

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Where are you God? Can't you see that Christians are being rounded up and tortured and killed in Syria and Iraq? Where are you God? We've done everything we can do to love and care for our son, but now he's 18 and he's moved out and abusing drugs, and he won't even talk to us anymore. Where are you God? I've gone to church since I was a child. I did everything I could to live like you wanted me to, and now you've allowed me to be the victim of sexual abuse. Where are you God? I've worked faithfully – planned carefully I've truly tried to serve you, no I'm not perfect, but you know my heart God and now I've lost my job. Where are you God? I try to be a Christian leader and when I try to lead in a way that I truly believe will bless your people, I'm always second guessed. Where are you God – I love my child so much and I've raised my child to know you and now the doctor says it's impossible to say if he will be alive in 2 years. God, where are you? I've served faithfully as a pastor striving to help your people grow with sermons and bible classes and counseling, still divorce ravages my flock, fewer and fewer people really make worship a priority every week, and many are as reluctant to part with any meaningful portion of their wealth to serve you. Where are you God, So many leaders in our society are corrupt. The Christian faith is mocked and marginalized and ridiculed. As a Christian, to be honest, I just feel like a fool sometimes. I feel all alone sometimes. God where is the evidence that you exist – that you care? I'm just not seeing it!

“Where are you God?” That's the question that people in Israel asked from the time of Moses even until the time of the Apostle Paul 4,000 years later. Why? Many felt abandoned by God when a foreign power would invade and they made them live as servants. Many felt abandoned when famine and natural disaster came. Think of Naomi, Ruth's Mother in Law, who had to move to a foreign country and still her husband and sons died. Many felt abandoned because their political leaders were corrupt. Think of Naboth – killed by the king just so the king could have another piece of property. Even those faithful with a close relationship with God had their questions. Why would God allow his temple to be destroyed as happened when the Babylonians conquered Israel in 586? Why would he let his spokesmen be murdered as happened again and again throughout history from Isaiah to the apostle Paul? The prophet Elijah was so dejected that he went into the desert and asked God to take his life, convinced that there were no other believers left. Where was the proof? Where was the power? Where was the evidence that God cared, that God was really God?

The words before us today are from the written by Paul to the Christians at Rome. They are an answer to a question raised by the gentile believers in Rome. They wondered if God had abandoned the Jewish people since now the message of Jesus was being preached to Gentile people and so many Jewish people had rejected it. In their questions Paul sees an opportunity not just to clear up the issue regarding his fellow Jews, but to answer the deeper question about the evidence of God's love and power in the lives of all believers Jew and Gentile.

**11 I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: 3 “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”[e]? 4 And what was God's answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”[f] 5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6 And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.**

Had God abandoned the Jewish people? Had he given up on them? No. But note just how Paul answers the question. He uses the example of Elijah. Why is that important? Because in God's answer to Elijah God points to the evidence of His power and care and love that was right under their noses. Not included in these verses are the details of what happened before God spoke to Elijah. He had send a wind that actually tore apart rocks, followed by a fierce earthquake, and then by a fire. But he didn't appear in any of those. He followed them by speaking to Elijah in still small voice – we might say a whisper. And in his answer to Elijah's concern that he was all alone and might as well die, God shares with him the evidence of his power and love. Not the fire, not the wind, not the earthquake. No, the evidence of his power and love are the people that he called to faith and preserved in Faith, the “remnant chosen by grace.”

So many in Israel – even God's faithful were looking for the wrong evidence that God was loving and powerful. They looked for power and influence. They looked for a society becoming more and more moral. They looked for the destruction of their political or geographic or religious enemies. They looked for an end to being mocked and persecuted. But God in essence says – the evidence is right under your noses. In spite of all these hardships and injustices and seemingly thankless thousands, the message of forgiveness and eternal life through God's messiah is still changing hearts. My kingdom still grows. My sheep remain. That's an even bigger miracle than walking on water, or falling the walls of Jericho!

