

March 11, 2007  
The Way We Were

II Chronicles 32:30-31 / Psalm 42:1-11 / Job 29:1-30:15

Anyone reading today's passage knows exactly what Job is doing — you've probably done it yourself on occasion. Having lost everything and being wracked with pain for months now / feeling deserted by God and praying week after week after week without getting any type of response from God at all / Job resorts to doing what we often do when we go through difficult times — he begins to reminisce about "the good old days" when things were much, much different (or much, much better).

He thinks back on days gone by when God watched over him (and he means, protected him from such painful circumstances). Days not so long ago when God's lamp shone on his head, and by God's light he walked through darkness (v. 3).

Which gives us a much needed and somewhat corrective insight into Job's life. Because contrary to what it may have seemed, we now discover that Job HAD experienced difficult times prior to his present tribulation. The difference between those times and the present time being this: That in those previous times of trial, he had sensed the very real presence of God with him in each one.

In those previous trials he sensed the Lord close by him, the light of God's approving smile shining down upon him and the radiance of God's presence illuminating a path for him in the midst of his dark circumstances—unlike his present situation.

Which merely confirms what I've said before: That a Christian can face nearly ANYTHING that comes their way, with valor and courage and hope and a calm composure if they are only able to sense the nearness of God in it — that He's right there with them in the thick of it. Like Stephen, who with a glow of angelic peace on his face and an otherworldly tranquility of spirit, blesses those who are gnashing their teeth at him, yelling at him, and stoning him to death.

How could he do that? How could he endure such a difficult thing and respond with such a calm otherworldly tranquility? The text tells us: "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus seated at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). The same God

who by filling Stephen's heart with His presence gave him the grace to live well, also, by filling his heart once more, gave him the grace to die well.

It's hard to be bitter, anxious and afraid when you sense God with you in the trial — His smile shining down on you, His love filling your heart, His presence assuring you that everything is ok, and His hand holding yours — even if the circumstances are extremely difficult.

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That's why Job longs for the former days of blessing, when (as he says in verse 4): "God's intimate presence blessed his house, the Almighty was with him, his children were all around him, cream drenched his path, and the rocks poured out for him streams of olive oil."

What does all that tell us? That Job had known the joy of a close and intimate experiential acquaintance with God and the delight that comes from extended times of spiritual communion with Him.

He knew what it was like to have God protect him, and provide miraculously for him and touch his life and fill him with His Spirit and be assured of His love and convinced of His care and comforted by the knowledge of His presence.

And LISTEN: No one can speak of such things, or reminisce about such things, except those who have experienced such things.

In fact, for the person who has experienced such things, the most agonizing and crushing experience in life is seeing them evaporate, and disappear — to feel like God has deserted you.

And that's what I want to focus on today: Why it is that such times of spiritual desertion occur in the life of the believer, and God's intent in purposely ordaining them for us. Because as we'll see, God does, on occasion, ordain such times for us, with a specific purpose in mind, and thus it can only help us to understand exactly what those purposes may be in our particular case.

But FIRST, lest I be misunderstood as I address the FOUR main reasons for why we experience times of spiritual desertion, I need to explain the difference between God's Universal presence (whereby He fills all time and space, and is present at all times, everywhere), and what has been called God's conscious, sensed or manifest presence (whereby the God who is always present everywhere makes that presence known to people in a very real, tangible, visible, sensed or felt way).

In reference to God's universal presence, we may or may not be consciously aware of it. It's always there, but most often it's hidden from our sense perceptions, UNLESS God chooses (for

reasons determined only by Himself) to manifest that presence to us — VISIBLY (as He did with the Israelites in the wilderness, by a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud by day) — Or AUDIBLY as on the Day of Pentecost when the coming of the Holy Spirit was heard as the sound of a mighty rushing wind blowing into and filling the house where they were sitting — Or SENSIBLY as was again the case on the Day of Pentecost when they were all Immersed or Baptized with the Spirit and so felt it in their spirit, soul and emotions that people looking at the euphoric glow on their faces thought they were drunk! (And in a sense they were — intoxicated with the Spirit!)

There are times when the silent, unfelt, invisible God chooses to make His presence known in an audible, felt, or visible way.

And when I speak of times of spiritual desertion, I'm referring to those times when God chooses to remove from us the sense of His manifest or felt presence, since His real, universal, omnipresence has been sealed upon us and can never really be taken from us (Eph 4:30).

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Which brings me to my SECOND point, under which I will address the FOUR most common reasons God chooses to remove the sense of His presence from us.

The FIRST reason, mentioned over and over in both Old and New Testaments, is because we are engaging in some known, overt, conscious, premeditated SIN.

