

God So Loved the World

Genesis 41:1-57

God Speaks

What do you do when someone close to you does something very hurtful – maybe your best friend, a parent, your boyfriend or girlfriend? Maybe he forgot your birthday, or she insulted you, or they doubted your ability to do the job you just took. If you watch the sitcoms (which I don't!), you learn that people in these situations shout, they throw things, they express their extreme emotions in extreme actions. But sometimes we respond to deep hurt with the nuclear option – the silent treatment.

Isn't it odd that one way of expressing profound feelings is by saying nothing? Yelling and throwing things does not help the situation, but those actions seem to make a certain kind of sense. And the silent treatment is not that normal way of communicating by those of us who just do not have a lot to say. The silent treatment is when you are so angry, you refuse to say anything at all to the object of your anger. Perhaps if you are normally a relatively quiet person he may not notice, but slowly, eventually it becomes obvious that she will say nothing at all. The room takes on a deathly aura, the temperature drops, it becomes unbearable. Why is this? Why is the silent treatment so potent? Because communication is so central to our humanity, refusal to communicate with someone implies that he is worse than ordinary offenders – he is sub-human.

Genesis chapter 41 is a remarkable story: Pharaoh receives a double vision, a Hebrew prisoner interprets it, who is then made ruler of the country. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about this story is that God speaks. You might not immediately think this so remarkable because the idea of God speaking to people is so ingrained in our culture, and Christians expect God to hear us and to respond to our prayers. But think about it. Scripture presents God as so far beyond us – stronger, wiser, holier – it is quite remarkable that God speaks to people. This is not normal. Do you often – or ever – speak to the president of Brown or RISD? Or of the United States? Do you talk with your representative or senator? Do you think the employees at Amazon typically eat lunch with Jeff Bezos? Do they even expect to? And how about you? Do you converse with people who are below you, or you think are below you – the garbage collector, the food service worker, the children at church? Some of us might, but most of us do not. Our normal experience is that those who are much higher in rank and ability do not talk to those beneath them. So it is very remarkable that God speaks to us at all. It shows how much God respects us, values our companionship, and loves us.

It is doubly remarkable that God should speak considering how awfully we treat Him. God has been very good to us. He has thoughtfully told us how to live so that we will have a good life, and we have stupidly ignored Him. He has told us what He expects of us – whom He made, and whom He rules – and we have stubbornly rebelled against Him. If God were normal, we would expect Him to yell and throw things – or even employ the silent treatment – but generation after generation all through human history God kept speaking to His foolish, disloyal subjects.

God Does Not Say Everything to Everyone

But notice that God does not say everything to everyone. God gave the vision to Pharaoh, but Pharaoh could not understand it. God sent the interpretation to Joseph, but that was no good without the vision. And all the other stakeholders – everyone else in the world – was completely oblivious to what was happening and to the ominous future ahead.

This is God's pattern. Again and again God gives a partial message to people. God spoke to Abraham to leave home and travel to Canaan, and Sarah had to rely on Abraham's report. God spoke to Samson's mother, but not to his father until later. God spoke to Mary and told her she would bear the

Messiah, and He spoke to Joseph later and told him what the child's name should be. After His resurrection Jesus appeared to Mary and gave her a message for the apostles. The point is clear: just because God has spoken to you does not mean you got the complete message. Perhaps God does this to keep us humble, or perhaps it is to make us rely on each other.

God Cares for the World

This chapter shows us that God cares for the whole world. A terrible famine was soon to descend upon the world, and it could be catastrophic. Before refrigeration and modern transportation a year of poor crops would be devastating. The only food that could be stored was dried substances, and food could not be transported in any quantity from far a way. Today we can produce vastly more food than we need and we can transport it all over the globe. The only places in the world where hunger is a serious problem are those areas where war and political conflict prevent food from being delivered. As you drive across the American Midwest you will see unbelievable amount of food production, and the Russian steppe land and the Argentinian pampas have similar capability. Enormous ships deliver corn, barley, and other products all over the world. But this is a new development. Until recently, a year of famine would be devastating. Farmers would be faced with the gruesome choice of feeding starving people or saving some seed to plant the next year. In a second year of poor crops, many would die. Seven years of famine would kill most of the population and wipe out a civilization.

