

INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

The Lie of Isolation

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”

Psalm 13:1-2

People say time flies when you're having fun. But when things shift into a minor key, life seems to move in slow motion. We often find ourselves thinking, “I don't know if I'm ever going to get out of these circumstances.”

This verse contains a recurring question: “How long? How long?” David's circumstances aren't described, but he clearly feels forgotten and forsaken—a feeling we all can relate to. It's akin to what we feel when we lose a loved one.

To be isolated from human relationships is, without question, crushing. But what David writes of here is even more significant. He's expressing a feeling of isolation from God Himself. In his emerging depression, we discover that his perception, as is often the case with our own, does not reflect reality. What he *feels* to be true does not align with what he *knows* to be true.

“God's care for His children is like the sun: it's constant. Even when the clouds obscure it, it's still there. It's *always* there.”

The psalmist's sentiment is shared by many of God's people throughout Scripture. In Isaiah, God's exiled people cry out, “The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.”¹ Christian pilgrims—genuine followers and servants of Jesus—have occasionally felt like saying, “I believe the Lord has actually forgotten us. If He has not forgotten us, if He was still with us, how would we be in this predicament? If He truly was watching over us, surely we would not have to endure these trials.”

Christians, let's not believe the lie of isolation that our emotions can feed us. We can find rest in God's comforting response to His forgetful people: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.”²

God's care for His children is like the sun: it's constant. Even when the clouds obscure it, it's still there. It's *always* there.

Will we trust in God's constancy today? Amidst our feeling forsaken, God looks at His hands, engraved with each and every one of our names, and He says, “There you are. I have not forgotten you.”

¹ Isa. 49:14.

² Isa. 49:15-16.



INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

The Brevity of Life

“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent...”

ECCLESIASTES 12:1–3

Life passes us by a lot more quickly than we imagine. I vividly remember the birth of my first child—and then, it seemed that he was a teenager only a few weeks later. Suddenly, we wake up older and we realize that any given moment may be the only moment we have left to live for Jesus Christ, because life is very brief.

“With the minutes that remain in our lives, we can lift up our eyes and look on the fields, because, as Jesus said, they’re already ‘white for harvest.’”

As we age, our physical and mental abilities fade, old friends pass away, familiar customs which have been routine disintegrate, and our long-held ambitions lose their potential. These realities, though, shouldn’t drive us into despair but stimulate us. There is opportunity in every day! As Derek Kidner writes, “Death has not yet reached out to us: let it rattle its chains at us and stir us into action.”¹ With the minutes that remain in our lives, we can lift up our eyes and look on the fields, because, as Jesus said, they’re already “white for harvest.”²

The Bible doesn’t encourage us to wait until we graduate or get married or settle down or sort ourselves out or retire to serve Christ. Rather, it encourages us to live in the awareness of what James, the brother of Jesus, says: that we shouldn’t say, “Tomorrow, we’ll go here or go there and get gain and do this and all these things,” but instead respond, “If the Lord wills, we will do this or that.”³ We do so because, as James also reminds us, our lives are but “a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”⁴

Before the strength in our hands fails us and our teeth, eyes, and ears grow weak, will we choose to live for Jesus Christ? If we wait until tomorrow, tomorrow may be too late. As C. T. Studd once put it, there is

Only one life,
'Twill soon be past.
Only what’s done
For Christ will last.

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1976), 104

² John 4:35

³ James 4:13, 15

⁴ James 4:14



INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

Preparing for Death

“Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ***‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’***”

JOHN 11:21–26

None of us knows what a day will bring. Indeed, we all live with a measure of uncertainty; we cannot be prepared for every trial that comes our way. Yet we also live in a fallen world, and we know the sting of sin is death. Dying, therefore, is one reality for which we *must* prepare.

Any consideration of death and dying that doesn’t pay careful attention to Jesus’ words is incomplete. A great place to start, then, is the solid instruction Jesus provided just after his friend Lazarus’s death.

“Even though our physical frames will fail us, when we believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life, death simply becomes a transition, a passing from one realm of life into another.”

Lazarus’s mourning sisters were deeply concerned about what had happened to their brother. In response, Jesus said that Lazarus was going to rise again. Martha, misunderstanding this declaration, said, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”¹ Jesus then took the conversation one step further, saying, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Our answer to Jesus’ following question—“Do you believe this?”—affects both how we live and how we deal with death. Jesus has not only conquered death but also made a way for *us* to conquer death too. Even though our physical frames will fail us, when we believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life, death

simply becomes a transition, a passing from one realm of life into another.

One challenge which faces believers regarding death is not simply preparing ourselves for its imminence but also learning how to help others face it. No matter the situation, though, Jesus’ words provide the foundation for loving counsel. We are to speak both biblically and honestly, explaining the reality of eternity and the hope that is found in Him. Our words, echoing Christ’s own, should not be abrupt or unfeeling but filled with wisdom and grace.

