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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Now You See me, Now You Don't**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we just again, we thank you and we praise you for your goodness. We just are amazed at what you have done for us and the life that you have laid down for us and the gifts that you have given us including your word. We're at that part of our service where we open up your word. And Lord, I plead first of all for the presence of your Holy Spirit, for without your spirit, this word will not make sense to us. And so I pray you would accompany us by your spirit, that you would give us the ability to open up your word and that it would again be of lasting value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

I once had a conversation with a dear friend who was not walking with the Lord at all and we had just many different aspects that had to do with the gospel, and I had answers to most of his objections but there was one objection that he had that I had a hard time answering. I told him what God says in Matthew 7, he says that all who seek shall find. And he looked me right in the eye and he said, "You don't think that I've asked Christ into my

life dozens of times?" And then he looked right at me and he said, "You know what I got for it? A big fat zero. Nada. Nothing." So what do you say to that? I mean I did say the first thing that came to my mind and I still believe it was a legitimate answer, I said, "You know," I said, "God's time frame and yours are not necessarily the same." But I don't know how helpful that was. And so I've been thinking a lot about these issues and I want to spend some time in the next few messages exploring some answers to that question because I know it applies not just to my friend's dilemma but to many, many Christians as well.

How many of you have said to yourself or to someone else, "I cry out to God many, many times, and I get nothing back"? I've entitled this series "Now you see me, now you don't" because it seems to me to be one of the most prevalent complaints not just of my friend, but of all of God's people. God often times seems more absent than present, and the ability to connect with God on a tangible level seems something reserved only for a few selected saints.

Now in some ways I feel poorly equipped to tackle this subject because of the way that I in particular came to Christ. I had what you might call a road to Damascus conversion. You know, Paul who was named Saul at that time was not knocked off his horse by God

while he was on the road to Damascus, and Acts 9 describes it. It says: *But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* Well the light was so blinding that it took Paul's sight completely away and Christ goes on to direct Ananias -- Saul to Ananias to pray and so Ananias prays for Saul and the scales drop from his eyes and he knows from that moment on that he's going to serve the living Christ. I mean his life turns 180 degrees from that moment forward and he goes from being a persecutor of the church to one of its greatest saints.

Well, my conversion was not nearly as dramatic, but for me it was clearly spectacular. I mean I've given my testimony before so I want to give you a short version of why in some ways I have it easier than many when it comes to sensing the presence of God. Just to give you some background, this was 40-some-odd years ago, Janice and I were living in Vermont, and I got accepted to grad school in San Francisco and so we wound up driving cross-country and we stayed at the home of a friend of mine who lived in Sault

Ste. Marie, Michigan. He and I had become good friends when I was at Michigan State and I was anxious to reconnect with him because in the years since I had seen him, he had become a Christian. And he knew that I had no use for Christians. I mean I had my older brother who I was close to become a Christian, as far as I was concerned, he had turned into a religious nut case, and I have no use for Christianity at all. So I was anxious to reconnect with my friend to find out what had happened to him and to hopefully talk him out of this newfound faith that he had. Well, long story short, my friend had not only become born again but his entire family had become born again and his house wasn't just a house, it was a house church. Janice and I spent three days there while I tried to talk my friend out of his faith and he tried to talk me into it, and after three days we were at a standstill. And so my friend's dad challenged me, he said, "Well, why don't you ask God to show you if he's real?" I said, "Well, it's kind of obvious because I don't believe that he's real." So he said, "Well, okay," he said, "you claim to be an honest pursuer of the truth, why don't you do this," he said, "why don't you just take a moment, go in that room by yourself, and ask God to show you if he's real." So that kind of appealed to me because he said if nothing happens, then you can just walk away, say well, I gave it my best shot. And so I did that, and I went into a room and I prayed this bizarre prayer and I said, "God, and there is no God, if you're up there,

and you're not -- " I went through this whole kind of thing, and I said, "If you're real, show me." Five, four, three -- okay, you're not real. And so I walked out of the room very confident that I had done my duty and this was over and it was done and I was feeling very confident about that. And later that night they were having a church service and so the father said, you know, we would really love you all to come to the church service and I thought oh, gee whiz, this is -- you know, these guys are religious, I'm not religious, I don't -- I don't care for this stuff, you know, so we tried every way we could to get out of it and they just said, "We just think you need to be here." So I went and they had their meeting, they had their -- they sang their hymns, they prayed their prayers, it was -- it was nice, it was whatever, you know, so I mean I was a guest, I didn't want to -- I didn't want to impose on the fact that I was their guest, and so they prayed and then they stopped. And then there was a certain woman in the congregation who said we just -- I just very strongly, we need to keep praying. So they cranked it right back up again and they started praying, and they started singing and so they did this three times. But by the third time I'm getting really annoyed. And I want to give you an idea of just how my mind was at this point. I wanted nothing to do with this religion stuff at all. I'd done my duty, I prayed, I asked God to show me, he hadn't showed me, and so I'm stuck in a prayer meeting with these religious folks and I just want it to be

