



Having *coffee* with God

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MARK BARNETTE

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Advocate Press, Columbia, South Carolina

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First published in the United States of America in 2024

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Having Coffee with God
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-966237-06-8

First, and most important, I would like to dedicate this meager work to God and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who motivated me to record some of our many conversations.

Next, I dedicate this to my wife Elizabeth, who did not turn away from me when I told her of my talking with God but comforted and supported me in my efforts to record the words I heard.

Finally, to Jessica, who has been central to my journey and made this dream come true.

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Foreword

When I was asked by my good friend Mark Barnette to write a foreword for this book, I was immediately excited. Yet writing a foreword raises its own set of questions. Am I signing up to affirm everything that has been written? What if there are theological problems? What if everything is not absolutely correct?

These are just a few of the questions I considered while writing this foreword. First, the title *Having Coffee with God* is ambitious. I think C. S. Lewis is right when he says, “It is safe to tell the pure in heart, they will see God because only the pure in heart want to” (*The Problem of Pain*). In our better moments, we may ask, “Who would not want to have coffee with God?”

Many of us, like Mark, may shy away from such a conversation. He, too, was initially reluctant, only drawn in by the painful loss of a friend and a series of miraculous moments. There’s a part of us that may resist having coffee with God, just as Mark did. We may find comfort in the darkness of sin, the power of self-justification, and the worship of ourselves. But this path only leads to despair, as it did in Mark’s life, until he accepted the invitation to have coffee with God.

Do not read this book if you are seeking perfect theology; you will not find it. But you will find an experience of a living God who wants to speak into our lives. This is not the gospel according to Mark Barnette, but this is the gospel of the Christ according to Mark

Barnette. I realize the difference is subtle, but it is important. The first could be elitist, but the second is experiential.

This theology is the “Mark-ed up” version of the gospel of the Christ. Mark’s purpose is to share an experience of God, who finally got his attention. God speaks. Certainly, the Bible is God’s effort to reveal to humanity the need for salvation and God’s plan to achieve it.

It culminates in a witness of the living word, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who is sacrificed for our sins and is our savior. This book is Mark’s experience of this saving grace and the power of God’s mercy for him. The grand narrative of salvation becomes tangible and accessible because God speaks to Mark Barnette.

God speaks also to you. This book has a mission; it is written to bear witness that God wants to make the gospel tangible and accessible to your life. Maybe this book is God’s effort to open the conversation with you. The fact that you are even reading this foreword may point to a desire, need, and curiosity to have coffee with God.

Perhaps you have realized the darkness of your broken life, the despair of self-salvation, and the emptiness of self-worship, and you are wondering if God even knows or cares. Mark’s experience is a testimony to God’s love and care for him but also for everyone who longs to have coffee with God.

Jesus said: “Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I’ll come right in and sit down to supper with you” (Revelation 3:20 MSG).

These words are an invitation to all who are willing to hear and open the door. For Mark, it did not feel like a formal dinner invitation but an opportunity to share a simple cup of coffee to find the love and grace of an eternal friendship. If you hear this knocking, this is an invitation to open the door, just as Mark did.

May you find peace, joy, and hope as you read. Amen.

*Reverend Dr. Jon Lovelady, senior pastor
St. John’s Presbyterian Church
Jacksonville, Florida*



CHAPTER 1

The Beginning of My Journey

*“Your beginnings will seem humble,
so prosperous will your future be.”—Job 8:7 NIV*

First, I should say I have not laid this work out in strictly chronological order of its writing. I struggled with how I might best honor God as I began putting my thoughts on paper. He told me that all those who believe in him will serve him in different ways. Others will glorify God in more dramatic, widely publicized, and certainly more effective ways than I. My calling is softer and quieter, mere words on a page. What follows, then, are in some cases dialogues with God and offered as such. Others are pieces inspired by my conversations with God. In all cases I was moved to write what the Lord has told me. I do this not out of boastfulness or arrogance, but out of humility, amazed that the Lord would use one such as me.

Some will not seem strictly gospel, at least insofar as the organized church is concerned, but what I offer here is a recounting of those moments when God showed me his way. These words, I hope, will help people begin their own journey as they find their own path to the Lord in all his glory.

Second, even in today's unbelievable world, my blessings from God will be doubted by many. They will doubt I have spoken with

God. There will be those who will think I am either delusional or that I have some other, more sinister, motive. None of these are true.