We cannot know how to live until we’ve settled the question of how to die. Tomorrow is not promised. Let us not harden our hearts, then, but prepare ourselves, our friends, and our loved ones to overcome any fears and uncertainties about death with Christ’s promise of eternity.

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INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

God Is in Control

“Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, ‘Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.’ His brothers said to him, ‘Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?’ So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.”

GENESIS 37:5–8

Joseph was known for his dreams—and his dreams were far from ordinary! As he dreamed, it became obvious that God was involved, that his dreams were signs of what God would yet do.

Joseph’s dreams hinted at the fact that he was the object of God’s special favor, the servant of His divine purpose. These truths only increased his brothers’ hatred. Eventually, even the affection of Jacob, his father, began to cool.¹ Joseph became, in a sense, an isolated young man with no one to talk to or identify with.

“God is as much in control of the trauma, animosity, and difficulty we face as He was in control of the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams.”

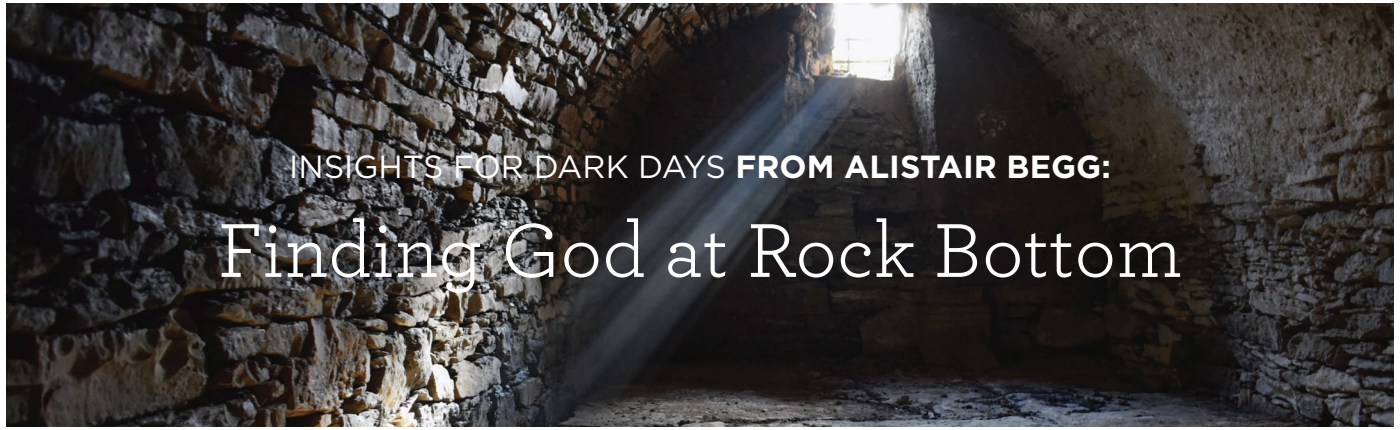
We might have expected Joseph to withdraw into himself, avoid the pain in his life, and hide from a world that hated him—a world that was alien to him, full of discord and fractured relationships. But that wasn’t his response! Instead, we find that he remained steady and focused, with a clear vision of the future.

Joseph’s resilience is striking. How do we explain such a response in the life of a seventeen-year-old?

In the very center of Joseph’s being was an awareness of the fact that God, who was his heavenly Father, was providentially in control of his life. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, providence is that act of God’s grace and kindness by which, in His wisdom and power, He preserves and governs all the events of the lives of His creatures.² Through every dream, in the midst of life’s chaos, Joseph recognized that God reigned over everything.

As in Joseph’s circumstances, so in ours: God is as much in control of the trauma, animosity, and difficulty we face as He was in control of the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams. When we can’t understand why it is that we would be objects of another’s hatred, we need to remember that God, seated on His throne, is interested in the affairs of our lives.

We can’t discern God’s plan based on what’s most comfortable, acceptable, and rationally obvious. God’s providential care expresses itself not only in ordinary, expected ways but also in surprising and unusual ways. Let’s not see the dark and disappointing times as thwarting His unfolding purpose. Instead, let’s learn each day to trust Him more completely.



INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

Finding God at Rock Bottom

“Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. ***But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.*** And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.”

GENESIS 39:20–23

After Potiphar’s wife falsely accused him, Joseph hit rock bottom... again. Once more the recipient of undeserved hatred, he found himself condemned—not to a pit this time, but to his master’s dungeon. The bottom had dropped out of his world.

And yet, as a man of principle, Joseph displayed enduring patience. He had fled the seductive temptation from Potiphar’s wife on the strength of his convictions, making his decision on the basis of purity and rightness. Indeed, Joseph feared God more than he feared a dungeon. He couldn’t sin with Potiphar’s wife because to do so would have been to sin against God.

“The Lord’s presence remains with His people even in the most extreme circumstances.”