over. And so they're praying and as they're praying, I was sitting in a room, and I still remember it vividly, it had a parquet floor and I started blocking the floor into grids and counting how many nails there were in each square foot section just so I could look respectful by -- I was looking down and I was just incredibly bored. So as I'm doing that, suddenly from somewhere God starts to speak to me. And he starts speaking to me in a way that at first I'm thinking, well, this must be something buried in my subconscious, my id or my superego has some desire to manufacture some God thing and it gets stronger and stronger, and then it starts growing logarithmically to the point where God's not just speaking, he's shouting. Of course there's nothing audible at all taking place here. And then I'm starting to think at some point if this keeps getting stronger, I'm not going to be able to stay silent, I'm going to wind up screaming. And then two minutes later I'm thinking to myself, I'm not going to scream, I'm going to die, because that's how strong this was. And it was God specifically saying to me, "I am God. This is my answer to your prayer. Deal with it." And so that happened in May of 1973. It was the most profound experience I've ever had in my life, and like Paul, it was a life-changing experience, and like Paul, my life turned 180 degrees and I've since learned that that experience is relatively rare. And I don't say this at all to my credit, I mean, God literally spoke to me. He didn't speak audibly but he communicated

to me just as if he had. And I believe he did so because I believe he gives everybody exactly what they need and I was so pigheaded and so ego-driven that this was exactly what I needed. And so I came out of that experience just -- I just assumed that this is the way you got saved. I never forgot, one of the first people that I ever shared the gospel with was a good friend of mine from back east. He had just moved out to San Francisco and I was explaining to him my experience, I was giving him the gospel and he was kind of reiterating it back to me and he said, okay, okay, let me get this straight. You pray to God to show himself to you and then you wait and then you get a lightening bolt in your belly button and the next thing you know you believe in God? And I said, "That's the way it works, yup, yup." 'Cause that's the way I thought it worked, I mean, that's -- I assumed my experience was normative for everyone. Obviously it was not. And it's about 44 years since that day and I've had many times during those 44 years when I wondered if God was really there. I mean there's been times I'm sure like you where I've cried out and the heavens were absolutely silent. But when that happens, all I have to do is go back to that time, to that night, and I know without a doubt that something spectacularly supernatural took place in my life. But I also know that for many, many people, coming to faith is nothing like that. That when it comes to testimony time, they lament the fact that their story doesn't have this dramatic impact that some other

testimonies have and they lament the fact that they don't have something spectacular to look back on. Maybe they were raised in a Christian family and to them being born again is just a natural progression of the training they'd received since being a child and they never got the lightening bolt in the belly button experience. Well, how you got here is not nearly as important as being here in the first place and yet there's one thing that seems to mark the lives of many Christians regardless of their testimony, it is that nagging sense that the God that they worship is for one reason or another absent.

You know, when I first went to San Francisco, I was 24 years old, and we became part of a church that consisted of people who were mostly my age and older, really, really old people. And I tried to understand their faith walk. We were only the new people, and we got away with murder in the stuff that we did because they were so terrified that the only young people they'd ever seen would leave. So I tried to understand their faith walk and incorporate it into my own and the one thing that I never quite got, one thing that I never quite understood was their sense of the presence of God. I would listen to these dear Christians and they would speak about their relationship with God as if he was right there in the room speaking with them constantly. And I mentioned this before, there was a hymn that so many of these dear folks loved back then that

completely stymied me. It says: I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and then the writer goes on to describe this experience he has with God in the garden. And she says: And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known. I can't tell you how much that song used to bother me. And it bothered me because I pictured myself coming into that garden alone crying out to God and still being overwhelmingly aware that I'm still in the garden and I'm still alone. God wasn't walking with me and God wasn't talking to me, so clearly something's wrong with me. I honestly believe that if you worked hard enough in your relationship with God you'd have the sense of his presence as real and as personal and as intense as that hymnist put it. I no longer believe that to be the case. And it has nothing to do with any failure whatsoever on God's part. It has far more to do with the failure on my part to understand the nature of our relationship with God. You know, we always tend to under promise and over deliver no matter what it is we are extolling and I just felt that for many years in my Christian evangelical community we overpromised and under delivered when it came to explaining the dynamics of my personal relationship with Christ. And it wasn't until many years later that I realized that what I was after in this and what God was after were two very different things. I was looking for some kind of combination of

