

Psalm 22:1-2
The Silence of God Part II
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Introduction

Last week we took a look at a common thread that is seen throughout the book of the Psalms. We considered the psalmist's struggle with the felt silence and/or absence of God. The purpose in last week's sermon was to answer the question, "How do we deal with this difficult trial of the felt absence or silence of God?" I had three answers to this question, and each of these answers came straight from the Psalms themselves. I will list the three answers I mentioned: 1. Do not flip out. Understand that the Christian does often times go through times of spiritual dryness, and thus a lack of God's felt presence is not necessarily the result of immaturity or sin. We witness this in the Psalms and in the book of Job. 2. Seek Christ in the midst of God's perceived lack of presence or speaking. This is what we see in the Psalms; the Psalmists go to God when they lack His felt presence and express to Him their desire for a greater sense of reality. 3. Walk by faith and not by sight or feelings. Ultimately, God's word has affirmed that His presence is with us in the word whether we feel it to be there or not (Matt 28:20; John 14:15-20). Whether we feel that we hear the voice of God or not, the fact is that He has spoken an ocean-full through His word (take a look at the size of your bible!). We ought not question the truth of God's word because of a lack of felt presence or because of the absence of a sense of hearing His voice.

This morning we are going to consider our discussion on the felt silence and absence of God in the life of the professing Christian, but we are going to be asking a different question. Last we asked, "How do we deal with this difficult situation?" This week we will be asking and answering the question, "What are the possible causes of the felt silence or absence of God in the life of the Christian?" I understand that I am working backwards here, and actually struggled with my approach last week. Usually you cannot discuss solutions to a problem until you first find its causes. Well, the Lord directed me in this approach to this issue, as backwards as it may seem, and I trust that he will work through it.

This morning I will be suggesting 4 different causes of this common occurrence in the life of the Christian. My purpose here is to merely suggest different reasons for this occurrence. My purpose is not to suggest that any one of these suggestions is more likely than any of the others. There certainly are other reasons that could be mentioned, but for the sake of simplicity and time restrains I am only going to cover 4 (which is already too much).

Possible Causes of the felt Silence or Absence of God in the Christian Life.

1. You might be unconverted

This is the one that we do not like to consider. But we must consider it because the New Testament scriptures would call us to consider it. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith." Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that this is the primary test of whether you are truly a Christian or not. As I have said in

the past, however, a person who professes to be “in Christ” and yet has never had a sense of being possessed by God ought to at least prayerfully consider whether God has done a work in their heart at all. After all, Paul does say that the Spirit within causes the believer to relate to God in the same way that a child relates with a loving father. Consider what Paul says in Galatians 4:6:

“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!”

So if the Spirit has never given you a sense that you are God’s child, you have reason for concern.

However, the danger in even speaking of this is that it tends to create paranoid Christians who morbidly keep their fingers on their hearts, checking their “spiritual temperature” or pulse, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has said.¹ The point of saying this is not to create in you some sort of an anxiety. But this cause for the silence/absence of God in the life of a professing Christian must be mentioned. It is worth the risk. And why? Because it is a concern that the New Testament authors bring up on a regular basis (Matthew 7:21-23; 13:18-23; 1 Corinthians 15:2; Galatians 5:2-4; Colossians 1:22-23; Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31; James 2:14-26; 1 John 1-5 to name a few places). The Christian ought to have a sense of being possessed by God. This is not to suggest that a true believer will live in a state of continual reality. As stated last week, often times the Christian will go through seasons, yea... long seasons of drought and distance. Thus, I would not immediately conclude that you are not a Christian just because you are going through a season (even if it be prolonged) of spiritual dryness. I bring this up merely for the purpose of saying that you should have concern if you have never, in the whole of your Christian experience, experienced something of God’s presence or confirming voice to you as his child. In other words, as stated above, if you have never felt possessed by God, you may have reason for concern.

If you should find yourself in a place where God seems silent and/or distant, you may want to ask yourself if you have ever come to know him in the first place. If you come to the conclusion that you may have never come to know him in the first place, what should you do? You should believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ, aligning your mind, heart, and life with his word, and do so until the day you die. Ultimately, as I stated in the post I put up on my blog this past week, “the hope and anchor of the Christian is the character, promises, and objective work of God as revealed in God’s word.” The hope of the Christian should not be in some experience or feeling; it should come from the finished work of Christ as revealed in Scripture. So if you should find yourself in a place where you have never felt possessed by God as his child, the way you deal with it is not by keeping your finger on your heart checking your spiritual temperature, it is by trusting in Jesus until the day you die, finding all of your joy and hope in him and what he has done for you in Christ.

2. You might be harboring unrepentant sin in your heart

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: It’s Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 115.

