

We come together this morning to continue this new series on the Psalms. We will spend time together this summer in the Psalms, looking at their various types and kinds. This month it was Pastor Flora's and my desire that we begin by looking at the type that is the most plentiful of the Psalms, were we to take the Psalms and break them out into different types. The type that seems to appear most often---over half the Psalms---are Psalms of lamentation, Psalms of lament, Psalms of complaint and crying and sorrows and fears.

In preparation for this, I've long been a fan of Derek Kidner, who was a fabulous Old Testament scholar and commentator. He says this about the whole of the book of Psalms: "It would be difficult to overestimate," he says, "the significance of the book of Psalms. Here in the Psalms we see mirrored the ideals of religious faith and communion with God; of sorrow for sin and the search for perfection; of walking in darkness, unafraid, by the lamp of faith; of obedience to the law of God, delight in the worship of God, fellowship with friends of God, reverence for the word of God; and of humility under God's disciplining, trust when evil triumphs and wickedness prospers, serenity in the midst of storm." The Psalms, with those ideas, can never be overestimated.

And they are also not to be reduced to our own private devotion, as this Psalm clearly states in its opening, which technically in the Hebrew actually forms the very first verse. You see it---I'm not even sure it's in the projected form of Psalm 13, but you see it in your Bibles. It says, "For the director of music. A psalm of David." In the Hebrew that's verse one. In the English we have started verse one with the next sentence. All that is to say, the Psalms were not meant to be reduced to private devotion. In fact, they were written---David wrote them for the purpose of being sung in the church, in the temple, by the people of God. They were meant for the public worship of God's people. And so it is for us. Though we will enter into David's---and in this case, a very personal---lament, it is meant to be written in such general terms that anyone can enter into it, particularly God's people as we gather for worship.

So I want you to hear the emotions, the power of the words that then lead us into worship of the only true God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hear now God's word, Psalm 13.

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

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me an answer, O LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;

my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

Will you pray with me. Our Heavenly Father, we ask that you would come, by your Spirit working mightily with your word, into the gathering of your church. That you would open our eyes that we would see wondrous things in your word. We thank you for this Psalm that you use to usher us into deeper worship as we magnify your name, the one to whom we bring sorrows. In Jesus' matchless name we pray. Amen.

I'm very grateful for C.S. Lewis and his work, *Reflections on the Psalms*. If you've never read it, it's a short work. It's not a commentary, it doesn't work like that. But he brings to this brief study of the Psalms, generally, all of his faith as well as his intellectual passion for the Scriptures and literature in particular. When we read the Psalms we need to remember, as C.S. Lewis would instruct, is that they are *poetry*, not prose. When we have prose, we don't have such hyperbole as we meet in poetry. And what we see in this Psalm is what C.S. Lewis says. He says the Psalms are poems, and poems are intended to be sung, not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons. [Though I recognize, ironically, I'm giving a sermon on a Psalm, okay? That point aside...] He says, most emphatically, the Psalms must be read as poems---as lyrics---with all the licenses, all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems, if they are to be understood, no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them, and think we see what is not. I will tell you if you typically read the Scriptures with a heavy, logical mind, the Psalms will frustrate you. I read the Scriptures with a logical mind, but I also recognize that the Psalms are full of not just logic, but emotional logic.

What I want you to see in these verses, in these brief verses, we have three vignettes: A Cry of Distress, A Prayer for Help, and A Declaration of Confidence. A Cry of Distress, A Prayer for Help, A Declaration of Confidence. Let me warn you that this Psalm starts white hot. But it ends with a calm peace. And all of that, from its white hotness to its calm peace, is instructive to our worship and it is instructive to our prayer, for there is no other place where Christians are to bring bear sorrows, other than in worship and in prayer. Are you ready to bring your sorrows? Let's have David, the one who wrote this Psalm for the music director, lead us in this cry of sorrows.

