

**WHY
IS GOD
IGNORING
me?**

What to Do
When It Feels Like
He's Giving You the
Silent Treatment

GARY R. HABERMAS



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Why Is God Ignoring Me? What to Do When It Feels Like He's Giving You the Silent Treatment

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*For
Dave and Jean,
Mike and Debbie,
and
Alex and Angie*

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

You've Got Mail

Wouldn't it be wonderful to receive mail from God? What would it be like to open up your mailbox and just once find a letter with a heavenly postmark? Would it even need a stamp? And what if it contained very loving and personal words from your heavenly Father—the sort of thoughts you would treasure all the days of your life?

Why doesn't God send us mail? Or at least communicate with us directly?

In all my years of talking to Christians who experience doubts about their faith, this sort of question is the most common. Who can be blamed for wanting to hear from God—especially when we're hurting? Isn't it natural to want to hear from someone we love?

I've experienced this many times, but none as profoundly as when I sat next to the bed and watched my wife of twenty-three years, the mother of our four children, dying of cancer. Looking

back, I can see the notes in my Bible that reveal the terrible pain and, worst of all, my incredible loneliness.

ZEROING IN ON THE PROBLEM

Struggling to understand and accept God's silence is not a new problem—or one that's reserved only for the spiritually immature. This was a major issue in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the lives of countless people since that time. According to *Time* magazine, the number one religion story for 2007 was the written confession of Mother Teresa, in which she explained that she had suffered great agony for fifty years of her life because she lacked a sense of God's presence. In spite of the many great sacrifices she had made in her life, she wrote that “the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see.”¹

That Mother Teresa's “faith crisis” was deemed to be the top religious news item of 2007 definitely speaks to the fact that even strong believers are not exempt from this struggle. And although this subject is a labyrinth of tunnels and glorious passageways that have the potential to lead to spiritual liberation, joy, and peace, reaching that point takes us on anything but a straight path.

Everywhere we turn, our world seems to be spinning out of control: stories of violence and wars, economic crises, and political corruption fill our newscasts. Unemployment rates are up and families are struggling to stay together. It seems as if God has given up, turned His back, and closed Himself off from our pain. How else can we explain our current condition? How could He be at work in the world today—and in the lives of His followers—when such pain and suffering exist?

Looking around at modern society, it's easy to long for better

days, perhaps even wishing we could have lived during Bible times when God seemed to speak directly to His people and answer prayer on a regular basis. After all, weren't believers always rescued from tough circumstances, sometimes even before they cried out to God for help? We read about the times that He healed the sick—sometimes in rather spectacular, miraculous ways—and it seems that every time there was a need, God simply appeared or answered in the very next verse.

Moreover, many biblical characters were able to commune with God, and on very personal terms too. It's almost as if God was *always* available and willing to meet their needs, and did so.

Sure, we know that people in the Bible had their times of persecution, hardship, and personal struggles. Some even died for their faith. But when we read their stories, it's easy to envision lives of excitement in which people could clearly see God at work. These biblical heroes could look back over their lives and see a regular pattern of supernatural events. If only we had the same privilege.

And what about all of God's promises? Many of us have read, meditated on, memorized, or claimed key texts that teach truly wonderful realities about God.

- God will always hear our pleas and answer when we call.
- We will not be plagued with the sicknesses of unbelievers.
- If we cry out to Him, He will hear and take care of our problems.
- He cares more about us than the lilies of the field.

But have you ever stopped to assess how many of these promises you've actually seen fulfilled in the daily reality of your own life? Do we really witness the truths that these texts proclaim?

Assuming that these promises were true in biblical times, why doesn't God answer our prayers and provide regular healing like we see Him doing in Scripture? Why don't we hear from God more often?

SILENCE: A COMMON QUESTION

Have you ever heard from God? The experience of religious doubt is *very* common, for both believers as well as unbelievers. We can even convince ourselves of God's profound silence to the extent that we wonder if we've *ever* heard from Him.

A few years ago I was teaching a seminary class, and a graduate student said to me, "I recently got engaged. Now I write to my fiancée every day." Because I knew him well, I teasingly quipped, "That won't last very long." More seriously, I told him I was very happy for him, and we began discussing the importance of showing our affection for those we love. Then the student dropped a little bomb on me: "So why doesn't God ever send us mail? He loves us, doesn't He?"

His question was not a new one for me. Actually, the topic of God's silence was one I had been thinking about for quite some time, especially when it came to issues of unanswered prayer and suffering.

How many times have you heard from God in a distinct way? Just a few? More than a few? A lot? Regardless of how you answer that question, the bigger issue still remains: Why does it sometimes feel as if God is ignoring us? When things don't go the way we had hoped and we think that God has let us down, *no amount* of fancy talking or theorizing will remove the sting of pain. So why doesn't God break the silence far more often than it appears He does? Doesn't He realize that we may be hurting—even very painfully so?

While there may be many possible reasons for God’s silence, I believe He isn’t really all that silent. In fact, I believe He speaks *often* into our lives. Sometimes He does so in ways that are bold and loud; other times, His voice is more quiet and intimate—like a love letter. Maybe it’s God’s way to provide just enough evidence to convince, but not enough to coerce.

Shortly after I had that discussion with the seminary student, I began to ask students in my graduate classes to hand in anonymous slips of paper on which they had written the number of times they thought they had heard from God in very specific ways. The answers varied widely, but surprisingly, the majority of the students said they had experienced at least a couple dozen love letters from God.

