

# God's Nearness and Concern

By Leroy Neff  
(sermon 2006)

Several months ago a lady in this congregation asked me if I would give a sermon about some of the early days in the church. I hope that this sermon, at least in part, will answer that request.

You may find it hard to believe some of the things I am going to relate to you today. Most of these events took place years ago but I wrote them down and have added a few events of a more recent date. Most of the events concerned me and my family. Those events about other people were told to me or written by people that I believe spoke the truth.

Today we live in a time of great change. The world is an entirely different place than when I was young. Wickedness and sin have increased greatly. Violence, and all kinds of evil fill our daily papers and news programs.

In this present world we in the church have problems that were unheard of a few decades ago. We do not escape some of these problems, or the effects of these problems. As we grow older many of us have weaknesses and ailments that we never heard of before. Life expectancy is longer than a century ago, but the quality of life for many older people is not better.

Sometimes it may seem that God has gone way off somewhere, that He is not concerned, does not hear or answer our prayers.

Has God left us - does he no longer hear or answer us? No!

He is alive, on his throne, Jesus Christ is the head of His church. He does hear and intervene on our behalf, though it may not be as promptly as we would like sometimes.

Notice what Paul said in Acts 17

<sup>26</sup>“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, <sup>27</sup>“so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, **though He is not far from each one of us;**

## OUR NEEDS

Let's notice a few scriptures that promise help from God and show His nearness.

Matthew 6 <sup>25</sup>“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds

them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> “Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? <sup>28</sup> So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; <sup>29</sup> and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, *will He* not much more *clothe* you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. <sup>34</sup> Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day *is* its own trouble.

God will provide our needs if we have the right attitude, have faith and live a life that is pleasing to Him. When we have need we should ask for our needs as the next verse says.

Matthew 7<sup>11</sup> If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!

One of the things I remember when we were new in the church were Mr. Armstrong’s examples of how God had intervened and helped he and his family. There are several examples in his Autobiography, especially Chapter 22 of the 1986 2 volume set. Just before his wife gave birth to one of the children, the family was in dire need of several items. He prayed about it earnestly and every one of the items he prayed about were given to him in a spectacular way. I hope you will all try and find a copy and read the chapter.

\*\*\*\*\*If you do not have access to a copy, I have printed off one copy that I can loan to someone who would like to read the chapter\*\*\*\*\*.

I wondered if God would provide for me and my family too.

In 1955 when I went to A C God provided the answer. We were very short of money after the feast and for quite awhile afterwards.

A) One time there was no food in the house after my wife packed a lunch for me and the two older children. Our younger son was not yet of school age. I didn't know we were out of food but my wife did. She asked God in prayer to provide food. About lunch time the neighbor boy asked our son into his home. He then asked his mother for food, so she gave her son and ours a peanut butter sandwich. So the whole family had lunch except for my poor wife. By dinner time we had money to buy food.

B) On another occasion all we had in the house were potatoes and salt. My wife baked the potatoes and we salted them. They were the driest potatoes I ever ate, but at least they were nourishing. By the next meal time we had money for food.

C) We had not been eating very well for many weeks by the time Thanksgiving came. We couldn't afford the usual fare for that day. It so happened that an Ambassador graduate was getting married on that day. Mr. Armstrong invited the whole church to a pot-luck Thanksgiving dinner. It would be a Thanksgiving dinner and Wedding Supper. Mr. Armstrong selected and purchased the wine, the college provided the cooked turkey, and the members were to bring other dishes. I don't know what we took, but I am sure it was not much because of our financial circumstances. That was one of the most enjoyable meals we ever had. It has never been forgotten.

D) About that time I needed a suit to replace the only one I had. I was wearing the suit almost 7 days a week and it was about worn out. I prayed earnestly that God would provide one as we could not even afford a used suit at the time. In my prayer I read Matthew 6:33 and told God that He had promised and therefore I asked that he provide the need. . A few days later, "out of the blue" Selmer Heggvald asked me if I could use a suit that he did not need. His brother Sid had given it to him. I of course accepted. It was not a style that I liked, the material was not my preference, but it was a suit and it fit perfectly. The suit needed cleaning and pressing so we sent it to the cleaners. Before it was returned the old suit split across one of the knees. Obviously I really need a suit and God provided it. No one has ever before or since offered me a suit!

E) On another occasion my wife needed a pair of shoes. Her only dress shoes were worn out and not repairable. I again prayed asking God to supply her a pair. In a few days my boss asked me how we were getting along. I frankly told him of our need and he gave me a check for \$100. That was money for a pair of shoes and a whole lot more.

