

Painful Waiting, Hopeful Trusting

Psalm 13

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

¹ *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?

³ *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;*

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ *lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"*

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ *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.

“How long is this going to take?”

This is a question we ask when we're facing something unpleasant, but something we anticipate getting through. We might ask it to ourselves when waiting for our number to be called at the MVA. We might ask it when we're facing surgery. Some of you might be asking it to yourselves right now as this sermon begins.

Yesterday, Gabe and Kait got married at the Naval Academy chapel. We were put under a strict 30-minute time limit for the whole wedding ceremony. Gabe has grown up under my preaching for the past 9 years, so he was understandably nervous about whether or not we could make that work. He and Kait wanted to know How Long the wedding message was going to be.

But “How long?” is sometimes asked in much more serious and much longer situations. “How long will I be stuck in this depression?” “How long will it be until my children return to the Lord?” “How long will these cancer treatments last?”

Of the questions we ask in dark times, Why? And How long? are probably the most frequent and painful. When we ask “Why?”, often we're asking for an explanation that is beyond our ability to understand because we're searching for meaning in the seeming meaninglessness of our pain. “How Long?” is a more hopeful question, as we're seeking – and expecting – an end to our suffering, relief from our pain.

In the Psalms, both questions are asked, but How Long? is more frequently asked, by far. It is a question of expectation, of longing, and of hope. Because we trust in the goodness of God, in His wise and loving providence for His own, we believe that He will bring us through the difficult patches of His providence. That's why we ask, "How long?"

How Long, O Lord? vv. 1-2

¹ 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 don't know the life circumstances that caused David to write Psalm 13. But he is clearly in a desperate place. The Psalms encourage us and give us the language to pour out our hearts before the Lord without pretense. We've learned and used the ACTS pattern of prayer here in this church – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. We believe the normal pattern for prayer should begin with praise, following the example taught to us by Jesus, "*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.*"

But not all prayers follow the "normal" pattern of the Lord's Prayer. When our hearts are overwhelmed with pain, and we feel like they're going to burst under the strain, we can and must pour them out before the LORD. David calls on His covenant LORD, the Great I AM, the One who never changes and is self-sufficient in every way.

David feels forgotten by the LORD, and he does not gloss over this reality. He feels that God has hidden His face from him, that his prayers are not really being heard, that he is abandoned to take counsel in his own soul rather than with the LORD he loves so deeply and longs to enjoy close fellowship with.

As a sign of God's apparent abandonment of him, David's enemy is exalted over him. So, he asks how long his enemy will be exalted while he is cast down.

While David is being honest before the LORD, and such honesty is welcome and encouraged, we know that he was not abandoned by God, that God was not against him. Even in this pit of despair, the Holy Spirit inspired him to write this Psalm as the very Word of God for him and for all of God's people. David was judging his condition by his feelings and by his external circumstances, but his judgment was flawed because his understanding was incomplete.

In our modern society, we're always tempted to give too much credence to our feelings. People want their feelings to be fully validated as the measure of reality. Sometimes, we can then react against that and reject feelings as purely unstable and unimportant. The Psalms do not invalidate the reality of feelings, but neither do they grant our feelings the power to determine the

truth. We are to openly and freely acknowledge to God how we feel, but we must not allow our feelings to determine reality to the point of overriding the promises of God. God had made covenant promises to David, and He was keeping them faithfully, despite how David felt.

Consider and Answer, vv. 3-4

David doesn't remain stuck in his feelings. He moves to directly asking God to consider his state and answer his prayer –

³ *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
⁴lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.*

David knows rightly that his only hope of salvation is in the LORD. His covenant LORD is his strength and deliverer, the Mighty One who must save him. If the LORD does not answer, David's enemies will prevail. He will sleep the sleep of death. His enemies, who are also God's enemies, will rejoice. Evil will triumph.

We need to realize this deeply how much we absolutely need the LORD in our trials. 1 John 4:4 tells us, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." And that's true. But we need to remember that it is "He who is in us" and not we ourselves who is greater than he who is in the world. In other words, as Colossians 1 says, it is Christ in us which is our hope of glory, but not us in ourselves.

Hear how David expresses this in Psalm 124 –

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—
let Israel now say—
²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side
when people rose up against us,
³then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
⁴then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
⁵then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

⁶Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth!
⁷We have escaped like a bird*

*from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped!*

⁸*Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

This is how we can have humble confidence, free from presumption and actively dependent on the LORD. We need the LORD, and in Christ Jesus, the LORD is with us and for us. But we must not presume that this means we can do anything or go anywhere and put the LORD to the test because He'll always have to come to our rescue. We need to be actively, humbly, desperately dependent on the LORD's help, because His help is indeed our only hope.

If the LORD holds us up, we will be upheld. If He delivers us, we will be rescued. And He has given us salvation in His Son, Jesus Christ. But without Him actively, wisely ordering all things for our eternal good, we would be without hope. We would not be able to make it on our own. This is why a strong vision of a sovereign God is so vital to our humility and stability. Depending on ourselves will only lead to arrogance or despair.

