

“Truce Almighty”

Psalm 13

Sermon Series: At the Movies – Bruce Almighty Week 1. Wrestling with God

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He controls the temperature. He can create and fix anything. He has the answers to all problems. We call him Bruce Almighty – not Jim Carrey but Bruce Jones, our Facilities Manager. Whenever something breaks or malfunctions – and that happens every day of the week and six times on Sunday – we send up a prayer to God and then send out a call for Bruce. I mean this in all seriousness – I could not lead this church without Bruce Jones.

As for that other Bruce Almighty – Jim Carrey – I must confess when I saw the movie trailer, I winced with disgust. How can the Lord God Almighty be replaced by Ace Ventura Pet Detective? But when I saw the movie, I was surprised how it wrestled with many essential issues of faith. It raised questions I am frequently asked:

- How does God answer prayer and why doesn't he answer mine?
- Why am I suffering? Why is everything going wrong?
- Is God punishing me?
- How does God run the universe and why doesn't He do a better job?
- What is free will and why doesn't God make people act right or love Him?

Bruce Almighty goes from complaining about abuse from the Almighty to making a truce with the Almighty. It's a good film to begin our summer series *At the Movies* because it gives us an opportunity to see what Scripture teaches about these questions. It does something you rarely see: it looks at these thorny questions from God's point of view.

Bruce Nolan is a frustrated TV news reporter in Buffalo. Instead of broadcasting headline stories, he is always sent to cover the lighter side of the news such as the largest cookie ever made. He hungers to be a network anchor, yet his path is blocked. His girlfriend, Grace Connelly, played by Jennifer Aniston, feels ignored by him and wonders if she's wasted the last five years. Their dog keeps going on the furniture. Bruce goes ballistic on air when he learns his rival Evan Baxter, played by Steve Carrell, got the anchor job instead of him. After being fired, Bruce gets beat up by a gang. All this makes Bruce conclude God is against him. He thinks God takes pleasure in punishing him like a little boy torturing bugs under a magnifying glass. He shouts to heaven, "The only one around here not doing His job is you."

Ever feel like Bruce? You're facing financial fears, legal problems, family quarrels, worries about school or work. Maybe you think God is out to get you. What if, like Bruce, you pray to God for help only to get hit with more problems? What if you cry out, "How long, O Lord?" and receive no answer? What do you do when God is silent? Is God ignoring you, avoiding you, punishing you? We all feel that way sometimes. King David sure did. In Psalm 13 he cries out:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. Psalm 13:1-4

God wants you to be honest with Him. The Lord welcomes our cries and complaints. When Bruce blames God, he stands in the long Biblical line of Job, Elijah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and David who launch their accusations and anger at the Almighty. It's essential for us to be honest with God. No relationship can be close if we hide or hold back our true feelings. God will not smite you for speaking your mind. Sometimes getting it off your chest and putting your complaints in the Lord's hands is the best first step.

In the film, God doesn't punish Bruce for his criticisms. Instead, he calmly offers him an unbelievable deal. Bruce gets to be Almighty for a week. He receives a phone number on a pager (remember this is 2003) which directs him to an abandoned warehouse. Here he meets God, played by Morgan Freeman, who gives his powers to Bruce to see how good a job he can do. There are only two restrictions: he can't tell he has the power and he can't mess with anyone's free will.

What would you do with divine power? Bruce starts off selfishly. He gleefully performs miracles like parting the red soup in his bowl, unleashing plagues on the gang that beat him, making his dog go on the toilet, pulling in the moon for a romantic kiss with Grace and publicly embarrassing his rival Evan so he can replace him. Bruce employs his powers to create attention-grabbing exclusive headlines like the discovery of Jimmy Hoffa's body and the crash of a meteor.

The movie reveals some convicting truths about humans. One reason I blame God is I'm not getting my way. My will is not being done. It also shows if I have unlimited power, I might use it for selfish reasons and maybe destructive purposes. Our perspective is too short-sighted and self-centered. This is why God says,

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8-9

The Lord sees the bigger picture, the higher purpose. This is why God is God and I am not.

