Trusting in the Silence

Psalm 77

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Sometimes silence is a good thing, and sometimes it's not. For parents with young children, it often feels like there is never silence, especially if you've got more than one child. No matter what you're doing, whether you're cooking, cleaning, or going to the bathroom, there almost always seems to be a child (or spouse!) who needs something from you. If you're ever able to get everyone asleep at the same time, that little bit of silence is golden. There is beauty in that quiet.

But, when children are awake, quiet tends to make you suspicious. Between my own children, years of working with youth, and even my dog, I've learned that silence is sometimes suspicious. When you haven't heard a peep from your kids for an extended period of time, most parents' minds start worrying about what the kids might be up to. Often, the concern isn't necessarily that the kids are in danger, but that they're doing something they shouldn't be and are trying to hide it.

I had this experience with my dog shortly after Halloween. For the first time ever, we were home on Halloween and able to pass out candy. We had some candy left over, and I was happy to take one for the team by helping finish it off. I set the bucket of candy on a low shelf near my chair and then forgot about it. Later that evening, we were watching TV and I noticed I hadn't seen the dog for a bit, which was unusual. I began to get suspicious and watched to see if she came back into the room. She did. She quietly walked over to the bucket, gently grabbed a piece of candy from it, and quietly retreated to another room to eat it. When I followed her, I discovered that she'd already eaten at least two pieces before I caught on!

While these are relatively minor ways in which we might dislike silence, when we feel like the Lord is silent, especially when we want to hear from Him, it is incredibly difficult. When life is beating you down and you desperately long for the Lord to respond and end your suffering, His silence can be deafening. You may have experienced times like that, and if so, you'll resonate with Asaph's heart in Psalm 77.

The Complaint

Asaph begins by laying out his complaint to the Lord.

> 1 I cry out to God; yes, I shout. Oh, that God would listen to me! 2 When I was in deep trouble, I searched for the Lord. All night long I prayed, with hands lifted toward heaven, but my soul was not comforted. 3 I think of God, and I moan, overwhelmed with longing for his help. (Psalm 77:1-3, NLT)

These opening lines complain of God's silence. Asaph talks about being in the midst of hardship, desperately reaching out for the Lord, but never feeling any comfort. He talks about the depth of his despair, praying all night for God's deliverance and seeing

nothing happen. He paints a picture of absolute misery, feeling as though the Lord had abandoned Him.

Maybe you've had a time like this. I have. I've been through situations where I have been in such anguish that I couldn't sleep and could barely pray too. It's miserable.

We don't know what caused Asaph's time of trouble, but it is reasonable to assume that this may have been a response to the destruction of Jerusalem. It was likely such a shock to his system that he couldn't process it. Whatever the case was, we can clearly see his frustration in these verses.

So, what causes God to be silent? Why is it that sometimes the Lord feels so distant, especially when we feel we need Him the most?

One possibility is that we've wandered away. This is one of the most common reasons the Lord feels distant. Often, when we become comfortable in our lives, we let our relationship with the Lord go on autopilot. We stop praying as much, we stop spending time in the Bible, we become sporadic in our church attendance, and we stop spending time with other believers, and then are shocked when we feel far from God.

I'm reminded of the story of an old married couple. One day they were driving down the road, and the wife said to her husband, "I remember when we were young and in love and I used to snuggle up to you and you'd put your arm around me while you were driving. Why don't you do that anymore?" The husband thought for a second and then just asked, "Who moved?"

The first thing we need to do when we feel distant from the Lord is run back to Him because He hasn't moved! Look carefully at your life and see if something is pushing you further away from Him. Maybe your habits have changed or there's some sin that has crept into your life that is creating distance. See what has caused you to move and turn back to Him. Make the necessary changes and you'll find Him close once more.

Another possibility is that God is trying to teach us. I have great respect for those who teach Driver Education classes. Getting into a car and putting a kid behind the wheel who you know is clueless really deserves hazard pay. What I have learned through the years (and through my own experience teaching a child to drive), is that the Driver Ed instructor is paying far more attention than the students realize. While he or she may just look like they're sitting in the passenger seat enjoying the drive, they are watching carefully for things the student might not see. But though the instructor has a brake on their side, they don't want to use it unless they absolutely have to. It's far better to let the student learn for themselves.

Sometimes I think this is how the Lord deals with us. It feels like He is silent, but that doesn't mean He is distant. In fact, He's closely monitoring the situation, giving us the chance to make the right decisions on our own. He chooses not to intervene and fix

things for us right away, because if He does, we won't learn anything from it. His silence isn't indifference, but a loving act that helps us grow.

