

August 13, 2006

The Suffering Person's Greatest Yearning — To Have God Tell Us Why  
Psalm 69:1-18 / Matthew 27:45-46 / Job 13:1-24

Dr. Ronald Dunn summed up well the sentiments Job expresses in this passage when he wrote:

*"I think (the problem of the silence of God in suffering) is the hardest part of all. You can take just about anything if you know why it's happening. Everywhere I go, every meeting I'm asked – Why?... But I'm going to tell you something: God will very seldom answer your question of Why. It is not that there are no answers, it's just that you and I probably wouldn't be able to comprehend the answer if God were to tell us. And besides that, we have to learn to trust Him without knowing why."*

The great Puritan Ralph Erskine wrote something very similar in a sermon entitled, "Dark Providences made Clear in Due Time." He said:

*"God owes us no explanations. We owe Him implicit trust and obedience. It is not easy to trust God when He appears silent, as He was with Job, but trust we must."*

Yet that's **NOT** what we want to hear when we're suffering, is it? We innately want to know **WHY** we're suffering / **WHY** God has allowed it / **WHAT** His Purpose in allowing it is, and **HOW** long we will have to endure the pain before it gets better or goes away. The last thing we want is to be told that we must simply grin and bear it, or hang in there and simply trust God.

Nor do we want to be told that, "Things will become clear in due time" — though we know it's true! As the old proverb rightly declares, "Things ARE nearly always clearer in hindsight." God has shown us that time and time again.

But it's that waiting! It's the not knowing! It's those haunting doubts that **THIS TIME** is somehow different. It's the fear that this time things **WON'T** work out like they always have in the past. It's the concern (usually due to the fact that one's present suffering is much more intense than in the past) that God's attitude toward us has somehow changed since the last time.

You see, when we suffer in small ways, or struggle with lesser trials, it's easier to see it as loving discipline or God growing and maturing us. But when the trials become more difficult,

and the pain more intense—especially when it threatens our life—it’s harder to see it as expressions of loving instruction aimed at growing us.

In fact, one person at my former church, who had had a very rough past (the effects of which had followed her into the present), once said to me after I preached a sermon suggesting (in accordance with Hebrews 12) that trials are expressions of God’s parental love: *“If that’s how God loves, I’m not sure I want to be loved. Because it sure doesn’t feel like love.”*

And in the same vein, another lady (a mother) speaking of that same scriptural theme where God says in Isaiah that “He wounds in order to heal”(which in the context includes some very difficult experiences like conquest by a foreign nation, or being taken off to Babylon for 70 years as slaves!)—she said: “It’s hard to accept love in that form, because as a mother I would never subject my own children to such suffering and call it love if I had the power to prevent it.”

In fact, when we suffer intensely it’s hard not to feel like a well-known Christian author who once said to Jerry Bridges, “I know God loves me, but I’m not so sure He likes me.” It’s true. I myself have sometimes had to cling with all my might to the Gospel promise that God loved me, because it sure didn’t feel that He liked me very much! It’s hard to be subjected to pain on a prolonged basis and feel liked by God!

**Ever wrestle with that?** The conflict between what we KNOW the Bible says, and what it feels like when we’re suffering? The apparent discrepancy between knowing that according to the Bible God loves us; He has eternally, and will irrevocably! That the length and breadth and height and depth of God’s love for us is incomprehensible (as Paul says in Ephesians 3:18-19) — and yet at the same time God often permits us to suffer hurtful things that leave scars.

Experiences that make us feel that IF God does LOVE us, He sure couldn’t LIKE us very much! Or that maybe He’s only loving us because He’s promised to, and not because He WANTS to—not because He LOVES loving us! I mean I don’t know about you, but sometimes in prayer it’s hard to picture God smiling down upon me when I’m suffering. Or when I pray for relief, and He remains (as He has with Job) absolutely silent — and says absolutely NOTHING for weeks, or months on end.

In fact, THAT, I believe, is Job’s dilemma. For years he had enjoyed a close, intimate relationship with God. God’s face (to use the common OT imagery) had shown down upon Him with unhindered brilliance. God had blessed Job beyond measure—10 beautiful children, untold

wealth and influence, and a “hedge of protection” that had kept all suffering and satanic afflictions from striking anywhere near him.