F) And finally, there was a time when we did not have a stove or refrigerator in our home. We had just moved to a another rental home and there were no appliances. We could have tried to buy them on time, but I was tired of paying credit card charges with the high interest. We decided to pray about it instead. In the meantime we used a Coleman pump up camp stove to cook on, and used a camp ice chest in place of a refrigerator. I can't remember dome of the details but it seems to me that one of the deacons came to our house for some reason and saw that we were using the ice chest and camp stove in the kitchen. In a short time he delivered and installed a refrigerator and a cook stove for free.

## HEALING

There is another way God intervenes to help his people.

Psalm 103<sup>1</sup> Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, *ble*ss His holy name! <sup>2</sup> Bless the Lord, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: <sup>3</sup> Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases,

James 5<sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the

prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Mr. Armstrong mentioned miraculous healing's in his family, particularly his wife back in the 1920's and 1930's.

We believed that God healed the sick as promised in James chapter 5 and Psalm 103.

I knew of people in the church at Portland who had been healed of goiters and other ailments.

Would God heal our family too?

I) We had an opportunity to find out over approximately a one year period in 1962-1963. My wife had rheumatic fever when she was young and as a result had some heart problems and resulting weakness. The high altitude at Squaw Valley where we attended the feast caused her considerable distress. On the way home from the Feast of Tabernacles she had some kind of a heart attack. We didn't think she would live through the night but she did. When we arrived home, Dr. Owen, the College physician examined her and used an electronic device to check her heart. He confirmed that her heart was the problem. At times she was hardly able to lift her head above the pillow. She was bedfast for the next 10 months approximately. Finally she began to improve and we decided to have her examined again by a heart specialist. He told her that she did not have a heart problem and never did. I believe that God healed her so well that the doctor could find no evidence of a previous problem.

II) A few years later she had another serious ailment which lasted for about 19 years. On one occasion when she had a serious problem with the ailment she prayed fervently for God to heal her. She was immediately healed.

III) In the early 1960's I was the pastor of the Long Beach CA church. A member there, named Mr. Fisher came to me and asked to be anointed for double inguinal hernias. He had decided he did not want to have surgery. He chose instead to wear a hernia belt. Finally the school where he worked said that because his hernia was so bad, he should not work, so they retired him.

The hernia belt was always a problem to him. When he took a bath he had to get in the bath tub, take the belt off, have his bath, then he had to put the belt back on before he got out of the tub.

A few weeks after I anointed him he came to me again. He said that his hernia belt had started to cause him a lot of pain. Finally he took it off and then found out what the problem was. He no longer had the hernias and the irritation from the belt was causing the pain. God had healed him!

IV) Several years later I had the same problem. I was anointed but was not healed. Here I had anointed a man and he was healed but I was not! I wore a hernia belt for about 19 years and finally it got to bothering me and was uncomfortable. I took off the belt and have not had to wear it since. I too had been healed, but God waited 19 years to grant my request to be healed.

## PROTECTION

There are many promises in the scriptures about God's protection for his servants. Let's notice some examples of God's concern and protection.

Matthew 10<sup>29</sup> "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. <sup>30</sup> "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> "Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Psalm 32:7 <sup>7</sup> You *are* my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance.

The well known Psalm 91 tells of God's protection for his servants.

<sup>1</sup> He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. <sup>2</sup> I will say of the Lord, "*He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.*"... <sup>5</sup> You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, *Nor* of the arrow *that* flies by day, <sup>6</sup> *Nor of the pestilence that* walks in darkness, *Nor* of the destruction *that* lays waste at noonday. <sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; *But* it shall not come near you. <sup>8</sup> Only with your eyes shall you look, And see the reward of the wicked..., <sup>9</sup> Because you have made the Lord, *who is* my refuge, *Even* the Most High, your dwelling place, <sup>10</sup> No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; <sup>11</sup> For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. <sup>12</sup> In *their* hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone... <sup>15</sup> He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I *will be* with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. <sup>16</sup> With long life I will satisfy him, And show him My salvation."

Psalm 121 is another one that tells of God's protection and help for his saints.

In 1951 when we first came in the church Mr. Armstrong also told of miraculous events in his life where he or members of his family were protected. As best I recall it was in the 1930's when he was driving on the highway between Portland and Seattle. He came over the rise on a hill and there a short distance ahead was a car wreck. It was too close to stop, and there was no way he could see to avoid hitting the wrecked vehicles. Suddenly the steering wheel was wrenched out of his hand. The car swerved off the road, around the wrecks, and back on the highway. He believed an angel apparently took control of his car to avoid a certain collision.

