

WHEN YOU CAN'T PRAY

**FINDING HOPE WHEN YOU'RE
NOT EXPERIENCING GOD**

Second Edition

AL TRUESDALE



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TEN

WHEN GOD HIDES



JAWS DROPPED in 2009 when some of the private writings of Mother Teresa (1910–1997) appeared, published as *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. No twentieth-century Christian was more admired for her love for God and the earth’s dispossessed. For almost fifty years, she extended inexhaustible love and care to the poor of Calcutta, India. If ever a person walked and talked with God on a regular basis, if ever anyone’s prayers were faithfully heard and answered by God, it was the prayers of Mother Teresa. She had a steady cheerful demeanor and was always ready to encourage others. At least, that was the image we had of her. But when *Come Be My Light* appeared, a darker side of Teresa’s walk with the Lord surfaced, surprising her admirers and shocking some of her closest friends. Much of her life was pockmarked by an inner darkness that made her feel alone and estranged from God. She knew the meaning of “the dark night of the soul,” about which St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) and St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) spoke.

In spite of a deep, even painful longing for God, many times Teresa felt unwanted, even repulsed by God. Committed to being an apostle of joy, she often teetered on the precipice of despair; for long periods she was plagued by a silent and hidden God. “Do not think that my spiritual life is strewn with roses—that is the flower which I hardly ever find on my way. Quite the contrary, I have more often as my companion ‘darkness.’ And when the night becomes very thick—and it seems to me as if I will wind up in hell—then I simply offer myself to Jesus.”¹

Teresa speaks for many children of God who have encountered what seems to be a silent and hidden God. It is an odyssey in which all the once-familiar markers vanish and all comforting words from God become mute. Even supportive counsel from Christian friends cannot penetrate this thick barrier. Although God is spoken to, even yelled at, God does not speak in return. Tortured by faith’s dark night, the soul grasps for some limb or outcropping as the descent into silence and loneliness intensifies. Heaven turns to brass. Prayers falter like dying sparks. This was what Mother Teresa at times experienced.

The Hiddenness of God

A profound mystery in Israel’s life with God, one that scholars discuss but cannot fully explain, is the silence and hiddenness of God. It is the experience of a God who, to all appearance, sometimes seems passive and unresponsive to fervent appeals voiced by his people. Isaiah states the matter plainly: “Truly, you are a God who hides [Hebrew *sathar*, to conceal] . . . O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isa. 45:15, NRSV). On occasion in the Old Testament, disobedience or moral failure is interpreted as the reason for God’s hiddenness and silence (Deut. 31:16–18; 32:19–20; Ps. 89:46; Isa. 59:2; Mic. 3:4).

If disobedience and severe moral lapse were the only reason for God hiding, an explanation would be readily available and straightforward. But that is only part of the story. In other instances there is no apparent reason, and Israel's response becomes downright accusatory as though God has flat-out failed to be God, failed to keep his promise as a responsive, covenantal partner. The mood comes close to accusing God of moral failure or cowardice. Psalm 10 boldly asks, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (v. 1, NRSV; see also 13:1). Engulfed by unidentified terrors, and crying out for help without response, the psalmist questions, "Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" (88:14).

However, that language is mild, almost timid, when compared with Psalm 44, in which God is charged with dereliction of duty in time of crisis. Simply put, God went AWOL when the battle started, is simply nowhere to be found. Israel has boasted to the nations of God's power and faithfulness. But when the chips are down, God fails to back up the boast, abandons Israel, and leaves them to retreat before their enemies. Deserted, Israel becomes "a reproach to our neighbors" (Ps. 44:13). The harsh accusation rolls on until, finally, the psalmist accuses God of being asleep on the job. "Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (44:23–24). The psalm closes without a whisper of response from God.

The most sustained display of God's silence is found in the book of Job, where, in dramatic form, the most difficult questions of faith and the lived crises of life are openly aired. Job's accusers—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—think they have God and life figured out. They are confident that the world is governed by a morally consistent, reliable God whose ways are clearly comprehensible: *People suffer*

because they have sinned. Examine yourself and admit your own disobedience. God's displeasure and remoteness is your own fault!

Job is willing to admit guilt, if he is proven to be a disobedient sinner. But, until then, there is no way to reconcile his friends' orthodoxy with the wretchedness of his life. As part of Job's reply to his accusers (12:1–14:22), he tells God in so many words, *If I have sinned, don't play games with me. Out with it! Tell me what my transgressions are!* (see 13:23). Job asks the same question posed by the psalmist: "Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (13:24). With a hint of sarcasm, Job queries the Almighty: "Will you torment a windblown leaf? Will you chase after dry chaff?" (13:25). Job seems to be asking God, *While you are hiding, is this how you use your time?* (13:25–27).

It is quite possible that Israel's experience of exile in Babylon helped shape the book of Job into its final form and that the experience of exile is partly being expressed in the narrative. To the extent that this is correct, exile in a foreign land, far removed from Jerusalem, becomes a fine metaphor for describing the experience of exile for God's people who, like Isaiah, the psalmist, Job, and Mother Teresa, experience God's silence and hiding.

