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Emotional Doubt and Divine Hiddenness

A. Chadwick Thornhill*

Emotionally motivated doubts concerning one's religious faith can generate severe pain and anxiety in the life of a believer. These doubts may generate both emotional and physical problems that also significantly affect their health. Os Guinness in speaking of this type of doubt asserts, "no one is hurt more than the doubter. Afraid to believe what they want to believe, they fail to believe what they need to believe, and they alone are the losers."¹ While recent Christian scholarship has begun to be more attentive to this issue as it pertains to addressing the emotional doubts of the church community, much more work needs to be done concerning this prevalent issue. One issue in particular which may motivate emotional doubt and permit it to fester is that of divine hiddenness, or the silence of God. This essay will seek to develop a possible model for addressing the existential problem of divine hiddenness and the emotional doubt that it might cause in the life of a believer. In doing so, it will identify several potential "root causes" for the experience of the existential problem of divine hiddenness and attempt to guide a hurting individual through dealing with their doubt by applying misbelief therapy.

The Problem of Divine Hiddenness

The issue of the silence of God, or divine hiddenness, has been contemplated by theists and skeptics alike for centuries. Evidence of this issue can be found, for example, at numerous points in the Old Testament. The Psalms contain numerous references to the existential angst of Old Testament saints who felt far from God. David pleaded with God, "Do not keep silent; O Lord, do not be far from me. Stir up Yourself, and awake to my right and to my cause" (Ps. 35:23 [NASB]). Elsewhere he asked of God, "Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever. Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?" (Ps. 44:23-24 [NASB]). In contrast to David's

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¹ Os Guinness, *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 151.

pleas for God to speak, Elihu reminded Job that even if God were silent, man would have no grounds to complain against him (Job 34:29). While contemporary thinkers may often imagine the world of the Bible as one of constant miracles and divine discourse, the testimony of the Bible indicates that the silence, or hiddenness, of God was also an issue with which these believers had to deal.

The issue of divine hiddenness has points of connection with the philosophical problem of evil, though distinct in that it asks the question “Where is God” rather than “Why does God permit evil?” The problem of evil is often expressed by the premise that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God (if he exists) would prevent evil from existing in the world. Since evil exists God either does not exist or (contra traditional theism) is not omniscient, omnipotent, and/or omnibenevolent. The problem of divine hiddenness, on the other hand, asserts that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God (if he exists) would enable humans to know and relate to him and would subsequently reveal himself in a way that reasonable, inculpable non-belief would not exist. Since reasonable, inculpable non-belief is said to exist, God either does not exist, or (contra traditional theism) is not omniscient, omnipotent, and/or omnibenevolent. Thus, the issue of silence as expressed in the problem of evil examines God’s existence in terms of his moral activity in the world while the problem of divine hiddenness addresses God’s activity (or non-activity) in the world from an epistemic perspective often focusing on his self-revelation or relationship to human beings.²

The problem of divine hiddenness may be expressed in two forms: the cognitive or intellectual problem of hiddenness and the existential or emotional problem. While the two are certainly interrelated, they are expressed in different ways. Theists who address the cognitive problem discuss it on evidential and philosophical grounds, arguing that the problem of divine hiddenness presented as an argument against theism does not obtain, and thus does not invalidate belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent deity. The existential problem, although connected in content, deals primarily with the emotional state (fear, anxiety, doubt, etc.) that may or may not directly result from a reflection upon the cognitive problem. In other words, the existential problem of divine hiddenness may express itself in individuals who do not intellectually doubt that God is, or could be, active in the world, but rather doubt this activity on an existential or emotional level (i.e. in a personal way rather than a conceptual or factual one). The nuance of the emotional states or beliefs that may underlie the existential problem will be further explored in the section below titled “Identifying ‘Misbeliefs.’”

² See Peter van Inwagen, “What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?” in *Divine Hiddenness, New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, 24-32. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler note that often “the chief source of doubt comes from God’s apparent inactivity, indifference or impotence in the face of tragedy and suffering in the respondents’ lives and in others’ lives.”³ The problem of divine hiddenness (as well as the problem of evil) may often be the root cause of emotional doubt, or at least a contributing factor. Concerning the existential angst that divine hiddenness can generate, Howard-Snyder and Moser note, “Giving up the struggle to trust the hidden God often seems the only reasonable option as well as the only avenue to psychological well-being. Hence, even devout theists can face an existential crisis from divine hiddenness.”⁴ In light of the pervasiveness of this issue and its ability to act as a catalyst for emotional or existential doubt among believers, developing a strategy to address this topic should be an important concern for both the apologist and the pastor, as well as the church community at large.

