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WHEN GOD IS SILENT

How to Hear God When He Seems Far Away

Elmer Towns

Sunday School Dynamics
A Division of Church Growth Institute

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Chapter 1: Why Is Heaven Shut Up?

The poster in the church office pictured rays of light breaking through an overcast sky. The picture alone did not make the impression but the words that accompanied it did. The words stated, *"I believe in the sun when it does not shine. I believe in God when He is silent. I know the sun is up there even on the darkest day. And when darkness veils Jesus' lovely face, I rest on His unchanging grace."*

There are times in the life of every Christian when it seems like God has abandoned us and heaven is shut up to our prayers. During those hours, we sometimes find ourselves desperately pleading to God in prayer, but God appears to turn a deaf ear. Such times are frustrating and difficult to endure. At a time when we recognize our need for God most, we find ourselves asking, "God, why don't You say something?"

What does it mean when people are quiet? Some people get quiet when they are angry. For others, their silence may indicate they disagree with something we have said or done. Still others may be silent only because they are taking time to think before responding. In contrast, a fourth group may be quiet because they have been turned off and have tuned out of the discussion. Finally, there are some who are silent because something has amused them and they feel it would be inappropriate to laugh audibly. Just as it is difficult for us to understand the reason for someone's silence, so it is difficult for us to understand God's reasons for His silence.

How God Speaks to Us!

Sometimes, things appear quiet only because we fail to tune into all the noise around us. A couple may go for a quiet walk in the woods or a park near their home and enjoy a time of peace and quiet. At the same time, a jogger may run through the same woods or park listening to his or her favorite music through an earphone plugged into a portable radio. The music is playing throughout the natural setting, but only those tuned into the right station can hear it.

In the midst of those dark hours when it seems like God is silent, it is important to remember that God has spoken in a variety of ways. When God is silent in an area that concerns us most, it is important to recognize what He is saying elsewhere.

The first area in which God has spoken to most people is in the natural phenomena which surround them. Perhaps reflecting on his own experience with God who reveals Himself in nature, David wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard" (Ps. 19:1-3).

God has also spoken through the Scriptures which are called, "The Word of God." When Paul reminded Timothy "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16), he was literally saying God "breathed out" every word. When we speak, we breathe out words as air passes through our larynx. God also speaks through the Scripture He has breathed out for our benefits. The Psalmist reminds us, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105).

The third way God has spoken to us is through judgment. Jesus told His disciples one of the functions of the Holy Spirit would be to convict people "of judgment, because the ruler of

this world is judged" (John 16:11). To accomplish this goal, the Holy Spirit causes people to recognize what God has already revealed about His judgment. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:8).

Miracles are other ways God has spoken. One of the words used to describe miracles in the Bible is "signs." Just as a symbol on a road sign communicates a special message to the alert driver, so the miraculous signs accomplished by Jesus and the apostles communicates a special message to those who are receptive. Commenting on the miracles recorded in his gospel, John wrote, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). The writer of Hebrews wrote of our salvation, "which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us . . . with signs and wonders, with various miracles" (Heb. 2:3-4).

God has also spoken to His people at times in an audible voice. This was Adam's experience (Gen. 2:28-30), Cain (Gen. 4:6-7), Noah (Gen. 6:13-21), Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), Moses (Ex. 3:4), the people of Israel (Ex. 20:1-18), Balaam (Num. 22:9, 12) and others. The fact that God chose to speak to certain people in the past has more to say about God's desire to reveal Himself and His will to us than about the particular individuals to whom He spoke. Some of those to whom He spoke audibly failed to obey Him (Adam, Cain, Balaam) while others were faithful (Noah, Abraham, Moses). Also God chose to speak in a variety of contexts such as through a burning bush (Ex. 3:4), phenomena normally associated with an active volcano (Ex. 20:18), and a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12).

At other times, God spoke to people without using words. He apparently communicated a message from His heart to Paul in this manner. This is implied in the account of the early days of the second missionary journey. "Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them" (Acts 16:6-7). In each case, Paul and his ministry team were aware of the Lord's leading without God verbalizing His will to the missionary team.

God has also spoken through circumstances. Theologians call this "the providence of God." Simply stated, the doctrine of providence means God remains in control of every circumstance of our life. That is not always the way it appears from our perspective, but that is the way it is. When Joseph looked back on the varied circumstances of his life, he realized how God was preparing him for a special role. He told his brothers, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). He recognized the principle Paul emphasized in the New Testament. "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Ultimately, God's most complete revelation of Himself was spoken in Jesus. John described the incarnation with the words, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The meaning of the Incarnation was, described by Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, in a unique way. He wrote, "The heart of Christian doctrine is not only that Jesus is divine, but that God is Christlike and in Him is no un-Christlikeness at all." The writer of Hebrews began his epistle with the affirmation, "God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

Can God Speak Today in an Audible Voice?

If God has spoken to so many people in so many ways in the past, can He speak to me today in an audible voice? The answer to that question is both yes and no. God could speak to us audibly today because God can do anything. He is the creator of meaning and communication. The world was shaped into being when God began communicating in an audible voice (Heb. 11:3). To say God cannot speak audibly would make Him less than God. The very nature of God is to reveal Himself to His people (Deut. 29:29).

Despite all that, there are couple of reasons why God is likely to choose not to speak audibly today. The first is that God has already said everything He wants to say in Scripture. There is no need for Him to continue speaking when we have not yet fully responded to all He has already said. Instead of looking for an audible expression of God, we should be looking to the Scriptures to study them and discover His message to us.

God is also unlikely to speak audibly to us today because it is not His purpose to speak audibly today. Some people speak without thinking or speak when they should be silent. God is not like them. He disciplines Himself to act and speak in a manner consistent with His purpose and goals in a particular situation. In the past, He spoke audibly to reveal Himself. The record of His self-disclosure makes His speaking audibly today unnecessary.

If God did speak audibly today, His message would have to be consistent with what He has already said. Some people periodically claim to have heard God speak audibly. The question might be asked, "If God told someone something different than Scripture, then why did He not tell others this important message?" In the Old Testament, if a prophet claimed to have a message from God that was inconsistent with previous revelation, that prophet was exposed as a false prophet (Deut. 18:20-22). Testing the spirits of those who claim to have heard from God in an audible voice helps us discern truth from error (1 John 4:1).

If God Would Speak, What Would He Say?

If God were to speak to us today, what would He say? As we answer that question, we discover how God speaks to us today. Would He have an intimate discussion with us? He does this when we pray. Would He tell us what to believe? He has done this in the doctrinal books of the Bible. Would He tell us what He is like? He has done this in His self-disclosure in nature, the Bible, and the life of Christ. Would He warn us of danger? He has done this in the writings of the prophets. Would He help us deal with our deepest problems? He has done this in the Psalms. Everything God would say He has said. Rather than looking to God to say something else, we should look to what He has said and let Him speak to us.

When Is God Quiet?

Periodically, there are even times in our Bible study and prayer time when God is quiet. In these times, it is important to recognize there may be several reasons for His silence. God is quiet when (1) He is not ready to speak, (2) He is testing me, (3) He has already talked to me, (4) He wants me to make an important decision, (S) He knows I won't listen, (6) I forget what He has said, (7) something is hindering my ability to listen to God.

When Does God Turn a Deaf Ear?

David experienced a time when God seemed to turn a deaf ear to his prayers. God directed Samuel to anoint David as the King of Israel, yet Saul continued to hold that office for thirteen years. During much of that time, Saul was actively engaged in trying to kill his divinely appointed successor. David's world was turned up side down and at times he felt like God didn't even hear his prayers. He wandered in the wilderness, driven from his home and unable to worship God in the tabernacle. He expressed his feeling at this time in many of the psalms including Psalms 42 and 43. During this period in his life, David asked some of the same questions we ask. Why is God silent when we call to Him for help? Why is He turning a deaf ear to our prayers?

Sometime, in the midst of our problems, we talk about them to other Christians, people we respect. While this is helpful, sometimes they may not understand or have the answers for our situation. On other occasions, they may not be available for consultation.

Many Christians depend too much on circumstances to discern what God is saying in their life. We may get our eyes on things instead of looking to the promises of God in Scripture. Our circumstances blind us to the reality of God at work in the midst of our circumstances. A better response is suggested by the hymn writer who wrote, "When darkness hides His lovely face, I rest on His unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the vail. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

Times of isolation are hard on people because God created people for relationship. Separation from God causes alienation from people. The sense of "lostness" we experience during these times makes us unsure and takes away confidence. As a result, we second guess everything and begin feeling bad. We can identify with David when he said, "I will say to God my Rock, 'Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?' " (Ps. 42:9).

How to Respond When God Is Silent!

What is the correct response to God's silence in our life? When God is silent, it is best to view His last orders as standing orders. David remembered the anointing from Samuel and waited his time. Three times in these two psalms he rebuked himself with the reminder, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance" (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5).

A clear and accurate memory is important during the days of God's silence. David remembered the previous days he had enjoyed in communion with God. "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" (Ps. 84:2). This enabled him to reject the critics who taunted him with the continual question, "Where is your God?" (Ps. 42:3). His memory of the facts surrounding his anointing enabled him to encourage himself (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5). As a result, he never gave up seeking God. Despite the circumstances, he affirmed, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living; God" (Ps. 42:1-2).