Let's look together at verses one and two, the Cry of Distress. You'll notice in verses one through two, we see three prominent characters. First, you have the Lord---God himself---then you have the psalmist himself, then thirdly, you see, he talks about his enemies. Now what I meant by 'logical' and how oftentimes that's frustrated, is that this Psalm opens with what seems to be *illogical*, given the Scriptures themselves. Notice what he says in verse one. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" The reason why that is illogical, is because the rest of the Scriptures, throughout, from beginning to end, talk about that God is a God of all knowledge and all power and is everywhere present. The same psalmist, David, writes that "before a word is on my tongue, you know, it completely, O LORD." But in this poetic profession, at the beginning, his cry of distress is to God. It is illogical, but it makes emotional sense. Why? Because he's saying to a God who knows everything, he's bringing all of his heart into this prayer, and he looks at his circumstances, and he says to God, his only hope, 'Lord, where are you? Have you forgotten me?'

I want you to see that there's something so profoundly Christian and biblical about that opening prayer, which often doesn't meet our logic, doesn't meet our theological categories that God is omniscient and knows all things---but the one who prays also prays with a heart to the God who knows all things, and David is saying to the Lord, Have you forgotten me? And it tells us something that is profoundly biblical, which we must not forget, that David is doing something profoundly biblical, and that is, he is wrestling with God. Now why is that profoundly biblical? Let's think about it in contrast to Buddhism. Buddhism believes that when you come into prayer, you find something not outside of you, you seek to find the strength from within. You quiet your self, because you're looking for the divine within to be awakened from inside you.

In Islamic prayer, the whole idea is that to come before God you must come before God fitted and clean: clean clothes, clean hands, clean feet, clean head, and there is a lot of order and rules. In other words, you must come in complete submission.

But you need to see the biblical contrast. This is important. In Genesis we learn that the man, Jacob, who wrestles with God, has his name changed to *Israel*, which literally means, 'one who wrestles with

God.' Jacob wrestled with God all night and would not let him go until he blessed him. Christianity---biblical faith---demonstrates for us what David plainly declares: That our cry of distress is a wrestling with God, and that we are ones who ultimately are submitting, but we also recognize we come with who we are---no clean hands, no clean hearts. We can never come before God who is perfectly holy and righteous. I am unholy and not righteous, yet I can come with all my heart because I have no strength from within me. I am my greatest problem, not my circumstances. I am. But the Bible teaches me I can come before the Lord with all my distress, all my cries, and I go to him. O Lord, How long? We can do that without being disrespectful. We can do that, while at the same time being submissive, because it is a cry of distress to the only one who can answer the distress.

But he also does something else. He not only cries out to God, he cries out about himself. Look at what he says in verse two. Hear the second part of verse one. He says, "How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts...?" His thoughts before God are like a twisted pretzel. You can almost imagine, as he cries this out, how he feels when he's praying, because these thoughts want to shoot accusations. He's tempted to doubt that God is real---is God present? And yet he wrestles with these thoughts---is his enemy going to overcome him? But he goes before the Lord and says, my thoughts are battling within me.

Then he talks about his enemy. Not only does he wrestle with God, not only does he wrestles with his own thoughts, he wrestles about the nature of his enemy. He says, "How long will my enemy triumph over me?" He's wrestling, he's wondering---is my enemy actually going to overthrow me? 'Will he have victory over me?' is his cry to the Lord.

I want you to know that it is a beautiful thing that David is doing in these first two verses in teaching us---through song, through poetry---this prayer. That prayer is to be a prayer and a cry in distress. And that we bring not just our mind, but we bring our whole lives to the Lord, to his feet. Why is that important? I want to apply it this way, two things I want to address. First, I think we need to adjust our expectations. Secondly, a third way.

