

God is Love (4)

KSBC May 24, 2009

When God's Love Seems Distant

Psalm 13; 77

Intro. A breaking point for the overworked, the outer limits of exasperation for the overloaded, the impossible expectations of too much or many, the grinding stress of lengthy unresolved problems, the imminent attack of the enemy, the helplessness of facing the unknown and unexpected . . . times when your soul may refuse to be comforted. Weeks, where God is tragically letting things go on without giving you any tokens of his interest or concern. Perhaps months or years of seeming silence from God on issues of great importance to you.

We have all experienced it at one time or another and in various ways – feeling like God's love is distant if at all real. There are seasons of darkness and desolation at times in our lives and walks with God. To understand and rely on God's love means that we have to talk about and be prepared for those times when it literally feels like God is not love and does not love you.

Evidence from the Bible and church history is overwhelming on this topic. In recent centuries, some of those God has used in significant ways have both struggled with and written about their dark periods of depression and despair. These times were marked by a profound sense of God turning away. The Psalms often focus on the lament of the child of God who is in despair of one sort or another. The word pictures used are amazingly clear and common:

'Why, O Lord, do you stand so far off?'	10:1
'Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?'	10:1
'He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;'	40:2
'from the ends of the earth, I call to you'	61:2
'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.'	69:1
'I sink in the miry depths where there is no foothold.'	69:2
'but as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.'	73:2

We typically do not associate these circumstances, feelings and terms with God's love for us. Yet it is in these times when God's love is our only hope. It is in times like these that we must learn to connect with his love for our very survival.

Please read with me 2 Psalms that help us connect to God's love in practical ways while experiencing these feelings of distance and darkness.

Psalm 13 Psalm 77

Both of these Psalms summarize the feeling of distance in terms of God's love – 13:5; 77:7-9.

First, let's learn and be warned about the causes of these feelings of abandonment from these Psalms. Second, let's discover and determine to follow five practical responses that keep us connected to God's love.

4 Contributing factors to your sense of distance from God's love:

Psa. 13:1-2

1. A prolonged struggle.

Note the repeated (4x) plea of 'how long'. When any trial, trouble or problem goes on for an extended time, the length of time becomes a separate and equal trial. When there is no end in sight or termination point for this pain, it adds exponentially to the burden. Many of us would chose harsh pain for a short or known period of time over moderate discomfort for a long undetermined time.

Psalm 77:2, 7

Illus of David and Saul . . . prolonged, protracted chase 1Sam. 20:1-3

2. A divine unresponsiveness.

Note the repeated emphasis of being forgotten and loss of direct contact. Divine answers and activity has dried up. God is not blessings as he did in the past. This distancing from God could be in areas of family, children, business, work, church life, ministry or personal spiritual growth. It almost feels like rejection, with holding of compassion and being forgotten by God.

Psa. 77:7-9

3. A mental anguish.

Note the depth of mental anguish expressed by wrestling and the extent of this emotional pressure in terms of every day sorrow. The inner torment of rehearsing our failures, relying on our emotions, adjusting to physical fatigue or illness, dealing with unmet expectations or unplanned changes . . . all of these are a part of the wrestling that goes on in our hearts and minds. Rarely in the midst of these battles do we allow significant time and energy necessary for review and reflection necessary to remain in touch with the truth of God's love for us.

Psa. 77:1-4

Illus of Elijah – 1kings 17-19

Isa. 58:10-11

4. A real enemy.

Note the concern in verse 2 that has advanced beyond the point of just having an enemy and that enemy advancing . . . the concern has graduated to how long will my enemy go unchecked by God as he hides his face and apparently has forgotten? Everyone faces opposition of some type. The scriptures teach that in addition to the devil, we face the world and our own selfish flesh. The devil is experienced and effective at using our temperaments, weaknesses and even physical health to oppose us in our journey to know and rely on God's amazing love.

1Peter 5:8

Psa. 73:2-17

5 Ways to find God in the dark.

Psalm 13:3-6

Note that verse 3 begins a turning toward God by crying out to him. Here are 5 ways to turn toward God and encourage others to turn toward God to find him and his love in times of distress.

1. Pray because God's plans are loving.

Note in vs.3-4 the cry to God – please look at me, I feel abandoned; please answer me, I feel neglected; please give light, I feel like I am lost. Learning to pray when feeling abandoned is necessary. If the darkness and distance cause you to stop crying out to God, you must begin to question the nature and reality of your faith.

Psa. 77:1-9 – a model prayer

77:19 – path and unseen footprints

2. Wait because God's timing is loving.

Note the implied response of waiting to the direct questions of 'how long?' Psalm 40:1-3 give a clear example of drawing no deadlines for God and his timing. God's plans are according to his timetable.

Micah 7:8-9

3. Rejoice because God's hold on you is loving.

Note the direct statement of trust in 13:5. Note the summary of trust in 77:20. God's overriding concern is for his flock, his people. More than the displays of power and miracles, God leads his people like a careful shepherd. Rejoice because this darkness is a valley of undefined proportions from your perspective but is well known by your powerful and loving shepherd.

13:6 – I will sing

Phil. 3:12

4. Connect because God's people are loving.

Note that both Psalms are on record to be used in the context of worship. 77 was written to and for the choir director so that this song could be put before the congregation of worshippers on a regular basis. You need the encouragement, instruction, care, prayer and influence of God's people in your times of darkness. While nothing irritates a person in despair more than a happy person, it is biblical.

1Thess. 5:11, 13-14

5. Remember because God's works are loving.

Note the repeated emphasis in 77: 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12 on thinking, remembering and concentrating on God's ways and works in the past. The same discipline (thinking) that caused the distressed groaning in v. 3 can also lead to the hope and praise of vs. 10-20. Choosing to overcome isolated feelings by spending time in settings where you will be challenged to think and remember truth is vital to finding God's love in the dark.

Heb. 10:24-25

Responding . . .

1. Admit and turn from your wrong view of God that believes he cannot be both loving and distant.
2. Acknowledge and identify the major way your soul refuses comfort from God's love.
3. Renew your trust in God's great love by turning toward him and helping others turn.

Study Questions

1. What questions, observations or concerns do you have from the study today?
2. Read and make observations from both Psalm 13 and 77.
3. Share with the group an example from your experience of when you question God's love - God seems unresponsive and distant? Have you ever felt like God's love is something that you believe but do not actually enjoy? How?
4. Review the 4 contributing factors outlined in the message and in Psa.13:1-2. Which one or ones do you relate to the most and why? Which would you say is the most difficult?
5. Identify people in our church or community who are currently and potentially feeling distant from God because of any of these factors. What can you do to help or encourage these folks?
6. Review the 5 ways to find God in the dark. Which ones stand out to you and why? Which ones are hardest for you to do when you feel like God has stopped actively loving you?
7. Spend time in prayer for each other and the specific factors that each group member is wrestling with in their understanding and trusting God's great love.
8. What do you want to do, use or remember from today's study?