

The Silence of God

I would like to read our Scripture passage for this morning. (Long, silent, pause) Silence makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? We want something happening. We get a little edgy when nothing's going on. Humans can be restless. We will engage in meaningless activity, just to be doing something. We will turn on the radio for noise, just so there is not silence. I'm amazed at teens. They will have the television on, listening to music on Pandora while doing Facetime with their BFF, and when mom knocks on their bedroom door and asks what they're doing, they say, "homework." We live in a culture that is bustling with activity and throbbing with noise. We say we want to live quiet lives, but true silence makes us uncomfortable.

This is especially true when God seems silent. When heaven seems silent to us, it makes us squirm. We want to sense some activity from the throne of the universe. But there are those times we swear we can hear a pin drop in heaven. We want to sense the presence of God, we want to feel the Spirit move, we long for Scriptures to stir our soul, our worship to ignite our faith, but even with all the sincerity we can muster, we get nothing. God seems absent, Jesus feels distant, the Holy Spirit disinterested. We open God's Word and our favorite Scriptures feel empty. We go to church and our worship seems dry. Our souls cry out to God, but we hear only echoes in reply. We earnestly seek answers, but heaven seems to leave us guessing.

I make this point for a reason. Open your Bible to Genesis 16. Let's read the last verse of chapter 16 and the first verse of chapter 17. *"Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.'"*

Did you notice what happened between the two chapters? 13 years is what happened. 13 years and no word from heaven. 13 years and there is no development in God's promise. Abraham received no word from God. No angel showed up. No further promises, no further assurances. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Nada. Nothing. For 13 years, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael lived with the tension, mistrust, bitterness and resentment from their misguided union.

It's like the college freshman who went to take a zoology exam. Upon stepping into the classroom he noticed a number of bird cages draped over with cloths. The cloths left only the bottom part of the cages uncovered, so that you could only see the bird's feet. The professor

gave the instructions for the test. "Go to each numbered cage, and by examining the bird's feet alone, tell me what species the bird is, what part of the world it lives in, and what kind of diet it has."

The poor student spent several minutes staring at bird feet, and they all looked the same to him. As the clock ticked he began to seethe with anger. Finally, he approached the professor, "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. I'm not taking this stupid test." He then stormed toward the door.

"Excuse me, young man," the professor stopped him. "What is your name?"

The student kicked off his shoes and pulled up his pant legs and yelled, "Guess!"

There are times when God makes us feel the same way. For all we can tell, it seems God has left us guessing. I wish I could stand up here and give you only easy answers. I wish I could give an outline that showed you the way to health, prosperity and happy relationships in 3 easy steps, but I can't. Faith is never as easy as a televangelist's greed-fueled promises. Faith is full of struggles and uncertainties. A relationship with God is just that. It's a relationship, and it doesn't always go the way you expect it to, and it takes you to some surprising places. However, I can stand before you this morning and tell you that the struggles are worth it.

Body:

When it seems that God is silent, remember, you are not alone. Moses waited 40 silent years for God to deliver his people. David questioned God, "*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever; How long will you hide your face from me?*" (Ps. 13:1). In Psalm 42:9, the Sons of Korah cry out to heaven, "*Why have you forgotten me?*" Think of Elijah in a desolate cave keeping a lonely vigil. Think of Jeremiah lowered down into a dungeon until he "sank into the mire." Consider our Savior who cried out from the Golgotha's cross, "*My God, My God why have you forsaken me.*" Job laments in Job 19:7, "*Though I cry, 'I've been wronged!' I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice.*" I think this is why the book of Job is in our Bibles. Job's presence in the sacred word is a recognition that faith is not easy, but it is also a testimony that the struggle of faith is worthwhile.

The sentiments of these biblical heroes have been echoed by faithful men and women down through the centuries. Saint John of the Cross called the silence of God, "The dark night

of the soul.” Writers of old called it “the God who is hidden.” George Buttrick describes it as “beating on Heaven’s door with bruised knuckles in the dark.” Alexander Campbell, spiritual forefather of the movement that spawned Son-Rise Christian church once felt so abandoned in his religious experience that he refused to take communion.