That wasn't just true during Elijah's day. The whole narrative of the Bible shows us the same picture again and again. Noah – remains faithful in spite of the rest of human kind rejecting God. God preserves Noah and his family. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, treated unjustly by his captors. Still God preserves his faith and uses him to witness to thousands of others. Those living during the times of the judges saw famine, injustice and violence and idol worship prevail, still God touched people like Boaz and Ruth and Naomi. The prophets during the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah were often executed, still God sent his message out and the remnant remained faithful. During the days of Jesus, the priests and the religious teachers were corrupt. So many were looking for God to send a general – not a Savior, but still God preserved his remnant: people like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, the faithful group of women who wanted to prepare his body for the tomb. And now as Paul addresses the Romans, a faithful minority of Christians surrounded by a corrupt society and dealing with struggles within their congregations. He wants them to understand that this faithful remnant meeting week after week was the evidence right under their noses that was loving and powerful. They weren't saved because they were better than the Jewish people. They shouldn't now be looking for God to bring them to political prominence and power; they shouldn't expect an end to difficulty and trial, from outside of their congregation or from within. Paul simply wanted them to look at what God had done right under their noses – turned pagans into heaven bound Christians – and are thankful for God's grace. Just take a minute to take it in and say "Wow!"

It's important to be looking to the correct evidence – wouldn't you agree? What happens when you look for the wrong evidence, you're going to reach the wrong conclusions. Imagine a group of archeologists studying a battle field anticipating that it is from civil war times. As they don't find any civil war uniforms, so they conclude it wasn't a civil war battle, along the way they picked up countless weapons and bullet fragments but regarded them as mere curiosities. Years later another group stumbled across their findings and within minutes concluded that it was a civil war battle based on the weapons and munitions. Looking for the wrong evidence wrong conclusion. That's what had happened with many of the Jewish people; that are what Paul was warning against as he wrote the Roman Christians. Don't ignore the evidence under your nose. Don't be willfully blind.

So, do we ever find ourselves looking for the wrong evidence when it comes to our – "Where are you God?" Questions? How do we react to the removal of "In God we trust" from buildings or the removal of crosses from public monuments? How do we react when we hear about the murder of Christians in Syria by ISIS. Is there a voice inside that says, "God where are you?" How do we react when our college student body and professors level those powerful phrases, "You are intolerant?" "You are homophobic" "You are sexist!" "You are judgmental!" Is there that thought in our mind that says – "If God is really God, why does everyone else believe differently? How do we react when a child strays from the faith? How do we react when our service to Christ only seems to produce hardship? How do we react when we feel hurt by those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ? Isn't there that voice that wants to say, "Why bother if this is the thanks I get." "Why don't you help others to see the value of my work in your kingdom?" "God where are you?" "Where is your power and love?" It's then that God gently reminds us as he did with Elijah, like Paul did with the Corinthians to look right under our noses. And we can do that this morning. Look around. That family in front of you, the person behind you, the woman playing organ, the usher gathering the offering. These are evidence of God's love and power. They are here not because they are better than anyone else. They aren't here because they have perfect families. They aren't here because God has given them perfect health, perfect family, perfect job. They are here because God loved them, and through his words and through baptism he planted trust in his son Jesus for forgiveness and a place in heaven. This remnant is the evidence of God's love and power. Now maybe that doesn't drop any jaws at first.

A faithful remnant doesn't guarantee recovery from heath. A faithful remnant doesn't necessarily mean my family life will get easier. A faithful remnant doesn't get my bills paid. A faithful remnant doesn't necessarily mean a church without problems, or a church where all the bills are easily paid. A faithful remnant doesn't mean an end to people who marginalize me or mock me, which makes it so easy to seek after those things that do produce health and wealth and power and popularity. But to what end? Our bodies will wear out; there will come a point for each of us when all our money is worthless to help us. All of our jobs will one day come to an end. And our destination after death is not determined by our popularity while we were here. The only thing that has a lasting effect is being part of the remnant. Knowing and trusting in God's grace – the words and works of Jesus. They secure us a mansion in heaven when we die – and a life where those daily troubles and traumas are gone.

I'd guess that all of us are dealing with one or another disappointment in life right now. That's just how life is. But at those moments when those hurts cause us to raise those questions "Where is God, where is the proof that he loves me and cares about me." Don't look for miracles that produce health and wealth and power. Look at the miracles right under your noses. A mother a father, a child, a pastor, a teacher, all of your brothers and sisters in Christ – not because they are perfect, but because God chose sinners like them, and like you and me to be his sons and daughters. AMEN.