

Psalm 88
The Silence of God
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Sovereign Grace Fellowship: Sunday, August 2nd, 2009

Introduction

This morning we are going to be looking at a smattering of passages from the Psalms. The Book of Psalms is one of the most important books in the Bible. In many ways the book of Psalms is just as much a revelation of man as it is of God, because in the Psalms we see every facet of the soul of man. In fact, John Calvin said that the Psalms are “an anatomy of all parts of the soul.”¹ This is true because in the Psalms we do not so much see God speaking to man, but man speaking to God. We see man going to God with his joys, pains, longings, desires, grief’s, excitements, delights, fascinations, and dreams. In the Psalms we see men pouring out their hearts to God. In the Psalms we do not see men who are afraid to be vulnerable and open up before God, we see men who feel the freedom, yea the need, to be honest with God; to vulnerably open up their hearts to Him. Listen to what C. Hassel Bullock has to say about the brutal honesty of the Psalms (he is speaking here specifically of the psalms of lament):

These psalms are basically prayers, as the psalmists lay their problems out on the table before God. As they do, they lay their spiritual inhibitions aside as they deal with the crises that have interrupted their lives and created physical pain and spiritual consternation. While the boldness and naked honesty of the psalmists may shock us, this attitude is nevertheless instructive for our own spiritual lives. We sometimes hold back too much from God, conceal our true feelings in prayer, and create a false image of ourselves at the heavenly throne of grace. What would happen to us and to our relationship with God if we were truly honest with him and with ourselves? Thankfully there is a place in the biblical faith for this kind of boldness before God.²

So many people are afraid of being honest to themselves and God. When they go to God they feel that their doubts and fears and negative feels are irreverent to him. Without a doubt, we must be careful not to disregard the glory of God, but God invites us to be honest with him. God does not like it when we put smiley face stickers on our pains, doubts, fears, and feelings. God wants us to come to him with these things. He wants us to come with “naked honesty.” Oftentimes we feel ashamed of our fears and doubts and so we conceal them even when we go before God. We feel that we must keep our spiritual dignity intact; we feel that we must mask our true feelings in order to give self, God and others the illusion that we have an unmovable faith. So often, as well, we fear our visions and dreams because we are afraid of failure and of looking stupid. What we find in the Psalms is a *safe haven*—we find that God invites us to come to him (humbly and reverently, of course). We can lay ourselves open before him, telling him our every thought and desire and fear knowing that he will listen with a loving and gracious ear.

¹ In C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Encountering Bible Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 138.

This morning I just want to briefly take a look at a few passages from what are called The Psalms of Lament. There book of the Psalms is a compilation of 150 psalms (psalms are songs/prayers), and there are all sorts of different types or classifications of psalms in this compilation. This morning we are going to be looking at just one of those classifications, the psalms of lament. A lament is an expression of sorrow or regret. As we look at these Psalms of lament I am going to be picking out just one common motif, the silence of God in the midst of life, and especially in the midst of the throws of life. I am going to take you through a good sampling, 4 different passages to be exact, from the psalms of lament just to show you that this is a common element in the life of the Christian. Let it be known as well that this is just a small sampling of the silence of God in the psalms of lament.

I have a question for you: why was God so intent on putting these psalms of lament in the Bible for us—why was he so intent on exposing us to the prayers of God’s people when they feel that he is far from them? Because God wants you to know that it is normal for a Christian to at times feel as dry as bone spiritually. It is normal for Christians to go through seasons in their lives when God feels absent. This is a normal experience. I hope that our survey of these passages convinces you of this. I am not suggesting that these seasons of spiritual loneliness and dryness are great, but I am saying that they are normal.

So lets take a look at some of these “Silence of God” passages.

Psalm 13:1-3: “1 LORD, how long will You continually forget me? How long will You hide Your face from me? 2 How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day? How long will my enemy dominate me? 3 Consider me and answer, LORD, my God. Restore brightness to my eyes; otherwise, I will sleep in death.”

Psalm 22:- 1-2 “1 My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? [Why are You] so far from my deliverance and from my words of groaning? 2 My God, I cry by day, but You do not answer, by night, yet I have no rest.”

Psalm 42:9-11: “9 I will say to God, my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why must I go about in sorrow because of the enemy's oppression?" 10 My adversaries taunt me, as if crushing my bones, while all day long they say to me, "Where is your God?" 11 Why am I so depressed? Why this turmoil within me? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise Him, my Savior and my God.”