Casper the Friendly Ghost and Superman, you know, somebody who would possess super powers and would be at my side day in day out telling me do this, do this, don't do this, don't do this, go there, don't go there. I believe that I have a relationship with God and I believe that he communicates with me day in and day out, but I want to be very careful about how I describe how that relationship plays itself out so as not to give you the impression like I was unintentionally given that if I just hit the right combination of dedication and prayer that I would have this breakthrough relationship where God would be walking with me and talking with me not only in the garden but everywhere I went.

So this morning I want to look at just what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I mean we throw that phrase around all the time, but what does it mean? I mean does Christ walk with you and talk with you audibly or are you like I was, struggling to understand just what a personal relationship means. And if you're struggling, believe me you are not alone. Let me just read you some quotes from someone who deeply suffered from a perception of God's absence. This is what she wrote. She said: "I call, I cling, I want -- and there is no One to answer. Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven -- there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul -- love -- the word -- it brings

nothing. I am told God loves me -- and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul." You know who wrote that? That was Mother Teresa. I mean you may have some questions about her theology but I don't think anyone ever doubted her dedication and determination to put into action God's call for laying down your life for these least of Christ's brethren. She did it specifically as she says by her own words out of her commitment to Christ and the relationship that she had with Christ, and yet these writings came out after her death. She went on to say this: "They say people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God. In my soul I feel just this terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing. Heaven from every side is closed." People were shocked. They couldn't believe these words. I mean, when these were released they were just astounded. Folks thought if anyone had a wonderful relationship with God, it had to be Mother Teresa. The Catholic church has just made her a saint. Now did her writings prove her to be some kind of fraud or phony who had just covered up an empty non relationship to God or is what Mother Teresa wrote not uncommon for even precious saints to sometimes feel? I think the answer is not the former but the latter. You see, I believe God's perceived absence is normative, and I believe it's normative for every believer. I believe it is necessary. I believe it's necessary knowing who we are and who God

is and I believe God's perceived absence is natural and that it is the driving force that refines our faith, making it precious in God's sight and ours. And what I want to do in this brief series is examine not the presence of God in the lives of his saints but his perceived absence. And I say "perceived absence" because that's only our perception. See, we have inside, we have our knowledge, we know God is with us at all times and God made that crystally clear in scripture. In *Romans 8:38*, Paul says: *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* I'll be the first one to say I know, I know that that is true. Sometimes I don't feel like it's true at all. And what I want to do is paint a realistic picture of what life in a personal relationship with Christ consists of. And to do that we're going to spend some time looking at the lives of some of the saints in scripture that are there to instruct us and give us insight into our own lives. And if we look carefully at these lives, we'll find that sometimes God's perceived absence is as real as his presence and we'll find that it is all part of God's plan for us.

You see, there's a reason why God's approach to us is now you see me, now you don't, and I can sum it all up with two verses. 2

*Corinthians 5:7: For we walk by faith, not by sight. Hebrews 11:1: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. See, that walk and that assurance only develops and grows in the perceived absence of God. We understand the concept of no pain, no gain when it comes to the issue of physical training because we know that vigorous exercise breaks down tissues and grows new blood vessels and that involves pain and that's okay. I mean if our goal is increased stamina and strength, we're willing to pay that price. Well, here's the difference. You see, if God wants to increase our faith through the pain of his perceived absence, he is not going to ask our permission because we would be ill-inclined to give it. And I'm not sure we even understand that the price that has to be paid to grow us in faith is high or the reason why God's absence is necessary in the first place.*

And so the first place I want to start, we're just doing kind of a preliminary study this morning, I want to start at the very beginning and to see why absence was necessary and just make the statement at first that absence was never God's intention. The very first man and the very first woman lived in complete fellowship with God. And *Genesis 1:27* says: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be*

*fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. See in the beginning things were vastly different than they are now. God and man had a relationship that we can only hope for in the kingdom to come. And while it lasted, Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect fellowship with their creator. They were fully involved in the creative enterprise of managing and exercising dominion over the creation that God had put them in charge of until, until they fell for the enemy's lie and decided to throw in their lot with the serpent and purposely violate the one rule that God had laid out for them. God said, "Do not eat of the forbidden fruit," and so they decided that God was withholding wisdom and power from them and they decided that they would defy him by eating it, and it was the most devastatingly disastrous decision any human being has ever made. Adam and Eve's fall turned themselves and their creation from the very good of*

