

Diggings

...from the desk of Jim Fleming

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Guidance in the Silence of God

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem", Christ said as he commissioned his disciples. As we move on into Acts and follow this journey geographically outward through Judea, Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the world, we see early Christians preparing themselves to love one another and spread the gospel message, thus, expanding the word of the Lord. As Acts ends, we see Paul hoping to continue to go further yet to Spain (the uttermost part of the world). As the disciples faced the challenges of moving to different and much larger horizons, they looked to God for guidance. However, sometimes they found God's silence. Their struggle with a seemingly silent and distant God in the 30 year period of these portions of Acts is also our struggle as we strive to serve God.



Olive Tree at LaGrange, GA Center

Walking from Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, we find the mystery of the resurrected presence of Christ telling his disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem." When we move into Acts (Chapter 7), we move onward, to Judea, up through Samaria, (Chapter 8), and to the

uttermost parts of the world with the missionary journeys of Paul.

Growing into New Skins

Sailors in a Caribbean port found a gal there who did a great dance but she always moved sideways. Seeing the crabs on the beach go sideways, they named the crab after her... Sally Light Foot.



Sally Light Foot Crab

I'd like to remind you that crustaceans have exoskeletons and they only grow if they shed their previous skeleton. In fact, there are little holes in their exoskeleton that facilitate the exchange of oxygen with their blood supply. If they do not shed that skeleton, they will suffocate and die. Those who raise crabs in captivity know that crabs have to 'walk' out of their old skeleton. It can't happen by standing still; one has to move. In an analogy with faith, moving to new practices and beliefs left early Christians feeling very vulnerable and exposed as they shed their old skeletons.

Seeing the possibility of larger horizons was one thing. Moving to larger horizons meant making many hard, yet necessary, changes. The early church, somewhat like the crustaceans, had to shed old practices and ways in order to include a

larger and more diverse population of converts. It's important to remember that standing still was not a viable option.

In the book of Acts we find many stories of changes that moved the church to larger horizons, not only geographical exoskeletons but also religious exoskeletons. The church reached out to priest, the aristocratic, the higher class strata of society, and then to neighboring villages.

In Acts 8, Philip baptizes a man who cannot be circumcised; the Ethiopian eunuch. In those days eunuchs suffered the removal of the entire genitalia. Where do they get help with this radical move? In the Hebrew Bible a male convert to Judaism must be circumcised. Philip and the eunuch were reading Isaiah 53 together on that road to Gaza. Three chapters down the road from Isaiah 53 – what are they reading together? Isaiah 56: “Thus saith the Lord to the eunuchs who cling to my covenant” (that means they're not within the covenant and they cannot be circumcised), “who observe Sabbath and love my law.” They had not been allowed into the court of Israel in the temple. Thus saith the Lord to these people; “I will make a place for them within my house and within my walls. I will make a monument and a name better than sons and daughters which shall not be cut off.” So you see, Isaiah hopes for the day when some of the ritual and ceremonial restrictions and parts of scripture will no longer apply. Philip says that what God has done in Jesus of Nazareth is so significant, that it fulfills what the prophet Isaiah hoped for in the distant future. I love the way Acts has the eunuch saying, “Here's water, what would prevent me from being baptized?” Philip replies, “Nothing.” Do you see how that's a baby step; a new skin in Acts 8? In Acts 10 Peter baptizes Cornelius, a God-fearing gentile centurion from Caesarea who could have been circumcised but was not. So we can see amazing new exoskeletons in which the church is moving in the Book of Acts.

Jesus' Silent Wait in Gethsemane and on the Cross

Most servants of God in the Hebrew Bible experienced God's silence. We see it in the New Testament, as well. Many times it seems that God is silent in one's prayers. Traditionally, religious art portrays Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane with a calm face, eyes upward

looking, and, of course, a halo, but this was a time of great agony for Jesus. Praying all night, asking for companions to pray with him; of course they kept falling asleep. May I remind you that in the last night of Jesus' life after the Last Supper they would have gone to Gethsemane by going down the Hinnon Valley. They crossed the Brook Kidron to enter the garden.



