

A person wearing a bright yellow hooded jacket is sitting on a grey, textured rock ledge. They are facing away from the camera, looking out over a vast, turbulent sea with white-capped waves. The sky is overcast with grey and blue clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

When God “Seems” Far Away

MATTHEW WITTER

WHEN GOD "SEEMS"
FAR AWAY

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Ch I - STUCK IN NEW YORK

It was a Friday morning in November of 2015, just outside New York City. I woke up feeling low. I've never been a morning person anyway and am not generally overjoyed first thing in the day, but this morning I was dealing with the aftermath of the previous day's decision. I had suddenly ended a visit to East Africa partway into the trip. It was supposed to be part-survey trip and part-ministry trip. This was to be the first time my wife and children had been to Africa (my third time). I was to teach another Bible Institute session to pastors in South Sudan (I had taught in this Institute earlier in 2015.), make contact with missionaries, and get ideas for future housing for when we would move there eventually to plant churches. After planning the trip, purchasing tickets, getting everyone's immunizations and passports, making arrangements with missionaries in the two countries (Uganda and South Sudan), raising some financial support, driving from Phoenix to Miami for the flight, speaking in churches and sharing that I believed God wanted us to plant churches in Africa, I abruptly ended the trip in New York.

The journey was supposed to include three flights: Miami to New York (2 hours), New York to Amsterdam (about 6 hours), and Amsterdam to Entebbe, Uganda (about 9 hours). Although I had been on planes since I was twelve years old and had even flown to Africa earlier that year, flying had been getting increasingly difficult. I literally hated being on planes. It had gotten so bad that a few months before this trip, following a meeting in southern California, I rented a car and drove 5 ½ hours home rather than take the return flight of 50 minutes to Phoenix.

Yet I truly believed that God wanted us to serve Him in Africa, and I guess I figured that I would just grind it out and endure the flights. However, on that first leg from Miami to New York, about 20 minutes from landing, I decided that if we land, I was finished. (The

flight was as smooth as any flight could be—no turbulence, nothing scary or odd.)

We got off the plane, and my wife hurriedly said, “Where’s the next gate?” I found a seat and dejectedly told everyone that I wasn’t going on. We had to scramble to retrieve our luggage before it went to Africa without us, and also contact everyone in Africa who was either helping to house us or transport us around the country, all the while knowing this was a crossroads in my life. I had been headed toward Africa and raising support for over a year.

The situation did not improve when we tried to rent a car to leave. All the rental car companies at the airport had a credit card only policy—no debit cards. I had money, money in the bank, and a Visa debit card, but it wasn’t acceptable. I asked one of the attendants, “How is someone supposed to get out of New York then?” “Take a plane,” he said. I had my wife and two younger children and lots of luggage in JFK airport, and no way of leaving. My phone with Internet access had recently started having problems and was not operating well, but with our other cell phone, we were able to call my parents who were eventually able to arrange to get us a hotel room near the airport. The hotel shuttle driver, who I’m convinced spent his off time playing racecar simulators, came and took us to the hotel. This allowed us to at least get out of the airport and try to decide what to do.

I got up the next morning very down about all of this. What would people think? How did this happen?

Ch 2 - WHY AREN'T YOU ANSWERING?

Have you ever had times in your life when you looked for God, but couldn't "seem" to find Him? During a recent long and difficult season in between the two churches that I have pastored, I became perplexed by the lack of God's leading and presence in ways that He previously had made Himself known. Why was God not leading in the same way? Why did God seem distant? During this season, I began noticing Scriptures in which God's servants in the past went through similar times:

□ *Psalm 13:1 "How long wilt Thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?"*

□ *Job 23:8-9 "Behold I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him: On the left hand, where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him: he hideth Himself on the right hand, that I cannot see Him."*

□ *Psalm 88:14 LORD, why castest Thou off my soul? why hidest Thou Thy face from me?*

What does this mean? Did God really forget these people? Did God leave them to fend for themselves after previously making His presence in their lives very clear? Is God embarrassed that these verses are in the Bible?