Genesis 1 to the none good of Romans 3. And once they had traded in their perfection for a brand new fallen nature that no longer was in sync with their creator, they also found out that their intimate day in day out relationship with God was shattered. God remained perfect; they now fully embraced imperfection. And the immediate effect of their rebellion was that the God they had partnered with previously was now a God they feared, a God they hid from. Their sin caused them to be self aware in the worst possible way. Previously they were so caught up in the pleasure of a perfectly attuned existence that God said in *Genesis 2:25: The man and his wife were both naked and they were not ashamed.* All of that came crashing down the moment they embraced the serpent's lie and for the very first time they discovered that not only had they been lied to about the effects of their rebellion but that the repercussions would be profound and life changing not just for them but for all of creation. *Genesis 3:6 says: So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD*

*God among the trees of the garden.* See, the very first effect of their sin is an awareness of themselves as individuals now clearly living apart from the God they were once perfectly in sync with. We can't imagine what it's like to be naked and unaware of it but for them, self-awareness didn't even exist. You know so caught up were they in the joy of their existence, they had no need to look inward. But the moment they ate of that fruit became the moment they were aware that they were naked. And not only were they aware of their nakedness but now they were ashamed. And so they sewed fig leaves to cover themselves. The next immediate effect was a fear of the God they had never feared before. They heard God walking in the garden and instead of connecting with him like they'd always done in the past, they went into hiding. I mean they didn't realize it but now everything was different. Everything had changed. The relationship that they had enjoyed with God for we don't know how long was over. They were cast out of God's presence, and from there things went downhill almost immediately. Their first two sons, Cain and Abel, were the perpetrator and the victim of the very first murder. And mankind and God embarked on this divergent pathway from a complete and absolute interdependence to an estrangement in character and behavior that grew so stark that eventually God decided to wipe the earth clean of man and his rebellion and start over. In *Genesis 6:5* it says: *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every*

*intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

And again, we all know the story, I mean the flood wiped out all of mankind and Noah and his family through the ark repopulated it. But soon that bent character that was now an integral part of mankind reemerged, and it reemerged at the Tower of Babel where mankind collectively shook its fist at God and said once again, no, we will not scatter as you have instructed us. We will build a city and we will build a tower that will reach up into the heavens itself and then we will dare you to ever flood us again. God's response was this in Genesis 11. It says: *Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down there and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD dispersed them*

*from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. If you read this history, if you start reading the interactions between God and his creation, I read this and I immediately think of Lamentations 3 which says: It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. Because the story of mankind is the story of God looking down at his creatures and his creatures constantly shaking their fist in the face of their creator and the creator's showing them nothing but mercy in response.*

After the Tower of Babel, Genesis brings us to Abraham who represents God's great plan to save mankind. Now Abraham had been chosen to be the father of a great nation from which Messiah would come. And then we read about the patriarchs from Abraham through Joseph to Moses and David and the prophets and it's very easy to assume as we're reading that those who were particularly close to God enjoyed a fellowship with him that was vastly different from the fellowship that we experience. I mean, we just assume that these people walked with God and talked with God on a level beyond anything we've ever experienced, but then why would Isaiah say in *Isaiah 64: For you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.* Or why would Gideon say in *Judges 6: "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds*

that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian." Or the prophet Habakkuk who said in Habakkuk 1:2: O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "violence!" and you will not save? See, even great saints had problems with God's perceived absence. And the first thing that we need to understand concerning this absence, number one, is that it's absolutely necessary. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because they had to be for their own protection. God's full presence had become deadly. And if you look in scripture, you'll see every subsequent interaction that God has with man since the fall of Adam has been mediated through some form of physical or spiritual protection because God and man are now so vastly different that to be fully exposed to the living God in our fallen state would be to bring about instant death. And God said so explicitly. In Exodus we have Moses who's tasted of God and it's awoken in him the most intense desire there could be to have even more and more and more of God, and we have this conversation in Exodus 33:18, it says: Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And he -- that's God -- said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." Now we wonder,

