

# When God is Silent

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[ 0 : 00 ] A couple of Sundays ago, if you were here at St Columbus, Derek preached on the last chapter of the Old Testament, looking forward to the coming of Christ. And he made a faraway remark which was nothing to do with the sermon, but got me thinking. And he said, and it's something obviously that's very obvious, that for 400 years after that last chapter of the Old Testament was written, God was silent. There was no more written record of Christ after that.

Or we read about Moses in the desert, and he was sent off into the desert to look after the sheep when he fled Egypt. And for 40 years, God was silent, or so it seems, from Scripture.

And as we approach the end of this year and look forward to 2013, I wonder what do we do when God is silent? I wonder, as you look back over this year, and you look after, you look at your own spiritual journey, do you think God's been silent?

Are the times when you think God just simply isn't listening? Few Christians have chronicled the struggle of God and his silence more than C.S. Lewis. The famed author fell in love late in life with his wife to be joy. Though they met later in life there, the man blossomed, and the relationship became very strong and deep. Not long after they got married, she was diagnosed with cancer, and she endured a horrible long illness before she died.

Lewis, the great theologian, wrote about his feelings and his struggles in a notebook. And just before his own death in 1963, they were published in a book called *A Grief Observed*.

[ 2 : 17 ] I happened to come across this fairly recently and just reread it. It's a very short book. And in it he talks about the silence of God in his life, and he says these words, no one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I'm not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same relentless rebound of tears and tears.

I almost prefer the moments of agony. These are at least clean and honest. Meanwhile, where is God? When you're happy so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, 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 you need His desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of boating and a double boating on the inside.

After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the silence becomes greater. Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity?

And so very absent a help in time of troubles? I wonder how many of us have experienced the silence of God? We cry out to God in prayer, and yet there never seems to be an answer. We pray, pouring out our hearts, only to hear the words echo back without a reply. And we live, we've been brought up in a culture where we understand direct relations. If you put something in, something else comes out. If you work a certain number of hours, your employer will pay your wage. If you put your children to the right school, they will turn out good and correct. If you put your money into a safe investment, your pension scheme will be safe, so we thought. But when we cry out to God, and nothing happens, then something's not quite right.

[ 4 : 41 ] There must be a problem not with us, but with the listener. A few things are more damaging to a relationship, when a sense of not being heard or responded to. I think the statement I've heard more often this week than any other from my wife is, what are you not listening? Now, normally if you could, I'm watching the television or I'm doing something else, or I hear something, but I don't actually act upon it. But if God is calling for our soul, and we are attempting to connect with Him at that level, there seems no excuse for a sense. In fact, it seems cruel. Interesting, Lewis, later on in his book, comes to say these words. I have gradually been coming to the feel that the door is no longer shut and watered. I was like the drowning man who cannot be helped because he clutches and grabs. So what was he clutching to and grabbing to? What was missing in what first

seemed God's silence? Perhaps the most penetrating question is simply this, what happens when we call out to God? Well, the Bible is very clear, three things it says. God hears, God cares, and God responds. When we pray, God hears us. 1 John 5 verse 14. This is the confidence we have in approaching God. He hears us. When we pray, whether spoken word, or whether in our hearts, or whether collectively together at a prayer meeting, God's presence is there. But that's not all. When we pray, God cares. Again, 1 Peter 5, 7 says, Let him, God, have all your worries and cares, for he is always thinking about you and watching everything that concerns you.

Notice the emphasis. God is not simply concerned, but he also wants to be involved in your fears and concerns. Yes, God is the God of the universe. He holds it all together, but God's empathy knows no bounds. But it's the third declaration that Scripture makes that often leaves us perplexed. Job 33 verse 13 says this, You say he does not respond to God's complaints, but God speaks again and again, while people do not recognize it. The Bible is emphatic.

