

When God Seems to Hide His Face

Psalm 13

As you look back over your life, what are the times when you've felt that God's seemed to turn His back on you? What are the times when you've felt that God hasn't come through for you in the way you expected?

- Perhaps that time at school, when you needed a good pass in Science and you prayed really hard about it but it just didn't happen? Indeed, your mark went down rather than up.
- Perhaps that time in your youth when you had a crush on that gorgeous girl or that handsome guy and you asked God to give them a crush on you but that didn't happen. Indeed, they ended up marrying the person who used to be your best friend.
- Perhaps that time when you had an interview for what looked like your ideal job – it had everything you wanted: great wages, great working conditions, close to home, good opportunity for promotion. You prayed really hard about that one. You even fasted. But you messed up the interview big time.
- Perhaps that time when your dad was dying of cancer. You asked God to either heal him or take him quickly – but he died after 12 months of painful existence in hospital.

There are times when we cry out:

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?

How long will you hide Your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Perhaps even at this moment you cry out that way.

- Perhaps you face a difficult situation at work and you've been crying out to God about it.
- Perhaps your son or daughter has grown up and turned away from the gospel and you've been crying out to God about that.
- Perhaps the ongoing physical pain in your body has been going on for so long now and you've been crying out to God about that.
- Perhaps you're facing financial difficulties and you've been crying out to God about that.

It seems to you that God doesn't answer your prayer. It seems that God's forgotten you. It seems that God's turned His back on you and deserted you.

David's Suffering

I don't know what caused David to cry out to God like this. Neither does anyone else. That doesn't stop people having guesses.

- Some people see the word *enemy* there in verse 2 – and again in verse 4. They automatically think of Saul and the lengthy time Saul chased David all round the wilderness areas of Judea while trying to kill him. That's certainly one possibility. Under those conditions, I can very well imagine David crying out to God like this. That's how I'd have felt. Hey God, didn't You anoint me as king of Your people? How come I'm hiding in this cave in the middle of nowhere? Have you forgotten all about anointing me? This psalm would fit very well into that sort of situation – but Saul wasn't the only enemy David had during his lifetime.
- Some people see David's circumstances as being a time of prolonged illness – with the *enemy* being

death. The Bible doesn't tell us every time one of its characters gets sick. Indeed, usually the only time we're told about such things is when God steps in and miraculously cures the person. Yet, there's no reason to think these Biblical characters didn't get sick just like everyone else in the world. When God doesn't immediately heal us of such sicknesses and they become prolonged – like after two days (or maybe two hours) – we have a tendency to think God's forgotten us and we're missing out on God's blessings. Maybe David's going through something like that.

They're the two major possibilities suggested. You're quite welcome to come up with others. The psalm's very sparse on details – and so could come from any time in David's life. Perhaps it's that element of vagueness that gives it something of a timeless quality so that it appeals to all sorts of people in all sorts of situations. We just don't know the exact historical circumstances behind this psalm.

At this point, I want to pause for three comments. First, there's one thing lacking in this psalm that I think it's important to note. There's a danger arguing from silence – arguing from what's not actually said in the text – but, in this case, I think it's right. There's no hint in the psalm that David's condition is the result of some specific sin. There are other psalms where that is the case – like Psalm 51 – but not this one. There's nothing here to suggest God's turned His face from David because of sin. There's no confession of sin by David. There's no repentance. There's no hint of guilt. We're not talking here about a condition of punishment because David's done the wrong thing.

Secondly, bad things and bad feelings happen to Christians. We live in a sinful world just like everyone else. Christians too have car accidents. Christians have their houses broken into. Christians get cancer. Christians suffer depression. There's nothing in the Bible that says we're exempt. There are times when Christians feel that God's deserted them – that He's turned His face away from them. And sometimes those feelings can last a long time. All sorts of things can give rise to those feelings.

- Some prolonged sickness.
- Some prolonged difficulty in life.
- Some tragic circumstance.
- Some hormonal imbalance.

None of those things means you're not a Christian or God has deserted you – but it can feel like it. Sometimes there's this terrible emotional pain such that this psalm's words seem very appropriate.