Recognizing Emotional Doubt

Works on Christian doubt often recognize different species of doubt that variously affect a person’s mind, emotions, or will. Sometimes these categories focus on the content of the doubt,⁵ while others focus upon the motivating factors that cause these doubts.⁶ While any categorization will be somewhat artificial, since doubts can occur across multiple categories at once or may progress through a series of stages, a helpful form of classification is viewing doubts in terms of factual, emotional, or volitional motivating factors.⁷ This categorization facilitates a better

³ J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting in God* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 133.

⁴ Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

⁵ See Alister McGrath, *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith*. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

⁶ James Emery White in his *Embracing the Mysterious God: Loving the God We Don’t Understand* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) discusses struggles with one’s heart, soul, mind, strength, and neighbors. J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler in their *In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting God* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008) identify doubts of the head and heart. In his *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), Os Guinness identifies seven families of doubt which he labels doubt from ingratitude, a faulty view of God, weak foundations, lack of commitment, lack of growth, unruly emotions, and hidden conflicts.

⁷ See Gary R. Habermas’ *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God* (Originally published in Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1999).

understanding of how doubts may arise, but should not be understood in a way that oversimplifies the doubts that an individual may have in any given situation. In other words, those who experience doubts will often evidence a primary type of doubt (i.e. factual, emotional, or volitional), but this does not mean that the other categories may not be a factor as well. Psychological researchers Neal Krause and Keith Wulff warn against an oversimplified understanding of doubt, noting, “Investigators often fail to recognize that doubt may not affect everyone in the same way.”⁸

Those who experience factual doubt are concerned chiefly with answering intellectual objections to their faith and are generally satisfied once the data to resolve those objections is presented. Volitional doubt deals primarily with problems of the will in which the individual rejects God in spite of the general acceptance of the facts of the gospel. This species of doubt may be influenced by emotional or intellectual factors, but is more often typified by a lack of willingness or an opposition to act upon the facts that may otherwise seem reasonable to the individual.⁹ The third species of doubt, and the focus of this essay, is emotional or psychological in nature.

Emotional doubts may be the most painful to experience, and often the most difficult to remedy. As Guinness notes, “Battered emotions can produce a crop of doubts just as devastating as the militant atheist’s toughest questions.”¹⁰ This is often because the hurting individual fails to recognize the root of their doubt. They may believe (or hope) that their doubt is factual in nature, especially since emotional doubt often masquerades as factual doubt. According to Habermas, “Emotional doubt is identified not so much by the sorts of questions that are asked but by the underlying reasons for those questions.”¹¹ Thus, the individual may express their doubts in the form of factual questions, but their reasons for posing

http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/thomas_factor/thomas_factor.htm#ch5 (accessed April 4, 2010)) and *Dealing with Doubt* (Originally published in Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1990. http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/dealing_with_doubt/dealing_with_doubt.htm (accessed April 4, 2010)).

⁸ Neal Krause and Keith M. Wulff, “Religious Doubt and Health: Exploring the Potential Dark Side of Religion,” *Sociology of Religion* 65:1 (Spring 2004): 39.

⁹ Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt*, under “Chapter V: Volitional Doubt.”

¹⁰ Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 130.

¹¹ Gary R. Habermas, “Dealing with Emotional Doubt,” in *Passionate Conviction: Contemporary Discourses on Christian Apologetics*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishing Group, 2007), 245.

the questions are not intellectual but emotional. Those who experience emotional doubt often judge an issue by how they feel when discussing it rather than what they believe about it (i.e. “I don’t feel saved,” “I don’t feel loved,” etc.).¹²

When suffering from emotional doubt, individuals may often feel like they are thinking clearly or rationally about their circumstances, when in reality they are not. These doubts may commonly be motivated by a disparaging (and untrue!) view of one’s self or situation, or of God. Guinness insightfully notes, “If this person says that something is too good to be true, you can take it that they see it as both good and true but, for some hidden reason, not allowed to be so for them.”¹³ This disparaging view of self or God may be present because of some recent trauma (e.g., loss of a loved one, or broken relationships) or a past event that was never properly dealt with (e.g., childhood neglect or abuse, past sins, personal failures). Here Guinness is also helpful, noting, “sometimes the very process of believing puts painful pressure on old psychological wounds that are still too sensitive to bear it or that they think are too sensitive to rest.”¹⁴

Recent psychological studies have confirmed the existence of emotional and psychological catalysts in the experiencing of religious doubt. Some studies have found that religious doubting may be linked to family conflicts, such as those that might generate negative images of God or negative feelings about religion,¹⁵ or even personal adjustment issues such as poor stress management and depression.¹⁶ Kathleen Galek (et al.) notes that religious doubt is often “associated with depression, general anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, paranoia, hostility, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms.”¹⁷ One might say then that religious doubts can be caused by *and/or* cause negative psychological states. Doubts may even generate negative physical side effects if left unfettered.

