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WHEN GOD SEEMS DISTANT

Psalm 13

by

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Lesson 4: Psalms

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Years ago I talked with a well-known Bible teacher after hearing him preach. At the time I had been going through a dry spell in my spiritual life. So I asked him what he did during his personal devotions and if he ever had dry times. I was rather surprised when he answered that he *never* had dry times with the Lord. I pursued the matter, challenging his answer, but he stuck to his guns, insisting that he never had times when God seemed distant. He gently rebuked me by saying, "Brother, if you expect nothing from God, you will get it every time!" In other words, the source of my dry spell was my lack of expectancy and faith.

Since then I've thought a lot about what he said. I'm happy for him that he never has dry spells, but I must admit that I can't relate to that. I've had times when God seems distant. I agree with him that usually when that happens, it's because of my lack of faith or sin. But I also believe that there are times in the life of every Christian, when even though you are walking by faith and there is no known sin in your life, God seems far away. You pray, but God doesn't answer. You read the Bible, but it does not speak to you. You seek God, but it seems as if He is hiding.

When that happens, you're in good company. David, the man whom God called "a man after My own heart," had that experience. He describes it in Psalm 13. Out of the depths of his heart David repeats four times the haunting cry, "How long?" There is no indication in these verses that David had sinned. But his enemy was about to get him. In spite of David's repeated prayers, God seemed unavailable. Have you ever been there? You desperately call out to God, but He seems to have taken an extended vacation. Psalm 13 tells you what to do when God seems distant.

The psalm falls into three stanzas of two verses each: 1. The

problem (13:1-2); 2. The petition (13:3-4); 3. The praise (13:5-6).

The stanzas seem to decrease in their magnitude or turmoil. At first David cries out in anguish. Then he offers a more gentle petition. Finally, he rests in the joy of knowing that God will answer him. Franz Delitzsch says it well: "This song as it were casts up constantly lessening waves, until it becomes still as the sea when smooth as a mirror, and the only motion discernible at last is that of the joyous ripple of calm repose" (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, [Eerdmans] 5:199). In a sentence, the psalm is saying:

When God seems distant, we must call to Him
and trust in His unfailing love.

At those times when it seems as if God has turned His back, we must deliberately trust the fact that He loves us with an unfailing love, and that He will not forsake us, even though it may seem that way for a while. Let's examine the three parts of the psalm:

1. The problem: God seems distant (13:1-2).

God's distance in the face of the enemy's prominence resulted in a lot of inner turmoil for David.

A. David's God seemed distant (13:1).

It seemed as if God had forgotten David, had hidden Himself from him, and as if it would last forever. It always seems as if a time of intense trial lasts forever, doesn't it? The hard thing about waiting is that you have to wait! Don't you hate to wait? Waiting is especially hard if you don't have much to do while you wait. If this psalm was written when David was being pursued by Saul, then David had a lot of time on his hands. He was holed up out in the desolate wilderness of Judah. About all he and his men had to do was to get their daily provisions and keep watch. The hours, days, weeks, and months dragged on as David waited for God to act.

Sometimes it seems as if God moves so slowly! We live in a day that says, "Hurry, hurry, hurry!" But so often God says, "Wait! Wait! Wait!" Most of us can relate to a comment by the New England preacher, Phillips Brooks. Normally, he was a calm man. But one day he was clearly agitated. He paced the floor like a caged lion. A friend asked him, "What's the trouble?" Brooks replied, "The trouble is, I'm in a hurry, but God isn't."

Have you ever noticed the difference between God's timetable and ours? We think in terms of minutes, hours, and days, but God works in terms of years. Do you remember the story of Joseph? God wanted him in a position of influence in Egypt. How did He get Joseph there? First, he had him sold into slavery by his brothers when he was a teenager. He was hauled off to a foreign land. Then, he had him falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison. A long time went by. Don't you suppose that Joseph was praying fervently, "God, get me out of here?" But God didn't seem to hear.

Finally, an opportunity came to interpret the dreams of a couple of fellow inmates. To the one man, the king's cupbearer, who would be released from prison and restored to his job, Joseph pled, "Remember me and get me out of here!" The cupbearer assured him that he would--but he forgot! The next verse (Gen. 41:1) casually reads, "Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream" Two years! Think back to two years ago in your life. For two more years Joseph languished in prison. Couldn't God have given Pharaoh his dream sooner? Why the long wait? As it was, Joseph spent the better part of his twenties either as a slave or in prison in Egypt.

Or take the Apostle Paul. He was God's greatest apostle to the Gentiles. There was so much work to be done for

the Lord, and so little time to do it. Paul wanted to go to Rome and then on to Spain with the gospel.