Remember the poster at the beginning of this chapter? Just as there is a sun on the other side of the clouds, so God is speaking beyond His silence. We need to learn to listen through the

sounds of silence and tune in to the voice of God that rings out loudly in the world He created, the Word He composed and the Word incarnate.

Chapter 2: Why Can't I See God?

When I told my mother one morning that I intended to preach on the subject, "Why People Don't See God," she shared a simple answer to this complex question.

"That's easy," she said. "People don't see God because they are not looking for Him!" She went on to explain a thief does not look for a police officer and sinful people do not look for a holy God.

Throughout the ages of humanity, people have had a universal desire to see God. Intuitively they know God exists, but in their refusal to worship God appropriately, they make idols to represent their lower view of a lesser deity, one they can manage (Rom. 1:20-23). The key to understanding the people of a culture is their gods, for their gods reflect their values and attitudes of life. A. W. Tozer correctly observed, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God."

Early in my ministry, a man came to me and told me he had seen Jesus. He explained how Jesus had appeared to hire at the foot of his bed and told him to give me the use of his car for my ministry. At the time, I was pastor of a small Presbyterian church in Savannah, Georgia, and my only means of transportation was my bicycle. Mr. Miller told me Jesus wanted me to use his car whenever I was in town. For the next eighteen months I served as pastor of that church. Mr. Miller made his car available to me every weekend enabling me to do ministry more effectively. Despite his faithfulness in fulfilling his commitment, I found myself asking the question, "Did Mr. Miller really see Jesus?"

Why Do People Want to See God?

Why do people want to see God? Perhaps the reasons are as varied as the people who share that common desire. For some, the desire to see God grows out of their curiosity, the desire to search out new knowledge and know something that is presently beyond them. In contrast, others desire to see God because they want to worship Him. God created people to experience their greatest fulfillment in worship (Isa. 43:7).

A third group of people want to see God out of a desire for personal fulfillment. These people intuitively know they cannot know themselves until they know God. Paul reminded the Greek philosophers in the Areopagus, "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring'" (Acts 17:28). The French mathematician and philosopher Pascal wrote, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in every man that only God can fill."

A fourth group longs to see God as an expression of the intuitive knowledge which God has placed in every person. Solomon noted, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" (Eccl. 3:11). John described Jesus as "the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world" (John 1:9). Paul explained that God has given people this

intuitive knowledge of Himself "that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27).

While some desire to see God to grow in their knowledge of God, many others want to see God because they have rejected God's plan for their life. God told the prophet Habakkuk, "the just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4). It is hard to live by faith and trust a God not seen, touched, or experienced with our senses. Perhaps that is why people are drawn to external religions. People are materialistic and want to measure their religion by outward things and physical practice.

What Did Moses See When He Saw God?

The Old Testament describes a meeting between God and Moses which gives us insight into the problems one might face seeing God. While Moses was on Mount Sinai getting the law from God, the nation he left in the valley abandoned their faith in Jehovah and began worshipping a golden calf. God determined He would destroy Israel and begin a new nation with Moses (Ex. 32:10). Moses prayed on behalf of Israel as an intercessor, willing to be damned himself for his people, and caused God to change His planned course of action (Ps. 106:23).

Then Moses continued to prevail upon God in prayer with a unique request, "Please show me your glory" (Ex. 33:18). In response to that request, Moses was permitted to see the back of God (Ex. 33:23). As a result of that experience, Moses face shone and had to be covered with a veil when he returned to the camp of Israel. What exactly did Moses see on that occasion?

Moses did not see a physical presence. The Bible makes it clear, "No one has seen God at any time" (John 1:18). As noted earlier, God is described as "invisible" in the Bible (Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17). What Moses did see is where God was. "He endured as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). He saw a manifestation of God, God's glory (Ex. 33:22-23). While this manifestation was more complete than those seen by others in Scripture, it is clear in the context that it was also limited.

While we cannot see God physically, we, like Moses, may see where He is. The Bible describes the presence of God in four contexts. First, there is the corporate presence of God in heaven. Second, there is the omnipresence of God which means God is present at all times in every place present. Third, there is an institutional presence of God in that God chooses to dwell in the midst of His people, the church, especially in their worship. Finally, there is the indwelling presence of God, Christ living in our life.

There is a life and death paradox associated with seeing God. The penalty of seeing God was death (Ex. 33:20). When Jacob realized he had met with God, he "called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30). But in contrast, we are transformed by seeing God. Unlike Moses who had to veil his face, "we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18).

When Moses expressed the desire to see God, God said he could see His back but not His face (Ex. 33:20). Actually, God does not have a physical face or back as we might think of a human face or back. God is Spirit and not limited to a physical form. The Scriptures periodically describe God in the context of a physical body speaking of His arms (Isa. 59:1) and feet (Ps.18:9). These physical manifestations are attributed to God because they represent the functions He performs. Bible teachers describe these descriptions of God as "anthropomorphisms."

From Whom Did God Hide Himself?

The Scriptures record the lives of many great men of God who experienced periods of God hiding Himself from them. In the midst of his suffering job asked, "When He hides His face, who then can see Him?" (Job 34:29). God asked concerning Abraham, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing?" (Gen 18:17). Although God revealed Himself to Abraham at that time, there were many other times when God did choose to hide Himself from Abraham. Eli asked Samuel to share God's message with him pleading, "Please do not hide it from me" (1 Sam. 3:17). God chose to reveal Himself to a child while He hid Himself from the priest. The Psalmist cried out, "Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). In the midst of trouble, he found himself asking the question, "Why me, God?"

Why Can't I See God Physically?

A famous prospector spent several months prospecting for gold in the Northern Ontario bush. Failing to find any evidence of gold, he announced to the mineral company which had hired him there was no gold in that area. Later, another prospector not only discovered gold in the area, he also found the first prospector's distinctive boot imprint cast into the soft metal. The first prospector claimed he did not see gold because there was no gold to be seen. The second prospector proved the gold was not seen because the first prospector failed to recognize gold when he stepped on it.

The story of these two prospectors helps us understand why we can't see God physically. First, we can't see God because there is nothing to see. This does not mean there is no God. Rather, it means that the God Who is has no physical presence. Jesus told a Samaritan woman, "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). Paul referred to Jesus as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). The words of an apostolic blessing describe God as "the King eternal, immortal, invisible" (1 Tim. 1:17). The enduring faith of Moses is credited to his ability of "seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27).

God is described in Scripture as eternal, infinite and omnipresent. These attributes of God mean it is impossible for God to have an enduring physical presence as we normally think of matter. By definition, time is the sequence of events and space is the distance between matter. By their nature, both time and space must begin somewhere. In contrast, God exists beyond time and space. This may be one of the reasons God prohibited the making of any physical representations of Himself (Ex. 20:4). Any portrayal of God is a portrayal of something less than God. During the English revolution, Cromwell and the Puritans removed the icons from British churches on the basis of the second commandment.

A Russian cosmonaut once announced from space proof that God did not exist. He claimed he looked out the window of his spacecraft and did not see God. His observation was right, but his conclusion was wrong. Later, an American astronaut responded to his Russian counterpart during a lunar orbit. He read the Genesis account of the creation of the world by God

in six days. God may not have a physical presence, but the physical presence He created bears His fingerprints.

How Can I Know God If I Can't See Him?

For some people, their inability to see God raises the question of how they can know God. In response, we could ask if it is really necessary to see someone to get to know them. Many blind people form significant relationships with others despite their inability to see them. Some might claim their relationships are deeper than those of sighted persons because they are based on things deeper than appearance. The relationship between a young couple may also grow and mature despite a separation caused by time spent in college or time serving in another country. If human relationships can exist without sight, then it is not impossible to have a relationship with God simply because we cannot see Him.

Hymnwriter J. Oatman was one who understood and experienced the reality of knowing God who he could not see physically. He wrote the following words:

> Though I my Saviour may not see,
> Yet ev'ry hour He speaks to me;
> And since I made of Him my choice,
> Oh, praise the Lord, I know His voice!
>
> How often, tho' I see no form,
> I hear His voice above the storm;
> He bids the waves their tumult cease:
> The sun breaks forth, and all is peace.
>
> He speaks to me of truth and right,
> Of joy and rest beyond our sight;
> He speaks to me of peace and love,
> And tells me of the home above.

If we want to see God, we should look to Jesus. When Philip asked Jesus, "Show us the Father" (John 14:8), Jesus reminded his disciples they had seen the Father when they saw Him (John 14:9-11). "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared (explained or exegeted) Him" (John 1:8).

Our inability to see God physically should not hinder us from trusting Him and obeying His commands. By faith, we should look to Bible promises. The patriarchs "died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). They responded to God with obedience without depending upon physical sight. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would afterward receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8).

Not seeing God may actually aid us in knowing God by preventing us from being distracted by His appearance. Appearances of the glory of God in the Scripture resulted in people

hiding their face because of their inability to take in God's majesty. The same thing would happen today if we saw God in His regal majesty.

As we live for God today, we need to be careful not to let sin distract us from God. "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2). Our prayer is not God bless, but God save and forgive.