¹² Ibid., 246.

¹³ Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 154.

¹⁴ Ibid., 147.

¹⁵ See William P. Kooistra and Kenneth I. Pargament, “Religious Doubting in Parochial School Adolescents,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 27:1 (1999): 33-42.

¹⁶ See Bruce Hunsberger, Susan Alisat, S. Mark Pancer, and Michael W. Pratt, “Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Doubts: Content, Connections and Complexity of Thinking,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 6:3 (July 1996): 201-220; Neal Krause, Berit Ingersoll-Dayton, Christopher G. Ellison, and Keith M. Wulff, “Aging, Religious Doubt, and Psychological Well-Being,” *Gerontologist* 39:5 (1999): 525-533.

¹⁷ Kathleen Galek, et al., “Religious Doubt and Mental Health Across the Lifespan,” *Journal of Adult Development* 14:1-2 (June 2007): 22.

Emotional doubts may be especially painful when an individual cannot realize that their doubts are illogical; not generated by questions about the truth but rather by their feelings. This can develop a frustrating cycle of pain if the individual is not able to address the root cause of their doubts. Krause notes in a 2006 study on doubt and well-being,

Repeated episodes of unsuccessful encounters with [doubt] are likely to spark negative emotions, such as feelings of frustration, confusion, and bewilderment. Moreover, the inability to resolve the painful dissonance that doubt creates may reflect poorly on the self, undermining the feelings of confidence that are needed to confront doubt when it arises again.¹⁸

When this cycle of doubt is permitted to fester, it may likely engender extreme pain and depression. This may result in the acceptance of numerous “misbeliefs” that will damage the hurting person. As Guinness affirms, “Not only are our emotions easily influenced, they are highly influential. Once persuaded, they become the powerful persuaders, and here is their danger.”¹⁹ In order to break the cycle of pain, the hurting person must identify the root cause of their doubt that lies *behind* their questioning.

Identifying ‘Misbeliefs’

With a proper understanding of the nature of emotional doubt in place, one may now turn their attention to identifying the specific misbeliefs that cause doubts related to the existential problem of divine hiddenness. A suggested cognitive approach that may be employed to undertake this process has been outlined in detail elsewhere.²⁰ In brief summation, the approach follows a three-step process, the first step of which is listening to one’s *self-talk*²¹ to identify misbeliefs, which will be the focus of this section. According to this approach, it is not a traumatic event that causes most of a person’s grief or pain but rather what they tell

¹⁸ Neal Krause, “Religious Doubt and Psychological Well-Being: A Longitudinal Investigation,” *Review of Religious Research* 47:3 (2006): 290.

¹⁹ Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 128.

²⁰ The approach being utilized is based primarily on the misbelief therapy model of William Backus and Marie Chapian (William Backus and Marie Chapian, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2000).

²¹ Backus and Chapian define *self-talk* as “the words we tell ourselves about people, self, experiences, life in general, God, the future, the past, the present; it is specifically, *all the words you say to yourself all the time*.” (Backus and Chapian, *Telling Yourself the Truth*, 28)

themselves about that event. As Guinness states of this concept in the life of a doubter, “The initial wound was objective and real, of course, yet the doubt is caused, not by the wound itself but by the way it was regarded and the place it was given. These are a matter of subjective choice.”²² Identifying these misbeliefs is often the most difficult part of the process since these untruths may be deeply ingrained in a person’s thought patterns from years of dealing poorly with a given event. Once the misbeliefs have been identified, the hurting individual must seek to remove the misbeliefs (i.e. stop telling one’s self the untruths), and replace the false cognitions with the appropriate truths that respond to the misbeliefs. This step of replacing the misbeliefs will be discussed in the section that follows, but the process of identification must take place first.

A helpful starting point will be to become familiar with some potential categories under which these misbeliefs may be grouped. The misbeliefs identified below will all bear a connection to the problem of divine hiddenness, representing feelings generated by false cognitions about oneself, one’s situation, or one’s relationship with God. When a person feels that God is distant from them, his love is withheld from them, he has deceived or betrayed them, or he is mistreating or will mistreat them like the people in their lives, misbeliefs that God “is not there,” existentially speaking, are bound to arise.

