

In *Lessons in the Silence of God*, Mark Sooy explores the range of emotions and feelings one might encounter when God seems silent. In that silence we can discover how common it is and what we might learn.

Lessons in the Silence of God

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Mark S. Sooy

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Silence

This book is about silence.

The quiet absence of sound.

It is not about all silence, or every silence, but a particular kind of silence. A kind of silence that at times is both deafening and maddening. A silence which is both peculiar and familiar. A silence that speaks louder than many words, yet leaves you wanting to hear more, hear something—hear anything.

This book is about the silence *of God*.

You may assume, as you read, that we will be considering aspects of the spiritual disciplines that we might refer to as “silence and solitude.” Although this discipline is important and vital to a deep and growing spiritual life, it is not this kind of silence to which I draw our attention.

No, I’m referring to the reality of God’s silence.

When we ask for Him, seek Him and knock on His door to find what seems to be only silence. When the answers to our life questions go unanswered and remain unclear. When we listen for a voice or a word and look for a sign but hear and see nothing.

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When time moves steadily on and we wait and wait for clarity, direction, purpose and meaning.

This is the silence of God.

Yet, as some may rightly suspect, God is not so silent during these times. Although our actual experience may be something like silence, God works in us and around us and through us—guiding, directing, preparing and molding us toward the image of Christ. This activity of God is often mysterious and unseen, but it

**These lessons
are not
on the silence
of God...
these lessons are
in the silence.**

can bring hope and encouragement even in our darkest hours. When we trust in His constant love and nurture we can be assured that His purposes are full of goodness.

In this volume I share some lessons from the midst of the silence. These are lessons based upon my own experience of God's silence; and are informed and supplemented with lessons learned by others who have traveled similar paths.

These lessons are not ON the silence of God, or about what that means, although we discover something of that subject.

These lessons are IN the silence: what we find there, what we can do and, more importantly, what God is doing.

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As one who has spent time living in the silence, I hope these lessons will provide something to hold on to when God seems to have shut down. The lessons may bring some focus, purpose, meaning or guidance—and maybe a little encouragement along the way.

You will notice as you read that it becomes more and more difficult to separate these different aspects, or experiences, of God's silence. Although they can be identified independently, I have found they intertwine in the tapestry of real life. They wind around each other, bounce around and touch each other at different times and in different ways. They speak to each other and about one another, insisting on their place like a passive-aggressive child. As they mingle, they sometimes cause confusion and frustration. At other points one lesson will clarify the thoughts of another, while casting a shadow on the next.

Overall, it seems to me that the silence of God is a messy business. God is, after all, dealing with us as the fallen-yet-restored image bearers. The ones for whom He sacrificed His Son.

Adam's sin made a mess, a big mess.

The resulting damage to mankind's relationship with his Creator is sometimes found in our straining to hear God's voice and comprehend His guidance for our lives. We listen and strive, and listen some more to find—silence.

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And so, we dive into the silence. Not blindly, but anticipating the discovery of how God truly keeps His promises and remains faithful to those He calls His own.

**And so,
we dive into
the silence.**

In these lessons I have not sought to necessarily be instructive. There are, however, portions that are meant to teach. I have not sought to be philosophical. Though there are, of course, sections in these pages that some might consider philosophical.

Neither have I sought to only share my emotions, but emotions are part of the human condition, and the journey in and through the silence of God is full of emotional turmoil. You will hear some of that bubble up in my words and they are there to simply be honest about the journey. I'm sure some of my outbursts will not make sense—they don't to me either.

So, this is my walk in the void. I trust that those who may have ventured here and there along these same paths might find some kind of encouragement and camaraderie as we sometimes walk together and sometimes apart.

Let's venture, now, into the silence...

Sidelined

My experiences in life have been significant.

I've spent many years devoting myself to my studies. I've worked hard as I've served in both jobs and ministry positions. I've owned businesses and held executive leadership positions. I've earned an advanced degree and have been awarded honors for my academic achievements.

But it's all in the past. Memories of what I once was and what might have been.

And yet, I look into the future and see dozens of possibilities! I have a lot to offer. I am not ready to let life pass me by. This wealth of experience and knowledge can be useful for many worthwhile pursuits. I am ready and willing to step into whatever is next. I am experienced, willing and ready.

If the door would just open, I would step through it!

But that's just it, the door remains closed. Sometimes it feels as though the door isn't even in sight. To put it another way, the Coach took me out of the game and I've been sidelined. No amount of begging, hoping or suggesting seems to even get His attention and I'm left to watch everyone else play.

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The game is passing me by and I have to sit and watch.

The Psalmist echoes these kinds of thoughts, “*How long, O Lord? How long? Will you forget me forever?*” (Psalm 13:1) There seemed to be plenty of situations in which David and the other Psalmists experienced the deafening silence of God. Even our Lord on the cross quoted Psalm 22 and cried, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*”

**There are
countless reasons
that God
might choose to
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for a time.**

Sometimes I wonder about the spiritual life of the Christian who has never felt this sense of abandonment by God. It seems to me that what Christ and the Psalmists went through are common experiences of mankind—

especially those who are seeking God and His will above all else.

