

## **THE STUCK SYNDROME**

### **FINALE: THE GOD EXPERIENCE**

Without a doubt, the greatest longing of humankind is to experience God. At the heart of all our distractions are shreds of evidence that we want Him desperately. Ironically and tragically, we are experts at avoiding the very One we desire. Foolishly, we seek to manipulate Him, to define Him, to package Him, but such sterile endeavors only leave us disappointed and barren. Yet, here and there sunshine pierces the clouds, and we bask in the Presence. Life is filled with divine encounters, some subtle and unrecognized, others so paramount they set in motion a full-scale spiritual meltdown.

Dynamic experiences of God fill this world. We are awed when we think about the movement of the Spirit in Indonesia. A few decades ago, the island of Timor was swept up in the wind of the Spirit. Miracles abounded. Water was turned to wine. Even the dead were resurrected. One man, who was raised, had been dead so long that the believers who prayed over him were nauseated by the stench of the body.

We are mystified when we think of the experience of Francis of Assisi in 1224. Entering a rhapsody in God on Mount Alverno he received the markings of Christ in his own body. The stigmata of nail scars in his hands and feet, and the scar of a spear on his side.

And although we may wish for the more fantastic manifestations in our experience with God, there are encounters that are merely meant to preserve the sanity of the suffering. I recall a Czech pastor who was forced to stand motionless day after day. Any movement resulted in cruel beatings by communist interrogators. While standing so long his legs swelled beyond recognition, and day after day he was refused sleep. One day he caught his own reflection in a window and was horrified at the monster he saw. As pain and devastation rushed to overwhelm him, he testified of Christ suddenly being present, holding him, soothing him, and restoring his heart and mind. The God experience is infinite in variety.

Many are convinced that Japan is positioned for a tidal wave of God, but what form will it take? We have yet to see. One thing is certain, however, the experience will be unique to the need and longing of Japan. Throughout this series, I have stressed that Japan is ripe for God. Consider a few of the signs. A survey by NHK (Japan National Broadcasting) in the mid-80's showed that if Japanese were to choose a religion, over a third would choose Christianity. Just a few years ago, Walter Wangerin's *The Book of God* (*Shosetsu Seisho*) enjoyed rampant sales. The book was merely a rewriting of the

Bible in novel form. And consider the countless newly weds that flirt with Christianity today? Fifty two percent of marriages in Japan take vows in a Christian ceremony. Where in else in this world do secular companies build chapels, fill them with totally un-churched people, and then beg ministers to come and freely preach to them? But this is precisely what is happening. Clearly, Japan appears to be showing a readiness for this God. Yet, common tendency in the Church today is to bemoan the unresponsiveness of society to the message (or messenger, as the case may be). We wait for the culture to change, to open, and to come flooding in. But change is all around. This is the epoch of opportunity. The time for waiting has ended. We cannot exist as we have before.

In this age, few look for rational answers. There is little interest in the meaning of life. Rarely have I found anyone in Japan who was looking for truth, but I have spoken with hundreds who are looking for, what I will call, “life.” Ministering a few years, at Ivy League schools in Tokyo, awakened me to this hunger. Students didn’t give a flip about “knowledge of truth,” but ardently sought after an “experience of life”—to have a sense of really living. In this context, my approach to evangelism needed a radical adjustment. The “heart experience of the marvelous Mystery” now takes precedence over the principles and dogmas of the faith. People are even seeking to somehow get a feel of life through the experience of others, whether in the broken and radiant body of Ootake Hirota, whose book *Gotai Fumanzoku* became the bestseller of the 90’s, or through a naked Nasubi, ludicrously dancing over his first ramen in a year, and his slurping it religiously to the last drop. This description of a Japan eager for life is like an echo with the writing of Joseph Campbell in the *Power of Myth*, “People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

Both the Postmodern-heart, and the Yamato-heart, seek the same thing—an experience of life. This scenario meshes perfectly with the Christ who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Perhaps our focus needs a shift; to balance the truth aspect with the life aspect. For life is truth fleshed. After all, it is not just the cyber-lonely, the materially-compulsive, and the spiritually-clueless, who deep down thirst for Him, it is the Church as well. Yet often, we are devoid of the very experience that we, the Church, not to mention the masses, seek. In the words of R.D. Laing, “It seems likely that far more people in our time neither experience the presence of God, nor the presence of his absence, but the absence of his presence.”

What shape will the God experience in Japan take? We can only imagine the

possibilities of Japan's future. Classical mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec, captivates me in his explanation of the wanton and unrestrained experience of union with God, "Nevertheless, all loving spirits are one enjoyment and one beatitude with God, without difference, for that blessed state of being, which is the enjoyment of God and of all his beloved is so simple and undifferentiated that there is within it neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit as regards the distinction of Persons, nor is there any creature either. Rather, all enlightened spirits are there raised above themselves into a modeless state of blissful enjoyment which overflows whatever fullness any creature has ever received or ever could receive.€35

On the practical side, Charles Finney, a American revivalist during the Awakening, who witnessed hundreds of thousands of conversions, explained in very practical terms, "A revival is the work of God, and so is a crop of wheat, and God is as much dependent on the use of means in one case as the other." So we have a paradox, the God experience is sheer grace, and the God experience depends on us.

I believe that each tradition of Christian faith has a treasure to offer the Church. The Catholic tradition offers depth. The Orthodox tradition offers mystery. The Evangelical tradition offers clarity. The Liberal tradition offers compassion. And the Pentecostal tradition offers expectancy. Perhaps this is the greatest gift for the Church in Japan today—expectancy that the tidal wave of God is coming.

The story of the disciples in the storm of Mark 4 speaks right to the heart of our contemporary condition. Jesus and the disciples embark on a routine boat trip, but in the middle of the sea a storm begins to grow and rage. The disciples become frantic, overwhelmed, and torn with fear. They thrash about, in hopes of saving themselves, to no avail. The storm is too big for them. They strain at the oars and go nowhere. They are stuck, even sinking. "We will perish!" they cry, ignorant of who is in their boat. God Himself is in our boat. Feigning slumber. Waiting. It is only a matter of time€46

In prophetic words of Brazilian poet/theologian Rubem Alves, "we sail to the unknown, obedient to the calling of our soul...The Wind blows with unexpected violence...We are at the end of the world. We are at the beginning of the world."

The time has come. Expect Him. Expect a new Church. Expect a new world.

