



When God Seems Absent

Job

I have heard people teach on the spiritual life in which they compared our varying experiences of God's presence to the seasons of the year. They gave wonderful descriptions of the beauty of spring, summer, and fall. When it came to the topic of the soul in winter, here are some of the words associated with winter:

- Ice. Hypothermia. Wind-chill. Snow. Shoveling snow. Shoveling more snow. Buying a snowblower. Salt trucks. Black ice. Dead batteries. Frostbite. Gangrene. Thermal underwear.
- *Seasonal affective disorder.* Recreational eating. Death.

I don't particularly like winter myself. I know there are people in the world who claim to love winter. But it always makes me wonder: How many people spend their working careers in Florida, then retire and move to North Dakota?

A WINTRY SPIRITUALITY

Regardless of what you may feel about the meteorological season, I want us to think about a kind of "winter of the soul." "Spiritual winter." You may be able to relocate to some part of the world where you can avoid cold weather, but there is no place you can move to escape spiritual winter.

Spiritual winter, sometimes called "the dark night of the soul" is something most Christians, even strong Christians usually experience at some point.

- Spiritual Winter may come the day the word comes back from the doctor's lab that the test was positive.
- Winter may arrive when someone has lost a job or experienced vocational failure. They are not sure, without this job, who they are anymore.
- Maybe winter comes when you feel as if you have failed as a parent. Or it arrives the day someone you loved with your whole heart has died. You prayed so hard, you hoped so much, you don't understand.

Any of these events can chill the soul. But they are not its worst feature. The hardest part of winter is that God seems gone.

Psalm 88:13-14 *I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?*

It is the hiding of God's face, what feels like his absence, that is the psalmist's greatest pain.

Psalm 88:18 *You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.*

C. S. Lewis wrote after the death of his wife, "Where is God? ... Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence."

"Hello darkness my old friend." This is the hardest part of winter of the soul. It's not just this or that bad event. It's, *We can't find God.* He doesn't answer. The Sound of Silence.

I. JOB AND THE ABSENCE OF GOD

(Job 1:1-5) In all human history, no one has embodied winter more than a man named Job. In his book we come to the page where God is hardest to find.

Today I am going to cover the whole book of Job! That is obviously impossible, and you may

want to read this book after I share the “thought flow” of it.

The story begins, *"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job."* (Job 1:1) Uz is Edom, Southwest of Israel. *"He was the greatest man among all the people of the East."* The writer's point is that Job is not a part of Israel. You could put the setting like this: *"A long time ago, in a place far, far away. . . ."*

The problems in this book are the problems of the human race. All of us will wrestle at some time with the absence of God.

In the beginning everything is as we think it should be. Job is *"blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."* (v.1) He is so cautious he even offers daily sacrifices for his children— "Just in case," he thinks. (v. 5)

God gives him a wonderful life. The amount of blessing he experiences seems directly proportional to the amount of obedience he offers. And that is what, deep down, most of us secretly believe should be true.

But winter is coming to Uz. It will be a place where very bad things happen to a very good person. Uz will be a place, not just where suffering comes, but where it comes without warning and without explanation, creating confusion and despair.

Then suddenly (vv. 6-12) in the story there's a radical shift in scenery. There is a dispute between Satan and God, and Satan is allowed to wreak havoc on Job's life. Philip Yancey notes that the writer sets up this book like a play, but the action is going on in two locations. Picture a theater with two stages; a lower stage and an upper stage.

This is crucial to the story: We can see what is going on, on both stages, but the characters in the story do not. All they can see is what's happening on earth. All Job knows (vv. 13-19) is that he has lost his livestock, his wealth, his servants, and his children. We wait to see his response.

In vv. 20-22, he grieves. He worships. He falls to the ground. He cries, *"May the name of the LORD be praised. In all this, he did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."*

In Chapter 2 we switch back to the upper stage for one more brief conversation (vv.1-6). At first glance, the action in heaven looks very strange. It looks like a cosmic wager between God and Satan, where God uses Job and his family as pawns to win a bet. But it's not.