Is it that many Christians refuse to acknowledge these feelings?

Is there such fear of failure and being “found out” that many simply go it alone and never express these inner doubts and turmoil?

There are countless reasons that God might choose to pull us aside for a time. In some cases, it’s for our own good. Too often we lose focus and our priorities get twisted. God must slow us

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down to regain our attention. We receive no explanation from Him, it would just be best for us to sit out for awhile.

So He pulls us out of the game.

On the other hand, maybe the issue is with other people in our lives or within our influence. For example, a pastor might imagine that the spiritual development within himself may put him at odds with a soft, entertainment-focused church that cherishes convenience and comfort above all else. When it comes down to it these people are just not ready—and he must wait.

So God pulls him out of the game.

On the third hand, maybe the church is beyond the pastor's spiritual ability to lead and God must move him to a place that is a better match. Maybe it's the pastor that's not ready to lead or is leading in the wrong direction.

So God pulls him out of the game.

How about discipline? God disciplines the children that He loves (Hebrews 12). This is certainly something we must explore when it comes to considering our status in God's work. God's loving discipline is needed for correction, reproof and molding for righteousness that we might be prepared properly for Him to work through us (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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Perhaps you weren't as close to God as you thought and His silence is actually the present reality of your relationship with Him.

Surrounding each of these possibilities are timing issues. God's vision is comprehensive as He looks into our lives. He sees how our life intertwines with the lives of those around us. He also knows how our lives may, or may not, affect those of people that we will meet in the future.

The tapestry of humanity is before Him and timing is important as He guides and directs us in our course of life.

**The game
is passing
you by...
and you have to
sit and watch.**

Discerning the specific reason for being sidelined may be more frustrating than being taken out of the game. Which of the above reasons is God's purpose in pulling you aside? Can you tell? If you figure it

out today, chances are that tomorrow the reason will seem to have changed. It's really hard to pin-point the purposes of God in our lives in regard to His silence.

And it can be pretty frustrating to sit and watch.

You see the success of others in your field. As dark thoughts arise you battle jealousy and envy. You see some succeed in ways that

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could have been you. You question your own ability, your education, your experience and eventually your own worth. You wonder if there will ever be a place of significance for you again.

“How long,” you wonder, “will I remain on the sidelines?”

Watchman Nee tells of his own experience in being set aside into what he called “the dark night.” He notes:

“We cannot face the thought that God will keep us aside for so long a time; we cannot bear to wait. And of course I cannot tell you how long He will take, but in principle I think it is quite safe to say this, that there will be a definite period when He will keep you there. It will seem as though nothing is happening; as though everything you valued is slipping from your grasp. There confronts you a blank wall with no door in it. Seemingly everyone else is being blessed and used, while you yourself have been passed by and are losing out. Lie quiet. All is in darkness, but it is only for a night. It must indeed be a full night, but that is all. Afterwards you will find that everything is given back to you in glorious resurrection; and nothing can measure the difference between what was before and what now is!”¹

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For Reflection and Discussion:

- *Can you recall an example of God pulling you out of the game?*
- *Review the possible reasons found in this chapter that God sidelines us. Can you identify why God might have sidelined you? Are there other reasons God may have pulled you aside?*

Listening

We have a tendency to fill silence with other noise.

This is true when experiencing God’s silence and, in our day and age, noise is an ever-present companion. We have little patience with silence and must have “background” noise to take the edge off the quiet. We fill the void with the radio, TV, mp3 players, traffic, crowds and other elements of our environment—both by choice and by simply being around other people.

When God has chosen to speak in the quietness, however, we must make specific efforts at listening for Him and to Him.

God’s voice is audible if we tune our ears to hear it, but it is not necessarily distinct.

Too often our prayer is one-way, and we don’t stop talking long enough to allow the Spirit to speak. It is evident from Scripture that His voice is sometimes a whisper. He will not turn off the TV or mp3 player for you if you are unwilling to do it yourself. We must discipline ourselves to listen for the “*still small voice*” (1 Kings 19:11-13).

And where do we hear it? Is there a voice? An audible and recognizable voice of God?

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Well, yes and no.

God's voice is audible if we tune our ears to hear it, but it is not necessarily distinct. In other words, it may come in various forms (an actual voice, something we read, impressions within our spirit) and with different levels of clarity (clear as crystal, clear as mud, not clear at all).

Sometimes we must search for the clarity.

Four ideas come to mind as I consider how we might train ourselves to listen to God's voice and actually hear Him speak.

The first idea for listening for God is in the form of His Word, and I'd like to consider His Word in a dual manner. Primarily, we know God's Word as the Bible, written by the Spirit of God through the hands of men. We understand His Word to be authoritative for faith and life as the direct communication of His thoughts and character (2 Peter 1:20-21). In the reading of Scripture we are exposed to the mind of God and what He has chosen to reveal of Himself and His relationship with His creation.

