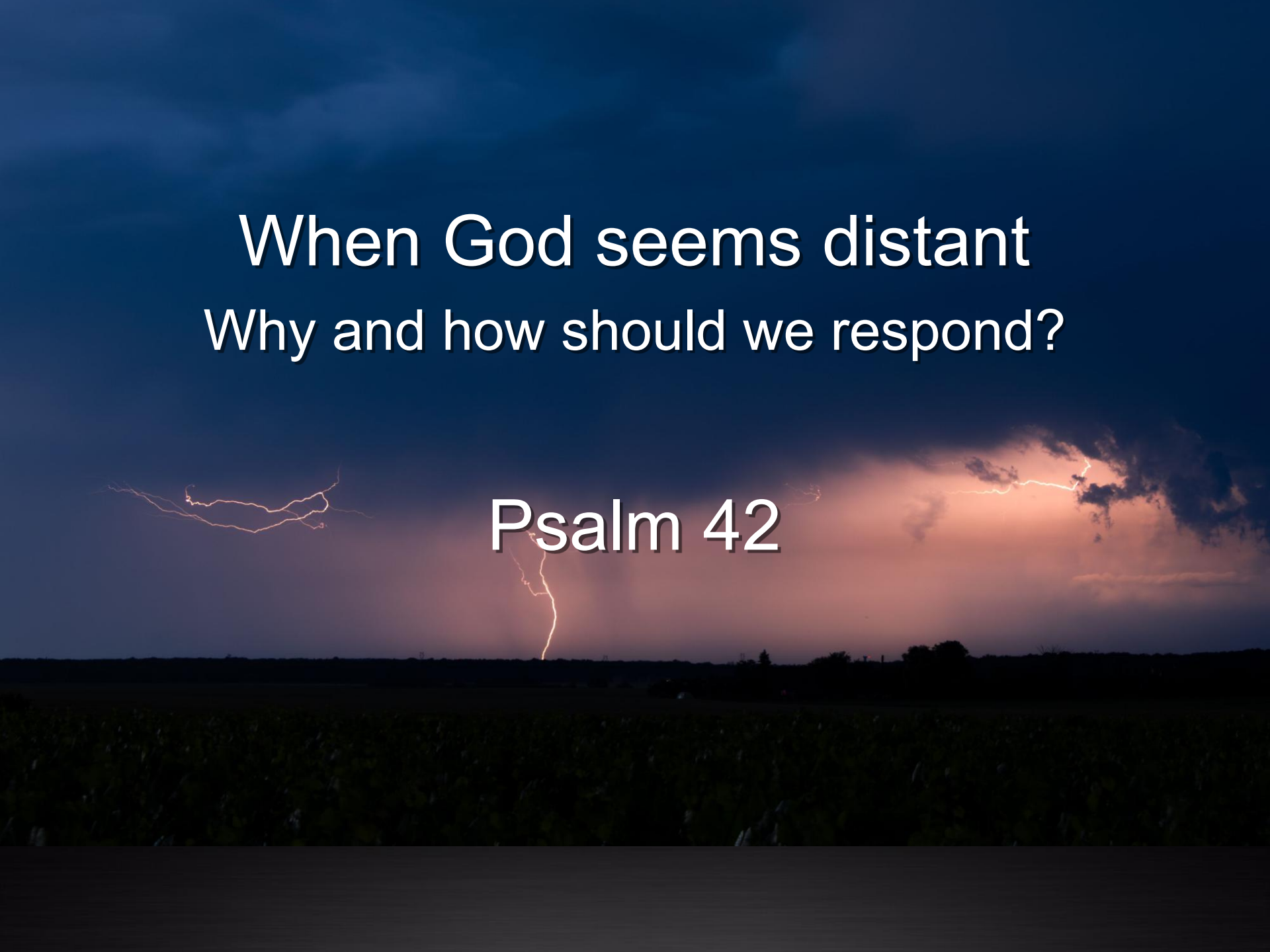


When God seems distant
Why and how should we respond?

Psalm 42



Feeling distant?

