

Why Does God Hide?

By David Feddes

If God exists, and if he wants everybody to believe in him, why does he hide? Why doesn't he show himself or do something so spectacular that it leaves no room for doubt?

Many of us wonder about that. The late philosopher Norwood Russell Hanson taught at Yale University. Hanson didn't believe in God, but he said he'd be willing to change his mind under certain conditions. Hanson wrote:

Suppose ... that on next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world are knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls; leaves drop from trees; the earth heaves and buckles; buildings topple and towers tumble; the sky is ablaze with an eerie, silvery light. Just then, as all the people of this world look up, the heavens open—the clouds pull apart—revealing an unbelievably immense and radiant Zeus-like figure, towering above us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays across the features of his Michelangeloid face. He then points down—*at me*—and exclaims for every man, woman, and child to hear, “I have had quite enough of your too-clever logic-chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured, N. R. Hanson, that I do most certainly exist.”

Hanson went on to say, “Please do not dismiss this example as a playful, irreverent Disney-oid contrivance. The point here is that *if* such a remarkable event were to transpire, *I* for one should certainly be convinced that God does exist.”

Doesn't Hanson have a point? God could certainly make it a lot easier for everyone to believe in him, couldn't he? Sometimes it seems that God keeps himself so well hidden that it's hard even to believe he exists. Why doesn't God silence all scoffers by making a public appearance?

Where Is Your God?

The hiddenness of God isn't a problem just for atheists. The prophet Isaiah was no atheist, but he still wished God would do more to show himself and demonstrate his power. In Isaiah 64:1-2, he prayed, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ...[C]ome down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you.” When Isaiah said this, the Lord had been keeping a low profile. It was hard for God's people to trust him and easy for God's enemies to ignore him. Isaiah wanted God to come out of hiding and unleash his power for all to see. Isaiah wanted the Lord to do pretty much what N. R. Hanson suggested.

Sometimes, even when you know God exists, he still doesn't feel very near, and his ways don't seem very clear. You wish he would do something dramatic not only to silence unbelievers but also to encourage believers. Many believers go through spiritual dry spells. Maybe you know what that is like. You believe in God, but you don't really sense his presence, and your heart feels empty and dry. That's how David felt when he wrote in Psalm 42, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” It's hard when you're panting for God, and he's nowhere to be found.

The problem becomes even more intense when you're feeling crushed by hardships and pain, and God remains hidden. You call on the Lord, you pray to him with all your might, but nothing happens. The cancer keeps advancing, or the marriage keeps crumbling, or society keeps going downhill. You keep praying, but God keeps hiding, and the only answer you get is silence. As the writer of Psalm 88 put it, "I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" (v. 13-14).

Good question! Why does God hide when it seems we need him most? Why doesn't an atheist get a revelation of God that he simply can't deny? Why doesn't a Christian going through a spiritual dry spell always get a supernatural experience to refresh her spirits? When people in trouble pray and pray, why doesn't God give them a miracle or at least an explanation? Why is it so hard to see God at work in the events around us? In Isaiah 45:15 the prophet says, "Truly you are a God who hides himself." Why is that? What possible reasons could God have for hiding himself?

Seeing His Face

You might think that if God exists, he should show his face and remove all possibility of doubt. That's what you'd do if you were God! But be careful what you ask for. When you demand to see God's face, you may end up with more than bargained for.

According to the Bible, the day is coming when the Lord won't hide any longer. He's going to do exactly what unbelievers say he should do if he's really God. Jesus is going to crack open the skies, he's going to shake the earth, and he's going to make a public, earth-shattering appearance that will leave no room for doubt. He will show himself, and everyone will see his face. However, the moment the Lord does that, it will be too late for those who don't already belong to him. Listen to this vision from Revelation 6:

There was a great earthquake... The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (v.12,14-17)

These people would rather be buried in a landslide than stand in God's awful presence. His face is an unbearable terror to them. When the Lord stops hiding himself, they will try to hide themselves. They will find his majesty and purity unbearable.

If you say you won't believe in God unless he shows himself openly and convincingly, watch out! If God met your demand, you wouldn't just calmly change your mind and say, "Well, now I've got my proof. I guess God exists after all." No, you'd instantly be terrorized and repelled by the awful splendor of God, and you'd be lost forever.

The Bible says that God hides himself and delays the public return of Christ because "he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). When God hides himself, he leaves room for doubt, but he also leaves room for repentance. When God stops hiding, there will no longer be room for either. The Lord's face will have an eternal and overwhelming attraction for those who have learned to love him in his hiddenness, but his face will have the opposite effect for all others. His irresistible holiness will repel them and send them hurtling away from him into the oblivion of hell.