I have two things to say in regard to this cause for the silence or absence of God. First of all, God and sin mix about as well as ammonia and bleach, ketchup and ice cream, The Patriots and the Giants. Sin is opposed to who God is at the root of his being. As I said in the Gospel presentation for VBS, “Sin is toxic to God just as bleach is toxic to us.” Sin contaminates God’s glory—his purity, holiness, and righteousness, his perfection. He has only two options when it comes to sin in the lives of his people: 1. he can either purify the believer of their sin, or 2. he can flee from the believer who harbors unrepentant sin in their heart. God cannot have company with sin, period. Thus, if you are experiencing a season where God seems to be unusually silent or absent in your life, you may want to ask yourself if there is any sin that you are unrepentantly harboring in your heart. It may be a good time to do some serious spiritual inventory, thoroughly checking yourself over, praying to God that he might open your eyes to any sin that you may need to repent of. Pray with the Psalmist,

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:23-24)

I want to take you through a few different passages to show you the reality of what I am saying about God not having company with those who harbor unrepentant sin in their hearts. Notice what the Psalmist says in Psalm 66:18,

“If I had cherished sin in my heart, The Lord would not have listened.”

This does not mean that God will leave us when we sin, but it does mean that God will turn a deaf ear to those who indulgently cherish sin in their hearts. Or let me put it another way; God will not hear the prayer of the one who unrepentantly indulges in sin. This has been confirmed again and again as we have been going through the book of Malachi. In Malachi 1:9, Malachi suggests that God has rejected the prayers of the Israelites because of their unrepentant lack of care for his name and his word. We also saw in Malachi 2:13-14 that God had rejected the sacrifices and prayers of the Israelites because of their lack of faithfulness to God and each other. We see the same thing in Isaiah 1:15 where God says to the Israelites,

“When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look at you; even if you offer countless prayers I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.”

Now it must be noted that the passages I mentioned have to do with those who live habitual, unrepentant lifestyles of sin. God does not flee from the believer who sincerely struggles in his/her battle against sin. These passages were aimed at those who had sold themselves out to sin.

There is danger in mentioning this cause of the silence of God because there is a tendency for many Christians to automatically become overly introspective, and they live with a debilitating fear that God will flee from them over the smallest transgression. Every time they sense God’s absence they tend to go overboard, and will stop at nothing to find something to repent of. I have seen so many Christians live in this state of paranoia. It is almost as if they cannot live with the thought that they might not have

anything that they need to repent of. They reason, “God *must* be silent because of some impurity in my life.” My answer: “Maybe, but not necessarily.”

Many Christians treat sin as if it were the monster under their bed. Even though they have looked, peeking their head under their bed 15 times to confirm that there is nothing under there, they still feel no assurance that they are safe. Once they are assured that they have no gross immorality to repent of, they begin to question their motives and intentions. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but some Christians do become enslaved to fearing sin that “might” be there (as opposed to sin that is clearly there). They become unstable, feeling that their every little flaw is driving God from them.

Let me put it to you this way; if you have to dig and dig and dig and dig and dig to find the sin that is causing God to be silent and absent in your life, the reason for God’s silence is probably not that sin. For the most part, believers know when they are entertaining sin in their hearts and they are at least minimally miserable about it. I must qualify this because I have found that the majority of Christians in churches that are similar to ours err on the side of morbid introspection. Let it be known that God does not flee from the believer because of a deep struggle with sin. He will only flee when the Christian has sold himself out to sin in a wholesale fashion, and he will always return to the believer upon repentance (as is evidence with both David and Peter).

Second, I must also mention something about the heart-hardening effects of sin. When I was in college I did something really stupid; I tried to learn how to play the guitar. I should have known that I was destined to fail before even trying. I significantly lack rhythm, which makes playing the guitar impossible, because half of the battle in playing the guitar is strum patterns. Anyway, one of the things I learned about playing the guitar during this 5 month trial run was that playing the guitar hurts, at least at first. That is, playing the guitar hurts until you built up sufficient calluses on your finger tips. However, once your fingers get hefty calluses you can play the guitar for hours without it inflicting any pain on your fingers at all. Calluses are interesting to me. They are God’s built in way of protecting the body from pain. The body naturally builds up harder tissue to keep the guitar string from hitting the sensitive nerve ends in your fingers. In this way, calluses can be good, because it makes playing the guitar much less painful. However, not all calluses are good. In fact, not all pain is bad. Pain, although it is an effect of the fall, is God’s gift. It is his way of saying, “I am sending this sharp pain to your broken foot so that you will stop walking on it before you make your injury worse. If I don’t send this pain you will not give your foot a chance to heal, and you will end up impairing yourself.” or “I am sending this sharp, body-wrenching pain in the right side of your belly so that you can get to the doctor before your appendix erupts and you die.”