What do you tell yourself about God’s communication with you or lack thereof? If the issue of God’s silence is one that haunts you, you may well be less inclined to pursue Him wholeheartedly. It has been my experience that the more people are bothered by what they perceive to be God’s lack of love, care, or provision for their needs, the more difficult it is to motivate them to obey God and experience His blessings in this present life.

We will see later that what we tell ourselves is of utmost importance in terms of how we “feel” about God’s seeming silence. This is a very powerful idea. You can make yourself believe something about yourself or the world, even if it’s not true, simply by telling yourself that it is so. This might mean, for example, that some people who have actually never heard from God may

What we tell ourselves is of utmost importance in terms of how we “feel” about God’s seeming silence.

think He has communicated frequently with them. More commonly, however, Christians tend to dismiss or even forget the times that God has spoken, acting as if they've never heard anything from God. Like little children, we find it easier to recall the negative things that happen in our lives than we do the positive.

But it could also be that God has intentionally chosen not to answer our prayers in the way we had hoped. Does this mean that He has turned away from us? that He doesn't love us or care what happens to us?

Of course, our generation is not the only one to ask this question. When Job suffered, he, too, questioned God's silence. Even when he proclaimed his innocence and cried out for help, God did not seem to respond or answer his plea.²

I believe that God *does* speak and intervene and that He actually does so with some frequency.

But like Job's friend Elihu, I believe that God *does* speak and intervene and that He actually does so with some frequency. Unfortunately, we often miss it because we are not listening or looking in the right places. Elihu went on to list some of the ways God shows Himself in this world, either to spare us judgment or to provide blessings for His people:

- He speaks through dreams.
- He speaks through pain.
- He speaks through angels.
- He speaks through prayers.³

Is Elihu's advice helpful today? On the one hand, it is great to think that God may still be active in the world today. But, on

the other hand, to consider that we frequently miss His various manifestations is somewhat disheartening. How do we know where He is if we don't know where to look? Is it possible that He is acting and we don't even know it?

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

These are some of the issues we want to grapple with in this book. I don't want to get ahead of myself, but a quick overview might be helpful here. In setting the stage, we will argue that, on the one hand, God does act very frequently today. In fact, I believe we can see this activity in at least half a dozen different areas throughout the world, the church, and in the lives of individuals. Some of these areas are supernatural and some are not, but they are all manifestations of His presence. Some are highly evidential, and the results have even been published in leading medical journals or elsewhere. At the same time, others are very personal.

While supernatural manifestations definitely seem to occur, even with some regularity, I need to say right at the start that this type of activity is not God's *modus operandi*. In other words, while I think we have plenty of reasons to believe that God is very active in the world today, there are also many times when He does not do precisely what we would like Him to do.

Perhaps most interesting to some readers, we will also look closely at Scripture. In doing so, we will see that people of that time frequently wrestled with the same questions we have regarding God's activity (or inactivity) in their lives. We will show that, surprisingly, on *most* occasions, the events of the Bible are very similar to the situations we experience today.

Then we'll move on to look at the way God speaks to us through prayer. In Scripture, prayer always has conditions,

so we'll study some of these requirements. And after prayer, we'll look at other disciplines that Scripture admonishes us to practice if we want to experience more of God's presence in our lives.

Finally, we'll consider the effect the things we say to ourselves can have on the way we hear—or don't hear—God's voice.

Have you ever seen those books that appear to contain three-dimensional pictures? When you first look at a scene, your view is limited. However, when you place the book close to your face and then move it away slowly, an entirely new vista appears. The new scene can be markedly different from what you first saw in the picture.

My hope is that something like this will happen for you when you view the very difficult questions of God's silence from another angle. It is my contention that the teaching in God's Word is very different from what we might have always assumed. Perhaps God will open our own spiritual eyes to see realities in this world that differ from our initial perceptions, just as he did in the Old Testament account of Elisha's servant who had no idea of the presence or size of God's army (2 Kings 6:14-17).

In the following chapters, you'll find stories from real people who have experienced God's intervention in the world today. As you read, ask yourself this question: *Is it possible He has been working similarly in my own life and I just didn't realize it?*

O N E

**Supernatural
Activities
in Our World**



Any discussion of God's silence would be incomplete without first entertaining the question of miracles and supernatural activities.

We might suspect that during biblical times everyone believed in the supernatural and witnessed its occurrence on a regular basis. Maybe the average person would have even said that he or she had personally witnessed many acts of God. But this hardly sounds like the picture we get when we really study God's Word. Take John 12:28-30, for instance:

“Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine.”

In this text, when God spoke from heaven, the members of the crowd disagreed about the source of the voice. Some said they heard an angel, but others thought it was nothing more than thunder. Notice that the voice of God apparently wasn't one of the options. But note something else, too. Those who thought they heard thunder were not even thinking in supernatural terms. Not unlike today, a common response in Jesus' day was to interpret events naturally.

So we must ask ourselves: Is it possible that God still performs supernaturally in our world today and we are simply missing it?*

HEALING

Though we've probably all heard reports of physical and emotional healing, it is often difficult to confirm the details or accuracy of the stories. But occasionally some reports can indeed be verified. One such account is that of Barbara. At only thirty-one, Barbara suffered from a rare form of multiple sclerosis that was attacking her body's organs. Her diaphragm was nearly paralyzed, and breathing had become very difficult. Tumors had developed on her hands and feet, and she had experienced cardiac and respiratory arrest three times. In addition, she also suffered from

*In this chapter, we will investigate six different areas in which God appears to be active and moving even today. Obviously, this book and the stories contained within it do not have the same authority as Scripture. So it is our responsibility to be judicious and test the veracity of these accounts.

