

Series: FEAR AND PEACE: God Is Where He's Supposed to Be When Life Isn't

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 1, 2020

WHERE'S GOD?

Philippians 4:4-6

SPEAKER: KEN DAVIS

1. Every summer in mid-July, close to 2000 people would gather at a very primitive camp near our house in Pennsylvania called **Mahaffey**. No showers, no flush toilets, wooden dorms with single lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling in rooms—we're talking **primitive!** I was in charge of the youth—close to 500 of them! There was no lake, no sports center—just a big wooden, primitive building for them to gather in.

-Surprisingly, teens **loved** to come there. We worked **hard** at it--and we did have a great time together. For many of them, it was the spiritual highlight of their year. We had a morning service—and an evening service. And it was in **those** gatherings that a lot of the teens would connect—and **reconnect** with God. They were on a high. I know, because **I** was too!

-As I watched their lives—and as **they** experienced renewal—it was clear... **There's God!** Only God could change hearts and speak to kids that consistently—and in a **very** primitive setting! But I **also** knew this; a lot of those teens would go home, fresh from the **There's God!** moment—and within months—probably weeks—be asking, **Where's God?**

-They'd hit temptation, meet up with an old boyfriend or girlfriend, come back to a home where parent's screamed at each other—or go back to high school—we know what **that's** like. And the tenderness and goodness and support they felt would be gone—and they'd ask, **Where's God?**

- a. I wish I could say that's limited to the up and down emotions of the teen years—but, honestly, it's **not!** If you walk with God for any length of time, there will be moments when God is **so very present**. It's like He's dropping answers to prayer in your lap and whispering to your heart every day. And then you hit a season of silence where you think, **Where is God when I need Him most?!**

-HE doesn't act like He's supposed to act. You pray—and ask for His intervention—and **He doesn't do what you expect Him to do!** You know **exactly** what **you'd** do for you if **you** were God!

- b. You may be thinking, "Okay, Ken—I thought this series was supposed to be about **FEAR & PEACE!?**" So, here's the connect. Our world, for the past 7 ½ months has been in lockdown because of COVID. People, for the most part, have been banished to their homes. **The problem is that their homes are being pumped full of fear, 24/7.**

-So people are locked inside by this fear of getting sick, fined, or shamed. The only outside links are: a) internet, b) social media and, c) TV. And those links speculate **endlessly** on how bad it is, who has COVID, what the numbers around the world are, and what **idiot's** leaders are for opening anything up.

-Add to this the financial impact, job loss, shutdown of education, travel, entertainment, and many businesses—and **that** is a recipe for anxiety. Put people in a context like this—kids inside, parents home from work—and trying to **work from home**—shut in with the constant fear that others have a disease that could kill you or your family—and **that** creates...**FEAR!**

- c. Fear, see, has a way of hunting you down, sneaking around corners, grabbing you by the throat. And our fears say, **Where is God—and does He even CARE?** And my **answer** is—he’s right here—and He **does** care!

2. How many of you have ever asked the question, **Where’s God?** Well, you’re **not alone!** Read just about any narrative from the Bible, and you could write again and again in the margins, **Where’s God?** And then, **Oh—THERE’S God! BTW**, this content is not original with me. I got the idea from Andy Stanley who did a great series on this issue years ago. To start, what I’d like to do is just take a short trip with a group of people from the Bible called the **Israelites**. **Where’s God** is their story! Let’s start with Moses.

