
WHEN GOD LETS YOU DOWN – Psalm 22:1-11

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When I was just a young boy, my mother used to take me to our local church on Sundays. We were always the first ones there and we always sat on the aisle in the fourth last row. I don't know why we had to be so early; there didn't seem to be a big rush for those particular seats. But, every week we got up early, walked to church and sat in those same seats long before anyone else was there.

I don't remember much of those early years in church. The services were long and boring. The old minister wore long robes and he loved to draw out that last sound of every word in his prayers that ended in an "s".

It was the longest hour of the week.

I didn't get church. But, even more so, I didn't get God. Church was referred to as "God's House" but He was nowhere to be seen. During the sermon, I would look around and imagine that he was hiding in the elaborate woodwork. I looked hard at heating vents and speakers in the walls hoping to catch a glimpse of him before He saw me and pulled away again.

My first conscious attempt at prayer was simply, "God, why don't you show yourself?" Little did I imagine how many times in my later life I would utter the same words – but not so much in childish wonderment but with painful emotion – hurt, frustration and anger? And I don't for one moment believe that I have expressed that prayer for the last time yet.

One Sunday, many years later as an 18-year-old university student. I was drawn back to the church. I had investigated the Christian faith but was so turned off by Christians that I broke all contact with anyone who claimed to be one. I was safe in that church; they didn't believe the same way my former Christian friends did. However, I couldn't stop reading about Jesus. So there I was, sitting in the back, not far from where my mom and I used to sit, looking at the same woodwork, the same vents, the same speakers. The music was as dreary as ever, the sermon just as boring. But, somewhere in the middle of an otherwise forgettable service I just felt compelled to bow my head and surrender my life to Jesus Christ.

Outwardly, nothing changed; life went on as usual. But, inwardly I felt like I had been reborn. Everything looked different. It all had some mysterious, new, unexplainable meaning. God just seemed to be everywhere. I guess you just have to believe to see. Then, over the next several months, it all just quietly evaporated. God disappeared. I felt He let me down again.

Thankfully, a year later I found myself in a Bible School and my faith had been rekindled. God had become more real than I could have ever imagined. I returned home and I felt God was calling me to be a witness for Him back in that local church. So, I started a boys' club. Every Friday evening, I met with 10 or 12 teenage boys, playing games, having fun and to the best of my ability explaining the gospel. I loved the boys and wanted them to experience Jesus, too.

Toward the end of the year, I devised an evangelistic plot. I prayed about it, my friends from Bible School prayed about it. It felt like God was leading and making all the details fall perfectly into place. I challenged the men of the Deacons board to a basketball game against the boys' club. They accepted. I invited the whole church to come and watch. With my last \$42, I rented a Moody Science film to show after the game. I developed a little talk for after the film. It would end with an invitation to follow Christ. All the year's work was pointing to this one climatic event.

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That night went as perfectly as one could ever hope for. Spectators came out, the game was fun and exciting, they all wanted to stay for the film afterward. Every detail had been planned out and prayed out and was working out.

But, just as the film was about to start, the projector bulb blew up. To my horror, there was no spare. The one detail I had overlooked. My Bible School friends who came to support me rushed to their church 2 blocks away to get their projector but it was locked up in a room for which they didn't have a key. Within 30 dreadful minutes, all the people and all my hopes for the boys and the church vanished. Everybody had shown up – everybody but God. It was like a big party in which the guest of honor decided not to come. The stage was set; the audience was in place and lead actor decided not to appear. It felt like God had gone back into the woodwork. It wasn't even the embarrassment that was so hard to bear; it was the crushing disappointment and the lost opportunity. What would become of the boys and the church?

