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CHAPTER I

Encountering God's Person

Have you ever needed more than a Sunday morning service? Or a devotional on your smartphone? Have you ever felt like something was missing as you went through the motions of the Christian life? If that sounds familiar, you are a prime candidate for a kingdom encounter.

A kingdom encounter is when you discover how to connect with God by experience and not merely through information. The goal of a kingdom encounter is to give you and me a deeper, tangible experience of God's character and reality, and to take us to the next level of kingdom usefulness.

A person can attend church for years and never encounter God. A person can attend small groups every time they are offered and never experience the living and true Creator. God wants you to have more of Him than just theology on a shelf or information in your head. He wants to have an encounter with you that revolutionizes your life. Are you open to this?

Kingdom encounters most often come in the context of contradictions, challenges, and difficulties. They occur in times when you are facing conflict, when life seems off-kilter, or when things no longer make sense. It can feel conflicting at first. But what you need to realize—and what I hope you realize as you go through this book—is that when things are going left, you feel trapped and God seems absent, you are probably right where God wants you in order to experience a life-altering kingdom encounter.

My hope for you as you read through this book is that you will discover the delight and power of a divine encounter. That you will run smack dab into deity. That you will experience His presence at a level that leads to life transformation.

Far too many of us have a relationship with God that resembles the flicker of a candle more than the brilliance of a noon-day sun. We go to church. We speak Christianese. We do our devotions. We post Scripture on social media. Yet we live with the pervading emptiness that results from a lack of encountering and experiencing the Most High God. As a result, we live lives of disappointment, pain, loss, regret, and hurt.

This reminds me of the story about a police officer who was called about a man planning to jump off a bridge to his death. When the policeman arrived at the scene, he began attempting to talk the man out of his suicide attempt. When he inquired why the man wanted to die, the man said that life was no longer worth living.

The policeman then gave the man an idea in order to buy time. He said, “Just give me ten minutes to explain why life is worth living. Then I’ll give you ten minutes to tell me why it is

not worth living. Then, if you still want to jump, I won't stop you." The man agreed.

The policeman began explaining eloquently about the meaning, significance, and importance of life. It was then the man's turn. He began to share how miserable things had been for him. A broken family, a failed career, bad health, deep debt, abuse, depression, and more. After he finished, the policeman reached out his hand to the man. The man grabbed it and they both jumped. Hopelessness has a way of metastasizing and spreading. Hopelessness can plague our hearts and minds so much that it makes itself present in more ways than we previously imagined possible.

I want that to change. I want more people to find hope. I want more people to heal from the hurt life has dealt them. I want more people to know the Lord in such a personal and experiential way that they can't help but be transformed and restored. I want you to encounter Him afresh, because once you do, you will never be the same again. Just like Moses, Elijah, Peter, Paul, Hannah, and the numerous others in Scripture whose encounters with God altered the trajectory of not only their lives but also the lives of generations to come.

One of the more well-known encounters in Scripture happened at a bush in the wild. Standing amidst the untamed wilderness on Mt. Horeb, Moses saw the living Lord. Pasturing his father-in-law's sheep on what most likely began as an ordinary day, Moses encountered the extraordinary. Standing alone, undoubtedly covered in dust and the wafting smell of the flock itself, he saw something (or Someone) that would forever rock his world.

Some backstory on Moses may help us appreciate how someone can potentially be positioned for a unique encounter. Moses wasn't always a shepherd. Moses hadn't always traveled the worn pathways of sheep on hillsides and mountains. No, Moses had grown up in the luxurious surroundings of a palace. Having been found by Pharaoh's daughter as he floated in a basket on the Nile River, placed there by his mother in an effort to secure his safety from the murderous plot of the Pharaoh to kill Israelite baby boys, Moses knew only comfort and provision. He knew power. He understood the Egyptian ways. He had not only glanced behind the curtain, but lived there as well.

Yet at the age of forty, Moses made a miscalculation. A misstep. He blew it. He decided to act independently of the one, true God and take matters into his own hands. Even though Moses had been raised in Egyptian culture and immersed in Egyptian thought, he knew enough to know the truth about his own people.

Even as he had grown in the midst of the Egyptian dynasty, God had still found a way to reach his heart. His biological mother had been called upon to serve as his nursemaid while he was still young; God's providential hand had orchestrated this for him. While his mother raised him and cared for him in those early years, she also told him the truth about God and His people.

By the time he had reached an age of ability and awareness, Moses no longer wanted to sit by and watch the injustices around him. He did not agree with how his people were being treated by the Egyptians. He wanted to secure their freedom. God had placed within his spirit an inkling of his true purpose

and calling, but rather than wait on God's ways and God's leading, Moses had decided to act on his own.

