

# With: God — Finding God in the Shadow of Darkness

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Series: Presence With: God

So if you've been journeying with us through our new vision and purpose statement, we are people of presence. We want to be present with God, present with each other, and present in our community.

And I'm having trouble with my computer. And as we've been journeying through this, we kind of journeyed through the vision part of it. Now we're on the present with God—and what does that actually look like? What does that look like in our personal lives? And a lot of times, I think we look at things like this and say, what does that even mean? Well, that's kind of what we're journeying through. But the present with God in particular is something that I know that I've struggled with—even having my profession—and I know a lot of people have struggled with. And the reason I think this is important to us...

You love it when technology works, don't you? Just a second, guys. Sorry.

I think that presence in itself is actually a really difficult thing in the world today, isn't it? It's hard to be in the moment, and especially with our many distractions and things that are going on in our lives and the many things we have to think about and the priorities that we have, presence itself is very difficult. And I think that's why our vision has spoken to me. I think it's spoken to many of you. And I think life itself is fairly difficult, isn't it?

I've been meeting even with a lot of you the last couple of weeks, and I think sometimes when life gets this hard, I think we undoubtedly—even subconsciously—ask this question: is it really supposed to be this difficult? Every day we hear of another tragedy—a war, a shooting, a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, a fire, something. Most of us feel something, right? When that happens, most of us feel something, even if it's not the weight of the entire effect. And at best, what we typically do is we pray for those people, and we're a little sad. But the pain is generally, even when we hear it on the news or we see it on social media, the pain is out there.

But the most severe pain in our life is usually not out there. It usually has to do with proximity. There's smaller things in comparison, but they are monumental when they hit home. For instance, a hundred people could pass away or there could be a disease in another place, and hundreds of people could be affected—but when that one person is affected that you know, that's close to you, it just hits differently. Diagnosis, whatever it is.

My dad proved this to me. He was very good at it. He was a male nurse before being a male nurse was cool, because it's totally cool now. And he was very good at his job, and no matter what was going on, in super stressful situations he would stay—the shield was able to come down. In other words, if there was a highly emotional or huge thing that was actually going on, he was able to stop that emotion and be able to focus on the job that was at hand. Until one moment. I mean, it didn't matter what it was, but there was one moment where that caught him off guard and he wasn't able to do that.

I remember he told us about it when I grew up. He was in a room and they were performing CPR on a two-year-old boy. And he says, "It's like I stopped functioning and I had to walk backwards out of the room and just say, somebody has to take my place." He said, "It was the only time I couldn't function in my job." And when he thought about it afterwards, he said, "Jake, you were two. And you were at

home, and all I could see was my own son on that table." He said, "It was too close to home. This wasn't just a child—it felt like it was my child."

And see, every single person, every single one of us in here actually has a story like this. Not that we've had any experience performing CPR on a child or anything like that, but suffering is much easier to deal with when it has some distance between us and it. When it starts to hit super close to home, when the pain is no longer out there but it's now here, right now, and involved in our life, it has a completely different impact.

Now, I play basketball a few times a week. I'm not great at it—unless I'm playing against the UCA high schoolers. I know you're here. But I hold my own, depending on who shows up. But going full blast, if I played full blast, I could last for about a half a quarter—six minutes is probably what I would last before I would actually quit. And not like be done, but like be done done. Like there's no coming back from this. Like don't talk to me, don't look at me. I'm going to go over and die alone by the trash can sucking air. Okay? That type of done. Six minutes is probably what I would give myself. And I think I could outlast most of the guys I play with. Basketball—you can burn some major energy and burn some calories.

But then I came across—the reason I'm bringing this up is because I came across this this week—there's professional rowing. You guys ever watch this? You guys ever watch this, like in the Olympics? Somebody really likes it.

Rowers, listen to this. Rowers expend the same amount of energy as someone playing two full basketball games without a break. But instead of the almost two hours it would take to complete a basketball game, those basketball games—they do all of that energy expenditure in six minutes.

What happens in that six minutes? First, the first two minutes are a reality check. At about the minute-and-a-half mark, they say their brain goes into this mode of going, how much longer do we have to do this? In the first minute and a half.

