**WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT**

**PRODIGAL MESSAGE #13**

* **Memory verse of the week**:
* **Proverbs 3:5–6 ESV: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”**

*I was numb. I had just hung up the phone after speaking with the counselor at Wilderness Treatment Center. He had called me to confirm the safe arrival of my son at their facility to tell me that he had tested strongly positive for cocaine and marijuana. Just a few hours earlier, he had vehemently sworn to me that he was clean and that sending him to rehab was a mistake.*

* *In that moment and the days that followed, my mind wandered back to the circumstances surrounding my son’s adoption—circumstances that had God’s hand all over them. On April 17, 1984, during my residency training in Salt Lake City, my supervising surgeon at the time, Hugh Hogle MD, took my wife, Ginny, and I out to dinner. It was the first and only instance that Dr. Hogle and I shared a meal together. In the two years prior to that meal, Ginny and I had lost two babies from miscarriages late in the second trimester due to a medical condition that we discovered in Ginny. But that night, we spent the entire dinner talking about Dr. Hogle’s five adopted children—all from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds—and about the joy that their family had.*

*Adoption had never occurred in our family and had never really been discussed. In fact, I spoke with my brother—my best friend—almost every day for the last 10 years, and we had never once discussed adoption. But, two days after that dinner with Dr. Hogle, my brother—who knew nothing of the dinner—called me and asked if I might be interested in a private adoption. He was a lawyer, and a colleague of his had a young pregnant mother who was giving up her baby, and she was supposedly due in June. For some reason, I told Ginny that I was sure that that was our baby, and so we accepted the offer. Three days later, we received a call from my brother, who said that a sonogram had revealed that the baby’s due date would be closer to mid-May. Surprised, we began to speed up our planning … only to receive a call two days later and learn that the mother had gone into labor! So, on April 27, 1984—only 10 days after that fateful dinner meeting—our soon-to-be-adopted son was born, and we were flying back to Texas to go pick him up.*

*I was not following God closely at the time of my son’s birth; but, as the years have unfolded since, I have never experienced an event in my life in which I was more certain that God’s sovereign hand was at work. So, after hanging up the phone with the counselor and remembering the supernatural circumstances that placed our son in our lives, I sat in tears, wondering what God was up to. How could He give me a son, only to bring heartache and pain to my son and my family? Hunter’s life was on the line. How could God take him away?*

* “Live long enough and important dreams will shatter. Things will go wrong that God will not fix. He could fix them, but He doesn’t. It is a Sacred Mystery.”

– Larry Crabb[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

In our prodigal journey, we often find ourselves wondering where God is. We ask, “What is He up to? Why is He waiting to fix this problem? Can’t He see that things are getting worse, even downright dangerous? Does He even care about my prodigal’s talent and potential?” Thus, as we wrestle with these questions, we are actually wrestling with God—and wrestling with God is *OK*! God wants us to pursue Him genuinely and have a deep and intimate relationship with Him. It is acceptable and appropriate to work through honest and tough questions. In this week’s message, therefore, we will focus on the answers to these all too common questions.

* “Truth must govern our emotions, not the other way around.”

– John Streetstone[[2]](#footnote-2)

* **Wrestling with God and having doubts is nothing new**

Mark 9:20–24 reads,

And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! **All things are possible for one who believes**.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “**I believe; help my unbelief**!”

Despite such an admission by the boy’s father, we should take heart that Jesus healed the boy in the verses that follow. If we only have faith like a mustard seed, we can move mountains and mulberry trees (Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6)! And so, this passage in Mark 9 reminds us that as finite humans with limited understanding, we will always struggle with comprehending the grand plan of the infinite, eternal, omnipresent, and omnipotent God. Therefore, we must trust in what He tells us about Himself. **The more we know God, the less we will wrestle with Him**.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

– A. W. Tozer[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Truths that help when God seems silent**

1. *God is always with us.*

* **Psalm 139:1–3, 7–8**:“O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. … Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!”
* **Jeremiah 23:23–24**: “Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord.”

1. *There is a lot going on that we do not see or understand.*

* **Ephesians 6:12**: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”
* **Luke 22:31–32**: Jesus speaking to Simon Peter: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.”
* See also **Job 38:1–42:6; Daniel 10:12–13; 1 Peter 5:8**.