Bruce Almighty also helps us understand how difficult it must be for God to govern the world. Every decision and action has consequences. When Bruce lassos the moon for that romantic kiss, it causes tidal waves which swamp fishing boats. His meteor knocks out power to thousands. The impact of every divine decision is best illustrated when Bruce tries to answer prayers. He hears millions of whispers which turn out to be prayers begging for answers. At first, he attempts to use Yahoo (called Yahweh) and AOL (today he'd probably use AI). Yet the prayers keep pouring in. So Bruce takes a shortcut and, being a nice guy, says "Yes" to every prayer. While this pleases many at first, it ultimately leads to rioting.

This movie caused a true-life avalanche of prayer. In the theaters, the pager number was not a 555 number often used in movies. It was an actual phone number that hundreds of people

called to talk with God. The phone number led to a sandwich shop in Manchester, England, a woman in Florida who threatened to sue Universal Pictures and a church in North Carolina where the minister was named Bruce! This shows how desperate we are to connect with God. The Scriptures teach us the goal of prayer is not results but a relationship with God. Through prayer God gives more than answers: He gives Himself.

Yet what do you do when you pray and God does not answer? You ask the Lord to find you a job, to heal your parent, spouse or child, to bring back your wayward teen, to lighten the crushing stress, to restore your marriage, to stop your enemies and His reply is ... silence. It seems small comfort to say prayer is about a relationship with God not results. In times like these you need results. If God truly wants a loving relationship with you, why doesn't He do something?

There are some simple solutions to why God doesn't answer prayer. William Culbertson advised us to "keep praying, but be thankful that God's answers are wiser than your prayers!" Along the same line, Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of Evangelist Billy Graham remarked, "God has not always answered my prayers. If he had, I would have married the wrong man – several times!" Sometimes God answers our prayers with a "No" because what we ask is not what is best for us.

It's also possible that our requests are simply impossible. "A father heard his small daughter saying over and over, 'Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo.' He asked her what she was doing and she said she was praying. 'What kind of prayer is that?' he asked. 'I had a test in school today,' she replied, 'and I am praying for God to make Tokyo the capital of France.'" ¹ Perhaps the Lord says, "No," because our requests might cause other problems we cannot see.

Maybe God's answer is not "No" but "Wait." Our timetable is not the same as His. In an age when communication travels at cyber speed, we become impatient waiting for a reply from heaven. Jesus tells his disciples "they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). He will answer His people who "cry out to him day and night" (Luke 18:7) but according to His timetable. So how does God answer prayer? One formula says:

If the request is wrong, God says, 'No.' If the timing is wrong, God says, 'Slow.' If you are wrong, God says, 'Grow.' But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, 'Go!' ²

That's a nice, neat outline and it's certainly worth remembering. But outlines and formulas seem empty when you wrestle with the awful silence of God.

Why don't circumstances turn out the way we pray, according to our will? *Bruce Almighty* reminds us our free will comes at a price. We want the freedom to make our own decisions. We don't want to be controlled by a divine puppet master. Yet this gift comes with consequences. Freedom means things in this world don't always go the way we or God wants. God tells Bruce he can't override people's free will. Bruce can't make Grace love him. God does not tightly control everything here on earth. Sometimes we follow God's will. Sometimes we go the other way. War, cancer, global warming, earthquakes, cyber-attacks are evidence of people, nations and creation

¹ Steve Brown, *Approaching God: How to Pray*, Moorings, Nashville, TN, c. 1996, p. 179.

² Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not To Pray*, InterVarsity Press, p. 74.

not following God's will. As Buffalo erupts in riots and Grace breaks up with Bruce, he cries out to God, "How do you make people love you?" God replies, "Welcome to my world."

In the end, Bruce stops trying to make Grace love him. He even makes a truce with the Almighty. He humbles himself, gets down on his knees and cries,

You win. I'm done. Please, I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to be God. I want you to decide what's right for me. I surrender to your will.

