

But When?

Psalm 13

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Please turn in your Bible to Psalm 13 as we continue our summer series in various psalms. Last week, our guest preacher Patrick Allen preached from Psalm 30, which is a very beautiful psalm of praise. And in that psalm, the singer, the author David recounts how he cried out to the Lord for help, and he was restored. His grief turned into dancing, and his joy came in the morning. Indeed, we trust that joy will come. But sometimes we ask, but when? If Psalm 30 is a psalm of praise after the day breaks, then Psalm 13 is available to God's people to be on our lips and in our heart when we lament during the darkest hours of the night.

Hear now God's word from Psalm 13.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 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?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

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

[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, would you add to the reading of your word that you would minister to us in this place? As we weep with those who weep, as we rejoice with those who rejoice, that we come to you with our laments, and we come to you knowing you hear us. And though it feels that you may be hidden from us, we know that your smile is broad, and it is long-lasting as you see your church. Though we are in need of your grace, and we merit nothing of our own accord, you are pleased with us. Through your Son Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

If you're like me, we like to know the what's and the how's. And of course, why is an important question, too. But the question of when is a question of anticipation. Think back about all the times that the back seat calls up, "Are we there yet?" And the front seat replies, "Almost," which never satisfies. So the back seat calls again, "When? When will we be there?" Or when you tell your boss, "I'm working on it." And they ask, "When? When's it going to be finished?" Or you tell your friend, "Guess what? I got jury duty." And they just say, "Ugh. When?" "Did you hear that she's expecting? When?" "Did you hear that he doesn't have much more time?" Your mom tells you, "This is really hard. But it won't last forever." And you scream, "But when?"

Whether out of frustration, or fear, or excitement, that little one word question seeks out information about the future as we consider all the ways that we're being impacted in our present. It's actually less about knowing the future as it is about coping with the present. In these moments, we can feel very alone, and we can feel full of despair. We long for respite. We hope the situation resolves itself. We desire for the person to stop hurting us. We want the pain to go away. But do we endure in our own strength? Do we attempt to fix the problem in our own way? What is our trust? What is our source of hope?

And Psalm 13 provides those questions. It gives us permission when we hold back. It teaches us something about the depths of our heart, which we long for. It also provides the answer of our heart, too, because you see, friends, the Lord is good to His people. Therefore, we must endure with hope. This psalm points us to that reality of enduring with hope.

And there's three stanzas. There are three verses, if you will, of this poem. We're going to look at how David discusses his experience of distress, and we see an opportunity for prayer as well as the place for transformation.

So as we look at verses 1 and 2, look there with me now. We see how we endure with hope as we experience distress. Now, Psalm 13 is a psalm of lament. And we see how David is writing about a deep, deep distress. Of course, there's nothing in the psalm that gives any specific detail that would point us to a particular circumstance in his life. However, David writes many psalms about his personal experiences but in general ways. He often discusses the challenges he faces with enemies, which can come from those outside and against his nation, but they also can come from inside and within his nation.

Here, David's song makes his lament just enough generalities—that's a word you never get tongue tied on. But yet we resonate with it, don't we? It's just enough that we recognize our own laments, and we appropriate his words, and his song becomes our song as we direct it to the Lord.

We see here in these first two verses that David asks the question, "How long, O Lord?" four times, twice in verse 1 and twice in verse 2. Looking at verse 1, we see how David distresses over his perception of God's absence from his life. He says, "How long, O Lord. Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" This poetic imagery of hiding your face is a figure of speech that truly captures this raw emotion of experiencing this isolation from the Lord. We don't know the cause, and maybe there is none. But it is an intense feeling as though the Lord is withdrawing His favor and His presence away from David. Just like the earth hides her blue glow from the eyes of an astronaut on the dark side of the moon, or the experience of having a friend or family member turn their face away from you, and you're left confused and wondering why they don't look at you.

