

Getting Back to the Goodness of God

Psalm 13

Faith Evangelical Free Church (Manhattan, KS)

December 30, 2018

I want to begin this morning by reading in full the passage we'll taking a look at today. It is Psalm 13, and I invite you all to follow along in whatever way best allows you connect with and reflect on the powerful words, intense emotions, and rugged faithfulness of this hymn attributed to the poet-king of Israel, King David.

Psalm 13 (NIV)

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

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

2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, 4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

6 I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

On the surface, Psalm 13 seems fairly straightforward. It is a Psalm of lament, a prayer for help, a crying out to God in the midst of crisis. There are all sorts of fancy and scholarly ways to break down these sorts of psalms, but I think author and pastor Sam Storms gets it right when he says that passages like Psalm 13 all share this similar beginning: (The psalmist shouts to God)

"I'm hurting. They are winning. You don't seem to care."

"I'm hurting" -- something, or many somethings, has gone terribly wrong in my life and it is causing me a great deal of pain, anguish, and suffering.

"They are winning" -- My enemies have the upperhand. The scheme of Satan to drag me down is succeeding. The pressures and expectations and lies swirling around me are overwhelming me. I am losing the battle of standing on my own two feet.

"You don't seem to care" -- I feel alone and abandoned by God. Maybe he's forgotten me. Maybe he's actually, terrifyingly turned against me. Whatever it is I am in a great deal of pain and if God doesn't hurry up and pay attention to my needs...then I am doomed.

And then, unexpectedly and without explanation, at the end of all lament Psalms there is a sudden rush of faith, hope, and love. The psalmist inexplicably declares his or her confidence in God and in His worthiness to be praised.

It's like worship-whiplash, a 180-degree about face that often leaves us, the modern reader, with a feeling of warmth encouragement deep within our hearts...or, at times, a feeling of cold longing deep within our bones. For some of us in, vv. 1-4, we find commiseration. But we're not sure how to get ourselves over and into vv. 5-6. That's what I want to take some time to think about this morning.

Now some of you may be thinking, "uh...Sam, don't you think this is kind of a buzzkill? It's the Sunday in between Christmas and the New Year! We just go done with merriment and joy, and now we're supposed to be filled with optimism and excitement for what 2019 might bring. Why on earth do you want to spend time thinking about what it means to cry out, '*How long, Lord?*' Is this really the time or place to learn about lament?"

But here's the thing: as wonderful as Christmas is, and as much as I love this time of year with all the bright lights, cheerful music, and general merriment and bliss...it's also a time of the year when we're tempted and pressured to put on a false face of happiness. If you come into the Christmas season with burdens and sufferings you're not sure you can handle, all of a sudden it's like the whole world is telling you to "just be happy, it's Christmas!" And because you don't want to ruin anyone's holiday with your pain and struggles and junk...you work really hard to simply push it down, keep it out of sight, and tell yourself you'll handle it all on your own.

Brothers and sisters, hear me clearly: handling "it" -- your suffering, your heartache, your pain -- handling it on your own is never a good idea. You weren't made for that. You're not that strong.

So this morning I want to invite you to do what might feel like the very un-Christmaslike work of being honest and acknowledging your pain before the Lord. I want to assure you that is far more disingenuous to our faith -- to YOUR faith -- to pretend like everything is okay instead of being blunt and brutal about what is really going on inside our hearts.

Bring your troubles before the Lord. Bring the hurts and pains of you and your loved ones before the Lord. Lay what is really in your heart at the feet of Jesus. Wrestle with God.

And as you do so, even if it's hard, take heart and have hope...although we begin with the threefold cries of "I'm hurting, they are winning, you don't seem to care," we will also reach for and seek the depth of faith that can lead us to say "*I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.*"

So let's get back into the text and take another look at the beginning verses of Psalm 13.

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

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

The psalmist (who, again, was most likely King David) begins his prayer with a cascade of complaints, a deeply personal expression of despair in the midst of crisis. "*How long, Lord?*" is asked four times -- How

long will God forget him, look the other way, leave him in turmoil, and abandon him to face his enemies alone?

One of the unique and I think brilliant features of this psalm is that the background details of the David's lament are never given -- we don't know the events or the troubles that have brought him to his knees before the Lord. And I don't think there is any need to go searching for them.