- Blessed morning church! How are you feeling today? Like to do a little survey and I need you to respond actively.
- Please raise your hands if you have ever felt distant or you are now feeling distant from God.
- For those of you who felt this way, hands up if it was during a period of time when you were feeling very discouraged.

Feeling distant?

- Hands up if it was during a period of time when things were actually going well for you.
- Hands up if you were not even sure what happened. Like it just suddenly hits you.

Anyone, everyone

- Feeling distant from God can happen at anytime, and to anyone.
- Even those observed as “spiritual giants”, have underwent periods of “spiritual droughts” or what some call the “dark night of the soul”.

Tim Keller

- The late Timothy Keller was one of them. He was one of those preachers whom I regarded as very wise and faithful in ministry.
- Yet, in some of his sermons, he confessed that there were times when he felt distant or even estranged from God. On this, he taught that it is actually normal for Christians to feel this way in our journey with one another and God.
- Perhaps the most shocking to many was Mother Teresa.

Mother Teresa

- At the age of 36, Mother Teresa, went to live among and cared for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India.
- She opened homes for the dying, orphanages and care centers for people with leprosy. She ate, lived and loved what others call the untouchables (Dalits).
- She was widely known as a shining example who followed Jesus' footsteps for the poor.

Mother Teresa's journal

Yet, many did not know about her personal struggles until years after her death. In one of her journal entries, this is what she wrote:

*"There is so much contradiction in my soul. Such deep longing for God, so deep that is painful, a suffering continual and yet not wanted by God, repulsed, empty, no faith no love, no zeal... **Heaven means nothing, to me it looks like an empty place... yet this torturing longing for God**" – Mother Theresa, Come Be My Light, 28 Feb 1957*

Comforted

- So if you have felt or are feeling distant from God, you might want to know that such agonies have been experienced by many believers around the world.
- We might know little about such an observation because while some of us might be more willing to share; many might not be too eager to share such vulnerabilities with others.
- Some might even try to hide away such feelings, thinking that it is not very faithful for a Christian to feel distant from God.

Psalms of Psalms

- If we have been reading the Psalms, we know that the Psalmists were people who had experienced periods of spiritual droughts.
- In some of their writings (Psalms 13 and 22), they (like the David) even felt abandoned by God.

*“How long O Lord, will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?” –
Psalm 13:1-2*

Psalm 42

- As such, we are going to explore one of the Psalms - Psalm 42. The more senior among us might know that this Psalm inspired the song "As the Deer" written by Martin Nystrom.
- We are going to use this Psalm to gather some insights into the following:
 1. Agony of feeling distant and its causes
 2. Spiritual trap of relying on past victories
 3. Art of self-talk
 4. Power of honest prayer and hope

Psalm 42 (ESV)

As we are told this Psalm was written by the Sons of Korah. A group of Levite temple musicians who led the people in worship.

- As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
³ My tears have been my food
day and night, while they say to me all the day
long,
“Where is your God?”

Psalm 42 (ESV)

- 4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the
house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.

Psalm 42 (ESV)

- 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation ⁶ and my God.
- My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

Psalm 42 (ESV)

- 7 Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.
- 8 By day the LORD commands his
steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

Psalm 42 (ESV)

- I say to God, my rock:

“Why have you forgotten me?

Why do I go mourning

because of the oppression of the
enemy?”

¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,

“Where is your God?”

Psalm 42 (ESV)

- Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Prayer

Lord, while the Psalms were written by men, they are used by You to minister to our innermost needs. Therefore, as we explore Psalm 42, may the Holy Spirit gives the wisdom and grace to understand, and in understanding, put into practice what is beneficial for our soul and that which is pleasing in Your sight. This we ask in Jesus' Name. Amen

Agony – Psalm 42:1-3

- Let us look at the first three verses:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before
God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night, while they say to me all
the day long,
“Where is your God?”

Psalm 42:1-3

- In these three verses, we see the Psalmist seeking the the Lord in great desperation.
- As the deer pants for flowing streams, so my soul pants for You - **this imagery of a deer panting for water, conveys the Psalmist's deep spiritual thirst for God.**
- He was obviously in deep pain and agony. Verse 3 noted that he had tears all day and night as food; another imagery to describe him crying out to God for His presence.