*Israel gets to Egypt as a favored people with Joseph as Prime Minister. Clearly--**There’s God!**

*But Joseph dies—and a new Pharaoh comes who doesn’t know Joseph—and enslaves Israel—for 400 years! **Where’s God?**

*God blesses Israel—and they multiply like crazy. **There’s God!**

*But their numbers created a problem, and Pharaoh forces them to throw their male babies into the Nile. **Where’s God?**

*One Mom puts her baby in a little basket and floats it into the Nile while his sister, Miriam, watches. Pharaoh’s daughter finds him, adopts him, and names him Moses—and hires his Mom as his nurse. He’s raised in the palace and is set up to lead the country and in an ideal place to free the Israelites. **There’s God!**

*But as an adult, he gets angry and kills one of Pharaoh’s managers—and becomes a fugitive—caring for another man’s sheep in the desert until he’s an old man—and the people continue to suffer. **Where’s God?**

*But God reveals himself to Moses—and sends him back—**now** with skills in leading the Egyptian culture **and** desert survival. **There’s God!**

*But Pharaoh refuses to let them go and makes things worse. **Where’s God?**

*God sends ten plagues that judge the gods of Egypt—and **forces** Pharaoh to let them go. **There’s God!**

*But he changes his mind and traps Israel at the Red Sea—and the people rebel against Moses. **Where’s God?**

*In a dramatic act of power, God actually **parts** the sea for Israel to cross—and closes it on the Egyptian army. **There’s God!**

- a. Read the book of Psalms—written by David—and it alternates back and forth—almost Psalm to Psalm. **God is glorious in power, rules the earth—sovereign over all things! There’s God!!**

*Then, “God, how come the fat cats get ahead and everyone loves them and laps up what they say—and I get punished every day? **Where’s God?**

*God, you are mighty and strong! You give us victory! **There’s God!**

Oh my God—how come You’ve forsaken us—and never go out with our armies?? **Show up! Where’s God?

- b. Why? Because David’s **life** is a “Where’s God—There’s God” story. And this story **continues** throughout David’s lifetime and beyond. You read the record of the kings that followed him. **Where’s God? Nowhere in sight!** Oh, **There’s God!**

-And this continues right down to the exile, where Nebuchadnezzar rips apart and burns the magnificent temple Solomon built—and hauls the best of Israel off to Babylon. What about the promise to Abraham? What about the prophet Isaiah’s words about a Messiah to be born? **Where’s God?** But against that dark sky, the stars shine. Daniel becomes an advisor to all the emperors—and writes an **amazing** “what’s next” book.

-The next emperor actually sends a guy named Nehemiah back to Jerusalem and bankrolls the entire rebuild of the temple. A Jewish girl named Esther wins a beauty contest—but becomes way, **way** more than eye candy. Esther becomes queen—and **saves her people. There’s God...oh yes, and There’s God!**

- c. But then Israel has this **400 years of waiting in dead silence!** The Messiah is **clearly** promised. God is going to still save His people—and Israel will bless the nations...but **how?** They come back to their land. And they’re ruled by the Babylonians, and then the Persians—and then the Greeks.

-And then this monstrous nation Daniel prophesied about, Rome - comes and oppresses them. **Where’s God? Where IS He? Why doesn’t He just let us know what’s going on?**

-And one day, an angel shows up to a young teenage girl, Mary—and tells her that even though she’s a virgin, she’s going to have a son. And His name will be Jesus. And he will be **very** great—and take the throne of his father...David! **Where’s God?** Well, there He is—as a baby forming in Mary’s womb. Then crying—lying in the straw of a cattle trough.

-He doesn’t at **all** like what God **ought** to look like, but there he is in the temple surrounded by puzzled Rabbis. And there he is building houses and laying stone in courtyards. And there he is being baptized—and healing people—and teaching everyone what God looks like—that God is **always** good, **always** loving, **always** forgiving and kind and generous. **There’s God!**

-But in the most profound ***where's God moment of all time***, Jesus—***There's God!***—gets condemned as a liar, a blasphemer and a fake—and nailed to a cross. ***Where's God?***

-Then right before He dies, He calls out, ***Where's God? Why have you forsake me?*** The answer? Silence. Just the “***Drip, drip, drip***” of blood from the cross into the dirt. Jesus is dead—his movement is crushed, his Followers seriously disillusioned! ***Where's God?***