I wondered if God would protect me and my family too.

1) In January of 1976 my wife and I were traveling from Big Sandy to Baton Rouge so that I could give a sermon at the church there. South of Shreveport the two lane road was raised

above the surrounding terrain by quite a few feet. There were no passing lanes or shoulder to park or drive on. Apparently the area was swampy and a more than normal base was required for the roadway. We were approached from the south by a long line of moving cars and suddenly a car proceeded to pass all the other cars and it was headed directly towards our car in our lane. There were no open spaces in the line of traffic to move back in his northbound lane. We were traveling at highway speed and a collision appeared unavoidable. There was no way to avoid a collision except to go over the bank. All of a sudden there was a widening of the road on our side and we were able to quickly move there and avoid an accident. That was the only wide place in the road that I saw. God's angel must have been looking after us and prevented a serious accident that could have been fatal.

2) In 1973 my wife and I and another couple went on an over night camping trip in our small van motor homes at the Chilao camp ground in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Pasadena, CA. The next morning the engine would not start. My friend said he knew how to get it started. He said to pour a little gas into the carburetor while cranking the engine. I was too stupid to know about the danger of such a procedure so we prepared to try it. My friend would pour in the gas from a gas can while I held the throttle open with my hand.

When the gas was poured into the carburetor there was a little explosion. A fire followed with flames perilously close to the wood ceiling of the cab. My friend threw the gas can, which was on fire, as far as he could throw it. My hand was burning from the gas and some of the hairs on my head were singed.

The motor home could have easily been set on fire, the can of gas could have exploded, my hand and face could have been badly burned. What actually happened? Nothing! The fire in the gas can quickly burned out. The motor home did not catch fire. The next day there was no sign of any burns on my hand or face. And a few minutes later I started the engine and we went home. I was grateful that an angel surely was in charge of the situation.

3) In the winter of 1970-71 near Austin, TX. my son Larry and family lived in a rented house in a semi rural area. When the weather turned cold, the whole family began to experience flu-like symptoms. They were extremely sick and some of them passed out. It happened a second time, and then a third time. Larry was so ill that he had to crawl in order to get to the bathroom. It was also during this time that the family went to San Antonio for special church services. It became so cold and icy while they were there that they rented a motel and stayed overnight instead of driving home.

It was so strange that each time they all got sick they all had the same symptoms. I talked to Dr. Wilmer Parrish, the College physician at Big Sandy, and he said it sounded like carbon monoxide poisoning. With that information Larry turned off the furnace and there was no more sickness.

They had the furnace checked but no problem was found. We went to visit soon afterward and while we were there, a church member friend who worked with gas furnaces came to check further. He checked the furnace which seemed to have no problems. He then checked the attic

and found that the flue for the furnace was not connected between the ceiling and the roof. Somehow the flue had never been connected or got disconnected some time in the past. The carbon monoxide was not being exhausted outside of the house and instead came back into the living area inside the house and was poisoning everyone.

In looking back some things became obvious. It was a miracle that on one of the three occasions all four of them were not killed by the fumes. Also, if they had not stayed during the coldest night in San Antonio, the furnace would have operated more. This would have produced more carbon monoxide poisoning than before and possibly killed them all. We believe that God miraculously protected them from death.

4) While deer hunting in Texas, our younger son was threatened by a rattle snake, right at dusk,. The snake was within striking distance. Our son was on a rock outcropping and the only way out was to go where the snake was located. He slowly raised the barrel of the gun toward it, and without being able to take aim, pulled the trigger. It blew the head off the rattlesnake.

I heard of other people who also had miraculous protection.

5) There was a man in the church at San Antonio TX who was out bird hunting and tried to fire his shotgun. It would not fire. On checking he found that the gun barrel was plugged with about 3" of dirt. He then remembered that he had carelessly put the muzzle of the gun on the ground when going under a fence. After the barrel was cleaned out the gun worked fine. If it had gone off with dirt in the barrel it would undoubtedly have exploded and injured him.

6) A similar thing happened to one of the ministers of the church. He was target practicing with a 38 calibre pistol and he was showing his sons how to handle a gun. One of the slugs got stuck in the barrel but he didn't realize there was a problem. The next shot caused the barrel to explode. It exploded on the opposite side from where his sons were standing. If it had exploded the other direction they surely would have been injured.

7) A Mr. Sharp, a member in Ohio wrote a letter to Mr. Armstrong of an industrial accident. He worked in a large mill and a large ladle of molten copper was accidentally poured over him. It didn't harm him at all, but I believe it did knock him to the floor.