I promise you I am both rational and sane. No one could have been more surprised than I when God blessed me with these words. I accept I am not worthy, but I accept that I am also part of God's plan and always have been, even before I knew it. For those who read and doubt my words, go in peace. I cannot make you believe; that is a choice you must make in your heart.

Finally, for those who read and believe, God will bless your life through your faith. I take no credit for that. I only showed you the door. If you believe, you have opened that door on your own.

We—God and I—discussed how we could use the gift of words he gave me. Playfully, he said I might write a devotional, that I should pick out my favorite 365 Bible verses, and that he would offer me insights to share.

Initially, I thought that sounded like a beautiful idea—and then it occurred to me that to do as he said, I would have to study the Bible to pick out 365 verses. I could feel the Lord's grin. Once again, it confirmed for me that, despite the frowning demeanor of some dour Christians who insist on a stern God, the Lord does have a sense of humor.

Instead, as a beginner, I suggested what was, to my mind, a more straightforward idea. "Why not," I pondered, "jot down our conversations, insights, and my meager reflections on your word."

I immediately realized he already knew my ponderings before my mind could even form the words, and he instantly approved. I sensed this had always been the true intent of God's plans for me.

There were, he shared, already many fine devotionals. What he genuinely wished me to do was document my awareness and growth in my Christian faith. In seeking me out, he wanted me to show a pathway for others who wish to come to Jesus and God. He knew I could not quote scripture, and he knew my mission would not be in preaching to the choir as devotionals usually do. Instead, he wished it to be a beginner's primer on faith. He wished me to show others

the first steps on the path to eternity with God. So I metaphorically invited him to sit with me and have a cup of coffee. Therefore, what follows is hopefully just that—at least the conversations, if not the coffee.

To those who read what I have put down, I promise they are the actual, inspired words of God shared with me. I pray you find meaning—and God’s love—in these dialogues.

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CHAPTER 2

The Age of the Prophets

“The prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened.”

—Numbers 24:4 NIV

Many people today would say the time of prophecy has passed, that it ended with the coming of the New Testament and the revealing of God’s word. They then challenge you to name one recognized prophet since St. John and the book of Revelation. Seriously, I have had those conversations.

Respectfully, God did not go silent with John’s passing. He did not “die,” though some have proclaimed it so. God has told me something different. He said miracles, prophets, and prophecy continue to this day. If we do not see his works, it is perhaps that we choose not to see them. Regardless, they are all a part of his plan and a way of bringing mankind to him. In fact, for those who seek him, God is revealing his word more openly and broadly than ever before.

While many in the media predict the demise of Christianity, I see things much more hopefully. More and more people are entering into a direct relationship with the Father, and he is freely revealing himself to them. I am certainly not alone in having a relationship with God, nor am I the only one to speak with him. I am sure that

if you could get people to be open, you would find an extraordinary number of Christians having a dialogue with God. I can sometimes understand their silence; they fear being thought crazy or dishonest. They would undoubtedly say, “No one talks with God, right? I must either be nuts or a liar.”

Not surprisingly, many people—most, in fact—are too embarrassed to admit they are talking with him. Some believe they are imagining things; some are afraid others will think them either mad or demented. And some refuse to listen.

In my case, God answered a simple dare because I initially refused to believe his voice. I thought I was imagining things myself until he performed a little miracle for me. He didn’t part the Red Sea or burn a bush, but it was impressive, nonetheless. I will tell you that tale in greater detail in Chapter 4.

That God is speaking to so many people today does not surprise me because—and this is my opinion—we are coming to the end of days. I know this belief has reappeared at various times since the birth and mission of Christ, but I feel moved by the Holy Spirit. While Christ says no one will know the hour of his coming, we do know there will be signs. I believe this to be one of those signs. Truthfully, it does not matter. It is not crucial that I know or can predict the time of the final judgment. It is not my call to make, and it is not a speculation God wishes us to focus on, either.

For those who say I am wrong, and that prophecy is no longer a part of Judeo-Christian tradition, they need look no further than the New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 declares, “Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good” (NIV).

Also, in Acts 2:17-18 we read that in the last days, God said, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (NIV).

Clearly, then, for believers it is still possible. If there is an issue, it is

being able to tell a false prophet from a real one, just as it has always been. For that, we must measure the words of the prophecy against God's word as recorded in the Holy Bible.

