

“The Forgetting God”

Psalm 13

God doesn't just have “highly superior” memory.

God has the highest form of memory.

God has the memory of an elephant.

God has the memory of a mother.

God has a memory like no one else.

God *is* memory.

And yet, curiously, God can also forget.

To the psalmist, it seems apparent that God has indeed forgotten something — or *someone*. The writer — let's assume it is David, as the heading of the psalm suggests — says that God has forgotten him! “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (v. 1). To paraphrase the first sentence, we might put it this way: “Really? You're still ignoring me, God?”

And then David says, “Can you really forget me forever?” And he doesn't let up: “How long will you hide your face from me?” (v. 1). This latter expression is no doubt a reference to a more powerful person looking away from a less powerful subject.

This evokes the image of the “hidden God,” or — the “idle God” who has withdrawn from the world to let creation and its inhabitants fend for themselves. In God's absence, God forgets us — or so David believed and so I believed at times during the summer of 2020.

He continues in this vein for the entire psalm. Four times, his complaint begins with “How long ...?”

This lament sounds very much like the breakup of a relationship. The jilted party has phoned and left messages or texted a jillion times.

“Hey! How long are you going to ignore me, you jerk? How long are you going to keep running away from me? Do you think you can forget me forever? Could you please have the decency to tell me how long you are going to keep me hangin’ here, ’cause I’m in some pain — as if you cared. But, of course, you’re not likely to care about my pain and the sorrow in my heart, now are you? It doesn’t seem to bother you that *you’ve publicly humiliated me after I made such a show* of declaring my undying and steadfast belief and trust in you! So how long am I supposed to put up with this crap?” I’m told this is called “ghosting” – when you break up with someone by not responding to their phone calls or texts. If you are ghosted by your spouse, it’s probably a different message.

That’s the tone here. Raw. Bitter. Harsh.

This is pretty much Psalm 13.

Unfortunately for David, no answer comes from God.

David doesn’t get closure or relief. He’s left with doubts and despair.

Honestly now. Have we not had moments like this? Is this not an experience that we share with David?

The gates of heaven are like our churches being locked up for months during the epidemic while God's away from the phone. God is not picking up. And so, God clearly doesn't care. It would appear that God has run out on us, abandoned us and left no forwarding address.

And after all we'd gone through together.

In fact, you think that God has forgotten you. God is — shockingly — the forgetting God!

But, here's the thing. *There are some things that God cannot forget.*

And *you* are one of them.

God may be omnipotent, but this is one thing that God cannot do. God cannot forget you.

There's a remarkable passage in Isaiah — 49:14-16. It begins by noting that "Zion" complains that "the Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." But then, a rhetorical question on the order of "Is the pope Catholic?" is posed: "Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?"

Uh, well, no she cannot.

The text continues by asserting that *it is more likely that a mother will forget her child than God will forget us.*

Not going to happen.

And then, there's this addendum in verse 16: "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands ..."

God says that we are tattooed on his palm!

It was quite common in the culture of those ancient days for a slave to bear a brand mark of his or her master on the arm or palm. Or, a soldier might want to write the name of his commanding officer on his hand. A religious acolyte might do the same thing with the name of her God. Sometimes this was accomplished with needle punctures or staining the skin in some way. For me it's a tattoo of Luther's seal on one shoulder and of a monk's vision in the woods on the other shoulder.

Here, God is saying that the Divine Creator and God of the universe has inscribed us in the palm of his hand. God cannot forget us. We're right there in his palm!

Tattooed in the hollow of the hand of God! (reredos)

God cannot forget us.

And yet ... the psalmist clearly believes otherwise.

What can we do when our mind is telling us lies that the heart does not want to believe?

We think that God has abandoned us, but our heart does not quite believe it.

Isn't this what we call the trial or testing of our faith? It is the refiner's fire; it is how the "testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:3-4). It is that "fiery ordeal" about which the apostle Peter writes (4:12), and about which we should not be surprised.

So then, we should not be surprised when confronted with moments of divine silence, according to the apostle Peter.

We should remember that, according to the apostle James, the testing of our faith has several positive outcomes.

We should have a conversation with God as did the psalmist in this text. Conversation is good. When we lift up our doubts and fears, our prayers become more authentic than ever! God doesn't mind, and perhaps welcomes, those moments when we get real.

And finally, we must act and move forward in faith as though God has not forgotten us. Because ... God has not forgotten us. The psalmist seems to have come to this place. He writes, "But I trusted in your steadfast love" (v. 5). Even when he felt ignored and forgotten, his trust in the steadfast love, loyalty of God brought him through the crisis.

God has a perfect memory. When a child of God repents of sin, rebellion, disobedience, mistakes and wrongdoing, and when that same child asks for forgiveness, then God acts like most parents would. God forgives. What parent can resist a child who comes running and crying with remorse and regret? Of course, the child receives forgiveness and the human parent probably forgets about it in due time.

How often has someone apologized to you, and you wave your hand and say, "Aw, forget about it. Don't worry about it".

God has the ability to forget ... our sins.

The Bible says, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). According to Isaiah, "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (43:26).

In the New Testament, we read: “For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12). And in the psalms, perhaps the same voice complaining about being forgotten by God, is now writing these words: “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us” (103:11-12).

All of you are blessed and should stay strong in the Lord!

May the peace of God . . .

#698 – How Long, O God