-Three days later, Jesus walks out of the grave. ***THE most profound There's God moment in history!*** He spent 40 days with His followers—and finished by saying, “Okay—I'm turning the whole thing over to you. Tell the world about me—and I'll always be with you! I'll be ***back!***” And then he left and hasn't been seen since. But He's ***there! He promised!***

3. A ***lot*** of people these days are looking for some kind of hope and reassurance. Some, I think, are saying either verbally—or without words, “***If there's a God—where is He?***” Just when we feel the pressure lifting—a little—we're told, ***COVID's back! Go home! Hibernate! Wear a mask Stay away from people! We're going back to Stage 2!***

-I have a problem with a system that only ***creates*** fear—and then appears to be using it to control people's behavior and sell them news. See, there's a difference between ***fear*** and ***caution***.

-The Jewish Scriptures are ***full*** of verses that tell people to be ***cautious***. You know, what kind of skin diseases and rashes to watch out for—and the kinds of mildew and mould to watch out for and how to deal with this stuff. It wasn't said as part of a religious ritual—it was good old-fashioned ***caution!*** “God cares about your health! You don't have microscopes yet, so He's giving you a heads up!” ***Caution!***

-We're told to ***fear God***. That doesn't mean that we run away—scared. It says, “Respect Him! Honor Him! Don't flip Him off or ignore Him to make life easier!” In fact, we're told again and again throughout the entire Bible—366 times—***DO NOT BE AFRAID!*** Why? Because God is ***with you***—and He's bigger than any problem you'll ever face.

- a. The problem I have with the COVID info stream is that the fear being created is destructive. And this is clear in the kinds of things that are escalating—like violence; like the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Like people actually ***being afraid of others*** and avoiding them.

-Let's be clear about ***fear***, okay? We humans are at our ***worst*** when we're afraid. Fear is about adrenaline—***fight or flight***. Fear is intended by God as a short-term reaction to get our attention and tell us that something's wrong. When fear becomes the ***fuel*** for life, it's very destructive. It destroys our health, it wrecks our peace, it steals our joy, it sabotages our hope and it has a profound effect on our ability to love and even ***think*** about others--things that God wants for us.

-Over time, fear can degrade into anxiety, which is a kind of low-grade, non-descript, awful feeling down inside that something ***bad*** is going to happen. Respect

and caution—is from God. Fear—as a way of living is **not** of God! In fact, fear can cause us to not see God or what He’s doing.

- b. The antidote is something that God has been offering for **years** to every human heart, every relationship we have—to every receptive place on this planet. The Hebrew word is **shalom**. It’s peace—but it’s **way** bigger than peace. Someone has described it as, **the way things SHOULD be**. It’s healing, well-being—things fitting together and falling into place.

-It’s **There’s God!** Where’s God? “Well, I can’t point to Him—any more than I can point to the air I breathe—or the love I feel—but I **know** He’s there! And if I don’t actually see Him—my faith will be in **His faithfulness**; my trust will be in His **trustworthiness**.

4. I want to close this talk with a story. Sometimes when the **Where’s God?** phase of life gets prolonged, we can lose hope. And **this** is a real-life, raw story I heard just weeks ago. Lanny Donaho is the CEO of BigStuf Productions, based in Atlanta, GA. He recorded this 15 years ago when he ran a teen camp out of North Pointe Church in Atlanta. It’s a little long—straight out of Lanny’s journal in his words. I think it could help you with your **Where’s God?** questions.

“I was working at the camp for teens—standing at the back, when my phone rang. It was my wife, Peggy, who had to break the news to me that some tests I had taken months before which had seemed to come back good at the time had actually been inconclusive. She had just heard from the doctor that I had cancer. When I heard those words, it was like the lights went out. I felt my insides start to crumble—and I was so scared, I wasn’t even able to breathe.

My mind began to race. I’m standing outside the facility for **Big Stuf Camp**—with 1400 students. They had just finished their worship time and God had **certainly been present just moments before**, but right then my world came tumbling down. I lost it. My greatest fear was there staring me in the face and it’s all I could see. God had just disappeared, and I crumbled and started crying...and couldn’t stop.

