

Divine absence and the light inaccessible

## God isn't just hidden. God *hides*. Why?

by [Fleming Rutledge](#) in the [September 12, 2018](#) issue



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Some *Downton Abbey* fans may have noticed when Dame Maggie Smith quoted from the Church of England hymnal. With Lady Violet's trademark grandeur, she said, "God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." She quoted it ironically, but the original text is anything but ironic. William Cowper, the 18th-century Englishman who wrote it, suffered from suicidal depression for most of his life. He knew a thing or two about the mysterious and often impenetrable ways of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself " (Isa. 45:15). This verse has had a lot of attention over the centuries. Throughout Christian history, the question has always been asked: "When terrible things happen, where is God?" This question becomes more urgent and more agonizing when something happens to children. When the news of the massacre at the Newtown, Connecticut, elementary school came through, there wasn't, or shouldn't have been, a Christian

believer in this country who didn't ask, "Where was God? Why does God permit these atrocities?"

This is the question that Christian faith must ask. It's a very shallow faith if it does not ask. Many people have been conditioned not to ask these kinds of questions—as though they were disrespectful, intrusive, or dangerous. Some worry that asking such a question is like opening a door to not believing in God at all. But the people of the Bible *do* ask, directly and bluntly. The questions are asked over and over again in the Psalms. The wonderful little book of the prophet Habakkuk asks it this way: "Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why are you silent when the wicked man swallows up the one more righteous than he?" (Hab. 1:2, 13).

The silence of God, the absence of God, is a major theme of scripture and a common struggle in the Christian life. Habakkuk's questions are part of every believer's struggle for faith. I suspect that many seasoned churchgoers have had occasion to ask why God so often seems to be absent. Anyone who has not asked this question hasn't been fully tested yet.

Isaiah says: "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself" or "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." Why is the King James Version better? Because when we say "thyself," we are still addressing God in the second person. When we say "himself," we are moving into the third person, distancing ourselves. "Truly, you are a God who hides *yourself*" sounds a bit flip to me. So I'm sticking with the King James. "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself."

Or as the hymn by Walter Chalmers Smith says:

Immortal, invisible God only wise  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most gracious, most glorious, the ancient of days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

The idea that God lives in "light inaccessible" is an ancient one. When Moses came down from speaking with God on Mount Sinai, his face reflected God's light so brightly that he had to wear a veil over it so as not to blind the people (Exod. 34:29-35). When Moses asked God to show him his glory (*shekinah*), God placed him in a cleft in a rock and covered him with his hand to protect him from seeing the glory directly (Exod. 33:21-23). Hymns from older times refer to these biblical

stories in a way that assumes the congregation will know them and make them their own. One hymn has these words: “He shelters me [me! you!] in the cleft of the rock and covers me there with his hand.” It’s a tender personalization of the story about Moses, but today’s average churchgoers may not recognize the connection. Smith’s hymn makes a biblical reference to God as “ancient of days.” That phrase comes from God’s appearance in Daniel 7.

God dwells in inaccessible light—light that we can’t directly look at. It’s uncreated light that emanates from God’s very being. This light was already there before God created the light that we see—“In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” This also is a basic biblical idea. God isn’t a product of human imagination, a human wish raised to the nth power, or a projection of human hopes and fears. God is outside and beyond our ideas of God, so we can’t see God from a human point of view at all. Put another way: God is invisible not only to our eyes; God is also invisible to our imaginations. But how then do we know who God is? How do we even know if there is a God?

“Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.” The name for this idea in Latin is *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. But that doesn’t quite get at what Isaiah is saying, because God is not just hidden on general principles. If God is hidden, it is because he hides himself. He *means* to be hidden. It is God’s nature to be out of the reach of our senses. There is a distance between God and ourselves that cannot be bridged from our side.

One of the main reasons we need to know the Old Testament intimately is that the God revealed in it—the God who is the father of Jesus Christ—is huge and elusive. One of the great biblical theologians of the past century, Samuel Terrien, wrote a book called *The Elusive Presence* in which he argued that the most important unifying factor in the Old Testament witness is God’s absence-in-presence (or presence-in-absence). Similarly, Blaise Pascal wrote: “A religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true . . . and a religion which does not offer the reason [for this hiddenness] is not illuminating.” Let us try very hard, then, to be *illuminating*—that is, to shed God’s illumination into the darkness of this world.

The saying of Isaiah—God hides himself—is remarkably set into a passage of rapturous praise of God’s mighty deeds of salvation for his people. It’s the same with the beloved hymn: God is hidden in light inaccessible, and yet he is most gracious, most glorious, ancient of days, almighty, victorious. These two statements seem to

cancel one another out. How do we know that God is gracious and almighty and so forth if God is hidden and inaccessible?