Scripture tells us to stay alert whenever we hear claims that a particular message or event originated with God. In Deuteronomy 13:1-5, the Israelites were told, interestingly enough, that even if someone performed a miracle, they were not to follow that person if his message contradicted earlier teachings from God. Similar teachings are found in the New Testament. We are told to always be vigilant and test for false prophets.

The point here is that when studying the mighty acts of God, we need to carefully consider the claims that are being presented and the source from which they originate. In keeping with the warnings in both the Old and New Testaments, we need to listen, watch, and evaluate stories of the supernatural properly. The stories in this book are no holier than any other accounts. So let the reader beware and put on his or her glasses of discernment.

a form of chronic lung disease that resulted in a permanently collapsed lung. As the diseases progressed, Barbara entered hospice and began to prepare for her death.

One day, two women were visiting with Barbara, reading the cards and letters from well-wishers, and as they were talking, Barbara heard a third voice in the room. The voice clearly said, “My child, get up and walk.” Although Barbara had not walked for two years, she did not hesitate. She stood up, started walking down the hall, and bumped into her parents, who were coming for a visit.

Barbara’s legs had been atrophied from the lack of exercise, but now the muscles were firm and held her weight without difficulty. Her mother’s first words evidenced her shock: “Calves! You have calves.” Her father was so excited he danced with her around the room. Like a ballerina, Barbara stood on her toes, leaped in the air, and laughed for joy.

Although hesitant to spoil the party, Barbara’s doctors reminded the family that MS is an incurable disease, and that in Barbara’s case, it had progressed almost to the point of her death. But after running a number of tests to determine what was happening, even the doctors had to admit that Barbara seemed to have been healed instantaneously. The MS had completely disappeared, her lungs were now healthy and functioning, and the tumors on her hands and feet were gone.

Barbara became a surgeon’s assistant. The physician she trained under had been one of her own doctors. He tells his classes, “She was a patient of mine. I said she would not live. I also said she would never walk again. Now she assists me.”¹

Is it possible that God still performs supernaturally in our world today and we are simply missing it?

Consider another example. Kate had recently been diagnosed with terminal stage 4 cancer.² During surgery, her doctor found that not only was her cancer one of the most lethal varieties, but it had also spread throughout her body. Rather than try to remove the cancer, they simply closed her up and told her she had only a few months to live.

When requests for prayer were sent out, my family joined with many other believers across the nation praying for Kate's seemingly impossible recovery. However, as I prayed, I experienced that nagging feeling that it wasn't doing much good. And sure enough, though we prayed, the cancer continued unabated.

Then one day I received a call. Kate had suddenly begun to feel better—even to the point of needing no painkillers whatsoever. Thinking this was just a temporary lull, Kate waited for the pain to return. But it never did.

Although Kate's oncologist told her that brief respites have been known to occur in some cancer patients, a full blood scan, a CT scan, and another biopsy of the tissue determined that the cancer was nowhere to be found. Eight years later, Kate has never developed another problem, and she remains a living testimony to God's work.

My last example comes from a very close friend of our family. Several years ago, Fred and Lucy's young daughter died of cancer. Not long after that, Fred, too, was diagnosed with a rare but lethal form of cancer. Twice he submitted to a biopsy, hoping that the diagnosis was a mistake. Unfortunately, this did nothing but confirm the presence of the life-threatening cancer. Fred was told he needed surgery immediately.

In the days leading up to the surgery, Fred's family and friends were deep in prayer. Although no one voiced these words publicly, several of us wondered why the Lord would allow this to happen

to Fred and Lucy after the very painful death of their young daughter. How much did God expect one family to undergo? Surprisingly, it was Fred himself who comforted us, telling us to have faith in God no matter what the outcome.

After the surgery, the family members waited anxiously for a report that did not come until three weeks later. Strangely, when the doctor saw them, he was wearing a bit of a smile. “Contrary to our two biopsies and all of our expectations, I have some excellent news to share with you,” he said. “No cancer cells were found in Fred’s tumor. Not a single one. I cannot explain it, but it looks like your faith has been working.”

Today, almost six years later, no further signs of cancer have appeared in Fred’s body.

Stories like these abound, like the tale of a young boy in Florida with leukemia whose church elders laid hands on him and prayed for his healing the night before his first treatment. When the boy went to the hospital the next morning, a blood test showed no trace of the disease. Thinking that an abnormality occurred in the testing, doctors ordered another blood test. Again there was no trace of the disease. That was many years ago, and the young man has had no problems since then.

Then there was a graduate student who prayed the night before he was to undergo surgery for a large cancerous tumor. When he finished praying, he ran his hand over the area where his tumor was growing and found that he could no longer feel it. When he reported to the hospital the next morning, he requested a checkup before going into surgery, but his request was denied. The surgery proceeded as planned. However, the surgeons found no tumor whatsoever and the procedure that was supposed to take two to three hours ended in just minutes. Years later, the cancer still has not returned.

