

“Psalms in the Summer”
Part 2: “Where Are You Now, God?”

In the 10th psalm the writer begins, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in my times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1). I wonder if you’ve ever felt like that? “Lord, why are you far from me? Why do you hide yourself in *my* times of trouble?”

In a number of other psalms, the psalmists express this same sense of God’s *absence*. Psalm 13, verses 1-3 express a similar struggle of the soul: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hid your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!” Four times the writer asks: “How long...?” Then he insists: “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God” (verse 3a).

Psalm 88 is another example of this type of psalm. We are not told what the precise nature of the psalmist’s problem is – perhaps he is desperately sick from chronic illness. We don’t know. But he says this: “But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:13-14).

Maybe you have gone through a period of life, or you are going through a time now, and felt what the psalm writers are expressing: God has cast you off. God has hidden His face from you. Perhaps it is some personal or family situation where you feel broken and devastated. You wonder, “Where’s God in all this? Like the psalmist in Psalm 13 you ask, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1). Or, it could be some bad habit or addiction you are trying to shake off. You have tried and tried. You’ve prayed. But somehow God just doesn’t seem to be there for you. Like the writer of Psalm 13 you ask: “How long, Lord, will my enemy triumph over me?” (In this case your “enemy” may be that addiction or destructive habit).

Perhaps you are trying to cope with illness, or you’ve lost your job. You’ve prayed for things to get better, but they haven’t. Maybe even they have gotten worse. In your heart, you’re saying, “Well, God, where are you now?”

I once visited an elderly woman in a nursing home. She was suffering from a debilitating disease, getting progressively worse. The disease eventually took her life. At the end of this particular visit I asked her, “Do you think it would help if prayed with you?” Her reply: “I don’t think so; it hasn’t helped yet.” I can’t help but believe she was asking herself, where are you God?

Elie Wiesel, a gifted Israeli journalist, spent years in a concentration camp, and was overwhelmed by the evidence of evil in his fellow prisoners and in his surroundings. One day he was forced to watch the hanging of a young boy by the Gestapo, a hanging that lasted more than half an hour because the boy’s body was so light. As this boy slowly strangled to death in agony, most of the prisoners stood there in stunned silence. One man sort of spoke for all as he cried out repeatedly, “Where is God now? Where is God now?” It doesn’t take the horror of a concentration camp for us to feel at times that God is *absent* from life.

The words of the psalmist can be our words, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul?” (Psalm 13:1-2a).

What can we do in these times when God seems far away, and we feel forgotten? There are no easy, pat answers – but perhaps we can find some help. ***First, I think we need to say that sometimes God really is absent from us!*** Or, to put it more correctly, we really are *far from God*. Because God is holy, and we are sinful, the natural state of human beings is that we are out of touch with God. There is a deep chasm between us and God. The prophet Isaiah said, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2). Jesus is God’s way of overcoming the awful distance between us and God! Jesus’ death on the cross reconciled us to God. When we trust Him as our Savior, He brings us back into a relationship with our Creator. So, if you are sensing that God is far away in a time of trouble, the first question to ask is: Have I opened my life to the gift of Christ? Have I trusted Christ as my Savior, to forgive my sins and bring me close to God?

But it’s possible to be a follower of Jesus, and to lose that closeness with God. Unconfessed sin in our life can do that. Or, we’ve allowed ourselves to drift away from God. So, if we are going through a time when we feel God has abandoned us, or is absent, it’s good to do some self-examination, and ask: Have I allowed myself to drift away from God? Is there evil in my life that I haven’t confessed or turned from?” Sin has way of making God a Stranger! In Deuteronomy 31:18 God said to Moses, “And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.” Feeling that God is far away could be a symptom that there is something in our life that is wrong or evil that needs to be confessed, and forgiven. We can’t cherish evil in our heart and be close to God at the same time.

But let’s say we have thoroughly examined our life and can truthfully say, “I’ve accepted Christ and been forgiven; there is no unconfessed sin that I cherish.” But we still feel like God has withdrawn in our time of difficulty. *What then?*

It may help to realize that this is a common experience. Even people of great faith and dedication to Christ can go through spells when it seems God just isn’t there. For instance, some of the ancient mystics – people who spent much of their life in pray and meditation and were very close to God – would call this “the dark night of the soul.” It’s like for a while God *permits* the powers of darkness and evil to overwhelm us and shut out His presence.

Why these dark nights of the soul? I’m not sure! I can’t help but wonder if God doesn’t allow these times to bring us to the end of our own resources, to empty us of pride and self-sufficiency, and teach us to rely on Him. Or perhaps God desires to temper and refine us so we filter out what’s important in life, and what isn’t. Or to strip away our deep attachment to material “stuff”.

So, if we get these spells where our inner life seems dried up, and our prayers seem empty, and God seems nowhere near – don’t give up! Stick with it. Keep praying. Keep reading God’s Word. The ancient mystics tell of the importance of maintaining our spiritual disciplines and our

search for God. And God has a way of bringing us through the darkness and back into the light of His presence.

