

What Do You Do When You Can't Find God?

Rich Nathan
September 15 & 16, 2018
When Life is Unfair
Psalms 42 & 43

Have you ever been disappointed with God? You absolutely thought that something wonderful was going to happen – a job was going to open up, you were going to raise a long-awaited baby, you were going to grow old with your spouse – and then your worst fears are realized. There's no job, you miscarry, your spouse dies or you discover they've been unfaithful and your world collapses.

A long-time member of our church went through a surprise hysterectomy when she was in her late 20's. She and her husband, Randy, began building their family through adoption. They adopted their son, David, when he was two-and-a-half. And then they were able to adopt a beautiful baby girl who they named Laurel. Connie said, "We thought our family was complete."

Let me share Connie's story with you in her own words.

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Initially Laurel seemed to be in perfect health, but it gradually became apparent that she wasn't developing normally at all, and was actually losing ground instead of hitting any of those early developmental milestones. Laurel gradually lost the ability to move her arms and legs so that her body just hung like a limp rag. She lost her ability to hear so she didn't have a startle reflex even when there was a loud noise, and then we realized that she had lost her sight and her eyes weren't tracking with anything at all. She lost the ability to swallow and we had to feed her through a tube that went directly into her stomach. She endured round after round of horribly painful medical tests, and we found ourselves on a nightmarish roller coaster with one set of doctors telling us that she was dying, then the next set of specialists saying that with extensive physical therapy she would be able to make progress.

Eventually after nine months of this, all the doctors and specialists agreed that Laurel's body was storing too much of a certain chemical, and that her central nervous system was deteriorating. At that point Laurel was put on hospice and given phenobarbital to keep her comfortable. She died at the age of 15 months.

As you can imagine, during that time Randy and I each spent MANY nights crying out to God (separately, of course, because we were taking turns sleeping).

Believe me, I WRESTLED with God.

We've been doing this series here at Vineyard over the past couple of months that I've titled, "When Life is Unfair". This series is designed to give you some handholds so that

when you go through some trial or difficulty you don't lose your faith. How do we continue to hold on when we go through extended seasons of feeling totally disoriented in our relationship with God? In our relationship to ourselves? In our relationship to others? There are times in life when we feel like the fog has descended. Our compass is broken. We feel lost. The old, reliable way that we thought the world would work has collapsed. The worst part of the fog rolling in in times of trial is that we can't find God.

The writer of Psalm 13:1 says this:

Slide Psalm 13:1

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

How do we keep hold of our faith in those seasons of life when we can't find God? That's what I want to talk about today in a message I've titled "What do you do when you can't Find God?" Let's pray.

The first bit of counsel that Christians throughout history have given to people who are in pain, people who are experiencing life's unfairness, folks who are struggling to find God because the fog has rolled in is to:

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Read [the book of Psalms](#)

You would be hard-pressed to find any book ever written that speaks to a wider range of human emotions and experiences than the Old Testament book of Psalms. We find in the Psalms worship, thanksgiving, praise, celebration, exaltation, peace, joy, faith, hope, love, and we find all of the negative emotions of life – anger, confusion, sadness, discouragement, envy, hatred, fear, guilt, rage. You name the emotion, we find it in the Psalms. The highs and the lows, the ups and the downs, the good and the bad, the darkness and the light, the agony and the ecstasy, the pain and the pleasures. It's all there in the book of Psalms.

Brothers and sisters, unfortunately we live in a time where much of the church has edited out anything negative from our corporate worship together in church. We live in a time where we have redefined what a person of faith looks like. Many people have become convinced that if you have real faith, the only emotions you're ever going to experience are positive ones. You're always going to feel happy, happy, happy. You're always going to feel the presence of God. You're always going to have the victory. Everything for the person of faith is always going to be sweetness and light.

One reason people have embraced this heresy of happy, happy, happy religion all the time is because the church has neglected the longest book in the Bible, the Psalms. Or

to put it more precisely, the church has edited, we've censored, this book. We've stamped certain Psalms with "Do not read". We certainly do not read or sing or speak about certain psalms – the psalms of lament – in church or even out loud in your private devotions.

There's a woman who was a missionary in Ethiopia. During her time in Ethiopia, she received a number of prophetic words that doors would open for her. She returned home. Within a few months of her return, she was unemployed despite seeking jobs in lots of places. She found herself living in the basement of a friend's parents' house. Her own family's house burnt down and all of her childhood memories burned with it. And her best friend committed suicide. Her world collapsed. Fog rolled in.

She found it hard to go to church where every song was upbeat. Everyone seemed so happy. Have you ever felt like that? That you were out of sync with all these happy people around you? You were out of sync because every song was happy. How did she find God? She felt like she lost him. Then she read the book of Psalms and specifically neglected part of the book of Psalms.

