

## When God Seems Silent

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Isaiah 55:8-9, John 11:1-6, 17-44

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus to life is famous one, with many things we can learn. We see the power of God displayed, a power that is stronger than death. When all hope is lost, we can still hope in God, trusting that God can work beyond what we can imagine. Recently, I was inspired from an interpretation of this story by the author, Oswald Chambers in his book, “My Utmost for His Highest,” he focuses on verse 6, where it says that when Jesus “heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” A big reason for this is, that people could then see God’s great power when Lazarus is raised from the dead. Chambers looks at this story as an image of how God answers prayer. We can easily imagine Mary and Martha praying that God would heal their brother Lazarus. But, for several days, God seems silent. Jesus doesn’t arrive before Lazarus dies and is in the tomb. But, in the end, everyone sees something extraordinary. God answers the prayer in a most unexpected way. Something even more amazing than healing his sickness, Jesus raises Lazarus to life.

Anyone who prays has times when it feels like God is silent, and we wonder, “Where is God? Why hasn’t God answered? What is God purpose here? I’ve prayed for something that I think is clearly God’s will, and yet God did nothing!” The story of Lazarus illustrates how God’s silence is often the doorway to a deeper understanding of how God is at work. God’s silence gives us an opportunity to grow in trust. And, it may also be the thing that leads us to repentance in some area.

Sometimes our prayers are made for selfish reasons, and then God seems silent. In the letter of James, he writes, “You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.” (James 4, verse 3). And, the prophet Isaiah writes, “...your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear...” (Isaiah 59, verse 2). It is clear that our spiritual condition before God affects how God responds. God hears every one of our prayers, but when we come before God with a self-centred attitude, or when we are in need of repentance, God may remain silent in order to get our attention. If God seems far away, it may be an indication that we have strayed away from God. If God were to right away reveal answers to our prayers, we may be tempted to think that there is nothing wrong in our lives. By God’s grace, we sometimes experience the pain of God’s distance. This pain then becomes motivation for us to make a change, and return to God .

As I studied the story of Lazarus, read today, one part in particular caught my eye, reminding me of an area where I regularly need to repent: I often keep emotional distance rather than truly showing care for people around me. In today’s story, Mary meets Jesus and says if he’d been there earlier, her brother would not have died. I’m reading from verse 33. “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” I have often struggled to understand why Jesus wept. He knew he had the power of God in him. He knew that he would be raising Lazarus to life, and yet he still wept! The original Greek word used for the weeping of the people around him is “klaiō” which can mean “loud wailing”. It shows a sense of dejection, a loss of hope, knowing that Lazarus is dead. But, the word used for Jesus’ weeping is “dakryō” meaning “silent weeping”. It is not a weeping of hopelessness. This sort of weeping shows a sense of being disturbed in spirit, sadness at what has happened, and possibly compassion for the people around him who are in grief.

Jesus shows us the way to live, giving us an example to follow. But, I realise that I am often far from the image of Jesus weeping. Jesus was not distant from people. He didn’t go around as some kind of “holy person” who is never affected by those around him. He connected with people. He showed emotion. He cried when he saw things that weren’t right. He freely expressed love and compassion rather than just saying things like, “Stop worrying about your sickness. God can heal you!” or, “Just trust in God!” I confess that sometimes I feel like saying things like that. “Smarten up! Why are you worrying about that? You’re a Christian – and Christians trust in God! There’s

nothing to worry about!” This would not be a helpful thing to say to someone who’s going through a really tough time. It lacks compassion. It’s like looking down and saying to someone stuck in a hole, come up here where it’s much nicer! Instead, the loving thing to do would be to actually climb down into the hole and help the person get out. I need to work on my relationship with Christ, that I can open up to being filled with more love. I pray that I may be able to have the courage to more often step into the mess of people’s lives and share the pain while looking for God’s leading in the situation. I believe that times when I’ve been too self-centred to get deeper into the lives of people around me affect my prayer life. It’s at those times when it feels like God is distant. Sometimes it takes a while to find my way back to a deeper relationship with God, but I’m thankful for times when the silence of God has helped me realise when I needed to make a change.

What about you? Are there areas where you feel like God doesn’t hear your prayers? Maybe there’s an area where you need to repent of something. It might be time to think about what it is that you are praying about. Is it for your own glory? Or, is it for God’s glory? Jesus tells the disciples that the illness of Lazarus will lead to “God’s glory” (verse 4). And later, in verse 40, Jesus tells Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” In raising Lazarus to life, the purpose was to glorify God. In his prayer, Jesus draws the people’s attention to God. It is by God’s awesome power that Lazarus is raised to life.

It’s possible that we may not be able to find anything in our lives that needs repentance, but God still seems silent. In this world there are many things that are a mystery. There are questions in our lives that we may never get answers for. Job was a man who was righteous before God. Yet, he experienced terrible hardship, and when he asks God for the reason for his pain, God is silent. He prays to God, “I cry to you and you do not answer me...” (Job 30 verse 20). Finally, God appears to Job, and just God’s presence seems to satisfy him. In the end, God never tells him why he experienced his pain, but God does bless him. We may only get our answers after we meet God in heaven. Even if we do not find out why God is sometimes silent, we still have an opportunity to learn to trust in God more deeply.

Through the prophet, Isaiah, God says, “...my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways...” (Chapter 55, verse 8). The story of Lazarus gives us an example of how God’s revelation can be beyond our imagination. Both Mary and Martha tell Jesus, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” Jesus hadn’t been there to heal Lazarus, and he died. It was the end. All hope was lost and God seemed silent. No one imagined that God could raise Lazarus to life again. It’s significant the Martha tells Jesus that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days already. At that time, people thought that the spirit of someone who had died could possibly return to the body if it was within three days of death. At four days, everyone would have understood that Lazarus was truly dead.

Oswald Chambers describes our experiences of God’s silence as times when God is trusting us to “hang in there” by keeping our faith and trusting that God is leading us to “an even more wonderful understanding of Himself.” He writes, “Are you mourning before God because you have not had an audible response? When you cannot hear God, you will find that He has trusted you in the most intimate way possible – with absolute silence, not a silence of despair, but one of pleasure, because He saw that you could withstand an even bigger revelation...For a while you may have said, ‘I asked God to give me bread, but He gave me a stone instead’...He did not give you a stone, and today you find that He gave you the ‘bread of life’.”

I still struggle with times when God seems silent, but I’m starting to see how God’s silence is sometimes necessary in order to help us see something we may have totally not expected. It may be a new awareness of an area where we need to repent and make a change in ourselves, or it may be a new and deeper understanding of the ways in which God works, such as the amazing display of God’s power in the raising of Lazarus to life. Let’s pray.

Loving God, your power is beyond all imagination! We confess that we easily forget that you are in control, and that you do hear our prayers, even when you seem silent. Forgive us for our lack of trust. When you seem silent, teach us to wait and trust that you are still at work. Help us to take

an honest look at our own motives when we pray. And, give us the courage to repent, when our selfishness gets in the way. May you have all the glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.