

## ***Praying Through Our Troubles***

### ***Psalms 13***

As we gather here this morning, the reality for some is that life is really hard right now. You are suffering. The longer I've lived and the longer I've served as a pastor, the more I've come to the conclusion that sooner or later life will get hard. For some of you, that time is now.

For some, you've received a diagnosis that has created all sorts of uncertainty about the future. Others have chronic health issues that you are facing. For some this means living with daily pain. Others have been without work or underemployed for a long time and it has created all kinds of financial pressures. Still others are facing a relationship that is strained. It doesn't get any better regardless of what you do. It might be a marriage that is deteriorating or an estranged relationship with a child or parent or friend. For others you have experienced some act of injustice - you've been wrongly accused or you've been violated in some way. For others it is depression. Everything feels dark to you. You can't imagine ever feeling good again. I could go on and on. The kinds of things that some of us walk into this place carrying this morning are weighty.

If you are facing such things, what are you to do? One approach is to just put on a happy face and act like things are okay. Live in denial. When asked by a friend how you are, you just say, "I'm fine. Things are good." You believe that it is better to not speak the dark things that you are thinking and feeling. Another approach is this Jerry Springer approach. Just let it all hang out there. Vent and complain and whine and play the victim to anyone who will listen to you.

A better approach, a biblical approach, is to pray through your troubles. In the psalms, we find guidance for how to pray through our troubles in the psalms of lament. A lament is a psalm that arises out of some kind of distress. One commentator says this about laments:

Modern Westerners often find themselves seeking to avoid or deny pain, but the laments accept that pain is a significant and intrinsic part of life and seek to put that reality in the context of faith in God . . . The psalms recognize even before modern psychology that we do not deal with pain by ignoring it but by acknowledging it and moving through it (Bellinger, 72).

Pain is a part of life. Laments invite us to not ignore our troubles, nor to whine about them, but to put them in the context of faith in God. They invite us to pray through our pain. That there are more laments in the book of Psalms than any other kind of psalm - there are sixty-seven - ought to indicate to us how needful it is to learn to pray this way.

As Steve has mentioned in the two previous sermons, we are encouraging you to view this sermon series as a workshop on prayer. We want you to take away one or two ideas and be intentional about practicing them this week. If you are in a place of difficul-

ties, my guess is that his will not be hard to want to do. If you are not experiencing such things then this is equipping for the future.

Today, we are looking at Psalm 13. It follows a structure that is typical of laments. I want to make a couple of comments about this structure because I think knowing this structure can be helpful to us as we seek to form how we will approach God with our own pain.

A lament typically begins with an invocation. In other words, it is addressed to God. Then you usually find the actual lament, the complaint, which describes in various ways the crisis which gives rise to the lament. Then the lament moves to the petition. There is a pleading for some kind of help. Often with the request, the psalmist presents reasons for why God should help. And then finally there is a conclusion, which in most cases is positive. Sometimes it includes an expression of confidence that God hears.

So with that background, let's look at Psalm 13. We are told in the superscription that this is *A Psalm of David*, which means that this psalm was either written by, for, or about David.

#### **I. The Lament (Complaint) (vv. 1-2)**

<sup>1</sup> *How long, O LORD?  
Will You forget me forever?  
How long will You hide Your face from me?*  
<sup>2</sup> *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?*

The psalmist addresses his lament to God. He cries out *How long, O LORD?* Four times in these two verses, he asks, *How long?* The repetition reveals the depth of the psalmist's despair.

He feels that God has forgotten him, *Will you forget me forever?* Whatever his situation, he has been experiencing it long enough that he wonders if God has permanently forgotten him.

He prays, *How long will You hide Your face from me?* God's face is a figure of speech used to indicate God's favor and blessing. Many of us are familiar with the benediction we use sometimes on Sunday mornings from Numbers 6 that goes like this:

<sup>24</sup> *The LORD bless you, and keep you;* <sup>25</sup> *The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you;* <sup>26</sup> *The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.'*

Numbers 6:24-26

When Moses or Aaron spoke those words over Israel, *The LORD make His face shine on you*, they were asking God to bless them. If, however, God's face was hidden, as the psalmist expresses it here, it is an indication that God has removed His favor. Now, whether God had actually removed His favor from the psalmist, we don't know. But from the vantage point of the psalmist, that is exactly how it felt to him.

And so, instead of God's attention and God's favor, the psalmist feels utterly alone. He is left to his own thoughts. He says, *How long shall I take counsel in my soul?* The NIV says, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?" He finds no help from God. All he has is his own thoughts. And they are not helpful. And so he feels alone.

