



When God Is Silent

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By Adena Peters

Outside the window, falling snow gently covers the dark, frozen earth. Though a fire burns cheerily in the fireplace, a chill envelops the room. We sit silently, enduring a moment of pain. Motionlessly we wait, but for what? What words can soothe the torture of the soul? No easy prescription eases the agony. The suffering has lasted years for my friend. "If only God would speak to me," he says. "If only I could feel His presence."

If only God would speak to us all! If only we all could feel His presence, especially in our deepest agony. How are we to respond when we don't hear or feel God? What do we do when God seems silent?

In ancient Israel, God was an ever-present reality. He was visible in the pillar of cloud. He spoke from Mount Sinai. Questions were answered. Miracles performed. God promised them every kind of blessing if they would obey Him: "If you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your

God, to observe carefully all His commandments . . . the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth." And there was also a warning if they would not obey: "But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes . . . all these curses will come upon you and overtake you" (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15 NKJV).

Those who obeyed would prosper; those who disobeyed would be punished. How easy then to obey God! Everything seemed so clear-cut.

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Yet God's plain dealing with Ancient Israel did not result in instant obedience. Repeated transgression brought repeated punishment. God set up a system of rewards for good and punishment for evil, and yet it failed. Why? Because even His open demonstrations of power could not force people to love or even obey Him.

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When God no longer spoke to Israel directly, He sent the prophets to warn them. “Return, backsliding Israel,” says the Lord, “and . . . I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God” (Jeremiah 3:12, 13). But few listened, and the sound of God’s voice grew fainter.

And today, are we much different from the ancient Israelites? Would a burst of miracles foster in us a lasting faith? Would shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, and the banishment of disease and crime produce a wholesale love for God? Or would we love God only for His gifts and exploit them to our own gain?

A classic case history is found in the story of Job, a wealthy and religious man. Even God called him perfect. And then tragedies: Job lost 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 5,000 oxen, 500 donkeys, numerous servants, *all* his children, and ultimately his health. What more could go wrong?

Plenty. His wife urged him to curse God and die. His friends called upon him to repent for the terrible sin that brought on such punishment. Yet Job maintained his constancy before God. He cried out, “Oh, that my grief were fully weighed, and my calamity laid with it in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea” (Job 6:3).

Job longed for death to swallow up the agony of living. To Job, God had dealt him tragedy and then hidden Himself. Job accused God, saying, “He will not allow me to catch my breath, but fills me with bitterness. If it is a matter of strength, indeed He is strong; and if of justice, who will appoint my day in court?... For He is not a man, as I am, that I may answer Him, and that we should go to court together. Nor is there any mediator between us, who may lay his hand on us both... Then I would speak and not fear Him, but it is not so with me” (Job 9:18-35).

While we know what was happening behind the scenes, Job didn’t. Questions filled Job’s days and nights: Why has all this happened? Why is God

silent? Why is He hidden from me? Job’s laments centered not around the loss of his family and his possessions but focused instead on the betrayal and rejection Job felt from God. Job didn’t want pity and words of counsel from his friends. He wanted a personal appointment with his Maker.

God eventually granted him that appointment. But the Lord did not give an explanation of events or congratulations for Job’s steadfastness. Instead, God turned the tables on Job, saying, “Prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me” (Job 40:7). Then He embarked on a seemingly irrelevant verbal tour of the wonders of the natural world. But the bottom line question was “Are you as smart as God? If you cannot understand the wonders of the created world, how can you understand My working in the moral realm?”

God never answered Job’s questions, yet the effect was stunning. God didn’t try to explain everything to Job. He revealed Himself. And it was enough.

Job was overwhelmed, and all traces of disappointment in God evaporated.

When things go wrong or tragedy strikes, we are tempted to doubt God’s care.

The book of Job is not just an eloquent book on suffering. A greater theme expressed itself—the theme of faith. Behind the scenes it was revealed that Satan challenged God regarding whether Job was “conditioned” to serve Him. Who wouldn’t serve a God who provided all needs and wants? But God allowed calamity to prove man’s freedom of choice. What would Job do? Would Job trust God regardless of circumstances?

Another biblical person with a similar experience was Jeremiah. In Lamentations he cries out against God: “Surely He has turned His hand against me time and time again throughout the day. He has aged my flesh and my skin, and broken my bones... He has set me in dark places... He has hedged me in so that I cannot get out; He has made my chain heavy. Even when I cry and shout, He shuts out my prayer... He has filled me with bitterness” (Lamentations 3:3-15). But even after confessing all this, Jeremiah remembers something that gives him hope. With faith that looks beyond present realities, he cries, “Through the



Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness" (verses 22, 23).

When things go wrong or tragedy strikes, we are tempted to doubt God's care. Some people will smile and blithely tell us, "Just have more faith in God. Everything will work out fine." Yet their words leave only a deeper hollow. Questions lurk in your mind: "There must be something wrong with me—do I have enough faith?"

We use the word "faith" to describe believing in the impossible. David, a mere boy, fought a giant and succeeded. Gideon and his pitiful band of men faced the vast armies of the Midianites. The army of the Israelites marched around Jericho until the walls fell down. All of these are examples of this type of faith.

But Job and others show us another kind—the faith that hangs on even when the miracles do not come, when the fog has rolled in and God seems to have abandoned us. We hear this in Job's cry: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). This kind of faith will bring us through

seas of turmoil and discouragement. This faith hangs on at any cost.

Throughout our lives we are likely to experience both kinds of faith. At times when our prayers are obviously answered, we feel a special closeness to God and experience His blessings. Other times when nothing seems to work, we feel shut out from God. It is then that we need this deeper kind of faith that trusts beyond sight and regardless of circumstances. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel has said, "Faith like Job's cannot be shaken

because it is the result of having been shaken." It is often in the times of shaking, stretching, and growing that we gain the most. It's the faith that we need when God seems silent.

While we know what was happening behind the scenes, Job didn't.

When tragedy strikes, we shouldn't ask, "Why, God, did this happen to me?" Sometimes, like Job, we don't get an answer. Instead, we should ask, "God, now that it has happened, will You give me the faith to trust in You anyway?"

God Speaks

One verse declares that God was revealed in a great tumult; another declares that God was revealed in "the voice of a thin silence" (1 Kings 19: 12). When God speaks, all Nature is silent. Zebahim, 115