The key question on the upper stage—in fact, the key question to the whole book—came when Satan asks in 1:9, *"Does Job fear God for nothing?"*

In other words, Satan is saying, *"Job is devoted to you and worships you because it is in his self-interest."* Satan is charging God with being naive. *"You think Job loves you. The truth is, he loves you the way children love the ice cream man; the way aging actresses love Botox. Turn off the faucet of blessing and watch how fast he turns off the faucet of devotion!"*

The question of this book is, can a human being hold on to God if we are not blessed (at least immediately) for doing so? Can we hold onto God in the face of suffering? Or, do we love God solely out of self-interest?

Job 2:7-10 So Job gets hit with a second wave of trouble. This time there are some subtle differences in his response. He does not fall to the ground in worship. He does not say, *"The name of the LORD be praised."*

He goes to sit on an ash heap at the town dump. It is an act of grieving.

Job's wife says in v.9, *"Curse God and die!"* This cannot be encouraging to Job. This does not sound like Robert Schuller. But remember, Job's wife has also lost all she had, including her children. She will now have to care for a horribly diseased husband until he dies, then she will be left alone and destitute. She gives voice to thoughts that have surely occurred to Job.

Job doesn't curse God. But notice what he says: *"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"* He is struggling to understand God now. Is God the kind of person who sends evil? Is God really good?

After the first wave, the text simply says, *"In all this Job did not sin."* Now in vs. 10, the writer records, *"In all this, Job did not sin in what he said."*

So now there is a little qualification. *"Job did not sin in what he said."* But in his heart I think Job has begun to struggle.

II. SILENT COMFORT - 2:11-13

Then Job's friends hear about all the troubles that have come upon him—and they come to comfort him.

IV. 12, "When they saw him . . . they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads." They had heard it was bad, but nothing prepared them for this. Usually when you visit someone in bad condition, you try to cheer them up and tell them it's not so bad. Have you ever been so sick that when someone came to visit, they took one look at you and burst into tears? There's no use pretending.

The story continues: *v.13 "Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."*

[This was such a powerful act that it became part of Jewish life. To this day the Jews will speak of "sitting shiva"—literally "sitting sevens." Friends will come and sit with one who mourns over a period of a week.]

It is worth noting that after the seven days are over, Job's friends will speak ... a lot. They will get into trouble for what they say. As with his wife, Job's friends have taken a lot of heat over the years, and for good reasons. Their words are not so hot. But their silence was brilliant! Their silence was a gift. Maybe the best way to mediate God's presence to someone who is suffering is to sit with them in silence.

III. JOB SPEAKS - CHAPTER 3

Finally, after seven days, Job speaks. We wait to hear what he'll say. If he can just repeat what he says in chapter 1 —*"God gives, God takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord"*—the test will be over and so will the book. Not to be.

V. 1 "After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth."

This is the kind of thing that keeps Job off the motivational speaker circuit. He didn't curse God, but he did curse his own existence.

Job goes on to request in *v.8* that that particular day be removed from the calendar. He says, *"May those who curse days curse that day."* (He doesn't tell us who "those who curse days" are; it seems like a limited profession.)

For the next 28 chapters Job pours out a level of bitterness, confusion, sorrow, and anger toward God that is staggering. Basically, he wants to know **WHY** God has forsaken him.

This is so raw that his friends can't stand it.

IV. JOB'S FRIENDS SPEAK - CHAPTERS 3-25

THE DOCTRINE OF RETRIBUTION

Job's friends spend 22 chapters voicing one central idea that was actually the primary theology of their day. It is sometimes called "the doctrine of retribution." The idea is that **goodness results in prosperity and blessing, wickedness results in suffering.**

Ironically, in their silence these friends drew Job closer to God. When they spoke, they pushed him away:

- "So Job, if you're suffering badly—you must have brought it on yourself. If you're no longer close to God—who do you think moved? If you will repent, he will deliver you from suffering." That's basically it.