We read about this in Exodus 2:11–12:

Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So, he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

The writer of Acts gives insight into Moses's thoughts at that time. We read in Acts 7:25, "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand." Moses believed that his purpose was to deliver his people, and his actions reflected it.

But as is the case with many of us, Moses had a sense of destiny without the proper sense of divine timing. He tried to force something that God had not yet unveiled. He used human effort, opinion, logic, and strategy to attempt to accomplish a divinely-appointed kingdom goal.

The goal was great: deliver God's people. His strategy and timing, however, were off. As I said earlier, he blew it.

When Moses chose to act independently of God and depend instead on his own expertise and self-sufficiency to accomplish the plan of God for delivering His people, he inadvertently ushered in his own move from the palace to the pasture. We read what happened next in Exodus 2:13–14:

He went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrews were fighting with each other; and he said to the offender, “Why are you striking your companion?” But he said, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and said, “Surely the matter has become known.”

Moses’s murder was discovered, and he had to run for his life. Moses ended up moving from the White House to the out-house and spent the next forty years of his life in exile, herding dumb sheep on the backside of a desert.

When we find Moses in Exodus 3, we also find a forty-year gap between his murder and his encounter with God. Forty years span the divide between his failure and the divine revelation of his future. During those forty years, Moses led sheep in the wilderness. He was no longer in the spotlight. He was no longer “the man.” He was no longer a high-profile celebrity in a culture of idol-worshipping and excess.

Rather, he was an outcast. A man in hiding. A man seeking to live as far away from Egypt as possible because what he had done wrong came with a high price tag tied to it. Moses had succumbed to a life of survival. He was just getting by. It is possible that even his dream of one day being used by God had dissipated into the heat of the sun-scorched land he now wandered.

Before we go any further in Moses’s story, I want to ask you about your own. I want to ask you if you have ever led sheep or if you are leading them now. By that, I simply mean to ask if your

life is not working out like you had hoped it would. It could be that something happened years ago that took you off course from your hopes. It could be that you are still struggling from a poor choice made early in your life. Did your dreams ever dissipate in the heat of disappointments, leaving you to wander around aimlessly, feeling trapped in a meaningless life with sheep?

Moses's early narrative isn't unique to him. Many people can identify with it. While it may not have been something as extreme as murder, poor choices in a person's life can still send them scrambling to regain what had once been lost. Or even send them into a wilderness just to wander on their own. God has given each of us free will. We are able to make our own choices. What we often forget is that those choices come with consequences that are most often outside of our control.

If you are one of the many who wishes they could go back and redo it, avoid it, or overcome it, Moses's story has you in mind. If you are just trying to make it, doing the best you can while leading sheep, and life seems to be dragging on, one endless day after another, Moses's encounter with God holds hope for you. After all, Moses shepherded sheep for forty years. From the time of his infraction to the time of his encounter, he spent countless days counting sheep.

So as we begin our exploration of encounters with God, I want to start by giving you some good news, particularly for those of you who are reading this and find yourselves in a dry place. If your life has become dull and dreary as you carry out your day-to-day routine, the good news of Moses is great news for you. Because as you have watched the calendar simply go by

or have heard the tick-tock of the clock year after year, decade after decade, God has been watching you. God has not forgotten about you. God has a plan for you. If you are still here, that means there is still hope for a fresh encounter with God.

God does some of His best work in the dark, even when we don't think He is doing anything at all. He does some of His best maneuvering and intersecting in those gaps when we feel as if He isn't even near. Your purpose and your destiny aren't about only you. While you may be wandering in the wilderness, God is working out the details of His plan in those He will one day connect you to. We will see this play out in the story of Moses as well as in the stories of others who have encountered God.

THE VICINITY

As we look at Moses's encounter, let us begin by taking a look at where he is. According Exodus 3:1, he is on the "the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." To clarify, the mountain of God, or Horeb, is Mt. Sinai. This is also the mountain where God's presence would be manifested in a miraculous way to Moses not long after this first experience, where God would give Moses the Ten Commandments.

While it goes by many names, this place is historically known as the mountain of God. This tells us that Moses experiences an encounter with God because he is first and foremost in God's vicinity.

A lot of people want an experience with God but do not want to hang out where God is located. They choose to place themselves outside of His vicinity. But if you want an experi-

ence with God, the first lesson to learn is that you have to hang out where He is. The pursuit of God includes the willingness and intention to go into God's presence. As long as you insist on a long-distance relationship with God, that is precisely the relationship you will have. Anyone who chooses not to pursue the proximity and vicinity of God will live absent of divinely ordained kingdom encounters.