We are talking about people who know God's power and wisdom. The Egyptians did not have the Bible, but they had the testimony of creation, which is sufficient to instruct them about God's essential nature. But they did not wish to know God or obey Him. They rejected the God who made them and invented false gods – Ra, the sun god; Osiris, the god of the underworld; Isis, the mother-goddess; and others. They even worshiped these inventions as though they were real gods! It was stupid. It was terribly offensive. You would think that God should have obliterated these ungrateful wretches. That is what some people think God is like. That is what some Christians think God is like. But the one, true, creator God is not like that. He is patient. He is merciful. He loves His creation, even when it is an advanced stage of rebellion. Seven years of famine would have permanently destroyed Egypt – men, women, children; Pharaoh, farmers, and slaves; the art and learning of Egypt all would have perished. God did not want that. God cares for this world, sick as it is, and God acts to save it.

God Is Active in the World

Most people believe in God. At least they say they do. But most people do not act like God exists. Day to day, hour to hour most people do what they want to do without a thought of what God expects of them or whether God might help them. Most people do pray in extreme situations. Foxhole prayers, we call them. But except in emergencies, most people act like God is absent.

When you are faced each day with roommates, professors, classmates, husband, wife, children, bosses, friends – it can be hard to remember that God is always there, always involved – because He is invisible. What we see seems real – and God, frankly, does not seem real. That is why stories such as this are so important. They remind us that, though we cannot see Him, and though His presence is often unnoticed – God is never absent. God is present and involved in this world.

One reason why this is hard to accept is that God insists on acting according to His own wisdom. He does not do what we want Him to do. We think, if God is so powerful and cares for the world and is involved in the world, why did He not prevent the famine in the first place? The short answer is that we do not know. But that makes sense, right? If God is infinitely wiser than we, it makes sense that He would act in ways different than ours. In fact, it makes no sense that we should understand all that God does. There are things we do not know, but one thing is clear: God cares about this world, and He is involved to exercise that care.

God is Active in Your World

The good news is that God is active in *your* world! We know that because He is that same God and He does not change. Human beings are unreliable, but God never changes. I had a long phone conversation with my wife on Wednesday. I travel to campuses every week, and I will be gone for two weeks this time. Sometimes it is hard to stay in touch the way we should. Occasionally when we have not talked for a few days Ruth will tell me, “You have a wife.” Actually, I think about her every day – but it is possible that I could get so wrapped up in my work that I might forget about her. So her reminder is not inappropriate. But that is because I am a fallible human being. God is not at all like that. He is always thinking about us and involved in our affairs. God gives you restful sleep so that you can work hard each day. God provides food to energize you. God equips you to absorb your course work and produce papers and exams. God protects you from disease and heals you when you get sick. I could go on and on.

God has protected our country from numerous terrorist plots. God has destroyed the ISIS caliphate. He used soldiers to do it, but you do not think they succeeded on their own power, do you? God has kept our country prosperous in spite of inadequate politicians. And think of the miracle of modern medicine! When I was a child, cancer was an automatic death sentence, but now many cancer patients survive. I had a stroke two years ago, and look at me! Do you dare to say that God is not at work in my world? The world is a complex place, and many factors are at work in any situation. If you do not pay attention, you can overlook God’s involvement. But the more you consider everything, it is crazy to think that God is absent from our world. In and among the people and events of our modern world, God is present, directing affairs and guaranteeing the result He wants.

God Cares for You

And what is it that God wants? The same thing God always wants. He never changes. God wants the welfare of His people. Four thousand years ago God wanted the salvation of Egypt, and today God wants you to be preserved from harm. This does not mean that life will be easy. I am sure those seven years of famine were no picnic, and you will undoubtedly face hardships. But just as God preserved Egypt through her crisis, so God will carry you through your crises. Because if God cared for idolatrous Egypt, you can be sure that God cares for His own children. I am a living example. For four days I could not read, walk, or swallow. I could have survived as a thinking vegetable. But God cares for me and He restored my sight, my balance, and my swallowing. I had eight weeks of therapy, and that played a big role in my recovery. But it became very clear that unless God intervened and acted to heal me, no amount of therapy would do much good. God cares for you, too. The proof is not in avoiding hardships, but in recovery from them. And you know, it appears that the hardships themselves are part of God’s care for us. But that is a sermon for another time.

