Hiddenness of God
J.P. Moreland

Announcer:

I, uh, also teach the rock climbing class here Biola. I, uh, I'm excited about this weekend. One, I, uh, celebrate my, my first year wedding anniversary on Monday. Really excited about that. Two, we have the Journey coming up. And three, I get to introduce a, a friend of mine named J.P. Moreland. I studied under JP for three years and I got to read his books, got to listen to him prior more than what's healthy for me. No offense, JP. He knows what I mean by that. But JP spoke at the Journey conference last year.

We're getting ready to have our third Journey Conference starting tonight. We work really hard, you guys, to bring in speakers that maybe not everybody's quite familiar with, but speakers that are going to be able to guide us into a deeper and abundant life with Christ. The kind of life that Christ led Himself, the kind of life that He told us about in the Gospels.

I want to pause for a minute and read a scripture to you. The scripture, that's in the first page of our Journey notebook for this year. This's our notebook. Those that attend get one. This, uh, the scripture comes from Jeremiah. I wanna just pause, and you might want to close your eyes, and let this soak for a little bit. "This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls". Jesus Christ paraphrase those words when He said, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me."
It's not a pain in the air. It's, it's freedom. It's liberation. OK? The Journey Conference is geared towards helping people transition out of the beginning stages of life into the, the more progressive stages. OK? Doesn't matter where you're at, we all go through our own journey of faith. And we're very glad to have worked with Ron, with the, the spiritual renewal week to help bring these things together for the, the good of the body here. And JP is gonna conclude the spiritual renewal chapel series.

JP is a brother and a teacher, scholar, fine man. He's impacted my life more than he may know. And I praise the Lord often for him. He's had a lot to do with the Journey Conference in a very very indirect way, simply by the kind of life he's led and by the way he's impacted those who, who operate the conference. And I, I really can't say anything. I, I think I should just bring the man up here. Dr. J.P. Moreland.

[Applause until 3:28]

J.P. Moreland:

Good morning. I'm on sabbatical this semester, which means I'm not here teaching. I'll be back at the end of January to start second semester. But I would really like to say, from the bottom of my heart, what a privilege it is for me to be a part of this university. I feel a deep sense of joy, identifying with the Biola faculty, saw a number of faculty just come in the gym. And it cheered my heart. I, I feel privileged to be associated with the faculty of this university and I would also like to thank you for coming here. My seven years here have taught me that you are a very choice group of people. And by and large, I have been very encouraged at the spiritual hunger
and passion in the student body of this campus. So I would like to begin by just saying thank you for being a part of this family and for, for letting me be a part of you.

I just got back from Kansas City, Missouri three days ago from my 30th high school reunion. I know you probably don't think I'm a day over twenty five but it's not true. It was quite an interesting experience. Our class, by all estimations, was one of the top two or three classes that have passed through that high school in 40 years. I think most everybody would agree with that. And it was very interesting to drop out of an airplane and to connect with people that I had not seen for three decades. I remember 30 years ago many of us were in a place where some of you were at. We had a lot of aspirations about life. We were gonna change the world. We were gonna be different. We were all going to be successes in our various spheres of life. And many of us went off to college to try to accomplish our goals.

Let me tell you. After reconnecting with my class, I learned that, in a fresh new way, that life is filled with both joys but awful lot of heartaches. And I spent the evening with a room filled peo-, with people who have had both good times but also had three decades of tough times. And if you haven't learned it yet, brothers and sisters, life is going to be hard to you. That's just the way it is. What, what was sad to me, I think more than anything else though, was that I met people that at your age were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and just enthusiastic about life. But I met a lot of people at this reunion, some of whom had very very small souls, and others who had grown to have very large souls. And you could see the small souledness and some of my classmates’ eyes. As you look into their eyes, the truth of the matter was that for some of them, there was really nobody home any longer.
Let me give you an example of this. I ran across one girl, I won't mention her name in case this is being taped. It would be a horrifying thing for this to get back. She was just a very unattractive girl. In fact, I didn't even remember who she was. She was pretty ugly. She's over-, uh, she's overweight. She, she never got married. And she had a Star of David around her neck. I went over and just struck up a conversation cause I couldn't remember who she was. She was just sort of a wallflower in high school. But what I discovered was that she had converted to Christianity as a Jew, wel-, years ago. And I'm not making this up when I say to you, there was a sweetness about her spirit and a warmth in her life and a sense of security that was very endearing to me.