And during that time of unhindered blessing, Job surely felt that God not only loved him, but cherished him! That God not only liked him, but favored him—maybe even moreso than anyone else on earth at that time!

Had you asked Job PRIOR to his sufferings: “Do you think God loves you?” I believe he would have said: “Absolutely. I have no doubt whatsoever. None at all!” Because it’s EASY to believe God loves you (and even moreso, likes you!) when blessings are falling like rain from heaven, all around you, and always have!

But, you see, the problem is that now all that has changed drastically. The supply line of divine blessings he was used to has dried up. In fact, God has not only stopped blessing Job, He has taken away every blessing He ever gave him—his children, his health, his influence and his immense wealth— EVERYTHING except his wife (the same wife who initially urged him at the beginning to curse God and die, or essentially commit suicide)!

And it’s THAT ABRUPT CHANGE in God’s dealings with Job that has sent him reeling. Not just the losses, and not just the physical pain, but the TOTAL CHANGE in the way God is now dealing with him NOW, as opposed to the way He always had BEFORE. Poverty instead of prosperity; Loss instead of increase; Sickness and disease instead of health — Targeting him FOR suffering, instead of protecting him FROM all suffering. **Job hadn’t done anything different, yet everything has changed.**

In that sense we could say it’s not so much the losses, nor even the physical pain Job is now enduring. It’s the fact that God is treating him differently than he ever had; Job doesn’t understand why; and God won’t tell him why. God has cut off all communication with Job. There is nothing but silence. And that silence; that not knowing why; and God’s refusal to tell him why, is what made his suffering so agonizing.

Dr. Dunn is right. “We can take just about anything if we just know why it’s happening.” But if we don’t, it can make it just about unbearable.

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Which brings us to our FIRST point (and the crux of the passage) — that when we go through dark times, and suffer emotional or physical pain, and especially when we suffer them intensely, God often becomes silent. Don’t ask me why, but that is what many, many saints past and present testify.

For some reason, when our suffering is the most intense (especially when it's emotional suffering) God seems to remain the most distant or silent.

Suffering (the Puritans used to say) is often accompanied by what they called a sense of "spiritual desertion," or what St. John of the Cross called, "The Dark night of the Soul." An experience C. S. Lewis described this way: "My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run with longing, are in me, dried up." It's the sense that God has, for some reason, abandoned or deserted His child. And the primary thing that makes them FEEL that way is His silence — His refusal to speak, or tell us WHY, when we go through times of prolonged suffering.

That's what we see in today's text — Job pleading with God to say something, or tell him why all this is happening. "Summon me," he says to God in verse 22. Call out to me...Talk to me... Say something to me (!), and then let me answer! This silence is killing me!

"Let me speak, and You answer me (v.22). "Tell me what I've done," says Job in verse 23. "Tell me how many wrongs and sins I've committed. Show me my offense and my sin. WHY do you hide your face from me, and consider me your enemy."(v. 24)

You see, THAT'S the most painful thing about Job's affliction — not the physical pain, but in the fact that he feels that God has "hidden his face from him." That God has withdrawn from him (and Job doesn't have a clue as to WHY)!

The word "face" here, is a term the Bible uses to denote God's presence — His tangible, sensed, or felt presence. What Tozer called "God's Manifest presence" which we can sense, as opposed to His universal presence which is everywhere at all times, whether we can sense it or not. "The face of a person became synonymous with the presence of that person," and thus the "face of God" was used to denote the presence of God, as the New Bible Dictionary notes.

But it was even more than that. The term "face" conveyed the idea of intimacy, closeness, friendship, relational fondness, caring and understanding. In fact, to speak "face to face" (especially with God), was the ultimate desire of every devout person — a privilege enjoyed by Moses, of whom we read, "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Ex. 33:11).

Thus it should come as no surprise that when the LORD told Moses what blessing he wanted Aaron and his sons to pronounce over the Israelites, he gave them this one:

*"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace."*

No one could ever conceive of a greater blessing for the people of God. For if God's "face" was turned toward His people it meant that He was with them, listening to them, attentive to their needs, and watching over them. And if His face shone down upon them, it was the virtual guarantee of His favor, and friendship, and the assurance that He would continue to reveal Himself to them, speak to them and guide them.

For God's "face" to shine down on them, would be the equivalent of saying He was smiling down on them approvingly.