Psalm 88:1-2, 9-14: “1 LORD, God of my salvation, I cry out before You day and night. 2 May my prayer reach Your presence; listen to my cry... My eyes are worn out from crying. LORD, I cry out to You all day long; I spread out my hands to You. 10 Do You work wonders for the dead? Do departed spirits rise up to praise You? Selah 11 Will Your faithful love be declared in the grave, Your faithfulness in Abaddon? 12 Will Your wonders be known in the darkness, or Your righteousness in the land of oblivion? 13 But I call to You for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer meets You. 14 LORD, why do You reject me? Why do You hide Your face from me?”

How to deal with this difficult trial of the silence of God:

1. Don't flip out--Understand that You are not Alone:

Isn't this one of our tendencies, to flip out—automatically conclude that we must not be converted or that there is some hidden sin our lives that we need to deal with? Not necessarily. The number one rule is this: don't flip out. Understand that you are not alone. Isn't that awesome, you are not alone! In the Psalms you find the highs and the lows of the Christian experience. Generally the way the Christian life works is that (for the most part) we live in a neutral state. God breaks in on us on a regular to semi-regular basis to remind us of his presence, and gives us certain assurance of his commitment to us. It is not that we are living on the mountain top, but at the same time there is a general sense of his presence. However, as can be so readily seen in the Psalms, the Christian can and does go through seasons of drought. During these times God can seem far off, silent, or even unconcerned. Understand that all Christians go through these seasons (some more than others). That is why God recorded them in the Psalms; to let us know that we are not alone. God's perceived absence or silence in your life is not necessarily because you are not a Christian or because God is angry at you. It certainly could be because of either of those two things, but not necessarily.

And I can tell you that if you have never experienced this as a Christian, you will. This is just a part of the territory when it comes to being a Christian. You will go through seasons, some short and others long, of dryness and silence and loneliness.

One of the things that I want you to notice is that it wasn't just the Psalmists who experienced times of drought and silence. No, Jesus himself experienced such a time as this. Do you not remember that he quoted Psalm 22 while he was on the cross, identifying himself with the Psalmist in an analogous way. When Jesus cried this out on the cross he was in agony because the Father truly did turn from him—he experienced the silence of God in a way that we will never have to. After all, he was bearing the sins of the world. Jesus was identifying himself with the Psalmist (only on a much deeper level). You are not alone. Jesus himself knows right where you are at. He identifies with you in your loneliness and silence. Does he not? Turn with me to Hebrews 2:17-18 and 4:14-16.³

2:17 Therefore He had to be like His brothers in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For since He Himself was tested and has suffered, He is able to help those who are tested.

4:14 Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to the confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us

³ Although these passages are primarily speaking of the temptations that come in the face of persecution, it must be understood that Jesus was tempted “in every way.” And without a doubt, one of the greatest struggles (if not the greatest) that Christ went through was the agony of loneliness and the silence and absence of God.

approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time.

You can go to him knowing that he has been where you are. He knows the pains of loneliness before God. He felt the pains of the Psalmist in Psalm 22 in a way that will never have to be felt by any of God’s people. You are in good company. And Jesus invites you to come to him to find encouragement in the midst of the silence of God.

Let it also be encouraging to you that church history affirms the fact that it is normal for Christians to go through periods, even extended periods, of spiritual dryness and loneliness. For example, C.S. Lewis explains such a season in his life after the death of his wife, Joy. C.S. married Joy knowing that she had terminal cancer. They did not expect her to live long at all; however, God allowed the cancer to go into remission and thus Joy and C.S. were blessed with four wonderful years of intimacy. Their relationship flourished as time went on—they became all-out romantics. Joy ended up dying four years into their marriage, and it came as a huge blow to C.S. C.S. describes God’s silence in the aftermath of the loss of his wife. C.S. Lewis struggled with the silence of God in the midst of the greatest loss in his life. Observe what he said in *A Grief Observed*.

“Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are not lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?”⁴

Isn’t this amazing? C.S. Lewis’ experience sounds almost exactly like the experience of the Psalmists in the passages we read. I am sure that some of you can identify with C.S. here. Is it not worse when it is in a time of tragedy? C.S. seems to communicate that the silence of God was more than just the absence of noise. The silence of God to him was awful because his absence in times of tragedy seemed like an indifference on God’s part. Thus, the silence of God in the midst of tragedy is a deafening silence. It reminds me of the “a darkness that can be felt” from Exodus 10. It is not the mere absence of sound, it is, in the words of one of my favorite high school teacher, Mr Wolf, “a silence that speaks volumes.”