God Still Speaks

And just as God still cares for His people, so He still speaks to His people. Perhaps you have never heard God’s voice in audible form, but God speaks to us in many ways. God speaks to us in creation, as Psalm 19 says,

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- 2 Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
- 4 Their measuring line goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

Pre-modern people on the whole were wiser than we in this regard. Science has clouded our thinking. Now, science is wonderful! I studied molecular genetics and aspired to be a scientist. No, without hesitation I think that science is good. It is fascinating simply to learn about the natural world, and science has made life far easier than in previous centuries. The problem is in thinking that science provides *all* knowledge. Rubbish! Science provides some knowledge, and scripture provides other knowledge.

So when you look at the sun (or imagine yourself looking at the sun), what do you see? A huge fireball of continuous nuclear fusion, with spots and plumes and spitting out particles? Good. So it is. Do you also see the glory of God? The sun, moon, and stars are constantly telling us of the glory of God. If you do not get this message, why not? Is it because the Bible is untrue about this? Or is it because you are not listening? Or perhaps you have so neglected your spiritual hearing that you are unable to hear what is so clearly, loudly, constantly proclaimed.

God is speaking – clearly, loudly, constantly, all over the world. “Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.” And why does God speak? We already established this: because He values us, He cares about us. God wants to talk to us. In spite of our failures, He is unwilling to give us the silent treatment. Every day, every night; the sun, moon, and stars; the rain, snow, and hail; the green grass and colorful flowers; glistening granite from New Hampshire and creamy marble from Italy; squirrels, rabbits, and chipmunks who dart across our lawns; birds who sing to us; mountains and valleys; deserts and oceans; all these are the voice of God speaking to us. They are God’s voice saying, “I am here. I am in control. I am making all things beautiful. I will take care of you. I love you.”

God speaks through other people. God spoke to Pharaoh in a vision, but the vision itself was inadequate. God completed His message through Joseph. God speaks to *us* through other people. When I was incapacitated by a stroke, the neurologist came in and said, “You had a stroke, but you will make a full recovery.” Now of course that man is not god. He did not know the future. I think he was God’s messenger to encourage me at a low time. Even more important are Christian friends who inform and remind you of God’s word. God speaks through our friends. In God’s wisdom He has chosen to speak more potently through His ordained ministers. Perhaps you sometimes think that the sermon on Sunday morning is irrelevant, and some pastors are honestly not very good preachers. But God still speaks through them. Many times I received clear insight into a problem or a text as I was listening to a mediocre sermon. I am not excusing mediocre sermons. I am here to declare that what God has ordained He will accomplish – and He has determined to speak through the men He has ordained to be pastors. Do not underestimate the significance of the sermons you hear in church.

God speaks through the scripture. This is God’s most powerful voice. Often we yearn to hear an audible voice from heaven, especially when we feel desperate for divine guidance or encouragement. The Apostle Peter did hear an audible voice from heaven, but he says that scripture is better. Listen to 2 Peter 1:17-19:

For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed...

And when Peter says “the prophetic word,” he is referring to the word of scripture. Scripture is more fully confirmed than an audible voice. Now I will admit that this does not seem true to me. I feel as though an audible voice from heaven would be more helpful to me than the Bible. But my feelings about this are

wrong. Peter is right. Honestly, sometimes when I read the Bible, it does not seem to do much good. But my instincts are wrong. The scripture is what I need most – including at the times when it feels cold and sterile. The cynic will say, “God is not speaking. It is *your* decision to pick up the Bible, and it is *your* decision where to turn and what to read. This is simply an exercise of your will.” Well, you will have to decide who is telling the truth – God, through the Apostle Peter in scripture, or the cynic. Me, I will take my chances with God and Peter.

We call scripture “the word of God,” because God spoke it to those who wrote, and because God continues to speak to us who read. As we read, the Holy Spirit takes the words of scripture and applies them to us in living potency. Apart from the activity of God, sure, the cynic would be right. Reading the Bible would be merely an exercise of human will. But in God’s presence, the Bible becomes the living voice of God speaking directly to you.

