

Big Noisy God

Dispelling the Rumor That God Can Be Found “Only in the Silence”

by Lynn Lusby Pratt

Have you heard the rumor going around—that God can be found “only in the silence”? Don’t buy it.

Please understand. I love quiet. I drive for hours with the radio off, sit in the porch swing and listen to the birds, and lie on Gram’s quilt in the dark to watch the stars. I insist on quiet for Bible and prayer time. (Well, OK, sometimes ya gotta have Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir as background!)

I agree that our lives are too frantic. It’s good to slow down. But statements like these trouble me:

- “The believer must first achieve a state of silence . . . and then God works in the believer’s heart.”¹
- “In order to experience the power of God, we must experience the presence of God. In order to experience the presence of God, we need to make a habit of spending time in silence.”²
- “It is necessary to go beyond words or images and to seek God deep within the silence which resides within us.”³
- “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. . . . We need silence to be able to touch souls.”⁴

Are these people serious? Does the Holy Spirit vacate the premises when it’s noisy and then return when things quiet down?

Isn’t God present, active, in the noise when the grandchildren squeal, “Thank you, God, for ICE CREAM!” Don’t tell me that the Lord can’t be found in the middle of our noisy routines like preparing a holiday dinner, repairing the car, working on the assembly line, or shouting for the fourth time, “Wesley! Come down out of that tree this instant!” And he’s present whether we’re inside a deafening tornado or enjoying fireworks or sobbing in the emergency room or cheering the home team.

Of course he is.

- Psalm 139:7-10 says that wherever we go, God is there.
- The Lord says, “Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him? . . . Do not I fill heaven and earth?” (Jeremiah 23:24).
- Jesus gave his followers assurance of his constant presence: “The Spirit of truth . . . lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:17).

But we’re being told that when you make “a time for your mind and your heart to be still,” *then* “God can meet you and fill you with His presence.”⁵ No, he’s present and accessible always (Joshua 1:9; Psalm 145:18, 19; Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 4:16)—and in the ways he’s set in place: we hear from him through his Word (Psalm 119:54, 98, 130, 160; Hebrews 4:12; compare 1 Corinthians 2:12-14), and we speak with him in normal prayer.

Yes, normal prayer. That “silence” the contemplatives refer to isn’t normal porch-swing silence but is the altered state of consciousness reached through mantra meditation, which, supposedly, mystically achieves a communion with God not attainable through prayer and reading the Word. If you hadn’t picked up on that before, do an hour of research.⁶ Then come back and read the quotes in this article from that perspective; you’ll see that’s what is meant.

The mystics would have us believe that regular prayer is inferior. Perhaps we’re in a precarious position and in danger of losing our connection? Or at least it seems we must outsmart and unlock the cosmic portal—as if in some video game—to transcend/force our way into a spiritual realm. But aren’t believers in Christ in a “spiritual realm” all the time? I mean, if it helps you to look at it that way, Scripture says that believers “are controlled not by the sinful nature

but by the Spirit.” The only prerequisite for being “in the Spirit” is “if the Spirit of God lives in you” (Romans 8:9). And the Bible says that this happens when we are born again.

Where in Scripture do we find that God can’t be known, doesn’t act, and may not even be present except in this place called “the silence”? Why, God has done some of his best work with the volume turned up.

Remember the 1 Kings 18, 19 account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal? Hundreds of chanting false prophets, Elijah’s taunting, louder shouting, Elijah praying out loud—with words, the fire from heaven . . . I’m thinking everybody “experienced God” that day!

And then when Elijah was in a cave after that event, there was wind, earthquake . . . and yes, the still, small voice about which the contemplatives make so much fuss. But that was one tiny moment in a long, cacophonous drama. God was never out of reach. Elijah didn’t need to “be put into a kind of suspended animation before [a] deep work of God upon the soul [could] occur.”⁷

In Judges 7, Gideon’s soldiers all blew their trumpets on cue and smashed their clay jars, and did God say, “Pipe down! How do you expect to practice my presence in all this racket?” Uh . . . no. The Lord caused the enemy soldiers to turn on each other. He was right there, and everybody knew it.

And then there’s 2 Chronicles 5–7, the dedication of the temple. Talk about rowdy! The ark of the covenant was being brought in. In celebration there were cymbals, harps, lyres, 120 trumpets, other instruments, singers . . . Followed by King Solomon’s long, out-loud prayer of dedication—with lots of *different* words, not the Jesus Prayer repeated for twenty minutes⁸ to “enter into the great silence of God.”⁹ If Solomon was ignorant of the secret of true communication with God, how come fire came down and consumed the sacrifice and the glory of the Lord filled the place? The Lord said outright that he had heard the king’s prayer (2 Chronicles 7:12).

