Amazing Encounters with God

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I live by a handful of unshakable convictions—or at least I try to. These convictions affect what I believe about my family, my calling, the world around me, and the people who inhabit this world.

One is that my marriage to my wife is more about making me holy than making me happy, so by God’s grace we’ll remain married no matter what life throws at us. Another is that it’s my joy and responsibility, along with my wife, to raise our children to know Jesus, tell the truth, work hard, have compassion, and treat everyone with respect.

These convictions, like a road map, guide my everyday life and decisions. If they were anything other than unshakable, I couldn’t build my life on them. Convictions have to be firm, like a rock. They have to be solid enough, like the foundation of a home, to handle the heavy construction, not to mention the storms that will test that construction over the days and years and decades.

The unshakable conviction that has led me through the crafting of this book is a simple one, one that you will hear over and over again.
on these pages: *We are constantly in the presence of God* as He speaks to us through the everyday occurrences of life, and when He uses ordinary things to show us Himself, we see that we are always just one breath away from an encounter with Him.

That conviction not only guides this book; it also drives my life. God is active and alive and near to us. He’s not an outer-space god. He’s always speaking to the human race, always revealing His character and personality and love and grace through the stuff we usually ignore and stumble over. If we are willing to listen, He will tune our hearts and minds to His message.

Once you learn how to look, you’ll be surprised to find that His presence is everywhere, all the time, coming at you from every direction—sometimes like a tornado that knocks you off your feet, sometimes like a flash of lightning that takes your breath away, and sometimes like a small child who leaps from behind a door to surprise his jumpy dad (not that this has ever happened to me).

Some call this theological reflection. Others call it spiritual discernment. I like to call it “paying attention.” God is everywhere. Sometimes He’s screaming at us to get our attention before we make a life-altering mistake in a relationship. Other times He whispers to us as we drive to work or school, letting us know we are forgiven even for sins we have forgotten. He can gently nudge us by using a lyric in a worship song we heard at just the right time, or He can smack us upside the head because we were too preoccupied with selfish things to listen to Him when He wanted to whisper. One way or another, He’s going to get our attention. All of nature and life is at His disposal.

That is what we are up to here, in this book, on these pages. I want to remind you just how accessible God is to you. I want to show you that you don’t need a seminary degree to experience His presence...
yourself. I also intend to argue that ordinary, regular, run-of-the-mill people can have some life-changing encounters with God in the most random and mundane places. You can come to grasp things about God that you never saw in Scripture, never heard about in church, or totally missed as a teenager, just by learning the discipline of paying attention to your life.

It’s easy once you realize you’re already swimming in sacred waters. The earth is God’s. All truth is God’s truth. All beauty reflects the glory of God. And He can and does employ whatever means He wants to teach you and me what He wants to teach us because, after all, the world is His. This means _everything_ obeys His command—so if He decides to unleash the power of the wind, a song, a scene in a movie, or a kind word from a stranger at the market, He will.

What would you think if I told you that one of the best sermons I ever preached was inspired by watching a Guns N’ Roses concert on television? And that an Italian World War II veteran taught me about forgiveness on an airplane? Or that a drunken millionaire showed me how to look past people’s outer appearances and look instead into their hearts? Or that an epiphany on the way to preschool with my four-year-old made me break down so badly I could barely see through my tears to drive? You have had dozens, if not hundreds, of amazing encounters with God whether you knew it or not.

May you never miss another such moment; may you be looking for God when He reveals Himself to you next time. And the next, and the next.

The pages that follow will not distract you from God’s Word. They will illuminate it, reinforce it, and make it come alive in a new way for you. When you can’t reach for your Bible, or your favorite Christian radio station isn’t playing in the background, or you find yourself far removed from your Sunday-morning worship service, you can still see
God. You can still hear God. You can still feel God. He is never far from you. He is close, maybe as close as the next person you meet, the next song you hear, or the next conversation you have.

So keep your ears open and your eyes peeled. His presence could be as close as your next breath.
MY PERSONAL OFFICE—MY STUDY—lies mostly underground, in the basement of my home. I go there to flesh out the ideas and inspirations that assault me during the day. It’s there that I practice theological reflection, the art of seeing the sacred that constantly surrounds me…and my basement study is one of the few places I can be alone, quiet, still, and focused.

My study looks like me. I’ve surrounded myself in that space with things that reflect my personality and my history: Action figures line the top of my bookshelf; thousands of volumes of theology, history, biography, and fiction fill the walls; and my bearskin rug is conspicuously displayed as a testimony to my deep love for the sport of hunting. But there’s one certain item in my study that to me is simply priceless and irreplaceable.

It’s a glass Coca-Cola bottle.
What makes this bottle so special is not the type of glass, its design, or the factory it was produced in. What makes it so special is the person it belonged to before it fell into my hands.

What would make a Coke bottle sacred? What makes anything sacred? What processes have to take place before a person, a place, or a moment in time is considered holy? And beyond that, what do the words *sacred* and *holy* even mean? They’re used often enough, but I get the feeling that the average person has no real understanding of such spiritual-sounding words. I know they’ve always sounded a bit intimidating to me. But I think the glass Coke bottle that adorns my study shelf might serve as a simple lesson on what makes something sacred.

The word *holy* simply means “set apart.” At least that is the easiest and most common definition. Instead of what we usually think of when we hear that word (visions from the book of Revelation of angels, thrones, scrolls, and bowls), “holy” is a simple word with a history to it. In order for something to be “set apart,” some questions need to be asked.