Just 12 hours before that call, Andy Stanley (his Pastor) and I had been sitting in a restaurant talking about the series he was preaching at the time wrestling with fear, and he asked me what my greatest fear was, and I explained that at that time, it would be any kind of medical procedure—needles, tubes, surgery, lying in a hospital bed. I just didn’t want to do any of that. It petrified me—and I couldn’t face anything like that. Now, 12 hours later, if I’d been able to think in any humorous way, I would’ve told Andy that my greatest fear was winning the lottery! I actually did wonder if saying my fear out loud **made** it happen!

-So there I was at camp, leading our team and 1400 kids—trying to help them see God—and **I was looking for Him myself!** And there was nothing I could do. Surely there was something I could do to control this—I could control about anything that came up. There had to be a way around any of the procedures I so dreaded. Mind you, I don’t think I was afraid of death at that point—just the procedures that would keep me from dying.

So I got on the internet and looked up **prostate cancer**—and that was a **huge** mistake! All I saw was that about 40,000 men die each year in the US because of the disease. Then I read about the procedures men go through to try to beat it—oh my gosh! There were enough stories on the

web to drive you nuts—even if you didn’t already **have** an unnatural fear! So I cried and I cried and I yelled at God—told Him how good I’d been. I asked Him what He was going to do about it—and why I couldn’t feel His Presence, and what happens to the **peace that passes understanding?** I asked Him if He didn’t know I had this Camp to run and a family to support, and couldn’t He just take care of it—or even if I had to wait, could He give me some signs along the way to give me a bit of peace.

I didn’t hear anything back or feel much like the prayer got through, but I did have this camp to run, so I set it over on a mental shelf for a while and I decided I would face it when I got home, and maybe God would show up then. I finished up camp for the next week and a half; then came home to see the doctor while he explained what he thought we should do. I sat there bawling while he very nonchalantly explained what he would cut and what he would remove and what the recovery process would look like. My wife was with me, and I know she wondered what in the world happened to the guy she thought she had married. And I left there afraid and angry—cause **it just wasn’t fair!**

I was serving, I was making a difference, and this was my greatest fear. “Hey God! Let’s get around this thing, alright?” And I didn’t hear much. We scheduled surgery for mid-August and I stayed miserable. I quit coming to church cause I didn’t want to be around happy people. I sure didn’t feel like worshipping. I went to the Elders and cried for a hour asking them to pray for my healing. That was the only thing I would accept from God. “Hey! I could have quite a testimony about the healing thing—if you’d **heal** me!”

I then asked the doctors to do one more PSA test before my surgery—so that I could show my faith. That way if the PSA number went down, then, hey—I was healed—no surgery, no tubes, no needles, no pain—and a good testimony! The PSA test came back a day before the surgery. The doctor said, “Your PSA had been 9 back in August—now it’s 18.” Nothing I had read said that anyone’s PSA was to be that high. So now I thought I was going to die.

The doctor reassured me—that PSA scores can’t rise that quickly—that the only thing he thought it could mean was that I had an infection and to put the surgery off. If I came in tomorrow, he would give me a shot that would prevent the cancer from spreading and we would do the surgery in 3 months when the infection went away. Not exactly the way I wanted the prayer to be answered, but, hey, lets look up the name of that shot and see if that might be an answer. The internet didn’t help me with that, either. By the time I finished reading the answer, I was sure the shot was going to turn me into a woman.

-And then in 3 months I would have to go through the same emotional trauma again—and face the trauma of surgery all over again. It didn’t look like God was going to do anything, and so I started to do some more research on my own to see what I could do to get out of this.

I **know** I wasn’t thinking straight at the time. I remember one day standing out in a lightening storm hoping—actually, kinda daring God to strike me down. My wife was worried and called Reggie, a friend, to see if he could come and handle this weird guy out in the driveway. God didn’t strike me of course—and I was convinced it was because He was busy attending to someone else—if He even was concerned about me or anyone else.

