

Always Present

BY DAVID JEREMIAH

Houston: *"Expect loss of signal in less than one minute. . . ."*

Apollo 13: "Roger that, Houston, We'll hear from you again on acquisition of signal. . . . So long, earth. Catch you on the flip side."

(After almost an hour)

Houston: *"Thirteen, this is Houston. . . . It's good to see you again."*

Apollo 13: "Good to see you too, Houston."

If you saw the 1995 film, *Apollo 13*, you may remember those lines. As cool and precise as they sound, underneath them lay the fear that gripped the world in April of 1970 during the near-disastrous mission to the moon. An oxygen tank on the Apollo 13 spacecraft blew up and crippled the craft, causing the mission to be aborted. In order to gain speed to return to earth, the craft performed a customary "slingshot" movement around the dark side of the moon, using the gravitational pull of the moon to "fling" the craft back toward earth. But for nearly an hour, behind the moon, the three-man crew would be cut off from communication with earth. For nearly an hour, nearly 250,000 miles from earth, the astronauts could talk—but no one would be listening.

It happened again when the craft re-entered the earth's atmosphere. For nearly three minutes on every space flight reentry, heat and disruption cause a communication blackout. Because of variables associated with Apollo 13's damaged condition, their reentry extended to more than four minutes. When the normal three minutes came and went, Houston began trying to reestablish radio contact, fearing the worst:

"Odyssey, this is Houston. Do you read?" (Silence)

"Odyssey, this is Houston. Do you read me?" (Silence)

"Odyssey, this is Houston. Do you read?" (No reply)

"Odyssey, this is Houston. Do you read?" (Still no answer)

"Odyssey, this is Houston. Do you read me?" (Nothing)

"Odyssey, this is Houston. Do you read?" (Still nothing)

What If God Wasn't There?

What if you called out to the heavens in prayer, uncertain if God was there? "God, do You hear me? Lord, are You there?" The NASA officers in

Houston were talking, but didn't know if the Apollo 13 crew had survived or been burned up in reentry. But they did survive: "Hello, Houston. This is Odyssey. It's good to see you again!"

It's one thing to call out to someone you know is there, but who doesn't answer. There's obviously a reason for their silence. But it's an altogether different thing not to know if anyone is there. Think how you would feel if you had no assurance that God was there when you needed Him. The assurance that God is always present in our life is the Christian's deepest source of security. Even if His answer is delayed (Daniel 10:1-14) or His answer is "No" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), that's okay. What isn't okay is a lack of assurance that God is always present in our lives.

Fortunately, that is not something about which we have to wonder. We will never have to wonder whether God is listening when we speak into the dark: "God, it's me. Are You there?"

The prophet Elijah had a moment of fun (okay, sarcasm) with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel concerning Baal's presence. Baal's prophets called on him for hours to send down fire from heaven to consume a sacrifice on the altar. They danced, yelled, prayed, cut themselves—and the heavens were silent. So Elijah said to them, "Call a little louder—he is a god, after all. Maybe he's off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he's gotten involved in a project, or maybe he's on vacation. You don't suppose he's overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?" (1 Kings 18:27, The Message). But Baal never answered because Baal wasn't there—then or now.

But as soon as Elijah called out to the God of Israel, God responded with fiery answer that consumed the sacrifice. Elijah never doubted God's presence in his life because he knew that God was always there. God never gets distracted, forgets, oversleeps, or goes on vacation.

In fact, even if we try to avoid God's presence—something I don't recommend—we find He meets us around every corner. That's what Jonah discovered when he tried to flee from God and met Him in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. And King David discovered the same thing: "You have hedged me behind and before, . . . Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Psalm 139:5, 7) David may have written this as he thought about his sins of adultery and murder that he tried to conceal. Far better, he concluded, to know that God is always there, even when we wish He wasn't, than to wonder if He is there when we truly need Him.

What If God Is There?

God told the prophet Jeremiah that He "[fills] heaven and earth" (Jeremiah 23:24). And the apostle Paul told the skeptics in Athens that God "is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). That means God is as close to you, right now, as the air you breathe—even closer. Regardless of where you are, what you are doing, or how you are feeling, God is present with you.

• A R T I C L E •

One of the most amazing stories in the Bible about God's presence is when Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers. In spite of this ordeal, the Bible says that God was with him. The official who bought Joseph, Potiphar, eventually put Joseph in charge of all his affairs: "The LORD was with Joseph," even as a slave (Genesis 39:2). Even when Joseph was wrongly accused and thrown into prison, "the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor" with the prison officials (Genesis 39:21).

Interestingly, the Bible tells us what happened as a result of God's presence in Joseph's life. First, Potiphar was introduced to Joseph's God: "And [Potiphar] saw that the LORD was with [Joseph] and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand" (Genesis 39:3). Probably for the first time in his life, an Egyptian ruler observed the influence of the God of Joseph—and was impressed.

Second, because God was with Joseph in prison, Joseph was eventually brought before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to interpret his dreams. Pharaoh was so impressed with the power of Joseph's God, he said, "Can we find *such a one* as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" (Genesis 41:38) As a result of God's presence in Joseph's life, Pharaoh made Joseph second in command over all of Egypt.

God's presence in Joseph's life—along with Joseph's submission to God's plan for his life—resulted in God being acknowledged and welcomed into the royal court of Egypt. And therein lies a significant reason for God being with you and me wherever we are, regardless of the situation: God wants to make His presence known to others through us.

Yes, God is with us for our benefit—to teach us, comfort us, guide us, correct us, encourage us, and celebrate with us. But if we are walking hand in hand with God, by His Spirit, when those who see the hope that we have ask us the reason for that hope . . . that's when God becomes present to others through us (1 Peter 3:15). If we are (like Joseph was) hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, but not crushed, despairing, forsaken, or destroyed because God is present with us—trust me, someone is going to notice. And they are going to want to know why.

And you will have the opportunity to tell someone who thinks God is far off that God is as close to them as they are to you—because God is always present with you by His Spirit. And instead of that person speaking into the darkness and hearing only silence in return, you may have the opportunity to show them what it means to talk to your God, the God who is as close as your very words. And how to hear His answers in reply.

Never forget: God is always present with you. And through you, He can become personally present to others.