

Sigh of Despair, Song of Triumph

Psalm 13

By Phil Johnson

This morning I want to look at Psalm 13. This is one of those famous psalms where David pours out his heart in raw, undiluted honesty. What we have here is total transparency—an expression of pain, and frustration, and discouragement, and profound distress. David is on the verge of utter emotional defeat. People in these postmodern times like to talk about "authenticity." This is *unvarnished* authenticity of the best kind—a man pouring out his heart to God—expressing his complaints and his despondency without ever once expressing any note of unbelief or sinful resentment.

Spurgeon said of this psalm that it is "intended to express the feelings of the people of God in [the midst of relentless] trials." He said if you have never had occasion to express the feelings David gives vent to here, you will do so before long. As usual, I agree with Spurgeon: If you desire to be a man or a woman after God's own heart like David—someone thoroughly conformed to the image of Christ—then the Spirit of God will in time explore and sanctify every passion in your heart, including those feelings that are tinged with bitter gall.

Psalm 13 is a wonderfully compact account of David's struggle with the feeling of despair and misery caused by seemingly endless trials. Here is how that mourning was turned to rejoicing.

In just six short verses, Psalm 13 runs the gamut of human emotions. There's a lifetime of experience, powerfully expressed in a text short enough to fit easily on a postcard. Here, in inspired words, we go from a sigh of despair to a song of triumph. David expresses *frustration* in verses 1-2; *fear* in verses 3-4; and *faith* in verses 5-6. Let me read the psalm:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. 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.

That's one of those passages of Scripture that resonates powerfully with practically every human heart, because it expresses the pain of human experience. And we love that it ends on a note of triumph. Here we see clearly the humanity of David. He's not so different from us. We can relate to the impatience and frustration he expresses at the beginning of this psalm. Misery and despair are probably familiar feelings to you, if you have lived very long. And we all long to experience the feeling of triumph David expresses at the end of the psalm. So Psalm 13 gives us a sort of road-map from despair to deliverance, and this morning I want to follow that road-map with you.

First, some background. Notice that this is a psalm of David. It is one of a series of psalms addressed to the choirmaster. In other words, it was written for performance by a choir in a public worship service. That makes the candid frankness of this psalm so much more remarkable.

This is not the kind of sentiment you might expect to find in a choir anthem. It ends on a great note of triumph, but it begins in a decidedly minor key. The feeling that

prompted this psalm is not the typical kind of feeling that would inspire us to sing—unless perhaps you're a blues singer. But even then, we don't think of blues music as something suited for worship. (Practically every other kind of contemporary music, including rap, has been appropriated for worship in some context or another. I don't think I've ever heard anyone propose an album of really melancholy blues songs celebrating the spiritual benefits of gloom and despondency.) There's certainly ample material throughout the psalms for any blues-singer. But unlike the typical blues song, this psalm ends with a celebration of triumph. That's true of *most* of the psalms that begin with expressions of human misery. You just can't achieve that kind of mood swing with authentic blues music.

I love the way David expresses his human passions with complete honesty. Remember, this is inspired Scripture. As David is writing, he is being moved along by the Holy Spirit. That's how inspiration works (2 Peter 1:20-21): "No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The undiluted authenticity we appreciate and resonate with in these opening lines—that plainspoken transparency with which David expresses his anguish—*that is not an expression of self-will on David's part. It is not an exaggerated complaint. It is not the angry outcry of fleshly resentment.* It is an honest feeling, attested to and sanctioned with the authority of the Holy Spirit.

It is, I believe, akin to what the apostle Paul describes in Romans 8:20-26, where he points out that "[all] creation was subjected to futility, not willingly"—in other words, not by choice and not even necessarily as a punishment for our guilt—but as long as sin remains in this universe, injustice abounds. And now "not only the [whole of] creation, but we ourselves, [all believers, the

people of God—] groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, [and] the redemption of our bodies." And sometimes that inward groaning becomes so severe that (v. 26) "we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

And by the way, to my mind, one of the strongest proofs of the inspiration of Scripture is the Bible's total candor about human frailty and human feelings. No human mind would concoct a religion that celebrates the sanctifying benefits of misery and frustration. But we often find this sort of raw honesty in Scripture—and especially in the psalms. There is no attempt to mask David's frustration, and no effort to paper it over with an insincere sentimentality. David always expressed his feelings with absolute honesty. And even those honest outpourings of wretched discouragement were material for worship in the songs of Old Testament Israel.

We don't know what period of David's life this psalm grew out of. He speaks of his "enemy" in verse 4, but we don't know *which* enemy this was. It might have been Saul, the renegade king, who chased David like an outlaw. Or it could have been the Philistines, who as a nation epitomized all that God hates. But there is nothing in the psalm itself that gives us a clue as to where this fits in David's experience.