Many of us could add our own names to the list. If you have experienced the silence of God, know that you travel a well-worn and faithful road, even if we don’t usually talk about this out loud in the church, especially in the 21st Century, American church built on easy answers, entertainment and catering to our every felt need. We usually don’t admit this to each other. Instead, we paint on our happy faces and go to church and pretend we’ve got everything together while we feel trapped in the silence of God.

Have you ever tried to pray and heard nothing, and sensed nothing? Has it ever seemed like your prayers did little more than bounce off the ceiling and ricochet around the room? Have there been times when you desperately needed some word of assurance, some demonstration of divine presence, and you got nothing? Sometimes, it just seems like God is hidden from us. We do everything we know. We pray. We serve. We worship. We live as faithfully as we can, and still, there is nothing. Have you ever experienced this? I’m sure that just hearing this out loud, from the pulpit, in church, is a comfort and assurance to many of us. How can He feel so close and so real one day, and distant on another?

Now there is something we need to understand. When we speak of the silence of God or the absence of God, we don’t mean a true absence, or true silence, but rather a sense of absence; the experience of silence. God is always present with us. He is an omnipresent God. We know that biblically. But there are times when He withdraws our conscious awareness of His presence. He allows us to experience His silence.

Why does God do this? Scripture doesn’t answer every question here, but it does give us hints. God’s word offers clues that point us in the right direction.

I. Maturity of Faith

The first thing I have to say is that this spiritual desert is a sign and furtherance of spiritual maturity, not a weakness of faith. Many who go through this struggle fear their faith

has failed, that their spiritual maturity is too weak. But such is not the case. The silence of God proves you have grown in faith, and God now believes you ready to grow in much bigger ways.

God does not usually allow those who are new believers or those weak in faith to go through this, because He knows they are not ready. They are given sustenance in the Spirit just as a new baby is cuddled and pampered. God treats us according to our needs and maturity. If you are facing the hiddenness of God, be assured that God is preparing you for the deeper things of God.

We will see next week that chapter 17 is a major turning point in the life of Abraham. His life is completely redefined, and I believe it is these 13 years that prepare him for that transformation. It's like when I taught the girls to ride their bikes. When they first started, I was right there the whole time. I have one hand on the handle bars. My other hand is on her. But after a while, they advance to the point where I let go. I'm still there. I'm still watching, but they do not feel my immediate presence. That first time I let go was terrifying to them. "Don't let go, Daddy." However, I know that one day they will have to ride their bike all by themselves, and I won't be there. I have to let them go. That's what God is doing with us. The silence of God increases the maturity of our faith.

II. Purification of Faith.

Secondly, God's silence acts in the purification of faith. We tend to think of God's working in our lives, as adding something to our lives. He gives salvation. He gives spiritual gifts. He gives wisdom. He gives strength. But some of God's most important work is what He takes away. One of the greatest values of the silence of God is what it tends to remove from our lives. When God hides himself from us, it has a great purifying effect on our faith. It keeps us from placing our trust in the wrong things.

This is certainly true in Abraham's case. Several times we have seen Abraham trust in his own devices. He went by what he could see and feel, and not by what God had said. These 13 years help strip Abraham of dependence on self, and prepare him to trust more fully in God.

A. Dependence on External Results

First, it strips us of our dependence on external results. Our society places great emphasis on measurable and quantifiable results. This focus creeps into the church as well with

all our attention on buildings, budgets, programs, and numbers. We like to count chapters read, time spent in prayer, services attended, and programs volunteered for. But when God's presence seems suddenly removed, these things seem hollow and empty. With our lives stripped of these wrong focuses, we begin to long for the deeper things of God.

B. Dependence on Internal Feelings

Not only can we misplace our focus on external results, we can just as easily develop an unhealthy dependence on internal feelings. Our culture has an almost idolatrous view of the emotional self. "Follow your heart," we are told. "Do what you feel is right."

This worship of emotions has crept into the church. It defines praise and worship to the point where we equate worship with a certain emotional feeling. We equate the Holy Spirit with certain subjective feelings. Why don't we connect the Holy Spirit to what we think or what we do, not just what we feel? We maintain fanciful images of God, because they make us feel good to do so. We view the church in certain ways, not because they is biblical, but we find them personally likable.

