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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Now You See Me, Now You Don't**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again, we thank you for gathering us together, we thank you for a place and the freedom still to gather, we are grateful for that. And Lord, this morning we are just going to be starting on a new series, a new journey, actually an old journey revisited and I just again, I pray for your Holy Spirit to accompany us. I pray that as we open up your book we would have not just the book but the privilege of your Holy Spirit opening it up and enabling us to make it of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well as you know, every summer I usually try to revisit some old teaching, and the reason why I used to do it was that all of my old stuff was handwritten and I have no way to access it, so I basically use that as an excuse to digitize it so I could have some access to it. This summer I decided to revisit a series that I did awhile ago to address an issue that I think at some point every one of us has wrestled with and it deals with our own sense of God's personal connection to our lives particularly when bad things

happen.

Joni Eareckson once described two very different and important scenarios when it came to struggling with and answering God's absence during a personal crisis. In one scenario you're given this fifty-pound knapsack and you're told that you're to carry it with no indication of what it was, no indication of what the point was. You're simply instructed to carry it some three miles to a certain destination over hills and valleys and streams, and you're told that it's critical to get it there as quickly as possible. And so you take off. And your journey quickly becomes very difficult, your lungs begin to burn, your legs begin to ache and you realize that this journey is not going to be easy, it's going to be painful, and yet you press on because you've been told the journey is critical.

Well in the second illustration you're not given a fifty-pound knapsack, instead what you're given your severely injured child that you're now carrying on your back to an emergency room. It's the exact same place, it's the exact same location, it's the exact same instruction, the hills and the valleys and the streams you have to cross are all exactly the same but the physical pain that you have to endure on a physical level is identical but on every other level it's profoundly different. Your lungs are bursting and

your legs are on fire but you barely notice because now you know precisely why and you know what you need to do, you know that makes all of the difference in the world. So much of our struggle as believers stems from the fact that many of our struggles in this life contain almost no information about the destination or about the point. And so we wonder why does God seem so distant particularly when we're suffering? Why in the world wouldn't God just lay out for us why he's doing thus and so? I mean if we just knew what the end game was, it would make all the difference in the world. Or would it?

I once had a conversation with a dear friend who was not walking with the Lord and we discussed many different issues that he had with the gospel and I had answers to most of his objections. There was one objection that I had a hard time answering though. We were speaking about scripture, I told him what God says in *Matthew 7:8*, it says: *"For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."* And he looked me right in the eye and he said, "You don't think that I've asked Christ into my life plenty of times?" He said, "You know what I got? A big fat zero. Nada. Nothing." What do you say to that? I mean I said the first thing that came to my mind and I still believe it was a legitimate answer, I said, "You know, God's time frame and your time frame are not necessarily the same," but I

don't know how helpful that was.

And so I want to spend the next few messages exploring some answers to that very question because I know it applies not just to my friend's dilemma but to many, many Christians as well. I mean how many of you said either to yourself or to someone else, "I cry out to God so many times but I get nothing back." And so I've entitled this series "Now You See Me, Now You Don't Revisited" because it seems to me to be one of the most prevalent complaints not just to my friend but of all of God's people. God oftentimes seems more absent than present. And the ability to connect with God on a tangible level seems something reserved only for a very select few saints. And you know in some ways I feel poorly equipped to tackle this subject because of the way that I personally came to Christ. I mean I had what you might call "a road to Damascus conversion," I mean like Paul when he got knocked off his horse, I got knocked off my horse by God. And I don't say this to my credit but God literally spoke to me. I mean he didn't speak audibly but he communicated to me just as if he had, and I believe he did so because I believe he gives to everybody exactly what they need, and I was so pig-headed and so ego-driven that this was exactly what I needed. I came out of that experience just assuming that this is the way everybody gets saved.

I mean I'll never forgot the first person I ever shared the gospel with was a good friend of mine, he was from back east, he had just moved out to San Francisco and I was explaining to him my experience. So I'm describing it and he's kind of reiterating and giving it back to me and I remember him saying, kind of going over the whole thing, he says, "Okay. So you pray to God to show himself and then you get this lightning bolt in your belly button; is that how it works?" I looked at him and I said, "Absolutely." I assumed that's the way it worked for everybody. Well, that's not the way it works for everybody. In the 48 years since that day I have had many, many times where I've wondered if God really was there. I mean there have been times when I have cried out to God and the heavens were absolutely silent. But when that happens, all I have to do is go back in time to that night and I know without a doubt that something spectacularly supernatural took place there, but I also know now that for many people coming to faith is nothing like that. When it comes to testimony time, they lament the fact that their story doesn't have that same kind of dramatic impact that other testimonies might have, and they lament the fact that they don't have something spectacular to look back on. Perhaps they were raised in a Christian family. To them being born again was just a natural progression of the training they received since they were a child. They never got the "lightning bolt in the belly button" experience. How you got here is not nearly as important as

being here in the first place and yet there's one thing that seems to mark the lives of many, many Christians regardless their testimony, and it's that nagging sense that the God that they worship is for one reason or another absent.