I had some time before the surgery, so I visited a few more doctors hoping they might say the first doctor was wrong. I actually found out about a place in Mexico that was doing a non-surgical procedure in the back of a warehouse, and all you had to do was show up with \$20,000 bucks in

cash in a suitcase, and they'd heal you. You laugh, but I actually called that place and considered it because I just didn't want to face surgery. Fortunately, a friend talked me out of that.

Meanwhile in my search for a doctor that might help me—I found one who helped me begin to think in the **right** direction. When I walked into his office, he asked me why I was there. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and prayed. And for the first time in a while, I sensed the presence of God.

So I went home and tried to see if God would give me some answers. I picked up the Bible and turned to Romans to see if there was something that would make some kind of sense to me. Before this time, I read through Psalms. I got very frustrated with David. He would praise God in one chapter, then cry out and wonder where He was in the next. All he seemed to be worried about was that his enemies were saying bad things about him, and I had **cancer**.

-And I'll never forget the day I read these words; Romans 8, that said:

Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored. (Romans 8:7-8 MSG)

All of a sudden, I felt that God was saying that He wasn't exactly pleased with me, that I was being selfish. So I'm sitting in my room and I'm having this conversation with God. I said, "Of course I'm focusing on myself; there's something going on with me! Remember? Don't you get it?" And it was like he was saying **back**, "Hey, there's something going on with **Me!** Don't **you** get it?" Then I heard these words: "Hey, I've been here all along, and if you want to get through this, you just focus on me, and you watch what happens. The whole time I thought God was ignoring me, I realized—it was **me** ignoring **Him**. I couldn't see Him very clearly, because the lack of control over my fears was right in the way. So I decided to do that; stop focusing on what I was afraid of and start focusing on Him.

I started to spend an hour or two a day, just walking and worshipping. I got my body in shape for surgery, and my soul was getting in a lot better shape as well. Then a great thing happened one day. I was a week away from having surgery with this new doctor I told you about. I was starting to get nervous again. I was at a friend's office, and he saw how nervous I was, so he put his hands on my shoulders and prayed, "God, take away Lanny's nervousness. Bring someone into his life--or some circumstance into his life--that will prove to him that he's making the right decision here. An hour later, I'm in my office when a girl came in with a note from another girl in her small group. The note was from Susan, a nurse, and she wanted to talk to me about my surgery. I called, and on the other end of the phone was a woman who said:

"Lanny, I know your history, I know what your PSA was in August and I know about your shot, I know you've been to see 3 different doctors"—and named them. "I know you're very nervous about the surgery, and I feel like God has had you on my heart for months, and I'd like you to come and see the doctor that I work for. He's a great surgeon—and I'm a research specialist—especially for prostate cancer. She knew more about that type of cancer than anyone I'd talked with. She said, "Just come and see him. If you want, you can go back to your other doctor, but I just think you should come by." Wow!

I went into that office and had no doubt that I was supposed to be there. I met an excellent surgeon who wanted to take care of me—**and a God** moment that I won't go into now, but the prayer of my friend had been answered and God was in the middle of the whole thing. That doctor did the surgery. It turns out that there are two totally different procedures, and had I gone with the previous doctor who did the procedure differently, there would've been some major complications because of an abnormality that I didn't know about at the time.

So I had the surgery, and the cancer extraction went really well. And when I woke up, sure enough, I had 3 or 4 tubes running in and out of my body, and needles stuck in my skin. But neither of those were as bothersome as the **fear** of them had been. A number of days later I came home—and came home connected still to a few too many things.

A week later I was exhausted—I hated having all the tubes and stuff, but I was headed the next day to the doctors to get the staples and tubes removed. I remember watching a movie with my 13 year old son. Afterward, he turned around and said, “Hey Dad. How long has it been since you knew you had cancer?” I said, “Since I knew something was wrong, it's been almost a year.” He said, “Well, tomorrow, Dad, it's all over.”

