

How Long, O LORD?

Psalm 13

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I've said this before when we have been in a sermon series, but it seems providential that we are where we are in our culture, and we are where we are in our study of the Psalms, because the last few Psalms have addressed our cultural moment. Indeed, God's word always speaks to us wherever we are in our lives, but the Psalms we have been studying seem to address the issues we are facing in our lives at this very specific moment.

Let's think about where we have been in the Psalms. We have moved from Psalm 11 to Psalm 12, and in these psalms, we saw the intensity of King David's situation increase. Now, as we move from Psalm 12 to Psalm 13, David's situation and his emotions continue to intensify. As Pastor Dean mentioned last Sunday, David felt alone because it seemed that all the righteous people had disappeared. They had been silenced, or they had abandoned him. Now, he felt all alone and surrounded by vile, violent people.

When we get to Psalm 13, we see that David not only feels abandoned by God's people, but now he feels abandoned by God. Can there be anything worse than being abandoned by God? It is hard to imagine anything worse.

Consider the prophet Jonah, who thought being abandoned by God would be desirable until it finally happened. Then, when he found himself thrown into the sea, swallowed by a great fish, and at the very bottom of the sea, he realized he didn't like this feeling at all. He compared his situation to being in *hell*, and so he cried out to God in great distress, asking God to save him (Jonah 2).

The nineteenth-century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, called Psalm 13 the *Howling Psalm* because it repeats the phrase, "*How long*," four times in the first two verses. Spurgeon goes on to say the beauty of Psalm 13 is this,

"Whenever you look in David's Psalms, you will somewhere or other see yourself. You never get into a [dark] corner [of life], but you find David in that corner [with you]. I think," said Spurgeon, "that I was never so low that I could not find that David was lower; and I never climbed so high that I could not find that David was up above me."

Let's consider what Psalm 13 is and what it is not: Psalm 13 is not trying to talk us out of our anguish, so that we deny our pain or we put on a super spiritual facade. King David doesn't want us to pretend we are not depressed, sad, hurting, or angry. He doesn't want us to deny our painful emotions. How we feel and how we process our emotions in the midst of prolonged suffering, depression, and pain matters, and whether you know it or not, it matters intensely to God.

Here in Psalm 13 David's aim in this song: *He wants to give us words so that, in the long, dark season of grief and anguish, we are able to pour out the pain that has invaded our hearts to the LORD.*

So, before we work through Psalm 13, let's overview the Psalm. In these six short verses, Psalm 13 lays out the paradox of what it means to live a life of faith in Jesus. The Apostle Paul expresses the paradox of the Christian life that we find in Psalm 13 this way in 2 Corinthians 6:10,

"As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."

Psalm 13 is simple and short, but don't let the brevity of this Psalm cause you to believe it is shallow. It is anything but shallow.

We don't know when David wrote this psalm or the historical circumstances that inspired him to write it. Perhaps this was written when David was on the run from King Saul. David spent many years fleeing Saul under the threat of death. Yet, whatever the circumstances, ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the inspiration for this Psalm.

These six verses break down into three stanzas, each with two verses. In vv. 1-2, *King David expresses his feeling of abandonment*. Then in vv. 3-4, *David calls on the LORD to answer him*. Finally, in vv. 5-6, *David confesses his faith in God even though there had been no change in his outward circumstances*.

David begins Psalm 13 crying in agonized perplexity and concludes by singing with joyful trust. The changes in the mood of this short psalm are extraordinary and intense.

There is also a literary point to consider, specifically the number of lines per stanza. The *first stanza* (vv. 1-2) of the psalm contains five lines. The *second stanza* (vv. 3-4) contains four lines. The *third stanza* (vv. 5-6) has three lines, although the ESV gives it four. It breaks the last line into two parts, but in Hebrew, it is only three lines.

The significance of this is that the literary structure of the poem, as well as its subject matter, shifts from a tumultuous emotional beginning (expressed in five lines) to a final expression of trust in God and harmony, which is simply expressed in three lines.

Friends, even the literary structure of the Psalm is inspired and teaches us how God brings order out of the dark chaos in our lives. This should cause us to marvel at the word of God as we see its inspired literary design. Friends, God's word is perfect and powerful.

Let's work through Psalm 13. I have three points that help us apply this Psalm to our lives. The points teach us how to lament so that we have the words to pour out our hearts to God when we feel abandoned by Him.