This is—for the next two minutes—this is where the race, for most of them, is won or lost. It becomes excruciating. This is where lactic acid is then pumping into their muscles. And for many of the rowers, the pain is so intense that they actually get disoriented. They start negative self-talk. And they have dissociation at this point.

And then there's the last two minutes. There's this grind to the finish. Their primary muscles have been on fire and in severe pain this whole time, but now their secondary muscles start to join them. And by the end of a six-minute rowing session, the body goes into self-preservation mode, and it's a matter of willpower just to make it to the end.

Does anybody want to go rowing?

Now, you're sitting there, you're speaking to yourself, like who in their right mind would ever volunteer for that? Right? Now, some of you are runners and you're just as sick. Okay? You guys got problems that are probably unfixable. I don't know how to deal with it. Who would run just for... It's just painful.

But that's the thing, right? We're sitting there asking ourselves who would do this, but there's no question for them to even start this that there's going to be pain in the process—that the whole thing is actually a lot of pain. It's not if there's going to be pain. It's not even when or how much pain there will be. It's that what will I do with this pain? This pain has its way in my life. How will I view that pain and how will I push through that pain? Sounds about right, doesn't it? This is life.

But the rowers, I think, have an advantage over you and I. The rowers expect it. They know the pain is coming. It's inevitable. And they already have this frame in their mind. Most of us have never given ourselves permission to think about our own lives like that. Do you realize that?

There's a Western assumption. I remember when I came across this and I was floored. There's this Western-minded assumption—that's our minds, by the way—a first-world assumption, and I think it's subconscious, that when pain arrives in our lives that it shouldn't be happening. You take that to a third-world country, you take that to basically any other generation throughout history, and you realize that suffering historically was a normal thing.

Life expectancy in the time of Jesus—anybody want to take a guess the age range? 40, 50? No, you're lucky. That's even high. 22 to 32 is what they expected. That was your life expectancy. Most humans back then didn't even live past childhood. In fact, if you made it to adulthood, you would probably live to 40, 45, but most people...

For us, suffering demands an explanation, doesn't it? For me, I want an explanation for why I have to go through the things that I have to go through in life. But for them, it's just the norm. Our culture teaches us, I think sometimes in our comfort-addicted life, to believe that pain and suffering shouldn't be a part of our lives and we try to avoid it at all costs. Are you with me? I do this in my life. One person's nodding their head. Good, yeah. We try to avoid it. I don't want—who wants to suffer? None of us are, I hope none of us are masochistic enough in here to want to do that. None of us want to go through life. We want paradise, don't we? It's almost like there's something calling us towards that.

But when this pain hits, this is when we start to question things. When real pain hits, we think, why, God, is this happening? Why don't You do something about this? There was a thief on a cross that said something to that effect. And we start asking Him, God, this hurts so bad—where are You?

And if that's you today asking God, where are You when I'm hurting like this, I want to show you something. It's in Luke chapter 24.

Now Jesus has just been crucified. He's just been hung on a cross, and His disciples sat up in a room for a few days. There were stories about His body being stolen, or at least missing. And the author describes these two men walking on a dusty road from one town to the next, and as they're walking, talking, there's a third traveler that comes up and joins them in their midst. And He asks what they're talking about, and they stood there with their faces downcast. In the Greek, this literally means their face became dark. So they just stood there with their faces down and it literally means, yeah, their faces went dark.

Cleopas was one of their names. And he says, "Are You the only person who basically hasn't heard everything that's going on in the world today? Over the last three days." And the stranger says, "What do you mean?" And they explain that there is a teacher—this man who is a prophet, He's powerful, and He was supposed to come and set Israel free. He was supposed to come and be the redeemer of Israel, their own country, set all the people free and they're excited to see Him. And then the religious leaders of their own country came and they turned Him over to the Romans and they murdered Him. And then there was something about a couple of women and some of our men that said His body was missing and angels told them that He was alive, but it doesn't seem like they believe it.

And the stranger says to them, "You're so thick-headed." That's what we want to hear, right? "You're so slow-hearted. Why can't you simply believe what the prophet said? Do you not see that these things had to happen—that the Messiah had to suffer, and that was what He needed to enter actually His glory?" And then the stranger goes into a bunch of Old Testament references—everything about

what had just happened the last few days. This person was going further than they would. They begged Him to come, continue what was going on.