When I first went out to San Francisco I was 24 years old, we became part of a church that consisted of people who were my age, you know, really, really old, old people. I mean when I walked into that church, I said, "Wow, this is nothing but old people." But you know, I tried to understand their faith walk, it was very different culture, two different cultures and I tried to understand their faith walk and incorporate it into my own. The one thing that I never quite got or understood was their sense of the presence of God. And I would listen to these dear Christians and they would speak about their relationship with God as if he was right there in the room with them speaking to them consistently. And I've mentioned this before, there was a hymn that so many of these dear folks loved back then and it used to completely stymie me. This is the way the words go. The lyrics say: "I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the rose, and the voice that I hear falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses." Well the writer goes on to describe this experience that she has with God in the garden. She says: "And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry

there none other has ever known." I can't tell you how that song used to bother me. And it bothered me because I pictured myself coming into the garden alone and crying out to God and still being overwhelmingly aware that I'm still in the garden and I'm still alone. God wasn't talking with me and he wasn't walking with me, so clearly something was wrong with me. I mean I honestly believed that if you work hard enough with your relationship with God that you should have the sense of his presence that's as real and important as intense as the hymn writer put it. Well, I no longer believe that to be the case and it has nothing to do with any failure whatsoever on God's part. It has far more to do with the failure on my part to understand the nature of our relationship with God.

You know we always want to under promise and over deliver no matter what it is we're extolling about God but I just felt that for many, many years my Christian evangelical community over promised and under delivered when it came to explaining the dynamics of my personal relationship with Christ. And it wasn't until many, many years later that I realized what I was after and what God was after in this were two very, very different things. I was after some kind of cross between Casper the friendly ghost and Superman when it came to my understanding of my relationship with Christ. It would be someone who not only possessed superpowers but who was

right there by my side day in and day out telling me: Do this, don't do this; go there, don't go there. This is the way it works. And I believe I have a relationship with God in which he does communicate with me day in and day out, but I want to be very careful about just how that plays itself out so as not to give you the impression like I was unintentionally given. That if I just hit the right combination of dedication and prayer that I would have this breakthrough relationship where God would be walking with me and talking with me not only in the garden but everywhere that I went. Suddenly the clouds would part and I'd begin to see with crystal clarity the way God was working in my life. Folks, that's not the way God works in our lives.

I want to go back to another old illustration. This is one that J. I. Packer had in his marvelous book *Knowing God*, because it addresses the same issue from a slightly different angle. He referred to it as the "York signal box analogy." See in York, England there's this huge switchyard for trains in which there are all kinds of different tracks and many different trains are being shunted from one line to another, and at ground level everything appears to be absolute chaos. Trains are moving in every single direction with no seeming rhyme or rhythm. But if you should be fortunate enough to be invited up into what they call the "York signal box," you would instead get to see the train yard from a



totally different perspective. Because there in front of you would be this huge electronic board that shows all of the tracks and all of the trains and where every one of them is headed and why.

Packer makes the interesting point that if you think that as you mature in your Christian faith you finally get to the place where God invites you up to the York signal box to walk with God and talk with God and to see why and how he's operating. He says if you think that, he says, you've got it completely wrong. That's not the way it works. Actually there is never a time when suddenly you reach a level of maturity that now you are enabled to understand where the trains are going and why. Instead Packer describes maturity in Christ as much more like driving a sports car in a cross country race. He says you may round a corner and see a dip in the road that you never anticipated. It could be finances, it could be relationships, it could be illnesses, it could be job situations, any of a host of dips in the road that sends you reeling, wondering why God would allow it, why he would seem to be so absent in the middle of it. And yet you trust God for the exact same reason that the apostle Peter trusted. It's because you've got no other options.

