

February 4, 2007
What To Do When God Can't Be Found
Psalm 139:1-12 / Job 23:1-17

Many years ago (in the year 1568 to be exact) a man known primarily for his "remarkable gentleness," was abducted and confined for 9 months in a 6 foot by 4 foot closet-like cell. His crime? Trying to bring needed reform to the Carmelite Order of Friars and Nuns to which he belonged, yet had become spiritually and morally corrupt.

The name he went by was "John of the Cross"— later to become "Saint John of the Cross" after he was canonized as a saint in 1726.

During his time in captivity he wrote a book called the "Noche Oscura" where he describes his an inward sense of being utterly abandoned by God during that time — a total inability to sense God's presence, or feel His closeness, or even believe that God would ever draw near to him again. The sense of being forsaken by God for an extended period of time.

And I mention that because it's similar in many ways to what Job describes in today's passage, where, with a sense of spiritual desperation he says of God:

"If I go to the east He is not there; if I go to the west I do not find Him. When He is at work in the north I do not see Him; when He turns to the south I catch no glimpse of Him."

He's gone. Nowhere to be found. That's how Job feels. It's his way of saying he's looked everywhere and tried everything to regain the sense of God's nearness and closeness, yet it is all in vain—hard as he searches and earnestly as he looks, he can't even "catch a glimpse of Him." Not even a hint! He feels totally isolated and abandoned — totally unable to sense, see, feel or find God anywhere in anything.

It's what St. John of the Cross called in his book "The Dark Night of the Soul." A book that has brought great comfort to many, because many earnest and devout Christians (so it seems) have like him, experienced times when they felt abandoned, forsaken, and deserted by God — that God had turned and walked away — the loss of all joy in God, and the sense that He no longer cared and was nowhere to be found, no matter how earnestly the person pleads for him to return.

And if you consider what St. John of the Cross suffered, it's not hard to see why he might feel that way. He was imprisoned and kept in isolation, not by unbelievers, but by his fellow friars! That would be the same as if this Christian community turned on you and imprisoned you in a little 6 by 6 closet for 9 months, and did the following things to you. His biographer writes:

“The few friars who visited him came only to shower him with recriminations, and throw his food on the floor. His jailor was not even allowed to talk to him, or remove the excrement from his chamber pot. The stench made John sick. His back was full of sores from the scourging he had undergone at the hands of friars trying to teach him that it does not pay to disobey. His robe stuck to his flesh, his clothes began to rot, and his body became infested with worms [remember he did not even have enough space to stand up or stretch out to sleep, and the only light was the light that came in under the door]. He lost his appetite, could hardly sleep, and when the hot summer arrived in Toledo (Spain) he was hardly able to breathe in his cell. In these surroundings he began to write his “Noche Oscura” (The Dark Night)... After six months in these conditions they changed his jailor. He must have been a kinder man, for he... allowed him to clean up his own excrement, and kept the door open to let air in.”

Maybe now you can see why he, like Job, would FEEL deserted by God. Extended periods of pain and suffering have a way of making that happen.

And that sense of spiritual abandonment which St. John of the Cross, and Job in this passage expresses, is not all that uncommon — even if you don't go through suffering as severe as theirs.

King David and the other Psalmists speak of it frequently. Peter sensed it after his denial of Jesus. Paul talks about it happening to him and Titus and the others with them in II Corinthians 1:8-10. And even Jesus Himself experienced it on the cross when He cried out, “Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani — My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Though we don't often think of it, the sinless Son of God did experience a sense of spiritual abandonment by God — that God had turned His back and walked away in His hour of greatest need, nowhere to be found. And it's that condition — the sense of spiritual abandonment that most all believers go through at one time or another, to one degree or another — that I want to address today from today's passage.

And I want to address it because I know (after literally hundreds of pastoral counseling sessions, and casual conversations, and reading hundreds of Christian biographies or testimonies — and by my own personal experience) that if you haven't gone through such an experience in your Christian life, chances are you will! To one degree or another, at one time or another most everyone does.

