

“Where’s God When I Need Him?”

Psalm 13

When we lived in Seattle, we used to drive to LA to visit my parents. It’s interesting making that 1200-mile drive with little kids. You know the questions: Are we there yet? When are we going to stop? I have to go to the bathroom. She’s touching me. How much further is it? We developed a system, before our kids could tell time. When they asked us how much longer till we stop, we’d tell them, “As long as one more Sesame Street,” or “One more Barney.” The problem was, that worked with a short little trip, but with a big trip, it was forty more Barneys till we’d get there.

Sometimes it seems like we’re forty Barneys from the goal in our life’s journey, wondering where the Lord is. Where’s God when you need him? Where’s God when you’re facing the enemy? What are we supposed to do while we wait for God? As Psalm 13 struggles with those themes, it breaks into three sections: David’s lament, in verses 1-3, his prayer for deliverance in verses 4-5, and his expression of confidence in God in verse 6. Let’s look at each section, or movement in David’s journey.

First, the lament.

David’s caught between God on one side, and the enemy on the other. It’s not an easy place to be when God, seems far away. The enemy is strong; in fact it’s why it looks like the LORD has forgotten him. And so David takes his complaint straight to God, and he asks his question four times:

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...
 How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)

It’s the same indignant cry of Psalm 22, when David says:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
 Why do you remain so distant?
 Why do you ignore my cries for help?
 Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.
 Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief. (Psalm 22:1-2)

The fact that the enemy’s winning and God isn’t answering make the pain worse—how long does this have to go on? Where are you?

We don’t know who the enemy is, and it could be a lot of things, but it seems like the enemy is death itself, because David says in verse 4, “Restore the light to my eyes, or I will die.” We always live in the valley of the shadow of death, our great enemy. Like Paul says,

For [Christ] must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:27)

God will deal with the great enemy. The Bible concludes with a great vision of the victory of God. It tells us, there's a lake of fire that burns with sulfur, and it says,

Death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death.
(Revelation 20:10, 14)

But that day seems so far away. And in the meanwhile, it's not enough to say something like, "We all have to die one day anyway." So David says, "How long—*why*, Lord? When I *long* for you, when all I *want* is you, when I'm in *pain* because of your absence?" David complains, he pours out his pain, because God seems far away. The first stage is lament.

Second, the prayer for deliverance.

David doesn't stay in the lament. Now, he begs God to look, to turn his face back toward him. There's no point to a lament, to crying about your circumstances or pain, unless you turn to God in prayer. David prays "Enlighten my eyes," eyes that are dim with grief, eyes dimming as the light goes out. When your eyes *aren't* dim, you're in good health, in the Old Testament point of view, like when we read,

Moses' eyes had not grown dim. (Deuteronomy 34:7).

In Hebrew, to "enlighten the eyes" means the same thing as to give the breath of life. Like Solomon says,

The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: the Lord gives light to the eyes of both. (Proverbs 29:13)

So David's saying, "God, restore my health, save me from death, deliver me from grief." When God answered his prayer, he would turn his face toward him again, and David's eyes would be enlightened; that means he would be restored, physically and spiritually, body and soul.

It's interesting that David would say,

Lest my enemy should say, 'I have prevailed over him, or my adversaries should rejoice because I am shaken. (Psalm 13:5)

"Enemy" is singular, like the great enemy, which is death. "Adversaries," plural, points to the human enemies around him. If David would die, then his enemies would gloat over him. It somehow makes the bitterness of death worse to know that. David wants deliverance from death, and also from the triumph of evil people who would delight in his death.

Third, the expression of confidence.

David lives in the tension between past experience and future hope. In the past, he *has* enjoyed God's loving kindness, and in the future, he *will* see God's deliverance—he's going to burst out in a joyful song over God's deliverance, but that's still to come. But since he knows victory *is* coming, he already feels the peace and the joy of the future event breaking into the pain of his present.

David had to go through a process, a journey to come to his affirmation of faith. In the end, he's confident in God's deliverance, but it's about a change in attitude, not in circumstances. That's because life's about our relationship with God. When life's hard and God seems far away, we remember how God came through for us in the past, and we hope in the future.

Let me go back and suggest three things for us for the times we struggle and God seems far away.

First, specify the problem. (vv. 1-2)

By this, I simply mean, recognize it. Even God's children have struggles. Life's hard, and sometimes we get sick and tired; we want to say, enough is enough! When are things going to turn around for me? If you don't feel like that today, you will, because it's part of being human. Of course, we know that, but sometimes we think if we follow God that things aren't supposed to be that way. But Christians aren't exempt from pain and stress.

Jesus tells us those times would come are coming when he says, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Paul knows about that, too, because he tells us,

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22).

Even John Newton, the former captain of a slave ship who became a Christian, wrote a hymn about it that says,

Why should I complain of want or distress, temptation or pain, He told me no less: The heirs of salvation, I know from His word, Through much tribulation, Shall follow their Lord."

