



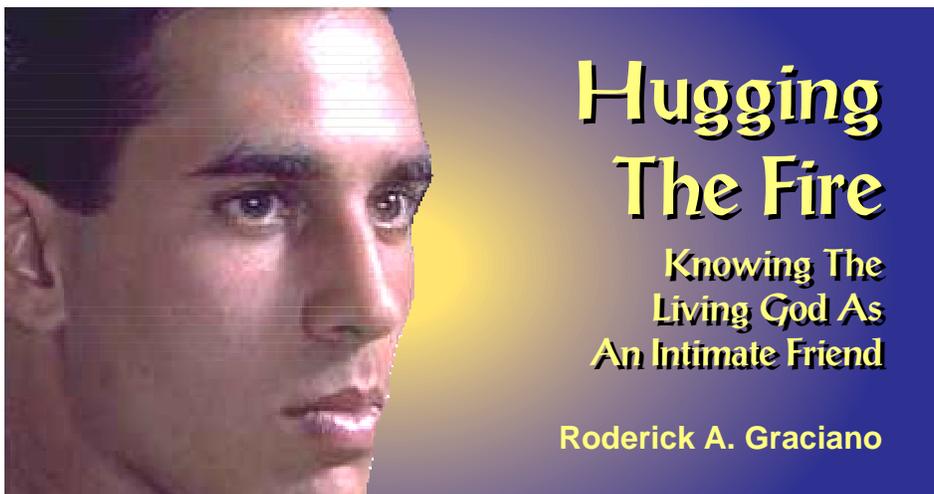
# The Timothy Ministries

# Explorer

Searching... in the light of God's Word

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alternatives face us in our relationship with God. We can draw near to the Consuming Fire (Heb. 12.29) and exult in His self-disclosure while our fleshliness burns away, or we can keep Him at arm's length and comfortably long for "something more." Historically, some of the professing people of God have always traveled each of the two roads. Some have taken the path toward intimacy with God, while others in the same culture have chosen the road of professing to worship God while maintaining relational distance from Him.

### Taming The Consuming Fire

Walking this latter road has often taken the form of a dispensational<sup>1</sup> anti-supernaturalism. In other words, some religious people have defended their more academic approach to God with the doctrine that God no longer relates to humans in direct, supernatural ways as He did in other eras. In their dispensational view, spiritual gifts and the dramatic interventions of the Holy Spirit have ceased. This cessationist belief has sometimes led to a compensatory emphasis upon ritual, theological study or doctrinal debate. In this way, religious people have tamed the Consuming Fire

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As he sat at our dinner table, I recently asked a 19-year-old Christian whether he had ever heard God speak to him. Without hesitation he emphatically replied, Yes! The week before he had so distinctly heard an answer to a personal question that he had looked over his shoulder to see who was speaking. To my surprise, this young man then proceeded to express how he does not believe that God speaks except in Scripture, for such was his theological training. He resisted my own testimony of an occasion when God spoke directly to me. "So," I asked, "are you saying that God spoke to you in a direct and personal way, but that you are having trouble valuing that experience because of your training?"

"Oh, I value [the experience]," he said, "I just have a hard time accepting that God really speaks that way."

"Hold on," I said, "regardless of your theology, haven't you ever wished for a God who was that close and personal, a God who would speak to you directly like He did last week?"

"Oh, forever!" the young man replied. "I've longed for that kind of God."

### The Relational Y In The Road

If we long for an up close and personal God, why do we hesitate to release Him from between the covers of the Bible? Since we were all created for intimacy with God, why do we fear it? It's no mystery really; it has to do with the pain that all intimacy brings. With people, we come to a Y in the relational road after we've been wounded emotionally a few times. At this Y we can choose the painful path of deepening relationship, or we can opt for the safer, more comfortable road of relational distance. The same

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and made Him into the God of history and theology—the *God of the Book*. The God of the Book is a comfortable God; we can discuss His will endlessly without ever inviting Him to the meeting.

The Sadducees of old worshipped this tamed God. They believed in God, but not in an interventional God. Like the Deists of a more recent time, they believed that “God helps them who help themselves.” *The Jewish Encyclopedia* explains that the Sadducees did not share “the Messianic hopes of the Pharisees, who committed the future into the hand of God,” but rather “took the people’s destiny into their own hands, fighting or negotiating with the heathen nations just as they thought best, while having as their aim their own temporary welfare and worldly success.”<sup>2</sup> The Sadducees did not believe in divine providence, the immortality of the soul nor in angels or demons (Acts 23.8), but they *did* believe in the written Scriptures and they loved philosophical debates.<sup>3</sup> No wonder the Sadducees had a problem with the Christ who invaded human history, silenced their debates (Mat. 22.34) and in a very concrete fashion shut down their temple market! The Sadducees were not looking for that kind of a relationship with God.