Here's what I mean. This is the scripture that I'm basing this on. This happened shortly after Jesus fed the 5,000. After he had fed them he began intentionally turning the crowds away that were

following him, and he did it by stating truths that they just could not handle. And these folks were looking to Jesus for a circus, for miracles, for free food. Jesus told them something so outrageous and repulsive that it sent many of his followers away. He said instead of bread they needed to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Well that statement drove people away in droves. Then at one point as people were leaving him, Jesus asked even his disciples if they wanted to leave as well. This is *John 6*. It says: *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."* You see, at some point usually after some major dip in the road we all feel like Peter, I mean, if we could bail, we would. We just got no place else to go.

So in spite of God's apparent silence we just kind of trudge forward and somehow we manage to negotiate that dip until we round another corner and find a section of washed out road that we never expected and then again trusting in God's sovereignty we somehow manage to get through that one and on to the next one and next one, and in each case it was never a matter of being able to see the big picture, it was much more a matter to anticipate that dips in the

road are going to come and knowing that God will get you through them even if he isn't walking and talking with you in the garden. So this morning what I really want to do is I want to look at just what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Boy, do we throw that term around. What does that mean? I mean does Christ walk with you? Does he talk with you audibly? Are you like I was, struggling to understand just what that personal relationship means?

If you've struggled with this, believe me, you are not alone. I want to read you some quotes from someone who deeply suffered from a perception of God's absence. This is what she wrote. She wrote: "I call, I cling, I want and there is no One to answer. Where I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love -- the word -- it brings nothing. I am told God loves me and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul." (Bowden, David. *When God Isn't There: Why God Is Farther than You Think but Closer than You Dare Imagine* (p. 161). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.)

Do you know who wrote that? That was mother Teresa. I mean you may have some questions about her theology but I don't think anyone

ever doubted her dedication and determination to put into action God's call to laying down your life for these least of Christ's brethren. She did this specifically because of her commitment to Christ and her relationship that she had with Christ. These were writings that came out after her death. She went on to say this -- quote -- "They say people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God. In my soul I feel just this terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing. Heaven from every side is closed." (Bowden, David. When God Isn't There: Why God Is Farther than You Think but Closer than You Dare Imagine (p. 170). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.)

People were shocked to say the least that these words came from mother Teresa. Folks thought if anyone had a wonderful relationship with him, it had to be mother Teresa. I mean the Catholic church just made her into a saint. Well, did her writings prove her to be some kind of phony or some kind of fraud who just covered up the fact that she had a non relationship with God or is what mother Teresa wrote not uncommon for even precious saints sometimes to feel? I think the answer's not the former, it's the latter. I believe God's perceived absence is normative for every believer. I believe it's necessary for knowing who we are and who God is and I also believe God's perceived absence is natural and

that it is the driving force that drives our faith, making it precious in God's sight and ours. And what I want to do in this brief series is examine not the presence of God in the lives of his saints but his perceived absence. I say "perceived absence" because that's only our perception because God is with us at all times. I mean God made that crystally clear in *Romans 8:38* where he says this. Paul says: *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* So I'll be the first one to say that I know that to be true, but sometimes I don't feel that to be true at all. And what I want to do is paint a realistic picture of what a life in a personal relationship with Christ consists of. And to do that I want to look at the lives of some of the saints in scripture because they're there to instruct us and give us insight into our own lives. And if we look carefully at these lives, we'll see that sometimes God's perceived absence is the opposite of what we think it is and that it's all part of God's plan for each of us.

You see, there's a reason why God's approach to us is "now you see me, now you don't" and I can sum it up with two verses. I mean *2 Corinthians 5:8* says: *We walk by faith, not by sight.* *Hebrews 11* says: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the*

*conviction of things not seen. You see that walk, that assurance only develops and grows in the perceived absence of God. You know we understand the concept of no pain, no gain when it comes to the idea of physical training because we know that vigorous exercise breaks down muscle tissue and it causes blood vessels to grow and that involves pain. If our goal is increased strength and stamina, we're willing to pay that price. If God wants to increase our faith through the pain of his perceived absence, he's not going to ask our permission because we're not inclined to give it. And I'm not sure that we even understand the price that must be paid to grow our faith or the reason why God's absence is necessary in the first place. And so I guess the first place to start would be at the very beginning, and that's to say, to explain why this absence from God or this absence of God was never God's intention. I mean the very first man and the very first woman lived in complete fellowship with God. This is *Genesis 1:27*. It says: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."**