The flip side of separating ourselves from sin is becoming like the One on whom we focus. "We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). The Bible describes hearing the Scriptures using the image of looking into a mirror (James 1:23). As we look into the Scriptures, we allow the Scriptures to change us into the image of Christ. In heaven we will actually see God (Rev. 22:4). Then "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

The Results of Not Seeing God

A good detective or scientist forms conclusions not only from what he or she sees, but also from what he or she fails to see. Our inability to see God physically can teach us an important lesson about God. Our failure to see God is not because God is so microscopic He cannot be seen but because He is so big as to be beyond cur ability to see. The size of our God determines the size of our faith. How big is God? Isaiah compared the span of God's hand with the size of the entire universe (Isa. 40:12). As a man's span tends to be about one eighth his physical height, Isaiah's description of God makes Him eight times the size of the universe He created. As our understanding of the size of the universe grows, our view of God should also enlarge.

Having a big God will change much in our perceptions. First, we realize He can do great things. "In the greatness of Your excellence You have overthrown those who rose against You" (Ex. 15:7). Then, we can give Him all our problems. "Casting all your cares upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Third, we realize His potential. "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). Finally, we realize His keeping power. "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory" (Jude 24).

My mother was right. People don't see God because they aren't looking for Him. Though I may not see God physically this side of glory, I can certainly see Him at work around me, if I take time to look. And what I do see impacts the way I respond to the One I can't see.

Chapter 3: Why Doesn't God Talk Audibly to Me?

As I was visiting with people before a church service where I had been invited to preach, I shook hands with a lady who made a startling claim. "Are you the preacher?" she asked. When I told her I would be preaching that morning, she added, "God spoke to me this morning and told me to come to this church. He said the preacher's message was for me today."

Three times during the public ministry of Jesus, God broke the silence of heaven and spoke audibly, being heard by those present at the time. The first time took place at the baptism of Jesus as the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove (Mark 1:11). The second occurrence took

place on the Mount of Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah left Jesus (Matt. 17:5). The third time God spoke was at the beginning of the passion week as Jesus taught in the temple (John 12:28).

God has spoken audibly at other times throughout history. There are numerous biblical accounts of God speaking with individuals in both the Old and New Testament. Perhaps the most significant example of God speaking audibly in the Old Testament took place on Mount Sinai at the giving of the law (Ex. 20:1-17). On that occasion, when the people saw manifestations of God's presence and heard God's voice, they pleaded with Moses to speak to God on their behalf fearing their continuing to hear God's voice would result in their death. In the New Testament, Jesus spoke audibly to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3-6). Those who accompanied Saul apparently heard a noise but were unable to comprehend what was being said.

Peter, one of those who heard the audible voice of God on at least two of the three occasions God spoke during the life of Christ, described the Scriptures as being more certain than the audible voice of God (2 Peter 1:9). This does not mean we should look at isolated Bible texts as God's message to us at a particular moment. No one Scripture may be interpreted independent of the message of the whole Bible (2 Peter 1:20), but God has given us the ability by the indwelling Holy Spirit to interpret the Scriptures and discover His message for all of us.

Hearing the Voice of God

The idea of hearing God's voice is appealing to many people. Many people want to talk, with God so they can know how to live and what to do. They would like to walk and talk with God as they do with a friend. This inner desire to speak with God and have Him speak back audibly may be very common among Christians. The idea of intimate communion with God has consistently been prominent in the hymns written and sung in various generations. But some go beyond simply having a desire to hear God's voice. A few claim to have actually seen Jesus with their physical eyes and talked with Him. Does He do that today?

Throughout the pages of Scripture, we read various accounts of individuals who heard the voice of God. Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). Shortly after Abraham's rescue of Lot and the captives from Sodom, "the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (Gen. 15:1). God spoke to Jacob in a dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:12-15) and later told him to return to that place (Gen. 31:3; 35:1). God used the instrument of a burning bush to communicate audibly with Moses calling him to lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt into the Promised Land (Ex. 3:4-4:17). Likewise, Joshua (Josh. 1:1-9), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10-14) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-10) all began their public ministry hearing the audible voice of God. King Solomon was also among 'those to whom God spoke audibly (2 Chron. 7:12-22).

Why Doesn't God Speak Audibly Today?

The fact that God has spoken audibly on many occasions in the past indicates His ability to do so again in the present. God can do anything He chooses to do because He is God. But God lives by the principles He uses to run this world. During this dispensation of grace, God has chosen not to speak audibly with people for several reasons.

First, God is unlikely to speak audibly to people today because He tends not to show partiality or preferences. If He spoke to one person, He would have to speak to all to be fair.

Before Christ's death, God spoke with individuals to communicate His message to others. But Christ's death and resurrection made all people "saveable," providing access to God for all (Eph. 2:11-18). All of us are on the same footing. In His death on the cross, the whole world was reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19). Therefore, if God had a conversation with one of us, He would have to talk to all of us.

Second, God has spoken to us through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews begins with the statement, "God who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). When God spoke audibly on the Mount of Transfiguration, He said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matt. 17:5). If we want to know what God would say to us if He spoke audibly to us, we should listen to what Jesus has already said.

A third reason God tends not to speak audibly today is because He has already recorded everything we need to hear in the Bible (Deut. 29:29). A recorded message is always more accurate and reliable than a non-recorded message. It says the same thing to every reader and does not change its emphasis, meaning, or application. We might forget an ingredient in a recipe or directions on a trip if we relied exclusively on our memory, but when we write them down, we have something to consult in which we may have greater confidence. Likewise, "we also have the prophetic word made more sure ... for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:19, 21).

When we wonder what God would say to us, we can study the Bible with others. Christians use the phrase "the priesthood of believers" to describe our direct access to God through prayer and our ability to interpret the Word of God independently. While this doctrine is often taught in the context of an individual's standing before God, the Bible always uses the word "priests" in the plural when referring to believers. Studying the Bible with other Christians helps us avoid the tendency of allowing our personal bias or past experiences to interpret the Bible in a mariner inconsistent with its intended message. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20).

All we need to know is recorded in the Bible. God does not need to tell anyone a special message, because all a person needs is in the Scriptures. Further, the message (body of truth) we need to know has been finalized. It is described as, "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 ELT). This implies that God does not need to add anything further to His completed revelation.

What About People Who Claim to Actually Hear God Speak?

Notwithstanding all that has been said above, some people periodically claim to actually hear God speak. Some even describe the sound of that voice. This voice is often described as being deep or loud in contrast with the still small voice heard by Elijah.

These people describe visions of God and have a very specific message they claim God gave them personally.

At times, the message they claim God gave them is rather elaborate. Indeed, some who claim to have heard the voice of God or an angel have written books containing the message said to be given them (cf. *The Koran, The Book of Mormon*, etc.). How do we explain those that claim to hear God's voice.

There are several possible reasons why someone might believe he or she has heard God's voice. One of these might be due to a mental disorders. Some are so "self-deceived" as to have

lost touch with reality. Some are dangerous and others are harmless. Some can be helped and others cannot become normal. Some live normal lives and others need institutionalization. For some, special medication can treat a chemical imbalance and the voice goes away. Others hear the voice because of a substance abuse problem that needs to be addressed.

A second kind of person who claims to hear God's voice is the religious mystic. These people think they communicate with God through experience and claim to talk to God through trances, visions, dreams, or hear voices. They may experience a dream so intense they are convinced of its reality. On occasion, they may experience unusual physical manifestations such as the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. The voice they hear may be self induced, demonic in origin, or caused by extreme asceticism often practiced by mystics as they attempt to subdue the flesh to the control of the Spirit. Regardless of the source of their voice, they should not be canonized.

A third kind of person claiming to hear God speak audibly is simply a liar. Some religious leaders have claimed God spoke to them, hence giving them authority. The Scriptures describe these people as "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:13). Occasionally, the news media will expose those who claim to get a special message from God but rely on technology and informants for their "prophecies" or "words of revelation."

Finally, some people who think they are hearing God's voice are actually hearing demonic voices. The Scriptures warn, "Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). This is probably the correct explanation in the case of many cult leaders including those involved with the New Age Movement and other occult practices and Eastern religions.

What Audible Words Won't Do!

Many people want to hear God's audible voice because they believe it will accomplish certain things in their life. Actually, the record of those who heard God speak suggests some of these supposed benefits may not exist. Israel heard God speak on Mount Sinai, but they continued to rebel until God finally banned them from the Promised Land. Prophets who heard God speak audibly were reluctant to obey (Jonah), felt like quitting (Jeremiah) or questioned God concerning what was being said (Habakkuk).

Hearing God's audible voice won't give you confidence. "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light" (2 Peter 1:19).

Hearing God's audible voice won't give you continual guidance. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). Hearing God's audible voice won't give you character growth. "Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). Hearing God's audible voice won't give you continual presence. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Hearing God's audible voice won't make you doctrinally correct. "All Scripture ... is profitable for doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:16). Hearing God's audible voice won't be the basis for knowing God. "These things I have written to you ... that you may know..." (1 John 5:13).

Since God Doesn't Talk Out Loud, How Can 1 Know?