And thus what I'd like to do is share with you what Job gives us as the FOUR things we need to do when we go through such times.

I wish I could tell you how to avoid such times. But I can't. Because sometimes, as in Job's case, they come upon a person who hasn't done ANYTHING to make them happen! Things happen over which we have no control, or situations come our way which we never dreamed we'd be in — situations we can't avoid.

Sometimes we may be guilty of having done something wrong to cause it. That's true. But other times we may have done nothing wrong (like Job). The sense of divine abandonment can come to both irregardless. And it's as help to you while you're in those times, that I'd like to point out the 4 SPIRITUAL STEPS or DISCIPLINES that Job followed in order to get through it. Steps we also need to follow.

What are they?

The **FIRST** comes to us in verse 10 where Job shows us that we must recall and cling to what we KNOW to be true even though what we "feel" and "see" seems to imply just the opposite. What does Job say in verse 10: "But He knows the way that I take, when He has tested me I will come forth as gold."

In other words, "I may have lost hold of the sense of intimacy I once had with God, where He seemed so close and near at hand; I may not be able to see, or even catch a glimpse of Him, BUT I KNOW HE STILL HAS HIS WATCHFUL EYE FIXED ON ME. He is obscured from my view, but I can never be obscured from His."

This is where knowledge of biblical truth and good doctrine or right theology is so important — because it is the only thing that will carry us through such times — When our sense perceptions are numbed by pain / When trauma or upheaval in our lives causes us to lose our ability to feel, perceive or enjoy God's presence / When the changes of life short-circuit the emotional and affectional aspect of our relationship with God or We hit a massive and unexpected bump in the road of life and it throws our spiritual bearings off kilter for a while.

What does Job throw himself back on at this time? The Omniscience of God. The truth that God knows all things — including where we are or will be at any given time, what we are or will be doing, the situations that are confronting us, how those things make us feel, and what they will cause us to do.

There are few truths more comforting and few doctrines that sustain the soul more than the knowledge that GOD KNOWS AND SEES ALL. That He is NEVER unaware, at ANY moment of time, of exactly what you are going through, and exactly what you need.

In fact, it's the knowledge and assurance that He knows which helps us to understand that if He chooses to allow it to continue, it's because He has a reason, and like it or not, He knows we can handle more than WE think we're able to handle.

As one saint has put it: "God never gives us more than we can handle. That's His promise. I just wish, on occasion, that He didn't have such a high estimation of my abilities!"

It's true! There are times when I thought I was at my whit's end — that I couldn't go on, or endure one day more — but God knew otherwise. And because He did, He refused to stop the purifying effects of the trial until it had accomplished that divinely stated objective of growing me. You too.

You see, that's where the second part of verse 10 comes in. For in it Job basically says that he is being "tested." And the Hebrew word we translate "tested," carries with it the sense of "being tried or tested by the fire," "to smelt, refine and purify metals."

That's what Job's suffering, by his own admission, is meant to accomplish — it meant to purify and refine him. And because that is what its meant to accomplish, when God, who omnisciently knows all and sees all and is fully aware of everything that is happening to him at all times, and is also Omnipotent, and thus able to stop it at any moment if He should so choose but doesn't, it invariably drives us to the conclusion that when God allows it to continue its because it hasn't yet accomplished its purpose.

God's goal is to refine us like gold. To remove the contaminating impurities. And thus He will keep us in the furnace of that smelting process until the impurities He is trying to dislodge from our soul or spirit have been dislodged.

To turn down the heat, or stop the refining process before the gold is melted into liquid form, thus allowing the impurities to remain lodged in the gold, or not giving them sufficient time to float to the surface that they may be scooped off and discarded would be to waste everything He intended to do — and God will not waste His time!