It is interesting that the Bible is the very book which is the basis for our understanding and knowing God, and yet it also records numerous occasions such as these in which men have sought for God and could not "seem" to find Him. During such a time in my own life (shortly before the canceled trip), I wrote the following summary of this in a notebook on Oct 16, 2015:

"The season of being in a place not doing what I really desire to do continues. It began June 2008, two months after moving into our

building in San Bernardino. The confusion of many things related to going to East Africa has not been resolved—namely, that after praying about going and believing that God called us to go, in July 2012 during a time of prayer, that I have found little motivation to raise support, and little motivation to live in Africa. I have not been able to figure out a basic plan of where to live...and how to finish Andrew's school and get to Africa. The Lord has not made those things clear. The high frustration goes in cycles, and it is intense during those cycles. No amount of seeking the Lord has brought a conclusion. The Holy Spirit does not communicate as He has in the past..”

It is not as though I had not gone through trials before this, but this season was different because of the “perceived” absence of God's interaction and leading in my life. Perhaps you have gone through or are going through a similar time in your own life. Perhaps one day you will. Maybe you have heard the voices of cynics and scoffers and have been influenced by them to believe that God is not there at all or at least is not interested in your personal life. Maybe a hardship, a disappointment, or an unanswered prayer has led to some bitterness, resentment or indifference toward God.

I hope the following chapters will be a help and encouragement to every reader and will serve to be a testimony to the ways and character of God.

Ch 3 - THE NIGHT UNCLE JIM VISITED

"In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:9,10

My walk with God began in earnest in April 1991. I had grown up in a Christian home and had gone to good churches that taught God's Word. I remembered asking the Lord to save me when I was seven, but I regularly struggled with doubts about whether or not I really had God's gift of eternal life. This concern grew significant during my junior year at the University of West Florida. It bothered me so much that I decided I needed to talk to someone, and I made an appointment with a former Bible teacher that I had while attending Pensacola Christian High School.

Looking back, it was clear that God was at work in this. I had initially tried to make an appointment with someone else, but I ended up seeing my former Bible teacher instead. God used him in a significant way, as his counsel was unique to my situation. He told me he had struggled in a similar way while attending a Christian college, and He encouraged me to settle this matter and ask Jesus to save me.

I left his office still pondering what to do. I wondered about the fact that I had thought I was already a child of God and that others, no doubt, had thought the same. I went home and sat in my room in a state of perplexity. While thinking on this, my mother informed me that Uncle Jim was on his way, and that we would be all be going out to dinner in a little while. Uncle Jim was my mom's uncle, who was a very nice and very eccentric man. We used to joke that every year we knew he would be coming around for a visit but not really know the details. Then one day he would call from the nearest Seven-Eleven and say he was ten minutes away.

I thought I would have to put this matter off until later since we were going to leave soon. However, I was overcome with a strong

sense in my heart that I may never again be this close to making for sure that I knew the Lord. I thought of a verse I had memorized earlier in life: "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name." (John 1:12). I then knelt beside my bed and received Jesus to save my soul.

Ch 4 - A CIRCUITOUS PATH INTO MINISTRY

My life changed significantly after that night, and I became interested in the things of God. I finished at the University of West Florida where I was pursuing a degree in accounting. During my last semester, I had a class on a Wednesday evening and missed the mid-week service at the church I attended. My cross-country teammate Daryl, who also attended the same church, told me about a guest speaker at the church service I missed. It was a pastor from North Carolina who mentioned that he had a need for a piano player for his church and a bookkeeper for the Christian school. Daryl noted the oddity of such a combination but then realized that I fit the description.

When I explored this lead, it did not look too promising at first, as one of the secretaries at the church indicated that she didn't know why the pastor would have shared that need since they already had a piano player. I was having difficulty speaking to someone about this and was about to give up, but decided to try one last time. I finally contacted the right individual and soon took a trip there for an interview. Two months after finishing college I began work at that ministry.

As it turned out, my primary responsibilities were in the school financial office, and I was not needed as a regular pianist. A couple years after working there, the pastor approached me about the possibility of helping to teach one of the adult Sunday School Classes. At the time I had no interest and declined the request. However, I had a change of heart a short time later and decided that I would help. This would prove to be the beginning of a significant change of course. I found that I really enjoyed studying, preparing lessons, and teaching that class. Through the Bible teaching responsibilities and the weekly church outreach, I was being prepared for the next place of service that God had planned.

One Sunday, a couple years after being at this ministry, the pastor mentioned in the evening church service the need for churches in

California. God used this and other things to turn our hearts toward starting a church in the West. Eventually we took a trip to southern California to seek possibilities of where God might have us to go. After the trip, my wife and I spent some time in prayer about going to San Bernardino, CA, and God made it clear that it was His will for us to go there. We put our house up for sale and raised a little (but not nearly enough) financial support for this endeavor, and in September 1998, we moved to California.