By contrast, there was another couple that were voted the best looking guy and gal in the school. And they were going together in high school and got married. And they still look exactly like they did when they were 18. Interestingly enough, but, but about the only resources they've had in life were a good family upbringing in a good community. And those aren't small, but that's all they had. They don't have a Christian view of the world. And as a result of that, brothers and sisters, the heartaches and the good times that have come into their, to their lives have shriveled their souls. So that the kind of chitchat they engaged in was sort of shallow and there was no depth to them.

And, and what I want to say to you is that it is not a slogan to say "you're really on a journey." You really are. And when you get to be my age, you don't want to have a small little shriveled self. You want to be a big person. You want to be the kind of a person that your neighbors and the people in your church and the people you meet, when they encounter you, know that there is
a grand doer about the way you live your life. There is a sort of a texture or a depth that, that exudes from you to other people. And you don't spend all of your time, trying to get everybody else to focus their attention on you. You know how to get off of yourself and focus on other people, because you're a secure, strong, wise, mature, deep individual. To put the matter briefly, you know how to live in the kingdom of God and what life is like in that kingdom. And you have practiced life in that kingdom intentionally for three decades since college.

Now can I say to you this morning that that will not happen by osmosis? My daughters will be at this university two three four years. I've got two girls in high school and God willing they'll be here. And I'm already beginning to look at you more like I'm your father, instead of your older brother. And if I had the chance and I could sit down with each one of you as your dad, I'd like to look you in the eye and say, "Would you please cherish your relationship with God in your life and don't waste it? Be intentional; be intentional about day by day, about trying to get good at life in the kingdom of God. Be intentional about that."

Now I think most of you probably want to be good at, at life in the kingdom of God. I know some of you are here, your freshman, frankly this is the first time you've been out from under control of your mom and dad. And you're kind of experiencing the freedom of not having to do what they tell you all the time. And you're probably somewhere in between Venus and Mars, in terms you're floating around somewhere. And so thinking seriously about life in the kingdom of God may not be where you're at right now. But let me tell you that the vast majority of you, I know, care about this matter. And when you realize how important it is, for what you are going
to become, for you to be knowledgeable and dedicated to becoming good at life with Jesus Christ, you realize what an important matter it is for you to take your precious life seriously.

But now there's a problem that I want to address this morning that you may encounter. And this, there is a problem for any of you who are serious about maturation and growth in the kingdom of God. And that problem, if I could put it very simply is this. It's called the hiddenness of God. The hiddenness of God. The French philosopher and theologian Pascal made the statement. He said, "In a religion that does not admit the hiddenness of God cannot be true. And any religion that does not explain the hiddenness of God cannot teach." Said Pascal, it is up to a religion both to acknowledge and to explain why God is hidden. And what I'd like to do for you this morning in the very brief time I have is to explain what it means to say God is hidden. I want to try to demonstrate this biblically. I'd like to explain why He hides. And then I'd like to give you a word of admonishment before we close. So that's what I'd like to head here in our time this morning.

What do I mean when I say God hides or He's hidden? Well, what does it mean to say anything is hidden? What does it mean to say a book is hidden? If you walk into a room and you know that that book is in the room, but it's hidden somewhere. What does it mean to say it's hidden? It means that you are not able to detect its presence. You're not able to see it or touch it or feel it or be aware of it. You may believe it's in the room, but if it is hidden you cannot be aware of its presence in the room. That's hidden under a cou- , under the couch or somewhere. You may believe it's there, but you're not in touch with it.
Have you ever experienced a relationship with someone, who are the person hid from you emotionally and psychologically? Ever experienced that? You know what that's like? You know, people can hide from one another, can't they? And it doesn't mean you can't see their body. They may be sitting three feet away from you. You can see their head, their eyes and hear sounds coming out of this little box here. But by and large, this person, may be a friend or a girlfriend or a boyfriend, has withheld from you. They've withdrawn. They're not open or vulnerable. They're, they are hidden. What does it mean to say a person is hidden? It means they're not letting you get in touch with them and detect what's going on inside of them.

Now I wanna submit that the Bible teaches that God regularly hides from His children. Regularly. That it is a part of the way God deals with you and me. That he will, from time to time, be as though He's gone out and gone to Argentina fishing. It will be as though God is unexperienceable by you. And He makes Himself regularly, either a hard to experience or impossible to experience. He withdraws not his presence, but his detectable presence. He's still there, but you cannot be aware of Him or it is with a great deal of difficulty that you can be aware of Him, because He is hiding from you and from me.