Three times God let me down. And it wouldn't be the last. There were times when disappointment was bearable, even understandable. I understood God's seeming absence. I learned some valuable lessons – I learned about who was really serving whom, whose will needed to triumph, and whose view of reality was superior. But there were other times – times when disappointment became too much – prayers weren't answered, bad things happened that shouldn't have, good things didn't happen that should have. Bitterness set in and I just had to put God on a shelf. It was too painful not to. It seemed that my faith had been rewarded by absence, trust by disregard; needs were ignored, circumstances unchanged. When I needed Him most, God wasn't there. I couldn't stop believing but I sure could stop trusting. I had no reason to do otherwise.

I tried to handle disappointments the best I could. I tried to deal with them Christianly – looking on the bright side, being thankful anyway, rationalizing them - anything but calling them what they were and complaining to the one who was letting me down. After all, that wasn't Christian.

As it turns out, while calling a spade a spade, being honest about the disappointments, taking it to God and duking it out isn't "Christian", it is Biblical. In fact, the Bible has a lot to say about disappointment with God.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Biblical references to disappointment with God is that there are any. If you were God would you want your followers to write a historic record in your holy book about how you let them down? I sure wouldn't. That's taking freedom of the press just too far. How could God allow that? Was He too weak to control those who were writing his own book? It's very bad P.R.; against all the rules of marketing. You don't advertise a product by listing all the consumer complaints.

Or, could it be that something else is being communicated? Could it be that God is saying "If you hitch your wagon to me, I promise you an adventure like nothing else-not pie-in-the sky but right here, right now. It will be an adventure full of things you couldn't even image. It will be an abundant life – but be prepared – it will have abundant joy but it will also have abundant confusion, pain, sorrow and heartache. And when you are upset, talk to me about it. You won't measure your life by its length but rather by its depth. You won't measure it by what you've accumulated but by what you've given away. You won't even understand it and, right now, I can't explain it. But, if you hang on, you're in for one heck of a ride. And some day, not now, it will all make sense." If that is what is being communicated then it is quite an invitation.

Perhaps the issue of disappointment can be put into a historical context. So, I would like to spend the rest of our time taking a broad, sweeping view of disappointment in Scripture. Today, I will limit our overview to the Old Testament and one book in particular. Even with that limitation, I will be doing a huge

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disservice to the text. But, let's see what the Old Testament might say to use today as we struggle with the issue of "when God let's us down".

In the opening books of the Old Testament, God seemed to operate very differently than He does today – He was clear and direct, -there was no room for confusion or misunderstanding. He made a covenant with Moses outlining in explicit detail how things would work. All the Israelites had to do was to obey the laws He gave them. If they obeyed, he promised them prosperity, fertility, good weather, economic success, military victory and even immunity from physical and mental diseases. If they disobeyed they would experience crime, poverty, infertility, bad weather, military losses and illnesses of all kinds. In effect, obedience would nullify any possibility of disappointment or hardship.

Yet when we read Joshua and Judges, we see that within 50 years, the people of Israel had degenerated into a lawless mob. Much of the rest of the Old Testament deals with the results of their unwillingness to obey the laws God gave them. It was clear that even straightforward, explicit rules were beyond their ability to manage. So, later God gave them a new covenant – based on grace and faith – the New Testament.

God also gave them direct, unmistakable guidance. Wouldn't that be wonderful in this day and age? In the Sinai wilderness God gave them a cloud over the tabernacle. If there was any question about whether they were to move or not, they just looked at the cloud. If it moved, they were to follow it. If it stayed, they stayed. The cloud even glowed like a tower of fire at night so there was no way any misunderstanding could take place. God gave them 613 specific laws to cover almost all aspects of personal and communal life. There was nothing fuzzy about God's will.

So, did all that clarity increase obedience and therefore success? Did it result in eliminating the Israelites' disappointment with God? Apparently not. In Deuteronomy, for example, we read that God told them not to fight the Amorites because He would not be with them. So, the Israelites promptly went to war and were soundly defeated. They marched when they were told to sit, they fled in fear when they were told to march, they fought when they were told to declare peace and they declared peace when they were told to fight. In fact, they made a lifestyle out of inventing ways to break the 613 commandments. Clear, explicit guidance was as big a problem to them as unclear guidance is to us.

