

What Do You Do When God Isn't There?

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Psalms 42-43 RSV

As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while men say to me continually, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember thee
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts;
ll thy waves and thy billows have gone over me.
By day the LORD commands his steadfast love;
and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock: "Why hast thou forgotten me?
Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"
As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.
Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people;
from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!
For thou art the God in whom I take refuge; why hast thou cast me off?
Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?
Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me,
let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God.
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Psalms 42 and 43 are really only one psalm, a psalm of the sons of Korah. As you know, the chapters in the Bible were added much later, and for one reason or another this psalm was split into two "chapters." The sons of Korah were priests that were in charge of the worship in the temple. So in this psalm a worshiper is speaking — in fact, he's a priest, and some of the things he says here reflect that background. As we listen to these words we can surely identify with this man, and understand how he must feel being separated from his God.

A typical topic for a sermon might be a discussion of one of the areas in which we need to grow as believers. We are all aware of the need for growth and for change in our life. Jesus' question to at the pool of Bethsaida — "Do you want to be healed?" — is always appropriate because we often face resistance to healing, both in our spirits and in our bodies. Another area in which we need to increase is the level of our trust and commitment to God, through Jesus Christ. Developing the gifts that God has given us, and opening ourselves to using these gifts to build up of the body of Christ, constitute another major area of concern. Learning how to live under the present rule of Christ is a further challenge in Christian growth; how we can live by the principles that God has laid down for the operation of the kingdom of God? These are all good subjects for teaching during our weekly worship gathering.

But today I want to turn to a concern that's more basic than any of the above. All the concerns I described presuppose that we have a relationship with God. We're making a response to Him, letting Him know that we want to serve Him — that we're aware of what He wants to do in our lives in some fashion, and sense a need for growth and change. But there might be a more basic issue that some of us, even the most mature Christians, face from time to time: *What do you do when God isn't there?*

Yes, what do you do when God somehow just isn't there for you? We've all gone through such times, when prayer becomes laborious and even agony. It seems like a waste of time; the heavens are brass — that's a phrase that's often used to describe this experience, when it just seems like you're pounding on the door of heaven and it never opens. God just doesn't seem to be present to you, His reality just doesn't seem to impress you. At such times the Scriptures seem like fairy tails or fantasies — stories that tell of great people of great faith in times past, yet we come under condemnation because somehow we can't feel God and we can't sense His presence like those great men of old, or like great leaders of the church today. Our worship seems false and futile, an exercise in frustration for us because somehow God just isn't there.

I believe that preaching ought to emerge out of where we actually live, and that it's not a good idea for me, as a preacher, to preach mere theories and talk about great victories in the faith that I myself haven't experienced. When I raise this question about what you do when God isn't there, it's because I frequently go through times like that myself. I don't want to be guilty of perpetrating on you the cynic's definition of a sermon: "the application of faith people don't have to problems that minister doesn't understand." I'm certainly not guilty of that, because I understand this problem. I'm not saying to you, "Copy me in my faith, because I'm setting an example." I'm standing on the same platform with you, as a believer struggling with some things.

So I'm well versed in this particular question, "What do you do when God isn't there?" I don't wish to dwell on it, but I came out of a rationalistic background. I was brought up in a liberal denomination, and we weren't just liberal by default — we were liberal by conviction. My Father, who was a pastor for many years, taught a non-supernatural approach to Jesus Christ. It was never expected that God would touch our life in any significant way, because He couldn't. We had a completely humanistic way of understanding what Jesus was teaching in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ was held up to us as an *example*, as the greatest psychologist or teacher that ever lived, a person who understood men and their problems. But we didn't see Him as *the Way, the Truth, and the Life* through whom we might come into the presence of a living God.

