

God's Absence in Prayer

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Psalm 13

Sermon Series:
Pray Daily: Igniting
Our Passion for God

*Can't
Christians sing
the blues?*

Wherever did we get the notion that prayer must always be nice and polite? Most assuredly, not from the Bible!

For the next two Sundays, our focus will be two categories of Psalms that might cause you to reevaluate how to pray. This morning we will examine the Lament Psalms, which, as the name implies, give full voice to human lament and pain. Next Sunday, we will consider the Imprecatory Psalms. Imprecatory is just a fancy word for those psalms which invoke God to curse our enemies. Isn't it a little risky, almost dangerous, to address God this way? The Psalmist thinks otherwise!

We began this summer with a series of seven sermons on The Lord's Prayer. You may remember this prayer was given in response to the question Jesus' disciples ask, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:4).

The Psalms are intended to teach us how to pray. Whereas most of Scripture speaks to us, the Psalms speak for us. The book of The Psalms is, after all, the original prayer book for God's people.

Our church is currently engaged in 90 days of prayer. Today marks our 50th day of prayer. You may be struggling with how to pray. I have a specific suggestion, a homework assignment, if you will. Pray one Psalm

every day until you read all 150 Psalms. Start tomorrow with Psalm 1. Read it, meditate on it and offer it up in prayer to God.

We show a decided preference for the beloved Psalms. These saccharine Psalms are the ones we frame and make into wall hangings. Nobody mounts the Lament Psalms!

Yet, a third of the Psalms contain laments of some kind. Jesus prayed on the cross from the Lament Psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

When our worship team planned this service, we couldn't identify a single Lament Psalm that has been put to music. Can't Christians sing the blues? Must we deny hurt and pain in prayer? Why are we so stoic about prayer?

The Lament Psalms are gutsy. They give us permission to talk with God honestly. These Psalms hide nothing from God. They bring our whole selves into prayer—our fears, hopes, longings, anger, gratitude and doubt. Even those private realities we are hesitant to utter out loud to ourselves, let alone to God, are given full expression in the Psalms. John Calvin called the Psalms "the anatomy of all the parts of the soul."

Martin Marty, a Lutheran theology professor, identifies in his book *The Cry of Absence* that half of the Psalms are wintry in tone.

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Only a third of the Psalms express a bright, sunny disposition. Everyone who keeps company with God endures dark, wintry periods as well as bright, sunny days.

Martin Marty describes the practice of reading the Psalms to his wife during her long ordeal with terminal cancer. She had to wake up several times in the night to take medicine to combat the nausea caused by chemotherapy. It took awhile for both of them to go back to sleep, so during that period, Martin would read the Psalms aloud to his wife. One night, she caught him skipping over several Psalms, including Psalm 88, which happens to be a Lament Psalm. He skimmed over words such as, “My life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit...” (Psalm 88), in favor of more consoling images such as, “He will cover you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge...” (Psalm 91).

“Why did you skip those Psalms?” his wife demanded. Martin told her he wasn’t sure she could take Psalm 88 that night. “Go back. Read it,” she said. “If you don’t deal with the darkness, the others won’t shine out.”

Psalm 13 is one such Lament Psalm. Lament is expressed from its very outset, “How long, O Lord?” Four times in quick succession, the psalmist asks, “How long?” The Psalmist grapples with God’s apparent hiddenness: “How long will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear

pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” Such questions are not really questions, after all. They are asked for rhetorical effect. They are intended to express our protest directly to God.

This protest in verses 1-2 gives way to a string of imperatives in verses 3-4. “Consider [me]! Answer me! Enlighten me!” Can we really talk to God this way? The Psalmist does!

Note the progression in this Lament Psalm. It starts with protest in verses 1-2, moves to petition in verses 3-4 and culminates with praise in verses 5-6. Every Lament Psalm, save one, ends with praise. “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Psalm 13 teaches that we can be honest about the pain we experience, because we know that God loves us and reaches out to us in mercy. Even in lament, we never let go of our faith!

Object permanence describes the concept that objects continue to exist even when they are no longer visible to us. Even when we can’t see an object, we know it still exists.

Yet, if a tiny infant can’t see something, it doesn’t exist. There is no reality for small babies except what they can feel, see, smell, taste and touch. “Out of sight, out of mind” is how babies experience life.

***Even when
God seems
silent, God is
present.***

At 8-9 months of age, children acquire object permanence. They acquire the cognitive ability to know something exists, even when it's not visible. Children are able to call up mental pictures of people or things even when they are not visible. The goal of parents in those early years is to help children deal with a parent's absence in the same way they have learned to deal with their presence.

We need, in our Christian lives, to develop object permanence. We don't have to see something to know that it exists. Even when God seems absent, God is still present.

Native American Indians had a unique way of training young braves. On the night of a brave's 13th birthday, after learning hunting, fishing and scouting skills, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the night alone. He had never been away from the security of the family and tribe until this night. But on this evening, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away from the tribe. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of the woods by himself—all night long.

Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what more sinister sound it masked. It was a terrifying night.

After what seemed like an eternity, dawn broke and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy

saw flowers, trees and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man just a few feet away, armed with bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long. Although his son thought his father was absent, he was still present. Even when God seems silent, God is present.

Even on gloomy days, the sun continues to shine. If I board an airplane and climb to an altitude of 40,000 feet, the sun is shining.

On a wall in a basement in Cologne, Germany, where the Jews had hidden from the Nazis, there was found this anonymous inscription, "I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I am alone. I believe in God, even when he is silent."

To listen to some people's accounts, God speaks to them on a regular basis in a torrent of words. More often in my own life, God whispers. Sometimes, God seems altogether silent. Maybe God is not really silent after all. Perhaps I am deaf!

Our parched yards and wilting gardens attest to the drought we are currently experiencing. Maybe you are going through a spiritual drought right now. Your prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling. Your Bible reading seems rote and listless. Your singing in worship falls to the floor. I take some solace in the fact that nearly all the spiritual masters experienced dry spells. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross called it "the dark night of the soul."

***How will I
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stop praying?***

Psalm 13 gives us instructions about what to do in dry times.

First, keep it real. The Psalms teach us to pray what is on our hearts, not what ought to be on our hearts. Psalm 13 teaches me how to pray more humanely and honestly!

Second, keep remembering. When the psalmist encounters a dry spell, he remembers God's deliverance in the past. The Psalmist prays in verse 5, "I trusted in God's steadfast love." "I trusted" is a verb expressed in past tense. Practice little acts of remembering. Count your blessings!

Third, keep going! Keep praying, keep reading your Bible, keep worshipping. How will I know when prayer comes alive again if I stop praying?

Fourth, keep the company of others. Don't go it alone. In fire fighting, it's called the two-in, two-out principle. In scuba diving, it's called buddy diving. In rock climbing, it's called climbing buddies. Find a spiritual buddy!

This is now eight weeks running on prayer and we've still got five more sermons left in this series. This church is serious about prayer. This concentrated effort on prayer has the potential to transform our lives with God.

Some of us are like birds sitting on high voltage wires. We have positively no idea how much current surges through the power lines under our feet. If you take prayer seriously, it can change your life.