Psalm 42:1-3

- Notice that despite his desperation, the Psalmist did not ask for God to bless him or provide for his needs.
- Instead, he just wanted to feel close to God again. He wanted God Himself; and no one else; nothing else (Psalm 23).

Psalm 42:1-3

- Yet, while he felt like a deer thirsting for water, he felt that he had come to a dried up brook. He found no water. Just sand and mud. A deeply discouraging scenario.
- So on the one hand, he felt that he needed God. On the other hand, he felt distant from God.
- His agony was the outcome of a separation between theology (God is everywhere) and psychology (I don't feel Him anywhere).

Psalm 42:1-3

- My friends, have you ever felt the same way? Like a deer seeking an intimacy with God, but yet feeling....nothing?
- You very much wanted to stay close to God. And yet, for some reason, you felt that God is very far away from your life....

Psalm 42:1-3

- That was exactly how I felt when I encountered lies and betrayal by someone I use to trust in ministry.
- The worse thing is that the betrayal did not just affect me, but also the faiths of my family members, especially my children.
- It was such an emotional and spiritual agony. I very much wanted to seek God for refuge; and yet I felt distant and even angry with God for allowing evil to succeed.

Psalm 42:1-3

- At that time, I even contemplated seeking the law to address such a gross injustice.
- Looking back, I thank God for sustaining me even when I thought He was so far away. It was agonizing, but in His grace, God pointed me to a few bible passages to remind that He will vindicate.
- I needed to be patient. I needed to trust even when it was most difficult to do so.
- Nine months later, the vindication happened in an amazing way.

Psalm 42:1-3

- During those nine months, I came to understand an important truth: **feeling distant from God is NOT the same as being distant from God.**
- Theologically, those who are distant from God means they do not have a relationship with Him.

Psalm 42:1-3

- Yet, God is **always** very near to all who truly believe. In fact, the the Gospel of John tells us that we are one with Him; and He with us.
- In Matthew 28:20, Jesus also said that as long as we stay in the faith, He is always with us till the end of age.

Psalm 42:1-3

- So feeling distant from God does not mean that we have lost the faith or our relationship with God.
- If God did not forsake the Psalmist or us, why then do we feel distant?

Psalm 42:1-3

- It is like asking the the question: If we have the perfect Science teacher to teach us, why do we fail the exams?
- Yes, it is very likely that the problem lies within us.
- In that case, we ask the question: “What are the possible reasons for a person to feel distant from God?”

Why feel distant?

- According to the Psalmist's experience, there can be a few reasons.
- Firstly, we might feel distant from God when we get disconnected from the community of believers.

Why feel distant?

- Verse 4 mentioned that the Psalmist was feeling distant from God because he was exiled from the house of God.
- Not really sure why he was exiled but he missed worshipping with the people. He felt the need to be in the community again, in order to get re-connected with God.

Why feel distant?

- My friends, as a people of God, we need the community to thrive in our relationship with God.
- There is individual bible study, and there is corporate bible study. There is private worship and there is the coming together worship. There is behind closed doors prayers and there is corporate prayer.

Why feel distant?

- We need both. The Christian faith is a communal kind of faith. As Hebrews 10 reminds us, we need mutual encouragement and accountability.
- So one reason for us to feel distant from God, is that we “missed” coming together in worship and fellowship; on a regular basis.

Why feel distant?

- For the Psalmist, he was forcefully exiled. Some of us here might face real difficulties coming to church or getting into fellowship with other believers.
- But I suspect for some of us, we might have applied “self-exclusion” a bit too often from communal worship and fellowship.

Why feel distant?

- Another reason for the Psalmist to feel distant from God was discouragement or disillusionment.
- In verses 3 and 10, not only was the Psalmist pursued by his enemies, they also mocked him: “Where is your God?”
- In the midst of these struggles, God did not seem to be answering his cries.

Why feel distant?

