

# The God Who Is Absent

From the sermon series: God, Our Ally

*Text: Job 23: 3, 10; Mark 15: 34*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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*Oh, that I knew where I might find him... Job 23: 3*

*But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. Job 23: 10*

*...My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Mark 15: 34*

God, our Ally.

That is the focus of this series of messages. The reiteration of that theme over a sustained period of time will write it indelibly on our minds and weave it into the fabric of our hearts. With such a conviction being foundational to our lives, we will be able to negotiate life's perilous way with confidence and hope.

At no time will that be more important and necessary than at those times when it seems that the God with Whom we have to do is absent. It is such times that this message addresses and it is with such times that Christian preaching must honestly deal lest it become superficial sentimentality, a kind of religious "whistling in the dark."

The proclamation of the Gospel, the announcement of Good News, must never be an upbeat, positive message of good cheer that communicates the idea that one should simply keep one's chin up because it is really not as bad as it seems. If the Church conveys that impression; if Christian preaching is no more than cheerleading, then it will serve well those who live on the surface of life with no depth of experience and certainly no encounter with suffering, but it will fail miserably and soon alienate more serious souls who have been brushed with the mystery of evil and suffering in the world.

Not only will such superficiality offend those who know the experience of darkness; it will also fail to do justice to the full spectrum of biblical truth, for the

biblical message never makes light of the darkness but rather announces a Light the darkness can never overcome.

*But, darkness there is. Real. Devastating. Causing fear and trembling.*

God is our Ally. God is there for us.

That affirmation of faith I am attempting to declare from Scripture, approaching that truth from various angles. But certainly one of the most critical situations from which to trust that truth is the experience of God's absence.

One of the greatest concerns I have in preaching is that the Truth declared may leave the one who needs it most in a worse state than before, simply because the dark night of the soul is so deep, the pain so great, the feeling of desolation so overwhelming that a message that promises joy and triumph simply cannot be received. That may sometimes happen in spite of the sensitivity of the preacher. But it will certainly happen if the message fails to acknowledge the hell of experiencing the absence of God.

*If Scripture is faithfully taught, there will be no danger of soft-pedaling the darkness, the horror of being alone, lost, in a world from which God is absent.* Let us look then for a moment into the soul of Job. This Old Testament drama deals in classic fashion with the problem of suffering. Its theme is familiar and its purpose well known.

The book was written to counter the prevailing idea that there is always a connection between human sin and human suffering. It is a drama. The opening verses present the greatness and prosperity of Job. Then scene one takes place in the Court of Heaven. God speaks of Job's righteousness; Satan, the accuser, says it is not surprising that Job is so good - see how he has prospered. God says, "Go ahead, remove everything, test him." So Job loses everything; great calamity and loss are his. But through it all Job remains faithful. His classic response:

*Naked I came from the womb, naked I shall return whence I came. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord.*  
(1:21)

Scene two: Again the Court of Heaven. Obviously God won round one. Job was stripped bare but yet worshiped the Lord. Satan says that the real test comes when Job's own health, his flesh and bone are touched. God says, "Go ahead, test him but do not take his life." And it happens. Job suffers terrible physical disease. His wife cries out angrily,

*Are you still unshaken in your integrity? Curse God and die! (2:9)*

But Job remains a rock.

*If we accept good from God, shall we not accept evil? (2:10)*

The suffering was massive. Friends came to comfort but for seven days simply sat there, numbed by the magnitude of the horror.

Now we have the setting for the lesson of the drama. Job finally breaks out in bitter complaint. He curses the day of his birth. He lets it all spill out. His friends had been silent, quite overwhelmed by the magnitude of his suffering and as long as he bore it in silence they too said nothing. But now that he has finally broken out in bitter complaint, they find their own preconceived notions and pre-set judgments threatened. Now they feel constrained to answer because what they believe - their little systems of making sense of the world - was being challenged. They would have claimed that they were coming to the defense of God, of truth, of the proper view of things. In reality of course they were coming to the defense of their own dogmatic opinions. They had certainly come with good intentions of being comforters to Job in his affliction, but they had also come knowing the answer to the mystery before they heard the question. Their religious system was now under attack and so their intention to bring comfort was now overcome by their need to preserve intact their own world and life view. Listen to Eliphaz go on the attack:

*... now that adversity comes upon you, you lose patience; it touches you, and you are unmanned. (4:5)*

Then he comes to the point:

*... what innocent man has ever perished? Where have you seen the upright destroyed? (4:7)*

That was the prevailing opinion. That is what everyone took for granted. It was a life axiom, no longer even questioned. But Job questioned. He refused to bow to popular opinion - "What everyone knew." He was a good man. There was no secret iniquity he was hiding. His probing of the mystery is eloquent.

