



Psalm 13
When God Seems Distant

Summary: What is going on when God seems silent, distant and how do I respond?

I never intended to pastor this church. I never intended to live in Northern Virginia. I was going to be a chaplain for the military. Because of my prior service in the Marine Corps I had a little over 11 years to go until retirement, and then Madeleine and I were going to move to the mission field and serve God as self-supported missionaries. That was the plan.

And, it seemed like all was going well. I zoomed through my studies in seminary. I was elected president of the student body. I landed amazing summer internships as a Chaplain Candidate first at the National Security Agency and then at the Air Force Academy the following year. I graduated with honors from officer's training and later graduated with academic honors from seminary. Everything seemed to be going well.

Until it all fell apart.

I applied to go on Active Duty as a chaplain and was rejected due to bureaucratic issues I could neither affect or control. I came home from my internship at the Academy with no job, no direction, and no sense of where things would go from here. But I was sure it was all going to be cleared up soon. It was just a momentary set back and hey, these things happen in life, right? We all face trials.

But weeks rolled by and nothing cleared up, there was no movement.

A friend called and offered me job - \$12 an hour working construction. He loaned me his wife's tool belt and set me to work swinging a sledgehammer in the August sun. It was hot, it was hard, and it was not fun.

I had no idea why I was there or what God was doing, so I began to pray while I worked. "What's going on God? Did I miss something? Why aren't things working out? I would have done an MBA or something, but I thought I got this degree for You, for ministry."

The church we attended eventually brought me on staff – matching my pay of \$12 an hour and gave me 20 hours a week but that doesn't do much to cover the bills when you've got a wife and young son. We were living off of savings and savings were running out.

Weeks turned into months and inconveniences grew into frustrations, depression, anger, and bitterness. We suffered a miscarriage and even our dog died. It got to the point where it was hard to pray because we felt alone, abandoned by God. And if God's ignoring you, what use is it to try to talk to Him? We began to wonder, does God even care about us

anymore? Is any of this even real?

None of us make it through this life without scars. We will all be hurt. But it's a different kind of darkness when you feel as though, on top of everything else going wrong, God has abandoned you too. To feel as though your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling and piling up as just another mess on the floor.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know - it is not a unique or uncommon experience. Most mature Christians have passed through what some call the dark nights of the soul. Have you? Do you know what I'm talking about? If not, I want you to know, your dark nights might be coming, they're more common than you think.

Listen to what David has to say in Psalm 13.

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David.
Ps 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
2 How long shall I take counsel in my soul,
Having sorrow in my heart daily?
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

3 Consider *and* hear me, O LORD my God;
Enlighten my eyes,
Lest I sleep the *sleep of death*;
4 Lest my enemy say,
"I have prevailed against him";
Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

5 But I have trusted in Your mercy;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.
6 I will sing to the LORD,
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

Things end on a high note, but there is no missing the note of despair. I want to take some time this morning to see what we can learn from David's experience of times when God seems distant and silent and how we might be able to respond to similar times.

The first thing I want to notice is: *this is a Psalm of David*. David is Israel's favorite and most famous king. He's the one who slew the giant Goliath. He was specially chosen by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel. A whole dynasty of kings descended from him. Jesus is introduced at times as a son of David because they shared the same ancestry through Mary, Jesus' mom.

The point I want to make is: David had a pretty special relationship with God. There was no denying that God had significant plans for David's life. There is no way you could say

God didn't care about David.

And yet, David felt this way. *David* felt like God was hiding from him. David felt like God had forgotten him.

When you feel like God is silent or distant, I want you to know, you're not the only one. Many other famous people in the Bible had similar experiences. After calling down fire on the altar and facing off against all the prophets of Baal, Elijah hit a pit of depression and cried out to God – saying, "I'm all alone. There's no one with me. Everyone is against me."

After losing everything, Job wondered, where is God? Why did He let this happen? And why wasn't He answering Job's prayers?

Mary and Martha sent Jesus word that their brother was sick and Jesus didn't show up for several days. By the time He arrived, Lazarus was dead. And both sisters told Him, "if You had been here Lord, our brother would not have died." In other words, we had a funeral because You didn't show up Jesus.

Now, we know how each of these situations ultimately turned out but until they did, these men and women felt hurt, lonely, and abandoned by the God they loved and served. And I mean they felt it, it was a real emotional experience just like you and I feel today.

It is not uncommon for Christians to feel distant from God, or that He's silent or not responding to your prayers. In fact, I would say it is something of a gate all growing Christians must pass through.

During my doctoral studies I took a course on faith and for the final project I had to interview four people about some aspect of faith in their lives. I choose to ask people who were in serving in ministry to tell me the story of how they went from attending church to becoming a pastor or missionary. In listening to each of their stories, I found a common theme – there was always a dark night of the soul.