In verse 2, he moves on to other distresses. He talks about his inner thoughts and how his emotions are consuming in his life. He writes, "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?" In the ESV, it says, "Take counsel." This refers to an experience of listening, of taking advice, making plans. It's the sense of pondering, but it's coming from a source of distress because as he's mulling over his thoughts, he's also worrying. It's less about taking counsel from others but being inside his own head and being consumed by his thoughts. And likewise, his inward sorrow of his heart is truly a picture of how he is grieved. His whole body is distressed. This brings us again in verse 2 where he says, "How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" Where he goes from the inner reality of his heart in the moment to the external circumstances that are challenging his life. "How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

These distresses, though particular to David in a moment, have become the echoes of God's people throughout the millennia. It is for us today. It is for us in our own personal worship. It's us when we're gathered together in corporate worship. And it draws us to a place to ask of ourselves what is distressing us? What pricks you? What is disturbing you? Do you feel your strength run dry? And do you fear that you can go no longer?

Even here in David's distress, there is comfort to speak of our complaints and our fears to the Lord. When He feels absent, it is a work of faith in our lives to call out to Him. As the author of Hebrews says, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." Even coming with our pain is sometimes all the faith we can muster. When our thoughts and emotions cloud us, we're not alone, and

we can go to our heavenly Father and seek His care, His wisdom. And when people are against us, whether perceived or real, we need the righteous words of the Lord over the fickle esteem of others. We need to be reminded of how God is for His people and not against us.

As David is recounting his distresses, he begins to shift, although his emotions don't necessarily change that much, but you begin to see where his eyes begin to redirect. In verses 3 and 4, we see how we endure with hope as we seek opportunities for prayer. David's questions in verses 1 and 2 give voice to what afflicts him, and he seeks answers from God in verses 3 and 4. "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God." You see, his anguish in those first two verses doesn't stop. It doesn't just go away because he starts praying. Here, when he says, "Consider and answer me," he's saying, "Pay attention to me. Look at me."

C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain*. And in that book, he wrote a quite famous line. "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains."

You see, David is not casting his pains into the void of a cold universe. Rather, he is shouting back to the one who was there and who knows him, who directs his paths, who blesses him, who gives him rest from his enemies, and who establishes the house and the throne as an enduring covenant. You see, David is remembering that covenant from 2 Samuel 7, and that is why he's saying, "Where are you?" "How long, O Lord?" "When?"

These are prayers of faith. "Because if you don't do it, Lord, my enemies triumph, and they gloat over me. If you don't do it, my eyes go dark. If you don't do it, I cannot go on." And as prayers of faith, offering up his desires unto God, seeking the help of His Spirit through His abundant mercies. This psalm, this poem for God's people is to be a cry of our heart to the Lord who is there.

Paul writes in Philippians 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice." He has to say it twice because God whispers in our pleasures, but He shouts in our pains. "The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Our Lord Jesus says, "I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be open to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and the one who knocks, it will be opened." Likewise, our Lord Jesus says, "How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who seek him?"

Verses 1 and 2 are very natural to pray. At least they are for me. Verses 3 and 4, we're starting to move forward. We're kind of like, "Okay. That's where a Christian's supposed to be. Okay. Let's pray. Our desires of our hearts, let's move towards the Lord." But they also begin to be a mirror. They also provide insight into the condition of our hearts. That is, are we trusting in ourselves, or are we seeking to rely upon the Lord for His answer? Is our sorrow so bleak? Is our heart so deadened that we either seek answers elsewhere, or do we stop even searching?

As we endure with hope, in these opportunities for prayer, may we know that the Lord is good and kind. May He heal your sorrows. May He quicken your hearts with the light of His face.

And the psalmist David moves forward in verses 5 and 6. We endure with hope as we experience transformation. David says, "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me." Here, the psalmist is elevated out of his pit of despair and raised up by the hand of the Almighty. The poem transitions from David consumed by his circumstances to being transformed by his savior. You see, David as well as all of the people of God, our hearts can rejoice because our fears for the uncertainty of when is replaced with the

sureness of who. Our hearts can rejoice because shame of defeat is replaced with the trust of God's love. Our hearts can rejoice because our loss at the hand of our enemies is replaced with the gain by God's salvation. Our hearts can rejoice because the sorrows of our souls are replaced with songs to the Lord. Our hearts can rejoice because we know the Lord does not hide His face.

That's the beauty of poetry. David doesn't have to take time to get the theology right. He has a point that he's making in this particular psalm to say, "Scream. Beat your chest. Weep." And though it feels like God is absent, He is not. We can rejoice because we know the Lord has been good.

