

Away in a Manger: A Sermon on the God Who Hides

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Luke 2:7

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Isaiah 45:15 ESV

Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.

The question must be asked, why should the Kings of kings be born hidden in a manger in a humble village and not the palatial mansion where kings are expected to be born? Why the little hamlet tucked away in the hill country of Judea and not the city of the kings of old—Jerusalem? Jerusalem is the city of David, our Lord's ancestor whose throne He is promised. But not here is He born but in a stable, a lean to, probably a hole in the side of a hill where animals are given refuge for the night. He is not laid in a bed wrapped with silk sheets but laid in an animal feeding trough lined with straw.

Perhaps we don't ask the question because we can't imagine it any other way. We are so familiar with the story of Christmas where the gallant event is printed on Christmas cards, replayed in children's pageants, and duplicated in artist's renderings, all different and yet the same. There is Mary and there is Joseph and there is the regal Christ child in the sterile manger with cattle lowing and sheep looking on in affection. How else could it be?

But for three Persian astrologers known as the Wise Men, they could and did imagine it much different. Their search for the infant king took them to the capitol of Israel and to the royal palace where kings had been born. This is the way it was done then, yet God does not play by the rules. He hides the baby in a carpenter's home.

Jesus does not grow up in Jerusalem but in the ghetto land of Galilee, an even less important hamlet than Bethlehem. At least one other Hebrew king was born in Bethlehem but Nazareth was unadorned with famous names. Who would have ever heard of Joseph and Mary had God not been born into their home?

The child grew without the learned tutors of Jerusalem's university. He learned life not in books and scrolls but in burdens and suffering. Why? If He was here to save us from our sins why not make His identity more obvious?

Have you not asked yourself the question, *Where is God? Why is God seemingly remote when I need Him the most?* The great prophet Isaiah thought about the same when He said, “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.”

Where is God when two policemen are eating lunch in their patrol car and are assassinated? Where is God when the tides of war wash across the face of the earth staining it with blood? Where is He when death steals the life asleep in the crib? Where is His help when a mother scavenges for food like a vulture in order to feed her babies? Why does He hide Himself when families are ripped apart by the monster of hate? Where is God when it is so obvious you need Him? Surely if He would make an appearance, just an appearance, things would change. If He would just show us some sign then we could cope. If He would just make His presence real to us then it would be sufficient. It's almost as if God is not aware that men doubt His existence because He is often hidden from view.

I've thought about this so often. Why is the Bible written the way it is? It never tries to prove the existence of God; it simply states it as a fact. One intelligent man reads it and walks away skeptic, another man reads it and becomes a follower. It seems as if sometimes it's written so mysteriously that you wonder if it's really the truth or just a collection of fables.

And when He was in plain view as the baby who grew as the Son of Man, He remained obscure because He took upon Himself no evidence of His true identity in form or appearance. After the disciples were with Him for three years, Jesus must ask them if He had been with them so long that they still did not know who He was. “Oh, You are a God who hides Himself.” Veiled in flesh. Veiled. Covered. Hidden. The curtain was drawn in the humanness of Jesus. He was God hidden among us as a man, and a man that was quite unspectacular to look at. Nothing about His appearance told that He was God in the flesh. Again, the prophet Isaiah foretold, “For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him” (Isaiah 53:2). Hidden.

Jesus does not spend most of His ministry in the cultural areas—as we are taught today in seminary—but in the boondocks of Galilee, the Appalachia of its time. Most of His ministry was in Galilee, not Jerusalem or Judea. You wonder if He would have done things differently if they would have believed. Even the Apostle Paul said that men would believe if they only could see Jesus as He was. “Which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). Look at Him there in Pilate courtroom. He stands silent and does not answer the questions and when He does answer He does so in riddles. But had they known His identity, Pilate would have come away with a completely different decision. Oh, You are a God who hides Yourself.

I would have done things much differently, wouldn't you? At least after the resurrection. I would have gone right back to the Sanhedrin and shown those men what I said earlier, “I am the Son of God.” But He doesn't do that, do that. He doesn't go back to Pilate and answer his question, “You want to know what truth is? Here, look at My hands!” What would have happened, if He

had done that? Instead, He goes away and spends most of those 40 days alone, only making a few appearances to the apostles and a few others.

It's almost as if God doesn't want us to believe, doesn't it appear that way? Yet that's not the case at all. Listen to me, He sometimes is hidden but He's never silent. You and I have to learn how to see.