The purpose of speech is to communicate a message from one person to another. Many who want to hear God's audible voice want God to communicate some message to them. Ironically, in each case cited in the previous section, the thing they look for in the audible voice of God is really found in the written revelation of God, the Scriptures. God has given us a message in the Bible that contains all we need to know about salvation and service.

We can know and understand God's message to us by the indwelling Holy Spirit. "The natural unconverted person does not understand the things of the Spirit of God . . . but he that is spiritual understands all things" (1 Cor. 2:14-15 ELT). After we receive a message, we know, what the other person said. After we read the Bible, we know God's message to us. "These things I have written to you ... that you may know" (1 John 5:13).

God may not speak audibly today, but that does not mean He is silent. He continues to speak to us through His Word, prayer, circumstances, and other believers. If we fail to hear God speaking, perhaps we are not tuned into what He is saying. But if you belong to God, when He speaks you will hear Him.

Chapter 4: Why Can't I See Miracles?

Miracles had a significant role in Jesus' public ministry. From the earliest days of His ministry, He traveled widely "teaching in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people" (Matt. 4:23). When John recounted the life of Jesus, he told the story of Jesus around seven significant signs (miracles) accomplished by Jesus (John 20:30-31). Of all the miracles performed by Jesus during His public ministry, only one is mentioned in all four gospels. This has led many Bible teachers to identify "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" as the most significant miracle in the life of Christ.

The day after feeding five thousand men with five loaves and three fish, Jesus addressed the crowd of Galileans that wanted to follow Him as their Messiah. Four times Jesus used the expression "Verily, verily" or "Most assuredly" (John 6:26, 32, 47, 53). This double verily occurs twenty-five times in the gospel of John and on each occasion, it is used in a context in which Jesus is speaking to people who resist His message. Ever though these people wanted Jesus to be their Messiah, Jesus realized they still were not receptive to His basic message.

These people were willing to follow Jesus, but they were willing to do so for the wrong reasons. Jesus told them, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you because God the Father has set His seal on Him" (John 6:27). The crowd was willing to do something to accomplish God's work, but Jesus called them to believe. But they were not willing to live by faith. Instead they asked, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do?" (John 6:30).

The Bible uses three different words to describe miracles. The word "sign" is used to emphasize the message God is attempting to communicate through the miracle. The usual term, "miracle" emphasizes a work motivated by compassion. The third word, "wonders," refers to the result of miracles that cause those who see them to worship God in awe and wonder. It is interesting to note that even the most significant miracle performed by Jesus in His public ministry failed to produce faith in those who witnessed it. The day after they ate the loaves and fishes, the same people came to Jesus looking for another miracle to help them believe.

People Looking for a Miracle

The people of Jesus' generation were not the only ones looking for a miracle. The natural man of every generation including our own wants to see miracles. They also ask, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will you do?" (John 6:30). But even miracles do not help our faith. Our senses are fallible so we are never sure if we should believe what we see.

The essence of Christianity is faith. Jesus told those who would follow Him, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent" (John 6:29). He wanted them to trust God for the greater miracle, the miracle of salvation by faith. As Paul reminded the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

While most evangelicals state that there are no "sign miracles" today, we recognize that God works in the world through natural law and spiritual life. Every answer to prayer is a miracle, as is every conversion. When my friend Vernon Brewer got cancer, the church prayed for him and God healed him. Years before, we also saw God heal one of our students, Charles Hughes, who was in a coma and was not expected to survive when the church began praying for his healing. God still heals people of sickness and delivers them from spiritual bondage in answer to prayer and in accordance with His will.

The reality of miracles is closely tied to the existence of God. Merald Westphal noted, "If God exists, miracles are not merely logically possible, but really and genuinely possible at every moment. The only condition hindering the actualization of this possibility lies in the divine will." Therefore, it is important that we understand what miracles are and how God acts in a miraculous manner.

What Is a Miracle?

In his popular study of miracles, C. S. Lewis defines miracles as "an interference with nature by supernatural power." Lewis himself acknowledges this definition is limited but uses it to identify with the widely held perceptions of his readers. At the very heart of a miracle is a break with the natural, apparently caused by a supernatural being or influence. The Bible suggests miracles may come from God or Satan.

By definition, miracles are recognized in relationship to the laws of God. American Revivalist Charles Finney called miracles "a miraculous interference, setting aside or suspending the laws of nature." When things happen contrary to what would be naturally expected, people call it a miracle. In popular use, this term is even used when something happens within the laws of nature but against the odds of probability. When a sports team rises from the basement to first place in the last month of the season, people call it "a miracle comeback."

While we use the term *miracle* loosely, the Bible is more precise. God's miracles have a purpose. Theologian Henry Theissen defined miracles as "an unusual event, accomplishing some useful work, and revealing the presence and power of God." This means miracles happen not because we call for them but because they bring glory to God. In a speech against Christianity, the infidel Ingersoll defied God to strike Him within two minutes. Two minute, later, Ingersoll claimed the

fact he was still alive was evidence God did not exist. A Presbyterian pastor responded by comparing Ingersoll to a bug on the track calling upon a locomotive to squash him. The locomotive has more important things to do than respond to the ravings of a bug.

God's purpose in miracles is to certify those performing the miracle. Theologian Augustus Strong described miracles as "so extraordinary . . . coinciding with the command of a religious leader . . . as to fully warrant . . . that God has wrought ... certifying this leader has been commissioned by Him."

How Do Miracles Occur?

When God accomplishes miracles, He does so in one of six ways. First, He may choose to supersede and transcend all known laws in or out of the universe. The creation of the world and incarnation of Christ are miracles accomplished in this way. Second, He may supersede and transcend natural laws as He did sending a chariot of fire for Elijah and will do in the rapture of the church. Third, He may suspend the usual laws of nature as He did when walking on water. Or He may intensify His natural laws as He did when changing the water into wine at the marriage in Cana. Fifth, God may choose to redirect natural laws. The parting Red Sea and sending or withholding rain from a region are examples of miracles accomplished in this way. Finally, He may accomplish a miracle by neutralization of the usual consequences of sin. This is the means by which physical healings are usually accomplished.

Who Never Did Miracles?

If, as you look at your life, you find an absence of miracles, you should realize you are in good company. Adam never did miracles, but he heard the voice of the Lord. There are no recorded miracles in the life of Isaac even though his birth was the product of a miracle in the life of his parents. Joseph accomplished no miracles, but God worked through circumstances in his life. David was also directed by God in his life without miracles. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah saw the results of God's work, but were not known as miracle workers.

One of the great religious leaders in the first century was John the Baptist. Jesus Himself was among the huge crowds who came to be baptized by John. On one occasion, Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). He was clearly a man who experienced God's special blessing upon his ministry. Yet the Bible also tells us, "John performed no sign (miracle)" (John 10:41). The example of John reminds us we can have a significant ministry for God even if we never experience a miracle.

When one studies the history of miracles, it is interesting to note most miracles fall into three epoches. These are times when God uses miracles to certify his messengers and message that He is initiating a new work in the world. These periods tend to correspond with the times when much of the Scriptures were being written. When the New Testament was being written, "the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds" (2 Cor. 12:12). "God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?" (Heb. 2:4). These miracles served as authenticating signs in the ministry of the apostles who were laying a new foundation for generations to come.

Why Don't I See Miracles Today?

There are several reasons why we tend not to see many miracles today. Most of these are best understood when the "sign" purpose of miracles is recalled. God performed miracles through the apostles and prophets as a sign to authenticate His message by His chosen servants. Today, God has other ways of revealing Himself to us.

First, God reveals Himself to us in Christ. What we can learn from studying the life of Christ was previously communicated by sign miracles (cf. John 20:30-31). The Hebrews were reminded, "God in past times in various ways (including miracles), has spoken to us by the prophets, but in the fullness of time God spoke in His Son (Heb. 1:1-2, ELT).

Second, God has also revealed Himself to us through the Word. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable . . ." (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus said, "Search the Scriptures . . . these are they which testify of Me. The hymnwriter prayed concerning his study of the Scriptures that "beyond the sacred page, I see thee Lord."

Even at times when miracles were more common, God's desire has always been that we live by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). John Wesley taught the early Methodists the key to effectively ministering to people who are sick and dying was not to raise the sick but to help them die well. By this he meant the minister should help people confirm their faith and prepare them to face the challenge of death.

Miracles don't guarantee that faith will be more likely than that which comes from our study of the Word. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord . . . God also bearing witness with both signs and wonders, with various miracles" (Heb. 2:3-4). Some people will always refuse to believe even in the face of miracles, even "though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Finally, perhaps the reason we see so few miracles today is because people want miracles for the wrong reasons. Like those who would have made Jesus their Messiah for the wrong reasons, Jesus could also say of our generation, "You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled" (John 6:26).

How Shall I Respond?

When it comes to miracles, be cautious in your conclusions. Although certain types of miracles are unlikely today, don't say God can't do miracles today. He is God and therefore can do anything He wants to do at any time. But when people claim to experience a miracle, be sure to get the facts first. "Test all things, hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21, ELT). Take time to test a miraculous claim by the Bible. "Don't believe everything that claims to be from God, but apply biblical tests to them; because there are many false ministries" (1 John 4:1, ELT).