Any prophecy must confirm God's word and not contradict scripture.

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CHAPTER 3

Why Belief Matters

“Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.”—John 12:37 NIV

I believe in God. And even if I did not, I would still want to believe in him.

Why, you might ask?

Because, aside from any arguments involving religiosity, we need the rules that go with a belief in God, or at least the belief in something greater than ourselves. Without God, life is meaningless.

We cannot hope to survive using a humanist perspective. We desperately need an existence based on something greater than ourselves. One that holds us all to a higher standard and ultimately requires that we account for our actions. Anything humanity can invent, it can destroy, and that includes any society or any culture. History proves this fact time and again.

Some would argue the same statement could also apply to religion, and to some extent, they would be correct, but religions are not God. Religions are manmade conventions that attempt to proscribe how man worships God. It is the failure of moral, fallible humans who too often misunderstand, misconstrue, or misinterpret Jesus. The Son of

God is not responsible for our failings. Rather, he is our salvation from our failings.

Religions have, for centuries, waxed and waned, yet we always come back to a higher being, and I believe that being is the Lord. I believe there is an inherent need for man to believe in something fixed and immutable. Perhaps one could liken it to having a steady point on the horizon to watch when one is in rough seas.

It's a classic argument: moral relativism versus religious moral absolutes. The problem is, and will always be, that for society to exist, we must have absolutes. Murder must always be a crime; theft must always be a crime; rape and incest must always be crimes. Societies have historically held these and other activities as wrong. Religions stand as an impenetrable dam, holding back the flood of human frailty that would overwhelm civilization's incredibly thin veil.

Again, humanists and atheists argue that religion is the real root problem plaguing humanity. There is a knee-jerk reaction among casual observers to condemn Christianity for the many acts of its supposed believers. Christianity—and by that, I mean belief in Jesus Christ—is not to blame for the sins of those who endeavor to live according to Christ's teachings. I would submit that it is not Christianity that is the problem but us. We are the weak link in that chain. We all fall short of the glory of God. Our frailty and imperfection in the face of God's love present the real problem. It is we who are guilty of greed, deceit, murder, and more. We are the ones who misinterpret and corrupt the beautiful spiritual simplicity of God's plan for us. When someone does wrong in the name of Christianity, their actions damn only themselves, not Jesus. God's commandments are clear and unchanging.

Having set forth my brief argument from a philosophical point of view, let me also state a personal vantage point. The reality is simply this: God is as real as the sunrise on a beautiful day. For me, the philosophical argument, while logical, is superfluous. Belief goes beyond subtle points of logic; it stems from faith, and faith comes from understanding the meaning of truth.

My journey toward truth began with my sins of fatalism and arrogance, and it evolved into a conversation and a challenge. Frustrated with my life, I did something foolish. I was stupid enough to dare God. In fact, I double-dog dared him.

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CHAPTER 4

A Chance Conversation

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”—Isaiah 43:1 NIV

God is a big-picture guy, or at least that is what I had always believed; that was how I saw him. In my mind, the Lord was a distant and disconnected figure, one who neither cared nor concerned himself overly with mankind’s daily minutia. I knew such perceptions were not the teachings of Christianity, but my difficult childhood taught me differently.

I thought he had bigger things to worry about than one troubled young boy from a broken home. Though I’d been active in the Christian group Young Life in high school, I admit I was, at best, a mediocre Christian. For much of my life, I gave more attention to my daily comforts than my immortal soul. I long ago accepted the fact that, for me, salvation was both an undeserved and improbable option. For years, I wore that self-imposed death sentence like a badge of honor. I was, I proudly proclaimed, unworthy of salvation.

As an adult, my life became an unmapped journey, and while I accomplished much over the years, things never came into complete focus. I would sometimes wonder why I seemed blessed, but I took it for granted. While I thanked God intermittently, I saw religion as an

abstraction, as if philosophical belief alone was sufficient.

This fact also played a role in my years in the spiritual wilderness. I felt God had some plan involving me, but it wasn't something personal to me or one I even particularly wanted. I convinced myself he would understand if I ignored his chosen path for me. While I told myself my faith was important, I also sensed it wasn't important enough. I never inconvenienced myself with the way he laid before me. I had the arrogance over the years to reject his various overtures and faith-based opportunities. They did not appeal to me. So I kept going in a different direction, always believing but from a comfortable distance.

