God's Silence: Psalm 28

A Prayer for Help
(1) To you, O Lord, I call;
    my Rock, do not refuse to hear me.
For if you are silent to me,  
    I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.
(2) Hear the voice of my supplication, 
    as I cry to you for help,  
    As I lift up my hands 
    toward your most holy sanctuary.

I know that I am probably not alone in sometimes experiencing God’s silence. Sometimes when I want—indeed, need—to hear God speak, I hear nothing.

I am curious to know how to deal with it? How do you avoid letting God’s silence take you down into the Pit, as the Psalmist describes it? Because God’s silence, in our times of great need, can bring us low.

First, a distinction: There are two reasons for us not hearing God.

For some, they do not hear God because they do not believe that God speaks, or that if God speaks, he does not speak to them. They may not believe that God exists—so there is nothing out there to hear. The Bible has a phrase to describe these people who do not hear God speak. The Bible says that they “do not have ears to hear.” (e.g. Matthew 11:15, 13:19) They do not hear because something is wrong with their psychic or spiritual hearing equipment. Or, as they would put it, they do not hear because everything is right with their psychic or spiritual hearing equipment.

Today the most well known of those who have no ears to hear are the so-called new atheists. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, among others, are convinced both that God does not exist and that those who believe that God does exist are sadly deluded. It does not surprise the new atheists that God is silent, because there is no God. People who do not hear God are the sane ones, they believe.

For others, we do not hear God because God has chosen to be silent. The problem is not with our hearing equipment. We do have ears to hear. We have used those ears often to hear God’s soothing, encouraging, and helpful voice. But sometimes we do not hear because God does not speak. We have ears to hear, but God is silent. It is these people—most of you I would imagine—those who have ears to hear, that I am addressing.
Second, a declaration: God is sometimes silent.

Some of our Christian confreres do not want to admit God’s silence. I make great use of a study Bible called the NIV Thematic Reference Study Bible (Zondervan 1999) edited by an excellent evangelical theologian, Alister McGrath. In the appended 729-page thematic section, McGrath identifies hundreds of words and themes, and lists after each theme all the Bible verses he thinks pertain to those themes. It is like a concordance on steroids. Silence is one of the themes McGrath identifies, but in defining silence, McGrath declares that “Scripture stresses that God is not silent.” (1796)

I do not agree with McGrath on this point. The Bible tells us that Jesus, God incarnate, used silence often. He was silent in the face of the unfair judgment of the high priest (Matthew 26:63), before Pilate (Matthew 27:14), and in an audience with Herod (Luke 23:9). Jesus was also silent in the face of being confronted by the Pharisees. This silence made his disciples uncomfortable: “Why did you not answer them,” they asked?

My own experience of God reinforces the teachings of scripture and the apparently widespread human experience of God’s silence. My experience teaches me that God is silent. Often I do hear God’s voice. Obviously, I must have ears to hear. Yet when I strain to catch his voice, God does not speak. God is sometimes silent.

Third, an evaluation: God’s silence, for those who have ears to hear, is a good thing.

One way to look at God’s silence is as a teaching tool God uses to help us grow in faith. God’s son Jesus, for example, answered specific questions brought to him in different ways. Some he answered relatively straightforwardly. Others he answered by telling a story; sometimes the story was a bit oblique and hard to understand without faith. And finally, Jesus sometimes “answered” questions by not answering them, by remaining silent. Might we conclude that Jesus chose his method based on what was most likely to bring glory to God the Father and his overall purposes?

The idea that we are sometimes best served in our faith by going through a difficult time of testing, a dark night of the soul, is not an uncommon idea. Jesus himself spent a testing time in the wilderness. When I was reading A.N. Wilson’s God’s Funeral recently, I was struck by his quotation from a Thomas Hardy poem:

Yet it is a long pursuit,
Carrying the junk and treasure of an ancient creed,
To a love who keeps faith by seeming mute
And deaf, and dead indeed.

Wilson comments, focusing on the line, "To a love that keeps faith by seeming mute," by saying this: "Wittgenstein [Ludwig] is famous for articulating [the] submission of [human] silence. Yet there is a different silence—and that is (also) part of the drama. It is the silence of God himself. The Bible is full of it." (14-15) I think this poem and Wilson’s use of it tell us far more than simply writing it off to Hardy’s palpable deism.

Oswald Chambers, hardly a deist, sees God’s silence as something of a test:

"Has God trusted you with his silence—a silence that has great meaning? God’s silences are actually his answers. Just think of those days of absolute silence in the home at Bethany! Is there anything comparable to those days in your life? Can God trust you like that, or are you still asking Him for a visible answer? . . . His silence is the sign that he is bringing you into an even more wonderful understanding of himself."

—My Utmost For His Highest

I am 65 years of age. I have had enough years under my belt to do many foolish things. And it is fair to ask the question, Why did God not speak? When I was contemplating doing or saying something foolish, why did God not warn me off? And as I was doing something foolish, why did God so often not tell me to quit? And after I had done the foolish thing, was even perhaps suffering the inevitable consequences, why did God so rarely berate me? Why did God just keep, silently, loving me as I had to work it out on my own instead of reminding me, “Terry, I told you this would happen if you disobeyed my teaching.”

Fourth, a testimony: God’s silence does not mean that God has not heard

God is not a constant chatterer, like a radio we can tune on anytime we want just to have some sound, any sound, filling the air. God’s response to us is far more sophisticated than that. God is not our own personal radio, with an on/off switch that we control. God speaks to us as he sees fit. He speaks to us when he sees fit. And when it serves his purposes, God is silent. Chambers again:

“A wonderful thing about God’s silence is that his stillness is contagious—it gets into you, causing you to become perfectly confident so that you can honestly say, “I know that God has heard me.” God’s silence is the very proof that he has. As long as you have the idea that God will always bless you in answer to prayer, he will do it, but he will never give you the grace of his silence.”

—My Utmost For His Highest
God's silence can indeed bring us low. It more often than we would like hurls us into the Pit. Yet can we not admit that it is in the Pit, and only in the Pit, that some of the most important spiritual lessons are learned?

We can endure, indeed even embrace God's silence if we realize that even when God is silent he still hears. And sooner or later we realize that God hearing us is all we need. That is the Psalmist's testimony.

**Thanksgiving for It (Help)**

(6) Blessed be the Lord,
for he has heard the sound of my pleadings.
(7) The Lord is my strength and my shield,
in him my heart trusts;
So I am helped, and my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.

* * *

**Correction**

In our Spring 2009 issue we published an essay, "'Justification by Faith': Richard Baxter's Influence upon John Wesley." Due to an editing error, the essay was mistakenly attributed to Floyd T. Cunningham, president of Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. We apologize to Dr. Cunningham for the inconveniences this mistake has caused.

We also apologize to Dr. Joseph W. Cunningham of Eureka College who is the correct author of the essay. In order to emphasize this correct attribution, we are republishing the essay in this issue with Dr. Joseph W. Cunningham listed as the author.

---Terry C. Muck
Editor