

WHEN THE HEAVENS ARE SILENT

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Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote a very beautiful song quite a few years ago, but which has gained some amount of traction in the last couple of years. The lyrics go like this:

In the garden He went to pray
When it seemed hope was gone
He prayed with a broken heart
He prayed all alone

Have you had a Gethsemane?
Have you prayed in despair?
In the dark of those weary hours
Did the Lord meet you there?

Have you had a Gethsemane?
Have you prayed the night through?
Have you shed tears in agony
When no hope was in you?

Have you prayed, "If it be Thy will"?
May this cup pass from me?
But if it's thy will, dear Lord
I will bear it for Thee.

The song of course is talking about Jesus in the garden, alone with the weight of what was going to happen, on His shoulders, crying out to His heavenly Father. But the lyrics of this song force us to ask ourselves the question whether we too go through Gethsemane in our own life, whether we too have what some have called a wilderness experience, or as others have called it the dark night of the soul, which are the most unsettling moments in our walk of faith. It's like we are on autopilot. We just go through the motions. There's no more zest. And in a lot of cases, we become angry with God. And what is most difficult to bear is the silence we encounter to the question we ask of why we are in this situation. Because if God is guiding us, then why couldn't He have navigated us safely around this particular situation or circumstance? Questions like that arise, but the heavens almost seem to be silent, or eloquent in their silence.

Jesus experienced it in Gethsemane. And maybe you're experiencing it today. Maybe today is your Gethsemane moment. And maybe the silence is deafening. And the question for each of us who may be going through that kind of a situation is: How do we walk by faith and not by sight? How do we walk by faith when the parameters, the cues that would normally lead us are absent? How do you take the next step when the pathway is blurred? How do you wake up each morning with the same situation and circumstance that felt so overwhelming the day before? How do you go about doing the things you do when all you want to do is to find a deep enough hole to sink into?

Well, beloved, if you're in that kind of a place today, then we need to look back at scripture, at Jesus, and see how He navigated Gethsemane. Through the silence of Gethsemane and the cross, somehow Jesus found it in Himself to press on. When human company in the form of His disciples had deserted Him, He found the second wind He needed to keep going. If you're in this space today,

know that you're not alone. The Bible is replete with examples that tell us of people in the scriptures who felt the same obscuring of God's presence that led to some heart-wrenching cries, very much like the ones that you may be asking today.

Consider these as a sample.

- Job, in 3:11 asked, "Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?"
- Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4 "I have had enough Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." I'm done!
- David in Psalm 13 laments,
¹ How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
And day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long?
- John the Baptist, indecisive, not sure whether what was going on was right, asked: "Are you the One who is to come or should we expect someone else?" Indecisive, and that's something that envelops us at a time like this.
- Peter denying the Lord three times and then weeping bitterly.

Look at them individually: Job through suffering and questioning, Elijah through despair and loneliness, David through fear and doubt, John the Baptist doubt and uncertainty, and Peter fear and denial. All of these emotions, these attitudes seem to envelop us at a time when it seems that we don't have the answers to life's questions. When the things that are coming upon us seem to outweigh us, overwhelm us, take away our joy. We are faced with moments where we really don't know or don't care about purpose, much less walking in faith. And yet, these stories reveal that doubt, fear, questioning are natural parts of the human experience, even for those who had deep faith.

Philip Yancey in his book "Disappointment with God" posits three questions he feels that sometimes we ask rhetorically.

1. Is God unfair?
2. Is God silent?
3. Is God hidden?

Where is He when I am going through what I am going through?

And at the end of this book he relates a conversation that he had with a man called Douglas, whom he describes as a modern-day Job.

"In the story of Douglas, a modern-day Job, we see how one man's strong faith leads to a deeper understanding of God and life." Yancey asks Douglas, "What have you learned that might help someone else going through a difficult time?" Douglas responds by explaining. "I learned first through my wife's illness, and then especially through the accident, not to confuse God with life." then he goes on to explain that. he says, "We tend to think life should be fair because God is fair. Big mistake, isn't it? because life is not fair. We live in a world that has fallen, which is filled with sin, and it cannot be fair. But we tend to think life should be fair because God is fair. But God is not life. And if I confuse God with the physical reality of life by expecting, for example, a constant good health perhaps, then I set myself up for a crushing disappointment." Through his time of trials, Douglas learned a new meaning of faith, and I love this definition. He says, "Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse. When we look back after ten steps of the nine steps that we took, we will understand the walk of faith and how we managed it.

So what do we do, beloved, with the storms that come our way? What do we do with crisis moments of faith? What do we do when all that we believe in takes a beating, when the situation that we are in seems to overwhelm us?

Max Lucado, in his book 'You'll Get Through This', points out that we need to remember that God is always in the midst of the storm, always in the midst of the crisis, always in the midst of our difficult situations.