To suffer is one thing, but to suffer alone is quite another thing. It intensifies his suffering. And so what he experiences is *sorrow in [his] heart all the day*. At the very depth of his being, his *heart*, he has sorrow. And he has it all day long. It is what he rises up with in the morning and it is what he goes to bed with at night. For some, you know this feeling don't you? You could pray these very words for they are your experience right now. You have nothing but sorrow in your heart all day long.

The psalmist then says, *How long will my enemy be exalted over me?* We are not sure what or whom this enemy is. Some have suggested that it is literal death in light of what he will say in verse 3. Others see it as oppressors and that the death of which he speaks in verse 3 is metaphorical. We simply don't have enough information to nail down with certainty whom or what this enemy is. But this is part of the beauty of a lament like this because it lets us take these words on our lips in our own situation with whatever "enemy" we are facing.

When you back up and think about what the psalmist prays here, it is raw and honest isn't it? Do we dare to pray this way? God, why do you forget me? Why are you hiding from me? How long are you going to leave me in this situation? Do you have a theology that says you need to keep it positive when you pray to God? The laments invite us to be real with God. Bellinger says it this way:

The laments' amazing candor is sometimes shocking to the reader, but it is crucial to the honest dialogue of faith. The psalms do not bear witness to prayer 'as it ought to be' but to brutally honest prayer from the depth of life (pg. 72).

If there is one thing that the laments teach us is that it is okay to have an honest dialogue with God. We can be brutally honest with God. And why not? God already knows what we are thinking and so why not learn to bring our complaints to him? That's what the psalmist does. That's what the laments teach us to do.

As we go on we come to the actual petition of the psalmist. He prays for deliverance.

## **II. A Prayer for Deliverance (Petition) (vv. 3-4)**

<sup>3</sup> *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;  
Enlighten my eyes,  
or I will sleep the sleep of death,*  
<sup>4</sup> *And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
And my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.*

*Consider . . . answer . . . enlighten.* The Hebrew word which is translated here as, *consider*, is most often translated "look." The psalmist feels that God's face was turned away from him and so he asks God to look at him. "See my situation. See my plight. Turn Your face towards me. Extend Your favor to me once again."

He also boldly asks for the Lord to *answer* him. He wants an answer to his four-fold question of how long. He needs more than just the consolation of his own thoughts. He needs God's intervention; God's answer.

Finally, he prays, *Enlighten my eyes*. To have dim eyes was to be in a bad place – physically, spiritually or emotionally. Job, for instance, prayed this:

*My eye has also grown dim because of grief.* Job 17:7

Eyes that were full of light, however, indicated life and health and spiritual vitality. For instance, here is what was said of Moses at his death:

<sup>7</sup> *Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died,  
his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated.*

Deuteronomy 34:7

Up until he died Moses was full of spiritual vitality and strength - *his eye was not dim*. The psalmist is feeling like Job, not Moses. He needs God to enlighten his eyes. Whether he is asking for some kind of physical intervention or something more emotional and spiritual we are not sure. But it is clear that he needs God's intervention.

If God will not do these things, he says that he will *sleep the sleep of death*. This may mean literal death, but it can also be understood in a figurative way to refer to the severity of what he will experience. He also says that if God does not intervene, it will provide an opportunity for his enemies, which are God's enemies, to gloat. If God does not intervene, he knows that his enemies will rejoice when he is shaken. It will give them an occasion to say that God has failed to be faithful to His covenant promises. And so, lest this should happen, consider . . . answer. . . enlighten.

He boldly prays for deliverance. He asks for help. "God do something!" As you consider your own troubles, let me encourage you to go before God with a bold request to do something. You may find it helpful to use these very words that we find in Psalm 13. Or you may find other laments that voice your request better. Whatever the case, the pattern we see here is to boldly ask for that which we believe we need the Lord to do.

Now, as we come to verse 5, the psalmist turns a corner and he begins to express confidence in the Lord. One author writes that "the spine of lament is hope (Black). This is what helps the psalmist turn the corner - hope, confidence in God. This is a corner that we too must turn in confronting our laments.

### III. Expression of Confidence (Praise) (vv. 5-6)

The psalmist prays:

*<sup>5</sup> But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness;  
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.*

*But I* is emphatic. It marks this transition to confidence. He may feel that God is not paying attention to him. He may feel that his enemies loom. And though none of this has yet changed, he makes a choice. He says, *But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness.*

As Steve mentioned last week, this word, *lovingkindness*, is the Hebrew word, *hesed*. It is a theologically loaded term. It is found 250 times in the Old Testament; 125 of these occurrences are in the Psalms. It is a term that speaks of God's covenant loyalty. Israel was assured of God's love on the basis of the covenant that He had entered into with them. He had promised to be faithful to Abraham and his descendants (Deut. 7:17). God showed his covenant faithfulness by His loving commitment to his people even when they were not always faithful. And because of this lovingkindness God actively worked for the good of His people. Twenty-six times we are told that "his lovingkindness is forever" (e.g. Ps. 106:1). The psalmist decides to trust in the LORD's unfailing love.

