

But What if God is Silent?

We come away by ourselves and hope to hear the Lord speak to us, but what if he doesn't. This used to be what I feared the most. I hated periods when God seemed to be hiding. I've come to understand that it's not uncommon to have times when we feel flat, when we don't sense a special connection or receive a word—not even a whisper. But as I've read more and have come through these experiences of deadness, I've come to see the value they have.

These periods can help us to better understand in small measure the suffering of Jesus for our sin.

Manning writes: “Dominating all other images of the passion of Christ is the physical and psychological suffering Jesus endured. The psychological agony reaches its most affecting moment not in the torture inflicted on Jesus by the soldiers after his arrest but in the *solitary loneliness* (italics mine) of the Garden of Gethsemane earlier in the evening (Mt 26:36–41; Mk 14:32–42; Lk 22:39–46). Here we view the spectacle of Jesus in his isolation, “sorrowful and troubled,” abandoned by his companions, contemplating his death for the sins of the world. Here is Jesus falling to the ground in the extremity of agony, praying that the cup pass from him, sweat falling like drops of blood.” (Luke 22:44)

Saint John of the Cross writes that two purifications occur in the dark night of the soul, and in some measure, Richard Foster writes that he also experienced both purifications during a period in his life when God seemed strangely silent.

“The first involves stripping us of dependence upon *exterior* results. We find ourselves less and less impressed with the religion of the “big deal”—big buildings, big budgets, big productions, big miracles. Not that there is anything wrong with big things, but they are no longer what impresses us. Nor are we drawn toward praise and adulation. Not that there is anything wrong with kind and gracious remarks, but they are no longer what moves us. The final stripping of dependence upon exterior results comes as we become less in control of our destiny and more at the mercy of others.” Foster continues, “For me, the greatest value in my lack of control was the intimate and ultimate awareness that I could not manage God. God refused to jump when I said, “Jump!” Neither by theological acumen nor by religious technique could I conquer God. God was, in fact, to conquer me.

The second purifying of Saint John involves stripping us of dependence upon *interior* result. This is more disturbing and painful than the first purification because it threatens us at the root of all we believe in and have given ourselves to. In the beginning, we become less and less sure of the inner workings of the Spirit. It is not that we disbelieve in God, but more profoundly we wonder what kind of a God we believe in. Is God good and intent upon our goodness, or is God cruel, sadistic, and a tyrant? We discover that the workings of faith, hope and love become themselves subject to doubt. Our personal motivations become suspect.... We are led to a profound and holy distrust of all superficial drives and human strivings. We know more deeply than ever before our capacity for infinite self-deception... Our trust in all exterior and interior results is being shattered so

that we can learn faith in God alone. Through our barrenness of soul, God is producing detachment, humility, patience, perseverance.”¹

Certainly Joseph and Job and Jesus experienced periods when God seemed absent through no fault of their own—they hadn’t sinned and thus built a wall between themselves and God. God used these times for his purposes. Certainly, we don’t know God’s plan so when he leads us into periods of feeling nothing, we trust him and do our best to live through it.

After several personal retreats of varying experience, I have to concur with Foster. We are purified when we don’t experience the Lord’s presence. We are purified of our dependence on a particular interior result. We learn *not* to go on retreat because we receive such wonderful blessings. If we do receive a wonderful blessing we value it as a treasured gift but we don’t demand the gift. We retreat because we want to focus on Jesus, without distractions, and to have the uninterrupted time our souls need to read and ponder the Scriptures and to reflect on the Lord’s work in our lives and treasure in our hearts his goodness. We retreat to be with him.

Sometimes periods of disconnection with God (the dark night of the soul) can go on for years: Tricia McCary Rhodes writes of her dark night of the soul:

My husband and I prayed for a second child for six years, but our pleas seemed to be lost in a dark abyss...With each new day, my personal pain grew more unbearable. By the sixth year, darkness was my unwelcome companion.

Morning after morning, I sat with my Bible in hand—reading words that lacked meaning, feeling absolutely nothing. There was no action I could take, no truth I could learn. I prayed by faith but my heart felt cold and empty. I just didn’t know what to do. All I could do was wait. My feelings of resignation frightened me. Darkness. Silence.²

...Day by day, I made myself come before him. I read His Word, though it held little meaning. I wrote in my prayer journal, though it was empty and dry. I voiced my agony, though my hope for a response was negligible. I kept coming, trying to be still in the presence of a God I couldn’t find.

One day as I blithely filled in the blanks of a Bible study, from somewhere deep within me, a voice spoke. It was a familiar voice, but one I hadn’t heard in so long. His words were clear: “Tricia, your pain is not being caused by your failure to have another child. Your pain is caused by what you have come to believe about me—that I am not fair, that I don’t really love you, that I don’t have your best interests at heart.”

I began to weep in God’s presence, confessing that what he said was right. I worshiped him for His faithfulness, love, mercy and omnipotence—all that I knew was true about him. Six years of pain were alleviated in that moment when God chose to reveal himself in a new way. In that moment the dark night was lifted.³

The evil one is quick to plant thoughts of doubt in our hearts. We begin to believe lies about the character of God. God’s silence must never be mistaken for disinterest. (Ps 121:3–4). He may not be discernable to us, but he is not asleep. He watches over us whether we experience his presence

¹ Richard Foster, *Prayer—Finding the Heart’s True Home*. (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992). p. 22.

² Tricia McCary Rhodes, *Soul at Rest*, p. 170.

³ Tricia McCary Rhodes, *Soul at Rest*, p. 183-84.

or not. Our challenge is to hold onto our hope, persevering as Jesus did, “for the joy set before him” (Heb. 12:1-4) and not to succumb to the temptation to doubt God’s love for us.

If you find you have difficulty settling in with the Lord, experiencing the comfort of his presence, being drawn into worship, hearing his voice in your hearts, don’t worry. Stay with him. Stay to learn the lessons of seeking him. We do not come seeking him AND his *Yes* answers to our prayers, nor him AND a wonderful experience of his intimate presence with us. We retreat seeking him and him alone.

The Value of Training Ourselves to be Silent

Silence during personal retreats trains us to be silent at other times. The Scriptures speak of people pondering “in their hearts.” Silence allows us the opportunity to pray and think, and treasure life’s events in our heart without external words interrupting us. When we are falsely accused, betrayed, or slighted, we want to defend ourselves. Perhaps, according to James, we ought to be silent (see James 3).

We also know from the Book of Job, there are times when the Lord is working in a friend’s life and we need to be silent and listen well before we speak. Elisabeth Elliot writes: “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us.”⁴

Times of silence and solitude during our retreat train us to be able to endure times of difficult circumstances that will inevitably come during our lives.

Why Was He Silent?

Why is He silent when a word,
Would slay His accusers all?
Why does He meekly bear their taunts,
When angels wait His call?
“He was made sin,” my sin He bore
Upon the accursed tree,
And sin hath no defense to make,
His silence was for me!⁵

Leave the world behind, leave the conversations behind. Come alone into his presence, wait on the Lord. “The Lord is in his holy temple, keep silent before him.” Position yourself to hear his words. Attend to them. Listen carefully. Let the solitude and silence of retreat train you to find the Lord in the noisier, busy places of your life. **There is a time for us to speak and a time for us to be silent. (Eccl 3:7)**

⁴ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 40.

⁵Tan, P. L. 1996, c1979. *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations : [a treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers]*. Bible Communications: Garland TX

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