There is also the report of Nita, a paralyzed woman in Sri Lanka who could not speak and had no feeling in either leg. She reported that Jesus actually appeared in her hospital room and healed her. Several witnesses were in her room, including two medical doctors, who confirmed that she had indeed been healed.³

We've all heard stories like these. But often they are stories about other people. And even though the results might seem miraculous—clear evidence of God's presence in our lives—after a while, we start to question. *Was it really God or just a coincidence? Did it even happen at all? And if it did, why doesn't He do something like that for me?*

Questions like these are fine. But in my experience, Christians *do* know of healing accounts. Unfortunately, we usually allow the doubts to trump the potential miracles, even in the face of excellent evidence. Further, we often forget the positive cases and remember only the unanswered examples.

ANSWERED PRAYER

Years ago, my wife and I were part of a group of Christians who regularly shared prayer requests with one another. For two years, my wife and I kept a prayer diary, listing the prayer requests on the left side and the answers on the right.

Maintaining a rather skeptical attitude, I also kept a sidebar labeled “impossible prayer requests.” In this space, I listed things that, even as I prayed, I pretty much assumed would never be answered.

When our study concluded, I tallied the results. Across the board, we witnessed answered prayer in about 67 percent of all the cases. And what about my “impossible prayer request” list? There we saw a whopping 60 percent answered!

Given such great odds, you would assume that my wife and

I would never again question the efficacy of answered prayer. Unfortunately, even in the face of such amazing answers to our prayers, we continued to struggle with the same questions. I still have that list, but just a year or so after finishing the exercise, I could remember only two or three of the unanswered prayers on our list and only *one* of the answered prayers! Why is that? Since basically two-thirds of our prayers had been answered, you would think I could have recalled many of the incidents. I've always had a good memory.

How do we account for this? As humans, we tend to focus on the negative things in our lives and forget to be grateful for the positive things. I certainly found this to be the case with our prayer diary.

Adults often seem to think that their children are so ungrateful, but in the same way, we regularly forget God's goodness to us and then wonder what He has done lately.

Is there any way to verify answered prayer—and thus God's touch in our lives—more accurately? Perhaps. In a ten-month period between 1982 and 1983, cardiologist Randolph Byrd conducted a double-blind experiment on prayer in a San Francisco hospital, involving almost four hundred patients from the coronary care unit. Selected randomly, approximately half of all patients were prayed for, while the other half were not. Not even the physicians, much less the patients, knew which ones were receiving prayer and which were not.

The intercessors were all “born-again Christians”—both Protestant and Catholic—who did not personally know the

We tend to focus on the negative things in our lives and forget to be grateful for the positive things.

patients for whom they were praying. The result was that the prayed-for patients did statistically better than those who did not receive prayer. In fact, they improved in twenty-one out of twenty-six monitored categories. The report concluded that “intercessory

**Personal
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prayer to the Judeo-Christian God has a beneficial therapeutic effect in patients.”⁴

Other experiments on prayer have also been performed, and in an attempt to incorporate a wider range of beliefs in those who were praying, most of the later examples utilized prayer intercessors from a variety of religious faiths. Arguably, none of the other experiments achieved such positive results.⁵

Another study was then conducted at Saint Luke’s Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri. This was also a randomized, controlled, double-blind test involving about a thousand patients. Like the study in San Francisco, the prayer intercessors were Christians from a variety of traditions. These intercessors were mostly women who did not know the patients. The results supported the first study’s findings, with researchers concluding that “remote, blinded, intercessory prayer produced a measurable improvement in the medical outcomes of critically ill patients.”⁶

I found the comments regarding the Kansas City study to be rather intriguing. One Georgetown University professor noted the significance of the agreement with Randolph Byrd’s study in San Francisco. A Duke University researcher noted some crucial questions: Why didn’t some patients do better? And does answered prayer work only for Christians?⁷

Regarding this last question, it does seem intriguing that

the studies involving only Christian prayer intercessors seem to have been more successful in terms of healing, while those where the praying was done by non-Christians seem to be rather unsuccessful. I believe that God is active in the lives of unbelievers as well as believers and that He answers the prayers of both, but even so, the results of these studies do make us think, don't they?

To be sure, prayer experiments raise some perplexing questions. Even some believers think they are wrongheaded. In such cases, I recommend the strategy with which we started this discussion: keeping personal prayer journals can be a more satisfying indicator of God's activity in our lives.

ANGELS

Granted, accounts regarding the purported appearance of angelic beings do not have the same force as empirical studies of healing and answers to prayer. But stories of God stepping into His people's lives through angelic visitations were probably more common in biblical times.

One well-known account is found in 2 Kings 6:14-17. When a foreign army surrounded the city of Dothan, Elisha reminded his fearful servant that they were protected by a greater army. But when the servant failed to see any such host, Elisha prayed that his servant's eyes might be opened—and the man saw many horses and chariots of fire.

A number of contemporary reports are reminiscent of this ancient story. Billy Graham relates the account of John Paton, a missionary from the New Hebrides Islands. Hostile natives surrounded his headquarters one night, intending to burn the building and kill John and his wife. Inexplicably, however, the natives suddenly turned and left. Later, the tribe's chief was

converted to Christianity, and remembering that night, he asked Mr. Paton one question: “Who were all those men you had with you there?” When the missionary responded that no one else was present, the chief insisted that there had been “many men standing guard—hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands.”⁸

The writer of Hebrews 13:2 tells believers that we, too, could entertain angels without being aware of it. A seminary professor shares the story of a time when he and his wife were vacationing with another couple. As they were driving along the highway one afternoon, they came upon a woman standing alone by the road, so they stopped to pick her up, thinking she might need help. As they traveled, the conversation turned to the beauty and power of Mount St. Helens, and the professor made a comment about the return of Jesus. The woman responded that this event could possibly be closer than they thought. Immediately after speaking those words, she disappeared from inside the car.