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The Laments

Depending upon who is doing the counting, there may be as many as 65 or 67 lament psalms. They are also called psalms of complaint or psalms of protest. And an entire book of the Bible devoted to complaining to God, protesting our situation with God. It's called the book of Lamentations. Lament psalms are cries of despair. They are cries of anger, of protest, of doubt. It was reading the Laments out loud that brought this missionary back into worship with God. Some see in a lament where people are complaining to God or protesting an absence of faith. But I see in a lament an expression of bold faith! A willingness to see life as it is, and not play pretend.

Absence of faith means you constantly have to play pretend with God. You don't wrestle with God. Connie and her husband, Randy, wrestled with God when they lost their daughter. Instead, you construct a little fantasy world where everything is always happy, happy, happy.

Bold faith involves a willingness to see life as it is, to not play pretend, to deal with Reality with a capital R and not look away. But what makes it bold and makes it faith is that you're willing to talk to God about it. For a person of faith, no subject is off limits in our relationship with God. Nothing is out of bounds in talking to God. Nothing is precluded. Nothing is inappropriate. Everything that you are feeling, everything that you experience, becomes a proper subject of conversation with God. When you withhold parts of your life and parts of your feelings from God is to withdraw from God and to withdraw from the sovereignty of God.

Let's read together one of the great laments in scripture.

Slide Psalm 42-43

- ¹ As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
- ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
- ³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
- ⁴ These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.
- ⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.
- ⁶ My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
- ⁷ Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.
- ⁸ By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.
- ⁹ I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
- ¹⁰ My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,

“Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

¹ Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
against an unfaithful nation.

Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.

² You are God my stronghold.
Why have you rejected me?

Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?

³ Send me your light and your faithful care,
let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.

⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.

I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.

⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Almost all of the scholars say that Psalm 42 and 43 was originally one psalm. It was divided at some time in ancient history. Some of the old Hebrew manuscripts still have it as one psalm. Psalm 42-43 share the same vocabulary. They share the same themes. They have the same refrain.

Another reason that many people believe it was originally one psalm is because Psalm 43 has no heading of its own. If you look at Psalm 42, it says

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“For the Director of Music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah.”

It originally would have perhaps been sung in a worship service. But Psalm 43 has no heading. It is the only psalm in Book II of the Psalms that has no heading. It's a lament. It's a complaint. It's a statement of protest before God. We should not edit these kinds of psalms out of our worship experience.

We don't know the situation of the writer. Some people believe that the writer was in exile far from the temple in Jerusalem where God dwelt. Perhaps the writer was sick and unable to participate in temple worship. Maybe the Lord intended the writer's situation to be left open so that psalms like Psalm 42 & 43 or other psalms of lament can speak to any of us who feel cut off from God, whatever our situation.

What do you do when you can't find God?

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Read the book Psalms (especially the Laments)

Here's the second thing.

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Recognize your true need

Let's read again verses 1-2 of this lament:

Slide Psalm 42:1-2

- ¹ As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
- ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

Psalm 42:1-2 is really the cry of every human heart – every man, woman, teenager, child, Christian or non-Christian - every person on the face of the earth prays Psalm 42:1-2 all the time. For some, the cry is a conscious cry. "I am aware, I have allowed myself to be aware that my deepest need and longing is for the living God and so I vocalize this prayer aloud. My soul is thirsty for the living God. I recognize consciously that that is my need and so I speak it out."

For much of the world, this is an unconscious prayer. Their heart is praying this, but their minds are only dimly aware of the real thirst that is below all the other thirsts. A person may be aware of the fact that they are thirsty for love, thirsty for relationships. They are longing for justice, for an unfair situation to be righted. People are thirsty for real change in their lives. They are thirsty for help and intervention, for resource that goes beyond themselves.

Most people aren't conscious of the fact that what they really are thirsty for is God. But I tell you every person, every one of you, all the time, with virtually every beat of your heart, is praying Psalm 42:1-2.

Slide Psalm 42:1-2

"As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"

The great Augustine expressed this longing in the opening words of his famous Confessions back at the end of the Fourth Century when he said to the Lord,

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"You have made us and drawn us to yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

I've mentioned this before, but the Bible gives us two very different Greek words for our English word "life". The first Greek word is "bios".

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Bios = biological life

Bios is biological life; material life. But there's a second Greek word that we find throughout the New Testament, especially in the writings of the Apostle John. And that is:

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Zoe = spiritual life

Now it is the neglect of "zoe" – spiritual life – that makes so many people in the western world so unhappy. We constantly think that if we have more "bios" – more material life – then our thirst will be satisfied. The message we hear from every marketer is essentially that you are simply material. Every advertisement is about "bios" – about your body, feeding your body, pampering your body, comforting your body, relaxing your body, improving your body, exercising your body, clothing your body, strengthening your body, satisfying your body. Every message we receive is bios, bios, bios.

