

The Agony and Ecstasy of Waiting for God

Psalm 13

Studies in the Psalms #13

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As Christians, you know well that trusting in God is not easy when the world around us is saying, “there is no salvation for him in God” (Ps. 3:2) and, “there is no God” (Ps. 10:4). You know by now that trusting God’s promises when the going gets tough *is* tough. The Lord has promised to care for his people, but we look around and see them being persecuted, which makes us cry, “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away” (Ps. 10:1).

The Psalms are honest. Their cries are like the feeling of having an exposed and raw nerve in your mouth—it hurts! And this goes against the grain of what our pop spirituality in the church is all about. We come to church and get the impression that we have to smile because Jesus came to give me abundant life. But then you go home and find yourself crying out, “Lord, why is life so hard?” It’s the tension of already having eternal life this makes your sorrows and sufferings, temptations and trials that much harder. The Christian life is like a tug of war of. What makes it so hard is that unlike our non-Christian friends who ask “why,” we know an Almighty God has the power to change our situation but doesn’t always do so.

We hear this sorrow; we feel this suffering in David's individual lament in Psalm 13. It's full of agony. It's full of anguish. But in it we also hear his ecstasy as he sings in faith! It's prophetic of David's greater Son, Jesus, "who for the joy that was set before him [he means the resurrection and ascension back to glory] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). And what does the writer to the Hebrews say just before this? If you know the verse you realize that I just cut a part off from the beginning. He says to us, "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." And so we find ourselves identified with Jesus, like David was, in this Psalm.¹ So what is Psalm 13? It's a believing prayer that expresses *the agony and ecstasy of waiting for God*.

The Agony (vv. 1-4)

In verses 1-4 we read of *the agony* of waiting for God. What agony? Look at verses 1-2 where you hear the *problem* of agony: **How long? How long? How long? How long?** Four times **how long?** He cries out **how long** toward God in verse 1. He cries out **how long** toward himself in verse 2. He

¹ "This psalm is a general template according to which we can model our prayers to God in the midst of the deepest anguish and anxiety." Rudolph Gwalther in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, 7:104.

cries out **how long** toward his enemies in verse 2.² In those two little words—**how long**—we feel the agony and the anguish of soul. And David's probably been in this state of sorrow for some time. But it's in the brutal honesty that we find blessed sanity. "The path to ecstasy begins at the gate of honesty."³ God wants you to express and emote your honest feeling of agony, your honest feelings of separation from him because in that you express faith. Did you notice where David goes? To God! **How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?** We've got to stop feeling guilty about our feelings as if they're faithless! Tell God how you're feeling, brothers and sisters because he cares for you.

How long? Why is the loss of the Lord's **face** towards us and his **forget[ting]** us so serious?⁴ Over in Psalm 27:9 David prays, "Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger." For the Lord to "hide" his face is to be angry. On the other hand, the face of the Lord signifies having the utmost blessing of God. Psalm 11:7 says, "For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face." Psalm

² Viktorin Strigel in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, 7:104. I also found this in Dale Ralph Davis, *Slogging Along in the Paths of Righteousness: Psalms 13–24* (Ross-shite, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014), 14–15.

³ Futato, 67.

⁴ "God no more turns away his face than he forgets, but scripture adopts our human idiom." Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms: 1–32*, 173.

80 repeats this refrain three times: “Restore us, O God of Hosts, let your face shine, that we may be saved.” The face of the Lord is salvation! This is why in Psalm 27 David said the “one thing” he “asked of the LORD” and “[sought] after was to “dwell in the house of the LORD” so that he could “gaze upon the beauty of the LORD” (Ps. 27:4).