See in the beginning things were vastly different than they are

now. God and man had the relationship then that we can now only hope for in the kingdom to come, and we have no idea how long that lasted. But while it lasted Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect fellowship with their creator. They were fully involved in the creative enterprise of managing and exercising dominion over all of the creation that God had put them in charge of until, until they fell for the enemy's lie and decided to throw their lot in with the serpent and purposely violate the one rule that God had laid down. God said do not eat of the forbidden fruit. They decided that God was withholding wisdom and power from them, so they decided to defy him by eating it. It was the most devastatingly disastrous decision any human being has ever made. Adam and Eve's fall turned themselves and their creation from the "very good" of Genesis 1:31 into the "none good" of Romans 3:10. And once they had traded in their perfection for a brand new fallen nature that no longer was in sync with their creator, they also found the intimate day-to-day relationship that they enjoyed with God was gone, it was over, it was shattered. God remained perfect; they now embraced imperfection. The immediate effect of their rebellion was that the God that they had partnered with previously was now a God they feared, was a God that they hid from. Their sin caused them to become self aware in the worst possible way. Previously they were so caught up in the pleasure of their perfectly attuned existence that God said in *Genesis 2:25*: *The man and his wife were both*

*naked and were not ashamed. All of that came crashing down the moment they embraced the serpent's lie and for the very first time they discovered not only had they been lied to about the effects of their rebellion, but that the repercussions would be profound and life-changing not just for them but for all of creation.*

*Genesis 3:6 says: So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The very first effect of their sin was an awareness of themselves as individuals now clearly living apart from the God that they used to be perfectly in sync with. I mean we read these words, we think how in the world could you be naked and not even aware of it? You see, for them self-awareness did not exist. I mean so caught up where they in the joy of their existence, they had no need whatsoever to look inward. But the moment they ate that fruit became the moment that they were aware that they were now naked. Not only were they aware of their nakedness but now*



they were ashamed and sewed fig leaves to cover themselves.

The next immediate effect was a fear of God that they had never feared before. I mean they heard God walking in the garden and instead of connecting with him as they had always done in the past, they're now hiding. They didn't realize but now everything was different. Now everything had changed. The relationship that they had enjoyed with God for we don't know how long was over. They were cast out from God's presence and from there things went downhill immediately. Their first two sons Cain and Abel were the perpetrator and the victim of the very first murder. So mankind and God embarked on this divergent pathway from complete and absolute interdependence to an estrangement in character and behavior that grew so stark that eventually God decided to wipe the earth clean of man and his rebellion and start all over. *Genesis 6* says: *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

And again we all know the story, I mean, the flood wiped out all of mankind and Noah and his family through the ark re-populated it. But soon, soon the bent character that was now part of mankind re-emerged in the Tower of Babel where mankind effectively shook its fist at God and said, we will not scatter as you have told us to. In fact we will build a city and a tower that's going to reach up to the heavens itself and then we'll dare you to flood us again. God's response was this in *Genesis 11*: *Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."* And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, *"Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."* So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. I mean I read of these interactions between God and his creation and I immediately think of *Lamentations 3* which says: *It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.* I mean this story of mankind and God is a story of a creature constantly shaking his fist in the face of his creator and the creator constantly showing mercy in response.

So after the Tower of Babel Genesis brings us to Abraham who represents God's great plan to save mankind. Abraham's been chosen to be the father of a great nation from whom the Messiah would come and we read all about the patriarchs from Abraham through Joseph to Moses and David and the prophets, it's easy to assume that all of those who were so particularly close to God, that they enjoyed a fellowship with him that was vastly different than the fellowship that we experience. We just assume that these people walked with God and talked with God on a level far beyond anything we've ever experienced. But then why would Isaiah say in *Isaiah 64*: *For you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.* Or why would Gideon say in *Judges 6*: *"Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian."* Or the prophet Habakkuk who said: *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?* See even great saints had problems with God's perceived absence.

So the first thing that we have to understand concerning God's absence is, number one, that it was absolutely necessary. I mean Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because they had to be

for their own protection. God's full presence became deadly. Every subsequent interaction that God has ever had with man since the fall of Adam has been mediated through some form of physical or spiritual protection because God and man are now so vastly different that to be fully exposed to the living God in our fallen state is to court instant death. God said so explicitly. Moses had tasted of God and it had awoken in him a most intense desire to have even more. *Exodus, 33* it says: *Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And he -- that's God -- said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."*

How could it be that the fellowship that Adam and Eve took for granted could now become a fellowship so toxic that no human being could see God and stay alive? Well God tells us why in *Isaiah 59*. He says this: *Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.* Translation: God is holy and we are not.