I. Confront the LORD (vv. 1-2)

David begins with the honest and intense cry of "*How long?*" How long will the LORD allow this suffering to go on in his life? David's cry is raw and unedited. He simply goes before the LORD with his pain in prayer and cries out. Let's listen to his desperate cry one more time:

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

How long will you hide your face from me?

² *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?

We've heard David's laments in similar situations in other Psalms, but this one is the climax of his pain because he feels God has left him hanging out to dry. The repetition of the phrase "*How long?*" four times in two verses, coupled with "*Will you forget me forever?*" and "*sorrow in my heart all the day?*" in v. 2, conveys the profound, unrelenting duration of the suffering he is enduring. The Reformer Martin Luther says of David's suffering,

*The hollow slowness [of David's suffering] . . . lies in the very nature of the divine wrath that the feeling of it is always accompanied by the impression of its eternity and, therefore, by a foretaste of hell."*¹

Do you understand what Luther is saying here? Essentially, Luther is saying that this suffering has gone on so long and it is so intense that it feels like an *eternity*, so it feels like the wrath of God is upon him, and therefore, it feels like hell.

To top it off, David feels like God is not listening to him and giving him counsel, so he has to "*take*" counsel in his own heart. The Hebrew word for "*take*" in v. 2 is a word picture that gives us the image of a

¹ Quoting Martin Luther in Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, Vol. 2, 145.

storeroom or *warehouse* filled with sorrow and anguish. This *storeroom* is the only place David can go for counsel, so all he does is turn inward and pick through the pain in his heart like a kid picking at a painful scab until it bleeds.

Friends, you don't understand how David feels in Psalm 13 until even your weakness is exhausted, leaving you with nothing but pain. It is the extremely long dark night of the soul that seems to have no end in sight. There seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel, and you conclude that this is just the way it is and how it will end for you.

Friends, this is no short season of suffering. Psalm 13 describes years of being chewed up in the teeth of your pain. You stand at the edge of the cliff of despair and are contemplating jumping into the darkness that seems to have swallowed you whole.

It is at the edge of the cliff where you lift your eyes to heaven and say to God, "*How long, O LORD?*" You have hidden your face from me, and I have no one, so I have to take counsel with the dark thoughts of the storeroom of my mind. What am I to do since You have turned your face away from me?

We don't know why David cried out, "*How long, O LORD?*" We don't know what caused him to feel abandoned by God. There is no confession of sin in this Psalm. There is no mention of repentance and no guilt that seems to have contributed to David's feeling of abandonment.

However, we can consider some of the circumstances that may cause us to feel this way. First, *it may be unconfessed or hidden sins that cause us to feel abandoned by God*. Isaiah tells us this in Isaiah 59:2. He says,
*But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and
 your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*

If we are actively unrepentant of our sin and working to conceal our sin, then we can feel the separation between us and the LORD.

Perhaps you feel abandoned by God because of a *prolonged struggle* in your life that has lasted weeks, months, or even years. Perhaps you are dealing with a *long-term illness*, and there seems to be no end in sight. Chronic pain that seemingly has no cure is a darkness that can creep into your soul and cause you to feel abandoned by God. Perhaps you are the caregiver to this person with the illness, or you have a child with special needs, and your energy is spent. You don't know how you will carry on. Circumstances like these can empty us of our energy and leave us feeling depleted and, at times, abandoned by God. Perhaps you have lost your job, and no matter how hard you try, you can't get a new one.

Friends, sometimes, there is no circumstance or situation that causes you to feel depressed, which leads to feeling abandoned by God. You may simply struggle with dark, morbid thoughts and uncontrollable emotions that flood your heart and mind like dark storm clouds for no apparent reason. They cover your heart so that you can't sense God's presence or see His face.

Perhaps, like David, you have enemies. David was on the run from King Saul for years. He had to grow weary of being chased by his enemies. Consider the prophet Elijah; he had a dark season in his life when his enemies were pursuing him, so he told God that it was better for him to die than to live. Most of us don't have literal human enemies, at least serious ones, but we do have spiritual enemies.

As Christians, we have one great spiritual enemy who is worse than any human enemy imaginable. Friends, the devil is like a roaring lion prowling around seeking someone to devour. He is the real adversary of the soul. He will use our circumstances, physical conditions, and temperaments to control and, if possible, crush us under prolonged suffering and depression.