How did God get Paul to Rome? He had him imprisoned on a false charge. The governor in Caesarea heard his case and knew that he was innocent, but he kept him in custody because he knew that Paul had some influential friends and he hoped for a bribe (Acts 24:26). Acts 24:27 reads, "But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned." Two years! God's great apostle was confined in Caesarea. People were perishing without Christ! Why didn't God do something? Why didn't He move the governor to release Paul? Wasn't Paul walking by faith? Wasn't he praying? Why did he have to sit there for more than two years?

That's what David was going through. He had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel when he was a teenager. But Saul was pursuing him like a partridge in the mountains (1 Sam. 26:20). David was perhaps now in his late twenties. This had been going on for years! Where was God? Had He forgotten about David? Perhaps you can relate! When God seems distant, it always affects our emotions:

B. David himself was in turmoil (13:2a, b).

The idea of the Hebrew in verse 2 is that of adding one thought to another in an attempt to get out of the difficulty, but they all fail and just add sorrow to sorrow. At night David made his plans, and by day he tried them, but they were all futile, just causing him more grief (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 135). David had gone from hope to despair so many times that he felt like he was on an emotional roller coaster. He was like a rat in a maze with no exit; God had dropped him in and walked away. Thus,

C. David's enemy seemed to be winning (13:2c).

Saul was still the king. He was enjoying the comforts of the palace, while David was sleeping in caves. What made it worse, Saul was the bad guy! He wasn't seeking the Lord; David was. Saul was trying to kill David without cause, even though David had spared Saul's life. Didn't God know what was happening? Couldn't He do something? Had He forgotten about David?

Sooner or later you'll be there! You're in an extended time of trial. You call out to God, but He doesn't answer. You try to figure out how to get out of your circumstances, but nothing works. You go from the heights of hope to the depths of despair so many times that your stomach can't take much more. Meanwhile, those who aren't following the Lord are living the good life in the palace while you're seeking the Lord from the cave. There are two vital lessons to remember at such a time:

(1) God has *not* forgotten you! Note Isaiah 49:14-15: "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me.' 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.'" You may suffer for years, but God never forgets you if you are His child. "... He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5).

But God does *seemingly* forget some of His choicest servants, as we have seen. Joseph, Paul, David--all of them were shut up in unpleasant circumstances for years during which it seemed that God had forgotten. Do you know what was happening during that time? God was building maturity into those men as they learned to trust Him. Just as it takes years to grow a sturdy oak tree, so it

takes years to build the godly character qualities needed to be an effective servant of the Lord. That's the second lesson:

(2) There is no such thing as instant godliness. We have instant everything in our society, but there is no instant godliness. David was anointed as king in his teens. He had a strong faith at that time, as seen in his victory over Goliath. Did God put him on the throne when he turned twenty-one? No. Twenty-five? No. Twenty-six? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? No. Through all those years of running from Saul and living in caves, David learned to wait upon God. God was developing His man.

That's so out-of-joint with our rush-rush world! But that's how God works. If God has you shut up in some frustrating circumstances; and you have racked your brain trying to figure a way out, but nothing has worked; and you see the godless prospering while you suffer; and it seems like God is far away; hang on! Let God do His perfect work in you. He hasn't forgotten you. Learn to wait on Him.

2. The Petition: Call to the Lord (13:3-4).

Do you know why many Christians do not grow to maturity and why they are not used by God in a mighty way? It's because when God seems distant to them, instead of calling out to Him, they just shrug their shoulders, say "Oh, well," and go back into the world. Or, they go buy the latest self-help book that promises to fix their problem, but it doesn't help them to trust in God alone.

David didn't do that. When God seemed distant, he called on Him to answer him. Instead of turning from God, he turned to Him. Instead of complaining to men about God, David complained to God about men. Matthew Henry wisely

observes, "We should never allow ourselves to make any complaints but what are fit to be offered up to God and what drive us to our knees" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], 3:282). Four lessons from 13:3-4:

- A. Our prayers should be concerned for God's glory, not just for our happiness.

David wasn't just praying for deliverance so that he could escape from his problems and be happy. His fear was that the enemy would rejoice (v. 4). Since David was God's anointed king, if he died at the hands of his enemies, it would make God look bad. God's honor was tied up with David's deliverance. If you profess, as David did, to trust in God alone, then your defeat becomes God's defeat. To defend His own honor, God will defend you. So in a time of crisis, you can call out to God to rescue you, not just for your relief, but for God's glory. God delights to honor such prayers.

- B. We must seek God especially when He seems distant.

David was sensitive to the presence of God in his life. If he lost the sense of God's presence, he went after it with a holy fervor. The test of your faith is not when God's presence is real, when you see God at work in your life. The real test of your faith is when God seems distant. Do you seek Him then? If you seek Him, you will find Him, but if you turn to the world or look for a quick fix for your problems without seeking God, you won't find Him. Seek God *especially* when He seems distant.

- C. We must keep an awareness of God and the enemy before us at all times.

