

Isaiah 8:17 Questions (and answers) Concerning the Hiding of God's Face

Two weeks ago I preached from Psalm 27 (A Psalm of David). And in v. 9 he says, "**Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!**" After that sermon, a few of you asked the question: "What does it mean for God to hide his face?" Usually, when 3 people ask a question like that, it has been my experience that many more of you are asking the same question. So, I want to explore the hiding of God's face for the Christian. So, turn to Is. 8:17: "**I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.**" (The idea and content of this topic is taken heavily from John Owen: *A Fast Sermon: Christian Duty Under the Hidings of God's Face*, preached January 1, 1676) With this in mind, I want to answer 6 questions: 1) From whom does God hide his face? 2) What does it mean for God to hide his face? 3) How do we know when God is hiding his face? 4) What are the reasons God hides his face? 5) How may we distinguish between God's "hiding his face" and God's "departing." 6) What is our duty when God hides his face?

1) From whom does God hide his face? Let me mention first of all the Bible doesn't say God hides his face from the world. Why? Because his face has never shined upon the world since the fall. He cannot look upon sin. He is a holy God. And, to "hide one's face" implies that his face was once "not hidden." In our text God's face is said to be hidden particularly from "the house of Jacob." Who is the house of Jacob? Notice 2 things: 1) Throughout the Bible, they are the special, chosen, people of God; we might also say, "the true church of God" throughout history. God establishes his covenant (his special blessing) with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Micah 7:20 says, "**You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.**" So, God hides his face from the house of Jacob.

I would also like to point out that the name "Jacob" is usually associated with a state of trouble. Think of Jacob. His name means "deceiver." He tricked, he lied, he stole. His brother wanted to kill him. He ran away from his family. As he looked for a wife, he worked for his uncle for at least 14 years. He himself was tricked into marrying Lea, and finally Rachael. Later, he fled and headed back to Canaan to face his brother. On the way, he wrestled with God, and though he was hurt physically, he received God's blessing. All his life, this man wrestled with life and with God. He was a man of sorrow, affliction, and great temptations. And, according to John Owen, the church, the people of God, in the OT is only called the house of Jacob when they are in trouble, when they are low, when they are oppressed, when they are few, when they are oppressed. This is important for the context of Isaiah 8. Israel was in such a state. And though they were God's people, God's face was hidden. With this in mind, Owen references the church in his day. I think we can do the same. Many are struggling with sin, many are oppressed, many are sorrowful, many are "wrestling" with God. And God's face is hidden.

2. What does it mean for God to hide his face? Well, first, we must know what it means for God's face to shine upon someone. In Num. 6:24-26 we see what it means. "**The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.**" Here we see grace, preservation, and peace. And this is what we see in Jesus Christ. These blessings come down to

his people. Owen says there are four effects that always accompany the shining of God's face upon anyone. What are they?

i. Where God's face shines there is light and guidance. Ps. 36:9 says, "**For with you is the fountain of life; in your light** (countenance, face) **do we see light.**" Which of us would go for a hike in the woods after the sun goes down, or without a flashlight? Why not! We can't see. While God's face shines upon us, we will not be at a loss, nor in the dark about any of our ways.

ii. Where God's face shines, there is spiritual strength. God's grace and God's favor give strength. Whenever God's face shines, we have spiritual life, strength, vigor, quickening, great help in all our duties as we obey the commands of God, great confidence and strength during trials and sufferings, whatever we are called to do in the Bible.

iii. The shining of God's face is the cause of spiritual joy and refreshment. There is nothing that brings more joy in this world than to know that a holy God is on your side. He is not angry with you.

iv. When God's face shines there is deliverance from trouble. Psalm 80:3 says, "**Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!**"

This means that the opposite is true when God's face does not shine, or is hidden. Therefore, we must consider some very important questions concerning light and guidance, spiritual strength, joy and refreshment, and deliverance from trouble.

Concerning light and guidance from God, how are we/you? Do we/you see the beauty and the glory of the ways of God? Is God as beautiful to you in these days as has been in former days? When you come to worship together with God's people in the church, is there a great desire to be here? Or is this simply a formality? Do you find with the things of God that your heart is delighted and refreshed?

When you think of God's guidance, Owen asks, "*Are you bewildered?*" This means to be confused about the will of God, especially as pertains to godliness in your walk?

What about love? Are we in the dark as to the way of love, especially as it relates to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Owen says this is a great test to know if God's countenance, God's face, is shining on us. For without love, we can go through all the motions, but be as sounding brass and a clanging cymbal. Even on a bigger scale, is the love from church to church? When we think one another, do our hearts leap with a desire of love? Do we look forward to our home groups, eagerly desiring to love our brothers and sisters in word and deed? Owen says the ways of God are the same, the worship of God the same, the saints of God the same; but if these things are true, maybe God has hidden his face from us in these things?

What about spiritual strength? When God hides his face there will be decay as to spiritual strength, as to the flourishing and strength of grace.

And spiritual joys. When God hides his face there will also be decay of spiritual joys. How is it with us/you? Our joy is something purchased by the blood of Christ. And it is worth more than

everything in this world. How is your joy in these days? The past year, the past 3 years? Brothers and sisters, there is a difference between carnal joys and spiritual joys. And I am afraid that, in the church, we may confuse the two. What is a carnal joy? It is an emotion that comes from successes in this life, present enjoyments, the money to purchase a car, house, boat, etc. This includes success at work, promotions, good grades at school, the praises of men about our accomplishments, good times as on a family vacation, etc. And, yes, we do praise God from whom ALL blessings flow. But, in and of themselves, these are carnal joys. And when our satisfaction is found in these kinds of things there will be very little, if none at all, spiritual joy! Spiritual joys are different. Spiritual joy is something deep within the soul. And it doesn't compare with worldly joys.