A Path Out of the Darkness?

Where are Christians who identify with Mother Teresa and company supposed to turn? Is there a path forward, perhaps even out of the darkness? Is there counsel that doesn't ignore the mystery of God's silence and the oppressive, even maddening pain it engenders? Is there hope that transcends the blame that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar administer?

Yes, but none neatly resolves the biblical witness to God's silence and hiddenness. Experience has established an indelible record in Scripture and in the lives of God's people. Ignoring that

record cheapens faith and assigns it to a Pollyanna status. A religion doesn't deserve the attention and energy of honest people if it can't tackle life raw and unrefined.

Let's examine some facets of God's hiddenness that may help lead a child of God out of the darkness.

1. The Scriptures tell it like it is and thereby gain the respect of honest people. God doesn't silence desolate voices.

2. As the New Testament makes clear, the experience of the people of God with their God is woefully incomplete apart from the rich and varied witness of the Old Testament (Luke 24:21–27; John 5:39–40, 45–47), including its torturous wrestling with a sometimes silent and hidden God. The entire Bible belongs to the church and is our map for the Christian journey. We can't understand the Old Testament apart from the New, nor the New apart from the Old (John 5:39–47).

3. Though God is made known through the Scriptures, and definitively in the incarnate Son of God, God remains the sovereign God of holy love whose ways are sometimes beyond knowledge. No one more succinctly states this concept than the inspired apostle Paul. He writes letter after letter explaining the mystery of the gospel. But after working to explain how all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:25–32), Paul exclaims:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?

For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

4. It is important that we not permit our limited perception regarding God's activity to set the limits of what God is doing. We can be confident *something* is happening when it seems *nothing* is happening. The psalmist's question "Why do you sleep?" (Ps. 44:23) is prompted only by what he can see—as torturous as it is.

Habakkuk, who accuses God of standing idly by while the wicked swallow up the righteous (Hab. 1:13), is extremely upset. After he calms down, God tells him that, far from being inactive, he is actually using the wicked Chaldeans as instruments of his larger purpose.

5. Recall Jesus's fulfilled promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate who is "with us forever" (John 14:16) and who will never "leave us desolate" (14:18, RSV), even though we may not be able to detect his designs. Many times the Holy Spirit works below the radar, so to speak. One of the most assuring and joyous promises in the New Testament is that the Holy Spirit knows our weaknesses and intercedes for us in the Father's presence (Rom. 8:22–27). This is true for every Christian, regardless of whether we are young or old, weak or strong, mobile or infirm, joyous or lamenting. On our behalf, the Holy Spirit is never truant.

6. The New Testament telegraphs a hiddenness of God that Christians sometimes bring upon themselves. It happens when we refuse to forgive those who have offended or wronged us. Refusal to forgive fractures the compact of grace (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Titus 3:3–7), and casts a vote for Satan's opposition to reconciliation and the peace of God.

The Lord's Prayer says, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). The two expressions of forgiveness—God's and ours—are inseparable; exclude one, and the other slips away (Matt. 6:24–25; see also James 2:8). The Greek word for

“debts” leaves no doubt about their gravity. The debtor is guilty. Debtors have failed in their (moral) duty. Nevertheless, desiring to receive God’s forgiveness while retaining an attitude of unforgiveness is futile and self-deceptive (Matt. 6:14–15). God’s forgiveness is the model for our forgiving others. *Being forgiven* should make *forgiving* possible.

In perfect concord with the Lord’s Prayer, the apostle Paul exhorts Christians in Ephesus, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God’s example” (Eph. 4:32–5:1a; see also Col. 3:13).

The rationale behind the two commands is that, if God were a petulant grudge keeper, all of us would be hopeless. Instead, God seeks reconciliation in love and forgives the offender without trivializing the offense. If we want to be affiliated with this gracious God, we must be willing to act as we see him acting. Failure to do so implicitly withdraws our own request and need to be forgiven.

Jesus cannot be clearer. “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25, NRSV; see also Matt. 5:23–24). Seeking God’s forgiveness and having communion with God are conditioned by, predicated upon, forgiving our fellow debtors (Matt. 18:21–35).

A clear and compelling vision of Jesus on the cross can help remove this form of hiddenness.

7. Without wanting to sound like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, there is a final factor that needs to be added. Our own physical, emotional, psychological, and domestic states of health can have a powerful influence on our ability to hear God when God is trying to address us. When things are turbulent in our lives it is tempting, sometimes almost compelling, to think the turbulence occurs because of spiritual failures.

Years ago I suffered with a dear clergy friend gripped for two years by major depressive disorder. Held fast by feelings of sadness and emptiness, gripped by feelings of worthlessness and guilt, he mourned God's silence, absence, and hiddenness. Clinical depression, a malady that ran in his family, was the source of his darkness. What he needed most, and received, was excellent medical care. Today, he is psychologically healthy and understands the medical causes of his dark night of the soul.

If you or a friend or relative show signs of major depressive disorder, seek the prayer support of fellow Christians, certainly. But do not neglect to seek care from competent professionals who know how to help patients move toward emotional and mental health.