So when we're in this place of transformation, it certainly—it can be nice and pretty. It can be a place of resolution but not merely because it feels better, or that the situation got fixed. Just as David comes to a place of transformation, we can, too, at the place that we accept God's steadfast love. David can endure with hope because God's salvation is true, and it's sure. That's the poem of what it does to our mind and to our heart and to our very soul that is being uplifted into the very love of God. It's to stand firm and endure with hope because God's salvation is sure.

Now, this is a fun sermon, right? We experience verses 1 and 4 in our lives differently based on maybe the very emphasis of the experience. It may look different from season to season or circumstance to circumstance, person to person. But we don't know when verses 5 and 6 take place. We don't know when it will occur. But we can rest in the work that God has started and will be faithful to complete. Standing firm in His grip, we can sense the anger in our heart melt. We can sense the darkness of our heart lighten. We may find ourselves rejoicing in the midst of weeping and singing praises for how the Lord deals bountifully. He has been good to me. I'm sure He has been good to you.

We read it earlier in the worship service from Romans 8, starting at verse 31.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is it to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. And more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [ESV]

That's that picture of when. How long, O Lord? Why do you forget me? Why do you hide your face? It's another way of saying that. "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" And emphatically, Paul is asking those rhetorical questions for you to scream and sing and dance by saying, "Nothing. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ." He says it in Philippians. "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

In our reformed tradition, we have various catechisms and confessions that provide a very rich tapestry to the faith that we have. In Heidelberg Catechism question number 1, "What is your only comfort in life and death?" We know the first sentence perhaps. I'm going to read the whole thing. "What is your only comfort?"

"That I am not my own but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head. Indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life

and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him."

Brothers and sisters, friends, for some of us, you might be able to quickly move on and thrive in those verses of 5 and 6, and verses 1 through 4 are maybe scars or limps in your memory. For others, you cannot imagine verses 5 and 6 being on your lips because verses 1 through 4 are all too relevant to your lives. And perhaps even some of you cannot even turn to the Lord to ask Him to consider you. This psalm, as many, is one for the one who weeps and the one who rejoices. Because we all weep at some point. And there will be some among us weeping at any point. But through and through, the Lord is steadfast, and His salvation is sure.

Now, as we think about how this plays out in our lives and in our relationships as a community, may we be a community that knows how the Lord has dealt with us, that He has been good to you. May that be a community that shares that, that voices that, that celebrates that, that knows those stories in our lives of our despairing and of God's good salvation. May we be a community of believers that experience the deep goodness of the Lord. May we know how He is good and kind. And though your pains may be many, maybe your strength falters, may our hearts be marked by the love of our God more than the wounds of our enemies.

What warms the blood? What pumps the heart? When sorrow tempts you to sit and freeze, God's salvation and His steadfast love frees you to fly. A greater love renews a very deep sorrow.

Of course, we're back to the back seat. And so we ask, "How long? When?" I don't know. I'm not sure. As one commentator put it about time, he says, "So we find acknowledged here in scripture what we all know and experience, that the steady march of time"—I'm sorry. "Steady march of real time never corresponds to the rate at which perceived time moves, dawdling or cantering, disappearing in a flash, or seeming to stand still."

You see, the question of how long is really asking, "When will this distress stop?" That's natural. That's reasonable. However, we can seek the pain to stop with no interest in the opportunities for communion with God because we want it just to stop. We want to protect ourselves from the pain. And because we're distracted by that pain, or maybe we neglect our need, then we miss out on transformation. Our very selves changed and renewed because we are taking our distress to the very one God in Christ Jesus, who shines His face upon us. Just as an enemy wounds us by their relentless assaults, God in Christ Jesus transforms us by His steadfast love. He alone and above all lifts our chin up. He looks in our face. He lights up our eyes with His kindness and truth. Let us pray.

Holy Father, our savior Jesus, and the comforter Holy Spirit, we pray asking you to be our comfort when we are in distress. We pray that you would use us to be a comfort to those who might be in distress around us. Teach us as a people to know how to lament with hope, to endure with hope, to sing, to praise your name, to love your steadfast promises that are all fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Heal us and renew us. Give us patience and endurance for the things that we go about in our relationships, in our very souls and hearts, and in the circumstances of our daily living. We pray these things, O Lord, in Jesus's name. Amen.