

Editorial

What Can You Do When God Seems Far Away?



by DAVID POWLISON

We've all experienced times when Scripture seems irrelevant, and when our relationship with God waffles somewhere between distracted, indifferent, and complaining.

What can you do about that? Let me offer two suggestions. One asks God to do something for you, and the other asks you to notice some things about yourself.

Ask God

First, what can you ask the Lord to do when he and his words seem distant and dull? Psalm 119 teaches us to say: "Make me understand. Make me alive. Teach me. Open my eyes. Don't forsake me." Notice that the kind of help you ask for implicitly keys to the problem you are having:

I don't get it; *make me understand!*

I'm lifeless; *make me alive!*

I'm ignorant; *teach me!*

I'm blind; *open my eyes!*

I feel like I'm a million miles away from you; *don't forsake me!*

When you've gotten far away, ask him to close the gap. This psalm closes with a final cry for help that directly names both my problem and my need: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant" (v.176).

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We know that Psalm 119 is Scripture talking about Scripture. So it is remarkable how often what is written is a cry to understand what is written. In other words, Scripture itself is trafficking in the life experience where Scripture seems irrelevant and we are semi-comatose. God gets that. The psalm-writer was no super-saint. He knew the same struggle you and I have. You can take this to heart. “God, awaken me to what is written.” We can give voice to the very experience of disconnect that is given a voice in this psalm.

Notice my encouragement to you in those last two sentences: “Take to heart, and give voice.” When Scripture becomes dull to us, we are having a hearing problem. But if you are taking to heart how Scripture demonstrates the ways you can plead with your God, then your hearing problem is already being healed. I found my hearing problem being corrected even while I was writing these words. I was reminded that I can make my requests known—and so I found my voice: “Father, make me understand! Lord, open my eyes! Spirit, make me alive! Seek your servant! Do not let me go!”

Can you now find your true voice? If so, then the intertwining problems of Scripture’s seeming irrelevance and your dullness are already being solved. Don’t move on to the next point until you find your voice. Pray out loud, like the Bible does. Pray out loud, because you’re talking to someone who is listening. Give voice to your need.

Notice Your Own Life

Second, when Scripture and God seem hazy to us, we are also hazy about ourselves. We become hazy about how we are doing and about what we are facing. If God seems far away, where are you? Notice the dynamic that was already at work in the previous section. We were able to ask God to close the distance because we awakened to being far off.

When we are far off, we are also asleep to where we need specific help today. What are you facing? Where are you struggling? Whenever you become vividly aware of where you actually need outside help—today—then the kingdom of God comes near and Scripture sparkles. Promises speak exactly the hope you need right now. Commands give exactly the guidance that will set you free. God’s perspective is exactly the perspective that will reframe whatever you are facing. And the stories demonstrate how other saints, seekers, strugglers, skeptics, and sufferers have experienced analogous

things to your experience—often drastically different in detail, but strikingly similar in underlying pattern. We do not live by bread alone but by every word from the mouth of God. That’s not just a noble-sounding religious sentiment. It’s true in the details of life-lived.

So slow down and notice what’s going on with you. It will help you see that Scripture is relevant because it is exactly keyed to your daily struggles.

- Feel dull and distant? Psalm 119’s cries come alive.
- Feel the knife-edge of someone’s malice toward you? Psalm 10 has been there and walks with you.
- Feel your insignificance in the eyes of other people? Jesus’ approach in Luke 18:15–17 speaks warmly.
- Feel the sting of your sins? Romans 8:31–34 and Psalm 51 show you the way of repentance.
- Feel your lack of wisdom when walking into a very difficult interaction? James 1:5 and 3:17–18 come alive.
- Feel concern when those you love are floundering under the weight of their sins and sorrows? Psalm 25 breathes the honesty that identifies and cares.
- Feel anxiety because many hard things are coming at you all at once? In hard conditions, Jeremiah 17:7–8 sparkles with hope.
- Feel the approach of death? Psalm 23 is right there beside you.
- Feel the sterilizing, paralyzing unbelief of the surrounding world? Romans 12:1–2 is a wake-up call.
- Feel the threat of your own religious doubts? Jesus comes true to life as you watch Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John proclaim their faith. “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I believe, help my unbelief.”

As you become aware of your need, you awaken to where God intersects your life. Speak up about exactly the help you need.

