"Why Does God Hide Himself"

4 Dec 1955

[Montgomery, Ala.]

Preaching to his Dexter congregation on the eve of the Montgomery bus boycott, an event triggered by the 1 December arrest of Rosa Parks, King draws upon a 1947 sermon by Robert McCracken. King seeks to elucidate "the awful silence of heaven" in the face of evil such as "imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression." He used this metaphor to tremendous effect the following evening at the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).

[Isaiah 45:15]3

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Introduction—Long centuries ago, when proud Babylon ruled the world, the Great Isaiah cried, "Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior." How often through the centuries has this cry risen to human lips of late. We ourselves have not been unfamiliar with it. We have seen imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression. We have seen evil in the form of calamitous wars, which left battlefields painted with blood, filled nations with orphans and widows, and stacked up national debts higher than mountains of gold, and sent men home psychologically wrecked and physically handicapped. And God did not intervene. The awful silence of heaven remained unbroken. We appealed to God in desperate tones to intervene and defend his right. But still evil continued to rise to astronomical proportions. Our generation feels afresh what Keats called "the giant agony of the world." Small wonder that some like H.G. Wells complained bitterly "He is an ever-absent help in time of trouble." And others cried out with the earnest believer Carlyle "God sits in heaven and does nothing."

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1 According to a Dexter program from 4 December 1955, King delivered a version of this sermon. King kept a copy of McCracken's 27 April 1947 sermon "Why Does God Hide Himself?" in his homiletic file.

2 The overflow crowd reacted with thundering applause when King exclaimed, "And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." (King, MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, in Papers 3:72)

3 "Verily, thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior."

4 McCracken, "Why Does God Hide Himself?" "How often through the centuries that cry has risen to human lips! Of late we ourselves have not been unfamiliar with it."

5 McCracken, "Why Does God Hide Himself?" "And God did not intervene. The awful silence of heaven remained unbroken. We pleaded with Him to manifest Himself and defend the right."

6 John Keats, "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream" (1819).

7 McCracken, "Why Does God Hide Himself?" "What wonder that some like H.G. Wells complained bitterly, 'He is an ever-absent help in time of trouble.'"

In a real sense every true believer has had to accept the fact that he is worshipping a God that is partially hidden. 

Consider how God hides himself in nature. In saying this I am not forgetting the fact that for many nature is the very handiwork of God. But this is only one side of the picture. Nature is often cruel. Think of the pain and suffering inflicted upon thousands of people by some dread disease which they are not responsible for. Think of the disastrous effects of floods and tornadoes. Where is God when all of this is happening? "Verily he is a God that hideth himself."

Consider how God hides himself in history. Cromwell said to the man whom he appointed to tutor his son, "I would have him taught a little history." We know why he said what he did. He believed that the study of history inclined one to a sane, balanced and reverent judgment. But not all lessons that history teaches are lessons that inspire and quicken faith. So often when we look through the long corridors of history, what do we find? Might triumphing over right, Christ on a Cross and Caesar in a palace, truth on the scaffold and wrong on the throne, the just suffering while the unjust prosper.

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9 McCracken, "Why Does God Hide Himself?" "Consider how He hides Himself in nature. In saying that I do not forget that for many nature is the very handwriting of God."

10 The Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, looked to nature for inspiration and fulfillment.

11 Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was a Puritan politician and military leader during the English Civil War, which led to the defeat of King Charles I. Cromwell ruled England as Lord Protector from 1653 until 1658. In 1649 Cromwell wrote to his son’s mentor, Richard Mayor, "I would have him mind and understand business, read a little history, study the mathematics and cosmography." (The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell with Elucidations by Thomas Carlyle, vol. 1 [London: Methuen, 1904], p. 451)

12 McCracken, "Why Does God Hide Himself?" "Consider, too, how God hides Himself in history. Cromwell said to the man whom he appointed to tutor his son, 'I would have him taught a little history.' We know why he said what he did. He believed that the study of history inclined one to a sane, balanced and reverent judgment. But not all the lessons that history teaches are lessons that inspire and quicken faith. So often when we delve into the story of the past, what do we find?"

13 King underlined a paraphrase of James Russell Lowell's 1844 poem "The Present Crisis" in his copy of McCracken’s "Why Does God Hide Himself?" "Might triumphing over right, the race to the swift and the battle to the strong, truth on the scaffold and wrong on the throne, Christ on a Cross and Caesar in a palace" (p. 39).