Derek Kidner writes: "Awareness of God and the enemy is virtually the hallmark of every psalm of David; the positive and negative charge which produced the

driving-force of his best years" (*Psalms* [IVP], 1:78). We need to keep both realities before us as the factors which motivate us to holiness and put us on guard against sin. As Christians, the honor of our God is at stake through us. If we fail Him, the enemy will rejoice. Satan is trying to drag the name of our Savior through the mud by getting us to forsake the Lord or fall into sin. We need to keep God and His honor and the reality of our unseen, evil adversary before us at all times so that we will not disgrace our Lord.

Dr. Howard Hendricks said: "When you are doing what Jesus Christ has called you to do, you can count on two things--and you can stake your life on it: you will possess spiritual power because you have the presence of Christ, and you'll experience opposition because the devil does not concentrate on secondary targets. He never majors on the minor" (*Leadership* [Summer, 1980], p. 114).

- D. God allows us to come to the end of ourselves so that we must rely on Him.

David was fearing for his life. For the Hebrews, "dim eyes" were a sign that the vital powers were growing dim and that death was approaching. Bright eyes were a sign of life. David calls out to God to enlighten his eyes, that is, to bring him from the brink of death back to life again.

The Apostle Paul said that he and his co-workers in the gospel "despaired even of life"; "we had the sentence of death within ourselves, in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Sometimes God seems distant and allows us to go right to the brink, to come to the end of ourselves, so that we learn to trust Him more. Whatever their intensity, all trials are designed to bring us to a deeper trust in the Lord. If we dodge them without learning that

lesson, we missed what God had for us. David came to that point of trust. Thus, we see that David's problem led to his petition which led to his praise:

3. Praise: Trust in God's unfailing love (13:5-6).

David has not yet been delivered, but he trusts in the lovingkindness (NIV = "unfailing love") of God, and a calm assurance comes over him. His heart is filled with joy as he thinks of the deliverance which God will bring about. By faith, David counts God's future deliverance as past and says, "I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me" (v. 6).

Please note that David's circumstances had not changed one bit from the start of the psalm, when he felt confused, depressed, and forsaken by God. David was still hiding in caves; Saul was still on the throne, trying to kill David.

So what changed? David's focus! From focusing on himself and his problems at the start of the psalm, David shifted his thoughts to God's loyal love and salvation. That shift in focus moved him from confusion and depression to joy and praise!

It didn't happen accidentally, either! "But I" (v. 5) is emphatic (in Hebrew) and points to David's deliberate choice to rely on God's loyal love. He chose to interpret his circumstances by God's love rather than to interpret God's love by his circumstances. In a time of trial, Satan tries to get us to doubt God's love. But we have to resist that temptation and affirm with God's Word that He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God" (Rom. 8:28). With Joseph, we must affirm that even though those who wronged us meant it for evil, God meant it for ultimate good (Gen. 50:20). So we deliberately choose to trust in God's loyal love.

This Hebrew word for trust has the nuance of relying or leaning upon someone or something. You ask, "Then is God

a crutch?" Yes, and we're cripples! One of the main reasons people do not trust God is that they're too proud to admit their total need. Or they mistakenly think that they must earn God's love. But His love does not stem from any merit on our part, but only from God's nature. Thus it is pure grace, undeserved on our part. But since God's love stems from His unchanging nature rather than from our feeble effort, we can trust in it.

Conclusion

The famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was walking through the English countryside with a friend. He noticed a barn with a weather vane. At the top of the vane were the words, "God is love." Spurgeon remarked that this was an inappropriate place for such a message, because weather vanes are changeable, but God's love is constant. But Spurgeon's friend disagreed. "You misunderstood the meaning," he said. "That weather vane is stating the truth that no matter which way the wind blows, God is love."

When God seems distant, join David in deliberately trusting in God's unfailing love, however the winds of circumstance are blowing. As David wrote in Psalm 103:11: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him." You can count on it, even when your circumstances seem contrary. He is only taking you through the difficulty to develop maturity and godly character. "But it's been months! Years!" Yes, that's the way He works. He builds things to last, and that takes time. But the finished product is so much better in quality than quick imitations that don't develop trust in the living God.

If you are distant from God because of known sin, the answer is the same: Call out to Him and put your trust in His unfailing love as supremely demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ (John 3:16). He died as your substitute, taking the penalty you deserved. If you will flee to Him for refuge, He will never turn you away (John

6:37).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer a critic who said, "You're denying reality to believe in God's love when terrible things happen to you"?
2. Some groups offer instant godliness through some dramatic experience. Why is this so appealing? Is it biblical?
3. If a "Christian self-help" book "works" in solving our problems, why could it still be spiritually harmful?
4. How would you counsel a Christian going through a difficult trial who said, "I just can't trust God"?

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