

“Adam Mabry describes well the feeling of God’s absence, but in those deep moments of sorrow, he digs deeper still—into God’s word and God’s promises, with a raw and unshakable faith in the goodness of God. This book will prepare you for the wilderness that may lay in your future or provide a stream of water for your desert experience today.”

TREVIN WAX, Vice President, North American Mission Board;
Author, *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*

“I love the honesty of this book. Adam is unafraid to voice the questions most of us have but aren’t brave enough to admit to. He doesn’t offer trite answers but rather urges us to name our doubts and bring them to God. If you’ve ever felt God’s absence in your suffering, you’ll find *When God Seems Gone* an able guide to help you navigate that bewildering experience and fill you with hope in the God who will never leave you.”

VANEETHA RISNER, Author, *Walking through Fire* and *The Scars That Have Shaped Me*

“Everyone will eventually face the question of why a loving, all-powerful God allows evil and suffering, and will have to decide whether to turn to God in trust and hope or turn away from him in doubt and despair. In this book, Adam gives us his defense of why he has chosen the route of trust and hope. May it inspire every reader to do the same.”

RICE BROOCKS, Co-founder, Every Nation Churches; Author,
God’s Not Dead

“I love this book. As one who has had many sorrows of late, and as one who has a front-row seat at the trials of others, I’m always looking for books to commend to sufferers that will allow them to see the sun amid the dark clouds. *When God Seems Gone* gives us such hope as it leads us to reflect on various aspects of the encouragement-producing, hope-giving Scriptures.”

TONY MERIDA, Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, NC;
Executive Vice President, Acts 29; Author, *Love Your Church*

“As was the case with the psalmist when he cried out, ‘How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?’ we can know that the feeling of God’s absence may be real but is not true, because the risen Christ will never leave or forsake us. From his own season of trial, Adam does a remarkable job of helping us see that.”

SCOTT SAULS, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *Beautiful People Don’t Just Happen*

“As we suffer, difficult questions emerge in our relationship with God. I believe God gives his people fresh voices to answer these ancient questions in each generation. *When God Seems Gone* has the authentic resonance of an author who has experienced his own trials and suffering while serving God. This book is a helpful read for anyone struggling with their relationship with God during prolonged periods of emotional pain.”

MIKE ZODA, Marriage and Family Therapist; Senior Advisor,
New Rules Collective

"*When God Seems Gone* is exceptional. It's deeply personal, intellectual, Bible-based, and real. I am grateful that Pastor Adam wrote this book, born out of pain, yet so very hopeful and helpful. This book can give you a new perspective on the ways of God, and your way through your valleys and trials."

RON LEWIS, Senior Minister, Every Nation Church,
New York City

"Adam Mabry invites you into his pastor's study for a series of soul-restoring sessions. Looking with raw honesty at the pain of human brokenness, including his own, through a variety of biblical lenses, he brings to us hard-won clarity rather than pat answers."

DAVID A. CURRIE, Dean and Professor of Pastoral Theology,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"When you deal daily with the challenges of quadriplegia and chronic pain, you hunger for Christian encouragement that helps you actually live. Trite answers and thin-skinned platitudes don't cut it. When you hurt, you need firm and unshakable truths that carry you forward into the day with hope and courage. And this is what you'll find in *When God Seems Gone*. I'm convinced its wisdom will help hurting people find their way through the fog of pain and disappointment and into the embrace of the God of the Bible."

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni and Friends International
Disability Center

“If you are in a dark season—hurting, in pain, discouraged, or alone—Adam invites you to embrace your suffering in such a way that it can transform you. He skillfully, warmly, biblically guides you to deeper understanding of yourself and God’s ways to sustain you in your suffering. Pain is real. God is there with you. May you be encouraged.”

GRADY YARBROUGH, JR., Counselor; Executive Coach;
Life Coach

“Adam Mabry cuts right through the typical Christian clichés by voicing the thoughts and feelings that most believers experience but are afraid to admit. If you know what it feels like for God to seem absent, wrong, unfair, or a disappointment, then this is for you. Bring your honest questions and find yourself refreshed with honest biblical encouragement.”

SARAH WALTON, Co-author, *Hope When It Hurts* and *Together through the Storms*

“Adam wrestles with the most fundamental question of human existence, a nagging doubt that afflicts us all, people of faith and agnostics alike: *God, where are you? Why aren’t you speaking to me?* Even if you’re not struggling with his question now, you probably have in the past and will again in the future—and you probably know someone who is in the moment. Let Pastor Adam guide you through those dark nights of the soul. Reading this book, you’ll feel understood, encouraged, and renewed.”

J.D. GREEAR, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, NC; Author, *Just Ask* and *Essential Christianity*

WHEN

GOD

SEEMS

GONE

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ADAM MABRY

The logo for 'the goodbook COMPANY' features the words 'the goodbook' in a lowercase, sans-serif font, with a thin, curved line arching over the word 'good'. Below this, the word 'COMPANY' is written in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font.