A striking pattern emerges in this first part of the Bible: the very clarity of God's will had an infantilizing effect on the Israelites. There was no room to exercise faith because everything was already decided for them. There were no struggles about decisions – there were none to make. So, there was no reason for the Israelites to act like adults when they could behave like children. So after 40 years of disobedience, God started over with a couple of men who did act as adults and exercised faith.

No one needed to ask my question. "God, why don't you show yourself?" because He was always visible in that pillar of cloud. They had seen his mighty hand at work – they lived through the 10 plagues of Egypt, they crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and saw Pharaoh's army drown behind them, they ate manna, the miracle food fresh every morning. And yet, astoundingly, when God and Moses left momentarily, they created a golden calf and danced around it like a bunch of pagans. So, it seems that God's directness didn't lead to faith and obedience – just the opposite. It led to fear and rebellion. Paradoxically, it seemed that the closer God drew toward His people, the more distant they became. They were afraid of Him. As we would be. So James in the New Testament gets the order right – "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you". So, maybe, just maybe we should be grateful for God's hiddenness, not disappointed. If anyone had reason to be disappointed, it was God. And He was – in spades.

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One thing becomes abundantly clear in the Old Testament: God's power could do everything. Everything except the most important thing – it could not make people love Him. Miracles, displays of power created awe, but not love.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God seems to have drawn farther and farther back – perhaps making room for genuine love to grow. It created space for faith to bloom and prosper. Power and love can't co-exist. We see that in human relationships. When control is the predominant issue in a relationship, love is squeezed out. Power can command respect and obedience but it can never command love. And love is the essential ingredient for people and relationships to mature. God was acting like a good parent to a growing child – direct, hands-on involvement at first, then pulling back and releasing control to make room for the child and the relationship to grow.

But with that opportunity for love and faith came doubt and with it painful, haunting questions. Reading the prophets, one is confronted with very modern questions – about God's silence, about the success of evil people, about undeserved suffering, about the unfairness of life. Some of the prophets called God a weakling as if they could provoke Him to show Himself and act. The psalms echo the very same issues – as seen in Psalms 22 – the psalm of pain which lies directly in front of another of David's psalms – Psalm 23 of comfort and peace. It seems that we wanted it both ways – we wanted Him to retreat but when He did, we called Him names to force Him to come out. God couldn't win. No matter what He did, we were disappointed. If we consider that the Psalms were prayers and songs, it is quite jolting that Psalms like Psalms 22 are even there. Can you imagine Jan Porcino or Bob Swann leading us in a prayer like that? How would you react if one of them led us in prayer by saying, "Lord, where are you? We're hurting down here and you've turned your back on us. What's up? What is wrong with you?" Or if Edna led us in a song about how terribly unfair God was, how He has let us all down? And yet, there they are smack in the middle of the Bible.

But, in the midst of the complaints about God's hiddenness, God gave them a reply. He agreed with them. He acknowledged that He had withdrawn His presence. To Zechariah, he gave the flip side to James' comment, "When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen." Draw away from me and I will draw away from you. God also explained that His reluctance to act was not a sign of weakness but actually a sign of merciful restraint. I wonder if we ever see it that way. Or do we see His reluctance to act like they did – abandonment, powerlessness, lovelessness – and even non-existence?

Then, there is this startling statement in Isaiah that captures God's experience "In all their distress, He, too, was distressed." In the silence that love demanded, the silent One was in pain, too. If anything, the disappointed one, the betrayed one was not mankind, but God. The real Old Testament story is not disappointment with God, but rather the disappointment of God.

If God was creating a space for love to grow and thereby give opportunity for relationships with His people as adults, there is no more clear example than Job. The book of Job is one of the oldest books in the Bible and one of the most profound. It contains wrenching account of terrible grief and bewildering pain. It centers on the theme of suffering. The vast majority of it – Chapter 3 to 37 – do not contain any particular activity other than opinionated dialogues of 5 men – Job, three friends and a young fellow by the name of Elihu – all about pain and suffering. It is all about trying to make sense of the terrible plight Job was in as he sat in the ashes of his house having lost everything – family, health, and all his possessions.

