

When I Can't Feel God's Presence...

(prepared for a presentation to WAC-BoB in 2006)

Michael Card, the brilliant Christian author and singer talks of two different “types” of faith or obedience; the first is Torah faith or more appropriately Torah obedience and the other is unfettered praise and worship. He argues that moving from one to the other is the walk that we must make as true followers of Christ. It is during this walk that we each will have to find our own way of dealing with the “perceived absence of God” during what are sure to be extremely difficult and painful experiences.

Interestingly enough the first Psalm is a good example of Torah faith and the last Psalm is a good example of unfettered praise.

Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.
4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 150:1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens!
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!
3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!
5 Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

So I believe it is fair to speculate that the 148 Psalms in the middle of these can give us some insight into this path that we must follow and what our response should be when we feel separated from the presence of God. I also believe that even though one of us or all of us might be right smack in the middle of this path, that almost always seems to include an overwhelming sense of the absence of God, it is right here that God can do the most amazing, presence-filled work in our life.

It is right here, in the middle of our frustration, disappointment, loss, anger, need, thirst, hunger that we will return to over and over again in our minds (or at least our hearts) and offer praise to God for the blessings that he is bestowing upon us right now; for the ability to truly understand how to worship Him – if we are able to respond to Him appropriately.

The true tragedy is when we go through the valley and do not meet God in the middle. All of that pain, loneliness and agony for nothing. Just to come out more bitter and confused than when we entered in. Just to go through something equivalent again in the future...alone.

To illustrate my point I am going to look at some examples from the Bible as I am still unable to talk about my personal moments when I cursed the day I was born, cursed god's creation and even cursed our wonderful God; without completely melting into an incomprehensible, blubbering fool.

Job

Job was rich, respected and righteous. Arguably, because of all this, he was also persecuted to an extent that I do not think I would be able to bear. When he was told of the complete loss and plunder of his wealth, the murder of all of his servants and the death of all of his children; he worshipped God.

Job 1:13 Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, ¹⁴ and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, ¹⁵ and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁶ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁷ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁸ While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, ¹⁹ and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

²⁰ Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshipped. ²¹ And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

Unfortunately, I do not think I would have had anywhere near that response. Think about it, how would you respond? How could you respond? If you could somehow manage such a response, wouldn't you feel like it should be blessed?

Instead...

Job 2:7 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸ And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.

⁹ Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." ¹⁰ But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

So again, Job is struck with devastation, and even after he acknowledges his belief that it is from God, he still manages to accept it with an attitude of grace. However, the story of Job is not about Job's greatness. It is not about Job the spiritual giant that we would be hard pressed to relate to. It is about Job the man, who with his full-hearted passion for God combined with his half-hearted theology then proceeds to teeter on the edge of being "tempted beyond what he can withstand" (a promise that he did not have the benefit of knowing about).

It is about Job, cursing the day he was born, wishing he were dead and accusing God of so many things. It is about Job Lamenting and fighting with God, but never letting go of God. It is about a simple man who understood that he had a personal relationship with the creator and ruler of the entire universe and was not willing to let it go.

Read these words of Job as if they are your own. Have you ever felt like this? Have you actually uttered the same words? Can you identify with this broken man who has lost everything and is now so utterly alone?

After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said: “Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night—let thick darkness seize it! Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months.

Behold, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry enter it. Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, because it did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes.

“Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuilt ruins for themselves, or with princes who had gold, who filled their houses with silver.

Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light? There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners are at ease together; they hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master. “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave?

Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes.”

So now back to the topic for this week, where was God? Why was Job feeling so separated from God? Read the entire book of Job and you will see that his discourse is not just filled with perpetual mourning for his loss of family and possessions. Rather, it is filled with mourning over the perceived absence and undeserved wrath of God. This again begs the question, where was God in all of this?

Job 23:3 Oh, that I knew where I might find him....
Job 23:8 ...he is not there...
Job 23:9 ...I do not see him....

He was in the intermediate heaven where he always is. In fact it was God that singled out Job seemingly because of Job’s righteousness and success (Something which each one of us here probably longs for). He was there watching, waiting, for His perfect will to be completed....

Job 1:6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. ⁷ The LORD said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” ⁸ And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that

there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"⁹ Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason?"¹⁰ Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land."¹¹ But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."¹² And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

His perfect will and the crushing of a righteous man; how can these be congruent?

Job 2:1 Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD.² And the LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."³ And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason."⁴ Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life."⁵ But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face."⁶ And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life."

⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.⁸ And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.

So how does the story of Job end? Does he get his family back? No. He does get wealthy again, but not until he finds the place of true worship with his God. Prays for his detractors because asked to do so by God (and therefore God does not repay their folly). Do you see any correlations here?

I believe he also gets a lifetime limp, like Jacob's, which never lets him forget about when he wrestled with God.

Job 19:23 "Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book!²⁴ Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! **(THEY ARE!)**²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth."²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God,²⁷ whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!

Job 42:1 Then Job answered the LORD and said:² "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."³ "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.⁴ "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me."⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Well, at this point I can see that my original plan of going through the lamentations of David as he tried to survive physically and spiritually in the wilderness;

Psalm 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalm 88:3 For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. ⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, ⁵ like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. ⁶ You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. ⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah* ⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; ⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you. ¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah* ¹¹ Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abandon? ¹² Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? ¹³ But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. ¹⁴ O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? ¹⁵ Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. ¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. ¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. ¹⁸ You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness...

