

When God Is Silent

BROADCAST—November 18

SCRIPTURE—James 4:2-3, 8-10

TEXT—“O the hope of Israel . . . why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land . . . ?”
—Jeremiah 14:8.

William Wadsworth in one of his poems speaks of “the silence that is in the starry sky.” And while he wrote in poetic beauty his words are suggestive of a grim experience.

Have you ever prayed and the heavens seemed as brass? To you the only answer was the empty echo of your own cry. Because of such an experience you no longer believe in prayer. Or perhaps you have lost your faith in God altogether. Or, believing in the existence of God, you assume that He either does not care or else is powerless to respond to your plea.

However, we may well ask if any one of these conclusions is true. When God is silent does it mean that prayer is not real, that God either does not care or else is powerless to respond? In no sense is God an errand boy to run to your beck and call. Nor does His silence signify indifference or inability on His part. It means rather that there are conditions which govern prevailing prayer, that God responds to real prayer in wisdom as well as in love. What appears to us as indifference may well be evidence of God’s concern. The Bible says that God’s ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9). You will do well, therefore, to consider all of the evidence before drawing your conclusion.

Your experience of the silence of God is not yours alone. Even the prophet Jeremiah saw the time when God was silent. Perhaps his words in Jeremiah 14:8-9 find a companion response in your own heart.

“O the hope of Israel, the saviour

thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for the night? Why should thou be as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save? yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not.”

As we consider this matter let us note, first, God’s silence; second, prayer’s conditions; third, God’s designs.

First, consider God’s silence. The fourteenth chapter of Jeremiah is a gloomy one indeed. A terrible drought had settled upon Judah. The wells had dried up (v. 3). Plowmen plowed in vain, “for there was no rain in the earth” (v. 4). Cattle gave birth to their young and left them to die in the field, “because there was no grass” (v. 5). Jeremiah says that in such a condition “Judah mourneth . . . the cry of Jerusalem is gone up” (v. 2). Still God was silent. He gave no relief.

Hear Jeremiah’s response to God’s silence. “. . . the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble” is as “a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for the night” (v. 8). Instead of being identified with His people in their suffering, God seems to be just a stranger passing through the land. He does not seem to care. Or else He is as a “mighty man that cannot save” (v. 9). In either event the result is devastating to faith.

Is this akin to your experience? In

some crisis you called upon God, but God was silent. Perhaps yours was an economic or a family crisis. Or it had to do with health, your own or that of a loved one. Maybe it was a moral or spiritual problem. But whatever the case you called upon God in time of trouble, and, seemingly, the Lord did not hear you.

What shall be your reaction to this? Will you renounce your faith in God? Will you rebel against Him saying that He does not care, or else He is powerless to come to your aid? Or will you join with those who discount prayer merely as a subjective soliloquy, a mere talking to yourself with none to hear or answer? Before doing so let us look further at the matter.

Second, note prayer's conditions. Prayer is not some Aladdin's lamp to be rubbed in an emergency. Nor is it merely an escape hatch in time of trouble.

A ship was caught in the teeth of a storm. When someone suggested that the passengers should pray, one exclaimed, "My God, is it as serious as that!"

It was such an attitude which brought forth Judah's cry to God. All too often it is true of us. But prevailing prayer is not to be regarded as such. This does not mean that you should not pray in an emergency. To the contrary you should. But you should do so realizing the true nature of prayer. For there are hindrances to effective prayer, hindrances which reside in us, not in God.

Prayer is hindered through our lack of faith. Jesus said, "*What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye shall receive them, and ye shall have them*" (Mk. 11:24). The key words in this promise are "believe that ye shall receive them."

A certain woman lived at the foot of a high mountain which marred the

view from her kitchen window. Remembering Jesus' words about faith moving mountains, one night she prayed for God to remove it. The next morning it was still there. Seeing it she said, "Just as I thought."

Does someone ask, "Well, if she had had faith do you believe that the mountain would have been moved?" It depends upon what you mean by faith. If you will recall Jesus said, "*If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed . . .*" (Matt. 17:20). "As" speaks not of quantity but of quality. The quality of a mustard seed is that it has life, a life given from God. When conditions are right that life works to produce a harvest. So your faith must be a living faith, a faith which not only relies upon God but one which allows God to work through you. Had the woman possessed this kind of faith she would have been busy with a pick and shovel, if God so willed, praying always that God would give to her the power and patience necessary for the task.

Of course, there are some things that only God can do. In such cases you must trust Him fully. But more often than not He chooses to work through us. Jesus had explicit faith in His Father. Before the tomb of Lazarus, even before He had uttered His prayer, Jesus thanked the Father for answering it. But He also said, "Lazarus, come forth." He prayed for a lost world, and then mounted the cross. Likewise our prayers must be uttered in faith. But it must be a faith that says, "Use me, if necessary, in answering my prayer." Dwight L. Moody had the word for it: Pray as though everything depended upon God, and work as though everything depended upon you.

Again, prayer is hindered by sinful lives. "*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me*" (Ps. 66:18). This was the trouble

with Jeremiah's contemporaries. It may be true in your case. So before you blame God you would do well to examine your life.