Feeling Distant from God

A common misbelief that may be encountered is that the individual feels distant from God, or feels like God is not “there for them.” While life’s circumstances or a lack of spiritual discipline may be to blame for this feeling, the fact remains that God’s presence is unnoticed. As is characteristic of misbeliefs, the hurting person may not be consciously telling themselves that God is distant, but this misbelief undergirds their depression and doubt. Hart notes that doubt in general often generates “feelings of aloneness or separateness . . . [growing] to feel very separate and cut off from other people, life, and God.”²³ This lack of felt presence can lead to spiritual and emotional darkness if not addressed.

William Backus, psychologist and author of numerous books on “misbelief therapy,” notes that the self-talk of one who feels distant from God may resemble statements like, “I know the Bible says all this wonderful stuff about God, but I’m

²² Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 157.

²³ David J. H. Hart, *Christianity: A New Look at Ancient Wisdom* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake Publishing Inc., 2005), 90.

certainly not experiencing it. So maybe it's not true."²⁴ The lack of "feeling spiritual" or seeing evidence of God's activity in one's life may often prevent a person from even noticing the actual movement of God in their life or the seeking of his presence, for they have accepted that these ideas are unrealistic. Of this type of doubt, Guinness notes, "The pressure is painful because of the feeling that God is not guiding us at the very moment when so much is at stake."²⁵ As a result, when difficult times come, the individual's "immunity to doubt"²⁶ has been exhausted and the resources to combat it have been depleted, leaving them unable to resist their misbeliefs.

Feeling Unloved by God

One may also feel at times that God does not love them as he loves others, or even that God does not love at all. Backus observes that this misbelief may be generated from a disparaging view of oneself²⁷ or from judging the reality of God's love by one's circumstances.²⁸ Crump confirms this assessment, stating, "Our natural assumption . . . [is] that our life situation is somehow the result of God's disposition towards us . . . If I feel unloved by God, it must be because God does not love me."²⁹ If a person is not experiencing love in their interpersonal relationships, they may thus falsely attribute the absence of care and compassion in their own life to God. These false inferences illogically assume that what is true of one's friends and family is subsequently true of God. As McDowell states, "Since they are not loved by the people from whom they most need love, they can logically assume that they are unlovable."³⁰ According to McDowell, these feelings may be

²⁴ William Backus, *The Hidden Rift With God* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), 53.

²⁵ Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 175.

²⁶ Gary E. Parker, *The Gift of Doubt: From Crisis to Authentic Faith* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1990), 61.

²⁷ Backus, *The Hidden Rift With God*, 54; 142.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹ David Crump, *Feeling Like God: A Spiritual Journey to Emotional Wholeness* (Toronto, ON: Clements Publishing, 2005), 142.

³⁰ Josh McDowell, *See Yourself as God Sees You* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2000), 47.

generated when a person's needs for affection, acceptance, approval, or respect are left unmet.³¹ The absence of love or meaningful relationships in a person's life is a sure contributor to depression, and a possible instigator of doubt, especially when one falsely believes that God will fail them as everyone else has. The emotions of loneliness, jealousy, anger, or sadness may be undergirded by the misbelief that "God is not loving, or at least not loving towards me."

Feeling Lied to by God

Nothing can break trust more quickly in a relationship than when a person discovers that their loved one has lied to them. When this accusation is laid at the feet of God, the intensity of this charge is quickly escalated. A lack of trust in God's word or his promises was at the root of the first sin, so it is not surprising that it can still be a catalyst for doubts today.³² At the heart of this mistrust of God is the inevitable belief that "I know what's best for me and God does not." As Backus summarizes, this misbelief ultimately declares, "God can't be who He says He is, or He wouldn't treat me so badly,"³³ or "What God has let happen to me shouldn't happen!"³⁴

This lack of trust is often motivated by what the individual perceives to be unanswered prayers or broken promises. In his *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey recalls his encounter with a young man named Richard who abandoned his faith when his prayers remained unanswered. The breaking point for Richard happened after a long night of praying for a sign from God that he was real. Richard did not receive his sign and determined to "forget God and get on with life."³⁵ Similarly, in *Why Do Bad Things Happen if God is Good?*, Ron Rhodes recounts a movement in the 1990's within the Korean Church that declared that the rapture would occur on a certain, fast approaching date. As the day came and went, the

³¹ Ibid., 48-50.

³² The serpent used this tactic of undercutting God's word in his deceit of the woman in the garden (Gen. 3:1-6).

³³ Backus, *The Hidden Rift With God*, 53.

³⁴ Ibid., 142.