Doubting Asaph

Though God may have been silent to help Asaph learn an important lesson, he was beginning to despair and doubt.

> 4 You don't let me sleep. I am too distressed even to pray! 5 I think of the good old days, long since ended, 6 when my nights were filled with joyful songs. I search my soul and ponder the difference now. 7 Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will he never again be kind to me? 8 Is his unfailing love gone forever? Have his promises permanently failed? 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he slammed the door on his compassion? (Psalm 77:4-9, NLT)

Asaph begins to spiral in these verses. He replays for himself the "good old days" when everything was good and he would spend his nights singing to the Lord. He began to question what was different now. This is not an inherently bad thing to do, in fact, in some ways it is actually a pretty good approach.

But in the silence, his mind began to go to some dark places and ask some questions of doubt. He asked if the Lord had rejected him forever, if he'd never experience God's kindness again, if the Lord's promises had failed, if God had forgotten His grace or compassion. These doubts were causing him to question everything he knew about the character of God.

Many people think having doubts or questions is sinful. They think their faith should never waver in any circumstance. But doubts, in and of themselves, aren't sinful. They are simply questions about things we're no longer sure about. Everyone has doubts at times, even pastors!

Times of doubt and question do not have to derail our faith. Approached in the right way, those doubts and questions can lead us to a deeper and more complete faith. The reason I have answers to so many of the questions people ask is because there was a time when I asked those same questions myself! If we handle our doubts appropriately, they can be an opportunity to grow.

One of the keys to dealing with doubts is to bring them into the open. Asaph does this in these verses. He gives full voice to the questions he's contemplating. When we allow ourselves to wallow in feelings that God doesn't care about us, nothing positive can come from it. But when we really start being honest about the questions running through our minds and in our hearts, then we can seek answers to those questions, finding what we need to get through the times of doubt. So when doubts arise, be specific about the questions you're asking, then seek answers to those questions.

The Change

That is exactly what Asaph does, and we see a drastic shift in the last half of the psalm.

> [10] And I said, “This is my fate; the Most High has turned his hand against me.”
> [11] But then I recall all you have done, O Lord; I remember your wonderful deeds
> of long ago. [12] They are constantly in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about
> your mighty works. [13] O God, your ways are holy. Is there any god as mighty as
> you? [14] You are the God of great wonders! You demonstrate your awesome
> power among the nations. [15] By your strong arm, you redeemed your people, the
> descendants of Jacob and Joseph.[16] When the Red Sea saw you, O God, its
> waters looked and trembled! The sea quaked to its very depths. [17] The clouds
> poured down rain; the thunder rumbled in the sky. Your arrows of lightning
> flashed. [18] Your thunder roared from the whirlwind; the lightning lit up the world!
> The earth trembled and shook. [19] Your road led through the sea, your pathway
> through the mighty waters— a pathway no one knew was there! [20] You led your
> people along that road like a flock of sheep, with Moses and Aaron as their
> shepherds. (Psalm 77:10-20, NLT)

Asaph asked questions about God’s character. He asked if God’s promises had failed, if He no longer loved him, and if He’d forgotten about him. Because he had asked some honest questions, he was able to seek some honest answers.

As is the case in many of the psalms of lament, we see a very important word that usually occurs somewhere in the middle: it’s the word *but*. This usually indicates a shift in the writer’s thinking, and that is certainly the case here.

Up to this point, Asaph had been almost exclusively using personal pronouns. He consistently used words like “me” and “I”. Asaph’s focus had been on himself and how he felt, and not on the Lord. This led to his ultimate conclusion in v. 10: “The Most High has turned His hand against me.”

But Asaph didn’t linger on that (incorrect) conclusion, and we see the reason why. He stopped focusing on himself and started focusing on the Lord. In the second half of the psalm, Asaph almost exclusively uses pronouns like “you” and “He”. Rather than focusing on himself, he focused on the character of God.

Because Asaph had been honest about his questions, he was now able to find real answers. He said that even though he felt like the Lord had abandoned him, he knew God’s character and knew God would never abandon him.

He began by naming three characteristics he knew were true of God. **First, is that God’s ways are holy.** Holy literally means “separate”, but it also carries the idea of absolute perfection. When Asaph said God’s ways are holy, he was reminding himself that God never makes a mistake. Everything He does is purposeful and good. If we know God’s ways are holy, we can trust them when we don’t understand them.