Olive Press in Gethsemane at LaGrange

Jesus realized his death was coming soon and they are walking from the Last Supper to a quiet garden where he liked to pray. There are ancient olive trees there; they are about 1500 years old. Josephus tells us that the Romans encircled and attacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and then cut down all the trees within 10 miles of Jerusalem to make a circumvention wall around the city. So the Garden of Gethsemane would have lost its olive trees in 70 A.D. They are a symbol of endurance in scripture. You can cut off an olive tree at the ground and offshoots will come up.

Did you know Gethsemane means “oil press”? Jesus was praying in the garden and experiencing the heavy pressure of the coming events. Early Christians chose a stone to localize the text where Jesus prayed alone. That stone has been remembered for 1500 years and, therefore, has earned sanctity. “Father if possible can you let this cup pass from me”. The word ‘cup’ has a number of meanings, but one of them is ‘fate.’ The cup of the righteous is blessing; the cup of the wicked is (fate) curse. Can you let this fate pass from me? Another symbol of the cup, believe it or not, is a full cup of tears. People back then saved their tears of grief...a tear cup...and they put it in the tomb of the loved one they were burying. When Jesus saw Mary's and Martha's tears (four days into a funeral wake for Lazarus), it probably

meant he saw brimming cups of tears. The psalmist says “the Lord knows the measure of my tears in the Lord’s wine skin; the biggest container for the psalmist to picture is a huge wine skin”. God has so much compassion that God’s wine skin is full of tears. Jesus’ prayer might have been...Can you let this sorrow, (not just this fate), this grief, pass from me? And then he asked the disciples to pray with him. I imagine that Jesus prayed all night, because, it seemed the Lord was silent in this time of difficulty for him.

The first hearers would have known Jesus was praying in the Garden of the Oil Press. They visualized the oil press as producing a clear liquid flowing down the sides of a sack as it got flatter and flatter under the pressure from the weight added to the beam. He fell on his face and prayed. Not that calm, kneeling, halo portrait, but a portrait of agony. He asked Peter, James and John; “Can you continue to pray with me?”

Now, in ancient literature authors show that something continually happened by repeating it three times. That was especially the case when the scroll was not long enough to include every time it happened. Remember in the Hebrew Bible the Lord often says, “I say to you twice, yea a third time”. Even in our literature three dots indicates ...continuing. And how many times did Peter, James and John fall asleep, continually. Mention something three times and your reader will know that it was continually. How many times did Peter deny his Lord, continually.

Perhaps for a long time Jesus felt God’s silence. One wonders if this silence came to Jesus again at the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Remember that the Psalms did not have numbers; but were remembered by their first lines (sort of like our Christmas carols). If Jesus was unable to speak because he is at the point of death and wants his disciples to read Psalm 22, he will only quote the first line of the psalm. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The disciples would have gone home that evening, gone to a nearby synagogue, read a psalm scroll, and realized that this psalm begins with a suffering servant but ends in hope. Was this an act of the “Good Shepherd” to continue to care for his sheep by providing comfort and hope?

Support From the Faith Communities During Silence

Biblical people struggled with the silence of God and needed one another during those times when the Lord seemed silent. This is why we have faith communities. We are encouraged by some one who has faith when we have lost it or when the weight and darkness seems so heavy on us we cannot see objectively. A brother or sister in the faith community can be at our side. Jesus needed that with Peter, James and John. John the Baptist needed the comfort and assurance when he was imprisoned by the governor of the Jordan Valley, Herod Antipas. John’s followers could visit him in prison, and he would send them to Jesus with the following question: “Are you the one or should we look for another?” Who could have imagined that John, the forerunner, would be imprisoned by the government before the long awaited one, Jesus, was revealed. “Are you the one or should we look for another?” No doubt, John struggled with God’s silence.