One of the worst things that can happen to a person is the loss of the feeling of pain. Pain keeps us from putting too much stress on our bodies to keep us from maiming ourselves. Callus on the other hand covers over the important nerve endings that cause pain so we can put stress at the spot of the nerve ending without it causing pain. Pain is a good thing in our spirits as well—spiritual pain is what we call conviction. But what sin does is it builds a callus around our heart so that we are no longer sensitive to the pain of conviction, and our spiritual senses become completely inept because they are covered by callous. In other words, the person who lives a lifestyle of unrepentant sin, or hangs on the edge of doing so, loses their acute ability to sense the speaking or presence of God, because his/her sensitivity to God has become impaired by the callus brought on by sin.

Little by little the believer ignores God's word and by going against their biblically-informed conscience. After a period of this a thick callus grows and the believer no longer has spiritual sensitivity to God at all. Certainly this is nice because the pain of conviction cannot be felt, but neither can the encouragement, comfort, and satisfaction brought on by the presence and voice of God.

3. You might be neglecting the word of God and prayer

One of the biggest problems in Christianity is when believers expect God to fulfill promises that he has never made. I have mentioned this a few times since I have been in the pulpit, and I am sure that you will hear me say it again and again. The reason why I do not mind repeating myself on this issue is because it causes so many problems for Christians. Oftentimes one of the greatest reasons for a Christian's struggles in the Christian life is because he/she feels that something is amiss because God is not doing something that they think he should be doing.

When it comes to the speaking of God, God has never promised to speak on a day to day basis apart from his word. Of course, he has promised to speak to us through his Spirit, but the Spirit primarily speaks to us through the word of God. Thus the reason that many Christians experience the felt silence or absence of God is because they are looking for God to speak in ways that he has never meant to speak. If the word of God is not a priority in your life, it just makes sense that God would seem silent or absent to you, because the word is his primary way of speaking. If the word of God is taking a back seat because you are spending all of your time looking for God to speak in places other than his word, you definitely will be sensing the silence and/or absence of God in your life.

The Scriptures certainly do suggest that God communicates with the believer in supernatural ways, but the predominate way that God communicates with the believer is through his word. If you feel that you are experiencing the silence or absence of God in your life, run to the word. Engage it with both your mind and your heart.

It must also be said that many people experience the felt silence or absence of God even though they frequently open the word. Why? Because they are not engaging it with their entire being. Some Christians read the word of God only with their mind—they treat their devotionals as a mere intellectual exercise. Others, on the other hand, put their brain in their pocket as they go to the Word and read it mindlessly until the Spirit seems to supernaturally open their eyes to something wonderfully encouraging, convicting, practical, or enlightening. Others go to the word of God without engaging it with either their heart or mind; they merely go as an exercise in box-checking discipline. Each of these approaches to the word of God are empty and shallow. The Bible must be approached with the entire person. If you want to hear a word from God you must go to the word of God ready to engage and be engaged with your entire being—allowing God to challenge you mentally, intellectually, spiritually, practically, and psychologically, seeking the Spirit to open your eyes to the reality of who he is and what he expects from you.

God certainly does speak in supernatural ways, but he has never promised to speak to believers in this sort of a way on a day to day basis. The word of God is God's primary way of speaking to the believer.

4. God's Felt Silence is Often God's Sovereign, Mysterious Design

To put it bluntly, there is usually no concrete answer as to why God is sometimes silent and other times not. Just think about the psalms that we considered last week, Psalm 13, 22, 42, and 88; why was God silent to the Psalmists in those psalms? Only he knows. Why was God so silent to David in Psalm 22, when his life had hit rock bottom? It wasn't because he wasn't a child of God nor was it because he had some sin that he needed to deal with; ultimately we do not know why God was silent to David in Psalm 22.

One thing is for certain, however, and that is that God does what is best for his kids. Sometimes we find this hard to believe, but we must believe it. God wants what is best for you better than you want what is best for you. God loves you more than you love yourself. God desires to bless you more than you desire to be blessed. God does not ultimately bring physical, psychological, and spiritual trouble into our lives to hurt us—he does it for our good. It's hard to see that in the present, but it must be believed nonetheless—it is the only way you can sufficiently, hopefully, and joyfully cope with the pain of being a child of God in a fallen world. This is what Romans 8:28 is all about.

But God is ultimately sovereign over the way he deals with his children. Let me give you an illustration. When I was in college I went to Prince Avenue Baptist Church. Dr. Brown, the pastor of the church, took us through a series on the book of Daniel for our Sunday evening service. I remember very vividly the sermon he preached on Daniel 9. I felt the presence of God that night. The Spirit was upon Dr. Brown as he was preaching and I remember leaving the building willing and ready to mow the world over for Christ. I came back to my dorm and saw my good friend Tom, who also went to Prince Ave. When I saw him I began to tell him how clearly God spoke through Dr. Brown. He responded, “I hate to break your bubble, but to be honest, tonight was just a regular old Sunday night for me. In fact, I was having a hard time following, found myself losing focus, and really just struggled throughout the whole sermon.”

