

Divine Silence and Human Despair

by Horatius Bonar

God's silence can be a terrifying experience, but it can also be a call to repentance and acknowledgment of sin.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 28:6

Topics: "Divine Silence", "Human Despair"

Description

Horatius Bonar explores the themes of divine silence and human despair through the tragic story of King Saul, who, in a moment of desperation, seeks counsel from a medium after God refuses to answer his inquiries. Bonar emphasizes the profound dread of God's silence, which signifies rejection and abandonment, and contrasts it with Saul's despair-driven decision to turn to dark forces for guidance. He warns against the perils of backsliding and the dangers of despair, urging believers to trust in God even when He seems silent. Ultimately, Bonar calls for repentance and reliance on God's mercy, highlighting that even in silence, God seeks to draw us back to Him.

Transcript

"And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and inquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at En-dor." --1 Samuel 28:6,7

THE scene of this sad strange narrative, is the plain of Esdraelon, a place of battle-fields. The Philistines are in the north, at Shunem. Israel at the south, in Gilboa. It is a critical hour for Saul, and for his people. The enemy is in strength; Samuel is dead; Saul's conscience is not at ease; he has provoked the Lord; how shall he face the enemy? "He is afraid, and his heart greatly trembles." He knows not what to do. He does, however, the right thing so far: he consults God. But this inquiry is in vain. "The Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets." Then in his despair he betakes himself to the woman with the familiar spirit.

Thus heaven, earth, and hell are brought before us. A little of the veil is drawn aside, and we learn something of the workings of the invisible as well as of the visible. We notice, (1.) God's silence; (2.) Saul's despair.

I. God's silence. Saul in his terror cries, but there is no answer of any kind. No dream of the night reveals the secrets of the future; no prophet comes instead of Samuel; no voice comes from the high priest. All is

silent. Silent just when utterance was most desired and needed. Saul knocks at the gate of heaven, but it is barred against him; there is no response. That silence, how dreadful! The roar of thunder, the crash of the earthquake, the rush of the hurricane would have been a relief,--though terrible in themselves. But that silence, it is absolutely intolerable. It is the silence of heaven; the silence of Him whose voice was so anxiously expected. We read of the silence of the desert, the silence of midnight, the silence of the church-yard and the grave; but this is something more profound and appalling: the silence of God when appealed to by a sinner in his extremity. There must be a meaning in that silence. It is not the silence (1.) of indifference; (2.) nor of inability to hear; (3.) nor of weakness; (4.) nor of perplexity. He is alive to the case; he can hear; he is able to deliver; he knows what would meet the case. Yet he is silent. It must then be the silence of refusal, of rejection, of displeasure, of abandonment. Terrible silence! Anything would be better than this.

Such is the position in which God represents the sinner at certain times: "When they call I will not answer" (Proverbs 1:28); "I will not be inquired of by you" (Ezekiel 20:31). The foolish virgins going for oil too late; the knocking for admittance too late; the crying Lord, Lord, too late; the calling to the rocks and hills in the great day. The only answer is silence! Oh, terrible silence for the sinner! He would not call when he would have

been heard, and now it is too late! God called on him during his lifetime, but he would not hear. Now he calls, but God keeps silence. Yet even this awful silence will be broken. God will speak; He will speak from the throne. Depart, ye cursed, will be the breaking of the silence, and the answer to the rebel's cries!

II. Saul's despair. Danger presses; the Philistines are mustering; the crisis has come. Yet there is no answer. What will he do? There were three courses open to him: (1.) he might sit down in quiet hopelessness, and let the evil come; or (2.) he might, in faith and penitent submission, commit the whole matter to God, even amid this awful silence: or (3.) he might betake himself to hell for counsel since heaven was deaf. He chooses the last! In his despair he goes to the enemy of that God who was refusing to answer; he turns to the wizards whom he had himself put away; he turns from the living to the dead; he consults with hell. It must have been a dreadful day of suspense for Saul; a dreadful night, when having formed the fatal purpose, he sets out across the hill to Endor. What his thoughts and feelings were in that awful hour we know not. They must have been of the wildest and gloomiest kind. "God has cast me off, I will betake myself to Satan; heaven's door is shut, I will see if hell's be open." And when crossing the hill, and approaching the village of the enchantress, he must have felt, Now I am going on an errand to Satan; I am going to try if he can do for me what God will not." Oh terrible journey! Fit winding up to that silence and suspense! He is determined to get a glimpse of the future, though his prophet be the evil one himself. The past is dark; the present is gloomy; what is the future to be? God will not tell him. Will Satan? Thus he rushes on in despair;--he the king of Israel, the friend of Samuel, the conqueror of Israel's enemies,--the forty years' monarch and warrior, who has never trembled before an enemy,--he, the tall, stately Benjamite. Thus, in melancholy madness, he moves in that dark midnight, over the heights that overlooked his own camp and that of his foes. What a picture! Nothing in Milton half so grand or sad,--hardly anything out of hell half so terrible,--as this man of war, and might, and commanding stature, striding on over these hills to the gate of the pit. His despair had blinded him; he had not learned to say with one who was a greater sufferer than himself, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." He despaired because God was silent. Yet the silence was meant to lead him to repentance and acknowledgment of sin. It was God's last appeal to his conscience. Let us learn,

1. The perils of backsliding. Here is one who once bid fair, whom God favoured and honoured; the friend of Samuel, turning his back on God.
2. The terribleness of the silence of God. It means something dreadful: it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God; to cry and get no answer; to find no light!
3. The evils of despair. No sinner here ought to despair. His case may be sad; God's silence long and deep; his sins many; yet on no account let him turn his back on God; rather let him fling himself into His arms. This would be blessed despair.

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