Many Christians fail to experience the full blessing God has for them now because they are always seeking for something else, something miraculous. Don't seek a miracle. Rather, make knowing God more intimately the pursuit of your lift (Phil. 3:10). In doing so, you will be able to celebrate the miracles you have already experienced.

Chapter 5: Why Doesn't God Do What I Ask?

Pastor Splinter was the popular pastor of a large Winnipeg church with an extended preaching ministry throughout the Canadian province. He owned a small plane which he often used to fly himself to preach in other communities. He was on his way to such a meeting one winter evening when it happened.

The evangelical pastor had been warned before taking off that a severe winter storm was threatening in the area in which he intended to fly. Confident of the Lord's ability to take care of him, he thanked people for their concern and made his way to the plane. Several hours later, his wife received a phone call. There had been a plane crash in a remote Manitoba community and it was believed to be Pastor Splinter's plane.

When investigators did reach the crash site, their fears were confirmed. They found the pastor's body in the midst of the twisted wreckage of what had once been a small plane. But it was what they found on the flight box recorder that became most troublesome for the friends and family of the dead pastor.

For several hours before the plane ran out of gas and crashed, the prayers of Pastor Splinter had been recorded from his seat in the cockpit. There was only one request in these repetitious prayers. He had asked God for a hole in the storm so he could safely land the plane. But there was no hole. Finally, the plane ran out of gas and crashed, killing all on board.

Why didn't God answer Pastor Splinter's prayer?

Jesus promised, "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14). This is only one of several biblical texts that promise us answers to our prayers, but sometimes our prayers seem to go unanswered. For years as a little boy I prayed for my father to quit drinking, but he drank until damage done by his drinking made it impossible for him to stop. As a Bible college student, I was part of a group that prayed for God's blessing upon a mission church in our community, but the church closed. Perhaps the most frustrating experience for a believer is to pray and not get the answer. Sometimes God's answer is No; He has other plans that we do not understand. Other times we may give up and stop praying before God is ready to answer.

Who Did God Not Answer?

When our prayers go unanswered, we must not think we are the only ones who have not had a prayer answered. Sometimes, simply realizing our experience is shared by others will be enough to motivate us to determine why that prayer went unanswered and continue praying. This is a much better response to the problem than giving up on prayer all together.

Many Christians are surprised when they learn who prayed prayers that went unanswered. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matt. 26:39). This prayer was not answered and several hours later, Jesus was nailed to the cross.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved" (Rom. 10:1). But despite his prayers, many Jewish people continue to reject Christ as their Messiah. Also, Paul prayed three times for the removal of a thorn in the flesh, but that request was also denied.

The Old Testament also records accounts of men who prayed and were refused by God. Moses prayed, "Please, show me Your glory" (Ex. 33:18), but learned he was asking God to do something that God could not do in that situation. When his son was sick, "David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground" (2 Sam. 12:16). David was asking God to do something against the law of God which is the extension of God, and God cannot deny himself nor break His laws. Therefore David's child died. In a moment of despair, Elijah prayed, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!" (1 Kings 19:4). But God was not through with Elijah, so he did not die.

What Happens To Those God Does Not Answer?

Just as answers to prayer can produce several positive results in our life, so there are consequences with which people live when they don't get the answers they seek. For many, not getting an answer hurts their spirituality. They reason that if they are walking with God, He would answer. When there is no answer, they begin blaming themselves.

Others respond to unanswered prayer by abandoning prayer completely. They reason God's rejection of one prayer, is a total rejection of them personally. Such false reasoning can often have long-term consequences.

As a child I came home one day as my mother was making chicken noodle soup. Earlier, she had fried liver and the smell of fried liver filled the kitchen where she was working. Assuming that I smelled what she was making, I determined I did not like chicken noodle soup because it smelled too much like liver. A decade later I tasted chicken noodle soup for the first time and realized the error in my thinking.

The third thing that happens to those who do not get their prayers answered is a loss of faith. They know they sincerely asked in faith in accordance to their understanding of the biblical principle (Mark 11:22-24). When the answer doesn't come, they doubt their sincerity or their faith. Usually, what they have forgotten is the relationship between faith and works. When my friends and I prayed for our mission work in South Carolina, we had faith but lacked works. If we had committed some of our effort to visiting people and telling them about Jesus, God may have blessed our efforts and answered our prayers.

Ultimately, those who don't get answers to their prayers stop asking. Initially, they continue praying but lack the boldness based on their earlier confidence. Then they begin dropping certain unanswered requests from their prayer list assuming God is not going to answer that request either. Also, when they don't get one request, they are more reluctant to add new things to their prayer list. As a result, they don't get the things God wants to give them in answer to their prayers. In extreme cases, these people stop praying completely.

When Is Our Thinking about Prayer Wrong?

There are reasons why our prayers go unanswered. Some of these have to do with the way we think about prayer. Sometimes we don't get answers to prayer because we are praying

for something God has not promised. We may pray that we would never have troubles which is contrary to the teaching of Scripture (Job 5:7). Rather, we should pray for wisdom in the midst of our troubles, something God has promised those who will ask in faith (James 1:5).

On other occasions, we may pray asking God to do things which go against His nature. God cannot erase history or make a square circle, cold fire, or a stone too heavy to lift. When a student prays that God will help him or her cheat on an exam without being caught, he or she is asking God to do something totally incompatible with who He is. Instead, the student should study and ask God to help him or her recall what he or she has learned during the exam.

Some prayers go unanswered because we don't understand the nature of prayer. For many, prayer is like a list a child might send to Santa Claus at Christmas. The broad function of prayer is worship, fellowship, forgiveness, intercession, thanksgiving, not just to ask for things.

On other occasions, our prayers go unanswered because we give up too soon. God began to answer when we planted seeds in the garden, but we forgot that the constant water of prayer is necessary before harvest. Daniel prayed for something for three weeks before an angel arrived with the answer. The angel noted he had been sent three weeks earlier, but had been hindered by a spiritual conflict in which he became engaged. How many prayers have we stopped praying if we do not have an answer within three weeks?

Some prayers go unanswered because we don't trust God for His greater purpose. He answers prayer for His plan and glory, not our convenience. When a Christian prays for a winning lottery ticket, that prayer is designed to bring glory to the Christian rather than God. Winning a major lottery would result in many Christians depending more upon their financial resources rather than God to accomplish His purpose in their life.

Sometimes, we take one promise out of total biblical context. God has promised to do whatever we ask, but there are other conditions in Scripture. If we violate those other conditions, we have no authority to claim God's promises regarding answered prayer.

When is Our Feeling about Prayer Wrong?

The Scriptures identify several things which may hinder our prayers. First, our prayers are hindered by wrong desires. "You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:2-3). Also, our prayers are hindered by wrong actions. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day understood this principle when they declared, "Now we know that God does not hear sinners" (John 9:31).

Third, our prayers are hindered by evil thoughts. The psalmist noted, "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Ps. 66:18). Many Christians have unanswered prayers because they harbor sexual or financial fantasies. Also, domestic conflict may hinder our prayers. Peter warned husbands, "Likewise you husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7).

What Are God's Reasons for Not Answering

God has several good reasons for not answering our prayers. Sometimes, we expect the answer too soon. We ask God for tomatoes as we plant the seed and complain when He doesn't

answer by the end of the week. We are like the man who prayed, "God, give me patience, and do it now!" Some prayers take time to answer.

On some occasions, God answers prayer but those who pray fail to recognize His answer. A missionary family sailed into the wide mouth of the Amazon when their water supply ran out. The family prayed for fresh water and kept looking to the sky for rain clouds. When it did not rain, the family eventually died of thirst not realizing the water in which they were sailing was fresh.

On other occasions, unanswered prayer is God's way of saying no. Sometimes He says no to our prayers because what we pray for is forbidden in Scripture. At other times, what we pray for may be contrary to His plan or purpose for our life.

There are other reasons God may not answer prayer. At times, he may be testing our faithfulness. God may chose not to answer some prayer to see if we will remain faithful in our prayer life. Also, as answers to prayer are based on our relationship with God (Matt. 6:25-32; 7:9-11), a person who is not God's child by the new birth may not have his or her prayers answered. Further, God will not answer prayers which cause Him to go against His nature. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

What Is Our Response to God's Silence?

The challenge facing us is learning how to respond to God's silence in this area of answered prayer. A good place to begin is with submission. Jesus prayed, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). God has a plan for our life, one to which we should submit. Second, we must learn to patiently wait on God even as Paul had to be patient. Someday, even his prayer for Israel will be answered and "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). Paul knew of a coming a worldwide revival such as has never been seen. This revival, which is associated with the return of Christ in Scripture, will result in the national conversion of Israel.

Third, we must grow in our understanding of God's nature. God told Moses, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live" (Ex. 33:20). As we develop our relationship with God, the quality of our prayer life will also grow. Study the Scripture to know His complete principles. Then, in light of your new understanding of God, confess your own weakness, limitations and sin.

Chapter 6: Where Is God When I Need Him?

The great man C.S. Lewis began an address by recounting the details of a recent accident in Britain. A truck plowed into a crowd of school children, killing twenty-seven and injuring many others. Many in the community struggled with the pain of grief and sorrow over those who had been killed and injured. Lewis then asked the question many had been thinking.