how could it be that the fellowship that Adam and Eve took for granted could now become a fellowship so toxic that no human could see God and live? Well, God doesn't leave us guessing. He tells us why in *Isaiah 59*, he says: *Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.* Translation: God is holy and we are not. We may see ourselves as having a sin problem but we barely scratch the surface when it comes to understanding God's holiness, and our ignorance is no excuse. We get amazed when we see God's interaction with man and we know from scripture that even an accidental contact with the living God would be fatal. Just ask Uzzah. You know, in the Old Testament, God consented to dwell in the ark of the covenant. And there's a story in the Old Testament of David moving the ark and he's moving the ark against all protocol. He has it on a cart, it's drawn by oxen, that's not the way it was supposed to be moved and at one point the oxen stumble and the ark begins to slip. This is *2 Samuel 6*, it says: *And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God.* See, there's a reason why God says it is a fearful thing

to fall into the hands of the living God. You look at that, you say, well, Uzzah's just trying to be helpful. He paid for that with his life. R.C. Sproul pointed out that Uzzah was trying to prevent the ark from being defiled by falling into the mud, not realizing that it was not the mud that would defile the ark but a sinful human touch. That cost Uzzah his life.

See understand that much of the separation that exists between God and us is a profound mercy on God's part and it's completely at odds with the image of the God that we have in our minds today. I mean you remember the Raiders of the Lost Ark? Do you remember that movie? You remember where the Nazi collaborators, they finally discover the ark and they open it up and as they open it up, one of them looks and he goes, "Oh, it is beautiful." And then out of that ark comes this force that turns hideous and deadly and the characters start to scream and all of their faces begin to melt. That's Hollywood. That's special effects. But for once, for once Hollywood portrayed a god that was worthy of fearing. We have little or no sense of that fear because we are so isolated from the God of the Old Testament. We prefer Jesus, the nice God of the New Testament and we seldom consider that God the Father and God the Son are one in the same God. You see, the God who struck Uzzah dead for daring to touch the ark is the very same God who was calmly and methodically wiping spit from his face as he's being

beaten and mocked by those who are going to kill him. He's the king of the universe striking Uzzah dead for touching the ark and now he's wearing a crown made from a thorn bush. He's addressed in a purple robe designed to mock his so-called royalty and Roman soldiers are shouting and laughing as they slap him, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews." Well, there's a reason why this holy spotless king endured that shame. God's glory and our salvation was that reason. *Hebrews 12:2* describes Jesus as *the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

As we undertake our study of God's perceived absence, we want to acknowledge first that it is normative, I mean, it's something that virtually every Christian will experience. And secondly, we also want to acknowledge that it's necessary, because God is holy and we are not. And finally we acknowledge that God's perceived absence is a natural part of the faith that God is growing in you and me. I've said this many times, the only real currency that any born-again believer has before God is his or her faith and even that is a gift of God. I mean the only thing that you and I have to give back to God is faith, I mean it's the only thing that amazed Jesus. He marveled. He encountered it in the centurion in Luke 7, and the scripture said in *Luke 7:9: When Jesus heard these*

*things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." I want a faith that God marvels at.*

You know, Peter describes the natural purpose behind so many of our trials and he says this in *1 Peter 1:6*, he says: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* See, what Peter is saying is our faith -- not just our faith but our tested faith is more precious than gold. It's precious to us and it's precious to God. And God is determined to produce that precious faith in our lives. And I don't know anything that tests the genuineness of our faith more than God's perceived absence. And would it not then follow that a natural part of God's plan for us would include significant periods of time when the only thing we have to go on is not what we feel but what we know. I mean I know that Jesus Christ endured the cross, despising its shame for me. And sometimes when God's perceived absence is crushing, it is the only thing I know. But that's the time where the gold that is our faith is being refined so that it becomes far more gold and far less dross. So trust me, those times are normative. You will go through those times when

God seems to be nowhere to be found, and they are also necessary because God is holy and we are not, and they are natural. They are part of God's will. So we're going to spend some time looking at the lives of some of God's great saints to see how they encountered God's normative, necessary, and natural absence so that we can be nurtured the next time we find ourselves in the center of that fire. Let's pray.

*Father God, we thank you that your plan for us, your plan for each and everyone of us whom you have seen and chosen before the foundations of the earth were even established, that plan includes your absence, that plan includes you developing in us the ability to understand that now you see me, now you don't means that there's a large part of our faith that has to come from trusting you in your perceived absence. And so this morning, Lord, I just pray for each of us, particularly those who are in the middle of feeling that absence. I pray that you would give each and everyone of those individuals the sense of trust in you, the sense of knowing what the truth is, the understanding that this, too, shall pass, but that this is the refining fire that they're in, this is the faith that you are growing in them. Give them, give us, give all of us the ability to trust you enough to grow that faith, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*