

When God Feels Far Away

Two Reasons Why

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In my book, *Four in the Garden*, the protagonist, Cherished, loses his connection to Creator. Because of this loss, Cherished feels as though Creator has abandoned him. In the story, I had neglected to show that Creator stayed close. I recently revised my book and added this missing scene. In this new scene, Creator kneels next to Cherished as he weeps. We see Creator's pain and emotion regarding the damage to their relationship. We see Creator's longing for the relationship to be restored. Cherished can't see or hear Creator, but Creator has not abandoned him.

We all have experienced times where God seemed absent, not listening, or uncaring. During those times, our prayers feel empty and futile. We can't connect to God. It feels as if all lines of communication have been cut. It's tempting to give up on God when He seems unresponsive. But God says that He will never leave us nor forsake us (Deut. 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). So in spite our perceptions, God is not far from each one of us, according to Paul (Acts 17:27).

Pain and Fear

This perceived distancing from God has many possible causes, but I want to discuss two of them: pain and fear. Pain or fear blocks our experience of God. Think of them as loud noises that drown out all other sounds, including God. They steal our attention and focus away from God and onto ourselves.

When I was dealing with back pain, it took all my energy to manage my pain. When my pain was severe, I could barely carry a conversation or watch television. The pain pulled all my attention inward. I found it difficult to focus on anything except the pain because it was intense and constant. Because of that, I found it almost impossible to connect to God or feel God. The pain was much louder than God. We believe we need God most when we're in pain, but our pain hinders our experience God during those times, so God may feel far away. Nevertheless, when we suffer, God suffers with us (Isaiah 63:9).

Love is Greater Than Pain

During my back injury, God did break through on rare occasions and remind me that His love was no less real. Some of you may see a contradiction between God's love and pain. One might ask, "How could God be loving if He let you suffer such pain?" But I was able to embrace the paradox where love can coexist with pain, even excruciating pain. I think the best example of that is Jesus hanging on the cross and forgiving those who condemned Him. God's love supersedes our pain. My pain did not negate God's love. Instead of turning from God, I entrusted my pain to Him and entrusted my body to His care, because I believed that His love was greater than my pain.

If you are experiencing pain of any kind, whether physical or emotional, don't be surprised if God seems far away to you. Your pain acts as a veil that blocks or hinders your ability to access God. Pain is a primary, raw sensation that overrides our subtle spiritual senses. Pain has that effect on everyone. But don't assume that God has abandoned you. God is with you. Joshua 1:9 says, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Moving Through Pain

My advice is to entrust your pain to God. Don't hold it close, but keep a loose grip on it so God has ready access to it. Secondly, try to move through your pain. Pain has stages, and we tend to emotionally resist the intense stages, so we get stuck on one side of the valley and never complete the spiritual crossing because we're afraid. As we give God access to our pain, we give Him permission to heal us and transform us. Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." We may never understand why our lives have pain, but we trust God with our lives and with our pain, believing He can create something good from it.

Fear is Self-Centered

Fear is the other state that blocks God. It operates the same as pain in that it steals our attention and focus. When we are afraid, we pull inward, our body constricts, our thoughts center on self. By contrast, trust is characterized by relaxing and reaching outward. If we trust and relax, then we can float during stormy seas. If we fear and panic, then we fight and resist the waters, and cause ourselves to sink. When we fear, we close ourselves off from God because we curl up like a pill bug, shielding ourselves from everything outside of our vulnerable self. When we choose to trust, entrusting our fear to God, we make ourselves open to His activity and peace. “You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you,” says Isaiah 36:3.

Many years ago, I struggled with low self-esteem. I was convinced that no one liked me. I carried a continual fear of rejection. Because of my fear, I behaved in ways that gave people more reason to keep their distance. Their behavior caused me to withdraw more, to be more insecure and awkward, which pushed people even further away. One thing I learned from that struggle was how fear draws energy from self-focus. My need to be liked put my focus on me. Fear centers on ourselves, what we risk losing. When we focus on ourselves, we can't receive much from God. When we trust, we shift our focus from ourselves onto God and open a channel for Him to help us. If your fear is active and God feels far away, it may be that your fear is blocking His ability to comfort and help. Next month, I will write about ways one can overcome fear.

God can do so much more for us when we trust Him. When we fear, we make the situation about us and keep God at a distance. If we want God's involvement in our lives, then we need to learn to trust Him.

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Rick Hocker

Author of *Four in the Garden*

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Readers' Favorite International Book Award Winner

Available in print and e-book at all online stores

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