This is more than a truce. It's trust. Our best response is trust – trust that God is still with you and still working for your good. Remember how King David started Psalm 13 with the cry, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" By the end of this prayer, there is still no answer from God. The enemies surround David and the situation remains the same. The change occurs in David. He moves from trembling to trust.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me. Psalm 13:5-6

Why trust in God? As David says, "He has been good to me." When you are walking through a valley of shadows, when God seems silent, it's helpful to remember the many ways God has been good to you. Listing all your blessings can help lift your spirit.

Yet even more, we trust because Almighty God gave up His power, humbled Himself and paid the price for our freedom. He faced the ultimate silence for us. In the darkness of Gethsemane, Jesus says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." The word Gethsemane means "olive press." Olives are crushed under massive stones until all their oil seeps out. There, among the olive trees, Jesus feels the weight of the sin of the world – past, present, and future – bearing down and crushing Him. Falling down with His face on the ground, Jesus cries out, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." He prays with all His might. But this time, no angels sing, no Voice booms from heaven. In this moment, Jesus faces the same silence as us.

Now there is a choice before Him. Fight: use His Almighty power to call down legions of angels to drive off his enemies. Or Flight: run off and hide in the dark. Ages ago, in another garden, Adam and Eve thought the forbidden fruit would give them Almighty power. They would be like God. They used their freedom to fight against God's will and then took flight from God's wrath. That was the first of many falls into temptation down through the ages.

But now Jesus, all alone in the silence of Gethsemane, does not fight, take flight or fall into temptation. Instead, He falls on His knees and surrenders to His Father. "Yet not as I will," He prays, "But as you will." The silence of that moment does not break Him. Instead, Jesus breaks the power of sin and saves us. When you pray, Jesus is right beside you in the silence. Trust in Him. Trust in His unfailing love and salvation.

Like Bruce Nolan, Jennifer had dreams. As a little girl, her big box of crayons seemed like a treasure chest, a rainbow locked under a cardboard lid. Her dream was to be an artist. As a pre-teen she noticed subtle changes. Opening her combination lock, reading the chalkboard, catching a softball became difficult. Every ring of the bell to change classes filled her with fear. Navigating

through the crowded hallways was a nightmare. Jennifer could not avoid running into the other students. Why was she suddenly so clumsy? Then, at the age of 13, there was a diagnosis: retinitis pigmentosa. Her retinas were deteriorating and there was only one outcome. The doctor said a lot of words but Jennifer only recalls one: “blindness.” It broke like a shockwave over her and her parents. Their reaction? Silence.

It was silent in the car all the way home from the hospital. But it was not silent inside Jennifer’s soul. *“I’m not going to be able to drive a car. I’m not going to be an artist. How am I going to finish high school? Will I be able to go off to college?”*

When they arrived home, Jennifer did something unusual. She went straight to the old upright piano in the living and broke the silence that hung over them since the hospital. She’d taken a few years of piano lessons and was just learning to sight-read. But that day, with no sheet music she played by ear for the very first time. “The song that filled my living room that day,” she recalls, “the song that fills my heart to this day – was that beloved hymn “It is Well with My Soul.”

It was a miracle that on that very dark day, God gave me hope and light through the gift of playing by ear. But the greatest miracle wasn't that I played "It Is Well with My Soul;" the greatest miracle was that, because I was a Christian, it really was well with my soul. With such a concise statement, God gave new color to my life. Blindness has remained with me; it's still not well with my circumstance, but God has made it well with my soul.

Today, Jennifer Rothschild is a musician, author and speaker at Christian conferences. She brings hope to many who are suffering through the silence of God.

The only way I don’t shrink back from life’s challenges is through God’s grace. I’m continually amazed at the fact that when we trust God enough to take a step toward him in hope, faith or courage, he meets us right there – then equips us to take the next step. I know that’s what he’s done for me. It may never be well with our circumstances, but through God's grace, it can always be well with our souls.³

Trust God, pray and you will find it is well with your soul.