Now to demonstrate this, would you turn very briefly to Genesis chapter 3, if you have a copy of the scriptures? Genesis 3. I wanna run through a set of passages to demonstrate that this is not heresy that I'm bringing to you this morning. And, and then I would like to, uh, tell you why God hides from you and me on occasion. Genesis 3. I'm gonna read Genesis 3 verse 8. This is the account of the creation of Adam and Eve, and the kind of fellowship that God had with Adam and Eve right after their creation. And reading in verse 8, it said and "they heard the sound of the
Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from" what? What does your copy say? Hid themselves from what? OK, mine says "from the presence of the Lord God in the trees of the garden."

Now sto-, would you stop and think with me the following thought? How could a human being ever get the idea that they could hide from an omnipresent being? How could you ever get the idea that it would be possible to hide from a being that is omnipresent? You know how? As all tel-, try to come develop more later, it is because God first chose to hide from them. If you understand this text, the presence of God was not equally available in every place in the Garden of Eden. There were certain places in that garden where they, Adam and Eve, could go and they could be aware of God's presence in those places. Other places in the Garden of Eden, God's presence was not detectable or real to them in the same way it was at certain locations. Very interesting.

In the Second Great Awakening in the United States that happened around the time of the Civil War, there was a particular town where an unbelievable revival was breaking out. And people were being saved in an apple orchard. And they were only experiencing God in the apple orchard. And they had to go into this orchard and when they did, they were encountering God in this orchard and being tremendously transformed there. One judge in the town said, "I'm not gonna go into any apple orchard to meet God. Thank you. I can meet God anywhere I want." Bad idea. Because while God was on that present, He was not acting everywhere in the town. He was only acting in that orchard. And finally, the judge had no rest for a soul and he went into that apple orchard and he had an encounter with God. That's so radicalized him that he got out of that
orchard and he went to every mud puddle in the entire town and knelt in the mud and wept and confessed his sins. In every mud puddle in the town. You see God was hiding from many places, but His presence was manifested in that apple orchard.

In Isaiah 45, don't turn there, but Isaiah 45:15. The, the prophet finally just throws up his hands and expresses to God. He says, "Truly, thou art a God who hides thyself." And it is the experience of the Old Testament Israel that God would regularly hide from His people. He would withdraw His presence from them.

Turn to Philippians chapter 2 in the New Testament. Philippians 2. What we have in this passage? I'm gonna read Philippians 2:5 and the next few verses. We have a description of what the incarnation was like in this. These verses describe the overall texture of the coming of Jesus Christ to this earth. And here is what it says. Says, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God," that is He was clearly God. He "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped," what that means is even though He was divine, He chose not to flaunt His divinity and to showcase it, and, and to use His privileges as God. But instead, He did something. What does it say He did? He "emptied himself." Now that doesn't mean He ceased being divine. What it means is He veiled and hid His divinity to people. He Hid it. He covered it over. Do you remember on the mount of transfiguration when Jesus Christ shown, you remember that? I literally believe that I might be wrong about this, but my view is that nothing happened to Him. What, I think, did occur was Jesus Christ momentarily stopped hiding. And He let the kind of radiance that was truly His incarnate nature through. Most of the time He hid.
And what this means is that in the coming of Jesus Christ, His entire life was primarily a life where His divinity was veiled from view. It was veiled. Look at the way He was born. Jesus of Nazareth was born in obscurity, in a small town of Bethlehem. It is no accident that people, uh, wou-, Beth-, Bethlehem was called the least in Judea. It was not, it was off the beaten path and it was a very small place. Do you remember whom the Angels declared the birth of Christ to in the beginning? Shepherds. Did you know shepherds were not considered worthy that they could not testify in a law court the first century Judaism? Because they were regularly ceremonially defiled with animal feces and exposure to feces. So they were considered to be outcasts. And a shepherd was not able to give testimony in a law court and have it count for anything. Remember the resurrection of Jesus to whom does Jesus appear to in the resurrection first? Women. Again, women were not allowed to give testimony, cause women were considered in first century Judaism fickle and unreliable and liars. And a woman was not allowed to give a testimony in a court. If a woman had to testify, she had to bring her husband or her father or a brother or a male figure to say that she wasn't lying. And wh-, yet who to, to whom does Jesus Christ reveal himself first of all? To women. So you understand what I'm saying is that from the way He was born, to the way He died and rose unto His entire public career, Jesus Christ did not exhibit fanfare. He hid Himself from people.