Thirdly, one thing to learn from this psalm is that it's OK to express your honest feelings to God in prayer. After all, it's not as if God doesn't know how you feel. It's not as if you can put on some mask when you come to God in prayer and pretend that everything's OK and you're living on top of the world when you've got this ache in your heart. It's not as if God'll only listen to your prayer if you've got your victorious Christian face on while you're praying. God knows all about how you feel inside – even better than you do. His preference is that you be honest about it. If you're not honest about it, the only one you fool is yourself – and then you suffer for it.

David's Prayer

Having expressed his feelings of anguish and distress,

David then speaks his prayer. Verse 3:

Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.

*Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
my enemy will say, "I have overcome him",
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

The three main verbs in David's prayer express the heart of his request – look, answer, give light.

- Look. For someone who believes that God's turned His face away, the first request is that God turn His face back. He wants to experience the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6 – that Yahweh make His face shine upon you. Instead of feeling he's being ignored by God, he wants God's attention – He wants God to look favourably on him.
- Answer. Some people speak of God's three possible answers to our prayers: yes, no and wait. That's not what David has in mind here. He's asking for a positive answer to his prayer. He's tired of the anguish he's experiencing and He wants God to relieve it.
- Give light. The eyes often express something of what's happening in the inner being. People in anguish have dim eyes – eyes that reflect the sadness of their souls and the darkness of their inner turmoil. The eyes of those whose anguish is relieved often sparkle. The new lightness in their spirit shows in the light of their eyes.

To sum up: David asks God for relief from whatever it is that's causing his problems.

From a human perspective, that's all very understandable. It's very likely you and I would do the same thing if we were in David's position. We'd ask God to relieve the

problem. That's what we humans seem to do. Indeed, for some people, that's the only time they do pray – when they're in some desperate situation and they expect God to get them out of it. That's God's job – to get them out of trouble.

David adds an interesting reason in verse 4 – something that's perhaps a little bit different from the average Joe Blow who simply thinks it's God's job to rescue him (or her) from trouble. Verse 4 brings in David's theological understanding. Verse 4 brings in the issue of the relationship between God and His people. David faces the anguish of verses 1 and 2, not simply as a human being – but as a human being who's in covenant relationship with God. If God allows David to die – whether that be at the hands of an enemy like Saul or as the result of an illness – what message will that send to others? David's opponents will rejoice at his downfall on the personal level – but they'll also rejoice on the theological level.

- They'll say: see, there's no point being godly.
- They'll say: see, serving God doesn't pay after all.
- They'll say: God can't protect His own.
- They'll say: God doesn't keep His promises.

It's not simply that David will die – it's that God's reputation will suffer and people will be encouraged in their ungodliness.

Now just by way of warning – lest you take what I've just said the wrong way. The more cynical or the more self-centred may think: Ahh, here's a tactic we can use to persuade God to do our will. We need to find a reason to show God it's in His own self-interest to give us a positive answer to our prayer. Here's a way I can still be selfish and look pious at the same time. I don't think

David was that cynical or that self-centred in his prayer.

David's Faith

Verses 5 and 6 provide David's conclusion to his prayer.

*But I trust in Your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in Your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord
for He has been good to me.*

The mood changes significantly between verses 4 and 5.

- The first part of the psalm's full of anguish and despair and pleading to God to hear and answer him.
- Then there seems to be a change in verse 5 – there's now a quiet assurance and calmness.

What's happened?

We're tempted to see a change in circumstances.

- Maybe David's received a message that Saul's just dropped dead of a heart attack.
- Maybe David's fever's broken and he suddenly feels so much better.
- Maybe David's had a visit from a prophet who's given him some promise from God.
- Maybe a priest has pronounced some blessing.
- Maybe someone gave David a new pain-killer that had some rather uplifting side-effects.
- Maybe there's a few months between verses 4 and 5 and David's become used to his situation and resigned himself to the fact that this is his lot in life.

The text itself doesn't indicate that anything's actually changed. It just moves quite naturally from verse 4 to verse 5.