Examples of Paul’s Silent Waiting

Now, most of us picture the Apostle Paul always knowing what the Lord wanted him to do. So now, as we go through the Book of Acts, note that 16 of Paul’s thirty years from about 34 to 64 A.D. were spent not knowing what the Lord wanted him to do! Being uncertain of a direction is part of the normal Christian life and humbles us. It should result in us not telling others what the Lord wants them to do. “God told me to tell you this”.... Isn’t it amazing how many times a well-meaning friend puts in their two cents worth, and to give it more authority says, “God told me to tell you this.” Of course, the Lord works in our lives with well-meaning friends as well, but not necessarily so. Some forms of spirituality often seen on “Christian” television can always tell you what God wants you to do. This simply was not true with the founders of our faith. One way we grow is by not being sure. How could we ever get courage and faith as part of our character unless we are in situations where we need to stretch to find courage, to find faith? Growth isn’t just a zap at the altar. It comes with discernment, time, scripture, prayer, and friends. Sounds very much like shedding our old skin and moving toward a new and, perhaps, larger one.

Paul was born into a Jewish family and he had attended a synagogue. There wasn't much Jewish education available for a Jew in Tarsus. After synagogue school he may have studied under stoic philosophers. His parents then sent him to Jerusalem where he says that he achieved beyond those of his age. As a new immigrant he, perhaps, felt pressure to do better than the native-born. He even used to boast about how well he did compared to others in his class. Later he joined the Synagogue of the Freedmen, and he was involved in the stoning of Stephen. He heads off to Damascus where he received his call from Christ. Only Saul heard a voice. "You are hurting yourself, you are kicking thorns."



A Roman Mile Marker on the Damascus Road

On the street called Straight he found the home of Ananias. The face of Stephen, the voice of Christ and the welcome of Ananias, "brother Saul", were all significant in Saul accepting the grace of God.

Now notice how much waiting on the Lord occurred in Paul's early life in Christ. For the first three years in his faith journey he had no place to preach. With his education he ought to have been preaching, but no one in Damascus trusted him. Jews felt that he had gone to the side of this new messianic congregation. Those who believed in Jesus, could not trust him; and feared more arrests by him. So, the Book of Acts says he went to Arabia.

Paul says that he never met the Apostles until later. While experiencing God's silence, Paul was studying the scriptures on his own, trying to understand how Christ (whom Stephen and Ananias believed in) – could have been the long

promised one of God? Lots of discernment was needed.

We learn from Paul that when God seems silent, be faithful where you are. When we are not sure of where to go or what to do, why do we think that we have to be on the go in order to serve the Lord? We must serve the Lord where we are. And when Paul was imprisoned or infirmed, we should follow Paul's example. What did he do? He is writing letters. He would much rather be on the road, but he was preaching in letters, in person, and praying to the end. There were a lot of silent years for Paul in that thirty year period covered by Acts. Millions of Christians have been blessed by Paul using that silence to serve the Lord. He kept asking, "what can I do?" I can pray for folks; I can write letters.

As we get older, we can do less of some things and much more of others. Those two years in the Caesarea prison, and the two years in the Roman prison, were used by Paul and we are blessed to have his letters. When Paul was not sure what to do in God's silence, he was faithful where he was. After his desert time, the Apostles advised Paul go to Tarsus. Be faithful to where you have been, you have contacts there, you have friends there. It is wise to ask, "what has God allowed you to experience already in life?" How can you use those experiences when you're not sure what the Lord wants you to do? How can you build upon those kinds of things to help you in your faith journey?

In the creation narrative God didn't do too badly with voids "in the beginning." We need to trust that God can and will fill our empty times with good. So the silence of God doesn't need to be seen as negative empty time during which we must which must fill up. Stop, wait a bit, and let God work. When we are patient with silence, we will be ready to move into a new exoskeleton and a larger horizon.

Further reading possibilities by Dr. James Fleming. (Available at Biblical Resources Bookstore)

1) **Desert Spirituality**

God's Presence in Difficult Circumstances
158 Page Book Cost \$20.00