In Genesis 45, the story of Joseph, when Joseph's brothers come to see him, they are in the middle of a famine. Joseph told his brothers: "God sent me before you to preserve life. For these two years, the famine has been in the land and there are still five years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvesting. And God sent me before you." Notice the way it's played out! God, the crisis, and God. God sent me before you to preserve life; and then the famine is talked about; and then he ends with God sent me before you. Two bookends – God. In his crisis assessment, if you will, Joseph tells us that God precedes the famine, God would outlive the famine. God was all over the famine. God-famine-God.

And that's the way we need to look at the crisis points in our lives. That God is there as bookends to the things that we go through in life that seem so overwhelming. God-your crisis-God.

Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28 "God causes everything to work together for good to those who love God, and are called according to His purpose."

We look at the things that happened to us. We say, "Why did You let this into my life, God?" And yet, what God is saying as He looks at us is: "Don't worry about it, because that thing that is troubling you right now, I can make something good happen out of it. I can take that thing and make it worth the while." And what Paul is really saying here is that the crisis is never the end. What you're going through today is not the end. There isn't a full stop after this. God is still going to move through and turn that around for your good. You may not see it right now, but God is at work.

Max Lucado talks about two incidents in this book.

- He talks of a little boy who was seven years old, playing football with his friends, and a misdirected kick that should have hit the ball actually hit his stomach. And he collapsed in pain. They rushed him to the emergency room. The doctors did a sonogram and found something very strange beyond the kick that had troubled him. On his spleen was a tumor. They operated immediately, and seven years later, after chemotherapy and all, he is back on the football field, playing. A misdirected kick, but in the middle of that, God was present to take him through.
- He also talks of an orphanage in Nicaragua. There were many children in that orphanage, all waiting for people to come in and adopt them. One little girl got passed over every time. One day, she was just walking out of the house, and she accidentally hit her hand on the door, which closed on her finger. She screamed in pain. There was a couple who were sitting outside, who heard her and came running. They held her while she cried and put a band aid around the wound, and just comforted her. Two weeks later, the adoption papers were finalized, and this couple chose this little girl to take home with them.

A misdirected kick at the stomach, and a finger caught in the door – still allowed God to work His will into their lives in such beautiful ways. And beloved, He can do the same for you. You may look at what's happening to you and think: This is the end game. It's not. Because at the other end of it is God. He still is there in whatever is going through you.

So the question for you this morning is: Maybe you're reeling, maybe you've lost faith. You don't know what to think about your relationship with God anymore. And yet, you are too far known as a child of God to abdicate Him fully. But maybe there's anger, there's questioning, there's rebellion, there's hurt, there's loneliness. And yet, the key, as Jesus pointed out in the garden of Gethsemane, is to press through it, saying, "Even though I don't understand what is going on in me – it could be anything. It could be your financial situation, it could be your job, it could be health issues, it could be relationships or even a marriage, it could be loneliness, any number of things. But remember that you're never alone, that God's presence is with you in your situation.

Encouragement from Scripture:

- Deuteronomy 32:4 declares, "He is the Rock; His works are perfect, and all His ways are just, a faithful God who does no wrong; upright and just is He!"
- Isaiah 55 – ⁸ "For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.
⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts."

So often in the midst of the storm, in the midst of debilitating situations and circumstances, it's difficult for us to see the big picture. But God never loses sight of the big picture of your life. He never loses sight of it. And He's constantly working to make sure that gets fulfilled.

- Hebrews 13:5 "I will never leave you; never will I forsake you." Even in the silence, beloved, God is still present.
- Psalm 34:17-18
"The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
He delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the broken-hearted
And saves those who are crushed in spirit."

We don't see broken-hearted people, or people crushed in spirit. We don't see them because what happens inside of us, we rarely let out on our façades, on our faces. We've learned to control those kinds of emotions and just go on with life. and yet, deep inside we're broken. God is close to the broken-hearted, those who are crushed in spirit.

Here's the wonderful caveat as we end. Turn with me to Luke's gospel, 22:43 and underline this verse in your bible. In the midst of Jesus' Gethsemane moment, look how God took care of Him.

⁴³ Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him."

God is always looking to strengthen us in the midst of the storm. I don't know where you are today. I do know that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there are many sitting here for whom this message is meant.

I was sharing with Sheila today, whenever I get a message that is not (forgive the metaphor) buckshot, which means for everybody here, but which is sniper fire, meant particularly for people here who need to hear the message. This is a message like that. there are some of you here, crushed, broken in spirit, and yet, maybe going through the motions, who desperately need to know that God's strengthening hand is available to you in the midst of this storm.

Maybe you've never thought of it like that. Maybe you've never asked Him for it. Maybe you've never reached out your hand and said: Lord, hold me. Let that strength pour into me. Maybe today is the day for you to do it. And so, beloved, I want to say to you: don't let the crisis paralyze you. Don't let the sadness overwhelm you. Don't let the fear intimidate you. Because to do nothing is the wrong thing. To do something is the right thing. But to believe in God at this moment is the highest and the best thing that you can do. Amen.