That all changed several years ago when a doctor friend of mine named Howard developed a brain tumor. Although he put on a brave front, we all knew that, medically, his battle was hopeless. As the weeks went by, he grew increasingly feeble.

One morning, as I drove my golf cart with my dog Sailor, I could not stop thinking about Howard. We were in an empty section of our new neighborhood, and there was nothing around me but paved roads and vacant lots.

At that moment, I made what, in hindsight, might be thought a foolish statement. First, I said to God (and certainly not expecting an answer), "Lord, Howard has value in this world, and I am doing nothing of great importance. Take me and not him."

Suddenly and surprisingly, I heard God speaking to me, saying, "You are not offering me anything of value."

I was stunned, partly because of the rebuke but primarily because of the sheer experience of hearing an inner voice—a voice not my own.

"I offered you my life," I replied, both amazed at the sound in my head and somehow offended at the rejected offering.

The direct response stung me. Didn't it say in the Bible something about laying down one's life for one's friends?

"There is a difference," the voice continued, answering my unspoken question. "Jesus spoke about making a sacrifice. You are not

making a sacrifice if you give something you deem worthless. In all your years, you have never placed any value on your life, and if you do not, why should I? Do not forget: I know your every thought. I see the intention behind your offer. You are just looking for an easy way out. I have given you a great gift, and you tossed it aside again and again. If you care so little for your life, then it has no worth."

I denied God's response. How dare he attack my motives? How, I thought naively, could he know what I was thinking? I could not conceive that he concerned himself with the needs of each of us. I saw myself as a cog in a larger machine. Any concerns about me, I had always believed, were impersonal. I wasn't a person but a part for him to use or replace if defective.

Instead, I became argumentative.

"That's not true," I challenged God. "I know what it is. You could save him, but you do not. The truth is I've never believed you cared about us individually. You're just a big-picture guy."

Instantly, I followed my challenge with a foolish dare.

"If you care so much," I said, laughing, "let me tell you what I need. I need an O-ring."

In hindsight, it sounds like a silly request, but I was working on a project at home and genuinely needed one.

Moments later, as I approached the next intersection and pulled to a stop, I looked down ...

And there on the asphalt directly in front of me lay an O-ring.

I glanced around, nervously. No one was in sight—not a house, not a person, not a car. I was indeed wholly alone.

Feeling rather foolish, I got out of the golf cart and picked the rubber O-ring up.

As I drove the golf cart back home, I defiantly brushed the incident off as nothing more than an incredible coincidence. Hearing nothing but silence, I concluded that God had nothing further to add and that he had made his point—either that, or all that had happened was an incredible example of chaotic convergence. I considered the matter closed, and as I said, I needed the O-ring.

The next day, I was driving with my dog again on the same empty street. Suddenly I realized I was approaching yesterday's intersection. Immediately, my prior conversation came to mind, which I had since written off as a silly daydream.

With an arrogant laugh, I said aloud, "Okay, I'm betting yesterday was a fluke. If you're for real, let me see you do that again."

I approached the same stop sign and looked at the ground before me. Sure enough, there was another O-ring sitting in the road, exactly the same as the first and lying in precisely the same spot.

I stared in stunned disbelief—or should I say belief? I felt humbled, embarrassed, and ashamed.

Yet he offered no rebuke. God was gracious.

I picked up the second O-ring, hurried home, and told my wife the entire story.

Since that day, I have talked to God regularly, and he has shown me so much and guided me toward becoming a better Christian. I will be the first to admit he has had his work cut out for him. I have shared this story many times with many others as a testimony of our living God and his role in our individual lives.

I kept that second O-ring hanging in my home workshop as a reminder.

Then one day, the O-ring suddenly vanished. It was gone from its spot in my workshop, and my wife promised she had not touched it.

After she left the room, I heard God whisper to me, "Now I will teach you the meaning of faith."



About the Author



Mark Barnette has had a variety of careers, from award-winning journalist to international educator and founding president of The American University in Dubai. Along the way, he served in the United States Air Force and also partnered in a production company that made several documentaries in collaboration with the BBC. In addition, he was executive producer and writer of the award-winning *John Ehrlichman: In the Eye of the Storm*, hosted by Tom Clancy.