Ch 5 – EAST TO WEST

With complete and utmost respect for its residents (I was one for almost eleven years), I do not believe San Bernardino would make very many “I’d Love to Live There” lists. At one time, it was considered to be an All-American city but has deteriorated much since those days. However, we had a strong leading from the Lord in our hearts to go there and plant a church, and that’s all we needed.

We drove our completely packed moving truck (a few items had to be left in NC) and drove to Pensacola, FL. There, my dad joined the journey to help us get to California and unload our truck. After arriving in San Bernardino, we found a house that looked like it would work and completed an application to move in. The owner was finishing up some remodeling work and already had some applications. From a business standpoint, we were certainly a risk. We had some money in the bank, some monthly support, and had come to lead a church that did not yet exist. However, the owner took our application, drove to a phone (in the days before the prevalence of cell phones), made a few calls, and returned saying we could move in.

The following Sunday, I met a pastor a few cities to the west of us and began helping in his ministry for a few months while we made preparations to start. During that time, I learned of a church whose pastor was going to be leaving. The church was in Fontana, about 20 minutes away from San Bernardino. Someone suggested to me that maybe I had been brought out there, not to start a church, but to pastor this church in Fontana. That seemed appealing to me. I had nothing at all in San Bernardino--no building and no congregation--and in Fontana they had an established ministry and a building. I remember praying about this matter to try to discern God’s will. The Bible indicates that sometimes God answers prayers quickly, and sometimes He chooses to allow us to pray fervently and long. (This is illustrated well in the life of Elijah. A reading of I Kings 18 and James 5 shows that Elijah prayed for both fire from heaven and rain.

One prayer was answered immediately, and the other only after much asking.) This was one of those occasions where God answered right away. I did not hear a voice, but in my heart God directed in a very clear way that we were NOT to pursue the church in Fontana, but to stay with the original plan for starting a new church in San Bernardino. While it was not necessarily the answer I was hoping for, I at least knew God's heart on this matter.

We had our first church service on December 6, 1998. My cousin and her husband who lived on the coast drove out to be with us, and some college students from West Coast Baptist College came down to help us. There was also a couple from Maine who were out in San Bernardino for a few months for some contract work. They were a tremendous help in those first few months.

Like any ministry, the starting of San Bernardino Baptist Church had ups and downs. The area was generally friendly and not hostile to outreach, but was very slow to respond. Yet we witnessed God do truly amazing things. I'll share just one of them.

In early 2001, I went to an area on the north side of town to do some door-to-door outreach. I felt noticeably overcome that day by a sense of futility and that nothing would result from my efforts. I talked myself out of being there and left to make a visit to someone who had been a recent guest at a Sunday service. However, later that same day, I returned and found myself in that same neighborhood and still feeling the same way—nothing will happen here today. (It is certainly a challenge just about anytime you do this kind of outreach, but the feeling that day was unlike other times I have gone door-to-door.) I went to the first several houses, as I kept wondering when this feeling would go away. I finished a portion of a street, turned left, and eventually came to a house occupied by a lady in her early forties named Karen. I gave her an invitation to our church, which she happily received, as she told me that she and her husband had been looking for a church. I then asked her if she knew for sure that she would go to heaven when she died. She said she did not but said she would be interested if could show her this from

the Bible. (What I did not know at the time was that about a month earlier she had been in the hospital with bad blood clots and had been searching how to truly know God.) I had the privilege to share with Karen that Jesus Christ came from heaven to the earth, became a man, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and was willing to save all who would receive Him by faith. Karen asked Jesus to save her that day. A short time later she identified publically with Christ in baptism, and came faithfully to church. Several weeks later, she mentioned that she had to go to the doctor regarding her blood clots and asked for prayer. She ended up back in the hospital, and a week later she passed away at the age of 42 and went home to be with the Lord. I was greatly saddened at losing Karen here on earth, yet it was amazing how God saw to it that in response to Karen's seeking the truth, He gave me the privilege of being a messenger with the Gospel two months before she died.

At some point in 2004, I drove past a vacant building in the north central part of San Bernardino. I remember thinking that it had the potential of being a church facility. We had been meeting in a building behind another church since early 2000, following one year meeting on a college campus. A few weeks later, I drove past the same building and noticed a "For Sale" sign on it. After doing some research on the property and securing financing, we purchased the building in September 2004. The building was a shell that would take much design and work to be able to be legally occupied.