So don't be too quick to demand the kind of encounter with God that will occur only at Jesus' second coming. First make sure you've accepted the Lord in his first coming. In Jesus God came as a humble man rather than in divine glory. The Lord hid himself in humility in order to reveal himself in a form that would save us rather than destroy us. God's hiddenness may sometimes be a source of frustration, but don't forget: it's also the source of salvation. At one level, then, we can say that God hides himself because he is patient and merciful with sinners. He's giving more time to repent and prepare to meet him face to face.

Why Not More Miracles?

Still, you might wonder, even if God hides his face in order to spare us, couldn't he make himself a bit more obvious? He wouldn't have to show himself directly; he could just do a few supernatural things now and then to prove he's alive and well. Why doesn't God do more miracles to impress us?

Well, God *has* done some amazing miracles. He parted the Red Sea for Moses; he toppled the walls of Jericho for Joshua; he sent fire from heaven at Elijah's request. But even if we believe these amazing stories in the Bible, they don't really solve our problem. We haven't seen the sea parted lately or walls tumbling or fire from heaven to prove unbelievers wrong.

Jesus himself performed many miracles during his time on earth, but today we don't see miracles on the scale of Jesus' miracles. Oh, there may be an occasional reduction of arthritis pain, or an unexpected recovery from cancer, or an amazing occurrence once in a while—but miracles like Jesus performed? When was the last time you saw someone blind from birth given his sight, or 5,000 people fed out of one lunch box, or a man walking on water, or a dead person raised to life again? Even if the Lord hides his face in order to spare us, why doesn't he at least show more of his hand and reveal himself through miracles as mighty as those in the Bible?

That's a tough question, and I don't have an easy answer. In some ways the answer is as hidden as God himself. But here are a few things to keep in mind.

One is that God is the Creator and sustainer of everything that exists. He's constantly at work, even when he's not doing what we might label "miracles." The ordinary workings of creation are God's work just as much as the extraordinary working of miracles. Without the eyes of faith, we may think God is doing nothing, when in fact he's upholding and directing everything.

Another fact to remember is that God is free. He can do miracles whenever he pleases, and he can refrain from doing miracles whenever he pleases. He can say "yes" to our prayers for a miracle, and he can say "no." He's God; we're not. He's free to do as he pleases.

Still another thing to remember is that miracles don't have a very good track record of changing people's hearts. If you don't love God already, you're not going to start loving him just because he gives a supernatural demonstration. When God sent the ten plagues on Egypt, Pharaoh simply became more stubborn with every one. When God gave the Israelites manna in the wilderness, they grumbled more than ever. When Elijah called down fire from heaven to demonstrate God's power, Queen Jezebel tried all the harder to kill Elijah. And when Jesus did his miracles, his opponents either tried to explain them away or else credited them to the power of Satan. Eventually they seized him and crucified him.

God's Hiding Place

Jesus' supreme achievement didn't occur in any of his miracles but in his death. His miracles didn't remove anyone's sin; only his death could take away the sin of the world. The ultimate revelation of God's glory didn't occur in impressive miracles but in the disgrace of the cross. Nowhere was God more hidden in deeper darkness and nowhere was he more clearly revealed than at the cross. So if we look for God only in miracles, we may never find him at all, but if we look for God at the cross of Christ, we'll find him every time.

We tend to have our own ideas of where we should be able to find God and what God ought to be like. We imagine that God ought to do what we would do if we were God. If we were God, we'd use our power every chance we got. We'd show off a little. But the Lord often prefers weakness to power. If we were in charge of the world, we'd grind our enemies into the dirt and give our friends every miracle they ever wanted. But the Lord is often kind to his enemies and puts his friends through difficult trials.

If we had been in Jesus' shoes—a ridiculous thought, since we're so unlike Christ—but if we had been in Jesus' shoes, we'd have taken every opportunity to prove who we were. But Jesus often preferred to hide himself. Even when he did miracles for people, he often instructed them to tell no one. And he always refused to do miracles when his opponents demanded supernatural signs. Even when he was being tortured, Jesus refused to use his divine power. Some mockers laughed at him and called for him to come down from the cross if he were really their Messiah and king, but Jesus took the abuse and kept hanging there. Is that what you or I would have done if we had the power to rescue ourselves? We wouldn't have kept suffering. We'd have saved ourselves and put the hurt on our enemies. But Jesus stayed on the cross and kept suffering until he died.

Even after his resurrection, the Lord didn't do what you or I would have done. He appeared only to certain select witnesses before he returned to heaven. Everybody watched Jesus die, but how many saw him after his resurrection? In Jesus' place, we'd have made a grand appearance to the entire city of Jerusalem and said, "I told you so!" Instead, Jesus appeared to some people who loved him—a few hundred in all—and then returned to heaven. Everybody else would simply have to take their word for it that Jesus was alive.