1. *God’s timing is different from ours.*

* **2 Peter 3:8–9**: “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

1. *Our wisdom is limited.*

* **Proverbs 14:12**: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”
* **Isaiah 55:8–9**: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

“God’s restraint has a purpose. When He appears to be doing nothing, He is doing something we've not yet learned to value and therefore cannot see. Only in the agony of His absence, both in the real absence of certain blessings and in the felt absence of His Presence, will we relax our determined grasp of our empty selves enough to appreciative His purposes.”

– Larry Crabb[[4]](#footnote-4)

God’s greatest work in history was through his Son, Jesus. He did this great work in the still, fear-filled silence of the three days that Jesus was buried after His death. As Crabb states above, it is often in moments of silence such as this when God is up to something incredible. Our moments of silence should make us think about what is truly important, what we can really control, who is actually in control, and if God is truly good and can be trusted.

**Common issues we wrestle with**

Expectations

There are certain issues that consistently come up in the minds of those who love and care for prodigals, especially prodigal children. We love them and see their potential and talent. We have human expectations and are often frustrated when such expectations are not met. Expectations of a college education, sports success, a high paying job, a spouse, etc. are not bad expectations in and of themselves; but, they may not be what God has planned for our prodigals. It has been said often, “Expectations are just planned disappointments.” God’s Word provides insight into God’s sovereignty over our expectations:

* **Jeremiah 18:3–4**: “So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.”
* **Jeremiah 29:11**: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”
* **Romans 9:20–21**: “Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”

Knowing and understanding God

The above passages articulate clearly what we already know: God is in control, He sees the whole picture, and He has a plan for our prodigals that is in their best interest. When we lose track of that, we can fall into the trap of creating a false vision of who God is and what He is doing. We must be careful in such moments for **when God seems silent, nothing creates bitterness faster than trusting in a god of our own creation over the Living God revealed in Scripture**. But, if we can be confident in these truths about God, then we can begin to trust Him even when He seems silent. Our memory verse of the week, Proverbs 3:5–6 sums up this paradigm plainly yet eloquently: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”

As we wrestle with God, it is crucial that we understand and accept God’s love not only for our prodigals but for us as well. In last week’s message, we discussed how we can be *certain* of God’s love for us (see Prodigal Message #12: Loving your Prodigal). So, if we can confidently grasp the fact that God loves us unconditionally, then we can find comfort in the midst of His apparent silence. This truth may seem too simple—too easy even—but its implications are astounding when it’s fully embraced.

* **Romans 5:8**: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
* **Ephesians 2:4–5**: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”
* **1 John 4:10, 15–16, 18–19**: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. … Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. … There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.”

Wrestling with God vs. anger at God

It bears repeating that wrestling with God is OK—it is *not* a sin. If you cry out to God in order to know Him, His character, and His ways better, then James 4:8 should be of comfort to you: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” There is no sin in sincere questioning God from an honest and seeking posture; however, bitter anger directed toward God cannot be righteous anger and—in *that* case—does constitute a sin. Anger at God assumes that He got it wrong, can make mistakes, or is uncaring—all of which are false assumptions based purely on emotional impulse. Anger at God can be caused by pride, as God doesn’t carry out the plan that *you* desired based on your finite perspective. In addition, anger at God can be caused by simply not knowing or trusting Him enough. Finally, anger at God does not bring Him glory and, thus, runs counter to our purpose.

**Conclusion: Navigating God’s apparent silence**

In those moments when God seems silent, *remember the garden*. In the silence, Satan whispers in our ears the same kinds of things that he whispered to Eve in the garden of Eden: “God is not who He says He is. He doesn’t love you like He says He does. He doesn’t have your best interest at heart. He wants to rob you of your happiness. That apple won’t bother you; it will give you the knowledge of God and make you His equal. You are the God of your own life—do as you think best” (see Genesis 3:1–5). But, we must remember that Satan is the father of lies and a master manipulator (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:3, 14; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 12:9).

If you know nothing more about God than His faithfulness and love toward us in sending His Son to pay the penalty for our sins—that is enough. God instructs us on *how* to navigate the silence: “…looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself,** **so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted**” (Hebrew 12:2–3).

If we fix our eyes on Jesus in all things, then we can have an eternal perspective, much like the Apostle Paul, who says: “But we have this treasure [the gospel and the light of Christ in us]in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; … So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:7–9, 16–18).