³⁵ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 35.

faith of the people was crushed by God's failure to "keep his promise." Rhodes recounted that "[o]ne devastated member lamented: 'God lied to us.'"³⁶

Projecting Emotional Scars on God

As mentioned briefly above, it is all too common for hurt, disappointment, or conflict with others to mar one's beliefs about the person and character of God. Psychological wounds from one's childhood, abuse, neglect, or mistreatment from family members, or even division and strife within the local church, can serve as a catalyst for projecting one's pain onto God. At some point or another, most people have likely felt let down by God as a result of being let down by other people. In his *The Gift of Doubt*, Gary Parker recalls counseling a woman who was dealing with an adulterous husband. She admitted to him that she thought that God would protect her from evil because of her faith. As Parker recalls, he "suspected her disbelief in God came because she felt she could no longer believe in the goodness of people."³⁷ Philip Yancey described the religious doubts of a family who grew up in a home that lacked loving warmth. Upon recalling their doubts, Yancey states, "Because I knew these friends well, I could not help surmising they might be projecting their own family dysfunctions onto God."³⁸ When the god a person believes in is a projection of their past relationships or pain, it is no wonder that they doubt his care for them. Similar to the misbeliefs identified above, failing to correct these false cognitions will lead only to pain and disappointment. Having identified these potential misbeliefs, one must next attend to overturning them and replacing them with the truth.

Replacing 'Misbeliefs'

The 2005 Baylor Religion Survey, which polled 1,721 randomized respondents, found that America's beliefs about God could be essentially categorized into four views.³⁹ These categories result from a person's views about

³⁶ Ron Rhodes, *Why Do Bad Things Happen if God is Good?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), 171.

³⁷ Parker, *The Gift of Doubt*, 45.

³⁸ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 99.

³⁹ See Christopher Bader, et al., "American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US (Selected Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey)," Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, 2006.
<http://www.isreligion.org/research/surveysofreligion/surveysofreligion.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2010), 26-30.

God's level of engagement in the world and God's level of anger. It found that most Americans believe in an authoritarian God who is highly involved and wrathful (31.4% of respondents). The second most common view of God was in a distant God who is not active in the world and is not concerned about people's actions (24.4% of respondents). The belief in a benevolent God who is active in the world but less wrathful represented the third most common view of God (23% of respondents). Finally, others view God as critical, defining his activity in the world as minimal but believing that he is wrathful and will judge humans in another life (16% of respondents). These findings help illustrate the prevalence of misbeliefs about God across the spectrum of American religion. The importance of these findings is illustrated by Waldman and Newberg in their *How God Changes Your Brain*. The authors note,

Envisioning an authoritarian or critical entity—be it another person or God—will activate the limbic areas of the brain that generate fear and anger . . . However, when you perceive God as a benevolent force, a different part of the brain is stimulated in the prefrontal cortex . . . [which] suppresses the impulse to get angry or frightened. It also helps generate feelings of empathy toward others who are suffering or hurt.⁴⁰

As indicated above, what personality one assigns to God, whether metaphysically accurate or not, ultimately has a significant effect upon how one feels and the decisions one makes. A false view of God can create irrational emotional states in the life of an individual. This reemphasizes the importance of identifying untruths in one's life and replacing them with true beliefs. Rather than allowing one's view of their self, situation, or relationships to determine how they feel about God, it is vital that their beliefs about God be based upon his self-revelation rather than their misbeliefs.⁴¹ The correction of the untrue ideas and unrealistic expectations identified above must be grounded in the truth of the Scriptures found in sound exegesis and orthodox theology.

The Truth about Feeling Distant

When an individual feels the distance or silence of God in their relationship, they do so through an inadequate framework. The Scriptures

⁴⁰ Mark Robert Waldman and Andrew Newberg, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing, 2010), 110-111.

⁴¹ This is not to assume, of course, that a person can have exhaustive knowledge of God as he exists within his being.

consistently affirm the omnipresence of God even when his presence is not “felt.” A confidence in the God of Scripture can thus counter this contradictory feeling. As McGrath states, “It is perfectly possible for these two statements to be true at one and the same time: 1. God is there. 2. I don’t experience God as being there.”⁴² Since God is Spirit,⁴³ it should be expected that there might be times when humans inadequately relate to him. A believer’s “experiences” of God will certainly be inconsistent since they are often emotional and subjective. Their faith should instead be grounded in the reality of the work of God in Jesus Christ. Thankfully, as White states, “The real state of our souls does not rest on how we feel but on who God is, who we are in relation to God and who we are *becoming*.”⁴⁴ McGrath echoes these thoughts in recalling the felt silence of God between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. As he notes, “The first Good Friday reminds us of the need to trust in the divine promises made to us, rather than rely on our feelings and experiences.”⁴⁵

When one feels distant from God, they may need to ask honestly if they have been doing their part to cultivate the relationship. James Emery White recommends inquiring if the individual is praying, reading the Scriptures, involved in corporate worship, connecting with the body of Christ, engaging in ministry, and making time for spiritual reflection.⁴⁶ If they are not, the reason they may be experiencing distance between themselves and God is that they are not spending time with him. Like any relationship, a lack of time and effort will ultimately lead to a lack of closeness.