It's easy to start thinking God's forgotten you when you're not at peace, when you're plagued with trouble. You start to question God's goodness and faithfulness, maybe even whether he's there at all.

That's why the enemies that threaten to overwhelm us aren't just out there, but they're in here, too, in our mind. One translation of verse two is, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?" David knew God and loved him, but right now he didn't know *what* to believe any more, whether to believe God or believe his doubts that tortured him. No wonder he had "sorrow in his heart." No wonder he was afraid.

But notice what he does. He brings his complaint to the right place. He comes straight to God. It's the same thing Job does when the bottom falls out of his life—he says,

I long to speak directly to the Almighty. I want to argue my case with God himself...Let me speak—and I will face the consequences. Yes, I will take my

life in my hands and say what I really think. God might kill me, but I cannot wait. I am going to argue my case with him. (Job 13:3, 13-15)

Sometimes God delays, he hides his face from us, and it doesn't mean he isn't working in our situation for our good. It means he's giving us the opportunity to exercise faith, and he's stripping away our other sources of strength so we'll rely on him.

We all have times when we struggle with doubt. The point is not that we never have struggles, never have doubts, but that we bring them to the right place—to God himself. He's big enough to handle them.

Paul writes,

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

That's how we overcome. We trust God's promises and we look forward to glory, even when we have to act *opposite* from the way we feel. Otherwise, we let the evil one have the victory. So, specify the problem, and bring it to the Lord.

Second, say your prayers. (vv. 3-4)

One of the great things about the psalms is they show us how to be honest with our feelings, and honest with God.

Like psalm 73, when Asaph asks,

Was it for nothing that I kept my heart pure and kept myself from doing wrong?
All I get is trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain. (Psalm 73:13)

There's a great moment of transformation in the psalm, and he says,

Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I thought about the destiny of the wicked...then I realized how bitter I had become...I was so foolish and ignorant—I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you. Yet I still belong to you; you are holding my right hand. (Psalm 73:17-23)

God is faithful. Salvation comes. How? It's often in the place of prayer, in his sanctuary. And along the way, he says, bring your real self to me, not your ideal self.

David sees how important that is, and he says in Psalm 142:2, "I pour out my complaints before the Lord, and I tell him all my troubles." That's the starting point in prayer. Bring your impatience, your fatigue, your anger, whatever it might be, and bring them to God. David's learned to be real before God; it's why he says, "Look on me and answer me, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death." It's like he's saying, "God, I'm desperate, and you're my only hope!"

You can always come to him, and you can always be real. God wants the real you, not the ideal you. Even when you can't confide in anyone else, you can tell him. And we can bring our real, problematic selves to God. He understands.

Third, express your faith. (vv. 5-6)

We have to express our faith, even if we have to dig down deep to understand what God might be doing in our life to shape us and overcome sin in us. God allows hardship in our life not to punish us but to make us more like Jesus. So even when we wait, even when God seems absent, we trust. We need to do like Isaiah, who says,

Still, I will wait on the LORD, who hides his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. (Isaiah 8:17)

We need to be like Habakkuk, who says,

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will find joy in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

David uses the word, “mercy,” loving kindness. “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!”

See what happens? The psalm begins in anguish, and ends in peace. It starts in conflict, and ends in trust. David starts wondering if God is bad, and by the end he rejoices in how good God is. What made the difference? David’s circumstances didn’t change, but his attitude did. That’s because the center of life is a relationship with God.

It’s like that in the musical, “The Music Man.” A con artist named Professor Hill comes to River City with plans to pretend to organize a boys’ marching band, then to skip town with the people’s money. Marion the librarian doesn’t think he knows a thing about music. She doesn’t trust he’s really able to organize a marching band. But when she comes to see that he’s brought life and love of music to the town, she falls in love with him. She still sees all his faults, but she decides to change her attitude. The outer circumstances didn’t change, but she did. She won’t listen to the voices of anyone else any more, because she’s seen something else in him.

Now, my point is *not* that God is deceitful, or that we can’t trust him. My point is that sometimes your attitude changes things even when your circumstances don’t change.

Whenever your heart is heavy, there’s a choice you have to make. It’s which voice you listen to—the voices that rise up and mock your faith? The voices of self-pity or condemnation? The other voices that question God? You have to make a choice. When I get into a bad mental place, I have to shut those voices out, and instead listen to God’s voice.

When you face troubles, and you feel worn out, like you can’t go on; when God’s face is hidden; when your mind’s in turmoil and your spirit is cast down, and like David cries out in anger, “How long are you going to forget me—forever?!” Remember, when God tests you, it’s tough, but it’s temporary.

When that happens, you can choose life. And the way to do that is to affirm what you know. Hold onto what God has already made clear. Maybe it helps to quote a favorite Scripture verse that tells you again what's true.

God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

God says, "I have not forgotten you; your name is engraved onto my hands."

God says, "I love you so much, I died so I wouldn't have to lose you. I care for you. You are precious to me. You are mine."

Choose to affirm your faith. It makes all the difference.