- Some of us might be feeling distant from God because we have been severely discouraged or even feeling a sense of disillusionment.
- We might be serving in church for some time, but those whom we serve does not seem to be very appreciative. Worse, they are very demanding and critical.
- Some of us here might faced ridicule for believing in Jesus and observed that non believers are doing better in their careers or studies. We tell ourselves: “what really is the point?”

Why feel distant?

- Appearing in other Psalms are additional reasons for feeling distant from God.
- Psalm 27 suggests that we might feel distant because we have misplaced priorities in life.
- We feel distant because God is not our priority. The world remains our priority.

Why feel distant?

- We remain anxious and insecure because fundamentally, we do not trust that God will come through for our personal circumstances.
- And yet, we demand that God should get close to us. In this case, unlike the Psalmists who sought after God, we feel distant simply because we do not seek at all.

Why feel distant?

- Psalm 66 suggested that another reason for feeling distant is the existence of perpetual sin in our life.
- We have done something we are deeply ashamed of. Or we are struggling with a habitual sin.
- We feel distant because we feel that we are no longer worthy of worshipping God.

Why feel distant?

My friends, if you are feeling distant from God, what is your reason?

- Is it because we have been skipping communal worship and fellowship?
- Is it because we are severely discouraged and disillusioned?
- Is it because we are not really seeking Him in the first place?
- Is it because we have sinned against God?

Psalm 42:4 – Spiritual Trap

- For some of us, whenever we feel distant from God, we think of the “good old days”. In verse 4, the Psalmist thought about the past where he was free to worship in the house of God:

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the house of
God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.

Psalm 42:4

- That was aspiritual high for the Psalmist. He remembered the “shouts of joy and praise” when he was free to worship among his people in the house of God.
- Having spiritual nostalgia to help us cope with our relationship with God can be helpful. This is especially so if it leads us to trust and wait upon the Lord.

Psalm 42:4

- However, if we have the tendency to measure our current relationship with God solely based on **past emotional highs**, we might wrongly assume that “God has left” in times of His silence.
- Sadly, many believers stumbled or even left the faith because of this.

Psalm 42:4

- Sometimes, we wrongly conclude that we are no longer close to God; just because we no longer feel like “it was before”.
- Why am I not having that feeling again? Why am I not getting goosebumps? Why are they not worshipping as fervently as me? Why are they not raising their hands?

Psalm 42:4

- We all love it when believers worship God, pray to God and listen to God's word with great fervour.
- However, we serve a creative and sovereign God. We cannot dictate or always assume that the Holy Spirit will minister in a certain way. Or that there is a planned formula for revival. Or that the tongues we hear in public worship comes from authentic worship.
- Just because we cannot have a certain kind of feeling; does not mean that God is not with us.

Psalm 42:4

- Friends, we are not here to replicate what we have experienced.
- Instead, whenever we are, no matter if there is a large crowd, a big band, or a famous preacher, we worship God with all of our hearts, mind and soul.
- At the end of the day, faith is not a feeling to be captured, but a Person to be followed.

Psalm 42:4

- Sometimes, experience helps.
- However, how close we are to God, is highly dependent on how faithful we are to follow a God who might sometimes, be silent to our pleas or ask us to do the most unassuming tasks. Amen?

Psalm 42:5-7: Art of self-talk

- Of course, when God is silent or when we feel distant from God, we do not assume that it is an easy journey.
- Rather, if we are not careful, we might slip into the false thinking that God does not care or worse, God does not exist.

Psalm 42:5-7

- This is where we can learn from the Psalmist. We learn from him on the art of self-talk.
- In verses 5-7, the Psalmist stopped listening to himself. Instead, he started to talk to himself.

Psalm 42:5-7

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation ⁶ and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.

Psalm 42:5-7

- We can see that the Psalmist adopted a third person perspective and asked his own soul: “why are you so sad and discouraged?”
- Without waiting for his soul (or himself) to reply; he told his soul to start hoping in God. He was telling himself about truth. About the character of God.

Psalm 42:5-7

- The truth that while God might not be answering to his cries; God is still God.
- God knows what He is doing. He is sovereign and He remains the Psalmist's Source of salvation.

