



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Where Is Your God?

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*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?” (Psalm 42:1-3)*

“Where is your God?”

Ask the question one way, and it’s a kind of accusation. You say you believe in God. Then what about all the bad things your God allows to happen: hurricanes and cancers and terrorism and tragedy? If your God is so good, why is there so much suffering in the world?

“Where is your God?”

Ask the question another way, and it invites you to look inward, to explore your own soul. Where do you really put your faith? If, as it says on the coins, “In God We Trust,” who or what acts like a god in your life, claiming your time and talent and treasure? What do you expect from this god, and what, if anything, does your god expect from you?

“Where is your God?”

Ask the question a third way, and it invites you to look outward, beyond your own expectations to the one true God who made heaven and earth. Where do you find this God’s

presence, and what difference, if any, does it make in your life?

Let's ask the question all three ways, and see what answers come to mind.

First, the accusation. In some ways it's the easiest form of the question because it's the most obvious. Aggressive atheists think it's the grand Gotcha question. To them it's self-evident that a good God and great suffering are mutually exclusive, and since there's clearly a lot of suffering in the world, that settles the matter. There is no God.

Lots of other people don't believe in God, but they wish they could, and yet the problem of pain feels decisive for them, too, so they're left with a kind of reluctant atheism or agnosticism. Often they're sensitive, thoughtful souls, and they'd love to believe that there is a God who cares for human beings and the world as much as they do, but they just don't see it. There's too much suffering, and they wonder why, if God is real, God would be so silent and invisible and apparently out of touch.

Even many of us believers, when our own or other people's suffering threatens to become unbearable, cry out in our hearts, "Where is God?" Sometimes there's a hint of accusation in us as well: If you really are there, God, and if you care about us, why do you let these things happen?

When terrible things happen, we all want to know where God is. But if we're not satisfied with mere accusations, we might be driven to ask the question in a

different way. We might ask what sort of god we really do believe in, and what kind of deal we think we have with our god.

Truth be told, for all practical purposes, many people's god isn't really a god at all, in any transcendent sense. If they ask where they put their faith and trust, the honest answer lies in other places. They trust in themselves – their intelligence, their hard work, the money and things they've accumulated – or they trust in family or friends, or some sort of tribe that gives them a sense of security and identity and purpose in life. They may claim to believe in God, but the God Jesus talks about doesn't make much difference in the way they actually live.

Other people believe in something closer to the God of the Bible, but it's a god made in their own image, turning Genesis on its head. Though they wouldn't quite admit it, they want a god who serves them, not the other way around. They believe in a god whose job it is to keep them and their loved ones safe, and answer prayers in times of need, but otherwise stay out of the way, not expecting very much from them in the form of service or devotion or obedience.

If we ask ourselves, "Where is your God?" and answer honestly, it might turn out that the god we believe in lives mostly in our imagination. Maybe some of the problems we have with faith lie not so much in God, but in our idea of God. Then the question, "Where is your God?" might point us beyond accusations, and past our home-made images of God, all the way to the Maker of heaven and earth. If that happens, and we finally come to meet the one true God, maybe our souls will be satisfied at last.

The psalmist says, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” Think about longing for a moment. It’s a kind of sweet emptiness, isn’t it? – a place in our heart that’s vacant for a while, but we know what would fill it, and so the longing itself brings a kind of pleasure. It’s like when we send a note to someone we love, and we say, “I can’t wait to see you!” There’s joy even in the anticipation.

“My soul thirsts for the living God,” the psalmist says again. Think about thirst, too. We get thirsty several times a day, and then what? We go and find a drink. And the drink feels so good, especially on a hot day, or when it’s been a long time since our last glass of water. The drink quenches our thirst – but only for a while. In a few hours we’ll be thirsty again, and the whole cycle will repeat. Do you suppose God might have planted in us this cycle of emptiness, desire, and satisfaction in order to train our hearts for longing, so that we might also learn to long for God? If that was so, then in the life of faith not only satisfying our thirst but the thirst itself might become an occasion for faith and hope, and even joy.

I went to Honduras years ago with a group from our church in Carlisle, and we were working on houses all day long in the dry, 100 degree bright sun. Some of the group started to faint because we became dehydrated before we realized what was happening. When we go too long without drinking from the streams of living water, our souls begin to dry up too. That can happen even when things are going well for us, but it’s especially true when the scorching heat of life dehydrates our hearts. When we struggle with sickness or loss or any kind of suffering, we need the Spirit of God even more, but our condition itself might keep us from

seeing that. We may wonder where God is, when in fact God is all around us, though our parched and empty spirits can't feel it for a time.

The psalmist himself knows that dryness. On the one hand, he feels the emptiness, even the absence of God sometimes: "I say to my God, my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me?'" But on the other hand, he knows it was not always this way. "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving...." The psalmist was a worship leader once, but even people who lead congregations know what it is to feel parched and dry, and to long for streams of living water.

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" The psalmist knows that God is there, and if he can't feel God's presence for the time being, it's because he's the one who drifted away, not God. So he reminds himself of what he believes deep down to be true: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

There's a way to say all these things glibly and insensitively, as when Job's religious friends offer such useless advice that even God finds them annoying. But there's also a way to say them gently, and compassionately, because, like the psalmist, we've felt the questions in our own lives too.

Where is your God?

If we really want to find God, God is there for the seeking, all around us and within us. God can be found in every good thing we enjoy, and if we learn to see our blessings, not as things we deserve and take for granted, but as generous gifts from a gracious God, then our whole life can become one long parade of gratitude. If we look beyond ourselves and care for other people, then we learn what love is, and we find God there, too, because God is love.

If we look for ways that our challenges make us stronger, and hardships can drive us beyond the illusions of self-sufficiency, then hard times themselves will remind us that God is near, and show how much we depend on God. Even in the depths of suffering, when we can't for the life of us see or feel the presence of God, we may recognize in that dark night of the soul the suffering of Jesus himself, and see how God shares our suffering, and ultimately goes on to redeem it. Then we begin to see, as the psalmist says again, that tears may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

We have that promise from the risen Lord. Jesus opens the door to eternal life, but only because he has passed through death itself. In the meantime, he says he came so that we might find life here and now, and have it abundantly. That's the promise we have from Christ, the author of life and the conqueror of death.

Jesus' disciples walked with him, and learned from him, and saw the marvelous things he did. Then, after they thought they lost him on a cross, he rose again to reassure them. He said, "Now go and make disciples of all nations,"

and they came and told us, so we could become his disciples too.

And that's yet another answer to the question, "Where is your God?" Our God is in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, whose very name means "God is with us." And he is the one who says, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."



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