There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. Now, you may be thinking, well, the Bible says that, but that's not my experience. I prayed on Christmas Day for a new Ferrari to be outside my house, and it wasn't there. How many of us prayed that shelter would go yesterday in the last minute, and it didn't happen? Or have you been going to work for an imported meeting, and you've prayed that God would make sure the traffic lights would all be green on your way, and it simply hasn't happened? But most seriously, you may resonate with Luritage feelings as his wife passed away. How often do we casually say as Christians to each other, God answers prayer, but your experiences, that's not true. I prayed and God hasn't answered.

But the Bible doesn't back down when challenged on this. It stands by the declaration that God hears, cares, and responds, always. So what is happening with God's answer? In our struggle with God's perceived silence, we must take into account the idea alien as it is to us in our culture, but prayer is answered but not as we want it. You see, we expect if we put into a slot machine our 10p, we will get what we want. But sometimes God doesn't answer prayer as we would expect it, or want it. He chooses to answer it in a different way.

[ 9 : 34 ] Considering the fallen ways, that God does speak, but it seems silent to us. But first and most obvious is sometimes God answers simply no. We ask for it no matter how well intended, how appropriate it seems to us, God simply says no. Can you imagine a loving God saying no? Is that something that fits into your theology that a loving God can say no?

Once Jesus and his followers were travelling to Jerusalem and they were going through different cities and they arrived in Samaria. And Samaria, as many of you know, was not popular with the Jews and obviously the disciples understood some power that Jesus had. Because the disciples say in Luke 9 verse 53, Lord, do you want us to cast fire down from heaven to destroy them? That was their prayer. Let's just destroy them. Let's nuke them. Let's get them out of the way. But Jesus replied in Luke 9 verse 55? Of course not. You see the prayer was genuine. It came perhaps even with the right desire, but Jesus said no. See God cares deeply about us. He hears every request, but that doesn't mean his answer still cannot be no. I'm sure any of you who are parents or uncles or aunts and have children around know the importance of the word no. Now often the children or the child that you're saying no to has no concept.

[ 11 : 27 ] Why are you saying no? But often it's for their own benefit. So says with our souls in relation to prayer. We often make requests that cannot be granted, but we can be assured that God is still with us even when he says no. Even when pain erupts, tragic events take place, God is still there in the midst of it. Many of you know the apostle Paul had a thorn in his flesh. Now we don't know what that thorn was. There's been speculation by different people, but it was something that for him was a suffering and that held him back. And he prayed three times that God would take away that thorn in the flesh. And three times God clearly said no. But Paul was able to write in 2 Corinthians 12,9 that my grace is sufficient for you, for my power to make perfect, perfect in weakness.

God was still there for Paul. God was still able to help him in his weakness. The purpose behind God's refusal and the ramification it holds in our lives are held directly with his presence. He says no, but I'm with you. Trust me. God's silence can sometimes be mistaken not only for no, but not now. When we ask God for something, we are looking for it at once. We have our time scale. We need that job now. We need that car now. We need that money now or whatever. And if God wants to say not now, but hang on, we struggle with that. Those of you who are kind of under, I

don't know, 30 maybe will forget that you used to have to dial on to get your emails. And you had to go on your telephone, you had to go onto the telephone line and click on and you had to wait for the telephone line to connect. And it took all of 40 seconds, 50 seconds. I used to get so impatient with that. You know, we expect immediate things. We expect the emails to come through immediately. We expect the cash machines always to have enough money in them. We expect everything to happen quickly. But sometimes God's plan is saying later, not now, wait.

But God's delay to not be confused with his denial, much less his silence. The translation of a message of Romans 8, 22, 25 says this, waiting does not diminish us any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. See, God might be holding back because we're not ready for the answer. We're not ready for God to speak to us or to grant us what we've been asking.

Dallas Willard writes that we may have so little clarity on what a word from God should be like and so little competence in dealing with it that such a word would only add to our confusion, even when it would otherwise be entirely appropriate and helpful. It's interesting that as I prepared this sermon, as I give this sermon this morning, I'm waiting for God's guidance.