Psalm 42:5-7

- Friends, when we feel distant from God, one of the things we might want to stop doing, is to keep listening to our own complains and whining.
- Instead, develop the art of self-talk. **Learn to tell our feelings what is the truth; rather than letting our feelings tell us what is true.**

Psalm 42:5-7

- This is not about disregarding our own feelings.
- Rather, we must not allow our feelings to dictate what is the truth and what is not. Rather, God holds the only truth.
- The truth that God is ever present; that He loves us dearly, even in our darkest moments.

Power of honest prayer and hope – Psalm 42:8-11

- Yet, even as the Psalmist knows the truth and manage to tell himself the truth about God, that was just half the battle.
- The other half of the battle is dependent on what we intend to do with the truth. And this has to do with the power of honest prayer and hope in the Lord.

Psalm 42:8-11

- 8 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the
enemy?”

Psalm 42:8-11

- ¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
- ¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Psalm 42:8-11

- So as the Psalmist reminded his own soul of the truth, he came to the resolution that despite all that he was going through, **God loves him.**
- And for that, the Psalmist said that he shall continue to sing praises to God. He shall continue to hope and pray to the God who loves him. He had decided on a course of action after knowing the truth!

Psalm 42:8-11

- the Psalmist's prayer to God was brutally honest. There was no sugarcoating of whatsoever.
- He asked God: "Why have you forgotten me?" "Why do I have to keep feeling so discouraged through the oppression of my enemies?" "Why do you even allow others to say that there is no God?"

Psalm 42:8-11

- the Psalmist was not questioning God's abilities or wisdom. Instead, he was using prayer to help him process his feelings.
- Yes, he was going through a very challenging time. Yet he knows that God will someday deliver him. So for now, he should persist in honest prayer and hope in God.
- That is a most marvelous way for Psalmist to continue to trust God, while God do His mighty works which we might not see.

Psalm 42:8-11

- Ultimately, despite all that the Psalmist was going through, he made a choice.
- He made a choice to put his hope in God and he declared that someday, he will sing praises to God like how he used to.

Psalm 42:8-11

- My friends, faith is always a decision. Never just a “feeling”.
- Faith is the decision to trust in God’s love and character when we cannot understand or track His mighty hand.
- The world might call us stupid; but we know that if we are able to persevere and hope in Him; we will someday see God’s glory.

Psalm 42:8-11 (if there is time)

- Remember the time I was so discouraged and God said wait upon Him?
- After nine months of waiting, I was vindicated without having to do anything.
- The person exposed his own character in front of a whole assembly. Later on a few people apologized to me for not believing my earlier testimony.
- Had I taken matters into my own hands when I felt God was far away, I would not have seen His glory.

Psalm 42:8-11

- So my friends, the solution to us feeling distant from God are these:
 - Be honest with why we are feeling distant
 - Speak to our feelings about the truth; instead of allowing our feelings to tell us what seems to be true;
 - Persist in prayer and be honest with God on how we feel
 - Make the decision to trust God and learn to praise Him, even when it is hard to do so.

Conclusion

- While Mother Teresa served deeply and felt distant from God at times.
- Even in the days where she doubted God's love for her; She never gave up and even strived to be cheerful for the sake of those she cared for.
- According to her journal entries, she was committed to be an "apostle of joy" as she toiled to feed those who were dying from hunger, and clean the wounds of those living in leprosy.

Conclusion

“Jesus wants me to tell you again...how much is the love He has for each one of you-beyond all what you can imagine...Not only He loves you, even more--He longs for you. He misses you when you don't come close. He thirsts for you. He loves you always, even when you don't feel worthy...”
– Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*

Discussion Questions

- What are some reasons highlighted by the preacher for a believer to feel distant from God? Which reason resonates with you?
- Have you ever felt distant from God? What did you do?
- How did the Psalmist deal with his agony of seeking God and yet feel that God is far away?
- Faith is not about chasing after experiences, but it is about following a Person. What do you think of this statement?
- If we know that prayer is so important to the faith-life of a believer, why do you think believers should, in general pray much more and deeper than we are doing now? How can the church / DG help in this area?