Here's what I mean. We need to adjust our expectations because---not everyone, but there is still a healthy, strong myth among Christians that somehow, once I become a Christian, bad things will not happen to me. You see, we don't know the particular distress out of which David is speaking to God. He's not particular about it here. And what else is interesting, you don't hear any repentance here. In other words, David is not repenting for any particular sin or for any sins of the people that seem to have brought them into this distress. And what he's telling us, is that we must disabuse ourselves from the notion that just because you're a follower of God that somehow bad things won't happen to you or to me. That is not what the Scriptures teach us. Because the one that David ultimately points to is the Lord Jesus Christ, and I don't believe that anyone here, even with a cursory knowledge of who Jesus Christ is, would ever say that bad things didn't happen to him. Bad things happened to Jesus, and he was without sin. And if bad things happened to Jesus---without sin---then we ought to expect that bad things are going to happen. Because to believe that somehow that because I'm a Christian, bad things aren't going to happen, what we've just done is, we've manufactured a false god. Here's why. Derek Kidner also says this: "The presence of such prayers [like Psalm 13] in Scripture is a witness to God's understanding of us. He knows how we speak when we are desperate. It is the lifeblood of the Christian." The one who follows God has bad things happen, and we don't always know why. But when they happen, we have one to whom we can go, and we can cry out.

There's a second application point that I believe David draws us to here in this cry of distress. Not only, yes, bad things happen, and God is the one to whom we go, but it also demonstrates that the Psalms are teaching us a third way of dealing with our emotions. This is a thing which my teachers have taught me: By and large, there are still many---and I will speak directly here to Christians---there are many Christians today who still believe that we need to stuff our emotions. We can't be real with

them. But when we do so, we are denying our emotions' power and depth. David is teaching us we don't stuff our emotions. But there's another thing. Not only are we not to stuff our emotions, but neither are we to simply follow our culture's mantra that merely expressing our emotions is an end in and of itself. The Psalms teach us not to stuff them, but neither to just dump them. The Psalms show a third way. David is teaching us a third way with our emotions. He comes not stuffing them and he comes not merely dumping them. He is coming with purpose in this cry of distress. 'How long, O Lord?' is not just an emotional expression. It is a truth declaration that God is the one who knows. Will you teach me? Teach me to trust that you are the God who helps. This Psalm teaches us to pray our sorrows, to pray what disturbs us.

But ladies and gentlemen, you do not need to get that disturbance under control before you go to God. Yesterday afternoon one of the things on my honey-do list was to take a shrub shearer and level out the shrubs in the front of our house to be nice and level and all that good stuff, because before they were like 'this.' And I sat back and I was down on the sidewalk and I was looking up at the shrubs, and I was, 'Yeah. That's done.' Then I thought about today's sermon, and I thought about how often do I try to go to God as a well-manicured shrub. How often do you try to manicure your prayers and your emotions before you go to God? David doesn't do that. God understands, and he understands how we speak when we are in distress. We can come with shoots, branches going everywhere, weeds all in the garden, and we come to him with all of it, because that is exactly what Jesus did. At the center of our faith is one who cried out in distress that prayer of dereliction, 'Why have you forsaken me?'

And this Psalm begins white hot and it ends with peace. Jesus teaches us that his cry of dereliction on the cross began with a cry of distress from being separated from the Father, but it ends in a prayer of praise when he was raised on the third day. Do you see where I'm going? God is the one to whom we bring our cries, God is the one to whom we bring all of our mess, all of our distress, and we bring it to him, because in our sorrows, in our distress, God, by his grace, wants to demonstrate how he helps us. And that's where the psalmist turns next.

A Prayer for Help. Look at verses three and four. We see in this prayer for help that God gives him, and he's asking for, the grace of enablement. He's asking for the grace of protection. Here's what he says: "Look on me....O LORD, my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death." That is a cry for and a prayer for the grace of enablement. What do I mean? Notice what he says. He says, 'Look on me and answer me.' He says, 'O, Lord my God, give light to my eyes.' Why does he pray for light to his eyes? He's praying to see. He wants to see something. What is he wanting to see? Notice he doesn't ask the Lord to tell him what he wants him to do. He asks the Lord in the midst of his darkness and distress, help me to see you. Because, he says, otherwise, when I sleep, I'll die. I need to see you in the darkness. What does he need to see of the Lord in the midst of darkness? He needs to see the grace of enablement. What do I mean by that? What I mean by that is that God is the God in the midst of the storm, that the Lord doesn't remove.... And here's the thing about the Psalms, right? They move---in this case, in only six verses he moves from white hot distress to calm peace---in six verses. It doesn't give us a sense for how long this took, but we can bet that God does not immediately remove the distress. He doesn't tell us that he does so. So in the midst of the stress he's asking the Lord to help him see the Lord in the midst of the storm.