As we study Scripture more closely, His thoughts begin to alter our thoughts. In Paul's words, we become "*transformed by the renewing of our minds*" (Romans 12:2). It is only by reading—and listening—to this direct revelation from God that our minds can be transformed and become akin to His own.

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Another form of God's word is that Jesus, Himself, is the Word of God (see John 1). But how do we listen to Jesus? By His example. Peter tells us what that example consists of in 1 Peter 2:21-24a:

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross...

Simply stated, Christ's example to us is one of *submission and obedience*.

He walked through the passion experience by submitting to God and His purposes ("*entrusting Himself to Him*") and being obedient to God for the work He had been called to accomplish ("*He Himself bore our sins*"). In the same way we can assess our daily walk by the dual consideration of whether we are being *submissive* to the purposes of God in our lives and being *obedient* in the calling of the day.

A second idea for listening for and to God is through the voices of His creation. "*The heavens declare the glory of God*" says the Psalmist (Psalm 19:1ff). The elements "speak" without words, but can be clearly understood. Paul notes that the careful observer can learn about God's "*invisible attributes, His eternal power*

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and divine nature” because they have been “*clearly seen through what has been made*” (Romans 1:20). This is also the point Jesus is making when He tells us to “*look at the birds*” and to “*consider the lilies*” (Matthew 6:25-34). As we observe how God cares for His creation, we also observe how he cares for us.

**We’ve been told
that listening
is an art, and this
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listening to God.**

We’ve been told that listening is an art and this can also be applied when listening to God. Part of our problem is that we don’t stop long enough to observe creation. We must stop, pay attention and genuinely listen. God’s revelation in creation may not teach you systematic theology, but it will teach you how He cares for and sustains His creation—of which we are a part. This kind of observation will teach many other things as well; but only if we listen to the lessons God has implanted there.

A third form of listening for God’s voice is in the voices of others. We assume we should listen to the preacher, or the radio teacher, or someone of authority in the things of God. I suppose those are appropriate people to listen to and at times they have some good things to say. But what about all the “ordinary” people in your life that observe and learn about God’s provision and care from their own experience?

Let me share a short illustration that explains what I mean:

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There was a time in our life that my wife and I felt that we should sell our house and move. We had been in the house about four or five years, circumstances were changing, and we thought it was time for a change.

Wanting to be open with our children (their ages at the time were between 4 and 10) about what we were considering, we shared our thoughts and intentions during dinner one night. We all talked about it for a while, answered questions, and then spent time in prayer together about our situation and our plans. We asked God to clarify whether we should stay or go.

It had been raining during dinner and once we finished our prayer we began to clear the table. As the rain stopped, we looked out the dining room window and one of the brightest, most colorful rainbows I have ever seen appeared in the sky. In fact, it was a double rainbow!

One of the kids, I don't remember which one, simply looked out the window and said something like, "I guess that means that God wants us to stay." I looked at my wife quizzically and asked, "What do you mean?" Once again, in a simple, matter-of-fact sort of way our child said, "Well, the rainbow is God's promise that He will take care of us."

Thankfully, God kept my big mouth shut and I took the interpretation at face value. Like a thunder clap, God's voice rang clearly. We had prayed and received an answer through those

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little eyes of faith. Somehow, I knew that was God's voice I was hearing. I was not to question it. I was not to correct the theological implications. The Rainbow really is a sign of God's care (Genesis 9:12-16). I was not to keep peppering the observation with clarifying inquiries.

I was supposed to listen.

So I did.

We still live in the same house.

This leads to the fourth and final form of hearing God's voice we should consider. For lack of a better term, let me call it an internal Spirit-to-spirit interaction. Some might call it a "mystical" communication with God Himself because it's hard to define or describe. Once again, Paul sheds some light on this form of God's voice when he writes, "*The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...*" (Romans 8:16-17a)

The Spirit of God indwells the believer. He, in some way, communicates directly with our spirit. A refined conscience is part of that communication. That uneasiness we feel when we know something is wrong. The conviction to change something in our mind, or heart, or lifestyle (or all three).

This can be as real as hearing an audible voice.

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It's easy to dismiss these promptings of the Spirit as He nudges and cajoles our own spirit. Yet, with practice and careful listening (Hebrews 5:14), His voice can become ever-clearer in the midst of the noise of our own minds and the noise of our world.

In listening, *submission* and *obedience* can become finely tuned.

So in spite of the silence we might feel, God still speaks. He speaks in one way or another, or in many ways at the same time. Often He will confirm His thoughts to us by speaking them repeatedly in different ways and with different voices.

**Let me call it
an internal
Spirit-to-spirit
interaction.**

A good place to practice our listening is in the midst of silence.

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For Reflection and Discussion:

- *Which of the four forms of listening to God discussed in this chapter do you regularly practice?*
- *What can you do, today, to listen for God's voice? Take time to listen right now!*

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