The dialogue continues: Job's friend defending God for punishing Job, convinced that whatever Job gets he has coming to him; Job defending himself against their insensitive taunts. Finally Job cries out in despair at the blindness and obstinacy of his friends and makes his appeal to God.

*Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my care before him ... Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; by the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him. (23:3-4, 8-9)*

Job found no comfort or understanding from his friends whose insensitivity has gotten them the label "miserable comforters." He refuses to accept the popular

wisdom. He refuses to believe God is doing this to him as a punishment. He refuses to believe that God would not solve his terrible dilemma.

But, God is absent. He cannot find him. *This is the point I want to make for the purpose of this message. Sometimes God is absent.*

Let me simply summarize the resolution of the drama of Job. There is never given an answer to the why of suffering, the suffering of the innocent, the pervasive presence of Evil in God's good creation that brushes us all at some point. What is soundly refuted and persuasively denied is that there is a correlation between sin and suffering.

God does reveal Himself to Job. Job is quite overwhelmed by the majesty of God. His persistent questioning seems almost silly in the light of the revelation of Who God is. He bows and worships.

No answer is given.

But the absent God does reveal Himself. And Job finds that God is enough. A light scatters the darkest darkness when the Presence is known.

But let us remain with Job in his anguish for a moment. It is so very real and so very terrifying. In the midst of that darkness, no light is visible, not because there is no light, but because one is so numbed by the pain that one simply cannot penetrate the shroud of darkness that envelops the soul.

Perhaps in the Church we do not deal well with the darkness because it makes us nervous - like Job's friends we rush to God's defense - not that God needs to be defended but the darkness threatens our own little security systems. We are really defending ourselves against that darkness. We grow anxious when someone close to us in a time of great trauma seems to question God or even to deny that God is, is good and merciful, is there for us.

Job's friends did not do wrong in coming to Job. They did well in coming and being silent before the awful reality of his suffering. They seriously erred when they spoke, trying to explain, to rationalize, to defend God.

*God needs no defense.*

We often simply have no answers. It is our proper posture just to be there and wait in silence, bringing the comfort of a presence that cares even when it cannot fathom.

Sometimes God is absent. Sometimes we must simply trust, holding on with white-knuckled grip.

Job did not give up on God. But he could not find him. Thus his piercing cry,

*"Oh, that I knew where I might find him!"*

Job's darkness was terrible indeed; yet it did not match the darkness of another whose cry is differently expressed, yet essentially the same; a cry of total abandonment and utter desolation:

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

Still there was a clinging to God - the address is a personal address, "My God." Yet there was a sense of being abandoned, of being alone in the darkness.

*The darkness is real.* There is a mystery of Evil in the world. Sometimes there is no clue - no answer to the anguishing, "Why?" Let us simply acknowledge that.

Perhaps the most horrible instance of such darkness and suffering of the innocent occurred in our own time. The Holocaust, which claimed the lives of six million Jews in Nazi death camps, can never be fully taken in. The most eloquent statement of the darkness I have ever encountered is in Elie Wiesel's account of his own childhood nightmare in the camps, seeing the smoke rise from the gas furnaces that consumed his mother and sister and watching his father die by inches. His account is entitled simply *Night*.

He writes,

Some talked of God, of his mysterious ways, of the sins of the Jewish people, and of their future deliverance. But I had ceased to pray. How I sympathized with Job! I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted His absolute justice. (p. 55F)

One day a young boy was executed, hung from a gallows with the whole camp marched out to witness. Elie Wiesel watched, too, himself only a boy. As the child twisted in the air suspended from the noose, someone behind Wiesel said,

"Where is God? Where is He?"

Again, as he was marched by the child dying agonizingly, he heard it again,

"Where is God now?"

And he writes,

And I heard a voice within me answer him, Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging there on the gallows... (p. 76)

The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, was at hand and on the eve of that day is a great Jewish festival celebration. In the prison camp the Jews gathered for worship. Wiesel writes his thoughts.

"What are you, my God," I thought angrily, "compared to this afflicted crowd, proclaiming to You their faith, then anger, then revolt? What does Your greatness mean, Lord of the Universe, in the face of all this weakness, this discomposition, and this decay? Why do You will trouble on their sick minds, their crippled bodies?" (p. 77)

...

"Blessed be the Name of the Eternal!" Thousands of voices repeated the benediction; thousands of men prostrated themselves like trees before a tempest.