The four friends were so shocked that they stopped the car along the highway for fear that something had happened to the woman. They looked around, but could not find her. Stopping by the police station in the very next town, they explained the situation to the sergeant on duty. He responded by telling them, “You’re the seventh person driving through town to turn in a report like this in the last twenty-four hours.”⁹

A few New Testament texts hint that some of us—at least children—may have guardian angels.¹⁰ One interesting account concerns the family of a Denver juvenile court judge who died unexpectedly after a brief illness. It was a devastating loss to his wife, Gretchen, and their three children. Gretchen’s chief concern was how she would raise her children without her husband.

One beautiful Colorado Sunday, Gretchen took a picture of the children for their yearly Christmas card. But when she saw the photograph, something seemed very strange. Standing behind the children was “a tall majestic form” with its arms “outstretched as though it was protecting them.” When she went back to the company where the photos were developed, the negative clearly showed the same being. When Gretchen showed the picture to her pastor, he remarked that she now had a picture of the guardian angel that protected her children. Gretchen sensed that she was not raising her children alone.¹¹

Strange stories? Certainly. We must ask ourselves, though, especially in light of the many other supernatural phenomena available to us, if we are simply too close-minded when we hear such accounts. We do want to think carefully about these things and not just accept everything we hear. But we must also remember that if we have good reason to believe at least some of these stories yet constantly ignore or reject them, we may be discarding the very accounts that may indicate God’s presence in the world today.

If we have good reason to believe at least some of these stories yet constantly ignore or reject them, we may be discarding the very accounts that may indicate God’s presence in the world today.

DEMONS

Admittedly, the topic of demons is a very difficult subject. As strange as it may seem in the twenty-first century, a plethora of evidential accounts are available that establish the existence of

demonic elements in our world today. I am personally familiar with many such descriptions, though I refuse to relate stories that might seem to celebrate these phenomena without placing them in a biblical context.

Here's why: in my doubting days, when I came very close to walking away from Christianity, one of the research areas I pursued little by little was the occult. But in my opinion, no area

Many events in the world today are completely unexplained in natural terms.

is more dangerous, even when studied for its error. Scripture tells us to avoid it completely (Leviticus 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10-13; Revelation 21:8).

The problem is that the occult is a very powerful lure. Who doesn't want to look just a little way beyond our current existence? But when it comes to this subject, even a little curiosity can kill the cat.

So rather than getting into too much specific detail here, I will instead recount the research of two scholars whose testimonies are valuable for very different reasons. The first, well-known skeptical scholar and Jesus Seminar member Marcus Borg, questions the reality of Jesus' exorcisms of evil spirits. After relating some typical demonic accounts, Borg cautions us against being too sure about what can or cannot be true regarding the nature of these events. He reports the research of a psychiatrist and his team of professionals who expected to find clinical diagnoses of several such cases but instead found two possession and exorcism cases they "could not account for within a purely psychological framework."¹² Accordingly, Borg warns that we must not think we can necessarily resolve this issue of demonic activity.

The second is missiologist George Otis Jr. After many years

observing firsthand occurrences of demonic-like phenomena, Otis noted that certain regions of the world manifested exceptional idolatry and spiritual oppression. Otis then issued a challenge to anyone who denied such stories or who thought they could be explained in natural terms. He invited anyone who wanted to disprove him to purchase a plane ticket to certain places in the world as he directed, and he would show them many events for which that person would be unable to produce physical explanations. A correspondent with one of the major news organizations took him up on his offer and traveled to a number of locations with Otis. The correspondent discovered that the researcher had been correct.¹³

To be sure, this is a different sort of category than the previous ones. Nonetheless, if true, these stories combined with the others do indicate that, at the very least, many events in the world today are completely unexplained in natural terms. Some include characteristics that seem to point to a supernatural world, even in the twenty-first century.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Here we have a topic that may present more evidence than any other. Near-death experiences (NDEs) do not tell us which worldview or which religion is true. Neither do they tell us that all religions are true. But they do argue quite forcefully for a view of a world that is supernatural in nature. Moreover, NDEs indicate that the world extends far beyond what we normally observe in our day-to-day life.

In this category, we are not so much interested in general reports of people floating down dark tunnels, encountering deceased loved ones, or seeing a wonderful light or other supernatural beings. Rather, we are far more interested in the many

evidenced accounts where individuals who have had a near-death experience report events that can be verified later.

Many such cases could be presented here. I have collected more than one hundred such accounts. One example concerns Katie, a nine-year-old girl who drowned. She had no pulse for nineteen minutes. When she was brought into the emergency room, she had no brain activity. Needless to say, she was given very little chance of surviving. Just three days later, she revived and gave a very thorough account of what had happened during this time. She gave a detailed description of the emergency room, the doctors, and how she was treated.