To write about this project—getting the Conditional-Use Permit, obtaining the Architectural & Engineering drawings, getting the Building permit, securing an improvement's loan and, of course, doing the actual work—this chapter would be voluminous, and the memory of it might put my emotions into a state of disquietude. It will be sufficient to say that the Lord saw the long project to a conclusion, and we had our first service in the building in April 2008.

Ch 6 - I DIDN'T EXPECT THIS

Not long after we moved into our building, I noticed that my zeal for San Bernardino Baptist Church was not what it once was. For the next few months, I struggled with my apparent loss of interest, and this diminished enthusiasm never reignited.

In December 2008, we celebrated the Ten-Year Anniversary of the church. I invited a pastor to speak in the evening service on Anniversary Sunday. We did not have much time to spend together during his visit as he had to leave for a long drive home right after the service; however, he told me some time later that he had sensed something was not quite right.

It was the beginning of an unusual time in my life. I did not feel any clear leading from the Lord to leave, but I had lost my desire for being there. I actually did not sense any leading from the Lord either to stay or leave. Finally, in January 2009, I shared with the church that I felt my time there was finished, and that we would eventually be moving on. The next several months were spent searching for another pastor. I continued pastoring until the first Sunday of August when the next man, whom the church had voted in, officially became the pastor. We had a very smooth transition.

Two days later, we moved about 300 miles east to the Phoenix west valley. A friend of mine, who had also previously started a church in California, had since gone to the Phoenix west valley and started another church. Knowing about my struggles to leave or stay in San Bernardino, he approached me about coming to help him in Arizona. It would be a role that included some pastoral duties as an assistant, and I would also lead the music.

We left San Bernardino in somewhat of a fog. God's leading to go there had been clear. A church had been started, people had come to know the Lord, we had our own building, and I had enjoyed the privilege of teaching and preaching each week for over ten years. Now I was off to another place to serve in a different capacity. I

could not really have given a good reason why we left San Bernardino other than losing a desire for being there. God's leading and direction at this time simply wasn't the same as it had previously been. After arriving in Arizona, I had no long-term plans, other than the minimum two-year commitment I had given the pastor.

My time as an assistant pastor lasted a little more than three years. We were treated well, but the position just was not the right fit for me. The Lord allowed me to be somewhat productive in ministry, and again, the pastor and the people were good to us, but I was often unhappy in the capacity in which I served.

After about a year in Arizona, around autumn of 2010, I began developing an interest in ministry in foreign countries. It seemed we had so much here in the U.S., but there was much lacking in other parts of the world. I reviewed statistics on the Joshua Project website showing what countries and people groups were unreached. That Christmas, during a visit to my parents, I remember sharing with my dad that I was considering foreign missions. I also read a book by a pastor in Alabama who shared his heart regarding the church and worldwide Gospel ministry. In the book he mentioned a trip he had taken to a foreign underground church where he got to teach the Bible to church leaders. He wrote of how hungry they were for Bible teaching.¹ As I read that, I thought about how much I would love such an opportunity and wondered where I could "sign up" to do that.

About a year after this initial interest in missions work, it was suggested to me that I consider serving the Lord in South Sudan, which had recently gained its independence from Sudan and was the world's newest nation. Arrangements were made for a survey trip to South Sudan to examine this possibility. A Missions' board director whom I had communicated with regarding South Sudan was also going over to see South Sudan as well as another prospective missionary named James. We all flew separately but met up together in the capital city of Juba. (James' trip was quite adventurous as he was briefly kidnapped for money in Egypt before making his

connecting flight.) The trip took place in February 2012 and was an odd experience. I had heard people after returning from missions' trips talk about how much the trips changed their lives. I began the trip with great excitement, but after arriving, my time in South Sudan was spent mostly "enduring" rather than "enjoying" my visit.

I came back confused. I guess I had hoped to come home, having had direct leading by God regarding going to South Sudan. The other prospective missionary, James, was excited during the trip about the possibilities of serving God in South Sudan. In fact, he is there today with his wife and three children (and continuing to have other adventures similar to his experience in Egypt). I did not share the same desire, in spite of having been excited to take the trip AND having been interested in missions for the previous year.

A few months after my visit to South Sudan, I still did not know what to do regarding missions. In the summer of 2012, my wife and I set aside some time to pray about this matter. One July night, I finished a time in personal prayer and concluded that God wanted us to go. It was not like years earlier when we prayed about going to San Bernardino when God gave great clarity about going, but I did believe it was God's will to head toward east Africa.