With such a rationalistic or non-supernatural understanding Christianity — with the idea that God *really is* — becomes almost a fairy tale. Consequently, I still struggle to appreciate the spiritual, or the reality of the supernatural. It's so easy for me to entertain the thought that maybe God isn't there. Now I may be the only person here with this problem! But I think the absence of God can be a problem even for mature believers, because I've heard others talk about it on recordings or broadcasts or in person. Leaders we respect in the body of Christ, people who've accomplished great things for God, still go through times when He seems to have left them, times when He seems to be absent and the spiritual seems to have no reality or significance.

Several decades ago a form of theology arose in liberal circles called the "death of God" movement. These theologians spoke of the absence of the presence of God, and of any sense of a personal God. They were not clear in what they were teaching, but they said God had disappeared in our generation and that any talk about Him as if He is actually a living Person — the Creator of the universe and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ — is meaningless. They toyed with the question, Should we speak of the *absence of the presence* of God, or the *presence of the absence* of God?

Well, it really makes no difference! If you're going through a time when He isn't there for you, you're still alone facing your problem. Whether He doesn't exist or whether we somehow can't find Him becomes immaterial. We can deal with all kinds of problems and disappointments in life, issues of great magnitude and difficulty, if we know that God is with us. But it's difficult to confront these problems when, somehow, God isn't there. Everything becomes pointless and futile.

Well, I know I'm the only one with this problem, but let's go on. What causes this kind of thing to happen in our life? There are probably a number of causes, and I may have missed a few here. But one thing that causes us to feel that God isn't there is when we have the feeling that somehow God has let us down. Something we wanted to achieve we failed to achieve, or something we thought was good becomes spoiled or disappears. We feel God let us down when we needed Him.

I want you to understand that this struggle isn't foreign to the men and women of the Bible. We encounter it often in the Scriptures. Turn right over to the next psalm, Psalm 44:9-12, and listen to these words of the Israelites:

*Yet thou hast cast us off and abased us, and hast not gone out with our armies.
Thou hast made us turn back from the foe; and our enemies have gotten spoil.
Thou hast made us like sheep for slaughter, and hast scattered us among the nations.
Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.*

Do you see what Israel is saying to God? "You've deserted us, You've rejected us, You've gone away! Not only did You deliver us over to our enemies, but whereas You could have gotten something for us You didn't even sell us for anything worthwhile!" What an insult! So Israel struggles with this question of what do you do when God lets you down, when God's program somehow doesn't seem to be your program. The things you hoped for, things you thought were good and were even going to benefit the kingdom of God, somehow God did not bring to pass. You're left holding the bag, a bag that seems empty and shallow. And you just wonder, "Where has God gone?"

So *disappointment* can cause the question to arise, "Where is God?" At a more severe stage we can fall into *depression*, which is total self-centeredness. A person who's depressed is a person who can think of nothing but his own hurts. The whole universe revolves around him; he's turned inward and can't relate to other people or look objectively at the situation going on around him. At a time like this God seems to have gone away from such a person, and to speak to him about God seems pointless. As one of the Proverbs says, it's useless to sing happy songs to somebody who's downcast and depressed (Proverbs 25:20). You're not going to cheer them up that way, because they're locked into self-centered depression and feeling sorry for themselves. God can't be there for them at a time like that. As the psalmist asks in Psalm 42:11, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" He speaks of the despair and depression that we experience within our being when somehow we cannot access God. Disappointment and depression can cause us to feel that God has gone away.

There's a third cause for feeling that God has left us, and that is *persecution*. We may not think persecution is much of an issue in our life, though I think probably it's going to become more of an issue for Christians as time goes on and trends develop in this nation. It certainly is an issue for Christians in many lands today. When you find that you are alone as a believer, then you may feel God has left you. Psalm 42:1-3 speaks of this:

*As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while men say to me continually, "Where is your God?"*

There are people who are taunting this lone believer, “Where’s your God now — now that you need Him? This persecution and this taunt come back again in verse 10: “As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”

Recall Elijah after the great victory on Mount Carmel. He had just proved to the worshipers of Ba’al that their God was not as strong as Yahweh, the God of Israel. But then Jezebel got after him and he fled from the habitable areas of Israel, and went down into the desert of Mount Sinai. There he began to wail to the Lord and cry and say, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:10). Elijah certainly felt persecuted! I won’t say he felt God was gone, but he certainly felt alone.