We may see ourselves or having a sin problem but we barely scratch

the surface when we come to understanding God's holiness, and our ignorance is no excuse. I mean after all, we know from scripture that even an accidental contact with the living God was fatal. Just ask Uzzah. You probably remember the story in the Old Testament. God had consented to dwell in the ark of the covenant and David foolishly decides that he's going to move the ark and he moves it against all the protocol that God had laid out as to how it was supposed to be moved, and he's having it drawn on a cart and the cart's drawn by oxen. And at one point the oxen stumbled. And the ark that's on the cart begins to tip, it's going to fall into a stream. We pick up at *2 Samuel 6*. It says: *And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God.* Uzzah was just trying to be helpful. It was going to fall into the mud. Uzzah's trying to be helpful and he paid for that with his life. R.C. Sproul pointed out Uzzah was trying to prevent the ark from being defiled by falling into the mud and he didn't realize that it's not mud that's going to defile the ark, instead it was the sinful touch of a human hand. That's how profoundly separated man and God have become. We have to understand that much of this separation that exists between God and us is a profound mercy on God's part.

I mean, you remember that scene in *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*, you remember that scene where the Nazi collaborators finally discovered the real ark and then they open it up and one of them says, "Oh, it's so beautiful!" And then from inside the ark itself comes this force that turns incredibly hideous and deadly and the characters, they all start to scream and their faces literally melt? That's strictly Hollywood, that's strictly special effects; but for once, for once they portrayed a God worthy of fearing. We have little or no sense of that fear because we're so isolated from the God of the Old Testament. We prefer Jesus, the nice guy, you know the God who works in the New Testament, not the mean God, God the Father who works the Old Testament. We forget that God the Father and God the Son are one in the same God. I mean the God who struck Uzzah dead for daring to touch the ark is the very same God who very calmly and methodically is wiping spit from his face as he's being beaten and mocked by the very ones who are going to kill him. He's the king of the universe striking Uzzah dead for touching the ark and now he's wearing a crown made out of thornbushes. He's dressed in a purple robe and the robe is designed to mock his so-called royalty; and Roman soldiers are shouting and laughing and slapping him and saying, "Hail, king of the Jews." See there's a reason why this holy, spotless king endured that shame. God's glory and our salvation was the reason. *Hebrews 12* describes it. It says:

*Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that*

*was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

See, we will never, never, never be able to even start to grasp the price that God was willing to pay to restore the relationship that got shattered in the garden. And so as we undertake this study of God's perceived absence, we want to acknowledge first that it's normative, it's something virtual every Christian is going to experience. And secondly, we also want to acknowledge that it is necessary because God is holy and we are not. And finally, we acknowledge that God's perceived absence is a natural part of the faith that God is growing in you and me. I've said it before, the only real currency that any born again believer has before God is his or her faith, and even that is a gift of God. It's the only thing that you have and can say, "God, we can give this to you." It's our trust. It's the only thing that ever amazed Jesus. I mean when he encountered in the centurion in *Luke 7*. The scripture says: *When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."* That's precious to God. And faith is what he is determined to grow in us. God is determined to grow that precious faith in our lives and I don't know anything that tests the genuineness of our faith more than God's perceived absence. I mean, would it not follow that a natural part of God's

plan for each of us would be to include significant periods of time when the only thing that you have to go on is not what we feel but what we know. I know that Jesus Christ endured the cross, despising its same for me. And sometimes when God's perceived absence is crushing, it's the only thing I know. That's the time when the goal that is our faith is being refined so that it is far more gold than dross. Trust me, those times are normative. You will go through times when God seems to be nowhere to be found. They're also necessary because God is holy and we are not. And they're natural. They're a part of God's will.

Now I wish I could have given that answer to my friend who asked me at the very beginning of this message why God was so absent in his life. And I hope someday to be able to show him and you all in the lives of some of God's great saints to see how they encountered God's normative, necessary, and natural absence so that we could be nurtured when we find ourselves in the center of that same fire. Peter says: *Our tested faith is more precious than gold.* Precious to us and precious to God.

We conclude with Peter's words. He says this: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested*



*by fire -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.*

*Father, we want to have a personal relationship with you. We confess oftentimes that we really don't know what that means and we don't know how to go about it and we don't know what is healthy and what is not, what is normal, what is not. And Lord, I just pray as we go through these lives of the saints and we watch and see how you more often than not play the game that you play with as little children, "Now you see me, now you don't." So frequently, God, at the very beginning of our walk with you, we see you everywhere and then you pull back; we see you and then we don't, Lord, help us to understand that the way you are growing this precious faith in our lives, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*