Another thing to keep in minds is this: ***If we go through times of trouble and it seems God has hid His face from us and left us down, it can help to tell Him what we feel!*** The psalm writers ask “Why?” and “How long?” It’s not sinful to ask “why?”, or in our exasperation to ask, “How long, God?” As I said in the message last week, the psalm writers were brutally honest with God and expressed all kinds of feelings. We can do that too! Someone has remarked, “An honest complaint is more acceptable to God than dishonest piety.”

Let me say more about this question, “How long?”

When we are going through times of difficulty – when we’re out of work a long time, or a family situation doesn’t improve, or we’re sick and not getting any better - it’s natural to ask, “How long? How long, God, before you step in and help?” There is that cliché, “Time flies when you’re having fun”. I suppose the opposite is true: “Time drags when you’re *not* having fun!” Sometimes, it’s not that God isn’t concerned, or that God is off somewhere else and has forgotten you. It’s just that God says, “*Wait!*” Now is not the time I’m going to act...I’ve got to work some things out before I relieve your stress...I’ve got to put some other people in place who can come to your aid. *So just be patient!* Phillips Brooks was a great New England preacher, known as a man of great faith and poise and quiet manner. But he had his moments! One day a friend saw him feverishly pacing the floor like a caged lion. His friend asked, “What’s the trouble, Mr. Brooks?” Brooks replied, “The trouble is that I’m in a hurry, but God isn’t.”

And yes, sometimes we ask, “How long, Lord?” and God’s answer is something we don’t want to hear. God says, “You’re going to have to wait for *eternity* on this. It’s not that I don’t love you. I’m not hiding my face from you. It’s just that some things are not going to be cured, or resolved, in this life, but only on the ‘other side’”. *Just hang on and trust Me!*” I’ve conducted many healing services. I’ve heard some inspiring testimonies of how God has healed people. But God doesn’t heal every sickness. If a physical ailment is not cured, this doesn’t mean God has turned His back on us, or left us. It just means we have to wait for that ultimate healing that comes in heaven.

Here’s the key in all of this: Trust God! Even when it feels like God has abandoned you, He hasn’t. I started this message by quoting Psalm 10:1 “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” But if we read on in this psalm, the writer says to God, “But you do see! Indeed, you note trouble and grief...” (Psalm 10:14). Later he says, “You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry” (Psalm 10:17). The writer of Psalm 13, who asks God, “How long will You hide your face from me?” goes on to express a great affirmation of faith in God: “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me” (Psalm 13:5-6).

If some of the psalms reveal a feeling that God is *absent*, other psalms give us inspiring expressions of God's *abiding presence* through all of life. Perhaps this is nowhere better expressed than in Psalm 139. Here are the first 12 verses of that psalm. Read through them slowly, thoughtfully.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

The psalm writer revels in the reality that God knows him intimately. God had His eye on him even before he was born! And this God sees every action before it happens. The psalmist sees that no matter where he goes, he cannot escape the presence of the Almighty!

When I was at Lancaster Theological Seminary one of the requirements for graduation was that we spent a month in a "seminar abroad" program. That year our class spent a month in Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. Our flight took off from Kennedy airport in New York at 11:30 in the evening. We would be flying across the Atlantic Ocean into the dawn. My dad had his private pilot's license, and I spent tons of hours flying with him, but up to that point I had never flown on a commercial airliner. I was somewhat nervous and apprehensive. While we were on the plane, waiting to take off, the professor who went with our group handed out copies of a part of Psalm 139: "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand hold me..." (Psalm 139:9-10). Reading those words was very reassuring to me!

Yes, we can choose to cut ourselves off from God by ignoring or rejecting His gift of salvation in Jesus. There are periods where in our humanness, even the greatest Christians have felt abandoned by God. But for those who truly seek the Lord, God's presence is *inescapable!*

Tommy Dorsey enjoyed a fabulous career as a jazz musician, but at one point in his life, after taking some time off from music, he surrendered his talents to the Lord, and began to write gospel music.

In 1931, just as he was coming to the peak of his success he and his new wife were overjoyed to learn they were going to have a baby. Near the time for the baby to be born, Dorsey left his apartment in Chicago early one morning to play for a series of meetings in St. Louis. That evening when he finished playing, as he came down from the platform, a boy brought him a telegram with only 4 words on it: "Your wife is dead". He rushed to a phone, and all he could hear on the other end was "Nettie is dead. Nettie is dead." When he went back home he learned that his wife Nettie had given birth to a boy. But that night, the newborn baby died, and Nettie died in childbirth. Tommy buried his wife and son together in the same casket.

And then he fell apart. For days he withdrew into himself. He felt that God had treated him cruelly and abandoned him. He didn't want to serve God any more or write gospel songs. He just wanted to go back to the jazz world he once knew so well.

Then a friend led him to a piano. As Tommy Dorsey laid his hands on the keys, something happened to him. He felt at peace, as though he could reach out and touch God. He found himself playing a melody – it just seemed to fall into place, along with these words:

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light,
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

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