God is Holy, and therefore He cannot and will not condone sin in the lives of His children. His purpose in us is to sanctify us, and sanctifying us means getting us to let go of the sin that thwarts that purpose in our lives — something He often accomplishes by taking from us the most cherished of all His gifts — the fulfilling, soul-nurturing, joy-sustaining SENSE of His presence with us and in us.

WHY does He do it? Because He knows us! He knows that if He were to continue filling us with the joyous, soul-nurturing sense of His presence, even when we were consciously, purposely or rebelliously embracing sin, we would continue to embrace that sin and never let go of it — even (I'm sure) interpreting the continued sense of His presence as Him approving of our sin. We'd have "the best of both worlds," as they say — the joy of God's presence, and the pleasure of sin, all at the same time!

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Thus, to get our attention, and to let us know that our sin displeases Him, or that He cannot and will not approve of it or condone it, God removes from us the one thing that every true believer craves most — the joyous, fulfilling, soul-strengthening sense of His presence within.

You see, you can have your sin, or you can have the joyous sense of God's empowering presence within, but you can't have both! God doesn't work that way! Sin, as the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:30 (bitterness, rage, anger, slander, malice and unforgiveness) "grieve, or quench, the Holy Spirit with which we have been sealed unto the day of redemption."

The indwelling presence of the Spirit CAN'T be taken from the justified believer, says the Apostle Paul — we've been sealed with the Spirit unto the day of redemption. But the felt sense of that presence CAN be taken from us. We CAN grieve or quench the Holy Spirit to the point that we lose all "sense" of being indwelt by His presence (The picture there, being one of someone throwing cold water on red hot coals, not removing the coals altogether.)

So, if SIN is responsible for your sense spiritual desertion (because you have grieved or quenched the Holy Spirit by your sin) there is only one remedy — you need to repent of that sin. And to "repent" doesn't merely mean to say you're sorry and ask for forgiveness. It means to turn from your sin, leave it behind, and say goodbye to it for good. "The best repentance," said Luther, "is to do so no more."

And WHY must we repent? Because you cannot have the joy of intimate fellow-ship with God and be consciously, premeditatedly, rebelliously embracing something that grieves or quenches His Spirit! You can have your SIN, or you can have the JOY OF BEING FILLED WITH HIM, BUT YOU CAN'T HAVE BOTH!

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Then **SECONDLY**, our sense of desertion may have nothing to do with sin at all. Sometimes, when we go through difficult times, it is so painful that we can actually shut down emotionally as a sort of unconscious self-protective move. "Better to be numb," we say, "than to feel immense pain or depression." Yet, when one shuts down to avoid negative emotions, it also numbs out their ability to feel joy, or sense the presence of God. Which simply means the sense of spiritual desertion we feel is caused by us shutting down our affectional sense perceptions, and not by God distancing Himself from us at all.

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Likewise, that sense of desertion may be an expression of God's parental love for us, pulling back or distancing Himself from us in order to help us to mature, or grow. Which means it has nothing to do with discipline for sin, but with spiritual nurture, growth, or a divinely planned regimen intended to push us, like a baby child, to walk, or like a baby bird, out of the nest.

You see, there IS a sense in which we need to see our utter dependence upon God at all times. A sense in which we DO need to know it is God who “gives us life, and breath, and everything else.” We ARE dependent upon Him for EVERYTHING.

But there is a huge difference between a healthy dependence upon God where we know and are convinced He is the source of all we are and need, and an unhealthy dependence on God where out of laziness or a hesitancy to grow we want Him to do everything for us — even the things we are perfectly capable of doing for ourselves!

When we are new-born baby Christians God does many things for us that He later stops doing for us. He has to lest He thwart our growth and we become spoiled, lazy, slothful children! Like any GOOD parent, as we begin to grow and mature, He knows there are some things we need to learn to do for ourselves.

For instance, a parent should carry their infant, and even on occasion their toddler, but at some point early on (even before they're a year old) they need to stop carrying them all the time, and let them learn to walk on their own! Because if they don't they will thwart the child's development, and create a spoiled toddler who cries to be carried all the time! They will do a great disservice to their child.

So also God must often pull back when we venture to remain immature, or retain an unhealthy dependence upon Him! Because for God to continue doing everything for us, even when we are perfectly capable of doing it ourselves, would be just plain bad parenting, and create immature, dysfunctional, lazy Christians who merely want to be pampered and taken care of — wanting God to do for them things they are very capable of doing (and need to do) for themselves.

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Then THIRD, God sometimes withdraws the felt sense of His presence to make us more hungry for Him. God, says the word, wants us to be passionate for Him, zealous for the faith and the things of God. Yet over time, we so often fall into doing things out of mere habit and routine. We become complacent and so lose our first love.

So what does God do to remedy such a situation? He begins to pull away. WHY? To make us hungry for Him once again.