Parents, listen to me. Grandparents, listen to me now. Children need more than trips to Disney World to grow up well. How many fathers, and an increasing number of mothers, think, "As long as I provide for my child's material needs, I have done my job. That's why I work 65 hours per week – so we can live in a big house. The kids go to a great school in the suburbs or to a private school. I've done my job because I've provided my child with a massive amount of bios." Parents, Grandparents, you have not

done your job if you neglect the fact that your child needs more than bios, they need zoe, spiritual life, to live a good life in this world.

Every baby dedication that we do here at Vineyard Columbus, I say to parents: “Parents, your church family supports this baby dedication. You may have family members here and friends are watching who support your decision today to dedicate your child to the Lord. But, parents, do you understand that you are primarily responsible for cultivating your child’s spiritual life? That your child’s spiritual life is not a responsibility that you can simply delegate to the church or to children’s ministry or Sunday school or Christian school. Do you accept the primary responsibility to cultivate your children’s spiritual life?”

Do you imagine that you can satisfy this thirst inside by more bios? Well, the answer is you just need a new car. We just need to do another project on our house. Let’s redo the kitchen again. After all, we never really cook – we eat out all the time – but two ovens would be nice. You know, what I really need in this very difficult time is more of God. What do you do if you can’t find God?

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Read the book of Psalms (especially the Laments)
Recognize your true need

And here’s the third thing:

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Reject nostalgia

Let’s read verses 3-4:

Slide Psalm 42:3-4

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
⁴ These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.

When we feel disoriented, when our worlds are shaken and everything is changing we're moving so quickly that we can't find our footing when the fog rolls in – the most natural thing in the world is to reach back to a happier, idealized time.

- If only I could go back to the time when my kids were babies. I was so happy then.
- If only I could go back to the time before my spouse died. We had such a wonderful marriage.
- If only I could go back to my college days. I was so happy when I was single or when I lived in this other city.

What do we mean by nostalgia? Nostalgia is a longing for the good old days. Nostalgia is actually a combination of two Greek words.

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Nostos = homecoming

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Algos = pain or ache

Nostalgia is an ache for home. An ache for the past. The Jewish exiles in Babylon expressed nostalgia in Psalm 137:1

Slide Psalm 137:1

¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

They desired to turn the clock back, turn to a happier time when they were in their homeland in Jerusalem.

But nostalgia presents us with three problems. First of all, there is

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A personal problem

In nostalgia we desire a world that no longer exists inhabited by people who have now grown up, grown old or are no longer with us. Nostalgia is always a dead end. It's always a cul-de-sac. It's always an empty well. There's nothing there. You can't go back. Time only moves in one direction – forward. But when people are disoriented, they feel like their worlds have collapsed, everything they have relied on is shaking, we are suckers for appeals to nostalgia.

Nostalgia is not just a personal problem. It's

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A cultural problem

In the west, and in America, we've gone through so much cultural change over the last few decades. How we define family has changed. How we define gender has changed. How we define proper sexual relations have changed. Many people have experienced firsthand the impact of globalization. The elimination of their jobs. Technology has changed everything. Factories have closed. There's been massive change in the racial and ethnic makeup of America.

Many people feel disoriented and shaken by all of these changes. Marketers and politicians make an appeal to nostalgia. If only we could return to simpler times like the 1950's when everything was wonderful. And father knew best.

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Father Knows Best pic

The only thing we had to worry about as parents were the innocent antics of little boys like the Beaver

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Leave it to Beaver pic

We often idealize certain times. But, of course, the 1950's weren't so great if you were a person of color. Here's a photo of one of the Little Rock Nine.

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Little Rock pic

In the photo, we see a black teenager who was one of the first to go to an all-white Little Rock, Arkansas, high school. Look at the anger in the face of the white woman behind her.

Here's the famous Norman Rockwell painting of little six-year old, Ruby Bridges.

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Rockwell pic

She had to be escorted by federal marshals to her elementary school. She was cursed at by adults. Imagine a little six-year old being cursed at. She was attacked by a white

mob. Her crime was being the first African-American child to desegregate in an all-white elementary school in New Orleans back in 1960.

The 1950's weren't so great if you were a woman and you were a victim of domestic violence. The 1950's weren't so great if you were a woman and you desired to be working outside the home – especially as a professional, a doctor, a lawyer, a pastor, a business owner.

But nostalgia is not just a personal problem and it's not just a cultural problem, nostalgia is also

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A spiritual problem

The writer wants to return to a happier time when he met with God.

Slide Psalm 42:6

My soul is downcast within me
Therefore I will remember you
From the land of the Jordan
The heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar.