It is also important that they remember previous times of closeness in their relationship with God to help them through the times of silence. Often one’s faith keeps a short memory of its victories and unfairly focuses on its defeats. As Moreland and Issler affirm, “A main source of increasing God-confidence is *hearing and bearing witness* to answers to prayer, to the Lord guiding and speaking in various ways, to miracles of healing, and to deliverance from spiritual warfare and demonization.”⁴⁷ Engaging in active remembrance of these previous experiences of

⁴² McGrath, *Doubting*, 79.

⁴³ John 4:24.

⁴⁴ White, *Embracing the Mysterious God*, 59.

⁴⁵ McGrath, *Doubting*, 146.

⁴⁶ White, *Embracing the Mysterious God*, 55.

⁴⁷ Moreland and Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith*, 135.

the presence and working of God will reassure faith in tough times. In clinging to the character of God when one's faith is challenged, they can then depend on God even more for help in the times of weakness.⁴⁸

Thus, rather than doubting God when one is on a "spiritual low" or experiencing his silence in an existential way, they should recall times of closeness, recount specific instances in the past where God's work was clearly evident in their life, and remember that though their circumstances and emotions may change, the character of God never does. When the misbelief that "God is not here because I am not experiencing him" creeps in, it must be countered with the truth: "God is present whether I feel him or not, and God has worked in my life in the past, so I have no reason to doubt that he will continue to do so." Ultimately, one must remember that though God seems distant now, there will be a time to come when this perceived silence shall be no more. As Yancey comments, "In any discussion of disappointment with God, heaven is the last word, the most important word of all. Only heaven will finally solve the problem of God's hiddenness."⁴⁹

The Truth about Feeling Unloved

Perhaps no misbelief is more readily countered with "the truth" than the idea that God does not love. The difficulty, however, as with all misbeliefs, is recognizing one's emotional self-talk and stopping it long enough to replace it with what is true. The Scriptures are replete with affirmations of God's love for his people and for the world. Erroneous self-talk, however, convinces an individual that somehow they are exempt from God's love. When a person gauges God's love for them by their life circumstances, they wrongly assume that God loves those with a relatively easy life more than he loves those who experience great difficulties. Two examples can easily correct this misbelief. First, in the case of Job, it is clearly evidenced that God's love for an individual cannot be measured by how much or little they suffer. If this were the case, one must conclude (incorrectly) that God had little affinity for Job! Second, as Jesus stated so clearly, God "causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Mt. 5:45 [NASB]) Jesus himself provides another example of an individual who experienced great suffering, but yet was loved and honored by God.

When one fails to feel God's love because of a disparaging view of oneself, a different response is required. Ultimately, when one feels like they are incapable of receiving God's love, they do not doubt their self-worth, but rather God's

⁴⁸ Lynn Gardner, *Where is God When We Suffer? What the Bible Says about Suffering* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2007), 208.

⁴⁹ Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, 274.

goodness, power, and truthfulness. As McGrath makes clear, “To suggest or imagine that your sin is somehow worse than anyone else’s is to deny God the opportunity to break its power in your life.”⁵⁰ God’s love for his children is in no way based upon their merits, abilities, or past mistakes. It is based solely on his character,⁵¹ which is incapable of changing or failing. The greatest evidence of God’s love can be found in the darkest hours of the earthly life of the Son. Jesus bore public humiliation, severe beatings, and the agony of crucifixion as a demonstration of the love and compassion of God. As Clark describes, “Jesus’ ultimate redemptive task was to conquer sin by accepting suffering. He meets suffering with suffering love.”⁵² The love of God is thus demonstrated by the sacrificial love of Jesus,⁵³ and his love is offered to every man without any way for it to be earned.⁵⁴ This is the true joy and freedom of the love of God: it is unearned and unconditional! In fact, as Crump acknowledges, “Divine love will always love even those who fail to love in return.”⁵⁵

Instead of accepting the misbeliefs that God’s love is limited, or to be measured by one’s lot in life, one can embrace the truth that God’s love is freely given and eternally assured. God’s love can be believed and received because his character ensures that his love is faithful. A lack of warmth in interpersonal relationships does not necessitate the inability to accept God’s love. This misbelief must be refuted and replaced with the truth that God’s love is readily available at all times. As Habermas assures, “The greatest truth we can substitute in place of depression’s lies is that Christians are already both loved by God and will receive eternal blessings from Him.”⁵⁶

The Truth about Feeling Lied to

⁵⁰ McGrath, *Doubting*, 73.

