Trust God When God Seems Distant

"The LORD has hidden himself from his people,
but I trust him and place my hope in him."
Isaiah 8:17 (TEV)

That verse came alive for me during a 10-month span just before Amie and I moved to Oakmont 12 years ago to become the Associate Pastor. I felt so distant from the Lord and I felt alone, abandoned and felt as if I was being punished by God.

Despite the fact that we were desperately trying to do His will … we felt as if God was yanking our chain in some cosmic game of chess and that He was dangling the answer in front of us as if we were blindfolded and had to discover what He wanted us to do.

God is real, not matter how you feel. It's easy to worship God when things are going great in your life – when He has provided food, friends, family, health and a good job. But circumstances are not always pleasant. How do worship God then? What do you do when God seems a million miles away?

The deepest level of worship is praising God in spite of pain, thanking God during a trial, trusting Him when tempted, surrendering while suffering, and loving Him when He seems distant.

Friendships are often tested by separation and silence; you are divided by physical distance or you are unable to talk. In your friendship with God, you won't always feel close to Him.

"Any relationship involves times of closeness and times of distance, and in a relationship with God, no matter how intimate, the pendulum will swing from one side to the other."
(Philip Yancey)

To mature your friendship, God will test it with periods of *seeming* separation – times when it feels as if He has abandoned or forgotten you. God *feels* a million miles away.

David had perhaps the closest relationship with God (other than Jesus) and even he said …

"Lord, why are you standing aloof and far away?
Why do you hide when I need you the most?"
Psalm 10:1 (Living)

"My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Why do you remain so distant?
Why do you ignore my cries for help?"
Psalm 22:1 (NLT)

"You are my protector; why have you abandoned me? Why must I go on suffering?"
Psalm 43:2 (TEV)

I hope you can hear me on this issue … God never left David and He hasn't left you either! In fact, He has promised …

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"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)

"For the LORD loves justice, and he will never abandon the godly.
He will keep them safe forever …"
Psalm 37:28 (NLT)

"The LORD himself will lead you and be with you.
He will not fail you or abandon you, so do not lose courage or be afraid."
Deut. 31:8 (TEV)

"I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. [17]This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can't take him in because it doesn't have eyes to see him, doesn't know what to look for.
But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be *in* you!
[18]"I will not leave you orphaned. I'm coming back."
John 14:16-18 (MsgB)

But God has NOT promised that you will always *feel* His presence.

In fact, God admits that sometimes He hides His face from us …

"Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel."
Isaiah 45:15 (NIV)

"You wake up one morning and all your spiritual feelings are gone. You pray, but nothing happens. You rebuke the devil, but it doesn't change anything. You go through spiritual exercises … you have your friends pray for you … you confess every sin you can imagine, then go around asking forgiveness of everyone you know. You fast … still nothing. You begin to wonder how long this spiritual gloom might last. Days? Weeks? Months? Will it ever end? … it feels as if your prayers simply bounce off the ceiling. In utter desperation you cry out, 'What's the matter with me?'"
(Floyd McClung)

Illustration: Amie & I Praying at the Foot of the Bed

The truth is, there's nothing wrong with you! This is a natural part of the maturing process. Every follower of Jesus goes through it at least once, and usually several times. It is painful but it is absolutely vital for the development of your faith.

Listen to the words of a man who knew what we're talking about …

"I go east, but he is not there. I go west, but I cannot find him. [9]I do not see him in the north, for he is hidden. I turn to the south, but I cannot find him. [10]But he knows where I am going. And when he has tested me like gold in a fire, he will pronounce me innocent."
Job 23:8-10 (NLT)

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When God seems distant, you may feel that He is angry with you or is disciplining you for some sin. But often this feeling of abandonment from God has nothing to do with sin. It is a test of faith – one we all must face.

***Reflection*: Will we continue to love, trust, obey, and worship God, even when we have no sense of His presence or visible evidence of His work in our lives?**

It's important to realize that we can't go through life dependent on our emotions. They will come and they will go. They can be wonderful on Monday and hideous on Tuesday.
When you are just beginning your faith journey with the Lord, He gives you a lot of confirming emotions and often answers the most immature, self-centered prayers – so that you'll know He exists. But as your grow and develop in your faith, He will wean you of these dependencies.

