

“Trusting When God Seems Absent--Part Two”

Today we're finishing up a two-part sermon series called *Trusting When God Seems Absent*. Because in your spiritual journey there are going to be times when you feel the closeness of God and you feel his guidance. Those are awesome times and you will have them. But there will also be times when you wonder where God went. When you cry out for something specific like healing for somebody you love, or for yourself, or the healing of a broken relationship, or a job when you've lost one, or a new way of dealing with life. You cry out for something and it seems like God's gone missing, your prayers bounce off the ceiling back at you. It's scary and you can wonder if God even exists at all. It's a bleak feeling.

Some time ago, one man put it this way as he wrote in his journal: “Another very bad day yesterday. Feeling like an abject failure. If this is life, I can't do it. I feel like a fake. Nothing appeals to me, not even days off or vacation. They all have their cost and consequences. I want my innocence and naiveté back...In the past when I've been depressed and down it seems that I still at least had my faith, or some feeling or experience of God's presence. Now I don't have that...Where are you God? What are you up to? Have you abandon me...?”

This series is about what to do, or not do, when it seems like God is absent. As I teach about this I'm speaking from experience. The man who wrote that in his journal was me.

Last week we looked at 1 Samuel 4. And we saw that things looked about as bleak for Israel as they could possibly be. Their army had been decimated by their enemies, the Philistines. Three priests who had shepherded Israel for so long, Eli and his sons, all died in a single day. The Ark of the Covenant, which represented God's presence to the people, had been carried off by the Philistines. In the midst of all the bad news a woman gave birth to a son and named him Ichabod—which means the glory is gone. They can't find God.

In a minute we'll look at the rest of the story. But before we do that, let's look at this question. “What do you **do** when you feel like God is absent?” When you have problems and they're not going away, and worse than that you feel like you can't hear from God. He doesn't seem to be giving any guidance or any help or any answers at all. What do you do then? What do you do when God seems absent?

For some of you that's going on right now. So let's walk through four things that the Israelites would do to hang on to when it felt like God was far away. **“What to do when God seems absent.”** I want to boil down each practice to a single word. So all you have to remember today is just four words--things to do when it seems like God is far away.

Here's the first one. It may surprise you a little bit. **The first one is complain.** Let me be specific here: complain **to God**. Just take a look at the Book of the Psalms in the Bible—the prayer book of ancient Israel. There are psalms of praise, thanks, and wonder, AND psalms of lament. Which is a nice way of saying “a complaint psalm.”

Let me give you an example. This is what the Psalmist says to God. **“God, you gave us up to be devoured like sheep and just scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance gaining nothing from their sale...All this happened to us though we have not forgotten you or been false to your covenant...Awake, O Lord, why do you sleep?” (Psalm 44:11, 12, 17, 23, NIV)**

That's pretty harsh language to use toward God, isn't it? “Wake up, God!” There are more complaint psalms than any other kind! So when you feel like God is absent, the first practice you need to engage in is you need to complain.

Now, this is very good news for some of you. How many of you either already know how to complain, or you'd be willing to learn? How many of you have discovered that complaining is, in fact, your spiritual gift? Our spiritual ancestors believed that God that I'm in pain and will actually do something about it. And so they prayed these prayers of complaint a lot. But they're not just random complaining. Anybody can just complain. These Psalms are always addressed directly to God and they're deep prayers. You see, sometimes we pray pretty shallow prayers. You know, Miss America prayers: “Lord, feed the hungry people and bring peace to the world.” That's all good, but not very deep!

One of the reasons why prayer dies is that we pray these polite little prayers that are not connected to what's going on inside of us. Inside of me is a lot of junk, and mixed up motives, and messed up stuff, but that stuff is not going to get dealt with and set right unless I honestly, openly bring it out with God. Then I can trust that God is going to change what needs to be changed. When you complain to God it's a sign of being honest. It's a sign of trust. It may be a big step for you to complain to God—pour out your heart authentically. That's what I mean by complain.

The second thing to do when God seems absent is to lean. Lean on other people. Don't go through times when God seems absent alone. Makes me think of Job in the Old Testament. This guy suffered. Job had pretty much his whole life wiped out. He was miserable and wondered about God, but he did not suffer alone. Job needed some people around him and so do you. But you have to choose the people that you're going to lean on carefully.

The first person in Job's life that we read about was his wife. After he'd lost everything—his children, his wealth, his health—he's sitting on a pile of ashes, using a broken piece of pottery to scrape the sores that were all over his body. He's miserable and his wife, Mrs. Job, comes up to him and gives him this helpful advice: "Curse God and die." This would not have been encouraging to Job. This would not make a good bumper sticker. "Curse God and die" is not going to sell, OK? When trouble hits, I wouldn't make Mrs. Job my first choice for a leaneer. Choose the leaneer with care.

