

PALM SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 2020

## CRISIS OF FAITH

Do you ever feel that God is hidden, not listening as you struggle? Are you angry--convinced that God has turned his back?

When I go to movies, I love a good comedy. I want to laugh. I want to see something that lifts my spirits – not a movie that makes me sad, or depressed, or afraid, or grossed-out. I’m a sucker for those movies with happy endings. I like to hear that “somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue,” and I like it in *Ferris Bueller’s Day off* when everybody in Chicago starts spontaneously singing and dancing to “*Twist and Shout*.”

Those kinds of movies put a smile on our faces. We can forget our troubles – if only for just a little while. They make us feel good.

Palm Sunday is like that. What happened is a scene filled with optimism! Hope! Happiness! It’s a story about a spontaneous parade. I mean this is seriously happy stuff.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem and the people cheered! They were excited! They were filled with HOPE that this guy, Jesus, would be the man to set their whole COUNTRY free! It was like a political convention when all the red-white-& blue balloons fall from the ceiling and a championship-winning-team’s victory parade all rolled into one.

So, today it would be easy for me to stand here and say to you: “Just be like those people. Smile, be happy, cheer.” It would be easy for me to say: “Even though times may be tough for you now, just hope for the best. Wish for better times tomorrow. In the meantime, be happy, smile, and cheer. AMEN.”

But we need more than that, don’t we? We need more than just plain hype. We need more than just a syrupy “keep smiling and good luck” kind of religion. We need something that’s real.

After all, our lives go on from here. We’ve got real problems –we have financial concerns in our troubled economy, problems

getting on each other's nerves at home, we have a pandemic going on that we are powerless to stop – we might slow it down a bit but we can't stop people from dying.

Let's remember – Jesus' life went on after the Palm Sunday parade – and it wasn't all good. He was going to be betrayed, whipped, beat, nailed, and murdered.

***“The Dark Night of the Soul”***

Can you identify with that? Have you ever been betrayed, forsaken, left all alone, voted off the island by others? That's so painful, it can scar you for years.

Let me ask an even more serious question: Have you ever been forsaken BY GOD? Have you ever been angry at God? That He let you down? Ever felt that God doesn't have your back?

Ever been in a time when you felt like you were seeking and pursuing God in your life, but there was no answer -- like God was not home -- like God was hiding from you?

About 500 yrs ago, a man named St. John of the Cross wrote a poem called *“The Dark Night of the Soul.”* It's about the struggles a Christian goes through in this life on their way home to heaven. The term, “Dark Night of the Soul” has come to refer to a spiritual depression that believers go through. It's a time of refining one's faith. It's a season in life when it feels like God has left the house -- like God is nowhere to be found. Have you ever had a “dark night of the soul”?

Ted Turner – the owner of the Turner Broadcasting Network (TBN) and CNN on TV, the owner of the Atlanta Braves baseball team – as a young man he considered being a missionary. His sister contracted lupus. She died a horrible, painful death. From the time of her death, Ted Turner has called himself an agnostic or an atheist.

See, often it's not that we don't believe in God, it's that we're just so darn MAD at God, that we say, “I hate you! I don't believe in you! I can't love God anymore!”

Even David in the Bible had one of these “dark nights of the soul.” David was the shepherd boy who killed Goliath by trusting God, he became king, and was known as “a man after God’s own heart.” In Psalm 27, he wrote: **“Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.”** Psalm 27:9

How about you? Do you ever get so hurt, so mad at God, that you say “I don’t believe in You! I don’t love You! I hate You, God!”

**“Where is God?”**

It’s times like these when we go through some incredibly painful stuff in our lives, that we naturally ask, **“WHERE IS GOD?!!”** Where IS He? Why doesn’t He see what’s going on in my life? Why doesn’t He DO something? How can God just sit back and let this happen?

As bad as it is to feel betrayed, forsaken, voted off the island by someone close to you – then at least you tell yourself, you still have God. God’s still for you. He will work good out of this.