1. Who set the thing apart?
2. What was the purpose for this setting apart?

In the Scriptures we see that God Himself is the One who does the setting apart. It’s nothing but His touch that makes the person, the object, or the day sacred. If I declare something sacred, it means nothing. I might as well declare myself the president of the United States. Such a declaration is meaningless because I lack the authority to make it, and I also lack the innate holiness to transfer onto someone or something to make it, or them, holy.

God, on the other hand, is already holy and sacred. He is, within His own nature, set apart from us (though He did become one of us
in Jesus Christ). So God is the sole power and person in all the created order of the universe who has the right, the power, and the authority to deem something sacred and holy. It’s His touch that sets something apart.

Life is filled with sacred moments inhabited by God and ordained by God; they show us who He is and transform us into His people who know Him and love Him. He is holy, and when He touches a moment we are caught up in, it becomes sacred to us because God Himself was present. Our task is to train our eyes and ears to notice the “holiness” of average moments and average things—conversations with strangers, scenes in movies, lyrics in a song.

So what about the Coke bottle?

For 18 years I prayed relentlessly that God would do one thing for me: I wanted to meet Billy Graham. I began asking God for this when I was 14 years old, right after I became a Christian and surrendered my life to the very strong calling I felt to preach the gospel. Billy Graham was the most recognizable Christian face on the planet, history’s greatest ambassador of the gospel, and in 1987 when I converted to faith, he was at the height of his global crusade ministry.

Needless to say, I was told to forget it. Everyone said there was no way on earth I would ever meet him.

This was the line I was given for nearly 20 years. At first, he was too busy. Then as I entered college, I was told he was focusing on his last stretch of crusades in major American cities before he was too old to continue his strenuous schedule. Then I was told his health was failing and he wasn’t able to meet new people; he was being protected from all requests like mine. All of this made perfect sense, and I was impressed with the level of loyalty and professionalism his organization displayed. But I wasn’t content to take no for an answer.

Through a series of crazy events, and with the help of a few friends
who knew Mr. Graham, my prayers were finally answered on April 15, 2005. His public preaching ministry had ended because of his failing health, and he was spending most of his time at his home in Montreat, North Carolina, with his wife, Ruth.

I’d become friends with a student at a local university. We met during a skeet-shooting outing, and I found out he lived at Montreat. Of course, the first question I asked was, “Have you ever met Billy Graham or seen him around there?”

With an easy grin, he nonchalantly said, “Of course I have. I grew up with his grandkids and spent the summer swimming in his pool.”

Several months later, my wife and I were visiting my new friend in Montreat on a Sunday afternoon when his father, Mr. Graham’s personal doctor, made a visit to the Graham home. He invited us to tag along in the car. The next thing I knew, we were sitting inside the home of my hero in the faith, the man I admired and loved for his simplicity and integrity.

I would love to tell you every word of the three-hour conversation we had that afternoon, and I could, because I’ve recorded all of it in a notebook that I keep in a safe place. But as you know, this is about a Coke bottle.

When we sat down in the living room, one of Mr. Graham’s assistants asked us if we wanted anything to eat or drink. He gave us a list of options to choose from: ice cream, root-beer float, water, juice, and so on. My wife and I both decided to have a root-beer float. (For the record, he could have given me liquefied tar and I wouldn’t have known the difference. I was too overcome with emotion to notice.) Our friend and his father asked for a soft drink. But when Mr. Graham was asked, he responded by saying, “I will have a Coca-Cola.”

About an hour later Mr. Graham excused himself to go check on Ruth. As he moved slowly away holding onto his walker, I was eyeballing the half-empty Coke bottle sitting beside his chair. I asked the assistant...
what he planned to do with it, and he said he was going to throw it away. I declared it would be a serious tragedy to discard such a priceless item and have it tossed into a landfill, since someone who knew its true worth could easily rescue it and treasure it as their most prized possession.

Evidently, I made a case for sparing the bottle. When we left later that afternoon, not only did I have my picture taken with Mr. Graham, and not only did he inscribe my Bible, but I left his log cabin on the top of Piney Cove with an empty Coca-Cola bottle stuck inconspicuously under my arm.

That item now holds a place of high honor in my study and in my heart. It affords me more than just an opportunity to tell a good story. It brings me back to a time when I was in the presence of a holy man—one of the greatest moments of my life. In itself, the bottle has no particular historical value, and certainly no monetary value. What makes it holy…sacred…is the man for whose use it was set apart—the man to whom it once belonged, who had touched it and held it in his hands.

Do you see how we are surrounded by the sacred? God is speaking to us and touching us all the time, and we are most often too busy to even notice His attempts to get our attention.

When God enters a situation, it becomes sacred, and the lessons we learn become priceless. There are “Coke bottles” everywhere, amazing encounters with God—situations and conversations He has entered, sometimes almost in secret—and if we will train our ears and eyes to see Him there, all of life will become a prayer, a Bible study, an act of worship, or a great spiritual lesson on His love and grace.

When we see the sacred that surrounds us, we realize that our constant Companion and Friend walks with us every moment of every day, pointing out His reality in a world that is often too preoccupied with other things to notice the One they might encounter.

Now, every time I go into a store where they sell Coke in glass
bottles, I buy one. Then I get in my car, open the cap, take a sip, and remember. And every single time it brings me back to one of the greatest days of my life, where 18 years of prayers were answered, and a great and holy God arranged an amazing encounter with one of His great and holy servants.