Perhaps we feel that we’re the only one in our place of work, or the only one in our school, or the only one in the store where we’re doing business, or the only one at home who believes in God and is entrusting his life to God. Members of our family, fellow workers, people we meet are saying, in effect, “Where is your God, what’s He going to do for *you*?” At times like this we can ask that question, “What do you do when it seems like God isn’t there?”

Jesus told a parable about a sower who sowed seed. Some of the seed fell in shallow soil, and because it didn’t have any root when persecution arose it withered away. Persecution will destroy our confidence that God is there unless we have a root, unless we’re grounded in a relationship with Him so that we can withstand those times of persecution.

Related to this, and probably the same thing, is a fourth factor: *oppression* by the enemy. There may, indeed, be no visible cause for our feeling that somehow God has gone away. Disappointment might explain it, depression might explain it, persecution by people who aren’t believers might explain it. But sometimes it happens with no explanation, with no particular cause for feeling that God has left us. Maybe the only explanation for it is that it’s an attack of Satan, our enemy. Maybe things are going too well in our spiritual life, or we were doing too much for the kingdom and the work of God was being expanded through the way He was using us! The enemy saw this, and decided he had to put a stop to it. So for no apparent reason we fall into this blackness and despair thinking that God has gone away.

The apostle Paul went through such times. If we turn to 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 we’ll see that he had to deal with this problem:

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

People have wondered what this “thorn in the flesh” was, this messenger of Satan that the apostle Paul had to deal with. There have been a lot of theories about it, and most of them have centered around some type of physical problem — partial blindness, or some type of debilitating condition that sapped his strength. Yet, when you stop and look at it, how could a man who had serious visual problems or who was on his last legs physically, so to speak, have traveled so extensively across the ancient world under far more difficult conditions than we deal with today? How could he have accomplished so much for the Lord?

I think Paul tells us what his thorn in the flesh was. He says it was “a messenger of Satan, to harass me.” It was an attack of the enemy, because Paul was accomplishing so much good for the kingdom of God. And, although he doesn’t say so, no doubt Paul went through times when he

asked himself, “What do I do now that God isn’t here? What do I do now that I’m in this despair? What do I do now that everything seems pointless and futile?” He certainly went through many of the conditions that can bring on these questions: persecution, imprisonment, beatings, deprivation, shipwreck and all kinds of afflictions he had to endure. He must have faced this question. So he tells us that he had a messenger of Satan harassing him, to keep him from being too elated by what Christ had revealed to him, and to keep him from exalting himself because of what Christ had accomplished through him.

The psalmist, too, speaks of “the oppression of the enemy.” Recall Psalm 42:9: “I say to God, my rock: ‘Why hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’” I believe he’s dealing with real enemies — human enemies — here who have driven this devout priest into exile. But I think we would agree that the human enemies of this worshiper of the Lord God were being used by the enemy of our souls. A spiritual enmity is at work here, and again in Psalm 43:2: “Why hast thou cast me off? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” Has God gone away from this man, or not? He certainly feels that He has, “because of the oppression of the enemy.” So causes for feeling that God has gone away is the activity of Satan who wants to destroy that relationship we have with our King and Savior.

So there are four causes: disappointment, depression, persecution by people, oppression by the enemy. And a fifth cause that I think we ought to take pretty seriously, too, is just plain *fatigue*. Sometimes we glorify our problems by making them into spiritual problems, when the truth is, we’re just plain tired! We’re plumb out of steam, and we need some rest. I know that when I get overtired it’s easy to fall into this feeling that God has somehow gone away. When we’re tired we can say things, and do things, that destroy our faith and that we later regret. Never have a theological discussion with somebody when you’re tired. Wait until you’re refreshed, and you can see things more clearly. But plain old fatigue can cause you to feel that God has left you.