The only way to respond to questions like these is to learn what God has told us about himself—that is, to immerse ourselves in the holy scriptures. This may seem obvious, but one of the most familiar laments I hear from seminary professors is that many of the students who come to study for the ministry arrive without knowing anything about the Bible. One hopes they know something by the time they graduate, but there isn't any substitute for being immersed in the Bible from earliest childhood. And one way to become immersed is to know lots of traditional hymns—including the full text of Cowper's poem. His life was a torment to him in many ways. And yet he had known the love of God and would not give up his hold upon it.

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There are two different ways of asking "Where is God? Why does God hide himself?"

One way is scornful, hostile, and truly *God-less*, like the abuse and mockery hurled at Jesus on the cross: "He trusted in God to deliver him, so let God deliver him!" The people who yelled that insult thought they knew who God was and what God would and would not do (Matt. 27:43; also Ps. 22:8).

But the other way of asking, like Cowper's way, comes from deep faith. It comes from having at least a partial knowledge of God and of the darkness that opposes God. Anyone who has received even a tiny glimpse of the majesty, holiness, and righteousness of God will have an increased sense of the darkness, disorder, and malevolence that's loose in the world. These forces would swallow us up had not God set in motion his great plan to reclaim his creation. This is what Isaiah

celebrates above all.

The verse “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself” is curiously placed: it comes in the midst of a passage of ecstatic praise. In fact, almost all of Isaiah 40–55 is ecstatic. It’s the longest, most sustained hymn of praise to God’s power and purposes in the whole Bible. Yet the conditions in which those chapters were written were hopeless by any ordinary standards. The people of God had been dragged off to Babylon, where the colossal Mesopotamian gods dominated everything. They were forced to ponder the fact that their God had apparently abandoned them, along with his promises to them. When we remember that, it makes Isaiah’s prophetic work seem truly miraculous.

Isaiah writes that God is not dependent upon circumstances. God creates his own circumstances. God is not located simply within Israel. His power and promises encompass the entire created order. The chapter continues, mocking the gods of Babylon:

“They . . . carry about their wooden idols,  
and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. . . .

There is no other god besides me,  
a righteous God and a Savior. . . .

Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!

For I am God, and there is no other. . . .

From my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
a word that shall not return:

“To me every knee shall bow,  
every tongue shall swear.” (Isa. 45:20–23)

If we understand the context of this—a minuscule band of captive Hebrews dwarfed by the mighty empire of Mesopotamia—we can begin to grasp the audacity of the prophet of the exile. In Isaiah’s unexcelled proclamation, we look ahead to the proclamations of the apostle Paul, who picked up the universal theme: “At the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11).

It was widely noted, and noted with skepticism and even disdain by some, that every one of the funerals for the children of Sandy Hook Elementary School was held in a house of worship. This does not answer the question of why God did not stop the shooter, that inexplicably damaged and lost young man, when he opened fire at the school. We do not know why God appeared to be absent. What we do know is that God was present in this way: he was, and is still, present in the coming together of those who grieve with the families, to bring small lights into the blackness of their grief. They were not alone. Something or Someone drew the bereaved families deeper into the midst of the communities that continue to trust God even when he has hidden himself. Incomprehensible as it may seem, God is alive in the faith of his people wherever they are and in whatever condition.

The fact that God hides himself in the midst of revealing himself is paradoxically a testimony to his reality. Presence-in-absence is the theme of his self-disclosure. God isn't hidden because we are too stupid to find him, or too lazy, or not "spiritual" enough. He hides himself for his own reasons, and he reveals himself for his own reasons. If that were not so, God would not be God; God would be nothing more than a projection of our own religious ideas and wishes.

The Lord hides himself from us because *he is God*, and God reveals himself to us because *God is love* (1 John 4:8). Does that make sense? Probably not—but sometimes Christians must be content with theological paradox. To know God in his Son Jesus Christ is to know that he is unconditionally love unto the last drop of God's own blood. In the cross and resurrection of his Son, God has given us everything that we need to live with alongside the terrors of his seeming absence.

Many churches do not use the phrase "he descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed, but for many who have pondered its meaning, it is a central affirmation. In his death on the cross, Jesus descended into the hell of the absence of God. That's what the cry of dereliction on the cross means. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He experienced the absence of God his Father as no one else ever has, not even in the greatest extremity, because he experienced it for all of us. The Son of God underwent the opposite course: he came out from the light and went into the darkness . . . to be himself the light in our darkness.

Toward the end of World War II, during the liberation of Europe, Allied troops found a crudely written inscription on the walls of a basement in Koln, Germany, by someone who was hiding from the Nazi Gestapo. Here's what it said:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.  
I believe in love even when feeling it not.  
I believe in God even when God is silent.

The silence of God descended upon the cross on Good Friday—and on the morning of the third day the sun rose upon the empty tomb. As another writer reminds us: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deut. 29:29).

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