Do you remember the disciples, the Bible tells us, when they were with Jesus on the boat and the storm rose up? And they were like, Jesus is sleeping. They wanted to see the Lord. But of course they didn't trust that the Lord was enough to be the Lord of the storm. And Jesus came and he calmed the storm and everything went placid. They had little faith. Here David is instructing us in the midst of our distress to cry out to see the Lord who is the Lord of peace and calm, even when our circumstances are crying out with a mighty storm. He needs to see the Lord. He needs to see his God at work. Maybe not removing the distress, but in the distress with him. Don't you see what a powerful

thing the Christian faith is, that demonstrates for us that we do not have a God who is far off from our distress. We believe and trust in a God who, in his grace and by his design, sent his Son in the midst of the storm of our sin, our rebellion, our rejection of him. While we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us. In other words, in the midst of our distress, which we caused, God walked amongst us. He didn't look afar off, and Say, well, that's your fault. No, he came to take our fault on himself. God's love, God's grace has walked among us. We have seen the Lord. This is what David is praying for: That I might see you,

But he also prays for the grace of protection when he says these words, "My enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall." What is he asking to see of the Lord? Not only just the Lord's enablement, he also wants to see the Lord's protection. What does that mean in the Psalms? I believe it means that David sees his enemies, and they're gloating over him, but what he is praying for? He prays for the Lord's justice, and that is key. He does not pray that God would give him the weapons to take out his enemies. He's praying here for God's justice to be poured out on his enemies, entrusting himself to God's protection, saying, Lord, you are the Lord of righteousness and justice, holiness, goodness and truth. May you, according to your wisdom, bring defeat to those who gloat over me. And that is instructive for us in our prayers when we are tempted to want to act out in revenge towards those who come against us. The Christian faith does not have us pretend that we do not, in fact, have enemies. The reality is, instead of asking for revenge, God tells us to take up the instrument of love, while praying for him to work justice on our behalf---but to have mercy and to pour out grace, even on our enemies. He's crying out for the grace of protection.

It's instructive for us. It's protection not only from our enemies, but protection from our own vengeful heart. Lord, fight this battle for me. May your strong arm protect me, because left to myself, my own nature, I will pick up the sword. Isn't that what Peter did, removing the ear of the Centurion. But the Lord said, my enemies are of a different nature. My enemies will be defeated not by sword, but by my sacrifice. The Lord's ways are above our ways. David instructs us to cry out, pray out for help for the grace of enablement and protection.

But this Psalm goes from distress to a prayer for help to a declaration of confidence. You see it in verses five and six. "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me." It is a declaration of confidence, first, in God's steadfast love. David is rejoicing in the Lord's salvation in his heart, in his mind, in his soul. He wants to bring them and fix them on the only God who redeems. This is instructive for us, because we must know and be reminded that God, who is so steadfast in his love---that he, in his love, sent his son, not just to weep--and Jesus was known as one who weeps. (As you open up a gospel Jesus is often weeping.) But God, in his steadfast love, doesn't send a salvation through his Son as one who merely weeps, but he sent his Son as one who would die for our sin. And in that death Jesus cries out in distress because of his separation from the Father, so that you and I don't have to. You see, David calls on God's steadfast love in his salvation because he recognizes God is a God of forgiveness and grace and mercy. It is instructive for us, because therefore, when we suffer, we can escape the trap of feeling guilty because we're suffering. You see, if I believe that my suffering is all because of my sin, then I'll believe I'm always guilty in the midst of suffering. 'What have I done to make God mad? What do I need to do to make him happy with me?' What Jesus' prayer tells us, what God's steadfast love tells us, is that God so much loves us that he's sending his Son. He died on the cross for our sin. The price has been paid. Therefore our guilt is removed. Therefore suffering doesn't so much light up my guilt, as it lights up my hope that in the midst of my suffering, God is making me more like his Son.