Sometimes when we read Scripture we approach it like a curious, analytic third-party. We dissect the passage and its historical context until the emotion can be put in a box and set to the side leaving us with the very safe and unobtrusive data that makes us feel like we've got biblical knowledge without having to deal with the messy business of our soul's transformation.

But we're provided no such shelter in this psalm. We will never know with certainty what the original author was facing. Instead we're left with the jolting and unsettling invitation to ask ourselves...what in our lives has made us feel this way? How are we hurting? What causes us to cry out "How long, Lord" for ourselves?

Maybe you can draw on something from your past, remember a time when you felt a dark and troubling struggle in your soul.

Or perhaps this is happening for you right now. You came here today with a burden that is too much for you to carry, too great and terrible for you to defeat on your own. The questions of "why" and "where is God" have been on your lips this week, maybe even this very morning as you prayed.

If that's the case, then I hope this morning can be a gift to you, a way God is ministering to you even in the midst of your wondering where He at this moment when you need Him most. Please trust me, He is there, He does love you, and perhaps Psalm 13 can be for you the roadmap that allows you to circle back to feeling His presence once again.

"How long, Lord" is a cry that can apply to many circumstances. The "enemies" from v. 2 could be real people causing you harm, or it could refer to other things that cause physical, emotional, social, or economic distress.

And it is not only a heart-cry for adults; children and teenagers certainly feel this too. There are kids all over our community and indeed in our own church that know what heartache feels like. They ask "how long" when they or their loved ones get diagnosed with chronic illnesses, or when their family life is not what it should be. They feel the pressure of our culture pushing them to be something or someone they may not want to be, to do things they may not want to do.

Ultimately, "How long, Lord?" is an acknowledgement that those who walk with God can certainly go through times of deep pain. ***Sometimes we're going to feel, and truly be, helpless.*** It's one of the consequences of living in a fallen world that is still besieged by the power of Sin and Satan. There are going to be trials and challenges and all sorts of awful things that break us in way that require a power greater than our own to save us and heal us.

So, the first two verses of Psalm 13 puts three very hard and raw questions before you:

- What, in you life, is not going well?
- What causes you to feel helpless?

- And most importantly...**where, or to who, do you turn when you can't take it anymore?**
 - What are you going to do when your hurting and don't feel very close to or connected at all to the presence of God?

What did the psalmist do? Let's take a look at vv. 3-4:

Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

In vv. 1-2 we noted that the psalmist felt desperate and helpless, and was hurt by God's seemingly being absent and uncaring in regards to the psalmist's plight.

In vv. 3-4 we see something extraordinary and beautiful: yes the psalmist might feel distant from God, **but instead of giving up on his relationship with the Lord, he pushes further into it. He depends on it.**

Psalm 13 doesn't say "I'm hurting, God, and you're nowhere to be found, so forget you." That is the sort of response the world would understand, the kind of thing Sin and Death and Satan want us to do.

No, instead, in vv. 3-4 we see the psalmist say "I'm hurting, God, and you're nowhere to be found, so I'm going to sit right here and ask, plead, DEMAND you show up in some way...because I have nowhere else to go and nobody else to turn to."

It may seem counterintuitive to keep running after God's attention and care after so clearly expressing your frustration with His absence. But that's exactly what we see here, in almost a 1-1 correlation.

In v. 1 the psalmist said he felt like God's face was turned away...so in v. 3 he asks God to once again "look on [him]", connect with him again, be close to him again, and bring back the watchfulness that can keep him safe.

The psalmist was worried that God had forgotten him and left him to his own dark, sorrowful thoughts, so he asks God to "answer [him]", to give him insights on what is going on, to speak in such way that would satisfy his soul and put to rest his anguish.

"Give light to my eyes" is an interesting prayer. Throughout the Old Testament when someone has an experience with God they are overwhelmed by the light of his glory. In vv. 1-2 we got the sense that the psalmist felt God had withdrawn, turned fully away, and left him in the dark. So here he is asking for God to once again shine brightly on his life.

And just in case there was any confusion about what's at stake here, the psalmist makes it clear: if God won't act, won't show up and do SOMETHING, the psalmist fears he will "*sleep in death*" and fall to all his enemies, be they man, demon, or impossible circumstances.