Well, these are some of the causes, I think. But what are some of the answers? Like the causes, they can all cluster together. Fatigue, disappointment, persecution, oppression — they can all work together to cause us to ask, “Where has God gone? Why can’t I find Him? Why can’t I sense His presence? And, like the causes, the answers can work together, too.

So what do you do, when God isn’t there, to get restored to the awareness of His presence? I think the first thing we need to do is to *remember that we’re not the only one with this problem!* Indeed, it vexed men and women in the Scriptures also. This writer of Psalms 42 and 43 was a priest; he used to lead worship. He tells us, in the psalm, that throngs used to go up to the festival and he used to lead them in procession to the house of God. Perhaps he was a temple musician, and yet this man of God, the author of one of the psalms, experienced this same thing we sometimes feel. “Where is your God? When will I come and become the face of God?”

Classically, in the Scripture, we think of Job. In Job, chapter 23, we discover he’s dealing with the same issue:

*Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. . . .
Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him;
on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him (Job 23: 3-4, 8-9).*

Was Job dealing with this question, or wasn’t he? He certainly was! We’ve already mentioned Elijah, who felt that he was the only one left who was worshipping the Lord. He must have had a lot of doubts about the Lord’s ability to continue to use him to re-establish the worship of the Lord God in Israel. We’ve spoken about Paul, and we’re certainly in good company if we feel that we have a messenger of Satan to harass us and keep us from becoming too confident in our

relationship with God. Think of David; there was nobody in the Old Testament with a heart more for the Lord than King David, and yet he wrote these words in Psalm 22:

*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer;
and by night, but find no rest (Psalm 22:1-2).*

David had to face it, too, and we all remember that these words of David's were used by the Lord Jesus Christ as He hung there on the cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Now I think we should understand that in the time of Christ the Scriptures didn't have numbers to their chapters, and therefore the Psalms were known by their titles or their first lines; when the Gospels tell us that Christ, on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" it was like saying that He recited the entire psalm. which begins with those words but ends on a note of victory in the Lord and praise in the great congregation. So I think the Lord was not uttering a cry of complete despair, because there is victory as well as defeat in Psalm 22. But insofar as He uttered those opening words, we know that Jesus Christ identified with them, and identified with us in going through those times when it just seems that God isn't there.

Great Christians of all the ages, and leaders of today, face times when God isn't there for them. Recently I was listening to a tape in which John Wimber was giving some testimony to the effect that, although the Vineyard movement was well-established and people were coming to be taught by him and learn from him and things seem to be fine, inwardly he was going through a period in which God somehow withdrew from him and it just seemed he couldn't get at Him. So leaders of today go through these same times of questioning, the same times of wondering where god could be.

So the first thing to do is to remember that you're not the only one dealing with this issue. It happened to men in Bible times, and it happens to Christian leader today. The second thing we have to do is to *recognize an attack of the enemy* when it's taking place. If we recognize such an attack we can resist it. Scripture tells us that we *can* resist the enemy. James says, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). If you've submitted yourself to God, then you can resist the devil and he will flee from you. He does not have power over you if you choose to resist his power. People will say, "The devil made me do it" or "The devil took away my faith." He can only do those things if you let him. He does not have the authority over you to take away your trust in God, unless you cooperate with him and let him do that to you. We have the ability to resist, and I think we can even resist in the flesh the spiritual power of the enemy. He doesn't have power to take our awareness of God away from us if we won't let him. So take authority over him, in the name of Jesus. Rebuke and bind him, and send him back to the pit, and he'll have to go.

If the enemy is using fatigue to get at you — and I think it's one of his favorite tools — remember that things are going to look different to you after you've rested, and had a chance to re-gather your thoughts. So when you're going through a time of stress and fatigue and it seems as though the Lord has withdrawn from you, don't make any hasty pronouncements. Wait until you have a chance to get refreshed. Even that simple act will make things look a lot different.