Now, we read this and wonder how anyone could make this transition so quickly - moving from despair to confident trust. Most likely this change happened for the psalmist over time. The lament captures an experience that was lived out over time. And so there was probably a time where all he expressed was his lament and his request. But then over time through whatever means, he is reminded of God's covenant faithfulness. Maybe he reflected on Israel's history and saw how time and time again God demonstrated lovingkindness. Or maybe he was reminded of God's faithful love for him personally in the past. Whatever the case, he turns the corner and he trusts.

He comes to the place where he is able to say that he rejoices in God's salvation. In the Old Testament, the focus of salvation is not eternal life as we tend to think of it. Rather it was deliverance from enemies or from some kind of trouble. The psalmist believes that on the basis of God's loyal love, deliverance from his enemies is coming. And with that belief he is moved to rejoicing.

*<sup>6</sup> I will sing to the LORD,  
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.*

The psalmist ends up in a very different place doesn't he? From a complaint of, "What are you doing God? Why aren't you noticing me? I'm dying here," to a confession that God *has dealt bountifully with me*. He comes to a place of settled confidence in the Lord.

The psalmist arrives at this place by praying through his situation; not by ignoring it. And I think it is important to note that he arrives at this place of confidence and praise not because his situation has yet changed, but because, as Bellinger said in the quote I read earlier, he put his suffering "in the context of faith in God."

This is what the laments can help us do. They help us put our troubles in the context of faith in God. They help us pray through our troubles. D.A. Carson has said, "All we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer." This is part of the fabric of life. The question is how will we deal with our suffering when it does come. We can choose to deny it or we can choose to whine about it, both to our own detriment. Or, we can choose to pray through our troubles as the laments teach us.

And so with that, let me offer you some **prayer ideas** for this week.

**First, become familiar with the psalms of lament.** If you've never experienced real suffering or heart-ache, my guess is that when you come to one of these laments, they just seem weird to you. They won't when you are suffering. They will help give voice to your pain. And so don't shelve them until you need them. To become familiar with them now will equip you for tomorrow. I've given you a list of all of the psalms of lament (3-7, 9-14, 16-17, 22-23, 25-28, 31, 35-36, 38-40, 42-44, 51, 53-64, 69-71, 74, 77, 79-80, 82-83, 85-86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 106, 108-09, 120, 123, 126, 130-31, 137, 140-43.)

**Second, use the laments.** Use them **to express your grief or anger or whatever** to God. Bring your trouble to God. This can be so hard. Sometimes I just don't want to because in bringing it to God I have to face the pain. But the only way to get to a better place is to pray through it, not by ignoring it. So, don't leave it as something you are just worrying about or trying to figure out. Bring it to God. Are there areas of your life where you are worrying and fretting, but not praying? Pray. Bring it to God.

Use the laments **to express what you want him to do**. Be bold. Ask God to intervene in your situation. Sometimes we can't even find the words to express what we want God to do. This is where the laments come in. We can use the psalmist's words. It might be helpful to take some time to actually write down what you really would like to ask God to do. And then go to him with your requests.

Use the laments **to express confidence in the Lord** despite your situation. Let the psalmist's words help you be reminded of who God is and what he has done so that you can get to a place of hope and confidence.

Here's a third suggestion. **Use the form of lament (complaint, petition, praise) to write your own prayers.** Just going through the process of writing your own prayer of

lament can be helpful. It can help you get clear about your pain, about what you want God to do, and to remember and reflect on what he has done for you in the past.

**Finally**, in all of this, as believers living after the cross, we **pray in light of the cross**. Sometimes in our pain, we can accuse God of not caring, not loving us. We can think Him mean even. To pray in light of the cross is to be reminded that God has already done that which is of the greatest good for us. So, no matter what suffering or pain comes into our life, we have evidence in the cross that God is concerned about us and done the greatest good.

There is a marvelous promise in the book of Revelation that goes like this:

*<sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, <sup>4</sup> and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."*

Revelation 21:3-4

There is a day coming when trouble and pain and suffering will be gone. These things will pass away. But as long as we are living in this world, suffering will continue. And so we need a way to process our suffering and pain. We deal with our troubles not by ignoring them; not by whining about them, but by praying our way through them.

Amen.