They all had a similar plot line – there was a time when they didn't understand what was going on. Life hurt, it really hurt. Some lost their jobs or career. One lost an entire real-estate portfolio. He had more than 20 rental properties and was in the middle of building out an investment property on the lake when the real estate market collapsed. One lost his wife in a car accident. He was the driver and she had recently been discovered to be pregnant with their first child. Some preached entire sermons to empty rooms because no one showed up to the church they felt called to plant.

In each case these things happened *while people were serving the Lord*. And yet, suddenly, not only did some crisis happen in their lives, when they went to pick up the pieces God felt silent and distant too. It wasn't just the shock and pain of the loss - that was compounded by the loneliness and sense of abandonment.

I'm giving you examples from people in the Bible and in ministry so you understand – this happens to all kinds of people.

You might be tempted to say, “Well, if only I was more mature in your faith, or if I knew how to pray better, if I knew the Bible better, I wouldn't be having this problem. I wouldn't feel like God doesn't answer. Really spiritual people get answers all the time, they have it figured out.”

That's not true. David is writing Psalm 13 and I could bring you a long list of people who understand exactly what he's saying and thinking when he asks, [How long O LORD?](#)

I also want you to notice that David doesn't repent of any sins here.

David knows how to do that. You can read Psalm 51 if you want to see an example. It's the Psalm he wrote after his famous sin with Bathsheba. He opens with:

Psalm 51:1 Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.

David knows how to admit his sins and repent. But he doesn't do that here in Psalm 13. So, we can't say God is silent because of some sin David committed.

Now, that does happen. Sometimes God feels silent and distant because of something we have or have not done. Sometimes silence is God's way of getting our attention and forcing us to deal with things. When God seems distant or silent, we absolutely should do a little spiritual check up. But if this is the case, you'll know pretty quickly. God doesn't try to hide this kind of thing from you. If you're open to seeing it, He'll make sure you don't miss it.

But that's not what's going on here with David. He doesn't say, “God was silent and distant so I sought the LORD and discovered my sin, repented of it, and now everything is fine.” He doesn't make any mention of a need to repent.

And, notice that *this goes on for a long time*. In verses 1 and 2, David asks four times – [How long?](#) David had plenty of time to think things through and figure out if he was doing something wrong on his end. He's felt this loneliness for a long time so he asks:

Ps 13:1 [How long O LORD? Will you forget me forever?](#)

Friends, this is not the prayer of a man who's just having a rough day. This is a prayer you can't really relate to until things have begun to drag out for weeks, months, maybe years. *It's not just the depth of the trial David is facing, it's the length.*

That's part of what makes it so painful, isn't it? We can all suck it up for a little while. We can all press through on sheer endurance for some amount of time. But David has passed that point. I want you to see that the answer in these situations is not Stoic determination. David knows God is there. He knows God is real. He knows God can help, but He isn't – at least not in the way David hopes to see, and that's getting hard to endure.

David says he has tried taking counsel in his own soul. In other words, he's wrestling with his own thoughts. He's trying to make sense of it all. And he can't he can't figure a way out on his own.

Do you know what that's like? God's not showing up and you don't know what to do. You're stuck. That's what David is experiencing. So his heart is grieved, sorrow is his daily companion. We could sum up his whole complaint like this: I'm hurting, God doesn't care, and my enemies are winning.

So what does David do? He turns to God in prayer – and that's an important lesson of this Psalm. In response to God's silence and distance, David pushes farther in and pursues God, he continues to bring his concerns to God even though God seems silent because David has no place else to go.

Christian, there is a sense in which your confession that you need God to show up, that He's the only one who can save you or fix this mess is an act of worship. You're declaring that you cannot do this on your own. You're declaring that you need God. You're confessing that He is your only hope, the only one who can do this and that you want Him. In a sense you're showing that you really mean it by coming back over and over again, even though you're not hearing or seeing what you want.

Now, sometimes God does answer our prayers immediately. We love that. It's awesome. But sometimes we have to ask and keep asking – Jesus even told about the woman who got her way because she kept bringing the issue up to the judge, she wouldn't let it go.

And notice – David is honest with God. He brings his questions, his laments, his pain, even his heated complaints to God. You can do that. You can tell God what you're really feeling. It's inside of you, on occasion it's good to get it out. You might want to write it all down like David did – you might type it out or write it out in journal or notebook, but write down all your problems, all your frustrations. I do this personally sometimes – I take a yellow legal pad and write out at the top What's Frustrating Me Right Now – and then, I just let it out. Get it out of your head and heart and look at it. And then put it in front of God and ask Him what He wants to do about it.

Or, you can speak it, verbalize it. Go for a long walk, a run, take a long shower, or just sit somewhere by yourself and pour it all out. Voice your complaints and your issues to God. Not everyone else – don't go off on them, and don't go off on God either, but talk to Him, honestly. Tell Him what you're feeling, let it all out and ask what He wants to do about it.