See, for example, how the life-rearranging words of Philippians 4:6 can help you speak up about what you need. “Don’t be anxious about *anything*.” That’s not vague, idealistic advice to calm down and not get so bent out of shape. Your God is inviting you in. Begin your devotional time by stopping to ponder these questions and to notice: “What are all the things

I'm anxious about? What is stressing me? Am I brooding about yesterday or apprehensive about tomorrow?" Write down ten things, or the two or three that are hijacking all your attention. Get a grip on the pressures harassing you today, and the entire context in Philippians 4 will explode with significance. It *matters* that he is near. It *matters* that he's listening. It *matters* that he willingly communicates his peace to an anxious heart. You find relevant promises, and guidance, and an invitation to think hard about the intersection of God's nearness with your life. You become aware that you must pray real prayers to the real God whom you really need. You hear a call to limited but significant action—doing a few things that are right to do today, knowing that what you do never controls the outcome or makes all the pressures go away.

Or consider how the Psalms are written. Unlike the stories in the Bible, here the personal details are stripped away. Instead, a psalm speaks in experiential categories, inviting you to fill in details of what you are facing and how you are either struggling or being blessed. Psalm 25, for example, grapples with feeling the assaults of a godless world. It breathes an awareness of personal failures, and thus need for the Lord's forgiveness and instruction. It voices honest distress at life's pressures and afflictions. It moves naturally to care for brothers and sisters who face these similar problems and need similar help. I guarantee, some or all of Psalm 25's realities are relevant to you today. The promises of God in the Psalms—steadfast love, faithfulness, mercy, blessing, watchful care, refuge, and the like—speak directly. And they can also be filled out with New Testament details that show how every promise is tangibly "Yes" in Jesus. Steadfast love and watchful care come in person.

One more example. Consider how the Proverbs are written to provide an immediate flash of insight. What are you pursuing in life? What voices are you listening to? How you are talking with other people? How you are relating to sex, money, food, drink, rest, work? Can such topics ever *not* be relevant?! I flipped open the Proverbs today, and began reading Chapter 17. I was arrested by the first line: "Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife." I realized I'd been irritable that morning. I generated strife. So I honestly asked forgiveness. We gained a house full of quiet. So how will you bring your day into contact with some relevant beam

of light? You could do worse than simply read in Proverbs until something strikes home. Then walk that one bit of wisdom out into the rest of your day.

It is impossible for your devotional life to be stale when you awaken to what is really happening in your life. God intersects, speaks into, and touches what is going on. But it takes stopping to notice. And then it leads to asking, as we saw earlier. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) is the keynote talk for Jesus’ entire ministry. And the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12) are the keynote of the keynote. Jesus places his first blessing on the “poor in spirit” for a reason. When you know your need for outside help, for gifts that only the Lord can give, then the kingdom of God is yours. The King will show up in your day today.

Two Caveats

Asking and noticing are life-giving actions when we are dull in mind and heart. But let me qualify each so I won’t be misunderstood. First, our Lord might not answer our requests according to our expectations and timetable. An honest prayer is an act of submission. He is maker and sustainer; we are dependents. He protects; we are vulnerable. He judges fairly; we are accountable. He is merciful and generous; we are in need of generous mercies. Asking for help expresses trust, *not* demand.

I was greatly helped many years ago by working through the Gospels and noticing how Jesus responded to the various requests and demands people made of him. Sometimes he simply said yes to dire human need. Often he said no when the people were asking wrongly, aiming to get what would please them. Most often, Jesus responded in ways different than expected. Sometimes he delayed before doing what he had been asked—and made a teaching point out of it. Other times he did what was asked, but in a very different way than people expected, again, turning it into an occasion to teach or encourage or challenge. The Lord has bigger purposes in mind. He will answer our honest prayers for our real needs. And he will do so in ways that force our faith to deepen and mature.

To ask for the kinds of help we have been talking about is to pray according to his will. He will answer yes, but we can’t predict the form of his yes.

Second, I have stressed the relevance of Scripture for daily life. But not all Scripture is equally relevant. And not all Scripture is relevant in the same

way. For example, there are good reasons that no best-selling book will ever be written about 1 Chronicles 4:8:

Koz fathered Anub, Zobebah, and the clans of Aharhel, the son of Harum.

