

GOD, ARE YOU LISTENING? + + +

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What do you do when you pray and God is silent? You lift up your prayers, you cry out to Him on a regular basis, you have this need and it's just silent. It's frustrating, it's awkward, it's weird, it's sad, it's painful. Where's God in long stretches of silence?

In 2019, Nebraska had horrific floods. People stood ankle and calf deep in water watching their homes get destroyed, their livelihoods stopped and turned upside down. Where's God amidst all this chaos and calamity? Praying that it would stop, praying that others would help, and it was silent.

Even the great prophet Jeremiah writes in Lamentations 3:8, even when I cry out and call for help, He, God, shuts out my prayer. We've all experienced a season, a stretch, we may be in it, of silence from God amidst our prayers to God that are the most important prayers on our hearts and our minds.

Today I want us to discover when we ask where's God, that first God does hear our prayers, even amidst long stretches of silence. But second, what are we gonna do then in that stretch of silence? And that's what I'm praying that today we walk away from, is in the midst of this silence from God.

If you're experiencing now, this is gonna hit home. But I know that every one of us will experience it at one time. What do we do in the middle of that silence? How do we respond? What is God calling us to do? And what is God doing in the midst of the silence? How do we deal with that? That's what we're gonna tackle today when we ask the question in the midst of silence, where's God?

So again, my two goals out of this is that we would know where God is and what are we doing even in the midst of the silence. How do we live like that as Christians? Because truthfully, we get it, heaven goes quiet sometimes. Like we just give God everything and it goes quiet.

This is not something that is unique for you and for me today. This is not something that we'd look at and we'd go, well yeah, but we're 2,000 plus years past the resurrection. Like God doesn't speak or doesn't show up. This is something that has happened even when God was constantly speaking. And I believe God still is speaking. But heaven does go quiet.

There's a long-suffering prophet named Habakkuk. And I would invite and encourage you, if you've never read the book of Habakkuk, it's three chapters, should take you eight minutes to read. I would invite you. It's a conversation from one of the minor prophets that he has with God. And it's a back-and-forth conversation.

And in a second, we're going to read from Habakkuk chapter 1, 2 through 4. And it's through the message paraphrase. I use the message paraphrase because I think it just kind of brings home for you and for me today what Habakkuk is struggling with.

So again, when you see the words in red, you're going to read it with me. In this verse, you're actually going to start at all campuses. So from Habakkuk 1, 2 through 4:

Do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, help! Murder! Police! Before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out. Quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.

Pretty strong words from a prophet to God. In the midst of silence, Habakkuk gives everything to God. And it's a reminder for you and for me that we have a God who wants open and honest questions before his throne. So take heart and take comfort to know that in the long stretches of silence, you can bring open and honest questions to God.

Our God is not the God who will say, how dare you ask me that? Don't you ever talk to me that way. Do you know who I am? More importantly, do you know who you are? That's not your God. Your God welcomes to his very throne room those very questions. To say words like justice is a joke allows our full emotional turmoil to be verbalized.

In the flood of 2019, as they looked around and they said, they said, God, help us, save us, protect us. And it was silent. They looked around and they said, why my town? Why my city? Why my house? Why my farm? Levees broke fast. Everything happened quickly. Where are you, God? Where are you, God?

In the midst when heaven seems silent, and heaven was silent in 2019, God was loud in that he gathered around community. He gathered around answered prayers. He gathered around people to come and to stand besides and to let them know they're not alone. But he also gathered around churches and people to say, we're here with you. We grieve with you. We mourn with you. We hurt with you. We suffer with you.

And please know this when we give God all of our being and we say to God, where are you? Where is God amidst this in the midst of the silence? God is big enough to handle your disappointment. God is big enough and loves you enough to handle your disappointment with him. To hear it and not become defensive, not become angry, not become dismissive.

God's big enough for you. And so give it to him. In Psalm 34:18, begin this verse with me: The Lord, the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

What happens so often when we pray, no matter how long we've been praying, and it's not an answer that comes quickly, what happens so often is we begin to push away. We begin to say, what's the point of my prayers? Does God even hear me? Does this even matter? You know what? I'm just going to even stop praying. There's no point to this. I've tried over and over and over again, and it just doesn't happen.