You see, for Job, nothing could be WORSE than for God to "hide His face from him" — a phrase that would indicate God's disapproval, rejection, abandonment, and the cessation of all blessing, and communication.

And Job's question is, WHY LORD? What happened between us? Why the drastic change in our relationship? What did I do? We used to be so close, why this hellish "silent treatment"? Ever gone through such a time? A time when for no seeming reason at all, God pulls away, and stays away—for an extended period of time.

(And I'm not talking about losing the Holy Spirit! We are sealed with the Spirit till the day of redemption, says Paul in Ephesians 4:30. Yet, although it's impossible to lose the Spirit once we've received it, it is obvious from the experience of just about anyone that we can lose the felt sense of His presence. An experience most all have gone through at one time or another. An experience that often causes us to look back at how things used to be, as compared to how they are now, and wonder what went wrong?)

And although I do appreciate the quaint little saying (how does it go?) "If it feels like God is distant, guess who's moved" (implying, of course, that it's always US that has moved away from God) it's just not true! Sometimes, for reasons known only to God, He distances Himself from His people—that is, "He hides His face from them"—and it's NOT always sin that causes Him to do so, as David repeatedly tells us in Ps. 44.

And at such times, all we can do is follow Job's example and plead for God's return — that He would once again turn His face toward us, and cause His face once again to shine upon us. We must pray. Pray that God would speak. That He would hide His face from us no longer than is necessary for the affliction to do its work—remembering the words of Matthew Henry who said: "*Afflictions are continued no longer than till they have done their work.*"

Plead like David for God's presence to return. Earnestly cry out for Him, until the darkness lifts, and the storm clouds part, and the light of His countenance breaks through like the sun after a summer storm.

We need to be reminded of the words of William Cowper, who wrote in the midst of a continuous, nearly life-long sense of abandonment by God (most likely preaching to himself in words forged out of the depths of his own struggle):

*“Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.”*

You see, afflictions roll in like dark and ominous storm clouds and hide the sun from our view. In fact, it's amazing to me how hard it is, in the midst of a raging thunderstorm, or a hurricane, to believe that above the clouds all is peaceful, and sunny, and still!

Yet it is! I've been through three hurricanes (Hurricane Mitch being the worst) and it was hard to imagine the air being still, the sky being blue, and the sun shining in all of its peaceful brilliance above those clouds! Yet it was!

And so it is with God's love. Afflictions do hide God's smile from us. The raging winds, and claps of thunder, which attend the storms of life do drown out God's voice. It's hard to hear God's voice in a storm! But it is there. We just have to wait till the storm resides before we can hear it once again. We have to wait out the storm before the rays of the sun which was always there pierce the clouds like a brilliant shaft of light that illuminates the countryside.

*God's presence will be felt, and His voice will be heard once again—as soon as the trial we are experiencing, as Matthew Henry said, has done its work.*

Then **SECONDLY**, I'd like to address why God's silence during trials and afflictions so scares us. And in this regard I believe it's the same reason so many things which God does scare us. It's because we wrongly assume that GOD does things for the same reason WE do them. Let me explain, using the "Silence of God" as an example. Why is the silence of God so painful to Job, and us as well?

I believe it's very simple. It's because to us as human beings, when we're dealing with human beings, silence often implies absence, or worse yet, desertion or abandonment.

When our children were little (2-3 years old) and would wake up crying in the middle of the night because they were afraid of the dark, we would not always go in and pick them up, but rather,

we would stand at the door, or next to their bed, and simply say, "It's ok, daddy and mommy are right here." And that's all it would take. Our voice, assuring them of our presence, and they would go back to sleep. Why? Because it wasn't just the dark they were afraid of!

What was it? It was the dark, combined with that eerie silence which made them think or fear we had left them alone! That they had been abandoned in the dark! That's why they went right back to sleep when we spoke, even though we didn't turn the light on!

Because it wasn't merely the presence or absence of LIGHT. It was the presence or absence of their PARENTS! It was the assurance that we were there! The silence made them think they were totally alone in the dark. And it was the fear of being alone or abandoned that made them afraid, moreso than just the dark.

And you know, it's the same with Job (and us as well?) It's not the darkness of Job's situation. It's not even the physical pain he's had to endure. It's the thought that God has left him. God's absolute silence in the dark night of his affliction, made Job anxious, because as humans we know that silence often implies aloneness or abandonment.