After her, we read about three friends. This is what the text says in Job, chapter 2. **When "They heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was" (Job 2:11-13).**

Let me ask you a question: Who do you have in your life that's so devoted to you that they would sit next to you for seven days and seven nights during your time of trouble? When God seems absent, you need a few people to be fully present. People that you know will pray for you, people who will listen to your most honest thoughts without judging you and without coddling you; people who will point you back to God.

The key with this one: Don't wait until trouble hits. Be building these relationships now. Get in a small group. And you have no excuses. We're starting new home groups right now. And you're busy—we're all busy. And you're not real comfortable with people you don't know—lots of us are in that same boat. And it could be awkward meeting in somebody's home—so what, get over it! Step out in faith, just a little a bit, get in a home group and see what happens. This next round is just for 4 weeks. You can do this. This important, this is the stuff that can change your life. Don't wait until a crisis hits before you develop friendships that you can lean on.

Then the third practice: hush. Psalm 46 famously says, **"Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).** When God seems absent, a lot of us go into overdrive, and we try to fill up our lives with noise and activity as a way to do pain avoidance. But when we're in pain, that's when we need to be still the most. When it feels like God is far away it may not be a time for you to read more, or try more, or fix more, or get more advice, but to just be still with God. Hush.

The fourth practice is to remember. The Psalmist said, "I will remember the deeds of the Lord," "I will meditate on all your words." One of the most important things you can do in your spiritual life is just stir up memories of times when God spoke to you, comforted you, guided you, helped you and loved you. So that in dark days when God seems far away, you can remember. This is one reason why I encourage you to journal. Write things down that you're going through, that your thinking about, that you're experiencing in your life. It's an important record to look back on to see how God acted in your past so you can find reassurance in your present. Israel spent a lot of time remembering. That's one of the reasons why we have the Old Testament and Scriptures because they were devoted to remembering.

And one of the stories that Israel loved to remember the most, especially when times got tough, was this story from 1 Samuel about when the Ark had been carried off. When it felt to them like God was in exile, but then how God returned. Let's pick up where we left off last week.

Israel has been defeated in the battle by the Philistines. The Philistines have a huge parade and carry the Ark of the Covenant to the city of Ashdod and to the great temple of their god--Dagon. They saw their victory in battle as kind of a sign that their god, Dagon, had whupped the God of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant is brought to the priests in this temple, and they take it inside. They set it down in the temple next to this big statue of Dagon. All the Philistines cheer about how Dagon has prevailed over the God of the Israelites. They would have had a big celebration that went on for days. They would chant all their favorite chants. The soldiers would tell all of their battle stories and do the same thing that people do when they tell stories about fish or stories about golf, which is to lie and make up stuff about how well they had done, and then everybody goes home that first night.

It's night and there's nobody around to see or hear what's going on in the temple of Dagon, and something happens in the night. The priests of Dagon come around early the next morning to open up the temple. But as they open up the temple, the text says that their god Dagon has "fallen on his face before the Ark of the Lord." It looks as if Dagon has bowed down to worship the God of Israel!

The priests of Dagon realize this kind of thing is not good for business, to have your god bowing down before another God. So they dust their god off, prop him back up, and all day long they continued the celebration—they're coming into the temple to offer their sacrifices, to sing songs to Dagon. They do that all day long.

Then it's night again and the priests turn off the lights, and they go home and they leave Dagon alone with Yahweh in the temple...in the dark. The next morning, they come in and again Dagon has fallen on the ground before the Ark of the Lord. But not only that, this time his head and his hands have been cut off and are sitting there.

Now, wouldn't you love to know what happened in the night?! God only knows for sure. All we know is that this is a three-day story. The **first day** is a very dark day, and it looks like God is defeated. The glory is gone from Israel, and heaven is silent, and nobody understands why. Some days in life are like that. The **second day** in this story is a day of hidden combat. It is shrouded in mystery. It's a day of uncertainty and anxiety, and some days are like that. There's night, but our God does some of his best work at night.

But the third day...well, that's God's day! On the morning of the third day, all the powers opposed to God get defeated, and idols get disarmed, and stones get rolled away, and people are filled with awe and wonder because on the third day, that's the day of hope. This is a three-day story, and the third day is God's day. And from this point on in the story, Yahweh is on the march. And God will not be stopped. And judgment comes to the Philistines in the form of a physical affliction.