Let this be your comfort in any trial or Dark Night of the Soul experience:

God knows and sees all you're going through, even if you can't see Him at all, or anything He's doing. And because He does, you can know that if He remains off at a distance, as much as it may hurt us and cause us emotional pain, it is somehow necessary to accomplish what He is seeking to work in you, or He would take it away.

Then **SECONDLY**, Job tells us in verse 11: "My feet have closely followed His steps; I have kept to His way without turning aside." It might be asked how Job can follow in God's steps when he's just said he can't see God no matter which direction he looks — a God who has seemingly disappeared from the scene.

But this is the very thing Job is getting at — the person who has followed in God's footsteps for any amount of time at all, becomes familiar with the paths that God takes. They become accustomed to the general direction in which He always moves, and thus when He seemingly disappears from view, they know that the best way to keep from getting lost, or becoming a spiritual casualty, is to trudge on in that same direction, and keep to those familiar paths. When you're off in the wilderness of a desert experience, or out wandering on mountain paths when darkness falls, and your Guide disappears from view, it's NOT the time to try new, unmarked and untrodden paths! It's not!

It's time to stick with the familiar paths. The one's you've trod before. The one's you walked on when God was close by your side, and you enjoyed those special times of fellowship and intimate spiritual intercourse with God. The times when it was easy to see the way and keep in step with His Spirit.

The pathway to holiness, or the road to godliness (which are the paths God leads us on) rarely change direction. It doesn't go one way in good times, and another in bad times; one way when God is near, and another way when He is distant. It goes in the same direction all the time.

According to Scripture, there are evil paths and good paths / right paths and wrong paths / the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous / the path of immorality the path of the holiness / the dark and slippery path or the lighted pathway of God's Word / the path of life and the way that leads to death.

Those who have walked with God know what paths they need to trod, and what paths they need to avoid — all the moreso when their Heavenly Guide seems to have disappeared from sight!

Then **THIRD**, Job tells us in a similar vein (in the very next verse – v. 12): “I have not departed from the commands of His lips...” This also is important to remember. Because it is sometimes tempting, when we feel deserted by God or go through things that we feel are unfair (like Job); when we’ve been seeking to do all the right things and find bad things just keep on happening to us, it is easy to become resentful or disillusioned with God, and adopt a “who cares attitude toward God in relation to sin,” or a spiteful attitude that says, “If I’m going to get hammered regardless of what I do, I may as well do what I want.”

I’ve even spoken with devout and earnest believers, who confessed that when they went through difficult times, for an extended period of time with no let up, actually chose to sin out of desperation or spitefulness to God (and if you don’t think you ever would, you probably don’t know yourself very well)!

There are two occasions or seasons of life when people are the most susceptible to sin’s temptation:

The **FIRST** is when we’re on a spiritual high and thus become overly confident, let down our spiritual guard, and somehow think we’ve arrived. Paul alludes to this when he says, “Let him who thinks he stands beware lest he fall.”

It’s when we’re flying along on a spiritual high that we tend to neglect prayer, let our devotions and time in the Word slide, and try to exist in the power of the flesh which is often little more than the adrenalin rush of a stroked ego.

And the **SECOND** occasion when we are the most susceptible to sin’s lure is when we are in the pits, or despairing, and disillusioned with the Christian life, feeling God has let us down.

Times when we would do ANYTHING to get some relief from the pain, or depress-ion, or loneliness — EVEN TO THE POINT OF SINNING — if we felt that that would bring us relief.

The pleasures of sin are short-lived, as the Author of Hebrews tells us. But they still bring us pleasure — that’s their lure! They at least bring the person relief from their pain, or some type of pleasure even if only for a short time.

And to the minds of some who have wrestled long and hard without any progress, temporary relief seems preferable to no relief at all. And such thinking, during periods of spiritual darkness and hardship, has led many to depart from God's commands, and embrace sin for a short season.