And the cries of Jeremiah, the priest come prophet, who it seemed, could be neither;

Jeremiah 20:7 O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. ⁸ For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. ⁹ If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. ¹⁰ For I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! "Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my close friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we can overcome him and take our revenge on him."

¹¹ But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. ¹² O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. ¹³ Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers. ¹⁴ Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! ¹⁵ Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, "A son is born to you," making him very glad. ¹⁶ Let that man be like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, ¹⁷ because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. ¹⁸ Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

Lamentations 3:1 I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; ² he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; ³ surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. ⁴ He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; ⁵ he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; ⁶ he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. ⁷ He has walled me about so that I cannot

escape; he has made my chains heavy;⁸ though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer;⁹ he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths crooked.¹⁰ He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding;¹¹ he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate;¹² he bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow.¹³ He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver;¹⁴ I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long.¹⁵ He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood.¹⁶ He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;¹⁷ my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is;¹⁸ so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD."¹⁹ Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall!²⁰ My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.²¹ But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.²⁴ "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."²⁵ The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.²⁷ It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.²⁸ Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him;²⁹ let him put his mouth in the dust—there may yet be hope;³⁰ let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults.³¹ For the Lord will not cast off forever,³² but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;³³ for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.

Lamentations 3:42 "We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven."⁴³ "You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity;⁴⁴ you have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through."⁴⁵ You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples.⁴⁶ "All our enemies open their mouths against us;⁴⁷ panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction;⁴⁸ my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people."⁴⁹ "My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite,⁵⁰ until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees;⁵¹ my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city.

And then tie all of these together with the lamentations of Jesus over Jerusalem as well as Christ's suffering and being "forsaken" on the cross. The parallels with Job and Jesus are many, significantly for me, neither of them left the dance floor before the song was over and therefore they received their reward and inheritance.

David's laments and wilderness suffering give us an arguably more detailed description of Jesus crucifixion than any of the Gospels. Psalm 22 starts out with Jesus words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and finishes with ...for he has done it.

Jeremiah wept as the intercessor for the city of people he could not save and Jesus wept for the city of people that refused to be saved. The path from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, from Genesis to Matthew and from Matthew to Revelation is replete with examples of people who feel somehow estranged from God. Yet, God is always there. God does not change. God is perfect and has our BEST interests in mind at all times.

So when God does not seem near and we are caught up in the storm of our own suffering and confusion what should we do? I do not know exactly. Each of us will have our own battles, our own success and failures, our own spiritual highs and lows. However here are some thoughts:

- 1) Never let go of God/Jesus. Never give up on God/Jesus. Never look to another man to solve your problems with God/Jesus (help and support – yes). Deal with God/Jesus head on. Cry out to God/Jesus. Pursue God/Jesus with a passion and be willing to contend with God/Jesus if you have to. Work out your faith.....
- 2) Build your relationship with God/Jesus now, before the storm hits. Make sure you are on as solid ground as you can be in your knowledge of God/Jesus and love for God/Jesus before the crisis hits.
- 3) Don't be fooled into easy religion, prosperity preaching or small god theology! If anything rage against these attempts to rape you of your God and His Holiness. God is wild, dangerous and utterly impossible to force into any of those small-minded holes. He loves you with a passion that we have never even come close to understanding.
- 4) If you are in the battle right now, if God seems far away, draw close to other men for support and accountability. You might not need or want their advice, but you will be comforted by their support and prayers. Plus they just might be able to keep you on the dance floor if you feel like you might give up to soon.
- 5) If someone comes to you and needs your support, remember how unhelpful Job's friends were with their puffing and preaching. Just love your brother; it is more than OK to just be quiet with them. Do not be afraid of their pain and do not feel that you have to make it go away – because you can't. Pain is not the enemy, denial and doping is!
- 6) Lastly, as a real practical item, think of the times where you have found God/Jesus in someone else's love, support and actions. Start reaching out to anyone you can and be Christ to that person. Make a fool of yourself for God. Risk feeling the pain of Rachel for her children and Christ for the world – of Christ for you...enter into the true worship that Christ wants to have with you.

Joe Lavin
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A writing by Michael Card that I would like to be brave enough to adopt as a prayer for myself...

In any split second

There is enough pain in the world

To overwhelm every gentle heart combined.

The world's pain is as vast as the ocean.

The sorrow of the world is as deep as the sea.

Could the ocean really be the sum of the tears if the world?

Warm

Salty waves of grief

A tidal force of sorrow

That ebbs and flows as inwardly the world groans while outwardly its poor passengers cry out to a God whose eyes are dry.

When Jesus appeared there was a tear in His eye that was as old as the world.

It was not His own. It was the world's tear.

And when even a single one of those tears would course down His unshaven cheek and disappear into His beard, it was as if a black

breaker full of the world's tears was exhausting itself upon the clean sands of the shore of His Father's invisible compassion.

Jesus wept the tears of the world.

How is it my eyes are dry?

Or only wet with my own tears?

For the tiniest speck of one of the millions of seconds of my life has there ever been the smallest drop of one of the world's tears in my eyes?

When they see me, does the world see a man of sorrows?

Or do they see a false pretended joy that they could never know because I have never known it myself? Could never know it while holding so dear my own comforts.

Grant me, O Lord an acquaintance with such tears that the world has wept.

Surely the presence of such a great grief in my life would displace my small sadnesses, my petty anger, my selfish sorrows.

O red-eyed Jesus, turn my tears into the world's tears.

And awaken in the deepest part of my falsely satisfied soul

One Vast Loud "E'kah!"