I. God is a Person

Why does God do it this way? Why doesn't He just show up, like He will one day, as a Savior on a white charge to save the hour? Why didn't He come that way the first time? There's a reason. A blessed reason. A godly reason. A hopeful reason. God is a person.

A. He Has All The Positive Characteristics of Personality.

He thinks, He emotes, He has feelings—every kind of feeling you've ever experienced and then some. He is infinite in His capacity to feel. He is a person in every sense of the word and definition. God is a person. He is not a person like we are in that He is a personal being, He is spirit, but that doesn't make Him any less a person.

B. As a Person He Wants to be Wanted.

Just like you want to be wanted, the Lord wants to be wanted. I use the word *want* carefully. I do not suggest that there's some lack in God, because *want* does not have to mean lack but can also mean desire. God desires to be wanted by you, sir. He wants you to want Him. Why? Because He's a person. That's one of the basic characteristics of any of us, we want to be desired for our own sake. We want to be appreciated for who we are. Why should God not want to be appreciated for who He is? Does that not make sense to you?

God is a person. He wants to be wanted. Therefore, He does not force you to want or seek Him.

He gave you one of the most beautiful gifts that love could have created and that is the ability to choose what you want. But as any beautiful and priceless gift, there are usually hazards that come with it, and with that beautiful gift of choice, God has given you also the ability to reject Him and not to love Him. He gave you this ability so that your love for Him would be genuine and not something mandatory without any kind of alternative or options. No, God desires that you love Him because He has your heart, just like you have His.

He wants a relationship with you like any person wanting a relationship with someone they love. A reciprocal relationship, meaning both parties are giving and receiving. What do you have that you can give to God? I know it's a funny, almost silly, question. What does God need that you have? Nothing. He just loves you and that's why He wants your love. Therefore He does not force you to love Him or want Him.

When God created man in that beautiful garden, He equipped him with this amazing gift of love—the ability of choice—and we all know the story. Man chose differently. We did not make a wise choice but a foolish one and we rejected God out of our own free, unhindered will. God does not force Himself upon you, and yet He knows we need Him.

II. God Knows We Need Him

The story doesn't end in the garden. It's just the beginning. There in the garden, with the wrong choice made, and hearts going their own way—separate from God—God pronounces Bethlehem's gift and surprise. God born in a manger. From that moment and with precision, God creates history and paints the picture of His love through one patriarch after another, through one sinner after another. They were all sinners, Abraham, Moses, David, all of them, and yet the Gospel is repeated in each of their lives so that by the time Christ is born men ought to know that they need God.

A. Man Has Rejected God.

God in His love has allowed us to choose what we want, and it certainly isn't God. Unbelievable as it sounds to be offered God and all of the trappings of His glory and grace and goodness, we chose the opposite. And that choice came with a price.

B. This Rejection Has Created the Chaos.

The claim that God is not good needs to be refuted. That God is responsible for all the problems of our world must be argued against. No He isn't. The other option you have is that God made man without the ability to choose, that man was forced by his own instinct to serve the Creator. That's the only alternative. If you don't want the chaos and problems and turmoil of this present world, a robotic personality is the only other alternative. That's the way of the beast. That's the way of the animal. The cow doesn't have the ability to choose like you and I do. He simply acts out of the function of his own instinct. He eats grass because that's the way his nature dictates. But God loves us enough to give us that choice, even with the hazards that it would run and afford.

With that rejection comes the chaos. We chose it. I know you don't like the pain and the problems of your life but you've got to realize that if it hadn't been Adam and Eve but you in that garden you would have made the same choice. The Bible is clear. You can't say, "Oh Adam, oh Adam, it's your fault!" No, it's mine too. I have sinned as well. I have rejected the same God that Adam did there at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I, too, have said like Adam, "I don't want Your control over my life, I want to be my god." And so have you. So have we all. That's why the earth is in the groaning misery it's in today. We've chosen this.

Someone has said, "God hides from us so we can hide from Him." What this means is that when man chose to rebel and go a different route than God had ordained that the alternative was that He had to hide Himself. Think of it this way, if God was always present and the reality of His presence

was always keenly felt by you, what would that do to your lifestyle? How would that play into the choices you had made to do your own thing? If God was somehow always visible before you—and you knew He was looking at you, you feel it, you know it—it would be hard to make some of the choices you make, wouldn't it? So, in order for man to hide from God, God had to hide Himself. What do we see right after the great rebellion in Eden? Adam and Eve hiding from God.