Jesus, we are told, is the Bread of Life (He is our Spiritual Food). And how do you increase someone's hunger for food? You make them fast for a few days — a forced fast! And when that happens, they begin to crave that food. They quickly realize they should never have taken that Food or Bread for granted.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit is said to be the Living Water. And how does one make another thirsty for Water? They send them into a desert where there is no water, and that person soon realizes how precious and desirable that common, readily available, and seemingly insignificant commodity of WATER really is! Their mouth may even become so parched and dry that they crave water with all that is in them, and would give all they have for even the smallest little glass of water!

Isn't that what we find in Psalm 42? David writes: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." Why? Because he's going through a time of spiritual dryness. He writes the same thing again in Psalm 63: "O God, you are my God. Earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

David has found himself in a spiritual wasteland with nothing to drink, and it has made him crave the presence of God with everything that is in him!

That's what it's intended to do. Not make us think that God has given up on us, but make us all the more thirsty and earnest in our prayers for His return. It is intended to make us pray with all our hearts for the renewing and reviving influences of the Holy Spirit to return to our soul.

In fact, some of you may have prayed (at one time or another) for God to make you more hungry and passionate for Him. I just want you to know (and I say it from experience) that one of the ways He does that is to withdraw the sense of His presence — which is like bread and water to the soul — and by such a forced fast, answer your prayer!

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And then **LAST**, God will often withdraw the sense of His presence to "prove us," as the older versions put it. II Chronicles 32:31 says of Hezekiah: "He succeeded in everything he undertook. But when the envoys were sent by the rulers of Babylon to ask him about the miraculous sign that had occurred in the land, God left him, to test him and to know everything that was in his heart."

I find it interesting that this passage implies the same thing about Job — he, like Hezekiah, succeeded in everything he did — I rescued the poor, I made the widows heart sing, I put on righteousness as clothing, I was eyes to the blind, I was a father to the needy, I took up the case of the stranger, I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth! People listened expectantly to me; after I spoke no one had anything to add. He even says, "they waited for me like spring showers, and drank in my words like rain." "When I smiled at them they scarcely believed it, the light of my face was precious to them."

But as you read it you almost get the sense there was an idolatrous admiration for him that he seems to enjoy immensely. He was even a little arrogant, looking down on others in a somewhat pejorative way (30:8). But that's the whole point:

Oftentimes, when we begin to become prideful, or think its us that people need and not God — when we find ourselves thinking we're something special (in an arrogant type of way) — or that were better and wiser and smarter than everyone else; that what people really need to do is become like us, and look up to us, and listen to us — then God must often step in to humble us by withdrawing the assisting influences of His Spirit's power, and strength, and wisdom, until like Job we see what we're really like without him.

God already knows! But oftentimes we do not. Thus, He doesn't prove us so that He can discover what were made of. He proves us to reveal to us what were made of, and what we'd be like, were it not for the influences of His grace and His indwelling Spirit.

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You see, over time we can come to believe it's us who are the source of our success — it's our power, and our charisma, and our plans, and our wisdom, and our ability to control or manipulate situations! It's us, and not God. Did you noticed how many times Job said "I" — I did this and I did that... I, I, I, I, I!!!

And when that happens, God must step in (or step back) and humble us. "Remember," says Moses to the Israelites in Deut. 8:2, "how the LORD your God led you in the desert these forty years to humble you, and to prove you, to know what was in your heart..."

And when He does: The believer who thought he was so holy finds himself thinking thoughts about God that they never dreamed possible — evil, angry, blasphemous thoughts! / The believer who thought she had all this innate zeal for God (and looked down on others who didn't) finds it evaporate! / The believer who prided himself on being so pure finds impure thoughts and sinful urges flooding his heart.

/ The believer who prided himself on his faith finds his thoughts buffeted with doubts. / And the believer who thought she had so much self-control finds her appetites out of control and unable to resist just about anything (craving things, eating things, buying things).

And they could blame it on Satan. Or they could realize that God was "proving them" — that is, proving to them what they're really like, and capable of, apart from the restraining influences of His grace and indwelling Spirit. A "proving" that teaches us (as one of my friends used to say) that we can only look at the very worst of sinners and say, "There, but by the grace of God, go I."

David Wilkerson writes this in a devotional entitled "God left him...to prove him":

"Often, while in the righteous pursuit of God's work, the steward of the Lord finds himself apparently forsaken—tried to the limits of endurance and left all alone to battle the forces of hell. Every man God has ever blessed has been proved in the same manner. Do you find yourself in strange circumstances? Do you feel forsaken and alone? Do you fight a losing battle with an unpredictable enemy? These are all signs pointing to the proving process... Jesus has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. But the record of Scripture reveals that there are seasons when the Father withdraws His presence to prove us. Even Christ experienced that lonely moment on the cross. It is then that our blessed Savior is most touched by the feeling of this infirmity — and He whispers to us, as he did to Peter, "I pray for thee, that thy faith will not fail."