

Psalm 13

For the choir director. A Psalm of David.

Introduction

The book of Psalms is often misunderstood and, I would suggest, misapplied by Christians today. Part of the reason for this is our self-focused and individualistic approach to the Psalms. On the one hand, they're beloved by Christians because they give expression to our deepest feelings and emotions. On the other hand, Christians find it uncomfortable, and even in many cases repulsive, to sing the Psalms together in worship. I wonder if this could be a sign that sometimes we love the Psalms for the wrong reasons?

It's important to remember that this Psalm is first and foremost a Psalm of the *king*. It's first and foremost the prayer of Yahweh's Anointed, whom He has installed upon Zion, His holy mountain (Ps. 2:2, 6), and to whom He said:

- Psalm 2:7-9 — “You are My Son, today I have begotten You. *Ask of Me*, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like a potter's vessel.”

“Ask of Me,” says Yahweh to His royal Son; “Pray to Me” with these words. Psalm 13, then, is the king's response to Yahweh's invitation. He prays this prayer because it is God's will that he pray this prayer.

Far from this making the psalms prayers that *we* can't pray, the fact that these are the prayers of the king only establishes the fact that they truly do belong to us. The king represents and stands for the people. In the sufferings and sorrows of the king are the sufferings and sorrows of his people. In the triumphs and joys of the king are the triumphs and joys of his people. And so it's Yahweh's invitation to His royal Son that emboldens us to pray and to sing with His Son—the one whom we, by grace, have owned as our King.

We know that all the kings of Old Covenant Israel were—in terms of their office and lineage as royal descendants of David—“types” of the *true* Messianic King, Jesus Christ, just as the earthly Zion upon which David was installed as king was a “type” of that true heavenly Zion upon which Jesus Himself has now been installed as our King. So these psalms are ultimately, in different ways, the prayers and laments and praises of our King, Jesus Christ, with whom we have been united by faith. These are prayers that we know He prayed “in the days of His flesh” (Heb. 5:7; cf. the Gospel accounts of Christ's passion) and that He now leads us in praying as those still living in the flesh in this fallen world. We could say that He prays these prayers for us and on our behalf as He always intercedes for us at the Father's right hand (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). So let's come now to this specific prayer that our King prays on our behalf—and that He leads us in praying with Him.

I. Psalm 13:1a — How long— O Yahweh?

The Psalms are full of the real emotions and feelings that are common to the human condition, and specifically to the experience of every true believer. This psalm begins with a groan that's cut off by the extremity of its own feeling. In a moment, David will ask: "How long will You hide Your face from me?" That's a complete thought. Then he'll ask again: "How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day?" That's another complete thought. And then again: "How long will my enemy be exalted over me?" But he begins with a thought immediately cut short: "How long— O Yahweh?"

This is real human emotion. It's the kind of distress for which there's no easy "fix." In fact, there really is no "fix" at all unless God chooses to do something. If this is distress originally caused by sin, then we know the psalmist has already confessed this sin because there's no mention of sin or guilt in this prayer. He's already come to God repeatedly, asking for His intervention. And so this is why he asks, now, "How long—?" A more literal translation would be, "Until when—?" In just those two words, the psalmist expresses what is at the heart of so many of our trials and griefs and sufferings as God's children. It's not just the griefs and the sufferings themselves, but the feeling that they'll never go away, and that therefore God Himself is distant and far off, no longer caring or paying attention. And so we pray with our King, in some mysterious and wonderful sense at Yahweh's own invitation:

II. Psalm 13:1b — How long— O Yahweh? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

David knows that God is still aware of him. He knows that God has not had a cognitive lapse of memory. But that's what makes things all the more painful. God is aware of all David's griefs and sufferings, and yet there *still* seems to be no end in sight. And so for all practical purposes, it seems that God has "forgotten" him. But we need to take it a step further than just how things seem or how things feel. There's a sense in which God really has hidden His face from David (cf. Ps. 22:24; 30:7). We know, by faith, that God's face is always shining upon us (cf. Num. 6:22-27)—looking upon us favorably and with blessing—in Christ. But there's also a sense in which the face of God shining upon us is a picture of His gracious and favorable answer to all our prayers. So when our righteous prayers aren't being answered, we can truly say that God is hiding His face from us. Again, we know that He hides His face because in the mystery of His secret will, this is the way that His face is still shining upon us in Christ. But as wonderful and as comforting as that is, it doesn't take away the distress of still being compelled to ask (even if it is at God's own invitation): "How long—? ... Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?"

III. Psalm 13:2a — How long [until when] shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day?

We said a moment ago that there's no "fix" available to David. On the one hand, there's no sin for him to confess, and now we see that there's no wise or responsible course of action that he hasn't already tried or that he's not still attempting to work out. And yet so far God has granted Him no success, and the result is sorrow in his heart all the day.

We like “fixes.” But sometimes there really is no “fix” that can take away the cry of “How long?” or the sorrow in our hearts. Sometimes there is no “fix” because it is God Himself who chooses, in the mystery of His will, to hide His face.

