

When God Speaks in a Whisper

Since his voice was ruined by surgery, worship leader Bob Sorge has been speaking with quiet authority about faith in the face of frustration.

Why do bad things happen to obedient, faithful Christians? If God allows evil to afflict the believer, is it for punishment or promotion? Does God intend to deliver us out of our troubles?

From the days of Job to today, such questions have plagued millions of people. Rare is the pastor who has a sermon series on unanswered prayer. Charismatic Christians are especially known for expounding on the triumphal life but not dwelling on its perplexities.

Yet the body of Christ is consumed with perplexity and weary of platitudes, says one Missouri pastor, who may be producing some of the most intriguing work available in the United States today on the subject of suffering. Bob Sorge—whose bout with a surgeon's knife nine years ago left him nearly voiceless—has weighed in on the dealings of God with man to a growing audience of listeners around the world.

Now 44, Sorge was pastor of an upstate New York charismatic church in the spring of 1992 when disaster struck. Formerly the director of music at Elim Bible Institute in Lima, New York, he was developing a nationwide worship ministry and had already written a charismatic textbook titled *Exploring Worship*. He had built up his nondenominational congregation from 35 members to several hundred people.

Just before setting out to Singapore for an international worship convention, he noticed a mysterious soreness near his vocal chords. By the time he returned from overseas 10 days later, "It felt," he remembers, "like a marble was lodged in my throat."

Doctors said Sorge had an arytenoid granuloma: an ulcer easily removed by laser treatment. Just before undergoing surgery that August, he was told he would be back in the pulpit within three weeks.

When extreme pain persisted even after the surgery, however, Sorge realized something was terribly wrong: The surgeon's laser work had singed his throat, causing a permanent rawness.

He could only speak an hour a day—and that at a whisper—before pain took over. For a pastor in his prime, whose living depended on his being able to preach and lead worship, the surgical mishap was calamitous.

Thus started Sorge's wrestlings with God, what his wife, Marci, calls "the longest valley of our lives."

"The first year, you walk in denial," Marci says. "The second year, you realize it is not going to go away. It is total blackness. Then, you have to go deep. You have to have answers.

"He has not had an answer of 'Why?' yet," she continues. "It has changed us on how we relate to people who are weak and broken."

When Heaven Is Silent

In 1994 Sorge came out with *In His Face*, a book about the silence of God and why He sometimes delays in answering prayer.

"The first sign that you've been pruned is this: God stops talking to you," he candidly writes. "As frantically as you might beseech heaven, heaven is not talking to you right now."

Instead, he says, if God does speak, it is on an unrelated matter. "Although God may be silent regarding the things you want Him to talk about, He will be speaking to you the things that are on His heart."

Before the tragedy, Sorge had borne the attitude, held by many Christians, that suffering was somehow the sufferer's fault. The common teaching in many circles is that sickness is caused by a lack of faith or a lack of trust in God. But after two years of pain, Sorge says his viewpoint changed.

"God brought me to a new realization that calamity and tragedy come alike to saints and sinners," he writes. "Just because you're having troubles doesn't necessarily mean you're doing something wrong. Joseph made all the right decisions and still ended up in the blackness of prison."

Too many Christians, he says, are like Job's three unhelpful friends: They misdiagnose why a person is suffering and dump more guilt on the sufferer. And charismatics typically espouse a set reason for suffering: "God is disciplining you, and it's your fault."

But the disciplines of God are for promotion, not punishment, he explains. The means God uses to perfect His saints are the same means He uses to punish the disobedient. To the undiscerning, it appears to be punishment.

Naturally, Sorge himself had wondered if he was being punished. He had prayed: "Lord, I've done everything I know to do: I've prayed, I've praised, I've repented, I've fasted, I've rebuked, I've surrendered.

"I've read books, I've quoted Scripture, I've spent time in Your presence, I've reconciled with everyone I could conceive had a problem with me, I've gone on an extended personal retreat in solitude."

The only response he received was Ephesians 6:13: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (NKJV).