But, while it focuses on the incredible suffering of Job, it is really a treatise on faith – faith in its most raw form, removed from all props and reasons, in a space where only 2 things can flourish – faith and doubt. A space most of us occupy, albeit on a much smaller scale.

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Like every other book in the Bible, the book of Job is primarily about God even though Job gets the majority of ice time. But, unlike every other book in the Bible, the book of Job, offers a unique glimpse from God's point of view and offers a totally different perspective on suffering and disappointment.

It is structured very much like a detective story. If you experience receding gums and hair, you are old enough to remember the T.V. show, Colombo. Every show started with a murder. We, the viewers, saw who was killed, who the murderer was and why it happened. Then, after the first commercial, Colombo comes on to the scene and spends the rest of the hour trying to figure out what we already know. Colombo and his fellow actors are the only ones who don't know the real story. The question is whether Colombo is up to the test.

The same is true of Job. In the first 2 chapters, we see God and Satan having a debate. Satan essentially claims that people only follow God because he has bought them off. If things get tough and there is no payoff, surely they would fall away. God rises to the challenge and, for all intents and purposes, they place a bet – on Job. Then all the calamities begin to fall on poor, unsuspecting Job. Those first 2 chapters seem rather strange. It's hard to know what to make of it or how to package it theologically. But, there it is out in the open, a unique glimpse from the viewpoint of eternity. We are granted a once in a lifetime look behind the curtain and see suffering from God's point of view.

Job, like Colombo, is in the dark while we, the readers, know exactly what is going on. So, for 35 chapters we see Job put God on trail accusing Him of being unfair to an innocent party. Job is angry, hurt, confused; he feels tossed aside, let down and beaten up. His words are harsh and bitter and maybe not unlike what you and I may have said at some time. It is not at all difficult to identify with them. They voice complaints that we may never have had the courage to say.

But, because we know what happened before the first commercial, unlike Job, we know that God is not on trial – Job is. The plaintiff is actually the defendant. The point is not suffering – “where is God in the midst of my pain?” The point is faith – “where is Job in the midst of his pain?” How is Job responding? Is he up to the test? Could it be the same for us?

And could it be that our suffering and disappointments may have consequences far beyond what we can see or imagine? Perhaps not on the scale of Job where the destiny of the universe seemed to be at stake, but perhaps in some way our response does affect the unseen world, for after all, if the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner that repents, could it not also be that our faithful belief in the midst of calamity could set off reverberations in spiritual places? Later, the Apostle Paul points to this when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as men.” And in the same letter, he said, “Do you not know that we will judge angels?” Apparently what we do on earth has mysterious and far-reaching consequences – more than we can possibly know right now. How that works, I have no idea – it just does.

Because of the first 2 chapters, we can locate where the battle ground really is. Job thought, as we usually do, that the battle ground was between himself and God. But, the battle ground was really inside Job – as it is with us. So, the question “why?” is never answered. I strongly suspect that when we come up with our own answers as to why, they actually do violence to the experience and the real intent which is far beyond our reach. Rather, the book of Job seems to say that the more important questions is – “To what end?”

One of the most helpful things I have learned in the modest degree of suffering I have thus far experienced in my life, is to separate life from God. Quite honestly, I don't even know if that is even theologically justifiable; I just know it works for me. Life isn't fair; God is. Life doesn't sympathize with me; God does. Life just works better when I keep my relationship with God separate from the circumstances I

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am in. God uses circumstances – certainly, but he isn't equated with them. When I hurt in the midst of my circumstances, God does, too.

So, when God does finally show up for Job in chapter 38, He doesn't answer Job's "why" question. In fact, at first blush His response seems cold and hostile. As Frederick Buechner says, "He explodes. He asks Job who he thinks his is anyway. He says that trying to explain the kind of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little neck clam ... God doesn't reveal His grand design. He reveals Himself."