But the Lord is close. And he saves those who are crushed in spirit. And this is a time where I want you to know that when you are in the midst of a long stretch of silence from God, don't do what we naturally want to do and what Satan tempts you to do, which is to push him away. Instead, lean in.

Lean into the silence. Lean into the prayer. Lean into God. Lean in and say, I will pray all the more. I will give you all the more. I will talk to you all the more. I will be here all the more. And lean into it. Because he's near.

When heaven is silent, we lean into God. When heaven is silent, we lean into God. And we give him all the more that we have.

But man, doesn't it sometimes feel like waiting seems like forever? I mean, in the midst of our prayers, it just feels like we've been waiting and waiting and waiting. And it seems like forever that we keep waiting and waiting and waiting for God.

And in the floods in 2019, all those who were affected by the floods, they experienced the waiting and nothing changed quickly. And they experienced it because, first of all, for those who were affected by the floods with great devastation, they had to go and work with FEMA, a federal organization. So nothing moved fast.

But they also had to deal with insurance companies that were fighting about what is theirs to pay for, what isn't theirs to pay for. And they also were trying to rebuild. And it was hard. And they couldn't. And so the waiting seemed like forever as they were looking for what to do and how to do things and to get back on track. And they just couldn't get there.

I'm reminded of a Scripture from 1 John 5 that says this. This is the confidence we have that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

Now, I want us to be really, really understanding of this. Like, He hears us. God always hears our prayers, even in the silence. But I think sometimes what I find myself doing, and what you may find yourself doing, is we treat God like the vending machine.

We act like our prayers are just vending machine prayers, right? It's like, oh, you know what? I need a better marriage. A-2. Oh, you know what? I'd like my kids to know Jesus a little bit better. And I'd like them to make better decisions. B-4. I want my job, like, I want people to notice me and, man, I could really use a raise. And, by the way, God, if I get that raise, like, I'm going to give more to the church. So, C-6.

Oh, you know what? This would be great. I would love to be able to just go out on a mission trip. Like, if I could go on a mission trip, that'd be great. F-3.

I don't know what you were taught. I'm just going to share an open experience that happened in my family. I was taught, remember how sometimes, right, you go and you're like, I want to get that bag of chips there, and you hit the C-1, and the chips come, and then it gets stuck in that vending machine?

I was taught, well, that's the time where you just say, this vending machine doesn't belong to anyone else. Those chips belong to me. And you rock that vending machine as hard as you can. You kick the spots. You hit it. You're sitting there. You're reaching up into it, and if you happen to grab something else, that's fine. It's yours. Because that was your chip bag that it has now stole from you. And you have this righteous indignation against this vending machine because your 75-cent chip bag got stuck.

Don't we treat our prayers like that to God? Lord, I prayed for this. Why is this not happening right here, right now? Why aren't you answering this prayer? We cannot make God a vending machine.

And notice, by the way, it wasn't, ask according to His will, I will do it. It was, ask according to His will, I hear your prayer. And then we're reminded of who we have in our God.

And I think that John, when he wrote that in his first letter, I think he was remembering Jesus' words in Matthew 7 when he said, asking it will be given, seeking you will find, knocking the door will be opened. For anyone who asks receives, who knocks gets, and who finds goes.

And so I think he recalled that on him. Because he knows, and we know, that God isn't absent, He's attentive.

And what does that mean? That God isn't absent, He's attentive. What that means is that the silence doesn't mean that He's abandoned you. The delay doesn't mean that He's denied you.

Matter of fact, I want to ask you the question, what if in God's silence, He's actually setting you up for something better?

What if God's preparing you to say, you don't need the Cheez-Its out of the vending machine, because in an hour I'm going to have a feast. And it's not about that they'll expire in five years. You're going to have a blessings of abundance to be fully satisfied.

This week I was talking with a friend, and he was sharing that he and his wife tried to get pregnant for 17 years. 17 years they prayed, and it felt like God was silent, felt like God denied. Felt like God denied. And after 17 years, they became pregnant.

And he says, you know what? I could never imagine being a parent to a different child, and that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't waited. We got the perfect child for us, in the perfect time and season of our life, on his time and his ways. It doesn't mean he thought it was easy, but he recognizes it was worth the wait.