Second, God’s works are mighty. Asaph also reminded himself of God’s power. Nothing stands in the way of the Lord. No enemy, no matter how insurmountable is more powerful than God is! He reflects on the way God delivered the Israelites through

the Red Sea. The entire story is a beautiful picture of God's power. God caused the most powerful ruler on the planet to let millions of slaves go free. He bent Pharaoh's will to align with what He wanted to happen. And then when Pharaoh attempted to stop the Israelites, God opened a path for them to walk through the Red Sea on dry ground. When Pharaoh's army tried to follow, they were killed as the waves rushed back.

I love the line Asaph uses, the God led them through the mighty waters "on a pathway no one knew was there!" God knows about pathways we cannot see! Sometimes we despair because we feel like there's no way out, but sometimes God has plans to use pathways we don't even know exist.

In the times when we face doubts, we should remind ourselves of God's power and might. No one resists His will. He can change any situation if He so desires. Therefore, if our situation hasn't changed it is because the God whose ways are holy and works are mighty has decided there is a purpose to them. That is a source of great peace, even in times of great heartache.

Finally, God's love is great. This was Asaph's conclusion from looking at the story of the Red Sea. God redeemed His people from slavery. This was the ultimate picture of His love. He hadn't forgotten them and cared deeply about them. He cares for you and me too. Asaph says God leads His people like a shepherd leads His flock. The Lord wants what is best for you and me because He loves and cares for us.

But I think it is important for us to remember something about how God delivered the Israelites. It wasn't a quick process. They had cried out to God for many years. They had been oppressed since even before Moses was born (80 years prior!) They'd been in the land for over 400 years at this point. And once Moses came to deliver them, things got worse before they got better! Many times, the Israelites concluded that all hope was lost, but God was still working.

Psalm 77 doesn't have a very satisfying ending. It seems like it stops abruptly, but I think that's the point of the psalm. Asaph was struggling because he felt like God was silent. This led him to look inward and focus on himself. But once he shifted his focus to the character of his God, everything changed. The psalm ends abruptly because there was no more to be said. Once he saw God's character clearly, Asaph was able to trust and even rest in who God is.

In the book of Habakkuk, we see a prayer that is somewhat similar, but it ends with a beautiful statement of trust that has everything to do with knowing the character of God.

> [17] Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, [18] yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! [19] The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights. (Habakkuk 3:17-19, NLT)

Habakkuk's point was that his confidence was not tied to his situation, but the character of God. He knew that the Lord would provide what he needed, so he didn't need to worry or doubt.

Conclusion

So how do we get to this point? What should we do when we find ourselves beaten down by the circumstances of life and questioning whether the Lord still cares about us? I've got some suggestions.

First, recite God's promises. I would encourage you to find some great promises of God and commit them to memory. I'm fond of verses like Romans 8:28, that God is working all things for good, or 1 John 1:9, that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us, or 1 Corinthians 10:13, that God will always give us a way out of our sins and temptations, or Philippians 1:6, that the One who started a good work in us will see it to completion. These are just a few examples. God makes many promises to us in the Bible, so commit them to memory so you have them at the ready.

When times of trouble come, recite these promises, the things God has said He will do, and you will find comfort that is not tied to your circumstances, but His character.

Second, recall God's faithfulness. Promises are only as good as the person making them. Go back and look at God's track record. Has He kept His promises before? As you look back on the history of how God has worked among His people, you see how He was always working to keep His promises, though often not in the way or time they expected. And if you look back in your own life, you will probably find the same pattern at play. God has always been working; we often just couldn't see it. The more we remember the ways God has been faithful, the more confidence we will have in His promises!

Finally, reinforce these truths. If we want to be able to rest in God's character, especially in difficult times, we are going to have to keep coming back to the same truths over and over again, because it's easy to lose sight of them and put our focus on the wrong things. So be intentional about finding ways to reinforce those truths in your life. Spending time reading your Bible is always helpful. So is being church, talking with friends who will encourage your faith, listening to music that reminds you of God's character, and maybe even just putting verses with God's promises around your house. All of these things serve to keep the character of God always before our eyes. When you feel like God is silent, surround yourself with things that reinforce what you know to be true.

There are times when it feels like we're all alone and the silence is deafening. But just because we cannot see God there with us, it doesn't mean He's absent. Often the issue is just that we are too focused on ourselves and our situation and not focused enough on Him. If we'll put our focus in the right place, we'll find the strength we need, whether it's loud, silent, or anywhere in between.

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