This is the remarkable thing—God so loves you that He will let you have what you want: a life without Him. It's hard for us to see that as love, but, again, the alternative is what many men want to make me and others who believe like me to say: that God is some kind of manipulator and we're no more than robots. They contend that if electing grace is true then He's nothing more than a puppeteer and we're dancing to His tune as He pulls the strings. No. Just because I believe that God is sovereign doesn't mean your will has been raped. You still have the ability to choose, but you will always choose what you want.

The problem with mankind is that none of us want God. He is born in a stable; He's born in obscurity because men in the palace didn't want Him. Why, when they hear of His birth their first reaction is to gather the troops and kill the Messiah. He's in remote places because men in the public eye didn't want Him. Because of that, His birth had to go almost completely unnoticed and undetected. God does that because that's what the people want.

Is there a problem with God and His sovereign will and man and his will? No, there's no problem. I've learned a long time ago that when my will bucks up against God's, I'm always going to lose. God will have His way. But there are times when God in His wisdom allows me a degree of latitude, a realm in which I can be my own god and make choices the way my heart dictates, and He does it because He loves me enough to give me the ability to choose what I want.

So, my friend, if you're not a Christian today, it's not God's fault. It's not His determination that you reject Him the remainder of your life and die and enter into an eternity without Him completely, a place where there is no goodness and grace and hope. No, He may be hidden but He is not silent.

There He is in that unsterile manger. It wasn't clean. It wasn't a pretty picture on a Christmas card. It was full of the bacteria of animals. The smell of animal dung filled that little area. And this is the place that God speaks and says, "I love you. You need Me and I'm here. I've come." And you can choose to accept the Christ born in Bethlehem or you can continue to ignore Him and God will hide so you can hide from Him. But thankfully God pursues man.

III. God Pursues Man His Own Way

A. He Does Not Leave Man Alone.

He sends His prophets and they warned, predicted, and prophesied. And finally God sends His Son. There He is, once again, the Incarnate, veiled in human flesh.

B. He Reveals Himself Yet in Mysterious Ways.

Here He is, born as a baby to a carpenter and virgin, and there's no room for them in the inn so they have to take a shack of a building called a stable. God reveals the birth of the Son that night. But to whom does He reveal it?

He reveals the Birth of Christ to the lowly shepherds. Why does the hymn writer use the adjective *lowly*? Because in Jesus' day shepherds were on the low end of the totem pole. As far as the working class, they were considered the least of the least, right above the publican and the prostitute. Why? A shepherd's skills are not many. You just lay around the field and watch your sheep. Take them out of the sheepfold in the morning and bring them back at night. They follow you and will go where you call them. You've got to make sure no predator gets them but other than that you just sit around and watch sheep all day. That doesn't take much skill; therefore, the earnings that a shepherd would make were little compared to other trades. They were considered almost social outcasts. But on the night Jesus was born, to whom do the angels herald the heavenly announcement? The lowly outcasts.

If I had charge of heaven's choir, I would have them on Broadway. I would have them right in front of the White House; I would take them to Capitol Hill! Wouldn't you? "Let's show them what You can do, God!" But no, to shepherds they appeared.

Then He reveals the truth of the birth of the Son of God to pagans. Remember the three astrologers I mentioned from Persia, which is present day Iran? They were pagans. They worshipped idols and other gods. But God made the truth of His Son real to them so that they would pack up a few belongings and necessities and make the long journey to find this King of kings.

Notice the audience: shepherds, outcasts, pagans. Not theologians. Not religious people. He revealed Himself to the socially unacceptable and idolaters. What does that tell you about God? He may be hidden but He's not silent and He's speaking to people we would consider unacceptable and unworthy of such an announcement.

Humbly and reverently I ask, are you ungodly? Are you an outcast? Are you unacceptable? Are you unwanted in many circles? Then may I say to you, embrace it! Don't deny it. God has a word for you today. What is that word? He came to save the ungodly! It is with the broken and contrite that God dwells. Do not sit here today in your pompous self-righteousness and think that God owes you an announcement or a voice or some kind of sign. No. The only sign He gives this day is a heart broken over sin. That's the sign of the presence of God, as it was on the day He was born.

If I could just get people to see this. *Oh, Lord, open their eyes. Do not hide yourself from my hearers this morning!* You need to see this! Jesus is in this room this morning and through my voice He pleads with you, "Come you who are burdened and heavy laden and I will give you rest." If you leave here thinking you're OK and everything is well with your soul, I want you to know everything is not all right with your soul. It isn't. It is not all right with my soul. I've got a lot of issues

this morning. I've been preaching week after week on the Gospel and I've told you week after week that I still need saving. I don't stand here today as a perfect man. I stand here as a poor man needing the grace and mercy of a Savior born in Bethlehem, nailed to a cross outside Jerusalem's gates. That's what I need. Don't leave here thinking all is well. All is not well with you! You're living according to your will and God is outside of that will.