Waiting can feel like forever. Jeremiah 29:12 says, then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

Isaiah 30:18 says, the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and blessed are all who wait for him. The Lord longs to be gracious to you. Blessed are all who are gracious, are all who wait for him.

And so we wait. And in the midst of our waiting, what we find is we find that we have a God, a God who is constantly there, answering our prayer and has something even greater for us.

And so we can pray while we wait. And I want to encourage us also, that when we pray, pray for things that, things that may be hard.

I was recently talking with someone who shared with me that his kid is killing it in life. Things are great. Everything they touch turns to gold. They're considered at a young age, an expert in their field. Organizations bring them in, conferences have them as keynotes. Everyone knows their name.

But he shared with me that the child loves Jesus, but doesn't live with Jesus. Jesus is convenient, but isn't constant. And he said, to be honest, I'm not sure where the faith journey is.

And he said, as a parent, I've been praying for a long time, and God has just switched up my prayer a little bit. He said, I've actually started praying now that maybe my child would suffer a setback, would be knocked down quite a few pegs, would maybe have some pain. To realize what it is to rely on God.

And he said, as a parent, you never want to pray against your child. But when it comes to salvation, it's necessary. Because my prayer might bring them somewhere.

And he's just, what a great man. And he said, I don't know if I'm going to see it, but that's not my expectation. My expectation is that God's hearing it, and God's doing what he needs to do, in the time and the way he needs to do it, that is best for my kid.

And that's where we see what it turns into for us when we wait, that our trust becomes real, that our faith becomes real. That's where we see what it turns into for us when we wait, that our trust becomes your testimony.

Your trust becomes your testimony.

And when our trust becomes our testimony, we then can see what God's doing amidst us.

I was talking to a pastor who was a pastor of one of the areas that had the flood in 2019. And in the midst of that flood, that pastor said, you know what? We prayed that God would keep the floods away, but he didn't. God allowed the floods to come.

But God filled our communities with people who walked alongside of us. And God filled us with a reassurance that we are not alone. God filled us with support and encouragement. God filled us with neighbors and friends. God filled us with hope.

And God answered our prayers, not in a way that we saw, but he answered our prayers. This is what he did, and he filled that for us.

And this is what we have when our trust becomes your testimony, is that you know that you're filled with God's answered prayers in his way and his time.

And we have to remember that. We have to think about that. And we have to live that out for us.

Now, a couple other things as we think about how God, when heaven goes silent and the waiting is hard, and now we're making our trust becoming our testimony, we have to remember a couple things.

First, that faith grows in the valleys. Faith grows through the difficult times.

We pray all the time, I want my faith to grow, right? But when we pray that, I think what we think about is we think we want to be able to experience the mountaintop experience. And we want to live on the mountaintop where our faith will be.

And that as we get there, everything's just going to become greater and greater and all that.

And you know what I'm reminded of? I'm reminded of that your faith doesn't grow on the mountaintop. It's a beautiful spot, and it's a spot of respite and peace. And it's a spot where we look around, but you never in this life were designed to live on the mountaintop.

At the transfiguration, when Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop, and there he transfigured before their very own eyes, and he had conversations with the prophets and the fathers who had gone before them.

It was Peter who said, Lord, and I love this. I love Peter. I love Peter because he was so, so bold and so brash. And I think he was a little like me. He just was direct. He didn't always say what was in his head, or he didn't always think about what was actually in his head. And he just said things.

And so he said, Lord, it's really good that we're all up here with you. Matter of fact, why don't I go build a tent and then we can just stay here forever?

And you know what Peter was doing? He was saying, hey, God, let's like, this is great. Us three have arrived. We're good. Don't we're not going to worry anymore about the people down there to heaven with them. Like, we're good here. Let's go.

And I love Peter. And I love what Jesus says to him. He says, Peter, we're not staying up here. We're going to go down. And we're going to walk again amongst the valley. And we're going to walk where it's hard. And we're going to sow seeds of faith and life into the lives of others.

And we're going to do that.

And I love what he does because he reminds us that life, the majority of our life is lived in the valley.

And if you know anything about walking through a valley or actually being on a summit of a mountain, it's in the valley that you see the flowers and the fields and the birds and the butterflies. And you see new growth come up in the days.