Rather the change seems to occur in David – there seems to be a change of attitude. Yet, still we're not totally sure why. We can guess.

- Maybe the answer's in verse 4 – not the answer of the cynic that's confident he's eventually found a method for twisting God's arm – but the answer that focuses on God and is concerned that God be honoured above all (even if that means personal loss or suffering).
- Maybe the answer's in prayer itself. The prayer begins in a fairly self-centred way. The focus is on David and his feeling of abandonment. Perhaps the very act of praying to the all-powerful God lifts his eyes off himself and gives him hope because he's asked for aid from One who can help.
- Maybe the answer's in that word the NIV translates as *unfailing love* in verse 5 – the word that refers to God's covenant faithfulness. David remembers that God's been faithful to His covenant in the past and has shown Himself reliable and so can be counted on to remain faithful in the future. It's not simply a matter of wishful thinking on David's part – it's tied up with God's spoken covenant with Him.
- Or maybe there's no real change in attitude. Maybe David still feels exactly the same. Maybe he still feels as bleak as ever. Maybe he simply expresses this in faith. He knows his anguished feelings. He knows his inner struggle. But he also knows God – and he affirms what he knows of God despite his ongoing feelings.

In the long run, we don't know. For those in the grip of verses 1 and 2, there are no guarantees in regard to their feelings. There are some other guarantees that I'll get to shortly – but there's no guarantee the depression will lift.

It doesn't mean you're not a Christian. It doesn't mean that God's abandoned you. Nor does it mean you can't affirm verses 5 and 6 – despite your feelings.

Verse 5 says: *I trust in Your unfailing love?*

- For David, that means thinking back to the events in Israel's history – events such as the rescue from slavery in Egypt; events such as walking through the Red Sea; events such as the giving of God's instructions at Mount Sinai; events such as the provision of the land of Canaan; events such as God's persistence with them and provision for them despite their many failures. God had shown Israel His commitment to them in the events of their history. That's recorded for them in the Scriptures.
- For us as Christians, it means something even more significant. It means looking back to the cross of Jesus. There God shows most clearly His total commitment to us. There God shows us His unfailing love toward us. There can never be a greater demonstration of God's commitment to us than that. God didn't wait for us to be His friends before He did that for us – He did it while we were His enemies. No matter what the current circumstances of our lives, we can be confident of God's unfailing love towards us because of Jesus and His death for us. It simply doesn't get any better than that. Anything else God does for us is secondary to that.

This is something important that's come between David's psalm and our use of it today.

- In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays in agony – He asks that, if possible, the cup of God's judgment be taken from Him. It's not possible – and so

Jesus submits to the cross.

- On the cross, in words that are not that distant from this psalm, Jesus cries out the opening line of Psalm 22: *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*

The reality is: God should abandon us. Our sin should cause God to turn His back on us. That's what's right and just and fair. But, instead of doing that, God abandoned Jesus. And so I can be confident of God's unfailing love. I can be confident His face is turned towards me – even at those times it feels He's abandoned me. Even then, the Bible assures me He keeps working for my good.

Verse 6 says: *my heart rejoices in Your salvation?* As far as what that meant for David, it's not easy for us to work out exactly.

- It could be an expression of David's confidence that God would deliver him from whatever problem he faced at the time. Such confidence would be based on God's covenant promises.
- It could be an expression of David's confidence in God no matter what the outcome of the particular circumstances he faced. Again, such confidence would be based on God's covenant promises.

In other words, David's confidence would be based on God and what God had said – not on words that David may want to put in God's mouth.

What's it mean for us Christians living in the 21st century to say: *my heart rejoices in Your salvation?* For us, our salvation must be interpreted in terms of what Jesus has done for us at the cross. That's our central reference. Everything else revolves round that.

The New Testament indicates our salvation is past,

present and future.