In fact, silence can even signal the cessation of love, since we innately know that communication is one of the primary signs of a healthy relationship. And when words or communication dry up, relationship often dries up as well. That's why we use the phrase, "Their not talking to each other," to refer to someone who is having relational problems. Intimate communication implies intimate relationship, and no communication implies poor relationship.

From experience we know that when people are mad at us they often clam up, avoid us and give us the silent treatment. Don't they? Don't many husbands and wives go into a non-communicative shell when they are upset at each other? Isn't it typical of humans of people to withdraw emotionally and stop talking to the other person when they're upset at them?

And because it is such a common HUMAN response, don't we sometimes think that when God is silent He must be doing it for the same reasons we do? That He has withdrawn from us because He like us, must somehow be upset with us, or angry at us? Or worse yet, that we've somehow provoked His wrath, and made Him for-sake or abandon us?

Isn't that what Job says in verse 23? What did I do God? What sin did I commit to make you turn Your face from me? To make you stop talking to me and become my enemy?

And from what we know of chapters 1 and 2, what would God have said to Job? "NOTHING Job. You didn't do anything wrong."

**But that's hard to believe, isn't it? WHY?** Because we can't help but equate God's motives with the motives of people, and God's actions with the actions of people. If people do it for a certain reason, we wrongly assume, then God must be doing it for the same reason, thus equating the motives and actions of a Holy God, with the actions and motives of sinful people. And that is a dangerous thing to do—though we tend to do it all the time—thus misinterpreting what God is doing in our lives and why.

We reason that since lack of communication in human relationships means anger, disapproval, displeasure or a severed relationship, it must be the same with God. That's what Job seems to have fallen prey to in verses 23-24—just like we often do—causing ourselves needless agony, and thinking God is mad at us when He's not!

So what's the remedy? To remember God's ways are higher than ours. That's precisely why we have such a hard time understanding them! It's really not possible to equate the motives of a holy, all-wise, and infinitely loving God, with the motives of unholy, often unwise, and finite human beings!

Likewise, we need to remember that God's love is so infinitely more pure and perfect than ours, that it as well is incomprehensible to us! It's so high and wide and deep and long that it is beyond knowing, says Paul in Ephesians 3:19! That's why it confounds and confuses us at times! It's infinite, and we are finite!

And thus we must also remember that God's silence does NOT necessarily have anything at all to do with His being mad, or upset, or disappointed with us — as was true with Job.

Though it's inconceivable to us (because it's so contrary to the way humans think and act) Job was chosen to suffer because God cherished him and NOT because God was angry with him, as we clearly saw in chapter 1. And God's smile, though hidden by the dark storm clouds of painful providences, was still shining down upon him from above those clouds. The trouble is that Job (like us when we go through extremely painful circum-stances) had a hard time believing it.

Murdoch Campbell in his book, "In All Their Afflictions," tells of a minister in the North of Scotland who suddenly lost his spiritually-minded wife. As the minister prayed that night in the presence of friends, says Campbell, he told them:

*"If an angel from heaven told me that this would work out for my good, I would not believe him. But because God's Word says it, I must believe it."*

He's right you know. And in that statement we see one of the keys to understanding the silence of God in suffering. It's the fact that He has spoken in His Word — a Word which is LIVING and ACTIVE. A Word that has not merely BEEN spoken, but is eternally BEING spoken and APPLIED to every new circumstance and situation that arises in our lives, or in this world!

And because that is true, it means that even when God appears silent, or is silent, He's not really silent! For He has spoken and continues to speak afresh and anew in His Word, every time we read it, and His Spirit applies it to our hearts, and our situation.

As Jesus made plain in Luke 16, in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man in hell who wanted to go back and warn his friends that it was really true after all, if people won't believe the Bible, nor would they believe a voice from heaven! "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, said Jesus, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead."

"But if God would just speak I'd believe," we say! No, says Jesus. Because God has already spoken in His WORD, and through it He continues to speak afresh every day to those who will listen to it!

Which means that MAYBE, when God refuses to speak, it's because He's already said what needs to be said, and He doesn't feel the need to habitually repeat Himself, over and over and over again! He merely wants you to believe what He's already plainly declared in His Word!

Has God been silent in your life? Maybe it's His way of telling you (as He has me) to pick up His Word, open it, read it, and believe it as surely as if He were speaking it to you personally in the present — because He is!