God wants you to sense His presence, but He's more concerned that you *trust* Him than that you *feel* Him. Faith, not feelings, pleases God.

The situations that will stretch your faith most will be those times when life falls apart and God is nowhere to be found. This happened to Job. On a single day he lost everything! Most discouraging – for 37 chapters, God said nothing!!!

***Reflection*: How do we praise God when we don't understand what's happening in our marriage and God is silent? How do we stay connected in a crisis without communication? How do we keep our eyes on Jesus when they're full of tears?**

I recommend doing what Job did …

"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship
21 and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."
Job 1:20-21 (NIV)

In these two verses we see 4 things that can help you survive those times when God seems distant …

1. Tell God exactly <u>how</u> you feel.

Pour out your heart, unload every emotion, share your doubt, anger, fear, grief, confusion & questions.

"I can't be quiet! I am angry and bitter. I have to speak."
Job 7:11 (TEV)

"Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house."
Job 29:4 (NIV)

David admitted his hopelessness and at the same time had faith …

"I believed, so I said, I am completely ruined."
Psalm 116:10 (NCV)

"Why have you refused to help us? Why do you keep your hands behind you?"
Psalm 74:11 (TEV)

"Why, GOD, do you turn a deaf ear? Why do you make yourself scarce?"
Psalm 88:14 (MsgB)

"Lord, where is the love you used to have for me?
Where is your kindness that you promised to David with a faithful pledge?"
Psalm 89:49 (Living)

2. Focus on <u>who</u> God is – His unchanging nature.

Good, loving, in control, has a plan, will save & is all-powerful. When Job's life fell apart, and God was silent, Job still found things he could praise God for …

"You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your care you watched over my life."
Job 10:12 (NCV)

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth."
Job 19:25

"At God's command amazing things happen, wonderful things that we can't understand."
Job 37:5 (TEV)

"The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power;
in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress."
Job 37:23 (NIV)

"I'm convinced: You can do anything and everything. Nothing and no one can upset your plans."
Job 42:2 (MsgB)

"So he will do for me all he has planned. He controls my destiny."
Job 23:14 (NLT)

"He sees everything I do and every step I take."
Job 31:4 (NLT)

"From the very beginning, God has been in control of all the world."
Job 34:13 (CEV)

3. Trust God to <u>keep</u> His promises.

During times of spiritual dryness you must patiently rely on the promises of God, not your emotions, and realize that He is taking you to a deeper level of spiritual maturity.

So let me encourage you to remain steadfast in the midst of these uncertain times. Circumstances cannot change the character of God. God's grace is still in force and He is still for you … even when you don't feel it.

In the absence of confirming circumstances, Job held on to God's Word …

"I have not departed from the commands of his lips;
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread."
Job 23:12 (NIV)

His faith and trust in God's Word made him strong in the midst of pain …

"God may kill me, but still I will trust him and offer my defense."
Job 13:15 (CEV)

When you feel abandoned by God yet continue to trust Him in spite of your feelings, you worship Him in the deepest way.

4. Remember what God has already <u>done</u> for you.

God's Son died for you. Your identity is not wrapped up in what you do!

"Lord, with all my heart I thank you. I will sing your praises before the armies of angels. [2]I face your Temple as I worship, giving thanks to you for all your loving-kindness and your faithfulness, for your promises are backed by all the honor of your name. [3]When I pray, you answer me and encourage me by giving me the strength I need. [4]Every king in all the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for all of them shall hear your voice. [5]Yes, they shall sing about Jehovah's glorious ways, for his glory is very great. [6]Yet though he is so great, he respects the humble, but proud men must keep their distance. [7]Though I am surrounded by troubles, you will bring me safely through them. You will clench your fist against my angry enemies! Your power will save me. [8]The Lord will work out his plans for my life--for your loving-kindness, Lord, continues forever. Don't abandon me--for you made me."
Psalm 138:1-8 (Living)