⁵¹ Ibid., 112.

⁵² Kelly James Clark, *When Faith is Not Enough* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 92.

⁵³ 1 John 3:16.

⁵⁴ 1 John 4:9-10.

⁵⁵ Crump, *Feeling Like God*, 131.

⁵⁶ Habermas, *The Thomas Factor*, under “Chapter 4; Emotional Doubts.

Trust exists at the core of every relationship. When trust is broken, so are relationships, often to an irreparable extent. When a person feels like God has lied to them or betrayed their trust, the underlying misbelief is usually rooted in flawed expectations being placed upon God. Backus notes, “When we believe distressing events *shouldn’t* happen, we are believing in a fantasy.”⁵⁷ This may often be the result of a faulty hermeneutic, which involves misappropriating the words of God in Scripture in a personalizing way that fails to appreciate the context of a text or looks only at certain aspects of a doctrine. One may unrealistically expect that God will rescue them from all of their problems and pain because they are a Christian. Though there is evidence of divine rescue from physical and emotional harm present in the Scriptures (Daniel in the lion’s den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, or Peter in prison), often men and women of faith endured great pain, and even death, for their faith (Stephen, James, and Paul are some prominent New Testament examples). Habermas affirms this distinction, noting, “In contrast to those biblical texts that teach that God answers prayer and heals His people, far more passages make it plain that believers will suffer, that we will face adversities like unanswered prayer and persecution, and that we will die.”⁵⁸ The clearest example of all is evidenced in the life of Jesus. As McGrath describes,

It is simply inconceivable that God, having invested so much in our well-being and care, having committed himself to us in word and deed should abandon us or fail to be faithful to us. The cross of Christ demonstrates the vital fact that God stands by his promises, whatever the cost to himself, asking us to accept them, trust them and thus to enter into eternal life with him—something which nothing, not even the gates of hell themselves, can tear away from us.”⁵⁹

One may also feel betrayed by God due to unanswered prayers. This again often arises due to an improper understanding of prayer. Recalling Philip Yancey’s example of his friend Richard who prayed for a sign from God that he existed, one must consider that though God sometimes answers these types of prayers, he never promises in the Scriptures to answer requests for physical signs of his existence to one who doubts. When one places unbiblical expectations on their prayer life, disappointment is bound to follow. As Parker notes, “If we expect God to ward off every pain, illness, accident, business setback, athletic defeat, and relationship

⁵⁷ Backus, *The Hidden Rift With God*, 96.

⁵⁸ Gary R. Habermas, *Why is God Ignoring Me?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2010), 46.

⁵⁹ McGrath, *Doubting*, 110.

problem, we will inevitably suffer disappointment. If our faith rests upon this nonbiblical idea, then doubt will not only view with faith, but will subdue it.”⁶⁰

Misbeliefs related to feeling lied to or betrayed by God ultimately make the mistake of deciding in one’s self-talk that “I know what’s best for me, and God clearly does not.” Reflecting on the expectations of the Korean church related to the date of the rapture, Rhodes inquired, “[C]an anyone doubt that faulty beliefs can cause great suffering?”⁶¹ When misbeliefs or untrue expectations are accepted, the root of the deceit must not be pointed at God, but rather at the individual who has bought into their own deceitful self-talk. This erroneous self-talk must be identified, refuted, and replaced with the truth that God is faithful to his promises. His faithfulness can be counted on because he has demonstrated his unfailing love and faithfulness to men through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. While God does not always guarantee that he will rescue believers from suffering, he does promise to be with them through it.⁶² When a person experiences unanswered prayers or personal anguish, they can be assured that Jesus himself experienced all of this and much more. God has not left humanity to suffer without help, but through Jesus’ suffering and the promise of the Spirit, he has demonstrated his great love for them.

The Truth about Emotional Scars

It is often difficult to separate one’s perception of human relationships with one’s relationship with God since humans have no other relevant framework through which to understand their relationship with God. The danger comes, however, when a person equates their experiences or expectations of others with how God will or must treat them. This misbelief must be countered with the truth that when other people act in a disappointing or hurtful manner, this disappointment and hurt cannot be causally attributed to God.

