

### **“The Hidden Face”**

All was well -- but all changed abruptly. It happened during Wednesday chapel when I was in seminary. I don't remember the theme of the morning. I don't remember who led worship or preached. All I remember is a classmate who stood and offered a prayer concern. He was a big man with a voice to match, and he didn't "share" his request. He "shouted" it! His voice reverberated through the chapel. The intensity was raw. He was angry and distraught and having a meltdown. He finally stopped and we sat in stunned silence. The worship leader's complexion was white as a sheet, and the situation called for more than a *"Thanks for sharing."*

On my way back to the apartment I stopped to check on him. He was still visibly upset. *"Did I kill worship?"* he asked. "You came close," I replied. "But don't worry. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades." He vented more, but his words weren't all his own. He stared at the wall and from his depths he recited long passages from the Psalms. Not, *"Come, let us make a joyful noise unto the Lord..."* but Psalms of lament--

- *"My God, why have you forsaken me?"*
- *"Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"*
- *"When shall I behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me, 'Where is your God?'"*

I don't know if my presence helped, but my classmate taught me a lesson. God does not grade prayers. Logic, grammar, and the proper use of religious jargon do not matter. Sincerity, honesty, and authenticity matter greatly. I learned from Lynn that prayer cannot always be proper and polite. There are times when our need is so deep and our perception of God's absence is so great that only a raw, anguished prayer will do.

King Cyrus of Persia displaced Babylon as the world's premiere power. Cyrus declared that Israel was free to go home after generations of Babylonian exile. No more singing, "*How can we sing God's song in a foreign land?*" The hope they clung to was coming to pass. But when they came back to the homeland, their hope deflated like a party balloon. Jerusalem was unrecognizable. Jerusalem, the beautiful city of God, lay in ruins. Hope turned to doubt, longing to lament, and the dream faded into disillusionment.

When Isaiah was a young man he saw the heavens open. While in the temple he was overcome by God's holiness and he heard a voice say, "Whom shall I send?" "Send me! Send me!" Isaiah replied. But Isaiah was now an old man. Surveying the rubble that used to be the temple he cried to God, "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*"

It wasn't a polished and polite petition. Isaiah pleaded, "Do what you did before. Make the mountains quake. Send down great balls of fire and boil the sea. Scare the living daylights out of the nations and show them who's really Boss. You did it before, O Lord. Now do it again!" But all that Isaiah heard was wind whistling in his ears.

You know the feeling. Discouragement, disappointments and defeats pile up on you like an avalanche. You are no match for life and you pray to God to do something... anything... but nothing happens. You only hear the echo of your own voice bouncing in your heard. You watch a loved one riddled with pain, wasting away in a hospital bed and you plead with God, but all you feel is absence. Where is God when you need him--

spending winters in Florida, or just playing “hard to get”? ***“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”***

This is a problem for people of faith. We believe God is present, active, available and knowable, but evidence is hard to come by. Did God speak in the Bible, but no longer? Hardly. Our struggle was theirs, too. Listen to Job:

***“If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him,”*** (Job 23: 8-9).

If God was ever present, why did Isaiah pray:

***There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity*** (Isaiah 64: 7).

Hindsight is 20/20. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel was implored to *remember*. “Remember that God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.” Remembering is important for us as well. We cherish moments from our past when God’s presence was so close. But memory alone is no match when God seems absent.

When you think about it, it’s a wonder there aren’t *fewer* people in church. Most people do not come to church because they think it’s a religious relic. Worship doesn’t matter because it doesn’t produce anything of consequence, and we judge value by usefulness. Someone said, “It is one of the most peculiar things human do, to come together week after week with no intention of being useful or productive, but only of facing an ornate wall to declare things they cannot prove about a God they cannot see.”

How do you base your hope on a God that cannot be proven or seen? It’s no wonder that believers through the ages have

shouted “Amen!” to Isaiah. *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down to shake things up.”*

Life would be easier if God would just come out of hiding and respond quickly and clearly to our petitions. If only God would come out of hiding with irrefutable evidence that would dispel for all time the ranting of those who say God does not exist. That would be great, wouldn't it? Or would it?

