

1

CRYING OUT TO A SILENT, SLEEPING, HARD-OF-HEARING GOD?

“It’s not *you* I’m complaining to—it’s *God*. Is it any wonder I’m getting fed up with his silence? Take a good look at me. Aren’t you appalled by what’s happened? No! Don’t say anything. I can do without your comments” (Job 21:4-5, TM).

“Get up, GOD! Are you going to sleep all day? Wake up! Don’t you care what happens to us? Why do you bury your face in the pillow? Why pretend things are just fine with us?” (Ps. 44:23-24, TM).

“GOD, don’t shut me out; don’t give me the silent treatment, O God” (83:1, TM).

Is God’s voice growing fainter in our world?

If God silenced himself entirely in our lives, how many of us would notice the difference? Have we allowed the noise of our lives to drown Him out?

Our heads are filled with clamor. I recently read a newspaper article about a teenager who spends more than 10,000 minutes a month on his mobile phone. Using a wireless headset, he often leaves it on for hours at a time while he and his friend at the other end of the conversation go about their lives, studying, shopping, sleeping. At the same time, after school he is also often on his computer, juggling seven or more simultaneous Instant Messaging conversations, doing

his homework, and listening to music. “I’m good at multi-tasking,” he says. The article tells of another girl who spends almost ten hours a day on her phone, either talking or text-messaging. “The cell phone is a drug,” she admits.¹

Robert Benson wrote: “The way we live our lives in our cities and towns simply assaults most all of us most all of the time. The sheer unadulterated noise level is enough to make us crazy. Most of the time we do not even notice it. It has become so commonplace, so ordinary, that we are oblivious to it. Perhaps there is a contest going on that I was not told about, the prize going to the person who can tolerate the most noise.”²

Maybe you read that and think, my life isn’t all that noisy, is it? But you may be blocking out more than you realize. By “noise,” I mean more than the sounds from our cell phones and computers and televisions and freeway traffic and crowds in restaurants and shopping centers and lawnmowers and leaf blowers and car alarms and our neighbors and barking dogs and hundreds of other things.

Being too busy is a kind of noise also, assailing our senses and overloading us just as much as too many phone calls and Instant Messages and e-mail can. Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, author of *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap!* asks, “How many people feel too rushed to do what matters most to them? How many people feel in a hurry all day and into the night? How many people can’t take the time to stop and think?”

When our lives are so rushed, Dr. Hallowell compares us to “a tin can surrounded by a circle of a hundred powerful magnets. Pulled at once in every direction, you go nowhere but instead spin faster and faster on your axis.” What are all

these magnets that are tugging at us? He says people spend time

tracking too much data, processing too much information, answering too many people, taking on too many tasks—all out of a sense that this is the way they must live in order to keep up and stay in control. . . . We have magnetized our electronic devices . . . our material possessions, our children's grades and even toys, our career goals, the laundry, the dentist appointment, the up-to-the-second news and expert advice, and even our vacations to such an extent that we have all but given away our free time, our time to do nothing but breathe in, breathe out, and feel the earth beneath our feet.³

Few of us *choose* a noisy life. Instead, the noise in its various forms accumulates gradually, while we may be barely aware that it's happening. Even our own minds can create so much noise that God's presence is blocked out. My friend Dick went on a two-week spiritual retreat that included group study and worship but that also allowed for extended periods of silence, up to 24 hours at a time. Meals were often eaten in silence, and no media or technology of any kind was allowed on the retreat grounds. For four days in a row he walked the same path in the hills at 6:30 A.M. On the fourth day he was amazed to hear a sound he had not heard before—thousands of birds singing in the trees above him. Not until later in the day did it occur to him that those birds “had been there the first three days as well, but I had not heard them. It was shocking to understand that ‘the tapes playing in my head’ had drowned out their sounds. How could I be so oblivious to what was so close, and what else was I missing because of my noise?”

If our mental clutter can block out the singing of thou-

sands of birds, then it's no surprise that it can also shut out the still, small voice of God. As we will see in upcoming chapters, there are good ways of identifying the noise in our lives and then minimizing it so that we can invite God's presence back in. Noise, however, does not explain every period of God's silence that we may have to endure.

For some, disappointment or tragedy ushers in a period when God seems far off. His silence can descend on us during times of doubt and during times when we are running from Him. At other times we cannot point to any known cause of such a painful period. We have been following the Lord for years, but the closeness of His Spirit fades, and we feel spiritually stuck, adrift. The worship services, the music, the prayer that used to embody His presence now leave us cold. A cynicism may develop in us—toward the church, toward fellow believers, toward God himself. Where we once were full participants in the Body of Christ, we now stand aloof and set ourselves up as critics of all things Christian. We get good at pointing out all the flaws in the church and in other believers.

It's possible that a prolonged period of God's silence will be agonizing and bewildering, but it is also just as likely that, as His presence seeps out of our lives gradually, we'll be left with a dangerous indifference toward Him. Our treatment of Him may become merely intellectual, as we relate to Him at the level of a concept without the reality of a true relationship. Our faith may begin to operate only on the basis of tradition—we follow Him because we have done so for so long and it would require too much change and disruption and explaining to do anything different. We may feel comfortable in that tradition, or we may feel trapped. We slip in and out of church without touching God or anyone else. The longer this

goes on, the more likely we are to begin to doubt that His voice even exists. Though we may not admit it, even to ourselves, we may begin to believe that those who do pray to Him and feel His presence in their lives are simply deluded.

God's presence and voice are subtle most of the time. Most of us won't experience Him in a pillar of fire or a blazing light or a descending dove. Even those in scripture who encountered God in dramatic ways did not relate to Him that way all the time. And almost all of them—Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Jeremiah, David, Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist, and others—endured long periods of God's silence at some point in their lives. How did the great figures of Scripture respond to God's silence?

Some accused God, yelled at Him, and cried out to Him when they felt the sting of His abandonment. The Psalms alone are filled with anguish over God's silence. Some accuse Him of being asleep: "Get out of bed—you've slept long enough! Come on the run before it's too late. God, come back!" (Ps. 80:2-3, TM). Others question whether He is hard of hearing or at least is acting as if He is: "Open your ears, God, to my prayer; don't pretend you don't hear me knocking" (55:1, TM). "Don't turn a deaf ear when I call you, GOD. If all I get from you is deafening silence, I'd be better off in the Black Hole" (28:1, TM). Still others wonder whether He simply doesn't have time for them: "Listen, God, I'm desperate. Don't be too busy to hear me" (54:2, TM).

This book grapples with issues of silence. Among the questions it confronts are these:

- What does a period of God's silence in my life *mean*? Is His silence an aberration, a sign of His displeasure, or can it serve some deeper purpose?

SILENT GOD

- If God's silence is common in the lives of Christians, both now and in Scripture, then what can we learn from the experiences of other people about how God *uses* silence in our lives? Are there things God accomplishes with silence that He does no other way?

- Is it ever possible that God is speaking to us, but He is doing so in ways that we are not recognizing? What can we do to better attune ourselves to His voice and to His many ways of reaching us?

If any of these questions strike a chord in your own life, then I invite you to read on.