CH 7 - I'VE READ ABOUT THESE THINGS

After informing the pastor I was working under of my plans to go to South Sudan, we began making preparations for raising financial support with the idea that the current church in which I was serving would be our sending church. We created a video and set up a few meetings. However, the plans were significantly affected after a matter of disagreement with our sending church. We ended up parting ways, and I soon found myself in very “strange” territory. At age 42, after having worked in church or Christian School ministry for 19 years, I was now not in any ministry, and we had to put all missions plans on hold. I picked up some seasonal work around Christmas, and in early 2013, I got some contract work for a brokerage firm in Phoenix. It was a “wilderness” time for me personally, and for a while in my Bible reading, I only read the book of Job.

We began attending another church and became involved in small ways: outreach, song leading, and my wife teaching a class. I really did not have a specific plan for how to go forward. Later that May, the pastor of the church we had left called and told me about an opportunity to fill in for another pastor who was going to be out of town. He had been asked to send someone to fill this vacancy, but he did not have anyone available and knew I would enjoy the opportunity to preach. The church was in Casa Grande, about 80 miles from where we lived. We went there and really enjoyed our time at Casa Grande Baptist Church. I was asked to come two more times that year and cover the Sunday services: once in October and once in December.

Something else that occurred during this “wilderness” time was that our oldest daughter had finished high school and was looking at college. Of the several Christian colleges we looked into, one seemed to stand out as the right one for her at the time. We really had no money to help send her, but in spite of the perceived lack of God's leading in other areas, I did sense His leading that we needed to do everything we could do to send her to this college. We filled

out paperwork and did some necessary follow up to this paperwork. It was getting toward the end of summer, and still there was not enough money to send her to college. I earned enough at my contract assignment (and giving some private piano lessons) to cover basic needs.

Our daughter had a little in savings to get started, yet it seemed more logical for her to work, save, and then go at a future time. But the urging I sensed from the Lord was strong. I told my wife one evening that it seemed not to make sense to go forward with this and that the only thing I had was a strong urging from the Lord to try to get our daughter to college. That night my wife found an inexpensive plane ticket on short notice, and the following Saturday our daughter was off.

My wife picked up some part-time work to help pay the college bill, and our daughter worked on campus as well. However, in December with the semester almost over, there was still a balance on her bill, and with that balance she would not be allowed to take final exams. The school offered small loans, but I did not have peace about borrowing for this. The only reason she was there was that God had led us to send her, and I believed that He wanted us to trust Him to make it happen. I could have borrowed money back in August.

We prayed much about this. I reminded the Lord regularly that we needed Him to provide. At the last possible moment to pay, all I had was money from our tenant who was renting our house back in San Bernardino. The rent money was used mostly to pay the mortgage on the house. However, I decided to use it for the college bill, and then continue to seek the Lord to replace the funds before the end of the month when the mortgage would be officially delinquent.

Our pastor learned about some our financial situation after we did not renew my wife's phone service and he had tried to call. He brought us a very kind gift to help with some expenses.

A short time after this, I was to witness one of the most spectacular things I have ever seen God do in my personal life. On the Sunday after paying our daughter's bill with the rent money, I was working on packing a product we had sold on our online Etsy shop. A neighbor down the street asked me to come and talk to him. I was busy and didn't really want to be disturbed, but I ventured down to his house. (I had met him a few years earlier while doing outreach for the previous church. God had since worked in the lives of both he and his wife.) I sat down in his living room, and he proceeded to tell me the reason for asking me down. In so many words, he basically said the following: "I have not done very much for God, and I right now I really don't have any rewards waiting for me in heaven. I want to do something for God, and I just feel that you have a need, and if you do, I'd like to help."

I had read about things like this before. In books such as George Muller's autobiography, I had read of God's moving in someone's heart to give to meet a need without being asked by the one in need. I left his house that day with a check in hand and paid the mortgage before the month ended. Thus God, after leading us to send our daughter to college by faith, provided in a miraculous way.

Ch 8 – AFRICA, TAKE 2

Two months later, in February 2014, over one year after our first attempt at missions was delayed, I approached the pastor of the church we had been serving in and asked if he thought that they might consider being our sending church. He was very supportive and encouraging and said he would be happy to help in any way possible.