You know what you see in the summit? You see a beautiful scenery, but nothing grows up there. There's no birds, there's no trees, there's no butterflies, there's no flowers. It's barren.

You want faith growth, it's going to be what you do, what you do in the valleys, how you live in the valleys. And that's how we get to respond to our God. We get to respond in those great ways.

Habakkuk proclaimed it in 1 verse 5 when he said, look at the nations, right? I'm going to do something in your days that you're not going to believe.

I'm going to do something in your days that you're not going to believe.

And that's why we get to trust in God. And we trust in the very heart of God, even when his hand seems hidden, because here's the thing that we know.

Trust and truth with God, they're not just outcomes, but what they are also is they're products of the reality that he's always with us. That God's hand is always with us. His presence is with us.

This is the ministry of presence that he gets.

And that means we get to be people who in Romans 12:12, as Paul said, we get to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Friends, don't ever forget that God may not give you always what you want when you want it. But he will give you everything you need when you need it.

God will give you everything you need when you need it.

And that's where our trust becomes a testimony, just like the Proverbs 3:5-6, trust in the Lord with all your heart and he will make your path straight.

So our staff make fun of me quite a bit. But one of the reasons they make fun of me is I use this phrase called words create worlds.

Called words create worlds. And I believe it's so true.

You want to know what is happening around you? How are you talking? That will tell you.

I think in the midst of our prayers, one of the things that's really important is when you don't hear the answer, live the answer.

Don't give up hope.

And you know you've given up hope when your words change.

Live the answer.

So it's not if your marriage is struggling. It's not if we make 50 years. It's when we make 50 years.

If your kids aren't living out their faith, it's not. I hope they return to Jesus. It's when they come back to faith. It's going to be awesome.

I'm struggling to have a child. It's not if the Lord blesses me with a child when the Lord blesses me with a child.

I'm single and I really want to be married if I ever get married, when I get married.

I have cancer. If I don't make it when I conquer cancer, there will be a celebration.

You see, live the answer that you are laying before God and that you're desiring before God.

And so then what do you do in the midst of all that?

Well, here's what I invite you to encourage you to do, friends.

While we're walking with prayer in a long season of silence, worship and walk.

Just worship and walk.

Because just because God doesn't answer your prayer doesn't mean he's not working on his purpose.

And so in the midst of the in the midst of the silence as you're leaning in, worship anyways.

Walk a step forward anyways.

And I know that some of you have come here today and you feel like it's 2019 all over again.

That the floods are happening.

You've been praying.

Life is wrecked.

Things are destroyed.

And you're saying, where is God?

Here's what I want to invite you to do.

Worship anyways.

Walk anyways.

Because silence doesn't mean that God left you.

Delay doesn't mean that God's denied you.

And confusion doesn't mean that God's forgotten you.

God hears your prayers. God hears your prayers. He's answering your prayers.

And so if you're having a Habakkuk moment now or a Matthew 7 where you're knocking and you're seeking and the door's shut and you're standing in the hallway.

Worship anyway. Walk with God anyway. Keep going. And He'll turn your trust into your testimony.

I want to invite you at all campuses, we're going to close out the song Good Plans.

And I'll invite you today, I want to invite you today that if you're suffering in the midst of the silence still, come forward.

If you're asking questions still, come forward.

If you're seeking out His answers, come forward.

If you're confused, come forward.

Step forward to the altar at your campus in the midst of Good Plans and know that God has good plans for you. And don't come forward expecting a quick fix.

Instead, come forward knowing that you have a Father who's sitting with you. You have a Lord who's interceding on your behalf. And you have a God who's answering your prayers and setting you up for way more than you could ever see.

At all campuses, let's stand up for prayer.

Father in heaven, we pray.

Let's stand up for prayer.

Father in heaven, we thank you and praise you.

We ask, O Lord, that you would be the God who continues to pour over us, that in the long stretch of silence that we would know that you're with us.

That we lean in to you.

That even though it feels like heaven's quiet and our waiting's forever, that you have good things and that we trust in you.

And that we will come.

We will walk with you.

We will worship anyways.

We will walk anyways.

Because you are our good Father who has good plans.

And all of God's people said, Amen.