Where was God in all this? Is God not good to children? Did He not know what would happen? Doesn't God care about children enough to protect them? Couldn't He have prevented this disaster? Why didn't God do something?

Many Christians can identify with the confusion experienced by Lewis's listeners. We have all had our own personal disasters in life or seen those in our sphere of influence pass through deep waters. We have read the stories of the violent deaths experienced by faithful

Christian martyrs. Under such circumstances, it is only natural to ask, "Why doesn't God come to my rescue?"

Why doesn't God intervene to keep me from sinning? Why doesn't He keep me from danger? Why does He let things happen that may harm me spiritually?

When Did God Not Come to the Rescue?

The Scriptures record the lives of many people who struggled through difficult situations without God actively intervening. God could have protected Job from Satan's attack, but instead He told the Devil, "Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life" (Job 2:6). God allowed His faithful servant to suffer intense sorrow and pain that God might be magnified in Job's life.

Joseph also suffered great humiliation without the apparent intervention of God. Joseph's brothers abused him and sold him to the Ishmaelites as a slave (Gen. 37:27). Later, he was unjustly accused and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit (Gen. 39:20). God allowed Joseph to pass through these experiences because they fit into His larger plan for Joseph's life. Joseph revealed his understanding of God's working in these difficult situations when He later told his brothers, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

Sometimes, God allows a person to suffer to prepare that person for some special service. Such was David's experience. Samuel anointed David to be Israel's second king, but before David assumed the throne he spent more than a decade being hunted down by Saul. During this period in his life, David composed many of the psalms that reflected his growing passion for God. When David eventually assumed the throne, he proved to be a better king than he might have been otherwise.

This does not mean David's problems were over with the death of Saul. This man who did so much to be commended is remembered in part for his great sin with Bathsheba. "Then it happened one evening that David arose from his bed and walked on the roof of the king's house. And from the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold. Then David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her" (2 Sam. 11:2, 4). While David's sin cannot be justified, God apparently allowed His servant to fall into sin to get others into place. In the grace of God, Bathsheba became part of the messianic line and mother of the next king of Israel, Solomon.

Not all instances of God's people falling into sin have the same purpose or result. Ananias and Sapphira lied about the sale of their property and what they were giving to God and died. Sometimes, God allows his people to sin, so judgment will purify His church. As a result of God's judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira, "great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things" (Acts 5:11).

On other occasions, God allows his people to fuss so His work will prosper. That seems to be the case with Paul and Barnabas. These men engaged in an intense dispute over taking Mark with them on a second missionary journey. The dispute became so intense, the two missionaries parted company. "And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and ... went through Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 15:39-41). Although their failure to resolve their differences was wrong, God used this dispute to double the missionary efforts of the early church.

Paul also learned something about God allowing physical suffering and problems in his own struggle with failing eyesight. He learned God allows weakness to manifest His strength. In

an epistle to the Corinthians, Paul spoke of his thorn in the flesh. Many Bible teachers believe this thorn was a physical condition which affected his eyesight. Paul wrote, "Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me" (2 Cor. 12:8). But God responded by saying no. He wanted to demonstrate His strength in Paul's weakness.

People Who Expect God to Solve All Their Problems

Some people expect God to solve all their problems. They see the Christian life as a bed of roses without the thorns. These people misunderstand God. They fail to recognize the law of division of labor. This law divides things which God wants us to do from those things which God will do without us. When we ignore this law, we expect God to do what God expects us to do. Just as unrealistic expectations in a marriage may result in marital conflict, so a faith without works results in frustration as expectations in the Christian life are not realized.

Sometimes, a father watches his child struggle with math homework. He knows he could do his son's assignment much faster and more accurately and release his son from a difficult situation. But he also knows the struggle in which his son is engaged is part of the learning process. Therefore, the father chooses not to do his son's homework because, in the long term, struggling with math homework is in the best interest of the child. Likewise, sometimes God doesn't do things for us because He knows what we need to do to learn important lessons of life.

Those who depend on God to solve all their problems have boxed themselves off from reality. They quote the verse, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (Rom. 8:28), but they misinterpret its meaning. This verse does not promise all things are comfortable, pleasant and happy, but it does assure us that even the uncomfortable, unpleasant and sad experiences of life can be shaped by God to accomplish His good purpose in our life.

Because God uses problems to minister in our life and help prepare us for ministry to others, those who live in denial of problems in their Christian life are short-changing their Christian experience and ministry. First, they are bitter and miserable because they refuse to let God be "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation" (2 Cor. 1:3-4). Second, they are unable to help others because they have not received the benefits God offers us in problems "that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:4).

Ultimately, they deny their identification with Christ. Paul recognized "the sufferings of Christ abound in us" (2 Cor. 1:5). Those who do not face problems when God allows them in their life will never be able to identify with the suffering of Christ. This condition may lead to their losing their sense of purpose and vision. Peter discussed the problem of suffering and concluded, "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind" (1 Peter 4:1). Suffering is part of God's plan for the Christian life.

Why Doesn't God Run to Our Rescue?

As much as we might wish otherwise, God is not going to run to our rescue every time we encounter a problem. God governs His world by His rules. He controls everything by physical, social and psychological laws. Just as a football coach does not call a time out every

time a player goofs up or gets in trouble, God does not abandon His laws whenever we have a problem. He has a greater plan for our life.

God uses problems in our life to test us and help us learn by our mistakes. This is not always enjoyable but "no pain no gain." "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11).

Just as the pressure created in isometric exercise or a weight-training program strengthens our muscles, so suffering is God's gift to mature us. C. S. Lewis described suffering as "a gift of God." The early Christians were encouraged to look at suffering in this way. "My brothers, think well of all the various sources of your suffering... knowing they mature you" (James 1:2, 4, ELT).

There is no need for God to bail us out of our problems because He already told us what to do in the Bible. "He did not leave Himself without witness" (Acts 14:17). Paul reminded the Corinthians, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). That "way of escape" is often found in the pages of Scripture or the counsel of those God has placed around us.

God's purpose is not that we live from miracle to miracle, but from faith to faith. Jesus confronted those who would follow Him for miracles and rebuked them (John 6:26). In contrast, Paul three times in his epistles quoted God's message to Habakkuk, "But the just shall live by his faith (Hab. 2:4).

How Does God Intervene?

Actually, there are several ways God intervenes in our situation, sometimes without our knowing it. At times, God may give us special insight into a situation and then leave us to resolve a problem. That appears to have been the case when His people were endangered by a Persian decree. "When Mordecai learned all that had happened" he approached Esther "that he might command her to go in to the king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people" (Esther 4:1, 8).

A second way God may intervene in our situation is to burden us for a special task. Many prophets built their ministry around a burden or internal desire. This was also the basis of Nehemiah's ministry. In his memoirs, he wrote, "So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4). The burden he developed for Jerusalem resulted in his rebuilding of the walls of that city.

A third way God intervenes is through the Scriptures. Daniel got insight into the Babylonian captivity as he understood the Scriptures. "I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the Lord, given through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem" (Dan. 9:2).

One's understanding of the Bible can have significant results in our life. When an American oil man read of Moses' mother lining a basket with pitch to make it waterproof, he knew pitch was a petroleum byproduct. His company sent prospectors to Egypt and became the first to discover oil in the Middle East. On another occasion, a British general found himself

trapped in an area where David once hid from Saul. As he read his Bible and looked at his maps, he discovered David's long-forgotten escape route and was able to lead his troops to safety.

On occasion, God may use an angel to intervene in our situation. When Peter was imprisoned in Jerusalem, "an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors" (Acts 5:19). Does God still use angels to intervene in our life today? Many Bible teachers think so and stories abound of angelic protection of missionaries and others. But the problem with angels is that most of them do not look like their pictures on religious icons. The early Christians were encouraged to practice hospitality "for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels" (Heb. 13:2).

Ultimately, God does intervene in our lives by His providence. This does not mean we will not face problems. Rather, it means the problems we encounter are only those He allows to accomplish His purpose in our life. Therefore, our response in the midst of problems needs to mirror that of Joseph. "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

Chapter 7: Why Doesn't the Bible Make Sense?

Very early in World War II, the British intelligence service obtained the technology to intercept radio transmissions broadcasting orders from Berlin to various combat units stationed throughout Europe. The German leaders knew the British were probably listening in but continued to broadcast sensitive military information with confidence. They could do so because of the enigma, a coding machine that scrambled and unscrambled their messages. Those listening in on the broadcasts were unable to understand the scrambled message they heard.

What Germany's leaders did not know was that British intelligence had secured an enigma machine and were using it to break the various codes in use. Once the code had been broken, the scrambled messages between military units in Europe could be understood. Allied troops could then be warned of surprise attacks and counter attacks could be planned for greater effectiveness. Members of various European underground movements still had difficulty understanding the military broadcasts they listened in on, but those who had broken the code in England knew exactly what was going on.

For many people, understanding the Bible is like trying to understand a scrambled message between headquarters and a strategically placed military unit. There is a sense that this message must be important, but they have difficulty understanding just what is being said and what they personally should do about it. They hear others talk about some verse of Scripture which has become especially meaningful to them, but that never seems to happen to them.

Why Do Some People Miss the Message of the Bible?