*To my wife, Hope,
and my beautiful children,
Alanna, Nora, Cole, and Wyatt,
for the seasons of darkness through which
we have walked,
and the promise of the brightness
of the coming dawn.*

When God Seems Gone

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CONTENTS

Introduction	11
1: When God Seems Silent	21
2: When God Seems Slow	35
3: When God Seems Unfair	49
4: When God Disappoints	65
5: When God Seems Wrong	79
6: What Will You Do When God Seems Gone?	93

INTRODUCTION

The book you're reading is born of pain. And the pain is born of silence.

I've always found silence difficult. I love music, good conversations, laughter, and the din of a crowd. But since I was a boy, sitting still, being quiet, listening before speaking... none of that was natural to me. Silence was enforced with "Shh!" It was demanded by the teacher, expected by the parent, a rule to be followed as I sat in the audience. It was the treatment I received when I'd hurt someone's feelings, and it was the response I got to many of my questions. Silence was not a friend and not an experience I wanted.

Silence is merely an aural experience of absence—the sound that is made when no one is there.

No one to pick up the phone.

No one to answer the question.

No one to speak to.

No one to embrace.

So what does someone who dislikes silence and the absence it entails do? One makes noise, which I did. One becomes busy, which I did. Anything to avoid the gaping maw of loneliness that threatened any moment to open before me if I were alone for too long—if the noise of the world was too quiet. Small wonder, then, that the good news of Jesus seemed so good to me. The very idea that I would never be alone—never be abandoned to the pits of silence—because God himself promised to never leave me. To always speak to me. My young heart embraced this news as the best in the world.

As a teenager I read my Bible because I wanted to hear God speak—to learn the tone of his voice. I prayed because I believed that he listened. I meditated to learn to discover that still, small voice. With age came understanding and experience. I was learning to hear God more clearly, to study the Scriptures more faithfully, and, in the words of the great 17th-century monk Brother Lawrence, to “practice the presence of God” more intentionally. Silence seemed a distant memory, the not-sound of a lostness that was no longer real. It was the unlight of a darkness that had been expelled by the sun.

But age also brought life, and life brought more pain. Death, disease, illness, and mistakes. In such moments I went to God, and God was always there. His word always worked; his voice always broke through. And my heart was eventually warmed, even through hardship. God was always there.

Until one day, he wasn't.

I have experienced a few seasons in my life that were characterized by what felt like extended silence on the part of God, some of which will color the pages of this book.

- Unanswered prayers when I lived on the mission field
- Silence while I was suffering through seasons of intense depression
- The “Not yet,” in response to requests for healing in my family
- The “Where are you, God?” in the midst of pastoral ministry

But I probably don't have to tell you about the feeling of God's absence. You picked up this book because you probably have your own story to tell. And what we likely have in common is the dread, sadness, confusion, anger, and pain that comes rushing into our souls when God seems gone.

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S ABSENCE

The suggestion that God is gone makes no actual sense, of course. God is *always* there. Existence is the most basic property of God. That's why he introduced himself to Moses as "I AM" (Exodus 3:14). So let's get that out of the way up front. I'm not suggesting that God pops into and out of existence like some obscure subatomic particle. Neither am I proposing that God is flippant and flaky—here one minute and gone the next. And I am certainly not suggesting that God is small, like some character out of a myth, unable to be everywhere at once. As a pastor, professor, and theologian, I take rather seriously the promise of God to never, ever leave us (Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5). I know that I know that I know that he never, ever lets his children go (John 6:39). So let us dispense with any objection like "Theologically, God can never be absent." That is obviously true, and I'm not about to contradict it.

In fact, all that good theology seems to make the problem of God's absence that much worse. If God is always there, always present, and never leaves, then why does he seem so, so far away sometimes? The experience of his absence amid the knowledge of his presence threatens to make God seem cruel and uncaring, or even a figment of our imagination. This experience has wrecked the faith of some and repelled the interest of others. Felt long enough, the soft heart calcifies with cynicism or tears in despair.

So, when God seems gone, what are we to do?

WE MUST HAVE AN ANSWER

Of course, if you've read this far, it's likely that you know what God's absence feels like. You've cried over the miscarriage, beseeching heaven, but felt like your prayers simply fell to the ground. Perhaps your child has wandered into hardship, and God's presence seems no longer to characterize your inner life. Maybe you've tasted depression or abuse or abandonment, and you've asked that most universal of questions: "God, are you there?"

Or, maybe you are entering this question not from your own experience but from the experience of others. For the first time in human history, all of us are made aware of the suffering, crime, and evil going on all over the world, all of the time. That little supercomputer in your pocket and those social-media, news, and chat apps you use so often offer you constant streams of the terrible echo of sin's effects in our world. The news stream has become the nihilist's dream. With such technological tethering to the tragedy of others' lives, it has never been more plausible to entertain the possibility that perhaps *God is gone*—that he has vacated our world, leaving us to fend for ourselves. After all, it probably seems that way to those people in that story you just read on your phone.

We must have an answer when God seems gone. In fact, we need more than an answer; we need a practice and a belief. We must understand what the Scriptures have to say about this most wretched of seasons, and when we find ourselves in one we must learn what to do. And not

just for our sake but for the sake of the watchers. All our lives are a stage where we act out a living parable of what we truly believe. When our friends, our kids, and our neighbors see us suffering, and God not doing what we ask, changing how we feel, or responding to our experience of his silence, what is it that they see us believing?