In April, my assignment at the brokerage ended, and in May we had a special Sunday at our new sending church with an emphasis on our renewed efforts to raise financial support to get to East Africa (both South Sudan and Uganda) to plant churches. Shortly after this, my former youth pastor and then pastor, who was now at a Bible college in the west, told me about a college missions trip he was planning the following January to Uganda. He asked if I would like to go along to help chaperone the group, and I told him I would go. Also that May I was invited again to preach at Casa Grande Baptist Church.

We had some meetings in churches in California and Arizona in the fall, including San Bernardino Baptist Church. In October, I received news that the missionary we were planning to work with in South Sudan was going to leave the field and return home. One of his ministries was a Bible Institute for training pastors. Since I was already going to Uganda with the Bible College in January, I made arrangements to stay back (when my chaperone responsibilities were concluded) and travel to South Sudan and do some teaching in this Institute. This would potentially be a great door of opportunity for future ministry.

I took the trip as planned, and when the students boarded the plane to return, I stayed back and headed for South Sudan for the Institute. I was also able to spend a day with several pastors in northern Uganda, preach a Sunday morning service in a Ugandan village church and preach a message on a Christian radio station in Mount Otzi, near the Uganda/South Sudan border. The Bible

Institute went very well in South Sudan, and I got to do what I previously thought I would have loved to do (ch 5). I had a really good time with the men at the Institute, and the trip had been very successful.

Yet strangely enough, in a similar way to my first trip to Africa, I just did not really enjoy it. The long time away from home and family was difficult, and of course the long flights were grueling. As more time passed, I had a real struggle in my heart about our overall plans. I thought that God had called us, but I found myself lacking the motivation and desire to get there.

A few months after our trip, I visited a church east of Phoenix, and the pastor made a suggestion. He said that I should try to obtain a list of the churches that supported the missionary who had just left South Sudan and see if they would support us. This could possibly speed up the process of raising support. I remember specifically the conflicted feelings I had when he said this. I knew that this would be a good idea, and I wondered what was wrong with me as I found myself with no real desire to pursue it. In time to follow, I sought the Lord about this conflict in my heart, but I never felt any peace about abandoning our plans. This conflict was perplexing, but I could not see how to resolve it.

In May 2015, we relocated temporarily to Mesa, AZ. The next big event planned for us was taking a trip to Africa with my wife and two younger children. I spent most of that summer helping a church with various needs and had very few meetings for raising support. I bought the tickets in October for a trip in November. I contacted missionaries in Uganda and arranged help with our transportation and accommodations for after we would arrive. My wife contacted some of the missionary wives and offered to bring some things that they might need. She was looking forward to going. I also made arrangements to teach another session at the Bible Institute in South Sudan.

On October 30 we loaded our minivan and headed for Florida, as the first flight began in Miami. We planned to stay briefly with my parents in Pensacola, FL, and with my Aunt and Uncle in Orlando. The trip to Florida was a very unpleasant experience. We had driven from the West to Florida before and were well familiar with the journey, including the psychological turmoil of the 880-mile portion through Texas. However, that would prove to be less noticed compared to everything else. During a stop for fuel early on, my wife got a really sharp pain in her side and could hardly walk coming out of the gas station. We had no idea what this was, but got her to the car and continued. Then, 40 miles past El Paso we have a tire blowout on the eastbound I-10. It was a frantic 20 minutes changing the tire at night on the side of the road with trucks and cars roaring past at high speeds. My phone charging port was beginning to go out, and I eventually jammed the cord into the port and finished it off for good. We rode into the tiny town of Van Horn on our donut spare and got a motel room. The next day began a search for something that seemed possibly as rare as a total lunar eclipse—namely, a used tire that fit our minivan from a tire shop that was open on a Saturday in west Texas. It ended up that we drove 400 miles on the spare before we got a tire in town of Junction, TX. We finally arrived in Pensacola, FL, on Sunday morning around 7:00 am.

Later that night, I learned something that greatly affected me. The pastor that had taken over San Bernardino Baptist when we had left six years prior was leaving to take a church in the Midwest. Because I had not really reconciled leaving San Bernardino, this news was really bothered me as I wondered whether or not we still had a role to play at San Bernardino Baptist.