...

Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? ... How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praise be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?" (p. 78)

...

This day I ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. (p. 79)

And what was the sensation of this awful situation?

My eyes were open and I was alone - terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. (p. 79)

Elie Wiesel has become a strong advocate of the Jewish cause. I do not know where he is now in relation to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But certainly the poignancy of the pain could hardly find more powerful expression than he gives it in his account.

In his book, *The Meaning of Christ*, Robert C. Johnson records an incident from the ministry of H.H. Farmer.

Many years ago I was preaching on the love of God; there was in the congregation an old Polish Jew who had been converted to the Christian faith. He came to me afterward and said, 'You have no right to speak about the love of God, until you have seen, as I have seen, the blood of your dearest friends running in the gutters on a gray winter morning. I asked him later how it was that, having seen such a massacre, he had come to

believe in the love of God. The answer he gave in effect was that the Christian gospel first began to lay hold of him because it bade him see God - the love of God - just where he was, just where he could not but always be in his thoughts and memories - in those bloodstained streets on that grey morning. It bade him see the love of God - not somewhere else, but in the midst of just that sort of thing, in the blood and agony of Calvary. He did at least know, he said, that this was a message that grappled with the facts; and then he went on to say something the sense of which I shall always remember though the words I have forgotten. He said, "As I looked at that man upon the cross, as I heard him pray, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,' as I heard him cry in his anguish, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" I knew that I must make up my mind once for all and either take my stand beside him and share in his undefeated faith in God ... or else fall finally into a bottomless pit of bitterness, hatred, and unutterable despair. (p. 46F)

That I submit to you is a profound and moving response to the incomprehensible mystery of human suffering. The darkness is real. Wiesel's God died in the onslaught of senseless suffering, human cruelty and the absence of God. The Polish Jew found the love of God in a similar life situation because he sensed that in the awful agony of another Jew, Jesus, who expressed that absence, there was yet an undefeated trust in God - even in the depths of hellish torment. He sensed that Christian faith, the Gospel, if you will, was not a superficial pep pill that asserted God was in His heaven and all was right with the world, but was an invitation to trust in the God of love in the deepest darkness, not because an explanation was offered for the suffering, but that the God of Jesus and the Cross is a God present in the moments of most acute abandonment. He trusted God in the darkness because the alternative was horrible beyond description - a bottomless pit of bitterness, hatred and unutterable despair.

That is the choice we must finally make.

*The darkness is real.* Biblical faith never denies its reality. Sometimes one finally cries to heaven,

*"Oh, that I knew where I might find him!"*

Sometimes one's God dies on the gallows of human evil as did Wiesel's. Sometimes one cries,

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

Sometimes - realizing this God invites us to trust him at the very point of history's darkest hour, one comes to find the love of God just there, as did the Polish Jew.

Biblical faith never takes lightly the darkness; *Biblical faith declares a light that the darkness cannot overcome - the Light of Easter, of resurrection, of the promise of God's final triumph over the darkness.*

Good Friday was not the last word. Had it been the last word, there would have been no further word. But Good Friday found its answer in the Easter wonder of Jesus' resurrection.

That is the one supreme moment of God's revelation - within history, a moment from beyond history, illuminating history's meaning. An event of the End happening in the middle of history, throwing its light forward and backward, giving meaning to the whole and filling the whole with meaning - that life is not a cruel joke, a cosmic mistake; that life is not a tragic moment bracketed by oblivion before and oblivion beyond; that life with all the vicissitudes of our human experience is undergirded and overshadowed by the Presence of the God Who sometimes seems absent.

St. Paul said it well:

*"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself."*

The French Christian writer, Francois Mauriac, wrote the foreword to Elie Wiesel's *Night*. This is how he ended:

And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him - the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery wherein the faith of his childhood had perished? Zion, however, has risen up again from the crematories and the charnel houses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is through them that it lives again. We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him. This is what I should have told this Jewish child. But I could only embrace him, weeping. (p. 10f)

The Gospel we proclaim points to a gracious God, our Ally, Who will overcome the darkness with His light. God is our Ally; God is God. The darkness is real but it is not final. But Mauriac was quite right not to speak but to embrace the suffering one, weeping. That sensitive silence was the most cogent invitation to trust in the darkness.



If that is where you are, or if tomorrow that should be your lot, cling to God Who seems absent but Who feels our pain more deeply than any human support and who promises that dawn will yet break and light break through. Amen.

**Reference:**

Elie Wiesel. *Night*. English translation, Hill & Wany, 1972, 1985.