It is like the silence that comes after a liar has been found out: he has been caught, he bumbles his words, gets red, looks at you like a deer in headlights, and then there is that awkward silence—and the silence is not a mere absence of noise, the silence “speaks volumes” about the fact that he lied to you.

⁴ CS Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1961), 17-18.

It is a silence that speaks volumes because it is the silence of the one who claims to be infinite in love and grace. And his silence begs the question; “How can one who claims to be so loving be so absent when I need him the most?” But what a comfort it is to know that you are not alone in this. God’s silence does not mean that he does not love you. He has many reasons for allowing his children to go through these times of silence.

If God is silent do not flip out, understand that you are in good company. And understand that Jesus has been there, and he invites you to come to him in confidence “*so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time.*” He can sympathize with you, he has been there. He will not look at you as some sort of a whining baby and say, “toughen up, tuck that bottom lip in.” No... he will put his arms around you as he did with Mary and Martha, and he will weep with you over your anguish of soul. Jesus wept with Mary and Martha even though he knew that Lazarus was going to be raised just a few minutes later (John 11).

2. *Seek Him*

The first thing that Satan wants us to do when we are in season of silence is to stop going to God. That is the tendency isn’t it; to give up? We tend to reason, “Well, if God is silent, he must not be listening.” How does such reasoning go though? Just because someone is not giving you feed back does mean that he are not listening. Have you ever talked to someone on the phone who doesn’t give feed back all that well and you have to constantly ask, “Are you there... did I lose you?” And they retort, “No... I’m listening.” Just because God isn’t giving you verifiable feedback does not mean that he is not listening and weeping with you and for you.

Let me point out of the obvious: notice that the psalmists themselves prayed even though God was perceptively silent in their lives. We know that they continued to pray in spite of God’s silence because we have their recorded prayers where they cry out to God about his silence. Thus, the Scriptural pattern is that the Silence of God ought to drive the Christian to his God all the more. The more silent God appears, the louder the psalmist cries out. In fact, I believe that this is one of the reasons that God often times does leave the Christian in a season of silence—to remind him of how blessed his presence is. You do not recognize how awesome your wife is until she goes on vacation for a day or two and leaves you with the kids. When she gets back you plead with her, “Don’t ever do that again! You are the glue that holds this family together.”

Thus, if God is silent go to him and tell him that you do not like it when he is silent. This will not belittle him or offend him. Actually, it will please him, because it will be to him an evidence that you are not content when he is not around. The Psalmists set a pattern for us to follow—when God seems silent or absent, tell him how much you want him to not be silent (with reverence, of course). Isn’t it a blessing when you miss church and the next week someone says to you, “Church just isn’t the same without you.” It makes you have an “aww shucks” moment. God is pleased when he hears his kids plead with him to make his presence and voice known.

3. *Walk by faith, not by sight or feeling: Trust his word*

Lastly, trust his character, his word. You walk by faith ought to be built upon his word and character, not by sight or feeling. Isn’t this what the Psalmists did? Look at Psalm 13 and 42:9-11

*Psalm 13:1-3: "1 LORD, how long will You continually forget me? How long will You hide Your face from me? 2 How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day? How long will my enemy dominate me? 3 Consider me and answer, LORD, my God. Restore brightness to my eyes; otherwise, I will sleep in death. 4 my enemy will say, 'I have triumphed over him,' and my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. 5 **But I have trusted in Your faithful love; my heart will rejoice in Your deliverance. 6 I will sing to the LORD because He has treated me generously.**"*

*Psalm 42:9-11: "9 I will say to God, my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why must I go about in sorrow because of the enemy's oppression?" 10 My adversaries taunt me, as if crushing my bones, while all day long they say to me, "Where is your God?" 11 Why am I so depressed? Why this turmoil within me? **Put your hope in God, for I will still praise Him, my Savior and my God.**"*

These Psalmists did just as Jesus did, they rejoiced in the Lord despite his perceived silence, absence, or lack of involvement. Interestingly, Walter Bruggemann suggests that the Psalms of Lament "show... us what the Cross is about: *faithfulness* in the scenes of complete *abandonment*."⁵

All too often our faith is built upon our feelings. Now without a doubt, feelings and emotions and affections are a large part of Christianity, but they are not meant to be the foundation nor the whole of Christianity.