God Speaks Pre-eminently Through Christ

As the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 1, God’s speaking in the creation is enough to inform humanity who God is and how to worship Him. When people do not worship God, the voice of creation alone is sufficient to convict them of the death penalty. But God did not stop with creation. God spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden and explained how to live rightly. For thousands of years God spoke to people. God spoke at length to the prophets and explained in detail what He expected of mankind, how they had failed – of the doom coming upon them – and the glory of the coming salvation. God arranged for this to be written down so that it could be read each Sabbath day. The songs of God – the book of Psalms – were sung each day in the temple, and were a daily reminder of God’s presence, commands, and promises. All this is testimony to God’s extravagant mercy and love for His benighted creatures. But if you can believe it, there was more.

One of the most moving passages of scripture is Hebrews 1:1-3.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high... (Hebrews 1:1-3)

God is not silent! He has never been silent! At many times God spoke. God spoke in many ways. Read the prophets! God’s message was astonishing! But in these last days God has done something no one could have guessed. God spoke through His Son.

My son Peter is the RUF campus minister at West Virginia University. The other campus ministers are amused when he talks because he reminds them of me. Even though we are different personalities and don’t always agree, there is something about the way he talks that is similar to me. When the Divine Son came among us, He reminded people of the Heavenly Father. Jesus is the “exact imprint” of the Father, and so represents Him perfectly – so perfectly that when Jesus spoke, it was the Father who spoke. The words that Jesus spoke are the words of the Father. In fact, Jesus is so much like the Father, John’s gospel calls Him the Word. Not only Jesus’ words, but Jesus Himself is the Father speaking to us.

Fine for those 2,000 years ago you say, but what about us now? Jesus is with us now, speaking to us now. His words and the account of His life are recorded in the gospels, and when the gospels are read, Jesus speaks to us. Furthermore, Jesus declared that He would always be with us. His last words in Matthew’s gospel are, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” And in John’s gospel Jesus promised that

He would come to us as the Holy Spirit. Jesus fulfilled this promise 50 days after His resurrection on the Day of Pentecost, and He fulfills that promise personally every time a sinner believes in Him.

Is this too good to be true? Yes. It is. I would never, ever think or say such a thing, unless God revealed it to us. If you find this hard to believe, you are in good company. Do not think that you have to pretend to have great faith, or be a spiritual Christian. You can be honest. You can admit to God and friends that this is hard to believe. As Jesus continues to speak to you year after year, your faith will grow stronger. If you think all this is foolish nonsense, however, Jesus will not save you. You have a miserable future apart from Jesus. But Jesus will hear your cry for help. Ask Jesus to give you ears to hear His voice and faith to believe in Him. Jesus will not fail to answer such prayers.

Jesus is the pre-eminent word of God, He is with us now, and He speaks pre-eminently on His own day. Just as Joseph was raised up from the prison to be ruler of Egypt, Jesus was raised from the grave to be ruler of the universe, and He has been given the title of Lord. As Lord of all things, Jesus claims the first day of the week as His own. On the Lord's Day Jesus meets with His people for instruction and encouragement. When the men He has ordained to lead the church open the worship service, Jesus comes among His people. He speaks in the reading of scripture and the sermon. Then Jesus gives Himself to us in the bread and wine. On the Lord's Day Jesus says, "Come, my beloved. Listen to me. Take my body and my blood. I am yours forever. I love you."

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are overwhelmed when we see how much you care for the world and how much you value us, your poor, disobedient children. Your love seems too good to be true, and, honestly, we hardly believe. Yet we cannot reject your word either. Father, strengthen our weak faith. Make us more attentive to your voice. Forgive us for thinking that you are absent and have neglected us. And Father, some of us have despised your meeting with us on the Lord's Day, or valued it too lightly. Forgive us for failing to worship you, strengthen us, and move us to assemble with the church when you meet with us on Sunday. And Father, for those of us who do not believe in you at all, open our ears, enable us to hear your voice, and grant us that faith which will bring us into your Kingdom. Through Jesus, Your Son, Our Lord. Amen.

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