Philip Yancey notes that the arguments voiced by Job's friends are being repeated in Christian churches today. Suffering people have told Yancey that those who make their suffering worse are Christians:

- "The reason your sick is a lack of faith. If you just have faith you would be delivered."

Because we generally associate well-being with the presence of God and assume that suffering means someone has done something wrong.

No one wins the lottery and cries out, "Why me, God?"

And of course, it is true that pain was not part of God's original plan, and the day is coming when he will wipe every tear from every eye.

And yet ... **While God hates pain, he can also redeem it. It does not mean he is absent.**

A massive survey was taken that asked thousands of people what had most contributed to their spiritual growth. The number one answer was pain.

Of course, this doesn't mean we can go up to someone in enormous pain and say, *"Well, this is*

good news because you're going to grow a lot!"
Pain is deeper and more mysterious than that.

MINI-PAIN

One thing we can do is practice God's presence in moments of "mini-pain." Suppose I'm frustrated at standing in line at a store. (Home Depot on July 4) That's maybe a "1" on a pain scale of 1000, but I can, in a sense, use it as a tool. I can ask God to be present with me in my frustration at having to wait. I can look for Him in the presence of the clerk behind the counter who doesn't know her job very well. The practice of walking with God in mini-pain can serve people well when larger pain comes.

You know, I am very conscious that countless people have suffered infinitely more pain than I have. And I don't believe God is the kind of person who delights in inflicting painful little moral object lessons on helpless mortals. But in my own life, I realize that there is this strange duality about pain.

- It can cause me to wonder where God is, as nothing else can.
- And it can open me up to my dependence on his presence as nothing else can.

In summer I am tempted to think that because of my reputation, virtue and faith that I'm in control. My life will unfold how and when I want it to.

In winter I learn I'm not running things after all.

Somebody once said that "the biggest difference between you and God is that God doesn't think he's you." In pain, we get very clear about not being God.

V. THE GIFT OF COMPLAINING

Job spends most of the book complaining to God. In the wintry books of the Bible, mostly people complain.

Scholars sort out the psalms in different categories: psalms of thanksgiving; wisdom psalms, enthronement psalms. But by far the most common kind of psalm is called the *lament*—or complaint.

Ps. 44: 11-12, 17 *You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale... . All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. . . .*

Israelites devoted more psalms to complaining than any other single category.

This may be good news for you. Maybe you already know how to complain or would be willing to learn. Maybe complaining is your spiritual gift.

Check this out. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis has written that in the ancient world these complaint prayers are without parallel in other religions. In no other culture did people pray to their God in language that was so frank and even rude:

Ps. 44.... *You crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals. . . Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? . . . How long, O LORD, how long?*

People of other ancient religions prayed. They made requests, offered worship, even cursed their enemies. Only Israel, in all the ancient world, prayed this kind of complaint prayers.

For good reason, because only Israel in all the ancient world **believed that the great God who made the heavens and the earth cares that we are in pain and he can be expected to do something about it.**

This is what makes these prayers so powerful—and an important part of our spiritual life. **When we are passionately honest with God, when we are not indulging in self-pity or martyrdom but are genuinely opening ourselves up to God, when we complain in hope that God can still be trusted—then we are asking God to create the kind of condition in our heart that will make resting in his presence possible again.** And God will come. But he may come in unexpected ways.

VI. THE KIND OF PERSON GOD IS

Job is quite convinced that God has left him, and he complains that what he really wants is a chance to square off with God *man-to-man, no, man-to-God.*

Job 23:3-4 *"If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments."*

Be careful what you ask for. . . . Toward the end of his story, Job gets his wish: **Job 38:1** *"Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm."*

What do you think that moment was like?