It never would have occurred to me that anything was missing from that kind of prayer if today’s promoters of “the silence” hadn’t given me the idea. They say that silence is “the only thing broad enough and deep enough to hold all of the contradictions and paradoxes of Full Reality and our own reality, too. 99.9% of the known universe is silent, and it is in this space that the force fields of life and compassion dwell and expand. We can live there too!”¹⁰

Whatever.

That hardly seems to describe a personal relationship between God and his children. Remember, when we are told in Scripture that our primary responsibility is to love God (Matthew 22:37), “we are being told to relate to God in a personal way. Since interpersonal relationships are implemented and carried on by communication, it is indicative of God’s personhood that he *speaks*, and that our communion with him is in the form of words (e.g., Scripture, meditation, praise, prayer) rather than the contemplation of an idol or mindless mysticism.”¹¹

At Jericho, Joshua’s people didn’t get into the lotus position and measure their breathing to “find the silence within, thereby finding God.”¹² They simply obeyed the command God had already given them and marched around the city. There were trumpets and shouting, walls collapsing.

God worked in all kinds of noisy storms in the Bible. God spoke to Job out of the storm (Job 38:1; 40:6). No hint that Job had trouble getting the message. In Mark 4, Jesus was present *in* the storm. There was conversation with his disciples *during* it, and he gave orders *to* it. Acts 27 is the account of Paul’s shipwreck. Did Paul just wring his hands during the turbulence till he could drop anchor in the calm to get back in touch with God? Was God not present and active during the storm? Of course he was! An angel even found his way to Paul during the storm—and spoke.

What about Mark 9:14-28? Jesus came upon a disturbance in which people were arguing about a demon-possessed boy. The evil spirit manifested. Jesus wasn’t impeded in any way by this noise. In fact, he added to it. He commanded the evil spirit to come out, and the spirit “shrieked.” My guess is, some of the bystanders shrieked too!

Jesus' final moments are recorded in Matthew 27:50, 51. He "cried out . . . in a loud voice." There was an earthquake, the temple veil was torn. That's noisy. And God the Father was there. But what are we to make of a statement like this: "In the silence is a dynamic presence. And that's God, and we become attuned to that."¹³ Hmm. Does that mean that if only the crucifixion had been more serene, maybe God could have done something truly "dynamic"?

The book of Revelation is just dripping with decibels. In Revelation 8:5-7 alone we hear thunder and lightning, earthquake, hail, and trumpet.

At this point, critics are no doubt saying, "Wait, we're confusing apples and oranges. How God behaves in certain events is not the same thing as how we must access him in prayer [they mean, reach 'the silence'] or how God behaves during such prayer." I would counter that they're creating the problem: trying to separate prayer from our normal lives as if it were some elusive thing, as if we have to be initiated into the upper echelons of Christianity's elite before we can do it right. Remember, the torn temple veil is evidence that all believers have perpetual access to God—through Jesus' blood, not through a tedious (dare we say silly?) man-made formula (see Hebrews 10:19-22). True prayer, the opportunity to talk to God, is easy. That's how he designed it.

I offer from the book of Acts a couple of noisy events that included prayer. In Acts 4:24, the believers "raised their voices together in prayer to God." And "after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken" (vs. 31). In Acts 16, Paul and Silas caused a fracas at the marketplace and were beaten, then imprisoned. Next, we have praying and singing in prison, followed by an earthquake, shouting, trembling . . . God acted and released the prisoners. In these events I'm not seeing any trial and error employed while they realigned their spiritual technologies (or possibly the planets) in order to make contact with God.

But we're being led to believe that real knowledge of God comes through a Christianized mantra meditation that takes us into "the silence." Incongruously, this is also described as "an unknowing" (or odder still, "darkness"). But we don't need a knock-off brand of meditation that involves an ethereal floating off into "the void, the emptiness, the nothingness."¹⁴ All we need is biblical meditation. If we look up every concordance entry for *meditate/meditation*, we see that it simply means pondering with our minds the Lord's perfect Word and his mighty works.