Job says, "I have not departed from the commands of His lips..." And that would be my advice to you. Suffering, be it spiritual or physical, DOES frequently tempt us to depart from the commands of God's mouth. The pleasures of sin call out to us and beckon us to turn our backs on the God which we FEEL has turned His back on us.

Don't do it my friends. Remember this one thing: Satan's goal was to see if he could get the blameless and upright Job to sin and curse God by afflicting him with intense suffering. Which means that Job could have had Satan off his back if he had merely done that — if he'd merely sinned and cursed God.

And I say that to all here: There are times when sinning and departing from the commands of God may indeed put an end to unpleasant circumstances or personal suffering: A lie told here; a broken promise there; stealing something to avoid financial stress; baking out of a contract or shirking some responsibility.

And when that's added to the fact that God promises to forgive, it can become awfully tempting to depart from God's commands.

But don't do it, says Job! Do not depart from them, for though sin does bring temporary pleasure and relief, it also, as James pointedly reminds us, "gives birth to death (or spiritual deadness)" – the very thing you're trying to overcome!

Then **LAST**, Job says we need to treasure what we do have, while we wait for what we desire. "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my daily bread" (v. 12).

He can't see or sense the presence of God anywhere. God is no longer speaking to him in that personal sense in his thoughts and affection. So what he does is cherish the words and the promises God has spoken to him in the past, and cling to them.

For even if the sense of His presence is removed from us, His Words and His promises can't be. I may feel distant from God, numb to God, and unable to break through to Him.

But that can't remove His word from us, or the promises He has given us for the express purpose of carrying us through such times. I may have to walk through the desert, but God has given me a canteen! / I may get lost in the wilderness, but He has given me a compass! / It may be the blackest night, but even then He's left me the stars to guide me! / I may not hear His voice, but He can still speak to me and sustain me through His word and promises formerly given.

That's what one has to do when they go through the dark night experience. They have to rely upon, and cling to, and cherish and treasure what they do have, and have had, to carry them over until such blessed times return.

And it's not just the words God has spoken to us. We have the FELLOWSHIP of the saints. And when the Lord can't be found, we still have His people to carry us through such times — even if it only be one or two who understand.

We have the MEMORIES of sweet times of intimate communion with God in PRAYER. Times of prayer so euphoric we wished they'd never end.

We have the precious memories of the JOY we experienced when we first came to Christ and realized for the first time that God had loved us with an everlasting love, chosen us, sent Christ to die for all our sins, and baptized us with His powerful life-nurturing Holy Spirit whom He sent to live within us. We felt it so strongly and knew it with such assurance and that nobody could have convinced us it wasn't so! We would have laughed if anyone had suggested God it!

There were those times of WORSHIP that were so rich that we wished we could be taken up to heaven at that very moment! Times when communion with God that made even the best things of this world seem pale and laughably insignificant by comparison. Times of SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY so exciting that we couldn't get enough of God's Word, staying up till all hours of the night reading and soaking in the truth that was there.

Do you remember such times? You need to cherish and treasure them, and call them to mind when dark times cast the shadow of doubt on our present experience. That's what they were given to us for!

David, when going through one of those dark spiritual times, girded himself up by saying in Psalm 42, "I remember...how I used to go with the multitude leading the procession to the house of God with shouts of joy and thanksgiving." He strengthened his soul in his spiritually dry time by remembering the times when he experienced euphoric joy in worship. It's no surprise then to see how many times the Psalmists admonish people to "remember."

Remember the joyful experiences. Treasure the Word. Treasure His promises. Treasure the fellowship and support of the saints, and treasure the truth, until what you desire returns, and the darkness lifts, and you find your way out of the wilderness, or just find some streams in the desert as you continue to walk toward the green pastures off in the distance.

Trials are temporary, my friends. They are! Storms end, and so does the night. Hurricane winds eventually cease. The sun always rises no matter how long the night may seem. So don't give up hope! Suffering lasts for a season, but joy comes in the morning! Joy comes to those who wait patiently for the Lord — doing all the things they know they should as they wait.