Turn one and one more passage to Matthew 13. Matthew 13. I want to look at a few versus, then I want to begin to explain why this happens. Why this happens. In Matthew 13, do you remember in the Old Testament there was a nation of Israel that was a special vehicle through whom God worked through the world? You remember that? After Jesus Christ came, the
Kingdom of God was no longer associated with a po-, with a political nation. That is to say there was no longer a theocracy. And instead the Kingdom of God changes and it becomes diffused throughout all cultures in the world. And in Matthew 13, Jesus Christ teaches a set of parables to describe the nature of the Kingdom of God. Now that it is no longer visibly associated with a specific geographical people. OK, do-, are you following me on that? And so the parables of Matthew 13 are a description of what the Kingdom of God will look like now between His first and second comings, since that Kingdom is no longer associated with a visible nation. And you know the main theme of Matthew 13? It is that the Kingdom of God is a hidden, invisible, undetectable Kingdom.

Take a look very briefly at verse 30, uh, 31, the mustard seed parable of Matthew 13. "He presented a parable to them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all the other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants." What Jesus is saying is that the Kingdom of God is so small that you can hardly see it. And before you know it, unbeknownst to you, it is grown in its large. Look at the next parable. "He spoke another parable to them," saying, in verse 33, "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took" and did what with it? Hid it. Hid it. Turn to verse 44 of the same chapter. Matthew 13:44. "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure," What? "Hidden in a field." What I'm saying to you is that from the creation of Adam and Eve, to the coming of Jesus Christ, to the way the Kingdom of God is spread in the world, God is a God who hides Himself and His ways from His children on a regular basis.
Have you ever been to church and God le-, just didn't seem to show up? Do you know that that happens? I believe Revelation 3:20 teaches that there are churches where Jesus Christ does not attend the worship service. He is on the outside the door, knocking to get in the church. There are believers in the church, they're meeting, they're Christians, they're not unbelievers, but Christ is not a part of their assembly. He's hiding from that congregation.

Have you been through periods of your own life where the presence of God was not real to you? Have you had that happen to you? You know that that is a normal experience of God's children, ever since they have been God's children. And you should not think that something unusual is happening to you, if you enter a period of your life where you cannot detect the presence of God or experience Him or be aware that He is real and He is with you. Now I'm not suggesting that He's not with you. I am suggesting that He is not letting you be aware of Him. He's like a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a pal. He's hol-, he's hiding, he's holding. He's hol-, withholding. He's withhold.

Why would God do that? Why would He do that to His children? There are six or seven reasons. I'm not going to cover them this morning, but I'd like to very quickly give you three of them. Why God does this to you and to me?

The first reason that God will hide from you is to let you hide from Him, if you want to. God will hide from you to let you hide from Him, if you want to. This is what I think is going on in Genesis chapter 3. Again, stop and think of how it was possible for Adam and Eve to hide from God in the first place? Can you understand that if the world was a place where God's presence
was fully detectable everywhere, you understand how different life would be? It would be very difficult to go out and get the newspaper in the morning and just read the paper. If, if the presence of God was so overwhelmingly powerful that was vivid, as vivid as the grass you were walking on. Many times God hides from you and from me because He knows that in our hearts what we really want to do is to hide from Him. And He will let you hide from Him, if you want to. One of the things I've learned about the Lord over the years is that He doesn't like to compete with other things for our attention. He, by and large, will not do that. And if you want to hide from God, He will hide from you and let you hide from Him.

Second reason that God hides from us. This has to do more with guidance, though not His presence. But God hides from, His guidance from us, because the timing is not right for Him to let us know what to do. God will hide His guidance from us, because the timing is not right for Him to let us know what He wants us to do. Now let me say about this matter of God's will for our lives that I believe that many times God does have a very specific plan for you and me. I think other times God doesn't care. So, if you seek the guidance of the Lord on a matter and you don't get any clear indication from Him what you're to do, it may be that what God is saying is I don't care. Do whatever you want to and I'll go with you. I'll be behind you. Just do what you want. I'll stick, I'll stick with you. It may be, however, that God does want to speak to you, but the timing of the matter is not right.

If you would turn, uh, I don't have time, but if you would look at Colossians 1:29 and Galatians 4:4. What we learn from these passages is that when God sent Jesus Christ to this earth, He, before that time, He hid a number of things from His people. But when Christ came, He unfolded
things that had been hidden for generations. We also learned that Jesus Christ came at the very precise point. That was the ideal time. The fullness of time is what the Bible says. What that tells me is that there were many things God wanted to let His children know. He was still hiding them from His children. But He could not send Christ earlier or later because if He would do so, it would not have been the right time. Many times God does not answer you when you ask Him about what you want Him to do, what, what he wants you to do rather. Because if He would declare it to you at that point, it would harm you or it would harm His cause in the world. And the timing is not right. So I would say, if you're seeking the face of God and you don't get an answer, keep seeking but you reach a point where you might just step out and go ahead and trust that the Lord's with you. And, and be confident of that.