It's amazing, when you look at how God reveals Himself in these mysterious ways.

He reveals Himself to Abraham and says his barren wife will have a child and when that child comes Abraham is commanded to sacrifice it.

Joseph is promised greatness and power but is sold as a slave by his brothers.

God is not found in Job's prosperity and health but in his poverty and sickness.

David is promised a throne but is hunted as a criminal by the throne.

God doesn't reveal Himself according to your mode of operation. Why? Because He hides Himself so that if you really want Him you can have Him. That's why He doesn't operate according to your mode of operation. He remains hidden until you call out to Him out of a genuine and sincere want.

Never has God revealed Himself more than as a naked man banished from the throne as a criminal under the cover of darkness hanging on a cross. There He is! God Almighty hanging on a cross yet those who looked upon Him missed Him! Except, that is, for a few Galileans. He is not hiding. He was there on the cross. But He is not conspicuous either. God, dead on a cross? A criminal, my Savior? Yes, indeed, if you have eyes to see Him.

To the Greeks, Paul said it was intellectual suicide, foolishness. To the Jews, the religious "good" people, it was a stumbling block. And the same is true today. I have people in this room who are very intelligent and yet you can't make the links or connect the dots from God to your heart through the cross! You can't connect the dots. It doesn't make sense. It's somehow foolish to your intellectual pride. God's hiding but He's not silent.

To us religious people, which I was for 26 years, a preacher no less, but lost in my own self-righteousness, to believe in grace was a stumbling block. Thankfully God didn't remain hidden from me but on that December first morning, He revealed Himself to me. He came out of the shadows and with that He brought me into the light of His love. That same God is here to do that for you.

IV. God Reveals Himself to Those Who Want Him.

That's why He hides. That's why He seems to delight in the shadowlands, as C.S. Lewis called it. He wants you to really want Him. If you don't really want Him and He appears to you, you won't be able to handle it. It would be destructive. Once again, love keeps Him from doing what you say you want. How many sinners I have heard say, "If God would just show me, if He would just give me some sign, if He would just speak and make it really clear to me... I really want to be saved, but I need some sign." Let God give you a sign and see what you do. Isaiah had a sign. He saw the Lord and his first reaction was, "Woe is me! I am undone!" You dissect the words *I am undone* and you find out in the Hebrew they mean, "I'm coming apart at the seams." John saw Him and he fell at His feet as a dead man. He felt as if life was leaving his body. Others saw Him through the centuries and they did nothing but fear that their life had come to an end because they had seen God. If you really don't want God and He shows up, you are in trouble.

God can safely reveal Himself to those who are humbled. That's why He hides.

A. He is Not a Bully.

God is not a bully. He doesn't force His way into your heart. He doesn't make believers out of you against your choice. You may ask how I can still hold true to the doctrines of grace and say such a statement. Because that's what the doctrines of grace say! We do not believe in a God that seizes control of the intellect and the affections and the will and make a man do that which he is not inclined to do. We do believe that grace is given to every believer and every sinner who will believe, that does something to his stubborn, willful rejection of God. Something happens on the inside gives him a desire to want God. "It is God that worketh in you both to will"—desire—"and to do"—power—"of His good pleasure." It's called awakening grace! For you were dead in your trespasses and sins but then in one glorious moment in time eternity breaks in and that which was contrary to God is now supple, pliable, flexible, willing, wanting, and desirous of God! That is an act of grace! Otherwise you would continue to choose to stay the way you've been going all along.

God doesn't make the choice for you. No. He simply puts within your heart a desire that looks attractive to you, unlike any other desire that runs within the chambers of your soul. It takes precedence. And may I say to all of us who are saved, had He not done that you would still be rejecting Him. You would still be where you were—lost and undone.

He's not a bully. In C.S. Lewis' little book *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has a brilliant perception into the underworld, that is the demonic world. The book is an imagined collection of letters from a demon called Screwtape writing to his nephew Wormwood, a demon in training. You can see it is quite fanciful in its imagination but there is a lot of truth in it. In one of the letters, Screwtape is writing to Wormwood to train him how to seduce and deceive and even how to keep Christians from enjoying the abundant life God has given them. He warns Wormwood not to expect God, who is their enemy, to do what their father, Satan, does. He says, "The Enemy (God), does not work like our father. He lets them have their way." You see, Satan, when he comes, possesses and controls and dictates mercilessly. When Satan possesses a soul, that soul is a slave. But God

works counter to that. Though He is Lord yet you are a servant that can choose not to follow the orders of your Master. He gives you that latitude, that freedom. Why? He is not a bully. He wants you to do what He wants because of love. Love always wants to please the person loved.