So God goes into a long discourse full of angry questions for Job – "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" "Have you ever made the sun come up in the morning and go down at night?" "Do you know what is under the sea?" And after the geography and physics lesson, he launches into questions about wildlife – goats, lions, donkeys, ostriches and such – all equally unable for Job to answer.

God was making an emphatic point – "Job, if you have no clue how this visible world works, how on earth can you expect to understand the world you don't see?" If you can't even comprehend the physical world, how can you fathom the spiritual world? In the end, Job gets the point and he repents.

Despite God's seeming angry response to Job, He does consider Job one of his favorite people. God put all his chips on job and Job came through for Him. God seems to put very high value on the kind of faith Job displayed – the kind of faith that stubbornly holds on when it is severely tested. Even though Job complained bitterly, even though he despaired for his life, even though he longed for death as a way out of his torment, he defiantly refused to give up on God. "Though He slay me, yet I will hope in Him."

The same can be said for many of the men and women referred to in Hebrews 11, what many call the "faith hall of fame". Somehow, despite their dire circumstances, they tenaciously believed that the invisible world was as solid and real as anything they could see. They continued to trust God despite what all their 5 sense told them. They faced hardship like you and I will never see – but they held on. So, at the end of Hebrews 11, the author makes the comment that the world was not worthy of them. God places high value on this kind of faith but this kind of faith only seems possible when it is put under pressure. Rabbi Abraham Heschel observed, "Faith like Job's can not be shaken because is it the result of having been shaken."

So, it seems than that if we are to become the adults God wants to relate to then we need questions more than answers, uncertainties more than certainties and struggle more than comfort.

For us today, when we feel God has let us down, Job offers some helpful lessons: First of all, doubts, complaints, hurt, disappointment and all their acquaintances are all valid responses. They are not signs of a weak faith. They are just signs of honesty. So, they are all included there in the 35 chapters. God includes them to let us know what to expect and what the cost is of this valuable commodity called faith.

Secondly, we can say anything to God. We can give anything to Him. More often than not, the spiritual giants of the Old Testament did just that. They wrestled with God. They would prefer to go away limping like Jacob, rather than to shut God out. God can handle any and every human response except one – one that I can all too easily use – to treat Him as if He is not there. Job never once considered that response.

Thirdly, when God is silent, it is just that He is silent. It doesn't mean He is absent; it doesn't mean He is uncaring; it doesn't mean He is impotent; it doesn't mean He does not exist. It just means

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He is giving us the space to grow. So, it is important that we don't take His silence for more than it is. There may be layers and layers of things happening in the silence but you can count on the fact that He is there. God heard Job; he hears us. God had compassion for Job; he does for us. Clearly, He loves through the silence. He loves so much that He very often doesn't act – at least not the way we want Him to act. He simply acts the way we need Him to act if we are ever to become the mature adults He wants us to be.

Lastly, while the book of Job never minimizes or belittles the experience of feeling hurt and let down, it does add one small word to it – “temporary”. As painful as our life experiences can be sometimes, they will end. It may seem small consolation in the middle of the pain, but the promise of God is that suffering is for a season. When its work is over, it will be done away with. Disappointment is definitively not the last word!

Job's hope was not in victory over his friends or even in vindication – it was in God. You know his words – “I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I will see him with my own eyes – How my heart years within me.” He saw from afar what John saw in a vision given to Him many centuries later: from Rev 21 “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the old things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

And so He will. Let's pray:

Gracious God,

If any of what has been said is helpful, then I pray that when it is needed you would bring it to mind. To the degree it has not been true or helpful, then please make it utterly forgettable. But, always, always – please make Yourself unforgettable to us, especially when you accord us the great complement of putting us through trials in your silent presence. Be in us so that You will find us faithful. For your name sake we pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Now, to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.