You might want to repeat that to yourself to get the full impact! I've never heard anyone ever say that memorizing and meditating on this verse proved to be a life-changing experience. To my knowledge, no one has ever named their son Zobebah, or thought that Haruma might make a nice name for a baby girl. I suspect that the article you are reading is the only extrabiblical piece of writing you will ever read that even mentions, let alone quotes and discusses, these words about Koz and his kinfolk. And I suspect that if you ever did read this sentence while journeying through the Bible, you have no memory of reading it. But a best-selling book was written about the verses that follow:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!" And God granted what he asked. (1 Chron 4:9–10)

What's the difference?

The first passage is not meaningful on its own. But it is imbued with a resonant sort of meaning when placed in the bigger picture. Koz and his kin were members of the tribe of Judah, which is the tribe of David, which is the tribe of Jesus. And the fact that these names are written down does illustrate that the Lord takes note of the names of individuals and families. The promise of a Messiah and the promise that you and I will be included in the book of life are distant reverberations of 1 Chronicles 4:8.

The second passage is relevant in a more straightforward way. It matters whether or not we are honorable before God. It matters that our lives are constrained by pain, that humankind is born into trouble. It matters when anyone calls on the Lord to bless and protect, rather than grabbing the goodies and erecting walls of self-protection. It matters that we can see

God's goodness on display in the land of the living. All these significant realities resonate directly with our life experience. Of course this is only a story, a glimpse into how one man's life unfolded. It is not a prescription, not a guarantee of a pain-free life. It is one picture of the trajectory of faith among many others.

All Scripture is given to teach us about life and to encourage our faith (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). But some passages play lead trumpet, while other passages supply texture and rhythm in the background.

A Final Word

I hope these reflections on the struggle for relevance will prove helpful to you. Of course, asking God for help and noticing your own need for help are not the only ways out of a slump. God gives many means of grace. Listen to Scripture proclaimed faithfully and relevantly (2 Tim 4:2). Talk heart to heart with a friend (Heb 3:13). Ponder the two very different ways that people's lives turn out (Ps 1). Eat and drink the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26–29). Take time to carefully consider the beauty of a flower (Matt 6:28–9). Remember the Christian leaders whose lives and teaching most influenced you (Heb 13:7). In a dark hour, remember, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases" (Lam 3:22). And remember that Jesus also lived Lamentations 3, and lived it for you. And remember that the most repeated sentence in the entire Bible is "His steadfast love endures forever." God thought it worth repeating that his steadfast love lasts forever. And it's worth our repeating it, too. Say it out loud, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end."

The experience of the Bible sounding dull and our soul feeling numb is a familiar one to ministry-minded people of all sorts. You may be a preacher or worship leader. You may be a teacher or a friend. You may be a missionary or a small group leader. You may be a counselor or a parent. You may be an ordinary Christian, like all the people in the roles just named. You may be struggling to stay awake to God. The people in your care may be struggling to stay awake. They may even be sound asleep! May you take what we've talked about—ask for the help you need because you've noticed your life—and may it flourish in others lives even as it comes to flourish in your life.

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We have just explored two ways to reconnect with God when he seems far away. Our first article, “The Manna from Heaven Is Christ, Your Daily Bread,” gives a third way that God bridges the gap. Lauren Whitman shows us how the Bible presents Christ himself as our nourishment from heaven. Jesus generously feeds sufferers, sinners and seekers alike.

Marriage is meant to be a place of safety and trust, but when one spouse oppresses the other, marriage becomes a place of danger and fear. In the last issue of *JBC* (30:2), Darby Strickland’s article helped to identify when and how oppression happens in a marriage. In this follow-up article, “Counseling in the Brambles: How to Help Oppressive Marriages,” she describes how to intervene, setting counseling goals for both spouses.

In the final article of her three-part series on submission, Robyn Huck describes what happens when those in God-given leadership roles abuse their power and harm those under their care. She lays out a process to help those who suffer under abusive authority and explores how to weigh God’s seemingly competing commands to submit to those over us and yet to confront sin and injustice.

In “Ode to the White Board: Helping People Make Connections,” Todd Stryd illustrates how a white board can serve as a counseling tool. Using a case study of a woman struggling with debilitating anxiety, he demonstrates how to organize important facts and feelings on the board. This visual depiction helps her to make connections and come to new conclusions about how she can live out her faith.

Finally, we offer a book review of *The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family* by Karyn Purvis and associates. Reviewer Brian Leichty describes and assesses the book, pointing out how it can be helpful to Christian parents whose adopted children have traumatic backgrounds. But he also cautions that Purvis fails to understand children as moral agents, which means parents must read the book judiciously.

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