Eighteenth-century Baptist pastor Andrew Fuller said,

It is not under the sharpest, but the longest trials, that we are most in danger of fainting . . . When Job was accosted with evil tidings, in quick succession . . . [and] . . . when he could see no end to his troubles, he sunk under them.²

So, what do we do when we are in one or all of these situations, and it feels like there is no end in sight to our suffering? The answer I am about to give you is not an easy one to digest. I'm not offering a special prayer that is a quick fix to your situation. However, I am pointing you to the God who gives us His words to pray when we have no words of our own.

Brothers and sisters, in Psalm 13, God gave us words to help us lament. It is not unspiritual to lament honest prayers to God. It's biblical to confront God with our pain. God gave us the *Psalms of Lament* to teach us how to pray in times of pain.

We often think faith in Jesus means we come to church and slap on a happy face. But genuine faith is bringing our sorrow to God rather than hiding it. Verses 1-2 teach us that it is good for us to pour out our souls to God and ask Him hard questions.

Brothers and sisters, when Jesus came to earth to pay for the sins of His people, He endured tremendous suffering His whole life. Hebrews 5:7 says:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

Jesus was the truly innocent Sufferer who came to earth with the explicit purpose of living a perfectly righteous life and never sinning so that He could die in our place on the cross and pay for our sins. In the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, Jesus experienced the fullness of the darkness of the sins of His people. Now, because of what Christ has done on our behalf, we can come boldly before the throne of grace and pour out our hearts to God. For Jesus, the truly innocent Sufferer, mediates our prayers to the Father by His Holy Spirit. Because of what Christ has done, we can confront the LORD with the pain and darkness that have captured our hearts. There may be times in our lives when we feel the Lord has abandoned us, but because of the person and work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, God will never turn His face away from us. This leads us to our second point.

II. Call on the LORD (vv. 3-4)

In vv. 3-4, David moves from lament to petition and calls on the name of the LORD. He petitions God for three things. He asks God to *look* on him, to *answer* his prayer, and, finally, to *restore* his life. Look in v. 3:

*Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,*

The Hebrew word for *consider* literally means *look with your eyes*. As I mentioned in Psalm 11, this is anthropomorphic language assigned to God because He doesn't have eyes or a face. Yet, this is how we talk to God, so David desires God to turn His face to him or make His countenance shine upon him. In the Jewish mindset, this meant that God turned His face to His people in love and blessing.

I don't know if you have ever had this experience, but I did with all of my kids at some point. They want me to notice something they were doing, but I wasn't paying attention. Then they get in my lap, grab my face, and turn my face to theirs, saying, "*Look at this!*"

David is doing this in his prayer. It is the idea found in the blessing we use in our worship service sometimes, which is from Numbers 6:24-26,

² Quoted by Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 1a, *Psalms 1-26*, 155.

The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

The Jewish people understood the importance of the LORD looking upon His people with grace and love. To have the LORD turn His face away from you was the absolute worst thing that could happen to you, but for the LORD to *lift up his countenance upon you* meant He loved you. So, David wanted the LORD to *look at his suffering and do something about it*.

The second part of his petition asks the LORD to *answer* his prayer. He asks the LORD to *look* upon him and *answer* his prayer by reaffirming his love for him.

Finally, what is David's request? He asks for *restoration* when he prays, "*Light up my eyes.*" The Hebrew phrase "*light up my eyes*" is a request for the Lord to *restore* his spiritual, emotional, and physical strength.

Lastly, in v. 4, David gives a reason for his prayer. Look at what he says in v. 4:

*Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.*

In his prayer, David appeals to God's glory and honor in v. 4. He appeals to God's covenant when he uses God's covenant name, *Yahweh*, in v. 3. David understands that God's glory is at stake in his suffering.

Do you remember the point of Psalm 1? The righteous are like a tree planted by streams of water and will flourish, but the way of the wicked will perish. You see, David is saying, if things continue as they are and my enemies prevail over me, then Psalm 1 is in danger of not being fulfilled. This also means God's covenant is in danger of failing, and therefore God's glory is at stake. *David knows that God will not abandon His covenant and His people, so he prays to the LORD of the Covenant to reveal His glory.*

Friends, faith prays, even through the silence. Even in the darkness, David calls God his "*LORD.*" He doesn't stop praying, even when he feels unheard. David doesn't abandon God even though he feels like God has abandoned him.

Friends, our temptation in these seasons of suffering in our lives is to abandon God before He accomplishes His purposes. Our temptation is to turn somewhere else to have our unmet needs met. Our temptation is to do what the people of Israel did in Jeremiah 2:13,

For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Our temptation will be to abandon God because it *feels* like He has abandoned us. We will be tempted to turn to other things as some kind of functional saviors and gods that we invent so that they will give us relief from our pain and suffering.