You and I would not have handled things the way Jesus did. That's one more proof that God is God and we're not. He's not like us. He isn't like we imagine him to be. He doesn't do what we expect him to do. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The Lord doesn't consult us when he's deciding what to do. He does things his way, in his time, for his purposes. As the apostle Paul put it, religious people demand miracles, and educated people want wisdom, but the gospel message is Christ crucified. That sounds offensive to miracle-lovers and crazy to intellectuals, but to those who are being saved, Christ crucified is God's power and wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

If you want to find the God who hides, you can't just look where you'd expect him to be based on what you would do if you were God. You need to seek God as he really is, and you need to know where he's hiding. He's not hiding in a logical proof or a sensational miracle. His favorite hiding place is in the message of the cross. That's where you'll find him.

Here we see another reason God hides himself: he wants to humble us. The way of God is the way of the cross, and the way of the cross is the way of humility. The cross humbles us by

showing that we're sinners in need of Jesus' sacrifice, and it humbles us by ignoring our demands for supernatural signs and logical proofs and showing us that our qualifications don't count for much. The Lord is God, and we're not. We have to depend on him completely for our salvation and for everything else. Only then are we ready to know him at all. Only then can we meet him face to face.

Why Must Believers Struggle?

But what if you're already a Christian? Why would God hide from you? You've trusted in Jesus' death and resurrection, you've trusted the Holy Spirit to fill you and lead you, and yet you may still have times when God seems distant and far away. Your soul is dry. Your heart feels empty. You're going through a spiritual drought, and God is hiding. What's going on?

Or maybe you're facing a terrible tragedy or hardship. Awful things have been happening, and God hasn't done much to improve the situation in spite of all your prayers. Why not? Why would God hide himself even from someone who already belongs to him?

Again, I don't have easy answers, but let's look at this from the opposite angle. What would happen if you felt close to God twenty-four hours a day, if you always understood everything he was doing in your life, if you never found anything in the Bible puzzling, if all your prayers were answered with a "yes," and if God gave you all kinds of supernatural abilities? Sounds like heaven on earth, doesn't it? But what would really happen?

The Bible gives an example. The church in the city of Corinth was one where God gave people great insights and miracles and supernatural powers. But this church, with all its knowledge and blessings, turned out to be terribly unspiritual. They were so proud of what they knew that they became know-it-alls. They became so satisfied with miracles and supernatural experiences that some of them even thought the resurrection wouldn't be necessary. They thought they already had it all; they didn't need anything more.

What happened in Corinth shows what can happen to us if God pours too many good things on immature Christians who still have many sins and weaknesses. If we know too much, it can make us proud. If we're blessed too much, it can make us complacent. We know something of God, and if we're not careful, we start to think we know it all. We think we can figure him out for ourselves. We think we're experts on God. We become proud that God is our pal, that we know him up close and personal, and a lot of other people don't. Knowledge can lead to pride, and blessings can lead to complacency. If our lives are one spiritual high after another, one answer to prayer after another, if God makes everything go just the way we want, we could get so satisfied with life here and now that we don't much care whether Jesus comes again to make all things new. Who needs the second coming or the final resurrection? We've already got it all! But if we're less comfortable, less complacent, we're more eager for Jesus to return and more eager for the heaven and the new earth.

Humble and Hungry

That may be at least part of the reason God hides himself even from Christians, why he allows us to go through spiritual dry spells, why he sometimes sends trials instead of blessings. God hides himself to make us humble, and he hides himself to make us hungry. He makes us humble by showing us how little we know him or understand his ways, and he makes us hungry for heaven by letting us feel the pain and brokenness of this present world.

Right now, we're still a long way from heaven. We see dimly; only later will we see face to face. We walk by faith, not by sight. We must not only trust in Christ crucified, but we must walk the way of the cross ourselves. This doesn't mean we should stop longing for heaven. It just means we realize we're not there yet. It doesn't mean we stop longing for a richer relationship with God; it just means we realize how far we have to go.

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul wrote, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God." According to Paul, one of the most important things you can know about God is that no matter how well think you know him, you still don't know him very well. What matters is that he knows you, and that he's moving you to love him.

In Isaiah 45 the Bible says, "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel... But Israel will be saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced." Just a few verses later, this God who hides himself says, "I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said ..., 'Seek me in vain.'" It's hide and seek: God hides so that we will seek him, for only the seeking heart, the heart that is humble and hungry for God, can ever be ready to know God as he truly is.

Sometimes God teaches us more by making us ask hard questions than by giving us easy answers. He shows as much about himself by what he hides as by what he reveals. The Lord shows enough of himself in Christ and in Scripture to give us faith and hope and love, and at the same time he conceals himself enough to make us humble and to make us hunger all the more for the day when we see him face to face and he makes all things new.

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