Recounting a conversation with a “modern Job,” Yancey recorded, “We tend to think, ‘Life should be fair because God is fair.’ But God is not life.”⁶³ In other words, one must avoid projecting their life experiences and relationships upon God as if he is directly responsible for them or as if one must expect God to act in the same way as human beings. Though difficult to identify, the misbelief

⁶⁰ Parker, *The Gift of Doubt*, 46.

⁶¹ Rhodes, *Why Do Bad Things Happen if God is Good?*, 171.

⁶² Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:6-7.

⁶³ Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, 204.

here essentially states, “I have been hurt by people in the past, and can expect that God will hurt me too.” Clearly, this misbelief is contrary to the teachings of Scripture, for God’s ways and character are far superior to the attitudes and actions of others that a person interacts with on a day-to-day basis. When one’s faith in others is shaken or destroyed, this cannot be allowed to shake one’s faith in God. Whether a person’s family relationships were unsupportive or unloving, their intimate relationships were abusive or painful, or they have experienced disappointment in their life, they must remember that God does not respond to his children like fallen people do. Experiencing poor parenting or emotionally traumatic relationships with others is not a poor reflection on the character of God, but only on the character of the individuals involved. God is a loving and faithful Father who cares for his children far more than any earthly father could. As Jesus’ words remind, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Mt. 7:11 [NIV])

Conclusion

The misbeliefs identified above are all united by the common theme that God has not “been there” for someone; he has been hidden from them. Whether that misbelief arose out of a faulty view of God’s presence, love, truthfulness, or relationality, the root of each of these false cognitions is that God’s presence or activity has not met a person’s unrealistic and unbiblical expectations. It is worth noting that studies have found that those who are more involved or committed to their religious beliefs often have the most difficulty when they experience doubts.⁶⁴ Often those who experience the most pain are those for whom faith in God matters the most. They have a great commitment to God, but are unable to reconcile their emotional states to their cognitive beliefs. As has been demonstrated above, this can often be attributed to misbeliefs about oneself, one’s situation, or God.

The above approach has suggested a path of healing for those in the midst of emotional doubt. By identifying, refuting, and replacing the misbeliefs at the root of their emotional pain, a hurting person may stop their emotions from overruling their mind and will. The goal of applying misbelief therapy to emotional doubts is to stop the cycle of irrational thinking. As Habermas summarizes, “Unfortunately, if you let yourself get away with negative, untruthful thinking, the result is suffering, frustration, and the feeling that God is ignoring you. But when solid responses enter the picture, even powerful, emotional outbursts are revealed as *ungrounded*

⁶⁴ Neal Krause and Keith M. Wulff, “Religious Doubt and Health: Exploring the Potential Dark Side of Religion,” *Sociology of Religion* 65:1 (Spring 2004): 51.

*misbeliefs!*⁶⁵ These misbeliefs must be rejected for what they truly are: deceitful self-talk that will lead to emotional and spiritual bankruptcy.

Philip Yancey has suggested that the book of Job teaches not why suffering occurs, or how to deal with it, but rather that the most important battle that humans face is an internal one, demonstrating “the remarkable truth that our choices matter, not just to us and our own destiny but, amazingly, to God himself and the universe he rules.”⁶⁶ As misbelief therapy and its better known sister REBT⁶⁷ affirm, what a person tells themselves about their self-worth, situation, or God matters, and untrue self-talk is dangerous and destructive.

Ultimately, one must remember in applying any theory for “self-help” that true peace, happiness, love, and joy do not come from what humans do for themselves or even for others, but how they relate to their Creator. In seeking to apply misbelief therapy, one must be conscious of the fact that God is ultimately the healer and restorer of men. Simply put, misbelief therapy works because it is grounded in truth, God’s truth. In applying misbelief therapy to healing the wounds of emotional doubt, it must be remembered that men do not hold the power to free themselves from pain, but rather healing is generated by God and his eternal truth. As Habermas notes,

Believers are required to think and act in a responsible manner that chooses God over sins and our personal desires. We are called to radically commit our lives to our Lord. Yet, the power, weapons, and life itself comes from God. He provides all that we need to get the job done, but God doesn’t force us to do His will.”⁶⁸

What has been outlined above is descriptive of how truth can heal wounds caused by misbeliefs, and prescriptive in guiding a person through their emotional doubt. Undoubtedly, this approach can be of significant help to those who guide God’s children through their uncertainty and doubt.

⁶⁵ Gary R. Habermas, *Why is God Ignoring Me?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2010), 117.

⁶⁶ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 193.

⁶⁷ “Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy.”

⁶⁸ Gary R. Habermas, *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God* (Originally published in Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1999), under “Chapter 7; By Whose Power?,” http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/thomas_factor/thomas_factor.htm#ch5 (accessed April 4, 2010).