

"WHEN GOD DOESN'T ANSWER"

April 16, 1989

TEXT: Job 30: 20: "I cry to Thee and Thou dost not answer me; I stand and Thou dost not heed me."

This morning's lesson is not very apt to be found on anyone's all-time-favorite scripture list. Most of us prefer more happy, upbeat verses like Exodus 22, verse 27: "If he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate." Or perhaps Isaiah 65, verse 24: "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." Or good old Matthew, chapter 7, verse 7: "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it shall be opened unto you." Or Matthew 21, verse 22: "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Now, of course, I like those verses, too. I like them very much. But one of the Bible's most endearing characteristics is its complete candor. Four of its leading figures, for instance, are Aaron, Moses, David, and Peter. Yet nowhere does the Bible hide their faults. On the contrary, it very openly admits that Aaron made the golden calf, Moses disobeyed God's orders, David committed adultery, and Peter denied Christ three times. No denial, no excuses, no sugar coating. Just the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And the truth is that sometimes our prayers just do not seem to be answered. Sometimes, in fact, they do not even seem to be heard. Let me give you an example from my own experience. A number of years ago, when I was living in Kansas, I was part of a group of ministers who were training to offer a part-time chaplaincy at our local hospital. And the chaplain supervisor who was doing the training told us this story. As a chaplain, himself, he was asked to see a young woman who had been seriously injured in a terrible traffic accident. Let us call her Susan, for the sake of convenience. She and her sweetheart had been married that very morning, and were on their way to their honeymoon, when their car was hit head-on by a drunken driver. Her husband of just a few hours was killed outright. And Susan would never walk again.

Now, none of us had any trouble understanding his anxiety as he slowly walked to Susan's room and somewhat hesitantly introduced himself as the hospital chaplain. And we listened carefully as he related how she looked at him with neither anger nor bitterness, but asked with a terrible emptiness, "Chaplain, what do you do when you've poured out your heart in prayer, hour after hour, day after day, and there was nobody there?" Then,

before we had a chance to come to grips with that, he turned to us and asked, "How would you have answered her?"

Well, we gave our answers, very uncomfortably I might add. I do not remember just what any of them were, but I am glad to say no one suggested trying to change her attitude or giving her "goosey" little platitudes, or even offering good advice. We knew from his description that Susan had not turned her back on God. She just felt that God had turned His back on her. And, if you know your Bible, you know she was in good company.

Here are just a few of many passages that express the same feelings Susan had. Psalm thirteen, verse one: "How long, O Lord? Wilt Thou forget me forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?" Psalm twenty-two, verse two: "O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest." Psalm fifty-five, verse one: "Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not Thyself from my supplication." And from this morning's scripture lesson: "I cry to Thee and Thou dost not answer me; I stand (we would say "I kneel") and Thou dost not heed me." (Job 30:20)

As I said, one of the awesome things about the Bible is its absolute candor. And the Psalmists especially often confessed their doubts as well as their faith. They knew that life is not always lived on a calm and peaceful plane. They saw their faith as a struggle, just as it is for most of us. And nowhere do we see that struggle more vividly described than in the book of Job.

To understand the book, however, it is important to divide it into two parts. The first is the original poem, long and sometimes difficult to read, yet full of spiritual truth. The second is the prologue and epilogue which surround that poem like a set of prose parentheses. This latter we can set aside as useless. It demeans the poem by giving platitudinous explanations for all that has taken place. It sees Job's suffering as nothing but a test, a kind of celestial wager, if you will, a bet between God and Satan. And, of course, being a platitude, in the end everything turns out just fine.

Much more useful is the poem. Composed by some long forgotten genius, many consider it to be one of the world's greatest pieces of literature. And, more importantly for our purpose, it is also great theology. It gives what may be the only honest and helpful answer to Susan's question.

You see, Job was in much the same predicament. He, too, had suffered greatly and with no apparent reason or justification. He, too, had called on God for help, at first expectantly, then more and more desperately, and, in the end, almost hopelessly. "Oh that I knew where I might find Him," he cried, "that I might even come before His presence. I would lay my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what He would say to me and understand what He would answer me." (Job 23:2-5)

Like Susan, Job poured out his heart in prayer, hour after hour, day after day, and there was no answer. He said, "Behold I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I can not perceive Him; on the left hand I seek Him, but I cannot behold Him; I turn to the right hand, but I can not see Him." We can almost see him stumbling forward and backward, this way and that, in his utter desperation.

But in his lament we detect a subtle change. At first Job wanted more than anything else to have his situation changed. He wanted an end to his troubles, release from his problems. But, as long as that was what he wanted, pray though he might, he got no answer. Then he was willing to settle for reasons. Why had all this happened to him? If only he could get some answers, then he might be satisfied. But, as long as that was what he wanted, pray though he might, he got no response. And, of course, he blamed all that on God. "Where is God?" he cried. "Why has He deserted me?" But then his attitude changed again. Finally it was God, Himself, that Job desired. And when that happened he found Him.

Now please note that Job's situation still has not changed, at least not in the poem. In that respect, he was no better off than ever. And he got no explanations either. So far as we can tell he knew no more about the reasons for his troubles than he had before. But, you see, that is the poem's genius. It shows us that prayer's true answer is not in circumstances nor in explanations, but in God, Himself. Like Paul, we may not lose our thorn in the flesh. And, perhaps we may see no more reason to life than ever. But God gives us something even better. He gives us Himself.

And, you see, that was our real problem in the first place. What we see as life's God-forsakenness is but our own unwillingness to let God be God. His place is at the very center of life. And He is always there. Always! But, in our eagerness, one might almost say "lust", for things --some exciting new thrill, some pleasant entertainment, some "real" security, some longed-for power-- we wander out to life's circumference, away from God. It is not His absence, but our own, that plagues us so. For that is always our basic sin --our alienation from our own true self. But, like Job, we blame God. Like him, we cry in desperation, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him that I might even come before His presence."

But if, like the Prodigal Son, we come to ourselves, if we return to the center of life where our Father is, then we can hear Jeremiah's answer, "You shall seek me and find me when you shall seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13)

When finding God --for His own sake-- becomes more important than getting out of trouble, or being vindicated, or finding explanations, then we shall surely find Him. For He has promised it.