Even more surprisingly, Katie had been able to look in on her family back in their home. She reported the specific clothes that her family members wore, particular toys her brother and sister had been playing with, details about what her father was doing, and the roast chicken and rice that her mother had made before the family headed back to the hospital! As one of her physicians said, Katie should not have been able to report anything, since her brain was not functioning during this time.¹⁴

Numerous evidential cases can be found in the relevant literature. Some of the details are exceptionally specific, such as the roast chicken and rice dinner that Katie reported. A few of the more evidential cases involve rather incredibly detailed reports by individuals who had been comatose with no heartbeat or measurable brain function, sometimes for long periods of time. On other occasions, individuals who had been blind since birth reported seeing specific details during their NDEs—even though when they awoke, they were still unable to see. Some of the reports even cited events that occurred at a distance away from the dying individual. Other accounts resulted in atheists who immediately changed their views!¹⁵

Beyond the existence of the afterlife to which they point, near-death experiences are significant enough that they cause us to reassess the nature of the world in which we live. Some of the accounts raise other questions that must be addressed, such as why these reported experiences are usually positive.¹⁶ Those who experience NDEs report a supernatural reality that broke into their existence. At least a minimal concept of an afterlife seems to be indicated.

PREPARATION FOR THE GOSPEL

A number of accounts are currently floating around missiologistical circles in which indigenous people seem to have been prepared very specially, even supernaturally, for coming Christian missionaries. Many of the stories are striking enough to deserve consideration as another potential indicator that our world is frequented by the supernatural.

Sometimes timing provides an even more sensitive barometer. For example, one story has been told of a missionary vehicle breaking down in the wilderness, miles away from anywhere except a village where the people had been praying for a spiritual messenger to arrive. In other cases, tribes were eager to receive the Christian gospel message because their folklore told of a supreme God who sent His Son to redeem the human race; they had been waiting for someone to explain this story.

No one has captured this phenomenon better than Don Richardson. In his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, he relates more than two dozen such accounts, some of which are very intriguing. One story concerns the Gedeo people in south-central Ethiopia, who worshiped the benevolent being Magano. One man, Warrasa Wange, who lived in the border town of Dilla, asked Magano to reveal himself to the Gedeo people. Afterward,

Wange began having visions regarding two white-skinned strangers who would set up a shelter under the shade of a large sycamore tree near his town. These people looked strange and so did their shiny-roofed dwellings, which differed significantly from the local grass-topped buildings.

During these visions, Wange was told that these white-skinned men would bring Magano's message to the Gedeo people. In this manner, the people would learn about the true God. Other tribal soothsayers also began to teach the same message.

A few years later, Canadian Albert Brant and his colleague Glen Cain traveled to Ethiopia to begin a mission among the Gedeo people. Though they originally planned to minister in the central cities and towns, political pressures forced them to settle in Dilla, on the outskirts of the area. The two men set up their camp under an old sycamore tree in order to provide shade from a scorching sun. Obviously their arrival was no surprise to the Gedeo people who had been prepared for their message. After three decades of work, two hundred good-sized churches had been established in this region.¹⁷

These last accounts round out the picture a bit more, stretching into areas that other phenomena do not.

CONCLUSION

These six areas seem to indicate that God is still active in the world today. After all, if any of these is an accurate reflection of the world in which we live, it appears that the earth is a much more complicated place than we might have previously believed.

True, these sorts of phenomena may not be God's normal way of operating, and we have to investigate such cases in more detail. But still, what's amazing is that even believers often tend

to view accounts such as these very skeptically. Typically, we think we can explain some of the stories naturally and then dismiss with a shrug even those we cannot explain. Like some of Jesus' listeners in John 12:29, we think we are hearing thunder instead of the voice of God.

We want so much to hear from God, but when the evidence indicates that He has indeed spoken, we ignore His voice. As a result, we dismiss the very data that would answer our questions in wonderful ways, even though we cannot explain away much of it. Then we accuse God of sleeping on the job!

NOTES

Introduction: You've Got Mail

- ¹ David Van Biema, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," *Time*, August 23, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html>.
- ² Job 19:7; 30:20.
- ³ Job 33:14-30.

Chapter 1: Supernatural Activities in Our World

- ¹ Rodney Clapp, "One Who Took Up Her Bed and Walked," *Christianity Today*, December 16, 1983, 16-17.
- ² As in the majority of the stories I relate in this book, many personal details have been changed so that the particular persons involved cannot be identified.
- ³ Mark Buntain with Ron Hembree and Doug Brendel, *Miracle in the Mirror* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1982), especially chapter 18.
- ⁴ Randolph C. Byrd, "Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population," *Southern Medical Journal* 81, no. 7 (July 1988): 826-829; Randolph C. Byrd with John Sherrill, "On a Wing and a Prayer," *Physician* 5 (May/June 1993): 14-16.
- ⁵ For example, see BBC, "New Scientific Study Examines the Power of Prayer," news release, October 15, 2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2003/10_october/15/does_prayer_work.shtml (accessed September 25, 2009).

- ⁶ William S. Harris et al., “A Randomized, Controlled Trial of the Effects of Remote, Intercessory Prayer on Outcomes in Patients Admitted to the Coronary Care Unit,” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 159 (October 25, 1999): 2273-2278.
- ⁷ Adam Marcus, “Lord, Please Heal Whatshisname,” *CompuServe Health and Fitness*, <http://www.healthscout.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Af?ap=34&id=66344> (accessed November 14, 1999).
- ⁸ Billy Graham, *Angels: God’s Secret Agents* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 3.
- ⁹ Hope MacDonald, *When Angels Appear* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 111.
- ¹⁰ Matthew 18:10; Acts 12:15; Hebrews 1:14.
- ¹¹ MacDonald, *When Angels Appear*, 59-60.
- ¹² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, a New Vision: Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 67-71.
- ¹³ George Otis Jr., *The Twilight Labyrinth: Why Does Spiritual Darkness Linger Where It Does?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
- ¹⁴ Most of the details of this account are found in Melvin Morse with Paul Perry, *Closer to the Light: Learning from Children’s Near-Death Experiences* (New York: Random House, 1990), 3-9.
- ¹⁵ For many other evidential accounts, see Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), chapters 7-9.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173-191.
- ¹⁷ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981), 54-56.