In a great factory a giant machine suddenly stopped. A rat had built its nest so as to shut off the power. Many rats of sin insulate us from the power of God. But "*the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*" (James 5:16).

Our fathers used to speak of being on praying ground. Suppose that you were in San Francisco, but because of an emergency you suddenly wished you were in New York. Wishing would not make it so. The dimension of space forbids it, and you understand. Neither can you wander away from God, and in some spiritual crisis expect by mere wishing to be at God's side.

There are spiritual dimensions also. Sin separates us from God, and if we would be heard of Him we must first return to Him. For many of us our first prayer should be "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Such a prayer earnestly prayed would put us on praying ground. Then, in the words of Shakespeare, you would know the "pregnant hinges of the knee," a knee bent in prayerful fellowship with God.

Still again, prayer is hindered through a lack of sincerity. James reminds us, "*Ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts*" (4:2-3). "*Ye have not, because ye ask not . . .*" That you can understand. But "ye ask, and receive not" poses a problem. Why? Because you ask with the wrong motive that you might consume it in your pleasures.

Selfishness is no basis for effectual prayer. Outside a convention hall a Christian group displayed the sign,

"Jesus Only." But a strong wind blew away the first three letters so that the sign read "Us Only."

Does not this story illustrate the trouble with many of our prayers? You pray for health, not to serve others, but yourself. Or for wealth, not for the power to do good, but to live in luxury. Such motives are hardly worthy of so high a privilege. Or note the word "consume." It means to waste or squander. Can you blame God for denying you that which He knows that you are going to squander?

Furthermore, prayer is hindered when you do not submit to God's will. We are taught to pray "in Jesus' name." This means that you ask by His merit and within His will.

Paul prayed earnestly that God would remove his thorn in the flesh. Instead, God gave him the grace to bear it (II Cor. 12:8f.). Trouble within God's grace is far better than physical ease without it. It is better to walk with God in the dark than to walk alone in the light. The greatest gifts of God are not physical and material but spiritual. We should lay our petitions before God, and trust Him to deal with them according to His gracious and benevolent will.

The will of Jesus was perfectly blended with that of His Father. Therefore, we should learn from Him in the school of prayer. Hear Him in the garden of Gethsemane. "*O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt*" (Matt. 26:39). You must learn in prayer and supplication to make your requests known to God, but also to leave the "nevertheless" to Him.

Third, consider God's designs. Though God seemed to be silent in Jeremiah 14, hear His promise in Jeremiah 33:3. "*Call unto me, and I will answer thee . . .*"

The truth of the matter is that no real prayer ever goes unanswered. For God has an answer for every prayer. His answers are "yes," "no," and "wait."

Sometimes God answers with an immediate "yes." It was of such that John Dryden wrote when he said,

Our vows are heard betimes! And
Heaven takes care
To grant, before we can conclude
the prayer:
Preventing angels it met half way,
And sent us back to praise, who
came to pray.

At other times God answers our prayers with an immediate "no." The trouble is that most of us have never learned that God's "no" is an answer. This is what Shakespeare meant when he said, "So we find profit by losing our prayers."

No matter how much you may want something, it may not be for your best interest to receive it. Many years ago our small son was watching me shave. He became intrigued by my safety razor. When I refused to let him play with it, he began to cry. So to pacify him I let him have it. After all, it was a safety razor. But I failed to reckon with the ingenuity of a curious child. Presently I heard another cry, one of pain. My son had cut himself with the razor. What appeared to him to be a kindness soon turned out to be something else.

So it is with many of our prayers. To grant them would be cruelty, not benevolence. And God who is rich in wisdom and mercy says, "No." Someone said, "I have lived to thank God that all of my prayers have not been answered." They were answered, but the answer was a benevolent "no."

More often God's answer is "wait." That for which you pray may be for your good. And God is more anxious to give than you are to receive. But God says, "Wait."

Perhaps your attitude in asking is not right. And God seeks to correct it in the waiting. Or else God seeks to cleanse you from some sin, without which cleansing the blessing might become a blight. Or maybe He wants you to learn how to use aright that which He would give.

Suppose a small boy asks his father for a shotgun. The father does not say "Yes," for such would be unwise. He does not say "No," for some day he wants his son to have one. So in wisdom and goodness he says, "Son, I want you to have your own gun some day. If I give it to you now, you might hurt yourself or someone else with it. But wait until you are older and know how to use it, and I will give you a gun." So the child trusts, and hopes, and waits. And he is the better for the waiting.

Can you not trust your heavenly Father so? In your own best wisdom and faith lay your petition before Him, knowing that He delights to give good gifts to His children. If He says "Yes," receive it in gratitude and praise. If He says "No," accept His answer and trust Him to show you the reason why. If He says "Wait," then in patience submit yourself to His benevolent will, that He may bring you to the time and condition when He can say "Yes." Where-withal, remember that the silences of God are gracious silences.

God answers prayer; sometimes, when hearts are weak,

He gives the very gifts believers seek. But often faith must learn a deeper rest,

And trust God's silence, when He does not speak;

For he whose name is Love will send the best:

Stars may burn out nor mountain walls endure

But God is true: his promises are sure

To those who seek. —M. G. Plantz*

*Virginia Ely, *I Quote*, Geo. W. Stewart, New York, 1947, p. 268.