

PRAISE GOD IN THE MIDST OF YOUR DARKNESS

By Sam Storms

Do you sometimes feel the Lord has abandoned you? If clouds of pain, rejection or shame have shrouded you in depression, you need to sing about God's unceasing love.

When we moved from Dallas, Texas, to Ardmore, Oklahoma, we were able to purchase a very old, but nicely remodeled, two-story home. It was nearly twice the square footage of our previous house and provided our then 7-year-old daughter, Melanie, with more than enough room to roam.

One night I let Melanie talk me in to playing hide-and-seek. We used to play it in our much smaller Dallas home quite frequently, where it didn't prove to be much of a challenge. There were few places to hide, and the game usually ended quickly. But now things were different. We switched off most of the lights, and I hid in what turned out to be the perfect spot. I could hear Melanie excitedly opening doors and looking behind furniture, but failing to find me. After a while the house grew silent. Not knowing if she was still looking or had given up, I emerged from my hideout and went downstairs. I found her in the den, curled up on the couch, crying. When she saw me she leaped into my arms and squeezed me as if her life depended on it.

"What's the matter, Honey?" I asked, somewhat confused. Shaking and sobbing, she said: "I was all alone in the dark and couldn't find you anywhere! I was scared!" I strongly suspect that there are times when that's exactly how you feel in your relationship with God. It seems as if He's hiding from you. You're all alone in the dark, and God isn't anywhere to be found. Some people call it depression. For others it seems more like hopelessness. Whatever name you put on it, the feeling is unmistakable: God isn't there when you need Him most.

Scripture teaches that "The Lord your God is with you...He will rejoice over you with singing" (Zeph. 3:17, NIV). Far from being able to hear God sing, however, you struggle just to remember the last time He spoke to you. Where is He now when you need Him most? Where is He when your life is enveloped in darkness and you can't find the light switch?

Dark Night of the Soul

David, king over Israel, was no stranger to what you're feeling. Listen to his anguished cry. Perhaps you may find in him a soul mate: "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? 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" (Ps. 13:1-4).

Although it's painful to read of someone suffering like this, I'm also encouraged by David's lament. It tells me that I don't have to pretend everything is OK when it's not. Four times David cried out, "How long, O Lord?" Four times! Don't just read the words. Listen to the confusion behind them: "O Lord, will it ever end?"

It's important to note that David's feeling of abandonment was not related to some sin he committed. We read of no confession, no contrition, no acknowledgment of personal guilt, no repentance that might shed some light on why God's blessings were missing. In this case the cause for his turmoil must be traced to something other than overt transgression.

There are going to be down times in your life, as there were in David's, that are unrelated to specific acts of sin. Unfortunately this makes it even more difficult to handle! If you had sinned you could understand and live with God's absence, knowing you deserved to be chastised. But when God seems to disappear for no apparent reason, the perplexity is unbearable. David was by no means the only one of God's people to feel forgotten and abandoned. Consider Moses. The first 40 years of his life were anything but boring.

He had been raised and educated in the palace of Pharaoh. He had access to all the power, prestige, wealth, entertainment and education that the greatest monarch on earth could provide. But it didn't last. The next 40 years were of a different order. After killing an Egyptian, he fled to Midian to save his skin (see Ex. 2:11-15).

For the next four decades he toiled in utter obscurity, tending the sheep and goats of Jethro, his father-in-law. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, sheep and goats, goats and sheep, for 40 long, tedious, quiet, boring years.

Gone? Yes. Forgotten? No. Simply because one of God's own is for the moment unused does not mean he is unloved. J.I. Packer tells us in his book, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Servant Publications), that one of the disciplines to which the Lord calls us is the willingness, from time to time, not to be used in significant ministry.

Packer gives us an example to consider: "Imagine a devoted and gifted Christian woman, whose ministry has been precious to her, finding that for quite a long period the Lord sidelines her so that her potential is not being used. What is going on? Is this spiritual failure?"

"It is probably not spiritual failure at all, but a lesson in Christ's school of holiness. The Lord is reminding her that her life does not depend on finding that people need her. The prime source of her joy must always be the knowledge that though He did not need her, God has chosen to love her freely and gloriously so that she may have the eternal joy of fellowship with Him. "Regarding her ministry, what matters is that she should be available to Him. Then He will decide when and how to put her to service again, and she should leave that with Him."

God hasn't forgotten this woman. He didn't abandon Moses or David. Nor has He forsaken you.