First, remember you're not the only one. Second, recognize an attack of the enemy for what it is, and be aware of the ways that he will attack you. Third, *get with God's people*. I think this is very important. When we feel that God has left us or, somehow, He just isn't there, our tendency is to run away. We may feel ourselves under condemnation because all of those wonderful Christian people haven't lost their sense of God — yet here I am amongst people who are worshiping God and losing themselves in His presence! He's real for them, yet I'm empty and

I just don't belong here, I've got to get away! There'll be that tendency to run away from the presence of God's people, but when we go off by ourselves we only increase the chance that the enemy will be able to get to us and really do a number on us. So don't leave the presence of God's people! Encouragement comes through the fellowship of the body of Christ. The Scriptures teach this very clearly, for example in the tenth chapter of Hebrews:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:23-25).

The Lord is being glorified, the kingdom is coming, and therefore all the more should we assemble together with the body of Christ and receive the stimulation to good works, the encouragement for commitment to Christ, and the opportunity to celebrate the presence of the Lord that come when we come together as a body. That's why it's so important that we remain in fellowship, and continue to gather for worship and teaching. Draw encouragement from the faith of your fellow believers! You may have to make a telephone call to somebody you consider a spiritual example for you; and just remember that the time will come when they may want to call *you* for encouragement. You may want to get some CDs or other media; just having Christian teaching in your home, or in your car, can put you into the presence of the body of Christ. Get worship music and listen to people singing and rejoicing before the Lord. Do something good for a brother or sister in the Lord. It's amazing how much better you'll feel about the presence of God in your life if you'll do something good and beneficial to build up the Christian life of another believer or bless them in some way. I can testify how it is, that if I'm going through a time when God isn't real for me and all I have to do is to make some calls in the hospital and pray with people and see how they get blessed by that. I walk out into another world, and God is with me!

This leads us into a discussion of one of the most important ways to fight this battle, and that is to *worship* — to go where the presence of God is manifest, and where He becomes visible. Psalm 50:2 says, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." We believe Zion today is the worshiping church, the church that enters into the presence of the Lord. God will shine on us in that time of worship and praise. and become visible for us. So when God isn't there we know where we can find Him.

Go back with me to Psalm 43:3: "Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!" The author of this psalm knows that he'll find God when he gets into the place of worship — when he gets to Zion, when he gets into the assembly of those who are praising and adoring and honoring the King of kings and the Lord of lords. If you're going through a time like this when God doesn't seem to be there, get some worship music that will lift you into His presence and play it. Play it them in your car, play it in your home, get a portable player and play it at work — whatever you can do! But get into worship and praise.

Well, these are some suggestions anyway, some practical ways to deal with this feeling we get that God has left us. They all boil down to one simple thing, and that is: just "hang in there" "keep on keeping on." The author of Hebrews says that Moses "endured as seeing him who is invisible" (11:7). We need to exercise that kind of endurance to see God, even though He is invisible. Of course, He's always invisible; but at certain times we sense His presence in a special way, and at other times we don't sense His presence at all. But we can endure, as Jesus said: "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13) . Sometimes we just have to tough it out. Sometimes we just have to say, "I'm determined to see this thing through until it changes for me and God comes back!" Eventually the storm blows over, the shadows flee, the invisible appears in sight and God is seen by mortal eye.

“Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God” (Psalm 43:3-4). Let us go to Zion! But, friends, *we* are Zion. We are the temple. The book of Ephesians teaches us that we’re a spiritual house that has been built up in the Lord where He dwells. We’re to be a people “to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:14). When we remember who we are in Christ, then it’s a lot easier to get through those times of doubt when God seems far away, and to endure until His presence returns. He has promised that He won’t ever leave us or forsake us, but He’ll dwell with and we with Him in the New Jerusalem — in Zion which is the church, the body of Christ. And that’s who you and I are.

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