And so, we navigate the silence through trustin the Living God. We do not listen to or believe the lies of the devil. We develop our trust by growing in our relationship with God. Pure and simple, **we trust God in the silence because of who He is and what we believe Him to be**. If you don't know who God is and don’t have a relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ, then the silence would understandably be frightening and filled with uncertainty. However, if you embrace the fact that God is good, He loves you, and He cares for you, then you can trust Him in all circumstances—*even* in silence. Then, all you can do is wait patiently on the Lord, being confident in the silence that all will be well in the end when Christ returns to make all things new (Revelation 21:1–5).

In closing, we include a powerful picture painted by Brant Hanson*,* which sums up all that we have covered in this message:

*When we lived in Houston, our kids were little, and going anywhere was a logistical nightmare. I remember, one Saturday, finally getting our kids ready to go and buckled into their seats.*

*We had to stop by the grocery store, so I waited in the car with the kids while Carolyn jumped out, bought her stuff, and jumped back in. We drove around some more, through another neighborhood, to drop something off at some friends’. And then we had a couple of more errands to run.*

*We finally pulled onto I-95 south and drove for about twenty minutes in what I thought was a 65 zone. But it wasn’t; it was 55. I got pulled over by a Harris County officer, and we all sat in the car until he came back with a much-deserved ticket.*

*Eventually we pulled off the shoulder and kept going until we turned onto another interstate. That's when my daughter took her thumb out of her mouth and said something.*

*“Um…Daddy, where are we going?”*

Oh. Yeah. I should tell her.

*“We’re going to the big rodeo. We’re going to see horses!”*

*“Oh! Okay.”*

*That was it. But it dawned on me: How odd had this whole trip been, from her perspective? From the very outset, she’d just been sitting, buckled in, while we went here and there and everywhere. She’d just watched her mom run in and out, and a strange man approach the car with a funny hat and flashing lights, and we turned this way, and turned that way, and sped up and slowed down and sped up again.*

*And she had no idea where we were going. None. But she was cool with it.*

*If that were me, I’d want to know right off the bat. Where are we going? What are we doing? What’s up next? Why are we doing this?*

*But she wasn’t the least bit offended with my lack of communication. She’s a child, and children are, by nature, humble. They don’t have to know everything.*

*She knew almost nothing—not the final distance, not the final destination, not the duration of our stay, not even the reason for leaving her home.*

*What she did know, though, mattered infinitely. It’s the distinctive line between a life of mistrust, stress, exhaustion, anger, bitterness, and ceaseless striving, and a life of contentment and rest. And not just for her, but for all of us who know that, ultimately, we’re not in control.*

She knew who was driving.

*She knew, and still knows, that the one who is driving…loves her.*

*And that makes all the difference.*[[5]](#footnote-5)

*As I (Jay) look back at that moment when I got off the phone with the counselor from the rehab center, when I was wondering what God was up to, I realized that I was ill-prepared, as I simply didn’t know God well enough. I thought I did, but I didn’t. I still wanted control; I was too proud. However, my painful journey over the last 13 years since that day has humbled me, sharpened me, and opened my eyes to the truth of Who is driving the car of my life—and that* ***He loves me.***

…*And that has made all the difference.*

**Closed Group Discussion Questions**

**Day 1**

Describe in detail a time when you wrestled with God and what the outcome was.

**Day 2**

In Luke 22:31–32, Jesus prays that Peter’s faith will not fail; but, shortly thereafter, Peter denies Jesus three times. How can you explain this? Was Jesus’ prayer accomplished or thwarted?

**Day 3**

Describe your expectations for your prodigal. What were they before you joined the Prodigal Ministry and what are they now? How have they changed?

**Day 4**

In reviewing this week’s message, discuss in your own words the reasons that God may seem silent.

**Day 5**

What Scriptures guide you and help you find comfort and perspective when God seems silent and distant?

**Day 6**

Who is “driving” the car of your life and why?

**NOTES**

1. Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Pathway to Joy* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Streetstone, “Post-Truth, the Word of the Year: Feelings Have Replaced Facts,” BreakPoint, November, 22, 2016, http://www.breakpoint.org/2016/11/post-truth-the-word-of-the-year/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Crabb, *Shattered Dreams*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brant Hansen, *Unoffendable: How Just One Change Can Make All of Life Better* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2015), 200–201. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)