When God seems gone, what do we do?

WHY GOD SEEMS GONE

The Bible offers two basic reasons for the experience of God's absence. The first answer should seem obvious, but I'll say it anyway: sin. The cause of sin produces the effect of separation—not just theologically or philosophically but relationally. If I am flagrantly sinning against the holy and righteous God, I should not act surprised when he seems somewhat distant. The Bible says clearly that when we sin, separation from God follows (Isaiah 59:2). But perhaps you say, “Ah, but Adam, I've ‘prayed the prayer,’ you see. I'm a Christian, so even though I'm choosing to sin, God promises to never leave me.” And to you, I would say yes, if you are in fact a Christian, God will in fact never leave nor forsake you. However, if you go on sinning willingly with no repentance, conviction, or desire to change, you are not in fact a Christian; you are simply deceived (Hebrews 10:26; 1 John 3:6).

Imagine that I am constantly offensive, rude, and abusive to my wife. My heart desires her closeness, but I just have a bombastic personality, and I can get mean sometimes.

God made me that way, after all. I'm just living the truth of my personality. Furthermore, I have needs, so when I sleep around and cheat on her, look at porn, and otherwise violate my promises to her, she should understand. God made my body, after all. Now, if I were to actually live this way, would anyone in their right mind be surprised to discover that my dear wife was somewhat emotionally distant and not exactly chomping at the bit for our next date night? Of course not. You'd be surprised if she was willing to remain my wife at all. Why, therefore, would we feign surprise and indignation when our open rebellion doesn't produce a deep closeness with God—when he seems absent from our moments of prayer? I cannot constantly offend God and then act indignant when he feels far away.

However, the second reason the Scriptures offer for our experience of God's absence is infinitely more complex, textured, and difficult. Sometimes, God seems to choose to pull the felt experience of his presence away. The reader of the Bible can find many times when God is with a particular character, but then they end up feeling alone, sad, afraid, or depressed. Elijah fell into a bog of depression and suicidality after a miraculous victory over the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18 – 19). David wrote about his feelings of fear, sadness, and anxiety even while he was God's chosen king (Psalm 3; 6; 13). The Shunamite woman received a miracle but despaired when her son died (2 Kings 4). In these cases and more, God is there, but his people sure don't seem to feel that way. Now, why on earth would

God do such a thing? And what should our response be when he does? That very interesting question—and the questions it produces—is the topic of this book.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

If you're like me at all, you reach for the firm walls of good doctrine when you feel God's presence in short supply. When my emotions are shaky, I can stand on a rock of truth. But this book is not that book—it is not a theology of suffering, a solution to the problem of evil, or a survey of biblical truth-claims to assure you God is there. Far greater minds than mine have produced wonderful books like that, and any addition that I might make would be a mere restatement of their thoughts in my own words. I'm starting with the assumptions that God is there and that you probably already believe that.

Second, this book is not a voyeuristic exposé of my pain or an attack on those who hurt me, nor is it a catalog of the ways I've felt God to be gone because of what someone else did or did not do to me. Content like that sells, but I don't believe it helps. Such an approach is uncharitable to others, unwise as a way to encourage you, and unlikely to produce any good fruit when God seems gone to you. The pain of my life is just that—mine. And while phrases like “speaking my truth,” “feeling heard,” and “expressing myself” are big in our current cultural moment, they often are accompanied by a lack wisdom, prudence, and charity—all things that God seems to care more about than whether I got to speak my mind. While there certainly

are times when pain must be expressed and hurt must be discussed so that healing can follow, this book is not my version of that. Sometimes our own self-expression turns out just to weaponize someone else's empathy to make us feel "seen." God sees me, and he sees you too, even when you don't feel that way. That's what this book is about—how to process through those moments of silence and make it safely to the other side.

Finally, this book is not the wizened reflections of an old saint who has lived his life and has some Solomonic aphorisms to drop. At the time of my writing, I am not old, I am not sufficiently wizened, and I have no aphorisms to give you. While these pages will weave parts of my story in and out, we'll spend much more of our time seeing, feeling, and learning from the contours of the biblical story to listen to the heart cries of those in the Scriptures who experienced God's absence, and understanding how in the world they got through it.

THE WAY FORWARD

The next few chapters will weave story with Scripture. Each chapter will begin by considering what it is like for God to seem gone. We'll look at men like Habakkuk and Job, David and Jesus, and meditate on their journey through the absence of God. And each chapter will consider our response—how we should think and act differently, and how these things all combine to transform us emotionally and, most importantly, spiritually.

By the end of our brief journey together, I cannot promise you that God will seem near. I can't deliver the voice, the presence, or the experience, or relief from your grief. However, I can promise that you will know what to do when he seems far away. You'll even have some idea of why that might be. Together we'll learn how to live when he seems far away. And when we do, our lives will change. And when he draws near once again, perhaps the fruit God intended to produce in us through his absence will be found in his presence—a beautiful offering of our transformed lives in the company of the God who is there.