Well, the next week Dr. Brown preached on Daniel chapter 10. I remember sitting in the pew ready to continue through the book of Daniel. However, that night God didn't speak through Dr. Brown with a thunder. In fact, I was having difficulty following and keeping attention. That night after the service Tom came up to me and said, “Wasn't that awesome!” He began to tell me how the Lord spoke through Dr. Brown. I responded, “I hate to break your bubble, Tom, but I had the same experience tonight that you had last week.” I then asked him if he had done anything differently that week. He said, “No.” I told him that I did nothing different as well. Why did God decide to speak to me the one week, leaving me with an awesome sense of his presence and an excitement about His person and work in the world, and Tom with no sense of awe at all, and then speak to Tom the next, leaving him with an awesome sense of his presence and an excitement about His person and work in the world, and leaving me with no sense of awe at all? Ultimately, I don't know. I haven't a clue.

One thing I can know for sure however is that God gives us what we need when we need it. Why was God silent to Tom when Dr. Brown preached on Daniel 9? Because that is what Tom needed at that time. Why was God so silent to me when Dr. Brown preached on Daniel 10? Because that is what I needed at that time. Why was God so silent to David in Psalm 22? Because that is what David needed at that time. He needed the felt (as opposed to real) silence and absence of God.

Most people impose thoughts about revival on the Bible. Without a doubt, the presence of God must sought after with much fervor, but we often times tend to think that

an exuberant and monumentous feeling of his presence is what we need most to grow in our relationship with him. However, I would suggest that this is not always the truth. I am by no means an old person, but I can say with much confidence that the greatest times of growth in my Christian life have not come when I was on the mountain top (spiritually speaking), but rather when I was in the valley—when I had no where else to turn but to God and his promises as revealed in Scripture. The mountain top experiences are awesome and worth seeking, but they are not always what we need. Sometimes we need God to put us in a place where we have to stretch and exercise our muscles of faith, perseverance, and dependence.

God puts us in positions where the only thing we have to lean upon is faith in his character and promises as revealed in his word. He leaves us without financial assistance, human assistance, psychological assistance, spiritual assistance, nor experiential assistance—he leaves us with nothing but his word and Spirit-empowered faith. These, I submit are the times in life when the believer is closest to God. These are the times in life when the believer learns to depend upon God in the deepest sense of the word. God brings us through the valley because that is often times what we need.

One thing we must do is we must learn to adopt God's view of what is best for us as humans. What is best for us is not always what is most exciting, comfortable, or easy. In fact, God tells us in Romans 5 that trials are good for us because they produce perseverance, character, and hope. If you didn't have the New Testament would you have ever concluded that persecution and trials were needed for your growth? I wouldn't! God gives us what we need, and what we think we need to grow in godliness is not always what we actually we need. Praise God that he doesn't ask us what we need, rather he gives us what we need whether we want it or not. This is what Hebrews 12 is all about ("discipline" in Hebrews 12, after all, is not as much corrective type discipline as it is "formative" type discipline—because the discipline in Hebrews 12 is the discipline brought on by persecution).

So why did God bring David in Psalm 22 through such a season of dryness and loneliness? Because God knew that that was what was best for David at that time. Is this not a survival kit for suffering? Know that God will only do for you and bring you through what is best for you.

Conclusion

So what are four of the possible causes of the silence of God in the life of the believer? First, if the Spirit has never confirmed with your soul that you are possessed by God, you may have reason to be concerned for your soul. Second, your lack of spiritual reality may be the result of an indulgence in sin as a lifestyle. Third, you may be experiencing the felt silence of God because your relationship with him through his word is minimal to non-existent. Fourth, we must ultimately understand that the Christian, even at the height of his walk with God, can and oftentimes does go through long seasons of perceived drought, but we must understand that these seasons are brought on by the hidden design and plan of God. His purpose in this is ultimately to draw us closer to himself. And it is our job to understand that God will not leave us to ourselves, and that he only gives us what is best for us.

I am going to end with a song by Ginny Owens that adequately expresses the purposes of God during the valleys in the Christian life.

If You Want Me To
Ginny Owens

The pathway is broken
And the signs are unclear
And I dont know the reason why you brought me here
But just because You love me the way that You do
I will go through the valley
If You want me to

CHORUS:

Now I'm not who I was
When I took my first step
And I'm clinging to the promise
You're not through with me yet
So if all of these trials bring me closer to You
I will go through the fire
If You want me to

It may not be the way I would have chosen
When you lead me through a world that's not my own
But You never said it would be easy
You only said I'll never go alone

So when the whole world turns against me
And I'm all by myself
And I can't hear You answer my cries for help
I'll remember the suffering Your love put You through
And I will go through the valley
If You want me to