Moses did not get his encounter with God until he reached the mountain of God. While there, we read in Exodus 3:2 that the angel of the Lord appeared to him. It says,

The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed.

We know that the angel of the Lord is equated with God in this verse because later in verse 4, it tells us that "God" spoke to Moses from the midst of the bush. Whenever the angel of the Lord is equated with God in the Old Testament, it is the manifestation of the second person of the Trinity (Jesus Christ), acting as the spokesperson for the Father since He is the incarnate Word of God (see John 1:1, 14).

Before we get to what God said, let us take a look at what God did. After all, Moses had probably seen a number of burning bushes in his day. He shepherded sheep in the dry atmosphere of a wilderness. Brush fires happened all the time. But this particular fire was unusual because this particular fire burned without consuming the bush.

The fire itself was not what caught Moses's attention. He could have easily removed his attention and guided his sheep elsewhere. However, this fire grabbed his focus for another reason altogether. This fire wasn't doing what normal fires do, which is to consume that which it is burning.

What Moses saw was a contradiction. He became an eye-witness to the wonder of God's power. And one of the ways you can know you are on the precipice of an encounter with God is when He presents you with a contradictory situation. Throughout the Bible, you will see contradictions occurring when God shows up. We can identify a pattern of things not operating according to the normal flow. If a bush is on fire, for example, it is supposed be burning up. Yet if there is a bush on fire and the wood is staying the same, and the leaves are staying the same, and nothing is being consumed, that is not normal. That is not how things roll on earth. That ought to get your attention. Similarly, in your own life, when you experience something outside of normative patterns for life, open your eyes. When you see things that don't make sense, pay attention. If stuff just doesn't add up, focus in. Because you may be on the verge of a divine kingdom encounter.

When or if that happens, do what Moses did. When Moses saw the burning bush, it stopped him in his tracks. We read in Exodus 3:3, "So Moses said, 'I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up.'" Moses didn't skip it. He didn't gloss over it. He didn't rationalize it. Rather, he investigated it. He turned toward the anomaly in order to understand what was going on.

Many of us have missed an encounter with God because we have ignored the contradictions He has placed before us. We have ignored the thing that didn't add up, or the situation that didn't make sense. We have brushed it aside either out of fear or doubt. We have shrugged it off. But in doing so, we have also distanced ourselves from an experience God desired us to have with Him.

Moses turned aside to examine the contradiction. He sought clarity in the confusion. As he did, he heard God call him. Verse 4 says, "When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'"

Notice when God called Moses. It wasn't until after Moses had responded to the contradiction. "When the LORD saw . . . God called to him."

In Matthew 13:12, we find the principle that when we respond to God and what He has done, He will then give more. It's a causation-based principle. We read, "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance." It's another way of warning us that when God shows up in our lives, we ought not to ignore it. We need to respond to what He reveals because in doing so, He will give more. God is not about to waste His ways or His glory on those who do not pick up on it, care to know, or use it to bring Him more glory.

When God gives you a contradiction, it is not to be ignored or dismissed. It is to be investigated. You are to intentionally seek a clearer understanding of what has occurred by seeking God Himself. God didn't do anything directly related to Moses until after He saw what Moses did.

God is not interested in what you are saying. He is interested in what you do. Talk is cheap. It's easy enough to say what you are going to do. It's easy enough to say you are going to pray, fast, or seek God. It's easy to talk a good spiritual game. But God responds to what you *do*. Just like He did with Moses.

When God saw Moses turn aside, He called to him from the midst of the bush. He spoke to him personally. When God speaks outside of the context of Scripture, it is called a *rhema* word. These are the times when you know that the Holy Spirit is speaking to you as well. It could be something that happens in a church service you are attending. Or maybe during a sermon you are listening to on your radio or smartphone. It could occur as you are praying or reading Scripture. It is in those times when you simply know that God is speaking to you personally, but always consistently with His written Word.

Even though no one else may be there, and no one else may understand, God still speaks to us through rhema words today. He speaks through circumstances and signs, which come to you as an utterance with your name written all over it. My role as a pastor allows me the unique opportunity to hear about these rhema words from a variety of people. Whenever I deliver a sermon, it is a general message intended for everyone who hears it. And yet, without fail, different people will tell me later how God spoke directly to them through the message.