On Tuesday, we drove to Orlando to stay with my Aunt and Uncle before continuing to Miami. There in Orlando both our computers mysteriously stopped working, and on the final leg to Miami the ongoing overheating problems of our minivan plus the Miami traffic combined to get us into Miami too late to attend a church we had planned to attend that night. I still needed to withdraw some cash

for our trip, and the next morning, I scrambled through more traffic to get to a bank and return to the hotel to catch the shuttle to the airport. We paid for long-term parking at the hotel for while we would be in Africa and rode to the airport to take the first of three flights to Uganda. After one flight the trip was over, and we were stuck in New York.

Ch 9 – THE HAND OF GOD

I spoke to the hotel desk clerk and learned that I could walk to the subway and ride into Manhattan. There was a Budget Car Rental in Manhattan that would take debit cards. I asked my wife to call the airline and find out if there were still a chance to use the tickets for the remainder of the trip, in the event that at some point I would try it again. My son Andrew and I then hiked to the subway station, rode into Manhattan, hiked a little farther to Budget and got a car. Then we began our journey back to Miami to get our car (a journey that included unforgettable toll costs through New York.)

We left about 1:30 in the afternoon and made it to a motel in North Carolina very late. The next day we drove into Florida, and I left my wife and children in Orlando while I continued into Miami to get our van. I arrived in Miami to drop off the car at 1:15am (15 minutes after the last shuttle ran to our motel where our car was. I had to wait until 5:00 am for the next shuttle and struggled greatly with my phone that still was very difficult to charge. I finally made it to get our car, drove to Orlando to pick everyone up and then drove on to my parents' home in Pensacola late in the evening.

One of the thoughts that went through my head at this time was that maybe all of this was leading us back to San Bernardino. With our missions' trip cut short and having just heard of the pastor making plans to leave, it seemed like maybe we were being lead back to San Bernardino and it would be a wonderful "storybook ending" to a long season of perplexity.

Another thought that I struggled with was whether or not I could do anything else in ministry. If I concluded that I had "quit" God's will for my life, then how could I ever serve in any real ministry capacity again? How could someone lead others to follow God if he himself had chosen NOT to follow God?

Two days after arriving at my parent's house, I got this email from the pastor of Casa Grande Baptist Church, which sent us financial support on a monthly basis:

11/10/15

Hello Brother,

We pray for you folks daily! How is deputation going?

Keep on for Him,

This note did not bring joy. I was not ready to let our supporting churches and friends know what had happened with the Africa trip, and I had not figured out any long-range plans. I had not even talked to our home-church pastor yet. I did not reply. Eight days later, I got another email from the same pastor. This one came through the contact form on our personal website.

11/18/15

Hello Brother,

How is deputation going? We're praying for you folks.

I was persistent in not answering. The next day I got a request from the same pastor to be added to my Linked-In network (How do you get on Linked-In to begin with?) I realized that he was really trying to get me to reply, but I remained firmly reticent. The next day, we started back to Arizona. I felt that I needed to talk to our home church pastor, and even though I thought we might relocate permanently to Pensacola, the timing was not right. We got back to Arizona Friday evening, Nov 20.

I finally replied by email to the pastor of Casa Grande Baptist on Nov 23:

11/23/15

Please forgive the delayed reply. We are going through a difficult time right now due to a recent unexpected event. I will try to provide more detail soon as we seek the Lord through this. We appreciate your prayers.

Matt Witter

Less than 10 minutes later I received the email below. (Again, this pastor knew nothing of our recent experience with canceling the trip.)

11/23/15

I will pray brother. I was going to discuss this with you over the phone, but I'll put it in an email. I contacted you because the Lord may be moving us back to New Zealand to return there as missionaries. Despite the fact that you folks are on deputation, when praying about the best replacement here at Casa Grande Baptist Church, your name always comes up in my heart. So I thought it best to ask you to pray about this please. In my ten years here, there has only been one preacher that the people have really loved to have in my absence and that is you. I realize this would be a huge change, and I don't know the difficult situation you mentioned, but please pray about the possibility of...CGBC.
Praying,

This was the beginning of a process that eventually led to my becoming the pastor of Casa Grande Baptist Church. Although it did not happen immediately, and there were a few more "incidents" to the situation, I had the privilege of becoming the pastor in August 2016. The time following has been a season of refreshment and joy. How truly amazing are the works of God! Two and a half years before, I had been asked (by an intermediary) to cover a day of services at Casa Grande Baptist Church, and then while in great perplexity about the future after my attempted missions' plans, God opened this door to pastor that very church.