“Some victories are gained, not through an aggressive posturing of faith, but by simply standing,” Sorge says. “God didn’t deliver Joseph from prison because Joseph had a dynamic stance of faith, but because he kept his gaze fixed upon God. get powerful revelations for other when it came to his own life, he could see nothing.”

Certainly this was true in Sorge’s own life. Hadn’t he been obeying God when this happened? Hadn’t he been fulfilling God’s call to preach?

Bit by bit, things precious to him began to slip from his grasp. The worship ministry vanished overnight. He clung to his pastorate for six more years, preaching three times each weekend, his lips pressed to a microphone for increased volume. But he couldn’t engage in casual conversations with parishioners, much less counsel people.

“The only thing I could do is lay myself out on the carpet and just say, ‘I love You, Lord,’” he told listeners in a speech once. “I mean, there was no intercession in my life for years. There was nothing.

“I was pastoring at the time, and I thought: Boy, this is really bad. My poor church. The pastor doesn’t even pray for them anymore. I used to pray through the whole directory—every person. I stopped all that. I would prostrate myself and say, ‘I can do no warfare.’

“I felt like the stuffing was taken right out of me. All I could say was: ‘I love You. If this is an attack, I’m lunch. All I can do is love You, Lord.’ As I look back, I am convinced that is the most powerful warfare I could have done.”

Enduring the Testing

Six years after his affliction hit and what was left of his voice grew weaker, Sorge resigned his pastorate at Zion

Fellowship in Canandaigua, New York.

"It's hard to pastor a body of people when you are trying to keep your own head above water," Marci says. "It just came to a place where it became impossible at the relational end."

Chris Wood, now senior pastor at Zion Fellowship and Sorge's assistant for six years, agrees. "It came to a point where the frustration of being a senior pastor and not doing the things his heart yearned to do was too much. He couldn't interact with his staff or congregation."

The one bright spot was a 1994 encounter at a conference featuring speakers Mike Bickle, former pastor of Metro Christian Fellowship in Kansas City, Missouri, and director of the International House of Prayer of Kansas City; and Paul Cain, who operates a prophetic ministry in the same area.

Cain's prophecies over Christian leaders, notably John Wimber, have not been without controversy, but when Tommy Reid, pastor of the host church, suggested Cain might have a word, Sorge was ready to listen.

"Paul Cain prophesied there would be a day of deliverance when [Sorge's] voice will open up," Wood recalls. "We don't know when that day will be, but we're standing with him."

Two years ago, the Sorges moved to the Kansas City area, where Marci volunteers as personnel director for the International House of Prayer, and the family attends Metro Christian Fellowship. By this time, Bob had come out with several books, such as *The Fire of Delayed Answers* and *The Fire of God's Love*, and word had started to get out about his unusual insights.

"People really do listen to him," says Art Cole, a staff pastor at Grace Chapel, a Foursquare church in Tucson, Arizona, where Sorge has been invited to speak twice. "He speaks to issues most Christians have and about which most

don't have answers for."

In fact, Cole adds, inviting Sorge to speak is a bit "like open-heart surgery. It's uncomfortable, but there's healing." Sorge had wryly noted to him that he gets people's attention more without a voice than in the days when he had one.

An old friend of his, Wayne Clarke, who pastors Sabre Springs Foursquare Church north of San Diego, says Sorge galvanized his small congregation when he came there in February 2000.

"God tests our love," Sorge told the Sabre Springs church. "He says, 'Do you love Me?' I said: 'Yes, Lord, I love You. I am crazy about You.' He says: 'What will you do when I offend you? If you hang out with Me long enough, I will offend you.'"

"Because the fact is," Sorge continued, whispering into the microphone the way he has since the botched surgery, "He offends everybody, if you stick with Him long enough. He offended the disciples. He offended the Pharisees. He offended everybody. Finally, Jesus said, 'Are you guys going to leave, too?'"

"And Peter had to admit he was offended, but he said: 'Where else do we go? What are the options? You have the words of eternal life.' But the question He comes back to with Peter is: 'Do you love Me?'"

"The cross is His invitation to love, how much He loved us, and how we can love Him back. Our cross becomes our marriage bed where we express our deepest love for Him. And the sight of us on our cross reminds God of His Son on His cross."