Listen to what D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has to say about the place of feelings in the Christian life:

Avoid the mistake of concentrating overmuch on your feelings. Above all, avoid the terrible error of making them central. Now I am never tired of repeating this because I find so frequently that this is a cause of stumbling. Feelings are never meant to take the first place, they are never meant to be central. If you put them there you are of necessity doomed to be unhappy, because you are not following the order that God himself has ordained. Feelings are always the result of something else, and how anyone who has ever read the Bible can fall into that particular error passes my comprehension. The Psalmist has put it in the 34th Psalm. He says, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.' You will never see until you have tasted; you will not know it, you will not feel it until you have tried it. 'Taste and see', it follows as the night the day. Seeing before tasting is impossible. That is something that is constantly emphasized everywhere in the Scriptures. After all, what we have in the Bible is Truth; it is not an emotional stimulus, it is not something primarily concerned to give us a joyful experience. It is primarily Truth, and Truth is addressed to the mind, God's supreme gift to man; and it is as we apprehend and submit ourselves to the truth that the feelings follow. I must never ask myself in the first instance: What do I feel about this? The first question is, Do I believe it? Do I accept it, has it gripped me? Very well, that is what I regard as perhaps the most important rule of all, that we must not concentrate

⁵ Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 81.

overmuch upon our feelings. Do not spend too much time feeling your own pulse taking your own spiritual temperature, do not spend too much time analyzing your feelings. That is the high road to morbidity.”⁶

Why do I bring up this very important information about feelings? Because, isn't that the heart of the problem: “I don't *feel* God's presence. I don't *sense* his nearness. I do not *sense* his voice. He *seems* to be silent.” Not one of these statements is objective. It all has to do with subjective impressions and feelings. Not that subjective impressions and feelings are bad, but they should not be the foundation of your theology or everyday walk with God. So many people need to sense God's presence to feel that he is really there. Is it not enough that he has asserted his abiding presence with us in his word (Matthew 28:20; John 14:15-17). Do we need the senses and feelings aroused to believe God's word more; do we believe God's word less when those senses and feelings are not aroused?

When the Psalmists were confronted with the apparent silence of God, they trusted his word anyway. This is what walking by faith (faith in the objective word of God) not by sight is all about. It is about believing despite the fact that everything in your experience and environment seems to suggest that God is wrong. The life of the believer is to be built first and foremost on the word of God, and if his word lays forth a truth, it is to be believed regardless of the rigmarole that we humans may put it through.

On top of this, we need to be careful that we do not expect God to fulfill promises that he has never made. Has God ever made a promise that he going to give the believer a constant sense of his presence and voice? No, he has said something about his Spirit crying out in our hearts in Galatians 4, but this is hardly a verse that suggests that God will never allow his children to go through seasons of spiritual drought and silence. We, as Christians have one promise, and that is that God has already spoken. He has spoken through his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). What he had to say through his Son is recorded in the Scriptures. This is what the Psalmists recognized. They put their hope ultimately not in their ability to sense God's presence or active communication; they put their hope in his written word.

As Martin Luther has said in the great hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*: “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith, in his excellent word! **What more can he say than to you he hath said.**” The underlying question is this, “Is God's word sufficient for you, or do you need something more?” It is enough! I do not question his presence, his concern, his involvement, or his active speaking. I believe that he is doing all of these things because he says so in his written and living word, and that is enough for me.

When God seems silent and afar off, the battle is not so much to get the feeling of nearness back, the battle is to believe his word regardless of your feelings. This doesn't mean that you sit back in your dryness and say, “It is what it is.” No, you cry out to God and implore him to be sensitive to your desire for his felt presence. This is the pattern that God laid for us in the Psalms—the psalmists did not merely accept God's felt absence or voice—they sought it all the more, however their hope ultimately was in his character

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: It's Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 114-115.

and his word and not in their subjective experience. This is not a battle for feelings, it is a battle for belief. We will talk more about this next week.

Conclusion

So what do you do when God seems distant, silent, and indifferent? 1. Understand that you are in good company, and do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal as if something strange were happening to you.⁷ 2. Seek him despite his apparent silence. Understand that his silence does not mean that he is absent or uncaring. 3. Most importantly, believe God's word more than your feelings. Walk by faith not by sight or feelings. 4. Lastly, know that God is not morbid about this. He weeps with you. He loves you more than you love yourself. He wants your good more than you want your good. He wants you to know his presence more than you want to know his presence. Persist with him through the drought knowing that all of his ways are good, perfect, loving, just, and kind.

⁷ I know that this is a huge butchering of 1 Peter 4:12, but the principle remains—do not be surprised when common things happen to you. Don't be surprised when the pipes freeze in sub zero temperatures as if something strange were happening.