The only visible gods are idols. You can touch see Tiki gods and golden calves. They always give the answers you're looking for because they are no more than projections of our own desires. God prohibited the Hebrews from having any idols or graven images.

Moses asked to see God's face, but God told Moses he couldn't look and live. So God stuffed Moses into the cleft of a rock, and when God's presence passed by, Moses took a peek. It wasn't much of a look -- just a faint, fading glance at God's backside going away and disappearing into mystery.

You won't find God under “G” in the file drawer. You can't Google God. If we could summons God by snapping our fingers, religion would become obsolete. Churches, temples, mosques, and shrines would be boarded up. Preachers would have to look for other lines of work if the God we follow is a “finger-snap” God.

Blaise Pascal was a brilliant French mathematician, philosopher and a devout Christian who lived during the 1600's. Pascal said, *“Every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden, is not true.”*

God's is hidden to humble us. God's ways are not ours. There are no guided tours through God's mind. God's will is not bent by ours. God owes us nothing and is not interested in rewarding us for our efforts. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “God deflects our attempts at control by withdrawing into silence... then and perhaps only then can God be God.”

**Job confronted God with a thousand and one questions about human suffering and God's providence, and God answered Job out of the storm with an answer that wasn't an answer. Job humbly replied, "You've asked, 'Who is muddying the water, second-guessing my purposes?' I admit it. I was the one. *I've babbled on about things far beyond me*, made small talk about wonders way over my head." (Job 42)**

**In the thirteenth century in Persia there was a mystic named Jelaluddin Rumi who said:**

**I've said before that every craftsman  
Searches for what is not there  
to practice his craft.**

**A builder looks for the rotten hole where the roof  
caved in.**

**A water carrier picks the empty pot.  
The carpenter stops at the house with no door.**

**Workers rush toward some hint of emptiness,  
which they then start to fill.**

**Their hope, though, is for emptiness,  
so don't think you must avoid it. It contains what you  
need!**

**It doesn't occur to us to seek God in empty places because... well... they're empty! Nature abhors a vacuum, right? It's been said there is a God-shaped emptiness inside us hungering to be filled. Nothing we do can fill it because our hunger is for the hidden face of God whose language is silence.**

**Its Advent again, and like Isaiah we're still waiting for the ripping sound of the heavens being torn apart. Advent tells us to stay awake, focused and alert. But it is hard because our feet are sore from standing on our tiptoes for so long looking for Jesus' return. We get tired, and we are tempted to think, "What if it isn't so?" Our patience wears thin and we hear ourselves saying, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down -- right now!"**

I took a class in college that didn't thrill me at the time, but in retrospect, was the most helpful course I had. It was called, Religious Classics, Over three decades later I rely on the wisdom of the spiritual masters I studied. I've mentioned Blaise Pascal. Years after his death in 1662, someone found a piece of paper he had sewn into the lining of his coat, apparently to keep it close to his heart. On it Pascal wrote about an experience eight years before his death:

*In the year of Grace, 1654,  
On Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November,  
Feast of St. Clement, Pope and Martyr,  
and of others in the Martyrology,  
Vigil of Saint Chrysogonus, martyr and others,  
From about half past ten in the evening  
until about half past twelve  
FIRE  
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob  
Not of the philosophers and scholars.  
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.  
God of Jesus Christ.*

Had you been with Pascal on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, 1654 between 10:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m., you probably wouldn't have seen very much. It was Pascal's experience. He didn't dream it up. It was not bidden. He was consumed, and the only word this brilliant man could come up with to describe the indescribable was, FIRE.

There are times when the hidden God grasps you, and when it is over, be it for two hours or two minutes, you know you've been possessed by something that words alone cannot convey. It's like the experience I had visiting the Grand Canyon. Standing on the observation deck I had a strange sensation of being pulled over the edge. When words fail, there is something that tugs at us, inviting us to the empty places.

Had you been at Bethlehem the night *He* was born, you would probably have seen just another poor baby. But for those who

**listened and trusted that the emptiness wasn't empty, and believed the hidden God had at last shown his face, nothing would ever be the same. May the same be so for us.**