By threatening our faith with His absence, God actually purifies it, because we begin to question our own beliefs. The silence of God forces us to hold our faith to a scrutiny we would not otherwise, and there is a gnawing in our hearts and minds to know, what is God really like? What does the Bible really say? What is the church really all about? These can be the most valuable questions one can ask.

Through the barrenness of our soul, God is producing humility, patience, and perseverance. It is here where God can truly disclose Himself to us. It's as if He's saying, "You thought you knew me before; now see and know who I truly am." By removing himself, God increases our appetite for the divine, the Almighty as He truly is, not just the God we want Him to be. You see it is often not really God we are trusting in and seeking, but our own images and ideas of Him. If God can strangle these things from our hearts and minds, there is nothing left but God. So, the silence of God facilitates the maturity of our faith, acts for the purification of our faith, and thirdly, it stimulates the longing of our faith.

III. The Longing of Faith

All of this leads to something Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount. He said blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." If a desert does anything, it creates thirst. If we are in a spiritual desert, then we will have a thirst for God. Our normal experience of faith can create spiritual heartburn, gorging on religious junk food, rather than the living water we truly need.

A faith that takes God for granted is in danger, that's why God tries so hard to keep us from taking him for granted. If we could make the Creator of the universe instantly appear at our beck and call, we would not be in communion with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We do that with objects, with things, with idols, but not the Almighty. God is constantly smashing our false images of who He is and what He is like.

In a very real sense, the experience of the silence of God is an unexpected grace. In the very act of hiddenness God is slowly weaning us of fashioning him in our own image. God refuses to be a puppet on our string or our genie in a bottle. This is why He leads us into the spiritual desert. He wants us to have a faith that is always longing for the true God. And we must remember that Jesus' blessing in the beatitudes comes with a promise, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*" The desert is never the destination.

I would like to close with a couple of helpful suggestions on how you can practically respond to the God's absence. Remember, these are not easy answers, nor are they a quick fix, but they can be an oasis on your journey through the desert.

First, meditate on the Psalms of lament. There are Psalms that make little sense to us when things are going good. In fact, we may wonder why they are even in the Bible. These are Psalms in which these ancient Jewish worship leaders pour out their frustration and anguish. Remember that the Psalms was Israel's hymnbook. These were the songs they sang in worship. They aren't all happy go lucky, they aren't praising my Savior all the day long. They are filled with expressions, thoughts and feelings that are almost wholly absent from contemporary worship. In modern terms, Israel sang a lot of the blues. They sang sad songs in church. It's hard to open the Psalms in your Bible and not have one of the Psalms of lament staring you in the face. I put a list of them in your bulletin. Imagine singing this in church:

*Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
 Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!
 24 Why do you hide your face?
 Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
 25 For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
 our belly clings to the ground.
 26 Rise up; come to our help!
 Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

That's from Psalm 44. Our how about this stanza from Psalm 6,

*I am weary with my moaning;
 every night I flood my bed with tears;
 I drench my couch with my weeping.
 7 My eye wastes away because of grief;
 it grows weak because of all my foes.*

That's a real pick-me-up. Let's sing it again. I know that doesn't sound very churchy, but it's something every single one of us has experienced. It's a part of our relationship with God, but we come to church and pretend like it doesn't exist. I don't think it's a healthy thing that every song we sing in church is happy all the time. We're not being honest with ourselves. We're not honest with our guests. We're not being honest with God, because it isn't an accurate reflection of the Christian journey. If you are experiencing the silence of God, spend some time in the Psalms of lament, because you are not alone. Others have gone there before you, and they point to the light at the end of the tunnel.

Secondly, try to get away. Do everything you can to make a break in your schedule. Break your routine. It can be very difficult to see what you need to see stuck in the same old rut. Chances are God is trying to show you something about your faith. You need time to pause and reflect. You need to take time to be still and listen. God may be silent, because you need to be silent. As He said to the prophet, "Be still and know that I am God." Get away from cacophony of noise, and the hurry, scurry and worry of daily life. Go on a personal retreat. Spend some time fasting and in private worship.