There are many reasons people may miss the message of the Scriptures. Admittedly, some parts of the Bible are harder to understand than others. Even the apostle Peter had difficulty understanding some of Paul's epistles (2 Peter 3:15). But most of the reasons people struggle with the message of the Scriptures have more to do with our preconceived ideas about the Bible than the Bible itself.

Many people have a view of Scripture which might be best described as "romantic idealism." They miss the message of the Bible because they think it is filled with "tales" that have been passed onto us by ancient people that have no relevancy for today. As a result, the

Bible is looked upon as a storybook recounting great adventures which may or may not be true. No effort is made by these people to discern God's message for us today in the Scriptures.

A second group approaches the Bible as mystics. For them, the Bible is filled with esoteric material that can't be understood by mere mortals. They meditate on isolated phrases, events or ideas from the Bible, but do not attempt to understand the meaning of the Bible. For them, their thoughts about God and the Scriptures are always divorced from the reality in which we live. Because of their preconceived ideas, mystics tend not to study the Bible in its broad context.

The third group that miss out on the message of the Scriptures are the critics. These people miss the message of the Bible because they assume it is full of errors, mistakes and problems in its pages. When one talks with these people, it usually quickly becomes very obvious that they have never taken time to read the Bible to discover these "errors" for themselves. But because these people believe the Bible is unreliable, they never take time to read it and learn its message.

Three Terms to Know

Bible teachers use three terms to describe the Bible especially as it relates to God. These terms are "revelation" which describes God communicating truth, "inspiration" which describes God's guidance of the human writers of Scripture, and "illumination" which describes the work of the Holy Spirit in helping us understand the Scriptures.

Revelation was the act of God which gave people knowledge about Himself and His creation, including knowledge which people could not have otherwise known. The key verse in Scripture describing the act of revelation states, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). Because God is the source of the Scriptures, the contents of Scripture are guaranteed by the veracity of God Himself. This means we can look to the Scriptures as a reliable testimony in all it says about God, heaven, hell, or any other subject.

Inspiration recognizes the role of the Holy Spirit in producing the Scriptures. Paul's use of the term *theopneustos* communicates the idea of God "breathing out" the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16). Inspiration refers not only to the process by which God guided the human writers, it also applies to every word of the Bible. Just as we "breath out" words by passing air through our larynx to speak, so God has spoken by "breathing out" His words which are recorded in the Scriptures. In this God guaranteed the method by which the Scriptures were given.

Jesus made three statements that demonstrate just how authorative and reliable He knew the Scriptures were. First, He said, "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18). The jot and tittle refer to the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*yodh*) and a small mark which distinguishes several Hebrew letters from each other. A similar English idiom might refer to the dotting of an "i" or the crossing of a "t".

When challenged on His view of the resurrection, Jesus made reference to a statement made by God to Moses at the burning bush, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Matt. 22:32). Noting that the verb is in the present tense and that God is the God of the living not the dead, Jesus argued the case for life after death with religious leaders who denied that doctrine. These two instances demonstrate Jesus' complete reliability in the

Scriptures right down to the very words and verb tenses used. On a third occasion, Jesus simply announced, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:38), i.e., treated as unimportant.

In that God took such care to reveal and inspire His Word, it is not surprising that He is also involved in helping us understand His Word. Illumination is the ministry of the Holy Spirit which enables us to understand and apply the spiritual message of the Scriptures. When we sit before an open Bible and begin to discover the truths of the Scripture, this ministry of the Holy Spirit enables us to understand the message of Scripture. The Holy Spirit removes our spiritual blindness and helps us understand and apply the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures.

Why Do People Have Difficulty Understanding the Bible?

Some people have difficulty understanding the Bible because they fail to recognize the unique nature of the Bible. The Bible is a spiritual book. It has dual authorship in that it was written by people and God. Also, it is a supernatural book that is inspired by God. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (God breathed)" (2 Tim. 3:16). It is true the Bible was written by people using the language at their command, yet the Holy Spirit guided every thought and word so that it was accurate, reliable and authoritative. The result is that the Bible is exactly what God wanted said and contains no error.

If the Holy Spirit guarantees every word, Christians should study every word. But for many, that is easier said than done. Because the Bible is a spiritual book, there are two barriers that non-spiritual people face when reading its message. First, the message of the Bible is hidden. "The natural unconverted person can't understand the message of the Spirit of God because he thinks it is foolish. He can't know it because the message has built in restraints to the unspiritual person" (1 Cor. 2:14, ELT). Second, unconverted people are blinded by sin and Satan. "The message of the gospel is hidden to unconverted people because Satan has made it impossible for them to understand God's truth, but they understand the gospel of Christ and that He is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:3-4, ELT).

Why Did God Veil His Message?

It may seem strange that God should veil His message which He intended for all people, but the response of the unsaved to God demonstrates the wisdom of His actions. The unsaved have rejected God and His standards. The apostle Paul told Jewish leaders who rejected the Gospel, "You will be ever hearing but never understand. You will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes" (Acts 28:26-27, NIV).

The rejection of God and His standards by the unsaved suggests the Scriptures would suffer a similar fate. The unsaved would tend to trivialize the Scriptures. Jesus often taught His disciples with parables "because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables" (Matt. 13:11, 13).

Does this mean God is not concerned with communicating with the unsaved? Not in the least! God has given a general message in natural revelation. "The heavens communicate the God of glory, the skies manifest who He is" (Ps. 19:1, ELT). Those who respond positively to the message of God in general revelation become candidates for special revelation.

There is a close relationship between the faith in God and the Scriptures which are also called the Word of Faith. To produce faith in the reader, God begins with faith. The Bible is called "the faith" (Jude 3). This designation refers to doctrinal faith but also reminds us the Bible produces faith in the sincere reader. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

How Does God Communicate?

The Holy Spirit is the means by which God communicates the truths of Scripture to our life. He speaks by the Holy Spirit to our spirit. Spiritual truth passes from the mind of God to the mind of His people. "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:10). Then, the Spirit makes us understand. "You have an anointing from the Holy Spirit to understand spiritual truth" (1 John 2:20, ELT).

The Holy Spirit is who overcomes barriers. As a result, there is no spiritual barrier to biblical truth when the person is controlled by the Spirit. "Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Cor. 2:11-12). With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can understand the words God used to communicate His message. "We do not just speak with the words of people to communicate spiritual truth, but we use the words which the Holy Spirit has inspired so you can find out what God means by comparing one part of the Scripture with another" (1 Cor. 2:13, ELT).

The ultimate result of the Scriptures is the production of eternal life and spirituality in our life. To produce these results, the Bible must contain those qualities. Jesus said, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The Apostle Peter reminded the early Christians they had been "born again . . . through the word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). In describing the life-giving power of the Scriptures, one hymnwriter called them "Wonderful Words of Life."

Seven Words of Understanding

As we approach the Bible to understand God's message to us, there are several guidelines that will help us in our understanding. First, read the Bible carefully. Paul told Timothy, "give attention to reading" (1 Tim. 4:13). If you are not already doing so, set a goal to read through the Bible every year. This goal can be accomplished by reading a couple chapters from the Old Testament each morning and a chapter from the New Testament each evening. On Sundays, take an hour Sunday afternoon to read a few extra chapters each week.

Second, study diligently. Again, the apostle told his young protégé, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God ... rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). As you study, focus on the words of Scripture. The early Christians "searched the Scriptures" (Acts 17:11) and we should do no less. The word translated "searched" means they sifted the words. If God inspired every word, then every word is important. In previous generations, women would sift flour before using it to separate every particle. As you study the Scriptures, be just as diligent to look for every part of God's message to you.

Next, commit portions of the Scriptures to memory. D. L. Moody had written in the front of His Bible, "This Book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this Book." This

conclusion was based on the testimony of the Psalmist who confessed, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11).

As you study the Scriptures, strive for consistency. Take time to compare Scripture with Scripture, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual;” (1 Cor. 2:13). Remember, "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). This verse is often used to counter the view that only a religious leader or particular church can interpret the Scriptures, but it also warns us about adopting a personal interpretation of a text that is inconsistent with the teaching of the rest of Scripture and the widely held understanding of Christians throughout the ages.

As you "search the Scriptures" (John 5:39), be sensitive and yielded to the leading of the Holy Spirit in your life. "No one knows the work of God but the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:11, ELT). Don't begin with your theological bias but rather look for what God wants to tell you. When the leading theologians of their day came together to produce the Westminster Confession, their efforts failed until they yielded themselves to God in prayer and asked Him to show them the truth. Previously, their discussions had been marred by trivial disputes over finer points of doctrine.

God has given us an important message in the Scriptures which cannot be understood without the supernatural aid of the Holy Spirit in our life. But even Christians may find the Bible difficult to understand if they don't take the steps necessary to understand the Scriptures. However, when we do our part we find the Holy Spirit will help us understand and apply God's message to our life.

Chapter 8: Why Does God Keep Secrets?

Sometimes, the more you know the more you realize just how little you know. This is certainly true as we grow in our knowledge of God and His will for our life. Early in our Christian life we might come to a point where a complete understanding of God and His ways may seem within reach, but if we continue to grow we soon learn that their is much to learn beyond our perceived limit.