Therefore,

B. You Can Have As Much of God As You Want.

The question is, how much of God do you want? Isn't that always the question? That haunts me because I know I don't have enough of Him and I know why. It isn't God's fault.

"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13)

Jesus gave us a spiritual law of the kingdom when He said, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you."

I want to speak for a few moments to the believer, but dear sinner friend, this has application to you as much as it does to my brother and sister in Christ. God works in your life to the degree you desire Him to do so. One of the reasons God seems to be hidden from we, His children, is because God is still giving us the prerogative of a person, to be led by our own hearts. The Spirit of the Living God does not come in to control the way some demon might. He comes to control by His gentleness and tender ways. He simply points and directs as a guide. He shall guide you, but a guide doesn't force those he leads to go his way, he only points the way.

So I say to my brothers and sisters, if you are not satisfied with how much of God you have in your life would you simply look to your own soul, mind, and heart, and find the reason why. Within you lay the answer. The answer for this lack of God is not with God. God wants you to enjoy and delight in Him more than you do today. He has worlds of pleasure in His person that you and I have not yet discovered. I'm not talking about heaven, either. I'm talking about here on this earth. "The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly."

Why is it that when you read the Scriptures you don't hear a single thing? Why does the voice of God grow silent? Why is it that when you pray and pray and pray and the prayers are not answered? Listen, you're getting what you want and you always do. I'm convinced of this fact. This is a fact that pastors and churches are ignoring. We work out formulas and programs to imitate the presence and power of the Holy Spirit because we don't really want the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We want something like it that we can control. Therefore, God remains hidden from us.

Read in your Bibles to Hebrews 11:6.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God,"

Without faith. What does that mean? What is faith? Without it, I can't please Him, so what is it? Faith is not just believing something to be true. Faith is not just trusting that it is true. Faith is treasuring. Faith is valuing. Faith is appreciating something for its own sake. Faith believes because it sees the object as worthy of the investment. That means without treasuring, truly valuing, and appreciating God as a person for whom and what He is, I can't approach Him. If I don't have that, I'm approaching a false god, a concoction of my own imagination, something I've invented but is not God.

You can only come to the God of the Scriptures through faith, treasuring Christ alone supremely.

"and He is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him."

The question is, how much of God do you want? As much as you're willing to seek. This is not rocket science after all, is it?

Jesus put forth Himself as a man, not just for the redemptive purposes but also in the way in which He did it because He was making a statement. Not only was He coming into the world but He will only come to those who want Him badly enough to leave their flocks at night and go and find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. He will only come to those who will love Him enough to pack up for at least a three, maybe six, month journey and traverse deserts and wildernesses, going where they don't know. They had to stop and ask for directions because they wanted to see this King that badly.

How badly do you want to see God work in your life? This is the premise. He will reveal Himself to the degree you want. So I pray whether you're saved already or yet to be saved that only by the gracious power of this God whom I have tried to explain to you in His modus operandi, is our hope. I realize that, in the end, unless God does a work of grace, a work of supernatural power, causing eyes to see, nothing will happen.

Let me give you one more example. I know I need help in preaching, I agree. I want to be better at it. I've heard so many times that I need to tell more stories because, "that's how Jesus did it!" Well, OK, but I go to the Bible and hear the disciples ask Jesus a question, "Jesus, why do You tell so many stories?" And Jesus said, "They having eyes will not see and having ears they will not hear, lest they be converted and I heal them." In other words, Jesus told stories to let people stay in their blindness and unsaved condition. Wow. Jesus would do that? I mean, even the disciples didn't understand those stories. Every time Jesus told a story they were coming to Him, "What did that mean? Why did He do that? Because He chose to remain hidden except from those who wanted Him badly enough to come and say, "Please explain this to me." There's your principle. There's your law.

How badly do you want to be saved? Do not leave here thinking that you cannot be saved. No, you can if you want. Do not leave here, dear brother or sister, thinking your level of spirituality has plateaued and this is all it's going to be and you've got to settle. No! You don't have to settle!

None of us have to settle! God may be hidden but He's not silent! He wants to reveal Himself to you but your eyes are dim and your ears are dull and the heart is hard. Ask God to lift the veil, to touch the ear, to soften the heart! He will! He will. And you will enjoy Him in a new day, in a new way, with a new vitality. Amen.