Wow! My son letting me know that he loved me in this way! He walked out of the room, and all of a sudden all of the pictures of that year became crystal clear; from the phone call outside the camp facility, to standing out in the rain yelling at God, to doctors visits, to internet information, and a million others.

I began to weep, and then sob—and I couldn't stop. Then in the middle of the deluge of pictures and memories, I felt this huge, warm, invisible, loving hand on my chest, and I grabbed it with both of my hands, and I held onto it. And I heard God say, “Your son is right! It's **over!** I've been with you the whole time—and I'm with you now. I want you to carry on, now, with new confidence—and a new relationship with me. You don't have to cry anymore!”

And I felt a peace come over me like I never, never, **ever** felt before! “Carry on, my wayward son. There will be peace when you're done! Lay your weary head to rest—don't cry no more.” I gotta tell you, I slept better that night—and was more at peace that night having experienced the hand of God and hearing His voice—than I've ever slept in my life.

I looked back, and I saw some things:

*The very day I found out I had cancer, I was at camp—and I was surrounded by my best friends—there was Andy and there was Reggie—**lifting me up. There was God.**

*My family was still hanging in with me—**even though I wasn't the 'best' of me—There was God!**

*I didn't start out with the right doctor, and a lot of things happened that helped me **find** the right doctor—**There was God!**

*People were praying all the time—lots of people—people I didn't even know. **There was God!**

*My friend Reggie took off work to go to the doctor almost every time Peggy and I had to go—and Reggie **never takes off work! There was God!**

- *Andy called called me almost every day. **There was God!**
- *Peggy, my wife, had strength to keep our house and family going when I didn't. **There was God!**
- *I learned how to eat right and exercise. **There was God!**
- *An older guy I'd known for some time called me and said, "You know—you don't have to go through this alone. We're going to meet every week—just to see what God is doing through this. **There was God!**
- *Since then kids at camp whose parents have cancer have come up to me to talk and pray. **There's God!**
- *I learned that I'm really not in control of anything. **There's God!**
- *The surgeon gave my name to a number of other cancer patients—and I've spent hours on the phone with them. **There's God.**
- *It became so much easier to share my faith in Jesus with neighbors and business associates. **There's God.**
- *Fear was replaced by confidence in Him. **There's God!**
- *Cancer's gone—and **There's God!** And I had a new sense that even if it weren't gone, **There's God**
- *And even if it had taken my life, **There's REALLY God! Forever!"**

5. This past week, a good friend, Brian Reynolds, sent me this reminder of my **Trajectory** illustration last week—with the tea bag and the tea cup. The caption reads, **AIM HIGHER!** Can you read the words on the teacup? **I know the plans I have for you...**

-They're actually taken from a **Where's God** moment that Israel, God's people, had when they got hauled off to Babylon—and it seemed like **all** of God's promises to them had vaporized. But Jeremiah had a message for them from God. It's a message I've taken into my heart—cause it's for **me**. And it's a message you need to take into **your** heart—because it's for you, too.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 29:11-14 MSG)

-If you're in the middle of a **Where's God moment** right now—whether it's related to COVID or something else, I'm guessing you'll pray that God will just **stop** the whole mess, heal you, change you, give you a job, fix you or bring your children back—all the things that you **need** to pray.

-But would you add something to that prayer?

Heavenly Father, in your kindness—help me to **SEE** you in this! Just catch a glimpse of you. See, if I don't, I may lose hope. My fear *may* grab me by the throat and pull me under the waves. Do what you *need* to do in this mess, but help me to just see you in it. If I can catch a glimpse of you in this *Where's God* moment, I believe I'll have the faith to carry on and make it through.

-And my prayer for us in closing is this: God, ***we believe—help our unbelief!*** Give us the help to struggle and prevail—to come ***through*** the dark valley. To see the faith and courage of other's like Lanny—and to ***find you*** and ***believe in your goodness*** at this moment when we need you most! Amen!