While I do not have everything completely "figured out," I have concluded at least somewhat that in missions I was perhaps pursuing a course that really was not God's will for my life. I Thessalonians 5:24 says "Faithful is he that calleth you Who also will do it." God always enables His children to do the work He has called them to do. A pastor friend of mine tried to encourage me in this when I first discontinued my trip and was feeling really bad. He pointed out the significance of the fact that with all the people that were praying for

us, if I was not being helped that it was probably best to discontinue. No doubt, some things we wonder about here on earth may only be understood one day when we are with the Lord. Regardless of our understanding, we know that the ways of God are always right, as Psalm 18:30 reminds us, "As for God, His way is perfect."

Ch 10 – PERCEPTION VS REALITY

Earlier in chapter 2, I listed some verses in which the writer was looking for God and could not “seem” to find him. Psalm 88 is an entire psalm that conveys this situation.

Psalm 88 1 O Lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee: 2 Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry; 3 For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave. 4 I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength: 5 Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand. 6 Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. 7 Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves. Selah. 8 Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth. 9 Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: Lord, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee. 10 Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah. 11 Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? 12 Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? 13 But unto thee have I cried, O Lord; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee. 14 Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me? 15 I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted. 16 Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off. 17 They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together. 18 Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.

This writer has prayed regularly to God (vs 9) but feels as though God is hiding His face from him (vs 14). Making it even more difficult is that he cannot seem to find any encouragement from others (vs 8, 18). A season like this can be very lonely. Yet the writer is someone who knows God. Verse 1 says that God is the God of his salvation. We also know that God does not forsake His own (Hebrews 13:5), that nothing can separate us from the love of

Christ (Romans 8:38), and that God has pity upon those who fear Him (Psalm 103:13).

It appears that in a comparison of such Scriptures, there are times in which God allows His children to go through seasons in which His presence is not a keenly sensed or felt compared to other times. During such times, what “seems” to be and what “is” are not the same. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He does not forsake His Own. Because God “seems” distant does not mean that He is absent or is suddenly not involved in our lives. It appears that God wrote these passages for His children for times such as these. He included them in His Word on purpose.

During a trip back to Arizona in January (part of the extra “incidents” referred to in the previous chapter), my wife had the book *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis and asked if I wanted her to read some of it out loud to pass some of the driving time. The book describes a supposed “experienced” evil spirit (Screwtape) counseling a less experienced evil spirit (Wormwood) on how best to keep a Christian from serving God effectively. I was taken aback when she read me the following excerpt, in which the evil spirit was explaining how he observed God interacting with His children. He pointed out that over time God wanted His followers to learn to stand on their own and trust Him even when His presence could not be perceived. Screwtape says to his nephew:

“He (God) wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do [God’s] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”²

I was amazed at this apparent insight by the author, who evidently experienced this in his own life. It certainly described to some

degree what I had been going through—God’s presence and leading simply not the same as it had been in the past.

Hebrews 11:27 tells us that Moses endured as “seeing Him Who is invisible.” A person’s entire relationship with God is one of faith. We come to God by faith in Jesus Christ, and we then walk with Him by faith. Romans 1:17 tells us that the just shall live by faith. Hebrews 11:6 says that it is impossible to please God without faith, and Romans 10:17 says that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. In seasons in which God “seems” distant, His children need not doubt, question, or despair. God’s Word assures us that He assuredly is there.

During such times it is also helpful to remember what God has done in the past. Notice the Psalmist in Psalm 77:7-12. He is seeking for God, but determining to remember what God has already done:

Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? Selah. And I said, This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High. I will remember the works of the Lord: surely I will remember thy wonders of old. I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings.

A season of God “seeming” distant does not negate all of the things that He has done for us in the past. Such works should be a reminder and encouragement to us to continue to trust a God Who never changes and Whose ways are always right.

We must also remember that such seasons will end. For many, the time of testing comes to an end here on earth. For some perhaps, the season will end when they step into the presence of God in eternity. Consider the following verses:

□ *II Cor 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.*

□ *Psalm 71:20-21* Thou which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth. Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side.

□ *James 5:11* Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

I remember reading the Psalm 71 passage above at some point during my personal “wilderness” time, and it is a blessing now to be on the other side of the trial and experiencing the truth of those verses.

If you know God, I trust that these truths will encourage you if you should go through a time when God “seems” far away. If you have never believed on Jesus by faith to save your soul, I hope above all that you will trust Him and know the forgiveness of sins and the peace of knowing that you have eternal life.

Jude 1:24-25 Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen

¹ David Platt, *Radical* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), pp 23-25.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1975), p. 39