But I Have Trusted, v. 5

⁵*But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

Verse 5 is the wonderful turning point of Psalm 13. It is the hinge which pivots David and us from despair to joyful hope.

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love.” At first glance, we could misread this as David somehow finding comfort in the strength of his own faith. Very often, the hinge points of Scripture will turn us toward the saving work of God. Ephesians 2:4 has my favorite two words in the Bible: “But God . . .”

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴**But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—*

Titus 3:4 has a similar beautiful hinge point that pivots on the saving grace of God:

³For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴**But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,** ⁵**he saved us,** not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy

We could look at many more examples. When we are without hope, it is the intervening and transforming power of the saving grace of God that makes all the difference. And yet, on the surface, it looks like David is pointing in a different direction, focused more on the strength of his faith than on the power of God's grace.

And yet, that's not quite right. David knows that his faith in the steadfast love of the LORD is itself a gift of God's grace and evidence of the saving grace of God working in his life. When David says, "*But I have trusted in your steadfast love,*" he knows that God's grace changed him and gave him the faith to trust in the LORD's steadfast love. In other words, David knows he belongs to God not only because of the promises of the word of God themselves but because he received them by faith; his trust in God is evidence of God's grace to him.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians about this reality –

*For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, **because** our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.* – 1 Thess. 1:4-5, ESV

David has trusted in the steadfast love of the LORD, and this gives him assurance of God's grace and even joy in the midst of his intense struggle -

*But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

Because David has trusted in the LORD's undeserved, faithful love, his heart will rejoice in the Lord's salvation. God's steadfast love never changes. Hundreds of years after David, the prophet Jeremiah could sing that truth even as Jerusalem lay in a pile of rubble and ash –

²² *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;*

²³ *they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

²⁴ *"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."*

²⁵ *The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.*

*²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.*

- Lamentations 3:22-26, ESV

This is the language of faith, true and saving faith in the true and living God. Faith says: Because I know God's steadfast love never fails, I know His mercies are new every morning, and so I will rejoice in His salvation and I will hope in Him. I will wait quietly in my distress and seek Him earnestly, trusting Him to be who He is and to be gracious to me at all times.

When we are surrounded by enemies, when the pressure and persecution of our enemies seems too much, when our life circumstances are overwhelming, we can and must look up to heaven and realize that the eternal God reigns over us as our sovereign covenant Lord, our committed king and redeemer, and that He is ordering everything for our eternal good and His glory in our lives.

Often, we're too weak to worship heartily on our own. Our doubts and fears and circumstances can feel crushing. That's another reminder that we need the church. We need to gather for worship with other believers, sing together and hear each other's praises, pray together for each other, and hear the LORD speaking His truth to all of us.

I Will Sing, v. 6

And so, David concludes Psalm 13 –

*⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

It is not enough to simply know the truth. It is not enough to simply remind ourselves and even one another of the truth. Our souls need to sing to the LORD. He is worthy of our worship, and we were made to worship Him!

Why sing to the LORD? Here, David highlights one very good reason: Because He has dealt bountifully with me. If your favorite team scores a touchdown, you cheer. If you're an Orioles fan, and your team beats the Yankees 17-5, you gloat. If you eat something delicious, you say "MMMMM" and immediately want to share it with someone else. And if the LORD has been good to you, you sing!

Even in his present deep distress, David could look back on how the LORD had dealt bountifully with him and resolve to sing the praises of the LORD.

What a contrast between the opening and the closing of this short psalm –

¹ *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*

⁶ *I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

David's heart attitude was completely transformed because He sought the LORD earnestly, cried out to Him honestly, and trusted Him by grace to continue to be who He always had been – David's good and gracious king!

What Painful Suffering Teaches Us

And so, we can see that David learned valuable lessons in his suffering. We should seek to learn these same lessons, and very often suffering is the best teacher. In the movie *Shadowlands*, C.S. Lewis calls experience "the most brutal of teachers. But you learn."

What did David learn? What should we learn?

1. Don't wallow in painful suffering, but pour out your soul honestly before God.
2. Just because you're suffering, even very deeply and for a long time without any apparent reason, that doesn't mean God has either changed or abandoned you.
3. God remains steadfast in His love and good in His dealings with us, at all times, no matter what.
4. All suffering of God's people is temporary, but their joy in the LORD is eternal.

And this is where we really come to the golden Gospel key to unlocking joy in the midst of suffering: Because Jesus has taken our sins on Himself at the cross and conquered death forever in His resurrection, the eternal joy of believers can never be taken away by anything temporary in this life.

I was listening to a sermon by Toby Holt earlier this week, and he reminded me of an old saying: The believer's best week in this life cannot compare to the intense joy of our worst week in the eternal life to come. But also, the unbeliever's worst week here in this this life cannot compare to the utter misery of his best week in the eternal death to come. The sorrows of this life are all the sorrows a believer will ever experience, and they are temporary. The joys of this life are all the joys an unbeliever will experience, and they are temporary.

What does Professor Experience teach us in suffering? Perhaps the most valuable lesson of all: Perspective. And it's the eternal perspective that brings us unshakable hope and unquenchable joy even in the dark times when we cry "How Long?"