Three times David has asked, “How long?” Now he asks for the fourth and final time:

IV. Psalm 13:2b — How long [until when] will my enemy be exalted over me?

So far, we feel like we’ve been able to identify with the feelings of the Psalmist. But now we see that these “feelings” of the Psalmist are rooted in the concrete fact of his enemy being exalted over him (and, in verse 4, boasting that he has overcome him and rejoicing that he is shaken). The Psalms are full of “enemies,” and this tends to make us modern western Christians uncomfortable. Are we really supposed to have “enemies”? And even if we do, aren’t we supposed to love our enemies?

At this point, it can be tempting to “spiritualize” the enemies so that we think of things like the “world,” the “flesh,” and the “devil.” But the “world” is always manifested concretely in hostile men and women.

- John 15:18 (cf. 7:7; 15:19; 1 Jn. 3:13) — “If the world hates you [Jesus said], know that it has hated Me before it hated you.”

The “flesh,” on the other hand, is essentially the sin nature within us. But in the Psalms, the enemy is external to us and always carefully distinguished from the sin that is within. The psalmist “complains” to God about his enemies, but we can never “complain” to God about our sin. Finally, the attacks of the devil are also manifested concretely in the hatred and opposition that he seeks to inspire against God’s people (1 Pet. 5:8-10; or else in temptations to sin). When Paul says that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood,” he’s saying that behind our real flesh and blood enemies are the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). I cannot see any way to spiritualize the “enemy” in the Psalms. How, then, can these Psalms, with all their talk of “enemies,” be songs for us to sing and to pray today?

Remember that these are first of all the prayers that God has invited His royal Son, the King, to pray (Ps. 2:7-9). In order to understand who the enemy is, we must always have in our mind Psalm 2, which begins with these words:

- Psalm 2:1-3 — Why do the nations rage and the peoples meditate on a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against Yahweh and against His Anointed, saying, “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!”

The “enemy” in the Psalms is always first of all the enemy of Yahweh’s “Anointed,” which means that the enemy is always actively plotting and scheming rebellion against Yahweh Himself. But then we also need to remember the end of Psalm two:

- Psalm 2:10–12 — So now, O kings, show insight; take warning, O judges of the earth. Serve Yahweh with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

The “enemy” of Yahweh’s “Anointed” is always the one who has stubbornly refused to take refuge in Him. So this isn’t about one random man’s personal vendetta. This is about the king whom God has installed upon Zion who is concerned not only for God’s sovereign rule, but also for the peace of all God’s covenant people. In Psalm 3, David—the king— prays for his own salvation and then concludes with a prayer for all God’s people.

- Psalm 3:7–8 — Arise, O Yahweh; save *me*, O my God! For You have struck all *my* enemies on the cheek; You have shattered the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to Yahweh; Your blessing be upon *Your people*!

In Psalm 51, David—the king—confesses his own sin and seeks forgiveness and then concludes with a prayer for all God’s people.

- Psalm 51:2, 10, 14, 18 — Wash *me* thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse *me* from my sin... Create in *me* a clean heart, O God... Deliver *me* from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation... By Your favor do good to *Zion*; build the walls of *Jerusalem*.

The king is the one who rules for God over God’s people. Therefore, the enemy of the king is not just his own personal enemy, but the enemy of all God’s covenant people (cf. Jn. 15:18). Therefore, the enemy of the king is such only because he is first of all the proclaimed enemy of God.

Can you see how essential it is that when we pray the Psalms we pray them always in and with our King and always in the light of our place in the community of God’s covenant people? But this isn’t how we tend to read and/or pray the Psalms, is it? We generally read them in a highly individualized, and self-focused manner, which is why we’re so uncomfortable singing psalms about God shattering the teeth of the wicked and effacing the memory of our enemies (cf. Ps. 3:7; 9:6). But the apostles, in Acts, understood how to sing these psalms without having personal vendettas or a spiteful, hateful heart. After being briefly jailed and then ordered by the authorities to speak no more in the name of Jesus:

- Acts 4:23–29 — [The apostles] went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Master, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said [in Psalm 2], ‘WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE VAIN THINGS? THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.’ For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose

predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your word with all confidence...

The apostles can pray with confidence in the face of threats and persecution (but see also 2 Cor. 1:8-9; 6:4-10; 11:23-27) because they know that God will answer the prayer that He has invited their King to pray:

- Psalm 2:8-9 — “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like a potter’s vessel.”

So let’s come back, now, to David’s fourth “How long?”—“How long [until when] will my enemy be exalted over me?” In the west, today, we see the enemy meditating rebellion against Yahweh and against His Anointed in the promotion of “wokeness,” and “critical race theory,” and in its attack on the very “image of God”—who created man “male and female” (Gen. 1:27). But what about in other nations where communist and authoritarian governments are meditating rebellion by persecuting and oppressing His people? Can we not groan and cry out with them: “How long— O Yahweh?” Can we not pray in and with our King: “How long will my enemy be exalted over me?”

