

When God feels distant

Illness, death, suffering in so many forms can make life feel very raw.

Perhaps when we think about what life feels like right now, for some people it can almost seem to throw a sense of God's love and control off centre.

What do you do when you don't know why things are like they are? When it seems not just that God doesn't give the answer but that God's left the building. When it feels like it's not just that prayer doesn't work but that your faith doesn't work- or maybe - that God doesn't work.

Psalm 44 in the Old Testament is very helpful when we feel confused and God feels distant. The composer of the Psalm says this:

¹⁷ All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. ¹⁸ Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. ¹⁹ But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness. ²⁰ If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, ²¹ would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart? ²² Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Now notice something here. The composer has done nothing deserving his experience, but he is confused. Sometimes we think we know when things are like they are. We feel we have an answer, a reason, an understanding of why things are like they are, and it can comfort- we understand! But sometimes it's more like: "What are you allowing here Lord? Where are you in this? Why?!"

Back to that psalm – the composer of it cries out ²³ *Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us for ever. ²⁴ Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? ²⁵ We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. ²⁶ Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love*

A remarkable prayer – a passionate crying out. If it wasn't in the Bible it would seem a very disrespectful prayer. It shows what life can sometimes feel like for the Christian. God's Word articulates the Church crying out in passionate confusion: "Lord- it is like you have slept in today. Where are you?"

Does this ring a bell for you sometimes? When we feel God's not close, or not helping it can lead to cynicism and despair when life is very hard. Two things to say here.

One- it is okay to struggle. Wrestling in the desert can be our reality for a season: when you don't know what is going to happen; when you don't understand- and you feel God isn't helping. We are to have patience faithfulness, but in that, to be real and honest - go to God with your feelings and concerns.

Two: In all this know the hope. If we are not to give up when life feels tough and God feels faraway, we need a focus that helps us, that carries us even when it seems like God is not there. We are to focus on the God's covenant love.

Psalm 44 is quoted in the New Testament – see Romans 8:36- *As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."* But see the whole section and what God wants us to know about Himself – the love of God the Father in Jesus - when it feels or seems like He has left us:

Romans 8:35-39 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We want to understand; it's hard to live without understanding. We want answers- or results. When life feels all over the place we perhaps may want to blame ourselves, or others - or God.

Unanswered prayer is a faith challenger - if behind our struggle is basically us thinking 'God's a monster or mean or nasty or cruel. Or God's sleeping in or on holiday. God feels like an indifferent ruler rather than loving Father'.

What God gives us is something of great treasure that holds us in the desert: He loves us- always. We need to know God is always there and He loves us. And how do we best know He loves us? The Cross. He sent His Son for us. We of course are to remember Jesus the one who experienced the ultimate shut out - the great cry of desolation.

Mark 15:34 *And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"--which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

God is not immune to how it can feel. He knows, cares, and embraced the worst bring us to Himself.

We may not understand why some things are like they are. But we are to be very glad God is real, loving, powerful and cares. We are kept by Him in all times even the times He feels very distant

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation (including whatever you are going through right now), will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

AMEN