

When God is Silent

“So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place that He was”

- John 11:6

Whether in sermons, books or movies, the Christian world loves to focus on success stories. We hear glorious examples of how a person prayed and God came through in a miraculous way, solving all of his problems. These stories come together like a Hollywood storyline, and everything works out just as we think it should. We love to think of a God who swoops in to save the day like some kind of ethereal superhero in a white robe. While these types of stories are true and encouraging much of the time, for those who are suffering with no seeming help or rescue they can be demoralizing. Sometimes God is silent when we pray. Sometimes He lets us struggle through difficulty, seemingly without any answer to our distress. In real life, sometimes we have to watch while a relative's health declines no matter how fervently we pray; or the finances get tighter as the stretch of joblessness drags on past a year. One of the biggest strains on a Christian's faith comes when God is silent during a period of prolonged suffering.

The story of Lazarus in the Bible is usually told as one of those “superhero in a white robe” moments. His name has become synonymous with resurrection from the dead. I think we see it this way because we start into the story already knowing the dramatic conclusion. We miss the tension that builds and the gut-wrenching grief that preceded the miraculous event because we already know it will have a good ending. As we reread the story, there are some confusing and uncomfortable decisions by Jesus, described in seemingly contradictory ways, which sound more like a real life struggle than any Hollywood Christian story we can find. This event in the life and ministry of Jesus can teach us a great deal about suffering well, as well as how God feels about us and our plight while He remains silent.

The story in John 11 begins with a message being sent to Jesus about a man he loves. His beloved friend Lazarus is sick and dying. We expect the miracle-working Jesus to go running to help his friend, but inexplicably he chooses to wait 2 more days to go to him. Lest we think he has failed to understand the urgency of the situation, Jesus explains in very direct terms to His disciples that Lazarus has died. Even more baffling, Jesus connects his decision to let Lazarus die to his love for the family, and even expresses that He is glad it has happened for the disciples' sake. When Jesus arrives in Bethany, the reader is made aware of the harsh consequences of His decision: after petitioning Jesus for help, Mary and Martha were forced to watch their brother die and grieve his death for 4 days before Jesus finally sauntered into town. Anyone who has had their faith stretched by deep suffering can hear the pain in Mary's voice when she falls on her knees and exclaims, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not

have died.” Jesus wept with her, but we can’t escape that it was His choice to allow this to happen. There seems to be no lack of sincere faith in Mary or Martha, but they were certainly confused and distraught by Jesus’ lack of urgency in coming to Lazarus’ rescue. We do not like to think of God in these terms, but to me and others who have suffered greatly, this seems more like the real God that we have to deal with on a regular basis. He doesn’t always make sense and He sometimes allows the suffering to go on far longer than seems just in our understanding. But, there is good news here. We already know that suffering comes. In this passage we get an inside look at what God feels and why He allows it. First, let’s look at some things that are not true when we are suffering.

A great deal of the confusion that comes with suffering comes from some of our wrong assumptions about God. If I knew that my best friend was dying of an illness for which I have the cure, I would be there in a heartbeat to save his life. If I didn’t go, it would mean that I was procrastinating, that I didn’t care or that he had offended me somehow. No matter the reason, there would be something very wrong with me. We bring these same assumptions to God when suffering occurs. He couldn’t allow someone He loves to suffer, could He? Perhaps He was too busy with ministry responsibilities to get there any sooner. His hands were tied somehow, right? But we know in Jesus’ case that He was not procrastinating. He was, in fact, very intentional and accomplishing something by his waiting. He needed Lazarus to die if He was going to show the disciples His power later. He also was not unfeeling. The author makes it clear by mentioning 3 times how much Jesus loved them, along with documenting Jesus’ compassion and weeping at the scene of Lazarus’ death. Jesus knew what He planned to do, but He was still moved to the point of tears by the grieving of His friends. Finally, we notice by omission that John did not indicate any sin or lack of faith on the part of Lazarus or his family. Jesus never indicates that He is punishing Mary and Martha or that He is waiting for them to ask with more faith. It was for some of His most faithful, beloved disciples that He reserved such a grievous period of suffering. So we see that Jesus was neither disengaged nor disinterested, and no one from Lazarus’ family was disobedient. What then can we see about Jesus as He compassionately allows Lazarus, Mary and Martha to suffer?

To this point in John’s Gospel, Jesus has healed many. Everyone who followed Him was well aware of His power to heal people of sickness. It was for this reason that they called Him when Lazarus became ill. Had He swooped in to save the day, no doubt people would have been grateful. However, they would have gained no further insight into Jesus’ identity than what they already had. Jesus had a bigger plan in mind than their comfort. Jesus’ timing was very important if He was going to get His point across. Healing Lazarus of his sickness would have been no different than any of the others recorded in Scripture (by Jesus or even previous prophets), but raising him from the dead after 4 days in the tomb truly got people’s attention. Many believed in Him once they had witnessed it. Jesus knew the desperate state of the souls

in Jerusalem and He knew the confusion many of them had about His identity. Some thought of Him as a prophet and some as a teacher and miracle worker, but very few seemed to understand that He was God in the flesh, coming to rescue them from death and eternity in hell. He needed them to see His power over death if they were going to trust in Him after His crucifixion. By taking them through this horrific situation, Jesus was setting them up to know the reality of the powerful God they were serving. No other way would have had the same impact. He hated seeing them grieve and suffer, but He was willing to allow them to go through it if it would save their souls from the greater suffering that awaited them if they failed to believe in Him. We see in this gripping account the emotional and spiritual strength of Jesus to walk His followers through suffering that He could have prevented in order to save them in the end. It is a deep love that is able to endure this kind of doubt, despair and confusion from those He loves the most in order to lead them to what He knows is best for them. So, what can we learn about how to respond to this kind of complex and confusing love?

The love we need to experience and accept from Jesus is quite complicated and often confusing. How do we approach a Jesus who is allowing us to suffer? First, we are still called upon to pray to Him for relief and healing. Mary and Martha did, and so did many other saints throughout the Gospels. Many of those people were met with a miracle. Mary and Martha also did not hold back any of the deep emotion they felt as they grieved the loss of their brother. To Jesus' face they expressed grief, despair and probably a bit of anger, all without a rebuke from Him. He is not calling us to some kind of Christian detachment where we are not aware of our plight. He invites and understands our emotions. Third, He wants us to pursue Him rather than avoid Him and wrestle with the hard reality of our situation. Ask Him the tough questions and aggressively seek out an answer to the reason for your suffering. Lazarus' death eventually made sense (although most of us do not get such a clear reason for our suffering) when they were able to see the true purpose of it. He does not let us suffer unnecessarily, and He does not let us suffer alone. He will show up and grieve with us if nothing else, and His presence in our life brings true peace even in the midst of grief. Finally, do not grieve alone. Mary and Martha had many people around grieving with them, even before Jesus showed up. We need comfort and we need support in the midst of trials. Do not believe the "all we need is Jesus" lie, since the people around you constitute His very body. He has designed it to let His people do His work with His help. Sometimes the thing we need most is just someone to cry with us. God is beyond our comprehension and can be confusing. Do not be discouraged if your prayers for relief seem to be going unanswered. Jesus will show up, even if it is later than you expected. He grieves with you, even when He must allow you to suffer. And, you never know when He might be setting you up for an even greater miracle on the other side.