One of the benefits of an increased understanding of God and His ways is the greater ease with which we recognize God at work around us and the richer communion we experience with Him. Perhaps that is why many of us find it so frustrating when confronted with the secrets God chooses not to reveal to His people. There is a tendency to feel robbed as though God is deliberately withholding something that could make our life easier. Like Job, we may find ourself becoming very introspective and then defensive assuming things are not right between God and us.

Sometimes, there are no answers to our questions. For reasons only He may understand, God chooses to keep secret His insight into our situation. There is no indication God ever told Job about His conversation with Satan or the reason why He allowed Job to endure such intense suffering. Neither are there any promises that God will always explain to us what He is doing in our life. His decision to keep secrets does not mean He is mad at us.

People keep secrets for many reasons. Sometimes they don't tell us what they know because they love us and want the very best for us. A wife may plan a surprise birthday party for her husband. She keeps her plans secret to maximize her husband's happiness at the event. A travel agent may not introduce a customer to a discount airline with a history of safety violations and recent accidents, to keep his or her customer from danger. A parent may not tell a young

child just how serious an illness is, to prevent the child from becoming emotionally upset. A friend might keep secrets from another friend if he or she thought the information might hurt his or her friend or even cause a friend to contemplate suicide. In each of these and many other cases, keeping secrets is motivated by a person's concern for another.

God Keeps Secrets

The Scriptures describe God in the context of one of His primary functions, that of revealing Himself to people. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). God has revealed truth to His people but to whom much is given, much is also required. Those of us who are recipients are responsible to "do all the words of this law." Because God loves us, He has revealed insights we need to live the abundant life. That same love of God is also at work when God chooses to limit His revelation to us.

Love is not the only reason God keeps secrets. He who made us understands, more than we do sometimes, our significant limitations to grasp that which is infinite and unlimited. God, by the very nature of who He is, is beyond the human mind's ability to comprehend. This has been self-evident to Christian leaders throughout the centuries. Most often the word "incomprehensible" has been used by theologians who attempt to describe God. Nicolas of Cusa acknowledged, "The intellect knoweth that it is ignorant of Thee because it knoweth Thou canst not be known, unless the unknowable could be known, and the invisible beheld, and the inaccessible attained." Richard Rolle declared, "Verily God is of infinite greatness, more than we can think."

Our inability to fully understand the mind of God is declared in Scripture. "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,' says 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'" (Isa. 55:8-9). God hides His thoughts from us because we could not comprehend them. We are not only ignorant of God's thoughts, we do not know God's method of thinking. That is why so many of the principles by which God governs His world seem paradoxical to us. How can one save His life by loosing it? How can God bring to naught the things which are by using things which do not exist? God has a different method of thinking than we do. As a result, the content of His thoughts is also different.

Even the name of God is secret. I have written three books on the names of God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Over a thousand names of God are revealed in Scripture, yet that list is incomplete. When Jesus returns, He will have a name that only He knows (Rev. 19:12). Not only are some aspects of the name of God kept secret, one of the many names used to describe God in Scripture is "Secret" (Judges 13:10).

When Samson's mother was pregnant, she was twice visited by the Angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord was a Christophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. When Samson's mother asked the Angel His name, He replied, "Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?" (Judges 13:10). The older King James Version translates the word "wonderful" as "secret." Actually, both translations are correct. The name was secret or unknown because this was a Christophany and His name in the future would be Jesus. But His name was also wonderful. Isaiah used that name when he prophesied, "For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given ... And His name will be called Wonderful" (Isa. 9:6).

The dual meaning of this Hebrew word for secret and wonderful gives insight into the problem of dealing with the secrets of God. In the Christian life, it may be the same experience. When faced with a problem and tempted to wonder why God doesn't care enough to tell us something, perhaps He cares too much to let us know what we want to know.

The Threefold Secret of God

The secrets of God exist in three tenses. First are the past secrets of God. Eliphaz asked his friend Job, "Have you heard the counsel of God?" (Job 15:8). We do not know how God created the world, or many other details that might explain the wonderful (secret) works of God. However, we do know all we need to know to recognize what God has accomplished.

The second aspect of God's secrets is the present secrets of God. Regardless of our growth in the Christian life and sensitivity to the work of God around us, none of us see all God is doing today. Throughout history, major movements have begun in insignificant ways such as the posting of the ninety-five thesis (Protestant Reformation), the preaching of a sermon by a lay preacher (Modern Missionary Movement) and the gathering of believers to observe the Lord's Table (Moravian Revival). God may be doing something near us today in a way that seems too insignificant for God, but may have very significant consequences. Paul understood our inability to recognize God's present secrets when he wrote, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12).

Third, some of God's secrets remain future. God has shown us some of the future, but our vision of things to come is limited. He has pried the window of the future open slightly, "because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matt. 13:11). Still, some aspects of God's future timetable remain unknown. We don't know the time of His return. That secret belongs to the Father alone (Matt. 24:36). Neither do we know why God chooses to renew His covenant with Israel. A Bible teacher once observed, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Any attempts to explain why God acts in this way are speculative, for only God knows why He chose that people from the many distinct people groups which have existed throughout history.

What Present Secrets Does God Hide?

While we may speculate about God's past and future secrets, secrets God chooses to keep in the present are most challenging to us today. We struggle to understand why God gives us the leaders we have, why we differ from others in ways we wish we didn't, and why some of our friends are receptive to the Gospel while others are apathetic or hostile. Let's look more closely at these three aspects of God's present secrets.

Why does God place some in positions of political power over others who, in our opinion, may be better qualified? We do not struggle when God appoints a Joseph, Daniel or Nehemiah to an influential position in government. These men were gifted administrators with a deep, abiding faith in God which was reflected in moral values we share. Our struggle is with the Pharaohs, Nebuchadnezzars and Artaxerxes who rise to power and use their influence to promote values in conflict to those we hold. This is one of the areas in which our thoughts and ways differ from those of God.

Sometimes, God places evil rulers in office to deal with evil. When Israel sinned against God, the Lord often used oppressive leaders to discipline His people (cf. Judges 4:1-2). At other times, He placed evil rulers in office to do good. Two hundred years before Cyrus lived God predicted He would cause Jerusalem to be rebuilt (Isa. 44:28). God may also allow darkness to make light even brighter. "I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create sorrows" (Isa. 45:7, ELT). Fourth, to understand what God is doing in the appointment of certain leaders to positions of influence, it is important to remember His purpose. His purpose is not the comfort or success of His people. God's purpose is to bring glory to Himself in everything. "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever" (Rom. 11:36).

Understanding how God is working also helps us accept ourself for who we are. Paul reminded the Corinthians, "God gives us many kinds of special abilities, but it is the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all. . . . To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice. Someone else may be especially good at studying and teaching" (1 Cor. 12:4, 8 LB). Both our natural abilities and spiritual gifts come from God. We are accountable to use these gifts in a manner that meets God's approval (2 Tim. 2:15). Regardless of our gifts or lack of gifts, God's purpose is that, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31).

Understanding the work of God in salvation can help us as we pray for unsaved loved ones. The Bible describes God choosing (Eph. 1:4), predestinating (Eph. 1:5), and electing (1 Peter 1:2) prior to a person's actual conversion. This does not mean that some people are beyond the reach of salvation. A study of the context in which these claims are made reveals they refer primarily to the plan of salvation rather than the people who are saved. The Scriptures makes it abundantly clear that God has provided salvation for everyone (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). His salvation is wholly of grace, apart from human merit, and based on divine volition. We are responsible to carry salvation to all (Mark 16:15). When we struggle to harmonize divine sovereignty and human choice in our mind, it is comforting to remember God's mind is infinite and He has no problem harmonizing that which is beyond our limited intellectual abilities.

Living with the Secrets of God

Although God reserves the right: to keep secrets, He has also committed Himself to revealing His secrets under certain conditions. First, God reveals His secrets to those who worship Him. "The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him" (Ps. 25:14). Second, God reveals His secrets to those who live a holy life. "For the perverse person is an abomination to the Lord, but His secret counsel is with the upright" (Prov. 3:32). We are not responsible for the things He chooses to keep secret. However, we will be held accountable for how we respond to what we do know.

Our recognition of the secrets of God should lead us into a deeper experience of worshipping God and trusting God. As worshippers, we should fall on our faces when we realize His plan and purpose is much larger than we could ever understand. As believers, we must yield to God's larger plan for us and the world.

This worship-faith response was that of hymnwriter Fanny Crosby who learned to accept God's secrets in her life. One of her hymns, *In the Secret of His Presence*, has encouraged Christians over the years during those times when God is silent.

In the secret of His presence He will hide me,
From the burden of a weary world of care;

Overshadow'd by His mercy, calmly resting,
My Redeemer will protect me there.

He will hide me, safely hide me,
Where no sorrow nor temptation can betide me;
He will hide me, safely hide me;
In the secret of His presence He will hide me.

In the secret of His presence He will hide me,
And the Brightness of His glory He will show:
While He covers me with light as with a garment,
Oh the rapture that my heart will know!

In the secret of His presence He will hide me,
In the secret of His blessed, boundless love;
There communing and abiding with my Saviour,
What a foretaste, of the joys above!