

THE INSCRUTABILITY OF GOD

by Troy Caldwell, M.D.

I'm very thankful and honored to be a part of people's journeys. To be told the stories of life and help a soul find God and His meaning within its circumstances is an incredible privilege. God's hand often shrouds Himself in mystery. We often wonder "Why are His ways so inscrutable? Why are they so often hidden? Why do souls experience such difficulty finding God amidst their pain and travail?" Even Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?" The psalmist said, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" Yet a part of us knows He is not gone. The same psalm (10) ends, "You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more." We sorely miss, however, the glowing radiance of God's joy and peace when our soul is arid.

When I was eighteen I had a peculiar experience. I was traveling with a preaching and singing group. Prior to our events we would often have inspired times of prayer as we asked God to take control of our hearts and the services we were about to perform. God would seem intensely present, and we could then go forth in confidence that He was going to do His work. On one particular occasion, the other members of the group were experiencing their usual fervor in their seeking God. I, on the other hand, was experiencing a profound and perplexing dryness. I normally felt at least a gentle connection to His loving presence in everyday life and prayer, but at this time, my words that usually traveled to the heart of God went forth a mere foot above my head and fell lifelessly to the dust on the floor. My friends' prayers for me in no way helped. Where was God? Where had He gone? I left that weekend totally in the desert. My mind knew that God was faithful, but my perception of Him was utterly bereft.

On returning to my home city, I attended a series of nightly meetings held at my friend's church. The speaker was unusually good, but he said nothing that in any way altered my arid soul. One evening, however, about midway through the sermon, unrelated to the topic of the sermon, I suddenly heard an unmistakable voice in my intuition. "Troy," it said, "I want you to be baptized again."

Not hearing from God that clearly very often, I replied perplexed, "Well, Lord, why do you want me to go up and just get wet again?" I had been baptized before my soul's true conversion, but it had never seemed important to carry out a subsequent baptism before now. At this moment, however, it seemed of major import to God. His next comment clarified much for me.

"Troy, I don't want you to just go up and get wet again. I want baptism this time to be a symbol to the world and to you that you are going to live your life for Me one hundred percent."

At that moment I knew what the importance of the moment was. On reflection, I also knew why the dryness had preceded it. It was the barrenness that God used to underscore my need for Him. It also made a clear contrast for me between my God-free desert consciousness and the bold inner Voice imbued with power and grace. Lest I be confused by

God's more typical subtlety, the three day dryness created a disparity with God's hidden dryness and His presence in fullness. I definitely wanted the presence in fullness. There was no question by the end of those three dry days.

Dryness, therefore at that time was God's teaching tool for me. Michael Card captures this method of God in his refrain to "Could it Be."

Could it be you make your presence known so often by your absence?
Could it be that questions tell us more than answers ever do? Could it be that you would really rather die than ever live without us?
Could it be the only answer that means anything is You?

The spiritual life has traditionally been divided into three major phases: the Purgative Way, the Illuminative Way, and the Unitive Way. The wilderness is the great metaphor used to describe the journey in the Purgative Way. Dryness seems to be God's favorite tool during that phase. During the Illuminative Way, the glory of God's presence is manifested to the soul in great profusion. A desire for ever-deepening union is enkindled and reinforced during this wonderful time. Yet at the same time, there is an existential realization of the soul's absolute poverty and helplessness in the face of the consuming desire that grows for God's presence in fullness. Each new experience of the presence of God makes the individual yearn more deeply for total transformation in Christ. At the same time, one is convinced that only the Holy Spirit can provide the new heart that is necessary for full union with God.

After all of this, God seems to return to His tools of the desert. The Dark Night of the Soul which follows the Illuminative Way can be a grueling time of waiting for the Spirit to do Its transforming work. Out of the Dark Night grows an ecstatic prayer symbolized by betrothal. The person experiences God's promise of transformation as he or she is drawn out of their self and carried into the embrace of Divine Love. Although the ecstatic prayer of betrothal is transitory, the individual comes to know through it that it is indeed Christ who is the deepest reality at the center of one's being and activity.

Yet just as marriage is not forever filled with betrothal joys, the Unitive Way settles down to an alternation of the presence and absence of the Beloved that one has already known in the purgative and illuminative ways. The purifying work of the Holy Spirit is indeed painful at times, and during the pain, God seems at His enigmatic, inscrutable best. Yet through this ebb and flow, patience and peaceful waiting grow. One now knows experientially that God is faithful and will fulfill the promise through the exchange of our hearts for His and activate fully within us, the mind of Christ.

Now, this teaching today will hardly rescue you from the experience of God's inscrutability. Yet, perhaps it can shed some light on some of the patterns and perplexities you face when you ask yourself, "What the heck is God up to?" Asking this question and coming to some peaceful answer is one of the tasks of the spiritual direction experience. In doing this, I am blessed. My special thanks to some of you for the opportunity of sharing the experience with you.

Blessings to you,

Troy Caldwell