Chapter 2: More Love Letters from God

- ¹ For details regarding joy in Lewis’s own life, see his autobiography *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1955), especially pages 7, 16-18, 238.
- ² For a wonderful discussion of joy, see Peter J. Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart’s Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).
- ³ Compare the many relevant texts on this topic, such as Psalm 26:2; 38:1-4, 18; 139:23-24; Proverbs 17:3; 28:13; Jeremiah 17:10; 20:12; Romans 8:5-11, 27; Ephesians 5:1-11; Hebrews 4:12; 1 John 2:15-17; 3:4-10, 21; 5:16-18.
- ⁴ See also Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11-13.
- ⁵ Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 42.

Chapter 3: Our Favorite Verses

- ¹ See Psalm 34:4; 55:16, 22; 91:15; 145:18-19; Isaiah 30:19; Jeremiah 29:12-14; Job 22:27.
- ² See also Joshua 1:5, 9; Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 41:10, 13; Hebrews 13:5.

- ³ For instance, see Psalm 34:17-19; 50:15; 55:16; 91:15; 107:20; 138:7; Isaiah 42:16; 43:2.
- ⁴ See Psalm 34:19; 37:23-24; 138:7; 142:1-5; Lamentations 3:31-33; Micah 7:8-9; Zechariah 13:9.
- ⁵ See also Job 30:20; Psalm 10:1; 13:1-4; 39:12-13; 44:24; 83:1; 89:46; 109:1; 119:82, 84; Isaiah 45:15; 57:11; Lamentations 3:8, 44.
- ⁶ See also Joshua 7:7; Psalm 60:1; 82:2; 89:38-39; Jeremiah 14:8-9; 15:18; Lamentations 5:20-22.
- ⁷ See also 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, 16-17; Hebrews 2:9-10.
- ⁸ For more details than I can mention here, see my volume coauthored with John C. Thomas, *What's Good about Feeling Bad? Finding a Purpose and a Path through Your Pain* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008).
- ⁹ See also Psalm 31:7; 34:18; Isaiah 43:2; 2 Corinthians 4:7-11; Hebrews 13:5-6.
- ¹⁰ For further study on these concepts, see Isaiah 25:8; 26:19; Hosea 13:14; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; 2 Corinthians 4:14; Colossians 3:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13; 1 Peter 1:3-4, 8-9.
- ¹¹ See also Psalm 73:23.
- ¹² Flavius Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1

Chapter 4: Just like Bible Times?

- ¹ Compare Genesis 16:16 with Genesis 17:1.
- ² See also Job 2:10; 10:3, 18-21; 14:19; and 27:2.
- ³ The deaths of Peter and Paul are reported by Clement in Corinthians 5.4-5, which this early church father wrote in approximately AD 97. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that James the brother of Jesus died by stoning (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1).
- ⁴ For further study on this paragraph, see Matthew 6:25-34; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Philippians 4:6-9; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20; 1 Peter 5:7; compare Old Testament references such as Psalm 39:2; 42:5-6, 11; 43:5; 55:4-8, 22; 94:19; Lamentations 3:20-22.
- ⁵ A similar but more relevant situation occurred to Peter during his imprisonment in Acts 12:1-19, since no suffering is mentioned there. This is one of the few such examples in the New Testament.
- ⁶ Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Matthew 14:13; John 11:33. As we said earlier, it is true that Jesus healed many people who were diseased, though this was not always the case (Mark 6:4-6; Matthew 13:58). Even in the former situations, however, many had presumably been suffering for some time, like the woman who was afflicted for twelve years (Mark 5:25). But it is also important to acknowledge that Jesus' public ministry was a very exceptional time.
- ⁷ Some early manuscripts do not contain Luke 22:43-44.

Chapter 5: Conditions for Answered Prayer

- ¹ Hebrews 2:9-11; 5:8.
² Psalm 38:18; Psalm 66:18; Luke 18:9-14; 1 John 1:8-10.
³ See also Exodus 15:26; 23:25; Isaiah 59:1-20.
⁴ John 14:13; 15:16; 16:23-24.
⁵ Romans 1:9-10; 1 Corinthians 4:19; Colossians 1:9; James 4:13-17.
⁶ See the following examples: Isaiah 1:13-20; 57:11-13; 59:1-2; Lamentations 3:40-44.
⁷ Nehemiah 1:6-7; Isaiah 1:1-20; 58:1-4; 59:1-20; Jeremiah 14:10-12.
⁸ Paul Moser, *Why Isn't God More Obvious? Finding the God Who Hides and Seeks* (Norcross, GA: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 2000).
⁹ *Ibid.*, 58 (his emphasis).
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, see especially 4-13, 19-25.
¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30, 36.