Here's a third reason why God hides from His children. First reason I said was that He hides from us to let us hide from Him. Secondly, He hides at least guidance from us, because the timing is not right. Would be harmful for Him to let us know what He wants us to do. Finally, God will hide from us to let us have a chance to seek Him with all of our hearts. Jeremiah 21:10 to 14 talks about the Lord hiding from His children in order to give them a chance to seek Him and find Him, if they seek Him with all their hearts. See this watch up here. Would it make any sense to you for me to look at this watch and to say, "Would you all excuse me for just a minute? I need to go find my watch. I, I, it's, I've got to go get it." I think that you would probably say, "This must be some philosophical thread." And, and it actually would be probably. You, do you realize that you don't have to seek something that isn't hidden and absent to some extent? You understand that? Now, does the Bible encourage us to seek God? Yeah. So what does that have to mean about God? It means that God is not fully present, at least His presence is not fully
manifested. If it were, there would be no question of seeking Him. Do you understand? You can only seek a God who is in some sense absent and hidden. And so God hides because He wants to let you and me have the opportunity to seek Him with all of our hearts.

Now I want to close with a word of practical, kind of fatherly advice to you. I'm coming back from this reunion and I know you're not interested in it. And I lov-, I'd love to tell you I was a captain of football team and I'd love to tell you about that. But, but I, I suspect I would be derelict my duty if I did. But I want to say to you, I have a renewed sense of urgency about your life because of what I saw there. I, I'm, I want to tell you again. Thirty years ago, I was with a group of people that left high school, went to college, that, that had this kind of spirit that many of you had. And, and now thirty years later, a large percentage of those people who had the soul walked out of them, folks. And there's just not the life and vitality and the many longer. And I want to say to you, what makes you think that this isn't gonna happen to you? Huh? What makes you think that you're different? You're not. And I will tell you right now that being a Christian is not gonna make a difference, because you can be saved and going to heaven and end up being an empty, small, withered, shallow, trivial, person.

You don't want that for your life. You want to be a person that has depth and maturity. There is a richness and a depth and a stability and strength to your soul that you're not unstable and flighty and fickle and off the charts. You want to be that kind of a person. But that is not gonna happen, unless you make the right choices as a way of life over a period of time. And I say to you that for those of you who want to live life in the kingdom of God, don't be surprised if the God is hidden from you as a part of that journey. Because that is part of the way God encourages
us in the journey. It is not as though God's hiding from you, you're not detecting God's presence and that must mean that you don't care about the Christian life. Many times, it is precisely those who do care, uh, from whom God hides His presence.

Now that brings me to this weekend. One final word and I know you, I know you want to leave and I'll let you out here in a couple of minutes. For many years, I was a part of just the typical evangelical Christian community. And what I mean by that is I tended to go to church and hear the same old stuff, packaged in a different way, every week. The same old thing about the Christian life: have a quiet time, share your faith, have fellowship, blah blah blah blah. OK? All of that's true, but frankly it was terribly stale and unhelpful to me.

It was not until I got in touch with a whole different branch of the church, and a completely different type of literature called spiritual formation literature. Lot of it comes from the Catholics. God bless them. Some of it comes from good, solid Protestants. Many of them are older, and two or three centuries ago. But there are people today writing in this. It was not until my wife, who's here this morning, and I began to read and reflect on some of this slightly different literature about life in the kingdom of God, that some light bulbs went on for me in my heart.

The Journey Conference for two years in a row has been that kind of conference. I will guarantee you if you attend this conference, you are not gonna hear stuff that you have an opportunity to hear on a regular basis. You will hear speakers that just have a different view of things and come after this differently, because I know the guys who invite these people. So I want to urge you that
in closing. As you set out to make progress in the kingdom of God and you grapple with things like God's hiddenness, you need training and help to see things in a way that will ensure you will grow over the next three decades. And I would encourage you, as a part of that, to try to spend some time this weekend, being around people at this conference that don't sound the same and can give you some help for your journey.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this university. I thank you so much for, for my dear brothers and sisters here. We want to be good at life in your kingdom and we know that you hide from us. We really don't need to be told that. We experience it from time to time. Would you help us, dear father, learn how to draw closer to you, even when you appear absent? We ask it for our good and your glory. Amen.

You're dismissed.