

God Is Near the Brokenhearted

Psalm 34:18

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Every Sunday when we gather to worship, we gather with the brokenhearted. There is never a week without sorrow, and this week is certainly no exception: Dan Hart is gone to cancer, Dorothy Benedict lost her son-in-law in Norway on Friday, Betty's charge Esther seems to be declining, Patrick is off to care for his elderly father who suffers dementia and his aunt who has become manic. Some of you are caring for parents with cancer, heart disease, or Alzheimer's. Some of you are worried sick about your spouse.

Where is God?

When we are brokenhearted, we may feel that God is far away. The book of Psalms, the authorized prayer-book of the Bible, is full of prayers that express that feeling. Psalm 10 begins, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?" Psalm 13 begins, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" Those words were quoted by Jesus as he hung on the cross, suffering innocently, in excruciating pain, when—at least for a time—even he felt that God was far away.

We have been discussing C. S. Lewis on Thursday nights. He wrote a remarkable book on the subject of suffering called *The Problem of Pain*. But years later he married a woman with cancer, who unexpectedly went in remission and they had a couple of joyful years together. Then the cancer returned and Lewis lost the love of his life. In spite of his theological framework for understanding this experience, the pain of loss was unbearable. Here is Lewis asking "Where is God?" in his memoir called *A Grief Observed*:

But go to [God] 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. You may as well turn away.

So there is this experience, and we might as well be honest about it. Sometimes when we are heartbroken—especially in grief—we feel that God is far away and silent.

But then there is this: If you ask people to look back on their lives and tell you when they experienced the *reality* of God, they almost always tell you about a period of suffering and loss. "When everything else fell out from under me, when I dropped into the void, God was there." If you ask people "When did you really grow spiritually in your life? What event really changed you?" they never say "It was during the happiest days of my life." They always say "It was during the hardest days of my life."

Then there is the witness of the Bible, and of the psalms in particular. With one exception (psalm 88) all the psalms that cry out in pain about God's absence come around and affirm God's presence. Psalm 10 that starts out "Why are you so far away?" says by verse 14, "You, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless." Psalm 22, which begins "Why have you abandoned me?" comes round to this word of testimony: "He did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me but heard when I cried to him" (v. 24).

Both experiences are real: When we are in pain, God can feel far away. But when we voice our true feelings to God and let him know our disappointment or anger, we discover that God hears our complaints. So the truth, I suspect, is that God was never far away in any actual sense—although the whole notion of God’s nearness and farness are metaphorical, not geographical; we can’t measure where God is. What I mean is that God was never ignoring us when we were hurting. God was never against us. It was that our pain for the moment would not permit us to sense God’s presence.

Here is what I take to be the fact of the matter, stated as a proverb in Psalm 34:18—“God is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.” If there is anyone God is close to, it is the one who has been crushed. He answers the prayers of the poor man, the desperate, the one crying out from the pit. The one God is far from is the proud man, the woman who thinks she has it together; God is far from those who have no need of him. Psalm 138:6 says “Though the LORD is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly, but he takes notice of the proud from afar.” Isaiah (53:18 HCSB) says much the same thing:

For the High and Exalted One
who lives forever, whose name is Holy says this:
“I live in a high and holy place,
and with the oppressed and lowly of spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and revive the heart of the oppressed.”

Jesus echoes this idea when he begins the Sermon on the Mount with these words: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

Jesus in his teaching and in his life reflects the Old Testament truth that God is with the lowly, that he is close to the poor and the sick. Jesus was a picture of God’s presence. Jesus *was* God’s presence with the brokenhearted. But there is more. When Jesus went to the cross, he *became* one of the brokenhearted. In Jesus, God actually shared our suffering and shared the experience of feeling far from God. We can be sure that Jesus “knows all about our troubles.” And when we suffer we can experience what the apostle Paul calls “the fellowship of his sufferings.” Christians do not believe that all suffering is redemptive or that suffering itself is a path to God. What we say is that in the midst of our sufferings we can experience the presence of Christ.