But when you feel that God’s forsaken you, that HE’S betrayed you, that He’s voted you off His island -- then there’s no hope. You feel completely forsaken by God.

Now, I want to share something that’s real important – so I want you to listen up: (ready?) Faith isn’t feelings. Faith isn’t **FEELING** the presence of God. When you feel forsaken, God promises faith isn’t feelings.

If I FEEL forsaken by God, that doesn’t mean I AM. I can FEEL one way, but that doesn’t mean that’s how things really are. Truth doesn’t depend on how I – or you – feel.

I can feel God’s left the house, but that doesn’t mean He has. He’s still with me – still with you.

I may not see ANYTHING good in the pain in my life – but God may still be doing something good. He does His best work in our lives in times of pain when the props are knocked out from under us when He gets our full attention and we learn to trust Him deeper because He’s all we got!

On the flip side of that coin – I’ve known people whose life is going great – no problems, they’re on cruise control. And they think that just because they FEEL great, that everything IS great in their relationship with God. And I have to say, “Oh yeah? Just what God are you trusting in?”

See, faith isn’t feelings. When you FEEL forsaken, God still promises that He is *with* you, and for *you*. That’s His promise. And His promise is true – always.

Whether or not you FEEL forsaken doesn’t change God’s relationship or love for you.

But let’s make no mistake about it – God is not just some pansy God who would never harm a fly! He’s not all “sweet Jesus” “loving Jesus” without any backbone or bite. God often turned His back on people. He did it fairly. And that’s what’s about to happen in the Palm Sunday story.

There was a happy parade when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. But the Father was about to forsake Him. An innocent man was about to be murdered!

In the Old Testament, God ordered Abraham to kill and then burn the body of his only son as a sacrifice on an altar. How could a *loving* God, DO such a thing? God sent an angel to stop Abraham before he could harm his son, Isaac. Yet, in the Palm Sunday story, God was sending another only Son to be sacrificed -- only this time on a cross. And this time, the Son would not be spared.

God ordered Saul to slaughter the Amalekites *completely* – right down to the last woman, child and donkey.

Now, if God can wipe out Amalekite babies for the sins of their parents (! And make no mistake about it – He *CAN*, He *DID*, and He did it *JUSTLY, FAIRLY*) -- if He can forsake and wipe out babies, then do we have any hope at all?

Drama teachers tell us that for a play or a movie to be good, there have to be characters we can identify with -- but not too much. We have to identify with the people on the screen or on the stage. But if from the beginning we say, “hey, that’s me!”

then we are so busy being defensive that we never get into the story line.

We may like a religion that makes us FEEL close to God, and we like a religion that keeps God a little distant and keeps Him out of our business. But the truth is: a relationship with God is neither of those.

**Good News! You ARE forsaken!**

This story today IS your story. There's no distance here. If God can turn His back on Amalekite babies for the sin of their parents – and do it fairly – He sure can turn His back on us for our wrongs and sins. And we *DESERVE* it – every one of us!

We deserve to have God forsake us. To have Him vote us off His island. And this is the story of God doing just that.

It doesn't matter whether you FEEL close or distant from God, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem that's YOU. This is YOUR story. This is God the Father turning His back on YOU – wiping out YOU for YOUR sin and wrongs.

See, in this story we find 2 truths. One is about us, and the other is about how God does business.

The truth about us is about who we are – sinful, deserving to have God fairly wipe us out, punish us with death for our wrongs.

The truth about how God does business is that – He did just that in Jesus going to the cross.

That's YOUR junk, your pride, your secret sins that had to be punished, but Jesus stepped in, took your place, and took your punishment for you.

This is your story. A story about God turning His back on you. Whether you feel it or not, on Palm Sunday Jesus was on His way to do just that very thing for you!

