than a man's hand.

You must ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking, if you want to be a part of what God does. Time is not your enemy; it is God's tool and your friend—trust Him to use it well.

Progress through Process

The concept of process can be seen all through the natural world. Conception to birth. Birth to maturity. Imagination to invention. Blueprint to construction. Is there anything that simply appears without a preliminary process?

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is also like this. Even the miracles of which we have read in the Bible, or for which we have prayed in our lives, do not simply appear "out of the blue." They are the result of a divinely initiated process.

Mark 4:26-29

²⁶ Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. ²⁸ The earth produces the crops on its own. **First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens.** ²⁹ And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle, for the harvest time has come."

Germination, fruitfulness, maturity. New birth, devotion, spiritual maturity. "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). A time to plow, a time to plant, a time to water, a time to tend, a time to prune, and a time to harvest.

There is a time to seek and discover God's purpose, a time to pray and listen for God's direction, a time to obey and follow God's lead, a time to trust and wait for God to work, and a time to reap the harvest of a completed process, a fulfilled promise.

We believe in the God who works miracles, but most of His miracles don't appear instantaneously. And if we could see what God sees, we would know that even those that seem to be instantaneous are not.

Understand the process—God's revealed process—first the stalk, then the leaf, then the bud, then the ripe fruit. Generally, the Kingdom of God appears through a process, over time.

Pay close attention to detail, so you may recognize the signs of the Kingdom of God, as it steals into your circumstances. Be careful to appreciate the little things, for they always lead to bigger things.

During the time of process—while you wait...

...wait in faith, trusting God's wisdom and power; He has not abandoned you.

...wait in gratitude, thanking God for the grace that deems you worthy; He has not forgotten His promise.

"Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised" (Hebrews 10:36).