In Psalm 4:7 King David says to God: **“You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.”** A predominance of carnal joy and satisfaction of the things of this world is inconsistent with true spiritual joy. Where are our hearts? At this point Owen gives a test to know whether a person has spiritual joy or not. He calls this test *“spiritual exultation.”* These are special times where God makes himself especially close and our spirit rejoices and our hearts rejoice within us in ways that are hard to explain. We feel very near to God. I recall the words of Paul: **“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . .”** And we cry out to God, *“Abba Father”* (Rom. 8:16-17). I think of when Mary when she went to visit the mother of John the Baptist. And the baby leaped in her womb. Brothers and sisters, when Christ comes to you in this way (usually in your prayer closet) your heart springs up with joy. And there is nothing like it, to know God's face is shining upon you! If you've never experienced such, maybe God's face has never shown on you! Trust Christ today! Don't let another moment go by! And if it does, lay on your pillow tonight and speak to God about such things.

3. How do we know when God is hiding his face? I think this has already become a little more clear with the last point. Concerning the things I just spoke of, all Christians may experience these things periodically. We have ups and downs. We may have a period of backsliding, a period of sin in our lives, but God may not be hiding his face. I know these things are a bit subjective and there is great mystery here, but Owen mentions two things that indicate God's face is hidden. This first is this: God shuts out our prayers and we get no answers. (though no answers are still answers). Listen to these words from the author of Lamentations concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity of God's people by the Babylonians: **“I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; ² he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; ³ surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long. ⁴ He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; ⁵ he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation; ⁶ he has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. ⁷ He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy; ⁸ though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer . . .”** (Lam. 3:1-8). This is hard. I know. In that context God's face was not shining upon his people. Not even their prayers were being heard, much less answered.

The next thing he mentions is this: God's face may be hidden when we cry out for relief and it doesn't come. This is what we see with the Babylonian invasion and captivity. I am sure God's people were crying out to him for deliverance. Hos. 5:6 says, **“With their flocks and herds they**

shall go to seek the LORD, but they will not find him; he has withdrawn from them.” Isaiah describes such a condition when he says: **“We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men”** (Isa. 59:10).

This describes a person who sees something, who wants it badly. The way and the rule is plain (ex: God’s laws, God’s ways, God’s instructions). But still one cannot find the way. I think there may be those of us here that would tell me you want God’s way, but it is not coming. You want a spirit of faith of love; you want self-denial and a resignation to the will of God; you want a special fruitfulness in the things of God; you want to see the church alive with beauty and glory; you want to so many things; but they don’t come. Maybe God has hidden his face.

Owen mentions one more way we may know God has hidden his face: when we grow relaxed and cold in our efforts in the Christian life. I must be honest. If you are like me, you may be cold one day, hot the next; great in prayer one day, but horrible in others; very loving and kind one day, but not the next. We/you become content with the status quo (whatever that is). If this is the case, maybe God has hidden his face.

4. Why does God hide his face? In other words, what may cause Him to hide his face? Let me mention 4 brief reasons.

i. For the love of the world. Israel often loved the things of the world. And this is the context of Is. 57:17 which says, **“Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain (KJV “covetousness”) I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart.”** This is certainly one of the biggest sins of the Christian church today.

ii. For the practice of evil things. Micah 3:4 says: **“Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.”**

iii. Lukewarmness. I think we see this mostly in a formality of religious duties and worship. One of the ways we cover our own lukewarmness is by the multiplication of good deeds. God is concerned with the heart.

iv. We do not speak the truth of God in this world. We have been given the gospel to give to the world. And God’s truths in morality come alongside this gospel. This may be my biggest sin. May God have mercy on me/us!

5. How may we distinguish between God’s “departing” and God’s “hiding his face?”

There is a difference between God’s departing (leaving altogether) and God’s hiding his face. Hos. 9:12 says **“Woe to them when I depart from them!”** There is so much here! And when we get to the NT, this may be the same as the unpardonable sin; at least the result is the same. I think the Bible clearly teaches there does come a time when God will depart; He will leave and return no more! I know there is a lot of mystery here. As far as I can tell, in the NT, the hiding of God’s face in reference to the church is more like discipline. But, it is always a test, which I hope

is what is happening in this sermon. 2 Cor. 13:5: “**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.**” But, how do we know the difference? Owen gives 3 ways (there are many more).

i. It is only a hiding if we mourn after the Lord, who has hidden his face from us. If much of this sermon has described you, what does your heart do when you consider these truths? If your heart cries out for his face to shine on you, it is not a departing.

ii. It is only a hiding when NOTHING will satisfy you unless God returns. Ps. 27:4: “**One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.**” And, Psalm 84:10: “**For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.**”

iii. It is only a hiding when we can never rest in those things or ways which cause God to hide his face from us. This is part of the wrestling that goes on within a Christian because of the Spirit of God. If this is so, God has not departed.

6) What is our duty when God hides his face? Look back at Is. 8:17: “**I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.**”

In some ways, for the Christian, our entire life is one of waiting and hoping in Him! This is God’s design. It is for our good! And our earnest waiting and hoping are also evidence that God has not departed! “**But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint**” (Is. 40:31).

Waiting on the Lord is another sermon in and of itself. But, in a nutshell, for the Christian, it means to look unto Christ by faith, who is the face of God. Christ is his countenance. He is the radiance of the invisible God. To behold God in his temple and see his face is to look upon Christ by faith; and to receive all God’s spiritual blessings. “**And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit**” (2 Cor. 3:18).

May God bless his Word and the words of the sermon and bring great fruit in our lives!