A warning here: This part of the story gets a little earthy. I would apologize, except it comes right out of the Bible. God sends some plagues on the Philistines. There's a plague of mice which is bad enough, but then there's a plague of a physical affliction. This physical affliction gets translated in different ways. The New International Version uses the word tumors, which is a polite choice. The New American Standard Bible is more literal. This is what it says. "Now the hand of the Lord was heavy on the Ashdodites, and he ravaged them and smote them with hemorrhoids." The King James Version says that they had hemorrhoids "in their secret parts," which is where hemorrhoids usually go. (I'm just going to let you to insert your own joke here, because I don't really want to get in that much trouble!)

The obvious question is why would this detail make it into the Bible? That's kind of a weird thing to say. I wonder if whoever it was that was writing this down asked his wife to proof it for him. And why didn't she say, "You might want to leave that part out. Ixnay on the emorrhoidhays."

But this is a very deliberate part of the story and here's why: These were the Philistines. These were the enemies of God's people. They were very powerful. They had Iron Age technology. The Israelites had Stone Age technology. The writer wants people throughout history to know this, "Don't be afraid of your enemies, don't envy them, don't try to be like them. If for awhile it looks like the Philistines are going to win, don't be deceived. That's first day stuff, and the third day is coming."

The writer wants us to know that all people are just embarrassingly human. These very powerful Philistines are embarrassingly human, and all their iron swords, and spears, and shields, and chariots, do them no good, because what they really need is an inflatable cushion to sit on. While the Iron Age had arrived, the inflatable cushion age was still centuries away.

So, the people of Ashdod decide that having the Ark of the Covenant in their town is not such a great idea after all. They say, "Let's send it to Gath," another one of the Philistine cities. Of course, they don't tell the people of Gath what's happened, so the Gath people said, "Hey, we get the Ark! Cool!" But pretty soon, the people of Gath are all looking for something soft to sit on.

They decide to Fed-Ex the ark to Ekron, another big city. But by now the word has spread, and while the Ark is still being delivered the text says the Ekronites start saying, "Oh no you don't. Not here. Not in my backyard."

Finally the Philistines say, "Let's just send the Ark back to Israel. But let's send it with an offering." So they agree to send five gold mice and—I'm not making this up—five gold hemorrhoids as an offering. They load the Ark and the offerings in a wagon.

But the priests of Dagon are still skeptical so they say: "Maybe these plagues are just coincidence. So let's do a test." They hitch the wagon up to two cows that have never pulled a wagon before. These two cows are nursing calves. Their calves are back in the barn. The priests of Dagon say: "If these cows desert their calves and go on into Israel, then we'll know that Yahweh brought this suffering on us. But if the cows go home to their calves, then we'll know it was just all coincidence and Yahweh didn't do anything and we can keep our gold mice and hemorrhoids."

The cows get hitched up to the cart, all the Philistines are watching. The priests of Dagon are watching. Everybody is holding their breath. The wheels on the wagon begin to turn...and the cows are not going toward the barn. These mothers are not going to their calves. They make a beeline to Israel.

The text also says these cows mooed the whole way back to Israel. It doesn't say why they mooed. But I remember another parade when God was coming to his people, when Jesus was entering Jerusalem, and the people were making noise. The people were waving palm branches, and singing, and dancing, and shouting. The leaders told Jesus to shut the people up and Jesus says, "If I did that, the rocks would cry out." Because when God comes home to his people, there's just got to be praise, there's got to be noise. Those cows take the Ark all the way home. God comes home to his people. Because God just refuses to leave his people alone.

Listen, in those moments in your life when God seems absent—and sometimes those moments will come—know that God will soon be back. If right now you're living in the first day and things look dark. If you're living in the second day and things look anxious, your job is to keep complaining, and keep leaning, and keep being still, and remember that our God is the God of the third day!

Whatever your life is like right now, making sure that everything comes out right is **not** ultimately up to you and me. Our job is to hang on, and not lose hope, and remember that we serve the God of the third day, and the third day will come. Remember that although in our world sometimes sorrow may last for a night, our God does some of his best work at night, and joy comes in the morning. Remember that although it looks like Dagon is pretty strong, he is coming down.

Although sometimes the way of the Philistines seems pretty successful, it is headed for judgment. Although sometimes you might feel incompetent, or inadequate, or not gifted enough, or not faithful enough, then remember that God can use cows to get his work done. Think of what he can do through you!

Remember that though at some times it seems like God is a long way off, he's closer than you think. One day soon he will set everything right. One day he will come home, because he's the God of the third day. Remember that. Remember that and never forget it. And for today, that is the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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