

GOD IS NOT A

Ern Baxter on the importance of c

Ern Baxter, a member of the Integrity Communications Board of Directors, has been in ministry for more than fifty years, and through that time the Lord has taught him many important lessons about seeking Him. In this interview, Ern discusses some of those lessons.

New Wine: How can people be motivated to seek the Lord?

Ern Baxter: Two things motivate us to seek the Lord: crises that come into our lives, and also what I call process, which is our growing, maturing relationship with the Lord. When we talk about seeking the

Lord, it's difficult to completely separate the two. A person must have some kind of rapport with God to begin with. Most of the men in the Bible who came into times of crisis did so out of the process of their relationship with God. The crisis was an interruption, a confrontation or course change, in the flow of



FIRE ESCAPE!

of a day-by-day walk with the Lord

their lives.

Seeking God is more than a matter of prayer or intercession. It's a combination of *watching* and praying to heighten our sensitivity to what's going on. Hidden in whatever is going on is a clue to what the crisis is about. Prayer without watching is only half the solution, and watching without prayer gives you a nervous breakdown.

When we seek the Lord, we also need a good dose of patience. On one occasion I experienced a crisis that indicated a significant change was about to take place in my life; one of the many course corrections that have taken place because of the nature of my calling. I was convinced that God was in the change, yet the circumstances surrounding it seemed to drag on and I got impatient.

One morning as I was driving to church by myself I blurted out, "God, why don't You listen to me? How long am I going to drag on here? Let me get this change over with."

He just shot back like lightning, "Why don't you listen to *Me*?"

I knew instantly what He meant. We constantly ask God for things. We pray to Him. But there's a sense in which He prays, or speaks to, us.

NW: Does the Lord allow situations to come into our lives to intensify our fellowship with Him?

EB: Yes, and the Lord Himself is the best example of that. The Bible tells us He did always those things that pleased the Father. But He was constantly facing crises; the greatest were the betrayal, the trial, and the cross. In all of those, He was very much in the Father's pres-

ence in prayer. Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying." In several crises, He cried unto the Father out of His humanity. Crises were simply part of the process of His relationship to His Father.

Life consists of process and crisis. A marriage relationship is a good example. A couple will go along for a time and then they encounter a crisis, large or small. Eventually that crisis passes and they settle down, go along for a time, and then hit another crisis. They probably won't handle the crisis well if they're not handling the relational process well.

NW: Do some people go from crisis to crisis without a sense of the process, always in or out of a panic?

EB: Yes, that's true. Once I was close to a young man in my church, but he was weak. He'd walk with God enthusiastically, but then he'd start to wane and he'd lose his job or experience some other disturbing reversal. It was a pattern. Each time he would come to me sheepishly and say, "Well, Pastor, I guess I blew it again. I lost my job."

I'd say, "Okay, let's pray and get this straightened out."

He would get fixed up, find another job, and be fine, ready to go to the ends of the earth. But it was as if he used God in crises and forgot Him in the process.

One evening he came to me to say good-bye. He was leaving his wife for another woman, and there was nothing I could say to dissuade him. We wept together, and he was gone; it was obvious he had made up his mind.

I never did hear from him again, but about three years later I was listening to my car radio and I heard that this man had been found dead in the water alongside his boat. I immediately pulled off the road, found the nearest pay phone, and called his ex-wife. "Is he the man they found?" I asked.

And sadly, he was. Here was a man who used God in crisis. I'm not pronouncing judgment on his spiritual condition, but rather pointing out a principle. God is not a fire escape; He's someone you live with. Romans 7:4 says, "Ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another...that we should bring forth fruit." Again, our relationship to God is like a marriage, which is both crisis and process. But it's a relationship that you either handle or mishandle.

NW: Does God allow the crises to come into the process to strengthen our relationship with Him?

EB: Yes, and Job is a great illustration of this principle. God tested his faith, and God tests our faith as well. But how He tests it is up to Him. That's one of His prerogatives. If He didn't test us, we'd never grow. Remember the first step you saw your child take? If there wasn't a first one, he'd never walk.

NW: Do you think that many times God allows crises in our lives to sharpen our hearing?

EB: That's right. Often when we're praying we rush in and tell God a list of things, walk out, and slam the door. We don't even have the courtesy to find out if He would

like to say something. Our amen may not be God's amen.

NW: How do you handle the crises that come?

EB: The circumstances in which you are directly or indirectly involved are always changing. In my life, for example, the death of my first wife was a severe jolt. That's not a daily crisis; something like that happens maybe once in a lifetime. But whether it's a death, a financial reverse, or an accident, we can handle it if our relationship with God is based on a process rather than crisis.

NW: It might be helpful to hear how you faced the change in your relationship with William Branham, whom you ministered with for some time.

EB: In the ministry with William Branham, I saw a dimension of the supernatural that had in it such seeds of Christian unity and other good fruits that my excitement was hard to contain. But when I saw carnality start to invade the movement—exaggeration, misrepresentation, metaphysics, and eventually the breakdown of many of the healers in critical areas of their lives because they couldn't handle the crowds, the popularity, or the money—I had to withdraw from it. That probably was one of the most traumatic times in my life. I did a lot of praying at that time, a lot of groaning. In fact, I did a lot of screaming because I was close to an emotional breakdown. A tremendous move of God had been sold out so cheaply; it was difficult to handle. If I hadn't had an experience with God, if I hadn't had a consciousness of His sovereignty, if I hadn't had some kind of a relationship with God based on process, I don't know what I would have done.

I had maintained the pastoral oversight of my church while working with Branham, and I went back

and gave myself totally to that. I was now pastoring a church, whereas before I had been with thousands of people in city-shaking meetings. It was quite a shock. I would go to my study, get down on the floor, and just groan. I'd talk to God, and just wait. I couldn't do anything else. If it were not for my relationship with God, I could have taken the extreme position that Christianity was a "bunch of bunk." But I couldn't do that,



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because it wasn't a matter of Christianity; it wasn't a matter of the healers; it was a matter of who was the most important person in this, and that was God. God wasn't bunk to me. I knew that. I knew God, and I knew where God was.

NW: What did that experience work in your life?

EB: Romans 5:3-4 says, "Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope."

Tribulation means "pressure." God lets pressures come into our lives so that we get experience. There's nothing like experience.

I once heard a story about a man who lived on a hog farm all his life, raising hogs and doing a good job of it. He learned it from his dad. But one day he decided his boy wasn't going to learn hog farming by trial and error as he did; he was going to go to an agricultural college and learn how to be a smart farmer.

So off his son went, and after graduation he came back to the farm and his dad told him to go ahead and make some improvements. The boy did and the pigs began to die.

Suddenly the father realized that his son had built a fancy new operation, but forgot to put proper ventilation in it. So the old man tore it all down and built what he had before.

It takes a lot more than a degree in college to learn the facts of life. Because of his experience, the old man really ought to have been a lecturer at the college.

NW: Without your experience, you wouldn't have the relationship that you now have with the Lord, would you?

EB: Right. A word that is missing from our vocabulary today is *endurance*. Hebrews 12:6 says, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." If you endure chastening, then He deals with you as a son—if you endure chastening. It's not necessarily punishment; it can be instruction. To endure means to wade through until it's done. That's where patience comes in.

A lot of Christians live from crisis to crisis, and wonder why their crises are so hard. It's because they don't develop a process. All God is saying in a crisis is that if you move in close to Him and develop a process, you might not need all those crises. □