What are the times that God really worked in my life? Not so much in high moments of worship, but in the low times: when I got kicked out of school, when I got electrocuted and could have died, when the mission board rejected me, when a few church leaders tried to get rid of me as pastor, in my mother’s sickness, in being with people in death, in watching Becca deal with chronic pain. One of our older members told me this week she had a question for me: “Do you smile in your sleep?” She said I’m always smiling when I’m awake. I’d say I’m a pretty happy guy, and I experience God’s presence in times of contentment and walking the beach, but I have found that it is true that God is near—perhaps nearest—when I am brokenhearted.

If you listen to the stories of missionaries, you often hear them say that they really experienced God’s nearness in times of suffering and danger. John G. Paton was a Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides in the South Pacific, now called Vanuatu, beginning in 1858. He was 34 when he arrived. He found the natives to be hostile, violent, naked, and cannibalistic, but he was determined to share the message of Jesus with them. Four months after he landed, his wife died. Two weeks after that his newborn son died. After four years of danger, there was an

uprising against him and he thought he'd better try to escape. Paton's one island friend told him to leave the village and hide in a particular tree. Here's how he recorded that night.

I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush. The hours I spent there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets, and the yells of the Savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe in the arms of Jesus. Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among these chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior's spiritual presence, to enjoy His consoling fellowship.

Paton escaped to serve the people of that nation for 45 more years, until his death, and today the nation is overwhelmingly Christian.

You see, sometimes there is more going on than just God consoling us in our suffering for our own benefit. Sometimes God is comforting us for the benefit of others, to draw them to faith in Christ. Sometimes it is only our brokenheartedness and our physical suffering that can ever communicate the love of Christ to them. We ourselves came to know the love of God by seeing Jesus suffer on the cross. Sometimes people can only come to know the love of Jesus by seeing *us* suffer.

One more story: at Billy Graham's conference for itinerant evangelists in Amsterdam one of the more unlikely participants was a Masai warrior named Joseph. One day Joseph was walking along a hot, dirty African road when he met someone who shared the story of Jesus with him. Right then and there, Joseph became a Christian. The Spirit began to work in his life and he wanted to go back to his village to tell his own tribe about Jesus. He went door to door telling people how Jesus suffered and died for them and they could be saved, expecting their faces to light up the way his had. But the men of the village grabbed him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die in the bush. These were his own people.

Somehow Joseph managed to crawl to a waterhole where, after several days of passing in and out of consciousness, he was able to get up. He wondered why his reception had been so hostile. He thought it must have been his fault. He must have left something out or told the story incorrectly. So he went back to try again. He limped into the middle of the circle of huts and began to say "Jesus died for you so that you could find forgiveness and come to know the living God." But again he was grabbed by the men and the women beat him, reopening the wounds. Again they dragged him from the village and left him to die.

That he even survived this time was a miracle. Days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised and scarred but determined to go back. The third time they attacked him before he even opened his mouth. As they flogged him he spoke to them about Jesus and how he loved them and how he suffered for them. Just before Joseph passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him with barbed wire had begun to weep. This time Joseph awoke in his own bed. The ones who had beaten him were now standing around his bed, trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. While he had been unconscious, the entire village had come to faith in Christ. [Michael Card, "Wounded in the House of Friends," *Virtue* (March/April 1991, 28-9, 69 quoted by John Piper www.desiringgod.org)]

This is what Paul meant when he talked about "sharing in Christ's sufferings" and even "completing what is lacking in his sufferings." Sometimes the only way other people can see Jesus is in our suffering and the way we respond to it. Look, I don't want to choose suffering. I don't want the natives of Block Island to come after me with barbed wire. But if I do suffer—

even if I am bullied—I know that the Lord will be near me. And if I suffer with that knowledge it may be that someone will grasp the love of Jesus for the first time.

Hymn (Tune=*All the Way My Savior Leads Me*)

God is near the brokenhearted and he comforts those who mourn;
Mighty arms are underneath us from the moment we are born.
When we seem to walk in silence, when his voice we cannot hear,
There is love within that silence; it is then that God draws near.
Suff'ring love our Savior's essence, there is nothing left to fear.

Farthest from the self-sufficient, God is nearest to the weak.
In the center of our suff'ring is the comfort that we seek.
If I make my bed in Hades, still his love will find me there.
If I walk through death or shadow, I will know his constant care.
God is near the brokenhearted and my tears shall be my prayer.