Those of you that know the story—they sat there at the table that night and He took some bread and He broke it and He gave thanks for it. And as He gave it to them, it says that their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, and He disappeared from their sight. And they asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

I'm going to ask a very rhetorical question about this. Was there suffering in this story? I think this story is surrounded by it—the things leading up to it, even the things in the middle of it, even the things that they're going through in the moment and recounting the things that had happened. It was horrific. It was like reliving all the trauma that they had actually been through.

Could you imagine having this close friend, someone you left home to be with, to follow for the rest of your life? You're rejoining His revolution. You're going to overthrow the Romans who were torturing these people. And you were actually—Israel was going to take over. You're going to be free. And then to watch all that be wiped away right in front of you. Losing your best friend. He never did anything wrong. All your hopes and dreams were dashed in front of you. Your closest friend and your leader is gone.

The story of the road to Emmaus is a real story about how pain and suffering aren't just part of our story, of your story—it's actually part of God's story. When we ask why and we feel betrayed by God and who could have done something, I think we read this story and we realize, man, He was walking with us actually the whole time.

I love that line: didn't our hearts burn within us? Something in them knew. They couldn't see it or even understand, but they knew.

If we've all—I think a lot of us anyway—have been in that place of, why don't You save me? Or where are You at, God? And I've been in that place in my own personal life, and I look back and I gotta say, I wouldn't change a thing. I don't wanna go through the pain of my past. I don't wanna go through any of that ever again and I wouldn't wish it upon anybody else. And many of your stories are the same, and yet we're still here today.

By the grace of God, I think we are sitting in this room. And I think sometimes when I ask that question—not even out loud of God, where are You, or why don't You do something—I can't even fully express it because somehow I know that somehow, even though I can't feel Him, even though I can't see Him, even though I don't know where He's at, I know He's still there. We feel the burning in our soul even though we can't see it.

There's a poem by Martha Snell Nicholson called "The Thorn," and this is two lines of it:

I learned that Christ never gives a thorn without this added grace:  
And takes the thorn to pin aside the veil that hides His blessed face.

I'm finding out more and more—I don't like this very much—but I'm finding out more and more that it's actually the suffering in my own life when I usually see God the clearest. It's actually those times, the times I try to avoid, and which times I'm most likely to actually seek Him out and to see His face almost pretty clearly. When everything is fine and I have everything I want, typically I'm not looking for God. I'm thankful for everything and I'm grateful for all those things, but I'm not desperate enough to notice that He's right there with me in the midst of everything that we're going through.

And the more I'm in that space where I feel like something—a part of me is dying, I think it's kind of ironic that when I feel like that part of me is dying, it's also the time when the deepest parts of my soul wake up.

C.S. Lewis has a quote in *The Screwtape Letters*, and he's talking about the enemy. And if you've never read the book, it will mess with your brain a little bit. It's from a completely different perspective. But the enemy's cause, he says, is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do God's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, and asks why they have been forsaken, and they still obey. They still remain with God.

We talked about that this morning in our class—that God doesn't create our pain, but He also doesn't waste it. He makes a way through it, and He can use it even for His own glory, even though He's not the one who caused that. I think that is important for us to remember, and sometimes we forget that along the way.

This is going to lead us a little bit into next week, where we'll talk about the purpose that actually God uses our pain to make us a more mature human being. I think that God has found—His presence often is found in the deepest parts of pain of this world and life, and often we are presented with a completely different light, that God has nothing to do with pain when He came in this world and He was crucified. He went through all the pain, and He knows that pain, and He's there with you no matter where you're at in life.

Let's have a word of prayer.

Jesus, thank You for coming to this earth, for going through the pain that You did, for knowing what it's like to even be in pain. Thank You that You designed a world that was not made for whatever we're going through right now. It wasn't designed for that, but Lord, You created a world that we believe is coming where the pain won't just be washed away—it will be undone. We look forward to that day. Thank You for those promises. Thank You for being with us in our pain. In Jesus' name, amen.