David doesn’t sense the Lord’s face at all. And so he’s left alone in verse 2 lamenting the fact that he has to take counsel in his own soul everyday, all day long: **How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?** “Lord, look at me! How am I going to figure a way out in this situation? Lord, look at me! The more I go inward and think, the more I become depressed and downcast, sad and sorrowful.” I know some of us feel that way in life. You’ve come to the end of yourself and you realize that there’s nothing you can do to deliver yourself. **How long?**

And by himself in introspective insanity he does not see the Lord’s face but sees his enemies instead: **How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?** “I’m king! I have an army at my beckon call. Lord, you are the Captain of the heavenly armies. But all to no avail!” Isn’t this how we so often feel against our enemies? They are **over** us. I’m not talking about swords but “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) and all its influence on our kids. I’m talking

about your “fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11) as you’re there at work. I’m talking about the “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4) who never ceases to assault and you feel it everyday. What do you do about it? Again, and again, and again, these Psalms of lament need to be ours. Pray them. Emote. Vent. Lay it all out before the Lord. Before the Lord! That’s what Jesus did throughout his life, in the Garden of Gethsamane, and on the cross. The eternal King had to suffer the agony of crying out, **How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?** And he heard nothing. There was silence!

David’s agonizing problem leads to him to *plead* in verses 3–4. Again, we see here that we when cry to the God who has abandoned us we are crying out to him! One writer said this is “lousy logic but excellent faith.”⁵ Let me put it this way. I’ve said in pre-marital and marital counseling over the years that arguing as a couple is not sinful, but how you argue that is sinful. There is a holy arguing between two people who love each other, feel struggle between each other, and so they argue on the basis of that love. What David does here is teach us how to argue with God in a godly way.

⁵ Davis, 16.

We've already seen in verse 1 that he cries out to the LORD in all caps, which I've said before is the Lord's name from Exodus 3. It means he will be today what he was yesterday and what he will be tomorrow. He is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. And then look at what David calls the Lord in verse 4 as he argues in love: **my God**. There's faith in his frustration.⁶

Now comes the hard part: David argues by using three imperative verbs: **consider**, **answer**, and **light up**. That means, three *commands*. David is commanding the Lord to come to his aid. "What? Does the clay have authority over the potter?" Of course not, but we need to learn to pray like this telling God's that his own nature and his promises are at stake. Does God lie? No! Does God change? No! Does God break his covenant promises? No! A thousand times no! But from David's point of view this is what was about to happen as his enemies encroached around him and were about to say, "**I have prevailed over him**" and to **rejoice because I am shaken** (v. 4). If the seed of the serpent prevailed against David as the seed of the woman, God's promise of David's throne lasting forever would be a lie. **My God...consider me**. Look at my situation. **My God...answer me**. My pleas

⁶ Calvin, 182.

are dissipating into thin air. **My God...light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death** (v. 3). I'm dying but you are the source of life. You are the resurrection and the life!

The Ecstasy (vv. 5–6)

Waiting for God can be agony. But David's prayer also shows us that it can also be full of *ecstasy* in verses 5–6. Martin Luther said that prayer is the "state in which hope despairs, and yet despair hopes at the same time." Here he is agonizing, **how long**, but then he says so ecstatically, so triumphantly, so faithfully: **but I have trusted** (v. 5). He uses what we call a "prophetic" past tense. That is, he uses a past tense verb as a future tense verb so that what he says becomes a virtual prophecy. Despite all that he laments and cries out for above he says, **But I will trust in your steadfast love** (v. 5). He has trusted because the Lord has been faithful, he is trusting now because the Lord is faithful, and he promises to trust in the future because the Lord will keep his promises. And when the Lord does, David says, **my heart shall rejoice in your salvation** (v. 5). In verse 6 he continues, **I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me**. Martin Luther, again,

said, “The devil is not able to sing this little song; we fight with him and he beats us, but he will not bury us.”⁷

What a prophecy of Jesus we have here, brothers and sisters! Behold your suffering Lord as He cries out **how long?** Behold your dying King as he cries out **light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death** (v. 3) as he clings to the Father’s promise of resurrection. Behold your exalted King as his vow has become reality.

Will you cry out with your resurrected Lord for all your needs, problems, and wants? Will you vent in faith when frustrated? Will you emote yet with the ecstasy of faith? Will you argue with your loving Father whom you love, reminding him—reminding yourself!—of his promises?

Brothers and sisters, your God loves you more than you can imagine in your wildest dreams! He doesn’t always answer when you want him to answer. He doesn't always answer how you want him to answer. This doesn't mean he hates you or has forgotten you. It means it’s time to remember relationship 101 with God: pray. Go to him. He wants you. Cry to him. He wants your tears. Argue with him. He wants to increase and stretch your faith. This is the honesty of the Psalms. Amen.

⁷ Martin Luther in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, 7:106.