8) Two A C students were working on a roof of Ambassador Hall at Pasadena. One was using a mop to tar the roof. He fell off the roof but held on to the mop handle which was stuck on something. He was able to climb back on the roof. He then looked to see what the mop was stuck on. It wasn't stuck! An angel must have held on to the broom! Some time later I mentioned this in a sermon at Long Beach CA. On the way home, the young student who gave the sermonette reminded me about my comment. He said "I was one of the two students you were talking about." I asked if the story was true and he said it was.

9) On another occasion, two different A C students were shingling a roof of one of the faculty homes. The supervisor came by and noticed they had on leather soled shoes. He told them to quit working while he went to get rubber soled shoes for them to wear. While he was gone, one

fellow felt foolish just sitting there doing nothing so he started to work again. He slipped, fell off the roof. There was a table on the patio with a glass top. He said he landed with one hand on the glass, and on his feet "lightly."

10) This next account concerns Bryan Winger, who was the young child of Mr. & Mrs. Danny Winger of Santa Barbara California. He was crippled by multiple sclerosis and was hardly able to walk without falling. On May 11, 1979 while camping, he fell headlong into a bed of hot coals. He was not burned or even singed. This was reported in the Worldwide News of the church.

11) In 2002 my wife and I were traveling in our car to visit our son and family. We were several miles east of Gunison, CO. In a rural area on a two lane paved highway driving 70 mph. It was about 9:15 in the morning in broad daylight. Suddenly a deer dashed across the road in front of us and we hit it.

Hitting a deer at that speed would normally cause major damage to the car, with the deer possibly breaking through the windshield, with loss of control of the car, causing injury or even death.

We hit the deer with our left front bumper. When we stopped the car we found that there was some animal fluid on that part of the car, nothing more. There was no body damage to the car. I did not lose control of the car.

If we had been a few feet ahead of where we hit the deer it would have been a broadside hit with certain major damage. I believe that we were divinely protected, for which I am very grateful.

There are undoubtedly unknown dangers, let alone the known dangers that God's angels protect us from.

12) A few of you will remember Hal Baird. He was an elder in the church, an older man, who attended A.C. After leaving Pasadena he was a church pastor for several years until his death many years ago. He was pastor of a church in Missouri when a tornado came to his neighborhood. He saw it coming and rushed in the house to an inside hall way, got on his knees and prayed for God's protection. The tornado jumped over his house and landed again on the next street. Soon afterwards I visited him in his home and he showed me where it lifted up and where it came back down. Certainly God did answer his urgent prayer in a remarkable way..

## **CONCLUSION**

We often must wait before God grants our request. His answer is not always yes! Sometimes the answer from God is No, or not now, or later.

When God does not intervene and answer our prayers immediately we begin to learn patience.

James 1<sup>2</sup> My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, <sup>3</sup> knowing



that the testing of your faith produces patience. <sup>4</sup> But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Romans 8<sup>28</sup> And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.

There is a purpose in all our trials. The result is more godly character.

Hebrews 11<sup>13</sup> These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. <sup>15</sup> And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

God has promised to heal, but He does not say when He will. As I mentioned earlier my wife and I both have waited as long as 19 years before God healed us of some ailments. My wife and I both have health problems associated with old age. I don't expect we have 19 more years left in this life, if God were to wait that long again to grant our requests. But I do know that in that glorious first resurrection there will be no sickness, no pain, no suffering, no death.

At the beginning of the sermon I said that God is not far from us. But, we may be far from Him. Sometimes we cut ourselves off from God because of our sins. In such cases God may not listen to our urgent prayers for help.

James 4<sup>8</sup> Draw near to God and He will draw near to you....

James 5<sup>16</sup>.... pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. <sup>17</sup> Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.

I have mentioned several times that God intervened and helped me and my family. I also mentioned the help that God has given others in their time of need. Has God ever done miraculous things in your life?

Did you thank Him for it? Did you tell others about it, thereby glorifying God and His mercy toward you?

Finally --

From the prophecies of the Bible we read that a time of great trouble is ahead. No one knows how soon that will be, but conditions in the world now indicate it could be soon. It will be the

worst time of trouble mankind has ever experienced or ever will experience again. We know there will be great religious deception, World Wars, disease epidemics and death on an enormous scale.

When that time comes we need to be close to God. The time to start is now. We need to live lives of obedience which is pleasing to God. We need to put our heart and our desires on the things of God.

When trials and tribulation or problems come, we can cry out to God. He will hear and deliver us from our problems His way and in His time.

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