Maybe the enemy really will kill him, or maybe it just feels that way. There are commentators who believe "sleep in death" is a metaphor for the fears that creep into our lives and take hold of our hearts and minds, becoming what we know as anxiety and depression. The weight of all the psalmist cannot handle on his own is crushing him and without some action from God, some sort of lifeline...then his life will fall further into ruin and pain.

Look at me, God. Talk to me. Light up my eyes. I need you.

For a little more than a year now, my wife and I have been praying something very much along these lines. We've cried out "how long, Lord" and been frustrated by the lack of clarity or answers from God. Psalm 13 is actually Alison's favorite Psalm (has been for a long time), so while I prepped for this sermon I consulted quite a bit with her, which led us to having some conversations about the thing we struggle the most with right now...and we decided that it would be okay for me to share that struggle with you all this morning.

We have been trying to get pregnant for a year and a half. The relief on not having gotten pregnant in our first few years of marriage -- when we were overwhelmed by the newness of life together and the demands of our graduate school programs -- has been replaced by a deeply personal and painful discouragement that now, when we feel ready and very much want the blessing of a baby in our lives...it's not happening.

For 18 months we have prayed for a pregnancy, and for 18 months the answer has been a cold, voiceless "no". We've seen our friends and family -- quite nearly ALL our friends and family -- be blessed with children of their own.

We've had long nights with tears. We've had family get togethers with awesome and amazing baby nephews that are hard *because* they are so awesome and amazing...and we want to be part of that, experience that for ourselves. We've prayed big bold prayers. And we've prayed very broken prayers that sound an awful lot like Psalm 13. We don't really have an enemy so to speak, but we've got feelings of frustration and absence. We want to know "how long." We want to know "if ever." Honestly, most days we just want some message from God telling us one way or the other.

And rest assured, we've started the process of talking to doctors and getting tests done. We'll take all the steps we can. But ultimately we believe this blessing is in God's hands and, for whatever reason, they don't seem to be open to us right now.

We decided to share this with you all because we want you to know that, in regards to this particular issue, we are in vv. 1-4 of Psalm 13. And don't get me wrong, we are also very aware of just how ridiculously blessed we are. We've got jobs and health and an incredible community, a beautiful church, loving families, and if you follow either of us on social media you know we also have the world's greatest dog. The Lord has blessed us, no doubt about it, and that's part of how we can make the journey from vv. 1-4 to vv. 5-6 (more on that in a moment).

But life, even a life filled with the love of Jesus, isn't characterized by either-or emotions. Things aren't totally good or totally awful. They are a mixture, there are areas of bright color and incredible blessings which bring out our praise, and areas of bleak greys where we experience a lot of pain, and a lot of confusion and frustration, and are left to cry out to God.

So if you're here today and you know all too well what it means and what it feels like to pray vv. 1-4 of Psalm 13, then take heart...you are not alone. Whether you cry out "how long, Lord" in regards to pregnancy, illness, mental health, family conflict, loneliness, regrets, identity issues, or whatever...your lament does not make you a bad Christian. If you find yourself praying with pain and accusation behind your words, trust me, you're not the only one.

You are not an enemy of God or in rebellion to His Kingdom if you *respectfully* unleash the rawness of your struggles and fears before Him. Going to God to seek the kind of help and salvation only God can provide is always good, even if you have to limp, scrape, and cry your way there.

And we want to be, need to be, the kind of church community that can lovingly talk about this sort of thing. At Faith we want to be honest with each other about how hard life can be, how scary it is when God seems distant or quiet, and join with others in praying “Look at me, God. Talk to me. Light up my eyes. I need you” just as we will join with others in lifting up prayers of praise for miraculous provision.

I need Psalm 13:1-4 to assure me that it is okay, that it is normal, that it is even good to bring my struggles and my sorrows before the Lord, even in their most raw and blunt form.

But I also need Psalm 13:5-6 to lead me away from self-righteous anger and into the remembrance, dependence, and celebration of God’s magnificent unconquerable, unquenchable, unending love.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me.

Our overwhelming sorrow captured in the lament of vv. 1-4 is met with our trust in the unrelenting faithfulness and love of God in vv. 5-6.

In v. 5 it seems that some sort of corner is turned, the crisis is left behind or forgotten or somehow no longer the focus, and suddenly...there is nothing but trust in the Lord and praise for His goodness and salvation. No reason is given for this shift in attitude and change in perspective. We’re left to wonder, what happened? What did God do?!