It's an arresting message.

"When Bob is speaking, even in that hushed whisper, there is an intensity that comes across that adds to his message," Clarke says. "Of course you can't be a worship leader or a pastor without your voice. I'm sure he's been pulled through a

knothole backward.”

“I haven’t been able to sing for 7-1/2 years,” Sorge told the Sabre Springs church. “For any of you who can lead worship, you must understand what that can be like. It’s an injury that has radically traumatized and transformed every area of my life.

“As pastor, husband, father, teacher, conference speaker, every area of my life—everything I thought was my identity—was profoundly affected. Everything was shut down, and I found myself in an incredible crisis theologically, emotionally, physically, relationally.

“Virtually every area of my life was touched by this. It catapulted me into a desperate pursuit of God. I’ve discovered that God knows how to make us desperate.”

<P > Ministry From the Heart

A tall, sensitive man who works out of an office in his home, Sorge takes time to bake bread for his wife and three children, who range in age from 12 to 18. His days are filled with writing, answering voluminous amounts of e-mail and managing his Web site, which lists his frequent speaking engagements.

Charismatic pioneer and teacher Judson Cornwall, who has known Sorge since his Elim Bible school days, says his protégé shows a level of spiritual passion and friendship with God rarely seen among worship leaders.

“I believe the future will reveal that Bob’s greatest ministry has been his writings,” Cornwall told Charisma. “There’s a vast difference in tone between Bob’s first and later books. The first was written from his head. The second and others have come from his heart.”

But it is a broken heart, and Sorge admits that just as many Christians are broken by suffering as are transformed by it.

Or they slip into a numb resignation for the rest of their lives.

"There are casualties," he said during an interview in his home in Lee's Summit, Missouri, 20 miles southeast of Kansas City. "Satan is gambling he can turn you into a casualty, and God is testing you to see if you will become a spiritual giant.

"A friend always loves. A friend of God loves God even in the toughest of times. This is the litmus test of friendship with God: Do I still love Him, even when He allows inexplicable trauma to hit my life?

"A lot of conservative evangelical slant on suffering is that God is omniscient, sovereign, and He knows best," Sorge continues. "So we throw up our hands and just kind of cope. That particular approach doesn't satisfy people in crisis. I've had to seek after answers that satisfy me in my pain.

"The key word here is purpose. God has a purpose. The invitation for us is to press violently into it. If you want to find purpose, you first have to find God. Without God, there is no purpose.

"A lot of Christians will say, 'Just don't ask why.' I am not in that camp. Jesus asked why. David asked why. The Bible is full of people who had questions. God is to be wrestled with. He has unfolded purpose to me."

God has accelerated a character change in the dark night of his soul, Sorge says. The pastor often refers to Job, the first book of the Bible to have been recorded.

"That makes it a cornerstone of Scripture," he says. "Satan's accusation is that you have a tyrant for a father. The cynic will look at this and be bitter at God. The saint will be transformed by this."

That's why Sorge doesn't buy the theology that death will deliver him from his afflictions. The scriptural pattern shows that "there is a deliverance God intends for His beloved in this life," he says. "The pattern of Scripture is that God's man is eventually vindicated.

"My conviction is that God has allowed this in my life for a specific purpose," he continues. "Basically I am 'unto death' on this thing. I have assurances from Him He will heal me. I am waiting on Him to fulfill His Word. The alternative is to shut down, cope and level a lawsuit against the doctor who did this to me—that is, cope until I die. But that is not God."

Does he ever have doubts?

"Every day is a fight of faith, which is necessary to bolster myself in the assurance God has given me. The other voices scream at me, that I am delusional: 'It's been nine years, Bob. Wake up and smell the coffee. You are handicapped for life.' Everywhere I turn, I am bombarded by negative unbelief."

And so he waits.

"God is the master of suspense," he says. "He wants to take you into a story with suspense and intrigue, mystery, finale and conclusion, and give you a testimony to His glory. If you get it all up front, it's boring.

"He loves to deliver us out of situations where there is no possible way out. Then He sweeps in."

Julia Duin is an assistant national editor for The Washington Times.