Chapter 6: The Place of Spiritual Disciplines

- ¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), xi (emphasis in original).
² *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis in original).
³ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 8.
⁴ Willard is very emphatic on this last point (chapter 10).
⁵ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 3.
⁶ Daniel 9; Mark 6:46-47; John 17; Acts 2:42; 12:12; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Peter 5:7.
⁷ For just a few examples, see Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 119:15-16, 23, 48, 78, 97; Proverbs 2:1-11; 6:20-23; James 1:25.
⁸ Thomas McCormick and Sharon Fish, *Meditation, A Practical Guide to a Spiritual Discipline: Quiet Times for Forty Days* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 13.
⁹ See also Psalm 1:2; 27:4.
¹⁰ See 2 Samuel 12:16, 22; 2 Chronicles 20:1-4; Ezra 8:23; and Esther 4:15-16. Contrast these references with those found in Deuteronomy 9:9; Daniel 10:2-3; Joel 2:12-14; and Zechariah 8:19.
¹¹ Matthew 4:2; 6:16-18; 9:14-15; Luke 2:37; Acts 9:9; 13:2-3; 14:23.
¹² Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 60; see also page 54.
¹³ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 167.
¹⁴ Elmer L. Towns, *Knowing God through Fasting* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2002), 7-8; see also 89, 121.
¹⁵ See especially Luke 5:16; see also Matthew 4:1-11; 14:13, 23-24; 26:36-46; Mark 1:35; 6:31; Luke 6:12; see also Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 97.

¹⁶ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 4; see also 2.

¹⁷ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 11.

Chapter 7: What Do You Tell Yourself?

¹ Of the major secular theorists in this cognitive or cognitive-behavioral school of thought, few scholars have been as influential as Albert Ellis or Aaron Beck.

² Chris Thurman, *The Lies We Believe* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999).

³ William Backus and Marie Chapien, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1980). This volume may be the best choice for personal study on how to find relief for our emotional pain by changing the way we talk to ourselves.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 123.

⁵ Backus and Chapien, *Telling Yourself the Truth*, chapters 1-3, especially as outlined on page 15.

⁶ Thurman, *Lies We Believe*, 22.

⁷ In my book *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Grow Closer to God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), especially chapters 7-8, I have listed over a dozen cognitive and behavioral techniques to counter and then replace our emotional thoughts with new ideas. Although my chief subject in that particular book is Christian doubt, I believe many of the ideas are applicable to this discussion on God's apparent silence.

⁸ In the first two appendices in *Lies We Believe*, Thurman has already done some of the work for us. Common misbeliefs are arranged together, along with lists of several counterstatements or arguments against each one. Thurman's lists can be employed either in themselves or personalized, restated, or adapted in our own written charts. Thurman's many retorts can also serve as verbal responses to ourselves.

⁹ I have dealt at length with these issues, not only in *The Thomas Factor*, but also in *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody, 1990). Both books are available free of charge on my Web site at <http://www.garyhabermas.com>.

¹⁰ See also Psalm 42:11; 43:5; 56:3-4.

¹¹ See also Psalm 57:1-3.

¹² Lamentations 3:20-24; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 1 Peter 5:7; cf. Colossians 3:1-3

Chapter 8: Putting It Back Together

¹ See also Isaiah 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:3-4.

² See also Psalm 89:46.

³ Moser, *Why Isn't God More Obvious?* 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20; cf. pages 4, 11, 20-21, 26, 34, 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48; cf. pages 23, 34, 55.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 26. This book is full of wonderful meditations on the person and nature of God. It is truly a modern classic.

⁷ See also 1 Corinthians 15:53-57.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

1. How do you answer the author's question in this chapter: "Is it possible that God still performs supernaturally in our world today and we are simply missing it?" (page 4)?

2. Can you point to any examples in your own life when God might have revealed Himself supernaturally through one of the ways mentioned in this chapter: healing, answers to prayer, angels, demons, near-death experiences, or preparation for hearing the gospel?

Chapter 2

1. In what ways have you personally experienced God’s love in your life?

2. Think of a time when God showed His love for you through one of the ways listed in this chapter: joy, conviction of sin, a time-out, spiritual gifts, a word from the Holy Spirit, or others. What impact did this experience have on you?

3. Does acknowledging these activities help you better understand God’s presence in your life?

Chapter 3

1. Have you ever clung to scriptural promises as you made a heartfelt plea begging God to intercede in a difficult situation on your behalf, only to hear nothing? If so, how did you respond? How does this chapter help you see God’s “silence” differently in that situation?

2. In what ways have you experienced God's presence in and through the problems of life rather than from them?

Chapter 4

1. Think of your favorite Bible story or character. What problems/suffering/pain was involved? What blessings? How do you see God working in and through that story?

2. What can you learn from the life of Jesus with regard to your own pain and suffering?

Chapter 5

1. In what ways might you be impeding, delaying, or even halting God's answers to your prayers and other needs?

2. Of the conditions for answered prayer that are under your control—living a forgiven life, being obedient to God, praying in Jesus’ name, praying in faith, and praying according to God’s will—which do you find most difficult?

Chapter 6

1. How strong is your own personal relationship with the Lord? In what ways do you nurture that relationship?

2. Have you ever practiced any of the spiritual disciplines listed in this chapter? If so, which do you find most beneficial to your relationship with God? If not, which might you begin as a means of drawing closer to Him?

Chapter 7

1. Have you ever considered that many of your problems have very little to do with God and more to do with you? Does that thought make you angry or motivate you to change?

2. What false beliefs might you have about your current problems? What steps will you take to correct these thoughts?

Chapter 8

1. Given what you've learned in this book, how has your perception of God's activity/silence changed with regard to your own life?

2. How will you use the things you've learned in this book when faced with future trials and painful situations?

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