Such a view of sin will keep us, too, on the narrow way. True faithfulness comes not from pragmatism but from principle. It is the forming of decisions in the quiet place, without all of life’s fanfare going on, so that when everything comes crashing down on us, we will know how to respond.

As Joseph endured wrongful suffering, Scripture tells us, God demonstrated his love by granting him favor with his jailor. There is nothing in the narrative that suggests Joseph tried to manipulate the circumstances to his own end—and even if Joseph had been looking around for a friend or ally, he never would have anticipated the prison warder would fill that role! But God had other ideas. The Lord’s presence remains with His people even in the most extreme circumstances.

From time to time, we all feel as if we’ve hit the dungeon—a new low in our lives—and are confined by chilling isolation. Maybe that’s you today. Maybe you, like Joseph, have been the recipient of false accusations. Or maybe something entirely different is weighing down your weary soul. No matter what, the Lord knows. He’s never been taken by surprise, and He loves you with an everlasting love. Take comfort in knowing that, as the prophet Zechariah declared, “he who touches you touches the apple of his eye.”¹

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¹ Zech. 2:8



INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

Casting All Your Cares

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, *casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you*. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.”

1 PETER 5:6–9

Anxiety is a strange thing, creeping up at times when we least expect it and quickly overwhelming us. When we think about it, though, we realize that anxiety’s causes are generally the same for everyone. They may take on a different face, they may be propelled by different circumstances, but the issues themselves are remarkably similar.

When we face anxiety, we often try to ignore it by distracting our minds: “Let me listen to some music. Let me go for a drive. Let me run a mile. Let me do *something*... just let me run away!”

Notice, though, that in this verse, Peter does not say we are to deny, ignore, or flee from anxiety. Instead, we should be “*casting all your anxieties on him*.” The Greek word for “cast” here is a decisive, energetic action word. It might just as well be used to describe throwing out a bag of trash. We don’t take painstaking effort in moving it; we simply grab it and hurl it into the bin. Likewise, instead of going through our days pressed down by the burden of anxiety, we are to throw it, hurl it, upon the Lord.

It will help us, too, to read the verse in context: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him.” In other words, humility’s presence leads to anxiety’s absence. When we take matters into our own hands through too much worry, we indicate an absence of humility: we’re more concerned with ourselves than with our heavenly Father.

Whether it’s unemployment, exams, singleness, or a recurring illness, we may not be able to remove the causes of our anxiety. Peter doesn’t address circumstances, though; he addresses the anxiety produced by the circumstances. Our anxiety itself is what we cast upon the Lord, doing exactly what the Bible says to do: humbling ourselves under God’s hand, saying, “Father knows best.” We can refuse to be burdened by the worries which weigh us down, disturbing our peace and distracting our minds, because of the Lord’s willingness to help.

You might be struggling through today, hoping you’re going to make it to tomorrow. Perhaps it’s been a long time since you knelt beside your bed and truly cast your burden upon the only One who is able to carry it, saying, “God, I cannot live my life with this burden on my back. Take it. It’s Yours.”

If that’s you, don’t hesitate any longer. Cast your anxieties into the loving arms of your heavenly Father and experience the freedom and peace only He can provide.



INSIGHTS FOR DARK DAYS FROM ALISTAIR BEGG:

God Hears Our Cries

“During those many days the king of Egypt died, and *the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.* God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.”

Exodus 2:23–25

The promise of food had encouraged Jacob and his family to leave their famine-stricken land and relocate to Egypt with Joseph. For a time, everything was terrific. But their experience took a turn for the worse when a new king came into power. He didn't like the idea of Israel's people growing in stature and number, so he put them to work, ruthlessly enslaving them. Their lives were filled with tears and bitterness.

The people of God still had His promises, but those promises seemed empty. It was easier to trust God when they were receiving the benefit of food than when they were enslaved. In the long years of oppression, some must have said to themselves, “I think God's forgotten His promise. I wonder if He's really going to do what He said.” Despite their doubt, they called out to God, desperately seeking rescue.

God had not forgotten, and His answer came. God heard their cry, He heard their groaning, and in response, He introduced a rescue operation. God would not leave them in their misery. He was going to fulfill His purposes for His people and set them free from slavery.

This is what God's people needed to be reminded of then, just as we do now: God hears our groaning, God knows our circumstances, and He *will* act. Indeed, when we are at a loss for words in our distress, we discover that the Holy Spirit even intercedes for us through our prayerful groanings.¹ That's the level of God's concern for each of us. When our souls' cries seem to go unheard, when we begin to wonder if anyone truly cares, may our minds recall these heartening words:

Why should I feel discouraged,
Why should the shadows come,
Why should my heart be lonely
And long for heav'n and home,

When Jesus is my portion?
My constant friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.²

We should not neglect crying out to God but instead make our requests known to Him. He hears, He cares, and He works on our behalf. Let us take our concerns to Him today.

¹ Rom. 8:26–27.

² Civilla D. Martin, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” (1905).