One of the most striking features of God's rebuttal in the book is that when he appears, he

doesn't seem to get around to answering Job's question of "why!" He doesn't tell Job what the writer tells us—about the upper stage scenes of chapters 1-2. At first I wished he did tell Job, but now I'm glad he didn't - I'll explain later.

But the first thing to catch is that Job didn't seem to mind. When God showed up, His "why" questions didn't seem so important any more. I have a feeling there's something very important there for all of us. When you know God is in your presence, and you know the kind of God he is, then you don't really have to know "why".

God just asks him a bunch of questions Job can't answer. Why does God do this? At first glance it almost looks mean. And certainly part of what's happening is that God is pointing out that Job has a finite mind and a limited point of view.

But there's something more. Ellen Davis writes that God's questions are indicating something about the kind of person He is. They are filled with references to God's extravagant goodness and provision even though there is no "strategic gain" in it at all.

Job 38:25-27 *"Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, . to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass?"*

These lines would jump out at the reader in Job's day. Life in Israel depended on rainfall. They would never waste water. So why would God water "a land where no one lives"?

Because God is a God of gratuitous goodness. And he is uncontrollably generous. He is irrationally loving. He is good for no reason at all. He is good just because he loves to give. He sends streams of living water flowing out of sheer exuberant generosity. There is a wilderness where no one lives, yet it is full of beauty and grace because God makes a river run through it.

God creates, cares for, and delights in animals that don't appear to be good for anything.

What God is really telling Job is, "I'm worth it. Life, following me—it's all worth it. Don't give up. This pain is not going to

last forever. I am the kind of God who is worth getting close to."

Again, *because* God is gratuitously good—and uncontrollably generous—and irrationally loving. He just gives for no reason at all. It's his nature.

Job never does find out about the conversation in heaven, and I'm so glad! Why? Because that makes Job's story, OUR STORY! On this earth we live on the lower stage. Winter comes, and we don't know why either! We have the same problem and the same decision to make.

But Job finds out about something better. He finds out who God is. In **42:4**, Job says, *"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you."*

That's enough. God knows. God cares.

VII. EPILOGUE - JOB GETS IT

Most of the last chapter in the book of Job is an epilogue. In the final words (42:12-14) the writer tells something we would tend to miss, even though ancient readers would catch it. He tells us that Job had more children, then he gives names of Job's daughters, but not of his sons. In Hebrew genealogies, that was unprecedented and unheard of. What's more, they are strange names.

Usually Hebrew names are very serious; they express a character virtue or theological truth. But the names of Job's daughters are all about beauty.

- Jemima means "dove," considered a particularly lovely bird.
- The second daughter is named Keziah, which means "cinnamon," a prized spice.
- But the clincher is daughter number three: Keren-happuch, which means "horn of eye-shadow." Job named her after "makeup." It's as if you named your daughter Estee Lauder or Maybelline.

Not only that, but Job gives them an inheritance. In the ancient, male-dominated world, a father with seven sons would never dream of leaving anything to a daughter.

Sons were obligated to care for parents in their old age. Money that went to daughters would be used to care for their husbands' fathers; it was like putting money in somebody else's pension fund.

So why does the writer include this part of the story? Because now Job delights in and gives to the *least strategic creatures*. Now he is gratuitously good. He is uncontrollably generous. He is irrationally loving. He gives for no reason at all.

Does this remind you of anybody? Satan was dead wrong about old Job. The central question in Job is, “Can a human being hold on to God and faith and love even in the dead of winter?”

The answer is, “Yes.”

Job could not see the upper stage. Job did not know that his faithfulness had meaning beyond his wildest dreams. He did not know that something cosmic and eternal was at stake in his transitory life. Sitting on an ash heap; scraping boils off his skin with shards of broken and discarded pots; feeling broken, sick, mocked, confused, and hopeless—Job discovered what people in pain sometimes learn better than anyone else. He was not alone after all. Not even in winter.