



WHEN GOD GOES QUIET

Today we're going to think about something that most of us experience at some point, but few of us are willing to talk about: how do we sing when God goes quiet on us?

Psalm 77

Anyone here a John Grisham fan? Well, Psalm 77 takes the form of a courtroom drama – and God Himself is in the dock. What's the charge? Unfaithfulness. Does God keep His word? Does God remember His promises? In this psalm, God Himself is called to give evidence.

Before we dive in, did you notice that Hebrew word *selah* again? As I've said before, *selah* means 'break' or 'pause', and was probably some kind of direction for the temple musicians. It divides the psalm into 4 sections, 4 points – 2 questions, 2 answers:

1) Is God There (vs1-3)? Asaph had obviously been brought up with the understanding that when you're in trouble, you pray – because that's exactly what he does.

Unfortunately, it's a prayer that doesn't seem to work. He's been crying all night, and he's still crying in the morning. And sometimes, that can be our experience, too. Because yes, we know that God is supposed to use bad times to bring us closer to Him; and yes, we know He's supposed to speak to us when we read the Bible; and yes, we know He's supposed to comfort us

and strengthen us when we pray. But sometimes, if we're honest, God can feel distant (like a million light years away), the Bible can feel dry and irrelevant; and our prayers can feel like they're bouncing off the ceiling.

And maybe that's why the Holy Spirit inspired Asaph to write these words in the first place – as a way of saying, "It's OK to tell God how you really feel. Not just to tell Him what you think He wants to hear, but to tell Him what you need to say. To admit when you're struggling."

So, that's what Asaph is doing: he's beginning to question whether God is listening (or maybe whether He's there at all?), which paves the way for question #2:

2) Does God Care (vs4-9)? Asaph's going through some difficulties, he's losing sleep, and like many of us, he can't even talk to his friends. This is what he does instead:

- **He begins to reflect:** "I remember when life was good. Marriage was great, the kids wanted to spend time with me, I was surrounded by friends, my health was OK, my job was going well, I was actually getting stuff out of the Bible, and I could pray for more than 30 seconds at a time. I felt close to God."
- **He begins to react:** "Now my life's crap! Why haven't I got a partner? Why can't we have children? Where have my friends gone? Why is my job still on the line? Why has this illness dragged on? Is God mad at me? God gets mad at sin – have I committed some kind of sin I don't even know about?"

Now understand: if we wilfully do what is wrong, God may have to discipline us, like the loving Father that He is - but that doesn't account for every bad experience in life. Look at Job. Job was a godly man who experienced a string of disasters – financial ruin, family tragedy, failing health – and thought it was a punishment. But it wasn't. It was God's way of shaping Job into the man of faith he had the potential to be. The same can be true of us.

That, then, is the case for the prosecution; now for the defence!

3) God *Is* There (vs10-15). OK, so at this point in the psalm Asaph's stance begins to change. And the tone changes too – instead of accusing God, instead of questioning His reality and integrity, Asaph begins to act as the defence. And his argument goes like this:

We know God is there. How? Because of the evidence:

- **His work in creation.** Asaph remembers that God is the one who created all things (however you think He did it): the stars in the sky, the ground under his feet, even the psalmist himself (and us!).
- **His work in salvation.** Asaph remembers that God is a God who sticks by His people: He restored Job's fortunes; He blessed Abraham with a son; He made Joseph governor of Egypt, and so on.

And as Asaph goes over the Scriptures in his mind, he begins to ask a very different kind of question: "What god is so great as our God?" The other

nations had hundreds of gods, most of them ugly and all of them useless, but *Yahveh* is real.

Yahveh is true.

Yahveh is there.

Which leads us onto answer #2:

4) God *Does* Care (vs16-20). Now Asaph thinks back to the Exodus. You remember the story? The children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt, the mightiest superpower of that age, for centuries. And like all of us, they probably wondered why God was giving them the silent treatment. What had happened to all of those promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? Why wasn't God responding?

Now eventually, of course, He did – He sent Moses, He bombarded Egypt with plague after plague, and He forced Pharaoh to let His people go. But He did it in *His* time.

And this is where Psalm 77 ends – the parting of the *Yam Suph*, the Sea of Reeds. Just imagine it. You're one of the Israelites; you've got the Reed Sea in front of you; Pharaoh's chariots behind you. And then what happens? The sea begins to part! And if you'd been there with a smart phone you would have seen the sea churning, a pillar of fire and cloud, the Israelites making their way through the waters, and Moses and Aaron leading. However, what you wouldn't have seen was the God who was doing it all. But even so, He was there.

And Asaph realises that, regardless of the fact he's not seeing or hearing or sensing God at this moment ... God still cares about him.

Even In The Silence

So, when we're going through hardship and God is silent, what do we do?

As Christians there's an even greater event than the Exodus to look back to. Imagine you're one of the disciples, watching Jesus being nailed to that cross on Calvary hill. What are you thinking? Probably something like "Why doesn't God *do* something?!" But He is. He *is* doing something. He may *seem* distant, but He is there, leading His people to ultimate freedom, ultimate victory, through the death of Jesus. And what happens 3 days later? One empty tomb and one risen Jesus!

I.e. even in the silence, God is speaking.

We just have to learn to understand what He's saying to us.