What is it that you are turning to? Endless scrolling on the internet? Trolling others on social media, abusing alcohol or prescription drugs; busyness to preoccupy your mind; shopping to get a dopamine hit when the Amazon package arrives at your door?

Instead of abandoning God during these times, we need to double down in prayer. It is during these times that we need to draw near to God. It is during these times that we must seek Him with all our hearts.

On the cross, Jesus prayed Psalm 22 when He was at His lowest. He cried out,

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus quoted Psalm 22 as His prayer because it felt like and looked like God had forsaken Him, and for a time God had forsaken Him when our sins were laid upon Him. Yet, if you keep reading Psalm 22, you learn that God had not forsaken Jesus. Psalm 22 ends in victory. Listen to Psalm 22:19-21,

*But you, O LORD, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid! ²⁰
 Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! ²¹
 Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the
 wild oxen!*

Not only do we need to follow in Jesus' footsteps in these times, but we also need to remember that Jesus purchased our ability to endure the dark night of the soul. Now, as we voice our prayers to the LORD, Jesus also intercedes for us in prayer before the throne of God. We are the only ones praying; Jesus is praying for us, too.

III. Confess your faith in the LORD (vv. 5-6)

In vv. 5-6, we see that his prayer in vv. 3-4 has settled David's heart. As a result, he grounds his faith in three biblical truths: *God's character, God's salvation, and God's past faithfulness*. Listen to vv. 5-6 again:

*But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
 my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
 because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

The first biblical truth is found in v. 5a – *God's character*. Notice what David says:

I have trusted in your steadfast love.

The Hebrew word *hesed* means *steadfast love* or covenant faithfulness. It is God's faithful love for His people. David is looking back at God's covenant that He has made with His people. As he remembers this biblical truth, he is reminded of God's character of faithful love for His people. He knows God will not fail Him because God has never failed to keep His covenant with His people. When he reminds himself of this truth, his faith grows stronger.

Second, David looks forward to *God's salvation* when he says in v. 5b:

My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

He looks ahead to God's deliverance. He believes God will bring salvation to Him.

Finally, he reminds himself of *God's past faithfulness* when he says:

I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

David looks back on his own life and sees God's steadfast love and salvation. What does he do as he remembers God's faithfulness? He sings of God's faithful, steadfast love for him. In his pain and in the darkness, he worships. Like Paul and Silas, who sang praises to Jesus after they were beaten and thrown in prison for preaching the gospel, David, in the darkness of his own suffering, sings of God's goodness to him.

Perhaps he remembers how God took him from tending sheep to being King of Israel and shepherding God's people. By remembering God's goodness, his faith is reignited, and his eyes are lit up with the fire of faith.

Friends, we can look back on our lives and see God's faithfulness to us during our darkest seasons. That is good for us to do that, but ultimately, we should be reminded of God's faithfulness when we look to the cross of Christ. We look and see the Son of God on the cross, dying to pay for our sins, and rising victoriously from the dead. This is the faithfulness of God in our lives. It is by the person and work of Christ that we are saved.

Finally, one of the means of grace that God gives us to strengthen our faith is singing gospel filled worship songs that remind us of all that Jesus did on the cross to save us. When we are reminded of the gospel of Jesus Christ, our faith grows in the soil of that darkness. Our circumstances may not change, and faith doesn't always erase feelings, but it reorients our hearts so that we fix our eyes on Jesus, instead of drowning in despair.

Psalm 13 begins with "*How long, O Lord?*" and ends with "*I will sing to the LORD.*" That is the journey of faith, from despair to prayer, to trust, and, finally, to praise.

Listen, if you are in a season of *"How long, O LORD?"* take heart: God invites you to lament honestly. He calls you to keep praying, even when He seems silent. He will restore your joy because His steadfast love never fails.

Remember that on the cross, Jesus Himself cried, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* He entered the ultimate abandonment so that you and I would never be abandoned. In Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, we see God's steadfast love in concrete terms. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the great climactic act of deliverance. *"Jesus Christ was steadfast love [for us] embodied not merely in an event but in a person."*³ So, if you have repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, Christ has given Himself to you. He is the steadfast love of God that lives inside of you.

³ Dane C. Ortland, *In the LORD I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions through the Psalms*, 40.