

When God Feels Distant

Psalm 13:1-2

- Have you ever felt that way? Ever felt that the Bible isn't particularly helpful bc God doesn't seem to do those things anymore? And by that I mean not just a doctrinal position about spiritual gifts, but that you can't rely on him in times of need?
- Do you ever feel like the more you do right, the more things go wrong?
- That the world seems fundamentally unfair – and that's hard to square with a just God?
- Do you ever go through phases in your spiritual life where things are going well – maybe good spiritual habits like regular study, visiting, prayer, speaking about Jesus to others – and then times where you don't feel like any of that? Just not feeling it?
- Ever worship and others talk about their relationship with God and you don't feel any of that?
- Ever really needed God and been disappointed?

- Want to talk for a few minutes tonight about what to do when God feels distant.
- A number of the Psalms capture this spirit. Psalm 13:1-2 – it is language that is a bit shocking to us. It seems to accuse God.
- I want us to look through those Psalms and see what they can teach us about this situation that happens to us all – when God feels distant.

1) Tell God how you feel

- In some ways this is obvious, in other ways it is not. The Psalms show us that it is important that we admit to these feelings and specifically tell *God* about them. That's what the Psalms are.
- Psalm 13:1-2 – This is how David feels. He feels forgotten, like God is hiding.
- Psalm 22:1-2, 6-8, 11 – David feels forsaken. God is so far away, doesn't hear his words.
- Psalm 80:4-6 – Asaph feels that God is angry with his people's prayers. God has punished and now refuses to hear.
- Psalm 88:13-14 – The psalmist feels God has cast his soul away and hidden his face.

- It's plain from these psalms that these men are in deep emotional pain. They are godly men, reaching out to their God, and they feel like he has abandoned. He is distant.
- So they sing about it. These are their songs. They are cries to a God they cannot fully understand. They are cries for help. They may sound a bit irreverent, but they are not. They are the efforts to express the aching of a heart needing God and feeling distant from him instead.

- In some ways this is obvious, in others it is not. It is obvious we need to tell God how we feel. But it is not always obvious that we need to be brutally honest with God, even when it might sound like we are criticizing or insulting him.
- Imagine what our reaction would be if someone was asked to pray publicly here and their prayer was "Father, why don't you listen to us anymore? Our nation is a disaster, we rarely see people responding to your gospel, and it feels like those who are cursing you are growing. Have you forgotten about us? Why aren't you doing anything?". I think imagining that scenario helps us see how different this style of prayer is.
- The psalms help us to deepen our prayers by being authentic with God. We don't have to use flowery words or try to impress him. What am I really feeling and thinking? Don't butter him

up, he already knows! Tell God how you feel. If you feel like he's distant, he should be the first to know.

2) Investigate why God feels distant

- There is a part of this feeling that demands self-examination. How did I get to feeling this way?
- Some of the psalms show us that God feels distant *when we have sinned*. In this case, God hasn't grown more distant – we have distanced ourselves from him.
- Psalm 38:1-4, 9, 17-22 – David is overwhelmed by his sin and his suffering bc of it. He asks God to come near again – be not far.
- We may not think about it often, but sin has a definite impact on the physical and emotional state. If we are in touch with God, sin affects that. We cannot sin and just move on, continuing, as if God doesn't care.
- So it may be that when God feels distant, it is bc I have embraced things that drive a wedge between us. When I am reading lots of books and not the Bible, listening to a lot of things and not brothers and sisters, thinking about a lot of things that are earthly and not divine, I feel distant from God. And when I do wrong, I lose that sense that God and I are on the same page.
- Some of the psalmists express this sensation of God's distance *because of adverse circumstances*. Circumstances seem to obscure and cloud out God.
- Psalm 22:6-8, 12-18 – David is in an awful position. He is hungry, he is afflicted, he is being injured (perhaps metaphorically or prospectively). No wonder God feels distant.
- Psalm 43:1-2 – Deceitful and unjust man, oppression of the enemy. Note esp v. 2, where the enemy's oppression has such an effect on the psalmist that he goes about mourning and assumes God has rejected him.
- These psalms show us that when we're in really tough times, those circumstances exert a lot of pressure on us that affects our relationship with God. It creates a sense of urgency – stop this, God! Now! NOW!
- It's my opinion that we do a pretty poor job of being aware of our circumstances. There are times in life, times in our day, when God feels distant bc of some external pressure. When we're not getting any sleep...when we're super hungry or stressed...when people disrespect or upset us or wound us...when we're working hard for others...when we're on a tight budget at the end of the month.
- Investigate what's going on – and be objective about circumstances.
- But, having said all that, *sometimes neither sin nor circumstances fully explain the feeling*. It can just stem from the facts.
- Psalm 44:8-23 – It's not sin, it's not temporary. This is what I see. And from all indications, it appears unjust. And so the prayer comes, "Wake up, God! Help us!"
- It is not a criticism of God, but an expression of feeling, coupled with an expression of desire.