When I was a kid growing up in our neighborhood, you always knew what kids not to mess with because they had an older brother who would mess with you if you did. There were some kids whose older brothers didn't want to get involved. If there was a fight, the little brother was going to get beaten up. But other kids had older brothers who would step in and make

their little brother's fight their own. The big brother would step in and fight FOR their brother. And you knew it, and you didn't mess with them.

When Jesus went to the cross, He's the big brother who stepped in for you. He took your place, your punishment, took what you deserve on Him. You really do deserve to be abandoned by God. Not just feel abandoned, really left without any help or hope from God the Father. And then Jesus stepped in and took it all for you. This is YOUR story. You ARE forsaken! God HAS turned His back on you. God turning His back on you sounds like bad news, the worst! Yet, in this week's events, Christ goes to the cross, and that's YOU who gets the punishment for sin. Isn't that good news?

**"Why God?"**

You know, when problems and pain come and we feel abandoned, we often ask: WHY? Why God? Why are You letting this happen? Why don't You do something to stop this? From the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?"

Unlike us, Christ was NOT in a dark night of the soul, wondering why the Father abandoned Him. He was NOT saying, "Why God? I didn't expect this cross? WHY did You do this to me, Father?" No. that's not Christ's meaning.

He was quoting scripture written hundreds of years before. He said those words to remind us that this was no surprise and no accident. This was God's plan for thousands of years. Jesus was not the victim here. He was IN CHARGE! God *WANTED* this to happen. Jesus *KNEW* it would happen. Jesus *INTENDED* to step into the fight FOR YOU to let the Father unleash the anger and the punishment YOU deserve on HIM.

Jesus was forsaken so you never will be. You talk about a dark night of the soul – that's what Jesus did on the cross so that God will NEVER abandon you!

You ARE forsaken, you WERE forsaken when Jesus was on the cross for you. And that's over. It's done. It's complete.

So that now, in your life you'll NEVER be forsaken by God. You'll NEVER be forsaken. In any crisis of faith, through every dark night of the soul, YOU WILL NEVER be forsaken by God!

**Us: The wrong question is “why, God?”**

You know, for us, when we go through a time of doubt or a season when things aren't working out and God seems distant – what's the first question we ask? “WHY?” “Why is this happening?”

We ask it like we don't deserve this time of pain, or like God has no justification to leave us alone. None of that is true! We do deserve it. And God hasn't left you. The only time the Father turned His back on you is when Jesus was abandoned on the cross. And that's over, done, complete. God will NEVER turn away from you now! And God DOES know what He's doing -- we just can't figure it out – and God doesn't check with us first to get our permission for what He has planned for our lives.

Asking “WHY?” is the *WRONG* question! It's the wrong question because:

Faith is not the absence of doubt or anger.

Faith is trusting God's promise in spite of doubt or anger.

See, we are ALL going to have doubt and anger in our lives. The RIGHT question is not “WHY?” The RIGHT question is, “What am I going to do with it?”

We all go through a dark night of the soul, and the RIGHT question isn't “why God?” **The right question is “What do You want me to do, God?”**

That's why Paul, in the Bible said: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” Philippians 3:10 He's saying: “God, through this time of suffering, I'm STILL going to keep believing in You, I'm STILL going to keep following You, I'm STILL going to keep DOING what you want me to do. I'm STILL going to do all I can in YOUR mission for this world!”

To get past pure feelings, which can paralyze you, ask the right question, 'What do I do now God?'

Feelings are not required for faith and the absence of feelings does not mean the absence of God.

Persevering faith says: "Obey God anyway and do what you know you should do, even in numbness or anger."

Its in doing what you know you need to do that your heart will follow. Your feelings will eventually follow -- and you will find that God has always been there helping you through whatever problem, crisis, or loss you are struggling to overcome.

Are you going to allow doubt and anger to paralyze you in a crisis of faith - when you feel forsaken? Feelings can be great, but they can be misleading. Trust what Jesus has DONE. The forsaken part is over. You'll NEVER be forsaken. God will NEVER turn His back on you!

So, it's time to get going on this Jesus journey!