This reminds me of the time when I was at a conference where former President George W. Bush was speaking. He gave a general presidential message to the entire audience, but in the midst of his presentation, he looked my way and called me out

by name. When you are in God's presence, He knows how to call your name even in the midst of a crowd.

The Holy Spirit takes spiritual truths and applies them to the various situations of life we experience. He speaks. Unfortunately, far too many people miss out on hearing Him speak because they either fail to turn aside and seek to understand the unusual occurrences life produces, or they don't even notice them. But for those who do notice, God has a word for you. The question is: Do you hear it? When God grabs your undivided attention because He wants to show up in your presence, are you open enough to hearing what He has to say?

My best advice to you is that if you are in a wilderness, look for God to show up in a way that you can't explain. His ways are not your ways; His thoughts are not your thoughts (Isa. 55:8–9). God is not like you or me. If God were living in the era of soul music, His favorite song would be, "Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)?" Didn't I show up in a way that you couldn't explain? That's what God does. Look for it. Then draw near to Him at your own Mt. Horeb.

Moses heard His voice. As a result, Moses got to experience what is now known and called the "shekinah glory" of God. This is the specific glory God reveals when He manifests Himself. Keep in mind that God exists even when we don't see His glory, just as the sun still exists even on an overcast day. But to see His glory is to experience His existence. When you walk outside, the air is everywhere. Yet when the wind starts blowing, you experience the moving air, and you see its impact. The air exists whether or not it is moving. But when it moves, the air becomes an experience.

God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. He exists everywhere at the same time, beyond all time. But God's shekinah glory is what you and I experience when we encounter His movement in the midst of our lives. That's when we get to hear Him speak, like Moses did. Friend, if you are desiring a kingdom encounter with the living God as you wander in your personal wilderness, you must be in His presence. You must respond to those things around you that don't make sense. When you do, you will position yourself to hear from Him directly. As you place your heart and mind in His presence through prayer and the Word, you are placing yourself on the mountain of God. You are making yourself available to God for an encounter with Him.

God met Moses on the mountain. He called his name. To which Moses replied, "Here I am" (Ex. 3:4). God then gave Moses some instructions. He told him not to come nearer to the bush. He also told him to take off his sandals because the place on which he stood was holy (v. 5). Now, if you pass over that information, you may miss something vital to your spiritual understanding and growth. Let's look at it again:

God is speaking from the bush.

Moses is standing on the ground.

Moses is told not to come closer to the bush.

Moses is in God's territory now, which extends beyond
the direct location of the bush itself.

Moses realizes he is standing on holy ground.

Moses must remove his shoes.

The holy ground on which Moses stood wasn't the bush itself.

It was the ground surrounding the bush. It included the vicinity. God insisted Moses take off his shoes because the location was holy. Moses's shoes were dirty, as all shoes are. Many people post notices at the door to their homes to politely ask people to remove their shoes. This is because shoes track in the dirt from outside.

Dirt and holiness do not mix. Let me make something clear as we study this process of kingdom encounters: You cannot have an encounter with God if you are unwilling to deal with your personal sin. If you are unwilling to acknowledge and repent of your sin, you can't even get close to the bush. God is holy. His presence is holy. To enter into His presence, you have to be willing to take off your shoes and remove the dirt you have accumulated along life's path.

Holy means "to be separate." It refers to someone or something that is sacredly separate. Thus, to enter into God's holy presence, we have to separate ourselves from the sin that stains us. The only plan given for that separation is called confession and repentance. First John 1:9 puts it this way, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Repentance is the internal decision and determination to turn away from sin and simultaneously turn toward God in reverence, gratitude, and awe. The writer of Acts tells us that repentance is tied to entering into an encounter with God. It says in Acts 3:19, "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

Moses was instructed to remove his shoes because he stood on holy ground. He had to sever himself from the dirt that polluted him, symbolically, in God's presence. Likewise, we as believers must come to God with a spirit of repentance, forsaking our sin, and receiving His cleansing forgiveness. David modeled the need for and heart of repentance in his psalm of repentance (Ps. 51). His prayer is instructive as to how we are to enter into God's presence. Let's look at a portion of it:

Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted to You.

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my
salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give
it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not
despise. (vv. 9–17)

God is not asking that we sacrifice something for His forgiveness. That sacrifice was made perfectly for us through the sinless life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What we are instructed to do, as we see in this psalm, is to come to God in a broken spirit with a contrite heart to ask for His forgiveness. When that is done, forgiveness is given, and we can rest assured in the complete absolution through Jesus Christ. Romans 8:1 offers this hope, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Because Moses willingly removed his shoes—obeying God’s commands—he entered into a greater encounter with the living God. Removing his shoes also demonstrated humility in God’s presence since Moses’s feet were now directly on the dirt from which he was created. Moses was a creature in the presence of his Creator. But please notice what God used in order to speak to Moses. Even though it was a highly contradictory situation, God used an ordinary object. The bush was already there. It was simply an ordinary bush that had been invaded by God’s supernatural presence that resulted in an extraordinary encounter.