And here’s the funny thing: I think the answer is “nothing happened”. The psalm offers no account of God’s action, no miraculous intervention, no record of God speaking or description of His moving in power. For all we know, whatever crisis the psalmist had been facing...remained.

And yet despite all that is going wrong, despite the pain, despite feeling helpless, despite not being sure where God is or why He won’t act the way the psalmist has hoped for and prayed for...despite all this, the psalmist works his way back to declaring: “***I trust in your unfailing love”...and I know you, God, have been good to me.***

So in the midst of his suffering the psalmist rejoices in the only thing he knows for sure to be true: it is not that God is silent, it is not that God is hidden, and it is not that his enemies will win they day. All those things are what he’s feeling and experiencing...but they are not his foundation. They are not what he ultimately believed to be true.

No, the psalmist knows beyond any doubt that God is still worthy of his trust, has been good to him in the past, and will most certainly be good to him in the future and forevermore.

Psalm 13 is a journey that starts out in a place of very real and troubling pain, but takes you back into the trust and love of God. The one thing hold on to, with every ounce of strength, faith, belief is this: **God is**

good, and He is for you. When we're suffering and feeling helpless, we must commit ourselves to process of getting back to the goodness of God.

How this happens will look a little different for everyone, because the circumstances that surround your suffering will influence the way and even have an impact on much time you'll need to work back to and remember God's goodness.

We have a tendency to read the psalms as quick-fix devotions. We approach a passage like Psalm 13, read it in less than a minute, ponder it over the course of a 30-minute quiet time, then try to force our emotions to comply and transform to what we've just read.

But this may be too much too fast for true lament and suffering. When we're really hurting -- from a chronic illness, a job loss, a family conflict, after losing someone dear to us, or from unconquerable depression -- we do ourselves a disservice by trying to make it all right all at once. Most of the pain we experience in life cannot be reconciled or healed in the time it takes to read six verses. Sometimes this might make us feel guilty. The truth of God's goodness is right there, in black and white...why can't we feel it?! Why do we have such a hard time believing it is true?

One of the most helpful tips for reading the psalms, especially psalms of lament, that I've ever read came from a book on prayer by a pastor named David Hansen. While reflecting on the wild pace at which King David goes from sorrow to satisfied, Hansen reminds his readers:

"This psalm is a **poetic compression** of a much longer prayer. The poem recounts in a minute a spiritual reformation that took hours or even days of personal anguish."

(He then goes on to say)

"Praying the psalms changed the aim and order of my prayers. Some of the grisliest psalms end in hope and praise. Often, I can not wrestle through a problem to honest hope and praise in two minutes. I can however hold on to hope and praise as the goal of every prayer, no matter how long it takes and no matter how many emotional and cognitive shifts it takes to get there."

David Hansen, Long Wandering Prayer (23)

So we can make the truth, **God is good, and He is for you**, both the goal of our prayers and the anchor of our struggling and wayward hearts. You don't have to feel it immediately. But you do have to trust it and move toward it. God is good, His love is unending, He is worthy of your praise...and He understands that sometimes it'll take you hours, or days, or longer to take hold of that hope.

I want to be sure I'm not misunderstood: I am NOT saying, "God is good, so just get over it." The Bible never takes that approach or position.

What I am saying is "God is good...have no fear and push further into exploring that truth and trusting that it will never, ever fail you"

This is, of course, the very essence of the Gospel. When all other kinds of goodness -- blessings and health and wealth and comfort, and safety -- when all of these seem to be failing or falling away, we can still have confidence in goodness of God who both warned us to expect hard life, yet still encouraged us to have hope:

32 "A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

John 16:32-33

None of this is easy. Having a cry of "How long, Lord" in your heart is never easy. But, at least for me and I hope and pray for you too, it is made bearable by the promise that God is Good, and He is for me.

God is good, and He is for you, too.

So what do I want you to do with all this? Consider three things this week:

- 1) Be honest with yourself, with others, and with God about what's hard in your life.
- 2) Commit yourself to always getting back to the goodness of God. Answer the question, "How has God been good to you?"
- 3) Allow yourself the time to explore that question, and seek the goodness of God.