His Perfect Word

"Every word of God is flawless" (or pure, perfect; Proverbs 30:5). Psalm 1:2 speaks of the person whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." David said, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." David didn't unlock cosmic wisdom based on his rank as an ascended master; God's commands made him wiser than his enemies (Psalm 119:97, 98). Since "all Scripture is God-breathed," Paul could say that it is "the holy Scriptures" that make us wise (2 Timothy 3:15, 16). When we are truly meditating on God and his Word, our minds are engaged. We gain knowledge of God because he reveals himself to us. He gives us understanding (1 John 5:20). As we hear and apply his Word, the evidence that we know him is seen when we obey his commandments (1 John 2:3-6; 3:24). Further evidence of our relationship is that when we call, he hears; the very short Psalm 34 says it four times! (See also John 9:31 and many other passages.)

His Mighty Works

We are to "remember the days of long ago" and "meditate on all [God's] works and consider what [his] hands have done" (Psalm 143:5). That's what the troubled writer of Psalm 77 did. In his despair, a solution hits him: he will recall the great things the Lord has done. He names a few in this passage, but I picture him falling peacefully asleep as he remembers a list that never ends. Meditating on God's mighty works reminds us of who he is, of his love and power. And that will make us praise him *to* him. Any number of Scriptures picture God's children addressing him as great, marvelous, worthy of praise, etc. (for example, Psalms 57:9-11; 108:1-5; compare Revelation 15:3).

A ripple-effect purpose of thinking deeply about God's works is to make sure we always have them in mind. Then to others we can gladly and readily "declare [his] marvelous deeds" (Psalm 71:17). And of utmost importance is to pass

along that knowledge to our children. Psalm 78:4 says, “We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.” (See also Psalm 145:4, 5.)

As we continually give attention to his perfect Word and praise his mighty works, we come to know him (not *unknow* him) better and better. And then as we go about our living, just doing our best to follow him, he provides and acts.

So enough of this notion that the Lord holds himself at bay until we reach mystic enlightenment and realize that “God’s first language is silence.”¹⁵ The Lord is not absent until we release his energy in some “sacred space” by saying a “sacred word” and going into the “sacred silence.” The Lord is not limited in *any* way—nor is he programmable or capable of being manipulated or conjured either. Shame on us for such implications! Let’s be more careful about swallowing the latest spiritual fad without thinking it through and measuring it against Scripture.

Almighty God, the creator of the universe, speaks to us as we read his Word when we sit in porch-swing silence. He listens when we talk to him in prayer. That’s amazing! He is also present and intervenes in our noisy lives, in spite of or along with the noise. No problem. And sometimes . . . sometimes he’s been known to cause the noise himself as he thunders and shakes the earth (see Psalm 18:7, 13), blasts a trumpet (Exodus 19:16), drops fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:38), sends messengers who sound like the roar of rushing waters or a great army (Ezekiel 1:24) . . .

He’s a big noisy God.



Notes

1. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 71–72.
2. Steve May, “Silence and Solitude,” *Crash Course on Psalms* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2009), p. 74.
3. John Callanan, *God in All Things: The Spiritual Exercises of Anthony de Mello* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 16.
4. Mother Teresa, www.brainyquote.com.
5. Henry Cloud, CNN, “Being Still: Helpful Hints with Dr. Henry Cloud.”
6. For a list of quotes promoting “the silence” by New Age mystics (such as Wayne Teasdale and Wayne Dyer), evangelical Christians (such as Beth Moore and Dallas Willard), and Catholic contemplatives (such as Henri Nouwen), go to: <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/thesilence.htm>.
7. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988 revised edition), p. 103.
8. <https://gravitycenter.com/practice/breath-prayer/>; <http://orthodoxprayer.org/Jesus%20Prayer.html>; and others.
9. Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996 revised edition), p. 215.
10. I originally saw this in a program description of Richard Rohr’s spot on the Dalai Lama event in Louisville May 2013 (<https://centerforinterfaithrelations.org/2013-festival-of-faiths>). It appears on various other sites. Rohr is described on his own site as “a globally recognized ecumenical teacher bearing witness to the universal awakening within Christian mysticism” (<http://www.cac.org/richard-rohr>).
11. Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Creator* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983), p. 237.
12. John Callanan, *God in All Things: The Spiritual Exercises of Anthony de Mello*, op.cit., p. 4.
13. Interspiritualists Wayne Teasdale, Michael Tobias, “A Parliament of Souls in Search of a Global Spirituality” (KQED Inc., San Francisco, CA, 1995), p. 148.
14. The more complete quote is: “When one enters the deeper layers of contemplative prayer one sooner or later experiences the void, the emptiness, the nothingness . . . the profound mystical silence . . . an absence of thought.” Thomas Merton biographer William Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 13.
15. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 153.