He calls to mind, God himself. “I will remember you!” he says. This memory of God takes him back to the floodwaters of the Jordan River in contrast to the dry, waterless situation the writer refers to in the first two verses. He's panting for God. The writer speaks about abundant waters. A picture of the abundant presence of God. The memory of God in the past doesn't comfort the writer, instead he is overwhelmed by his present situation.

Slide Psalm 42:7

⁷ Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

Spiritual nostalgia. Have you ever engaged in spiritual nostalgia? Have any of you ever said, “I always found God when there was a choir in my old church. A particular song always connected me to God. If only I could go back to that old church or that wonderful woman's group that I was a part of. If only I could listen to that preacher again. If only I could have that fellowship that I used to enjoy.”? Nostalgia is always a dead end. Nostalgia is always a cul-de-sac. It's always an empty well. It's a dead end personally. It's a dead end culturally. And it's a dead end spiritually. We don't meet God in our memories, but in this moment.

God is never the great “I was”. He is always the great “I AM”. God’s Word says,

Slide 2 Corinthians 6:2

² For he says,

“In the time of my favor I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you.”

I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.

In Hebrews,

Slide Hebrews 4:7 (NIV)

⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

God always has a new song for us to sing. There’s always a new thing for us to do. There’s always a new thing for us to pray. There’s always new discoveries of God that God wants us to make today.

What do you do when you can’t find God?

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- Read the book of Psalms (particularly the Laments)
- Recognize your true need
- Reject nostalgia

And let me quickly tick off a few others.

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Responses that work

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Talk to yourself

This refrain in verse 5 is repeated three times in these two Psalms.

Slide Psalm 42:5 (NIV)

⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Talk to yourself. That's what the psalmist is doing. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was a great preacher in London in the middle of the 20th century, wrote a book that I've read several times over the past 40 years. The book is called *Spiritual Depression*. I can't recommend this book highly enough for any of you who feel deflated, defeated, dejected, weighed down.

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Book cover

Here's what Dr. Lloyd-Jones says:

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The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down' – what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God' – instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God'.

And the second response that works is

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Hope in God

Hope is not believing for a certain outcome. Most people think that "if I have hope, it's hope that God will give me a certain outcome that I have been begging him for. Maybe not today, but maybe tomorrow or next week or next month." "He's going to give me that healing. He's going to give me that spouse that I want. A door for ministry will open." Certainly, you can pray for an outcome that you seek. God knows you want it anyway. You don't have to play games with God. But that's not what biblical hope is. It's not hope for a certain outcome. It's hope in God. God is enough. God is the one who will have to sustain me.

You know, in the Bible there are so many instances of men and women who did not obtain the outcome they were seeking from God. There are so many men and women in the Bible and in history who did not live in Daniel 3:17.

Slide Daniel 3:17

¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand.

They lived in verse 18:

Slide Daniel 3:18

¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Many single people have prayed to married and have not found a mate. Many sick people have been prayed for and have not been healed. Many people have asked God to give them a certain job or a certain house or a certain grade or a certain ministry or to have a baby, and they didn't get it. Hope is not believing that God will give you a certain outcome in the future because I believe. Hope is believing that the infinitely wise, infinitely good, infinitely loving, infinitely perfect, infinitely satisfying God will be enough for me, whether I get the thing that I want in my life or not.

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Talk to yourself.
Hope in God.

And finally,

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Talk to God

Psalms of Lament are so wonderful because the writer doesn't feel the need to be happy, happy, happy all the time. The writer doesn't put on their church face. The writer doesn't feel the need to put on makeup before they pray. Instead, the writer of this Lament trusts God enough to know he is able to handle their whole self – to handle all their fears, all of their anger, all of their upset. Do you believe God is big enough to handle all of you?

Let me close with this. You can't find God. Your world has collapsed. Talk to God about this as many times as it takes till you find him. There's a wonderful verse in the book of Revelation. Here's what Jesus says,

Slide Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

This is such a great verse on the meaning of prayer. The picture is you're inside a locked house, anxiously spinning in your head about what you're going to do, making plans about your future. You're depressed, sad, angry about the hand that life has dealt you. Outside the locked house of your own dark emotions, Jesus says, "I'm standing at the door and knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in."

Prayer is nothing more than opening the door and inviting Jesus into whatever you are presently experiencing. Open the door and invite Jesus in to your real feelings, to your real thoughts, to your real struggles. "Lord, come into my jealousy. Come into my hurt, my grief, my loss, my fear." The Lord will make himself known to you. Let's pray.

What Do You Do When You Can't Find God?

Rich Nathan
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When Life is Unfair
Psalms 42 & 43

- I. Read the book of Psalms

- II. Recognize your true need

- III. Reject nostalgia
 - A. A personal problem
 - B. A cultural problem
 - C. A spiritual problem

- IV. Responses that work
 - A. Talk to yourself
 - B. Hope in God
 - C. Talk to God