Notice that David didn't *just* vent all his frustration and anxiety at God, *He asked for God to help*, he declared his need. He says:

3 Consider *and* hear me, O LORD my God;
Enlighten my eyes,
Lest I sleep the *sleep of death*;
4 Lest my enemy say,
"I have prevailed against him";
Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

David sees that his current situation is going to end one of two ways – either everything stays the same, it all keeps going the way things are and David eventually dies or is defeated and his enemies seem to have won, or God reveals Himself and saves David. Those are only two options. So David asks God to reveal Himself – to enlighten his eyes.

Now that sounds like a strange request to us, but I think you can get it. It might make even more sense for some of you Bible scholars though if I told you that the Hebrew phrase translated as [enlighten my eyes](#), is found in the Priestly blessing. In Numbers 6 we read:

Numbers 6:22 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 23 "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, "This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them:

24 "The LORD bless you and keep you;
25 The LORD make His face [shine upon you](#),
And be gracious to you;
26 The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace."

27 "So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them."

David is saying, God, please look down on me. Let me live with Your eyes on me.

Think about that: God, I don't want to hide anything from You, I want to be totally exposed to You, I want You to know EVERYTHING that is going on in my life.

Now, can I ask you to do some thinking here? Why would David want that? Why would David think that God's awareness, presence, and action is what he needed? Why was David so confident that God was the answer to his problems?

Answer: because David had already experienced God's presence, guidance, and help in the past.

Notice how David ends this Psalm. After spilling out his feelings and the hopelessness he sees ahead unless God acts, David remembers what God has done in the past and expresses

confident hope of a similar outcome.

5 But I have trusted in Your mercy;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.
6 I will sing to the LORD,
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

God never changes. Our circumstances do, but God never does. It's easy to worship when everything is going well; it's easy to sing when you've had a rough spot or two this week. But when everything around you feels dark and hostile and depression is your closest friend, it can be hard to worship.

But David looks back, remembers all that he already knows about God and chooses to worship anyway. The God who has delivered him out of so many difficulties in the past will surely deliver him again.

"All of this is true God, my situation is still a mess. *But*, You are still true too God. *I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.*"

Based on what he has seen in the past, David chooses to continue trusting God with the present and the future. He chooses to defy the darkness. He chooses to worship on the basis of what He has already experienced while he hopes for what will come.

But notice this – there is no ultimate resolution to David's issue. The Psalm doesn't end with God showing up in a fiery cloud, answering David's prayer and wiping out his enemies. David opens by talking about his feeling, prays about his situation, and then determines to worship God despite what he's facing and enduring. We never get the answer to his question – how long?

But we do learn we're not the only ones that ever feel like God seems distant and silent and we receive an encouraging example of how to respond.

Friends, when God is silent we can respond in three ways.

We can say, I'm the problem. God must not want anything to do with me. But, is that really true? We saw last week that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. God hates your sin, that's true, but if you're willing He will cleanse you from that sin, He will help you fight it, and He will help you grow into the man or woman He wants you to be. If you need to repent, repent. The Bible says if we draw near to God, He will draw near to us.

Maybe not as fast as we want, maybe not in the way we want, but He will draw near – the problem is not entirely with you.

OK, so maybe the problem is with God – that's another way people respond when God is

silent. They say He isn't real, or the teachings of the church are all wrong, they tried it and it didn't work. Let's just move on and if God is real, we'll let Him take care of it all without us. He obviously doesn't need or want us anyway.

So, when God is silent we can say the problem is with me, the problem is with God, or we acknowledge our feelings and the facts of our circumstances, and still choose to live by faith. We can say, God I don't understand all of this, but on the basis of all the other things I do understand I'm going to continue to ask you for help like David does here.

Christian, I encourage you to make a list of God's promises. Spend time reading the Scripture, look at what God promises and hold on to them.

Make a list of your memories. Ask a spouse, friend, or family member for help – say, “let's make a list of all the amazing things God has done in our lives.” And do it before you go through a trial so you have it to look back on. Then pull it out and update it every now and then. When you can't see God clearly, remind yourself of when you could.

And finally, do some cross-examination. When life isn't going the way you hoped, when you don't understand what God is up to – look at the cross. Look at the ultimate example of what God has done for you. It won't solve all your problems, it won't drive out all the clouds, but you need to remember the cross – remember this tangible, actual, display of God's love. He suffered on Calvary for your sake. How can you say He doesn't care or He doesn't hear?

I don't know where you are this morning, what you're going through, or what you're struggling with. I don't know if God feels distant and silent or immanent and clear.

But this I do know – we will all go through times when life is hard. And when we do, the best way to respond is to look back on all God has already said and done and listen to His promises for the future.

Then, tell Him how much you need Him as you choose, by faith, to worship Him in the present - day by day, moment-by-moment, until He finally bursts forth, and [makes His face to shine upon you](#), until that moment when [He lifts up His countenance toward you and gives you peace](#).

Now is a great time to do that as we prepare to receive communion. I want to encourage you to think for a moment about the issues in your life, and then I want you to think for a moment about the reality of the cross – Jesus really did this for you – and if this is real, and my friends, it is, it is absolutely real – if this real, what does it tell you about God and His love for you?

Let's pray,