I don’t know how God is going to meet you, but I do know that any old bush will do. God can use the most ordinary thing and set fire to it in order to create the most ingenious contradiction that allows a greater manifestation of His power and glory. But let me remind you, if this is going to happen to you, you cannot be a flame-resistant Christian.

People put on flame-resistant suits when they work in close proximity to flames so that they won't catch fire. Some of us believers will never burn with the brilliance of the Holy Spirit's power made manifest in and through us because we wear evangelical flame-resistant suits. We really don't want to get close to the fire of God's presence. We don't want God to rub off on us like that. So, to protect ourselves from that which we cannot explain or rationalize, we put on our intellectual or emotional flame-resistant attire, and we come to church, leaving on our flame-resistant shoes. All the while, we wonder why we don't catch fire for the Lord.

God's miraculous manifestations are for those who have the faith to enter into His presence and the humility to surrender to His instructions.

Once Moses responded to God and took off his shoes, God revealed to him who He was. We read this in Exodus 3:6–7 where it says,

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

The LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.”

God makes Himself known to Moses by first identifying who He is: the God of his father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He reminds Moses of His history

before He tells Moses of what is to come. Not only that, He also lets Moses know that He has seen the affliction of the Israelites in Egypt, and He is aware of the same atrocities that plagued Moses's heart some forty years earlier.

Remember that this whole thing started years ago. Moses thought he knew what he was supposed to do, to be used by God to deliver the people. He knew God had a handle on his life. He just hadn't gone about it God's way. The calling and purpose were clear. The path just got distorted because Moses had too much Egypt in him at that time, to the degree that he sought to bring about the resolution through his own methods and means.

But, by introducing Himself to Moses in this way, God let Moses know that He had not forgotten the covenantal promises He made to Moses's ancestors or what He had planned to do through Moses. God had not forgotten what He had planned to do for His people either to fulfill those promises.

It is important to point out here that God's delays are often tied to our development. Because Moses would one day be called upon to lead the lost sheep of the house of Israel, God gave him forty years of experience leading sheep through a wilderness until his self-confidence was ready to be shifted to God-confidence.

God's delays are also tied to Him creating a scenario to be most ideal for His purpose. While God was developing Moses, He was also making a spiritual link between the condition of the Israelites with Moses's own maturity. Moses thought he was ready to deliver Israel forty years earlier. He had the education, wealth, eloquence, power, and raw materials to do it. But what he didn't have was a dependence on God evidenced by spiritual

maturity and humility. God is always after developing our spiritual maturity before bringing us into our destiny. He wants to connect our character with our calling.

God also prepares other parts of the purpose while He is preparing the person to live it out. The Israelites didn't know what God was doing to solve their problem as they cried out to Him to deliver them from the Egyptians. They definitely weren't daydreaming about a hero-shepherd-man from Midian. But God was getting ready to make a divine encounter where He was arranging both situations to meet at the right time.

These kingdom encounters are God-ordained points of connection that only He knows beforehand. We don't know what, where, or how God is going to arrange kingdom encounters. All we can do is proceed with our development, trusting God to bring us to the point where we are ready for that connection to take place at the proper time.

There may be something God put on your heart to do years ago, but it has yet to be fulfilled. I don't know how long you may have been struggling as you wait on God. Or perhaps you have gotten to the point where you have given up hope that He will even do anything at all. But I want to encourage you to keep your eyes open for the living Lord. God hasn't forgotten you. He knows where you are. He knows how you got there. He knows how long you have been there. And like He did with Moses, He can call your name for you to carry out the plan He's placed on your life, even if you have gotten off the timetable you had once envisioned for your life.

The first half of a football game is never the whole story for

how things will wind up. Many a team that was losing in the first half winds up winning the game in the end. Much of this shift comes because of their meeting with the coach at half-time when adjustments are made. So if your story up to this point is one of loss, defeat, regret, and disappointment, then meet with God at your burning bush. Or, if necessary, ask Him to give you one. He can reverse the things that make it appear that your life is over. He can move you from a regular existence to a premium, super-unleaded one and bring you to a victorious life as you discover and fulfill your kingdom destiny.