- We have been saved. To use the Biblical language: We've been taken out of the kingdom of darkness and put into God's glorious kingdom. We've had our sins forgiven. We've been adopted into God's family. We've been guaranteed a place in heaven. We don't have to fear God's judgment.
- We are being saved. We're not yet perfect in terms of thinking and living according to God's will. We still sin and will continue to do so as long as we live on this earth. We're still subject to the sorts of feelings expressed in this psalm. Yet, sin's no longer the final word in our lives. God's saving us from that in the present. Our minds are being transformed so we think in godly ways. Our attitudes are being transformed so we desire purity. Our behaviour's being transformed so we become more like Jesus. We're developing the family likeness.
- We will be saved. God has promised us a perfect future – a future where everything's done according to God's perfect will. There'll be no more sin. There'll be no more of the consequences of sin – sorrow and suffering and pain and death.

All that's involved in our salvation.

What are the implications of that for our lives now? In particular, what are the implications for those times when it seems God's hidden His face from us? **First**, we can be sure of God's commitment to us. It may seem to us that God's hidden His face. It may seem to us God's turned His back on us. It may seem to us the heavens are as brass and we can't get through. In overwhelming despair we may cry out: How long? And we may get no answer.

God doesn't promise to give an answer – nor does He promise to remove the suffering.

Yet, in the midst of the pain, don't forget the reality. The Bible tells us God turned His back on Jesus so He wouldn't have to turn His back on us. God turned His back on Jesus because He bore our sin. Because of that – and only because of that – we now have permanent access to God. Hebrews 10:19 and 22 states:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith ...

We may feel God's turned His back on us, but He hasn't. For those who are in Jesus, He won't – for He sees us as being in Christ. In Christ, He's made us acceptable to Himself.

Secondly, we can be sure that God's committed to our salvation. Yet, that salvation has to be defined in God's terms, not ours. We have a timing problem in the way we think about our salvation. We want the whole package now – past, present and future – but that's not what God's promised. Some of our salvation is delayed to the future – a fairly significant part of it.

Think back to verses 1 and 2. When is it you get to that point in your life? Some people get to that point whenever God doesn't give them whatever they ask for straight away. They seem to need God to keep giving them presents on their own terms in order to be assured of God's love. Most Christians, however, don't get to the point of verses 1 and 2 until after some reasonably serious and prolonged problem in their lives. It's something

they've struggled with in prayer for a period of time and they can't understand why God doesn't answer them.

- Their request seems godly.
- Their request seems to be in line with God's will.
- Their request seems to honour God.

Yet, God doesn't grant it.

I suspect that often we're interested in being saved from suffering. There's nothing wrong with that desire. Our future salvation will include that. Yet, in the present, God's more interested in saving us from sin – the sin that dwells within our hearts. God's more interested in saving us from the disease than the symptoms. He will get rid of the symptoms too – but that awaits Jesus' return. In the meantime, He wants to attack the root problem in our lives. Sometimes He uses the symptoms to do that.

- One of the symptoms is getting old and dying. That's part of living in a world affected by sin. It reminds us all's not right with this world. It reminds us not to selfishly hang onto the things we try to accumulate now. It hits at the heart of selfishness in our beings.
- Another of the symptoms is natural disasters. They too are part of living in a world infected by sin. They're part of God's general judgment on sin. They remind us relations between God and humanity aren't right. They're a wake-up call to turn back to God.
- Another of the symptoms is suffering. Suffering too can draw our attention to the real disease. We think the priority's to avoid suffering – yet God uses that to refine us and to knock off the edges of our sinfulness.

Romans 5:3-5 states:

Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.

God uses even sufferings to achieve His good purposes in our lives – to achieve His salvation for us.

Too often, our "how long" is simply a cry for relief from the symptoms – or a cry for relief from how the presence of the disease in others has negative impact on us. May God grant us an even greater desire for relief from the real disease that's within our own hearts. May we grow in our hate for the wrong attitudes within us and at the same time may we grow in our desire to become personally godly. How long, O Lord, before I'm truly pure in heart? That's what's at the real heart of the salvation God's given us. We need to grasp it's at the heart of the salvation we've accepted from Him. That's what true relationship with God's about.

In that salvation we can rejoice – confident that God will bring to completion the work He's begun in us. In that salvation we can be totally confident – knowing that God will be faithful to His covenant promises to us in Jesus.