3) Remember what you know about God

- I intend for this to be a strong contrast with feeling. Sometimes God *feels* distant – but we need to remember what we *know* about God. Something objective, solid, dependable. Something beyond feelings. Watch how the psalmists do that.

- Ps 74:1-3, 7, 9-11, 12-17, 20 – The psalmist sees God’s place devastated, combines it with no signs or prophet.
- Yet (v. 12) God my King works salvation. *This is what he does!* Everything is set up perfectly for him to come and do his thing! He is still in charge!
- Remembering what we know about God turns lament into rejoicing, even though nothing in the circumstances changes.
- Ps 77:7-14 – I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the LORD. And so he recounts the deeds of God while he waits for a new chapter to be written in his time.
- Ps 10:12-18 – But you do see! (v. 14) You note it! You are king (v. 16).
- The feeling of distance from God means that we redouble our efforts to remind ourselves of his character. What is he like? What has he done before? What is he thinking now?
- That means recounting what he did in past times. It means recounting what he has done in my own life. It means looking back and seeing him. Then when I make a request, I make it from a deep, objective knowledge of God.
- I feel this personally. My family’s history of being NT Christians comes from my grandfather. Tell story.
- I feel this personally. I don’t believe it was an accident that I ended up with my wife – that things worked out just so.
- So when I recount what I know about God, it is personal. And it combines with the testimony and goodness of God’s work in the Bible.
- And I will add this thought: part of what we learn about God in the Bible is that his timetable is not my timetable. I want things done quickly, God does not seem concerned about quickly. So perhaps there is some waiting that needs to happen – this can give me patience and perspective when God feels far away bc he is not acting.

4) Choose to worship him anyway

- The psalms encourage us to go ahead and worship, even if we feel distant. In fact, it may be in worship that we really do draw closer to him!
- Psalm 13:5-6 – I’m in trouble here, but I will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD. He has dealt bountifully with me. David is so certain God will come through that he’s worshipping beforehand. What a song I’m going to sing when this mess is all over!
- Psalm 79:5, 8-13 – We will give you thanks forever! We will recount your praise.
- This is the song of a hurting, overrun people. They need help. And yet “we will give thanks”.
- We will give thanks even though we feel God is distant. Even though everything looks so bleak. We worship God.
- Psalm 143:7-10 – Teach me to do your will, lead me on level ground. I want to learn, I want to listen, I want to know the way I should go. This is that worshipful disposition that we spoke about last week, where God is in charge and I am ready to learn from him.
- I don’t know what’s going on, I don’t feel like you’re paying attention, but you still deserve my respect and honor.
- He also points his prayers back in the direction of obedience and relationship.

- If we wait until we *feel* close to God to worship him, we may be waiting forever. If anything, when we feel distant from God, we are aware that something is not right – perhaps more aware than we typically are when God feels near.
- It is here that we often embrace a destructive line of reasoning. We withdraw from worship – even from our brethren – because God feels distant. Something must be wrong with me. Nobody else seems to feel this way. So I'll just stay away.
- This is a time to reach out in faith. And if you take nothing else away from the sermon tonight, take this: if you feel distant from God, you are not alone! You stand with some of the giants of the Bible and with almost all of your brothers and sisters. Don't pull away from him! Choose to worship him anyway.
- This spirit reminds me so much of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. God can deliver us, but even if he doesn't, I'm still not going to bow down. I'm going to worship God alone anyway.
- It reminds me so much of Habakkuk. The invasion is coming and I'm terrified, and even though the fig tree doesn't blossom, I will rejoice in the LORD. I may not grasp it all, but I'm holding on to my God anyway.
- Worship God anyway. And it may be that in worship you draw closer to him and that feeling returns.
- But more than anything, we must remember that our relationship with God is not just a feeling. It can continue even if we're not feeling it.

- Sometimes God feels far away. He's not. He's not far from each one of us.
- Sometimes his actions might puzzle us. It's OK. We can still follow him and trust him.
- When God feels distant, don't give up on him.
- Might be sin – make right.