We know that today there is no longer any enemy that is exalted over Jesus Christ because he has been installed not upon an earthly Mount Zion, but upon the heavenly Mount Zion—“far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:20-21). This means that we pray the Psalms in a way that the Old Testament saints never could. We pray, now, in light of the fulfillment, already, of Psalm 2.

But there’s still a “not yet.” It still remains for “all rule and all authority and power” to be “abolished” (1 Cor. 15:24). “We do not yet *see* all things subjected to Him” (Heb. 2:8; cf. Hughes), therefore Christ must reign *until* He has put all His enemies under His feet (1 Cor. 15:25; cf. Heb. 2:9). And so we still groan, waiting for the redemption of our body and even of the whole creation (Rom. 8:18-25). The Spirit still help us in our weakness, interceding for us with groanings too deep for words (Rom. 8:26-27).

The enemy does still exalt himself over God’s covenant people, and so it’s still our King—Jesus Himself—who leads us in praying: “How long [until when] will my enemy be exalted over me?” We pray this prayer only and always in and with our King. When we understand this, how can we have any hesitation in praying and singing these words together, and with all God’s church throughout the world? When we understand this, how could we sing these words with anything less than a pure and God-honoring heart? We long to see our enemies crushed and destroyed insofar as they’re the declared enemies of our King, and therefore insofar as they’re the enemies of all our brothers and sisters, and therefore insofar as they’re the enemies of our own most holy joy and gladness. We cry out to God for the destruction of our enemies insofar as they’re also enemies of the Gospel (cf. Acts 13:10; Rom. 15:30-31; 2 Cor. 11:12-15; Phil. 1:27-30; 3:18-19; 1 Thess. 2:14-16; 5:2-3; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 3:1-3; 1 Tim. 5:14; Rev. 6:9-11; 11:5, 12; 16:4-7; 19:1-3). But insofar as my enemy (with a name) is personally antagonistic toward *me*, I’m also called to

love and forgive and pray for him (Mat. 5:43-44; Rom. 12:19-21; cf. David in 1 Sam. 25:2-38 & 2 Sam. 16:5-14).

“*How long*— O Yahweh? Will You forget me forever? *How long* will You hide Your face from me? *How long* shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day? *How long* will my enemy be exalted over me?” We remember that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day” (2 Pet. 3:8; cf. Ps. 90:4), but this doesn’t, in itself, remove the distress of the present circumstances. And so it’s Yahweh Himself who still invites us to cry out together in and with our King: “How long—O Yahweh?” “Until when?” Rather than being an expression of doubt, this is the cry of faith. It’s the question that all of God’s saints have asked in every generation. Contained within the lament is petition. So we read in verses 3-4:

V. Psalm 13:3-4 — Look and answer me, O Yahweh my God; give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy says, “I have overcome him,” and my adversaries rejoice that I am shaken.

We know that these are just the kind of words that our King prayed “in the days of His flesh.”

➤ Hebrews 5:7 — He... offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence.

Since God has heard the prayer of Jesus and since He has answered that prayer by “raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand” (Eph. 1:20-21), therefore we pray the psalms today in a way that the Old Testament saints never could. We pray the psalms in light of the fulfillment, already, of Psalm 2.

But there’s still a “not yet.” And so we still pray with all God’s people, in and with our King: “Look and answer me, O Yahweh my God; give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy says, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my adversaries rejoice that I am shaken.” Which is really just to pray: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mat. 5:10); “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

If contained within our lament/“complaint” is petition, then underlying all our petition is a confident trust and joyful thanksgiving. And so we confess with the psalmist:

VI. Psalm 13:5-6 — But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to Yahweh, because He has dealt bountifully with me.

We pray these words in a way that the Old Testament saints never could. We have trusted in the lovingkindness—in all the covenant mercies—that God has shown to us in Christ.

➤ Titus 3:4-7 — When the *kindness* and [*loving*] *affection* [*philanthropia*] of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He

poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace, we would become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

- Ephesians 2:4–7 — God, being rich in mercy because of His great *love* with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in *kindness* toward us in Christ Jesus.

We know that our hearts shall rejoice in His salvation. We know that one day we will sing to Yahweh, because already He has dealt bountifully with us—because already He has answered the prayer of His Anointed. It’s this certainty that God will answer the prayers that we pray in and with our King—the prayers that God Himself has invited us and called us to pray—it’s this certainty that gives us joy even today; a joy that exists still together with our sorrow and our cries of lament: “How long— O Yahweh?” “Until when?”

Conclusion

Our ability to pray and to sing the psalms as a church can be an indicator of our spiritual condition—of where our priorities truly lie (Ps. 119:53, 136, 139). And so also a commitment to learning how to pray and sing the psalms together—in and with our King—is a wonderful, powerful means of molding and shaping our priorities after the priorities of Christ and His kingdom.