A Cry of Praise

Sometimes the frustrations of the present threaten to undermine the trust that comes from remembering the past. We are so lost now that we forget what happened back then. We think, *What good is yesterday when I'm hurting so badly today?*

That is where faith comes in. Faith in the God we've seen act in the past renews our hope for the future. David knew it. So he made a choice, as you and I must make, to entrust himself to God's pledge of undying love. If you remember only one thing in this article, let it be the words of David in Psalm 13:5-6. Make them your words: "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."

Yes, on occasion God does seem hidden from view. His presence feels like a fast-fading memory. His love seems to have evaporated under the hot summer sun. When that happens, do what David did: Contrary to every fiber of your being that demands you say otherwise, declare to the heavens, "But I trust in Your unfailing love!" God's love will not fail! It has not and will not die. Though hidden from view, though far from what you're feeling, God's love for you lives.

Singing in the Cesspool

Someone might object, insisting that it's one thing to resolve inwardly to cling to God's unfailing love, but something else to "sing" to the Lord as David did. Oh, really? At a conference in Brighton, England, in 1991, a remarkable word of testimony was given by a pastor from China. He had spent 18 years in a prison for his faith. Here is a man who seemed to have every reason to doubt God's love for him. But he didn't.

His assigned task in the camp was to empty the human waste cesspool. Being atheists, the prison guards took sadistic pleasure in giving this job to the Christian pastor whose faith they despised. They never knew what a blessing it turned out to be for him: "It was more than two meters in breadth and two meters in length, filled with human waste collected from the entire camp. Once it was full, the human waste was kept until it was ripe and then dug out and sent to the fields as fertilizer.

"Because the pit was so deep, I could not reach the bottom to empty it; I had to walk into the disease-ridden mass and scoop out successive layers of human waste, all the time breathing the strong stench. The guards and all the prisoners kept a long way off because of the stench. "So why did I enjoy working in the cesspool? I enjoyed the solitude. In the labor camp all the prisoners normally were under strict surveillance, and no one could be alone. "But when I worked in the cesspool, I could be alone and could pray to our Lord as loudly as I needed. I could recite the Scriptures, including all the Psalms I still remembered, and no one was close enough to protest. Also, I could sing loudly the hymns I still remembered. "In those days one of my most favorites was 'In the Garden.' Again and again as I sang this hymn in the cesspool, I experienced the Lord's presence. He never left me nor forsook me. And so I survived, and the cesspool became my private garden."

The next time you begin to wonder if God really loves you, try singing in your cesspool. God's love can work wonders virtually anywhere! The longer I reflect on this Chinese pastor's experience the more convinced I am of the truth of Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians 2:16. There he says that because of God's love for us we have been given "eternal encouragement"--not a momentary boost nor a temporary surge, but encouragement that is eternal, unending, ceaseless, both for now and in the ages to come.

What we must realize, however, is that encouragement from the Lord sometimes comes in small doses. It's always there, but not always easy to discern at first glance. I discovered the truth of this only recently in what I consider a remarkable example of eternal encouragement.

It was a time of spiritual dryness. I was depressed, frustrated and confused. Worst of all, God didn't seem to care. I was having lunch with a man who, together with his wife and family, lives and ministers in Hong Kong. We had never met before that day. He had never visited our church and knew nothing about me or my ministry, past or present. During our two-hour conversation, we discussed a variety of issues pertaining both to his work on the mission field and my pastorate. The surprising thing about it, though, was that through all of our conversation he mentioned only two texts of Scripture: John 1 and Joshua 3. It "just so happened" that the two texts he mentioned were the very two on which I was scheduled to preach the next Sunday! He had no idea I was preaching on John 1 on Sunday morning and on Joshua 3 on Sunday night.

I wrestled for days trying to discern some grand spiritual symbolism in what was an undeniably stunning incident. Then it came to me. I'm convinced that this was an example of God's eternal encouragement during a time when His love was hidden from view. It was God's way of saying: "Sam, I'm still here. I still care. And contrary to what you're feeling right now, I am still in control." I don't know why God chose this approach. But I can assure you that His love, though at times hidden, will supply for your soul just what is needed to sustain you through the most distressing of trials. It may be small, but it will be sufficient.

God's love for you always shines bright. But if clouds of pain and rejection and shame have for the moment blackened the sky, rest assured that gracious winds will again blow strong, and the warmth of His passionate love will renew your once cold soul. In anticipation, go ahead and sing like David did. Go ahead and sing like the pastor in the prison cesspool. Who knows, you just might hear God join you with a song of His own! *

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