But when I am suffering the consequences of my own sin, grace meets me there, too. If God says, I sent my Son to die for you while you were yet my enemies, how much more then, having received the Lord, will you not receive overwhelming forgiveness. So today if you're here, and you are suffering the consequences of your sin in your life, you need to know God's word for you is grace, grace, God's

grace. Come to him in confession, come to him in forgiveness, turning from your sin---but may I say, turning from your righteousness, too. Because it isn't just, okay, Lord, now you have forgiven me, now I'm going to work really hard, so that I don't end up there again. That is not the message. It's not just lay down your sin---lay down your righteousness that you're trusting in, too. *Lay all of your deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet, before him gloriously complete.*

So it removes us from our guilt, but it also removes us from our self-pity. At the center of my faith I have a suffering Savior. Through his suffering I am healed. Then he tells me, 'What's good for the goose is good for the gander.' What is good for my Savior---then I, too, will suffer. Therefore I don't have to stand before God and say, 'Why? Woe is me.' I can come to him with all my distress, knowing that I can trust his steadfast love, even in the midst of the storm of my distress and suffering.

Not only is it a declaration of God's steadfast love, it is also a declaration of confidence in God's bountiful goodness. Here, my friends, I want to show you the beauty of Hebrew and the beauty of Hebrew poetry. It says here for us, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me." So in the first portion of verse six he says that I will sing to the Lord, meaning it is an ongoing thing, it's an ongoing action. But then in the second part of the verse he says, "For he has been good to me." He's saying it in the past tense. Now why is that important? Because I want you to see that he's doing two things at the same time in this last verse. He's saying, I will sing in the present and in the future for God *has been* bountifully good, overwhelmingly good to me. So he uses the past tense. And this is the way the Hebrew works. David, as he ends this prayer in a prayer of praise, he's able to look out into the future with a certain confidence of God's goodness, as if it was already past tense and done. In the mind's eye of the poet he goes into the future, and he looks back on his life, and he says, God has been good to me. But he says that in the present, looking into the future. Meaning simply this: That we can ask God in the midst of our distress, and he speaks to us in such a way through these verses, through the verses and the cries of the psalmist, David, that we can have a confidence that God's goodness to you can be experienced today and in the future, and forever, because, for God, all time---past, present, and future---is one time. It is finished. God is good. He will be good. He has been good. Because the Lord is bountiful in his goodness. David gives us here, in this declaration of confidence in God's bountiful goodness, a vision of the God who, in glorious victory, has poured out his love and his goodness. And he is worthy of our confidence and hope.

In a few moments we're going to sing this song together. I read these words to you.

O worship the King, all glorious above,
O gratefully sing his power and his love.
Our shield and defender, the ancient of days,
Pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.

O tell of his might, O sing of his grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space,
His chariots of wrath, the deep thunderclouds form
And dark is his path on the wings of the storm.

Your bountiful care, what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light.
It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain
And sweetly distills in the dew and rain.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail
In you do we trust, nor find you to fail.
Your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer and Friend.

Take to the Lord your sorrows, for a God of redemption, grace, forgiveness, and mercy meets us there, for he is the Lord. Let's pray. On behalf of all of these who are here, Father, this morning, I pray for any who are in the darkness of distress. Whether a storm of circumstances, or even the storm of their own making, I pray Father, you would meet them in the darkness with the light of forgiveness, grace, and salvation. I pray, Father, that you would instruct all of us to come to you white hot with all of our distress, knowing that our prayers, which begin in tears, can end with praise. Lord, instruct us through this Psalm, instruct us this summer as we read the Psalms. Make us a people for your name and for your glory. Lord, help us to know that you meet us here by your steadfast love and bountiful goodness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.