**The God of History or the Present Son?**

Neither were some of the Italian Jews who received the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is what the puzzling exhortation of Hebrews 6.4-7 is all about:

- Hebr. 6.4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,
- Hebr. 6.5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,
- Hebr. 6.6 if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Many readers of these verses have asked: How is it possible that “Christians” who have “shared in the Holy Spirit” (v. 4) can then “fall away” without hope of repentance (v. 6)? The

answer is that the exhortation of Hebrews 6 was not to Christians who had *personally* and *individually* experienced the redemptive work of the Spirit. It was to attendees in a Messianic Jewish Synagogue who had *corporately* witnessed the Spirit’s work in their midst. These individuals within the synagogue assembly had been intellectually enlightened by the testimony of Jesus’ messiahship, and had *corporately* witnessed spiritual gifts and the blessings of the Gospel in the lives of their peers. Now, however, a time of persecution (Heb. 10.32-34) tempted them to turn away from the living God (Heb. 3.12), rejecting the evidence of their *corporate* experience in favor of personal temporal safety. These Jewish people had, after all, become used to the God of the Book who, according to

a popular belief, had been silent for 400 years! Supposedly, God had not spoken to their ancestors in any direct way since the prophet Malachi’s ministry in the 5th century BC. Now these 1st-century Hebrews were being asked to believe that their God had suddenly “spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb. 1.2). This was not a call to worship “the God of history” nor even “the God of the Book,” but a call to embrace “the Living God” into whose hands it *is* a frightening thing to fall (Heb. 10.30,31). This

Living God, in the person of His Son, cares nothing for endless discussion of elementary truths (Heb. 5.11-6.2), but commands immediate obedience, faith and holiness. This was not the kind of God that some of the Hebrews in this synagogue had bargained for.

**Not In Our House Please!**

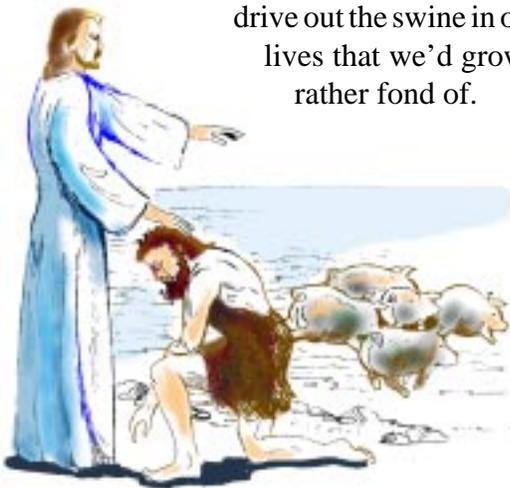
Nor was He the kind of God that the Gentiles of Gadara were interested in. Jesus healed two homicidal demoniacs near there who had been so violent that their presence had effectively closed a public road (Mat. 8.28-34). One would think that the community would welcome the man who had delivered them from such a public menace—but no. The “whole town” pleaded with Jesus to leave their region. This reaction had always puzzled me until recently. About

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a year ago, two demonized individuals were dramatically delivered in a church near Tacoma. Such encounters had never occurred nor been looked for in this church before, but two phenomena resulted: (1) others with demonic problems went to this church seeking help, and (2) some long-time members left the church. Some who left the church spoke to me straightforwardly about their reason: they disapprove of the “new doctrinal emphasis” on demons. I’ve attended services there, however, and I suspect that our problem as American evangelicals is not so much with demons as with the One who casts them out. Ironically, a missionary friend in a Mediterranean country has just sent me a thrilling e-mail, reporting the very same kind of deliverances from demonization in her little native church as in the local church here. We rejoice to hear of such victories from our missionaries. The question is, why do we Americans condone the casting out of demons “on the mission field,” but condemn their being cast out in our own churches? Apparently we have realized, like the Gadarenes, that if Jesus begins to

drive out demons in our own back yard, He may also drive out the swine in our lives that we’d grown rather fond of.



**The Secret of the LORD**

It’s true that if we embrace the Living God He will drive a herd of pet sins out of our lives, and this sanctifying process is not pleasant. However, the benefits outweigh the requisite growing pains. Psalm 25.14 puts it beautifully: “The LORD confides in those who fear

him” (NIV). The prerequisite for this promise is to fear the LORD, which involves confession (Psalm 25.6,11), humility (v. 9) and obedience (v. 10). The promised benefit is that the LORD will *confide* in you. What does that mean? Comparing translations reveals the nuances of this clause:

The *secret* of the LORD is for those who fear Him...(NASB)

The *friendship* of the LORD is for those who fear Him...(NRS)

In the Hebrew text of Psalm 25.14, the word translated *confide*, *secret* or *friendship* is the noun סֵדֶר (pronounced *sod* like in *soda*). It “signifies being closely pressed together for the purpose of secret communication and converse, confidential communion or being together.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the benefit of embracing the Living God, in spite of the awful discomfort involved, is the privilege of *hearing His voice* in intimate communion! The intimate God that my young friend (at the beginning of this article) longs for is not disavowed by Scripture, but proclaimed from Genesis to Revelation. God has not gone mute nor on vacation. He has not been left behind in history nor been confined to a book. He is ready to come near to us if we will only come near to Him *on His terms* (James 4.8). If we will stop telling God what He can and cannot do in our dispensation and in our city, He will draw us into the intimate friendship we’ve dreamed of.

Notes

- 1 I do not here refer to the theological and eschatological system of Dispensationalism *per se*, but only to the idea that God relates to His people differently in different and distinct chronological periods.
- 2 *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, p. 631.
- 3 Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.4.
- 4 C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms*.

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