

# Faith in the Dark

A sermon delivered by Wendell Griffen, Pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Ark., on October 14, 2012.

## **Job 23:1-17**

*23Then Job answered: 2“Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. 3Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! 4I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. 5I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. 6Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. 7There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.*

*8“If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; 9on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. 10But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. 11My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. 12I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.*

*13But he stands alone and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does. 14For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind. 15Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. 16God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; 17If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!*

## **Psalm 22:1-15**

*1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

*2O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*

*3Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

*4In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.*

*5To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*

6But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people.

7All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

8“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

9Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.

10On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

11Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

12Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

13they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

14I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

15my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

History shows that humans can adapt to changing circumstances and situations even when we are under great pressure. Some of the best lessons of faith, courage, sacrifice, cooperation, valor, and devotion are lived and learned during such experiences.

But the passages from Job 23 and Psalm 22 show that faith comes under its greatest pressure when we can't sense God's presence. As tough as things can get at times, we are somehow able to deal with it better by knowing that God is with us. But what about when we must walk through dark experiences and can't sense God's presence?

We know life includes sorrows as well as joys. When we must walk through the dark valley of grief and sorrow, we want to sense God's presence.

We know life includes sickness and disease as well as health and vitality. When we walk through the dark valley of fear, anxiety, and pain, we want to sense God's presence.

We know life includes enemies and dangers as well as loving friends and family members. When our enemies attack and threaten to overcome us, we want to sense God's presence.

We know that our journey includes the experience of dying as well as all the other experiences in living. When death approaches, we need to sense God's presence.

What happens to our faith when we can't? What does faith look, feel, and act like in the dark? What is our ministry with and to people who must endure suffering and pain along with what appears to be the deliberate silence of God?

**Faith in the dark is frustrated faith.** The words we find in Job 23 are utterances from a crying soul.

*"Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. 3Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! 4I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. 5I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me.*

...

*7There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge. 8"If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot*

*perceive him; 9on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

...

*17If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!*

The frustration of a suffering soul also comes through plainly in the lesson from Psalm 22.

*1My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? 2O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*

Frustrated faith happens when we need to be comforted as only God can comfort us but God is silent. Frustrated faith comes from coming up empty after having resorted to our tried and trusted ways of seeking God. Frustrated faith comes when God doesn't seem to vindicate us when we've been standing in the gap and proclaiming our devotion to God. Frustrated faith comes from not knowing what God is doing with us, from feeling like God won't even hear our cries and pleas, and from knowing we can't do anything about it.

Frustrated faith isn't merely about feeling like God has put us on hold. It isn't about feeling like God has stepped out and left a message for us to use voice mail. It feels like we have called on God from the depth of our dark situations and experiences only to hear the phone ringing, ringing, and ringing!

We know God is there. We know God knows we are calling. We know God knows we are suffering and calling about it. God knows we are desperate to hear from God. But God won't pick up the phone. God is inexplicably silent!

It's hard enough to endure the kind of suffering Job experienced (family tragedies, business failures, what appears to be incurable illness, and accusations from friends). But on top of all that, Job had to deal with a growing dreadful feeling that God was ignoring and evading him.

So what is a reverent soul to do with it? Confess it! Follow Job's example. Vent the anger and frustration. Our complaints and objections won't make God show up. But Job shows that we need to "get stuff off our chests" with God when it seems that God is ignoring or eluding us.

Yes, we can complain about God's silence. We can object to it. We do all of that and still be faithful. For faithfulness isn't always comfortable. It isn't always cordial. And it isn't always polite. Sometimes the honest response of a faithful heart when God seems to be purposely silent is "I don't like this and I want you to know!"

Job's comments show us that we can admit our bitter frustration when God is inexplicably silent. The frustration must be admitted. It is real. It is undeniable and inescapable. God can handle our honest frustration. Our honest frustration isn't a sign that our faith is weak or gone. It's proof of faith that is frustrated and frustrating!

Frustrated faith is sometimes the only faith we can live in the dark! Sometimes the only faith we can live is faith that angrily and bitterly cries, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

And when faithful people are going through such frustrating times, they need our encouragement and understanding. They don't need us belittling their frustrations and suffering. They need for us to lovingly listen, lovingly give them venting room, and lovingly share their frustration and pain. They are in the dark. They are frustrated because God is inexplicably silent about their suffering. In that painful place they need us to be instruments of tenderness and compassion.

People around us will experience pain so great and frustrating that they, like Job, cry, *If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!* When that happens, we must be flickering candles of love and hope in the darkness with them. We must not add to that darkness by making them feel guilty about their honest frustration.

**Don't stop calling, believing, and trusting God!** It's tempting when people

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don't return our calls to stop calling, even in this age of voice mail. But don't yield to that temptation in the dark times of faith. Even when he was in the depth of his frustration and anger about God's inexplicable silence, Job held on to enough faith to continue trusting God. *But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.* [Job 23:10]. *For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind.* [Job 23:15]

Despite the feeling of the Psalmist at Psalm 22 of being forsaken, we read these words at verses 3 thru 5: *Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. 4In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. 5To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*

Their message is a defiant affirmation of God's trustworthiness despite the inexplicable fact of God's silence and their frustration concerning it. They affirm that God is good, just, and trustworthy even in their frustration and pain. They declare that God's silence is painful, but God is still present. God's silence is painful, but God is still up to something with them. God's silence is painful, but they will not quit trusting and loving God.

Beloved, when life turns dark and God is inexplicably silent, remember that silence doesn't mean non-existence. Silence doesn't mean unconcern. Silence doesn't mean disapproval. Divine silence during our seasons of darkness may be part of God's process of producing something in and from us that would never be produced otherwise.

God is working even when God is silent. God is working even when we are frustrated. God is working even when life around us dark. God is working even when we don't understand God's work or our place in it.

Dr. Gardner Taylor has been an inspiring preacher for many people across his long ministry. Dr. Taylor and the first Mrs. Taylor (Laura) were guests in our home and met our sons when the congregation where I was serving invited him to preach for a church anniversary. But their long and inspiring marriage ended tragically when Laura Taylor died after being struck by a truck while crossing a

New York street.

After she died, Dr. Taylor returned to preach a second time at the church where I served. As we drove to the airport for his return flight to New York, he admitted his painful grief and spoke honestly about how he dealt with God about it. I will never forget his words. *I told God that I do not like this. I said I cannot see any way that this is good or how you will get any good out of this. But if there is a way for you to get good out it, I will go through it.*

Gardner Taylor said to God, "I will continue calling, hoping, and trusting you, even though I don't understand what's happening and don't like it." Gardner Taylor told God, "I'm yours. If there is a way for you to be glorified by this darkness, I will trust you even if I can't understand it."

That's faith in the dark. Amen.