[15:11] We're praying as a family for our next steps, what we should be doing next. And at the moment, there doesn't seem to be an answer. And for someone who is impatient as I, it can sometimes be maddening not to know why God won't open the next door. Why don't you just tell me? Why don't you just tell me often, I think. But sometimes I wonder if we're not ready to receive his words. There's something he's doing in us that apparently must happen before he reveals what he's going to do through us. Thirdly, not only is no or wait, but actually what we sometimes understand silence is, is a deep calling to deep. A third response from God that cannot be mistaken for silence is perhaps the most difficult to grasp. We sang about it in Psalm 42 a few moments ago.

As we do our pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for living God. My tears have been my food day and night, where men say to me all day long, where is your God? The psalmist has a hunger for the word for God. He's obviously, it seems to be going through a difficult time, a difficult period in his life. He's in pain and grief and confusion.

But notice as we sang also how the psalm continues. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, my soul is downcast within me. Therefore I will remember you, deep calls to deep, in the roar of your waterfalls. You see the psalmist comes to see that there is actually no silence. The answer coming from God is deeper than words. God is there, God is speaking, but he's underneath the waters of life. Thomas Kelly puts it this way, God is down in, in creating silence. Perhaps it is God who is saying, be still and know that I am God.

Could this be how God mentors us? Is God apparently silent, is actually trying to teach us? When I go through seasons where God's answers do not come, am I forced to reflect on my own life? Am I forced to think is this sin in my life? Are there patterns of behaviour that need to change? Do I gain insights into who I am and who God wants me to be? Do I find a deeper depth of relationship with God that I've never experienced? One offer puts it this way, silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go. See we think of a word from God as the soul's main substance, but actually silence can be the way that God speaks to us.

[18:48] It's interesting that if you go into the Benedict rule of monasteries, the word that strikes you is listen, don't speak. Can I suggest that those of us who are evangelicals, those of us who are a form background, find being still and silent very difficult? As evangelicals, one of our characteristics is that we do and we're active and we do things. There was a tradition going way back to the early church fathers of people going into the desert to find the spirit of silence.

The desert was seen as a place that wasn't empty, but a place where we could find God and be quiet in God's presence. I did my theological training at the London School of Theology and once every term we had a day out which wasn't academic study but was a time for reflection and being quiet. On one of those occasions the Nathumblyn community came and led our retreat day and from breakfast to supper we had to be silent. That was hard going, let me tell you, for someone like me. And one of the statement was go to your cave and find God. Go and be silent and find God. You see we rush around so much doing many good things but actually we need to be still and find God. That was certainly the experience of Jesus. Remember after his baptism before starting his ministry he went into the desert so that he could just commune with his father.

Jesus cry from across my God my God why have you forsaken me speaks of a separation within the Trinity as Jesus took on the world sin but also serves as a silent reminder to Jesus of the

deeper cause of his death of why it was happening. I wonder over the next couple of days do we need to be silent in God's presence? As Derek said there's no prayer meeting here on Wednesday night. It doesn't mean that we don't think prayer is important but we recognize what's going on in our lives. Well I wonder whether it's Wednesday evening or whether it's a morning or an hour or two that we simply be quiet and silent and see what God says to us. Larry Crabb says this Jesus screamed in agony God where are you and God seemed to say nothing but deep was calling to deep and in his reconciling of the world to himself Jesus heard the voice of God in the depths of his heart.

I wonder as we look back in 2012 has God been silent or has he been working in us and transforming us and as we look forward to 2013 I wonder what will the silence hold for you and for me and for us collectively. Will we hear God's small voice speaking to us and then act upon it. Let's play together.

Father we stop in your presence at the end of this coming year and we thank you that you are always with us but nothing as we read can separate us from the love of God.

[ 23 : 05 ] And so in the silence we come to you to bring our confession, to bring our praise, to bring our questions and our concerns and to bring our prayers.

Father we thank you that you speak to us in many different ways but often you speak to us in the silence and in the stillness and often in the hard times.

We pray that you would give us ears to listen and hearts to respond so that both individually and collectively we can be transformed to be sanctified to be more like Christ and through that we can go and reach your world with the good news for Christ. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do and may we continue to please and honor and glorify you in Christ's name. Amen.