The truth is, it could apply to a lot of different events in David's life, because David was *often* beset with trials, and often wondering why God stayed His hand when His enemies seemed to have the advantage. The emotions expressed in this psalm were therefore a recurring theme—and not only with David, but with the other Hebrew psalmists and prophets as well. The expression, "How long, O LORD?"—and variations on that theme—are found in Psalms 6:3; 35:17; 74:1; 80:4; 85:5; 89:46; 90:13; and 94:3-4.

The same expression is used in Zechariah 1:12, where the angel of the Lord is speaking. My conviction is that wherever we meet "the Angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament narrative, that is no created being. It's not an archangel. It is a preincarnate reference to Christ, the Son of God. He is the *Angel* (or messenger) of the Lord. And we don't have time to trace this theme through the Old Testament, but repeatedly when the Angel of the Lord is mentioned, he has the attributes of deity. People fall down and worship Him. And in some cases, He is *called* God. In Exodus 3, for example, when the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush, verse 2 says it this way: "The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed." Then verse 4 says, "God called to him out of the bush." So it's clear (isn't it?) that the Being in the bush is no mere Archangel, but God himself manifest in some specific, visible form. And indeed there are clues throughout Scripture that the Angel of the Lord is none other than Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity.

With that in mind, listen to Zechariah 1:12-13. Zechariah writes, "the angel of the LORD said, 'O LORD of hosts, [so this is God the Son speaking to God the Father:] how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?' [Then Zechariah says:] And the LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me." In other words, this cry of distress ("How long, O LORD?") is even echoed by Christ. In fact, it is similar in both tone and pathos to the words Christ spoke on the cross in Matthew 27:46: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That, in turn, was an echo—probably a direct quotation—from another psalm of David, Psalm 22:1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?"

So the groan that begins this psalm expresses the common experience of the people of God. And it was the experience of our Savior as well—who "because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." That is the promise of Hebrews 2:18.

And what we have in Psalm 13 is a road-map to the only way up and out of that sense of despair. It is not by any effort of our own, not by any merit of our own, not by any four- or five- or twelve-step program, but by faith in the only Deliverer who can lift us out of the miry clay and set our feet on a rock.

Here in Psalm 13, David asks the question "How long?" no less than four times in the first two verses. That fact prompted Charles Spurgeon to call this the "How Long Psalm"—but he said "The Howling Psalm" might be an even more fitting title, because of the incessant repetition of David's cry for relief.

Four repetitions of that sigh of despair are significant. It suggests that whatever persecution David was suffering had already gone on longer than he thought he could endure. He felt he was losing his strength. He was desperate for relief.

The Hebrew expression "How long" literally means, "Until when?" David's unrelieved anguish pours out in this passionate plea for an end to the trial. There is nothing at this point that he can do but pray. He is drained of energy; all his own plans have failed, and he is out of strategies. Therefore *all* his feelings are poured into a cry for the Lord's help.

But what comes out at first is this fourfold complaint: "How long, O LORD? . . . How long? . . . How long? . . . How long?"

Psalm 13 is a fascinating look into David's prayer life. I like the way he prays. He pours out his soul in *frustration*; he deals honestly with his *fears*; and finally he declares his *faith*. The psalm divides neatly into three parts like that—three stanzas, or better, three *strophes* of two verses

each. Verses 1-2 record David's protestation. Verses 3-4 give us his supplication. And the closing two verses express his exultation. So you have a complaint, a prayer, and a song of triumph. There's a clear progression. As I said at first: he pours out his *frustration*; then his *fear*; then his *faith*. All of these are honest, straightforward expressions of David's heart, as he struggles through the ordeal of a severe tribulation.

Here's a lesson for supercilious people inclined to think truly godly people should be always upbeat and giddy: Frustration is not incompatible with a life of faith. In fact, it is only when we confront our frustration honestly before God that we can realize the victory of faith.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

This psalm is first of all a great prayer. There's nothing ordinary about it; in fact, it shatters the stereotypical notion of what really "spiritual" praying is like. But two qualities stand out as its hallmarks: brevity and honesty. Most of us could improve our praying by taking a lesson from those two characteristics. Remember that Jesus criticized the Pharisees for making long, pretentious prayers? There's none of that here.

But this psalm is more than a lesson about prayer. It is a model response for Christians going through deep trials. David wrote it in anguish over the apparent success of an unrelenting enemy. The frustration David expresses in this psalm came from seeing ungodly enemies prosper while it seemed as if God was hiding His face from David!

Now I think most of us can understand David's inner turmoil in the opening cry of this psalm. We know these feelings all too well. And if you are in Christ and have not yet been in the valley of frustration, as Spurgeon pointed out and I noted earlier, you will be. Second Timothy 3:12-13 says, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." The wicked often seem to prosper while those "who desire to

live a godly life in Christ Jesus" are subjected to trials, or persecution, or miseries of various kinds—and it would be inhuman to experience such persecution and not experience the frustration that accompanies it. Remember that David was a man after God's own heart, and this was how he responded. Jesus was God incarnate, and He prayed a similar prayer on the cross. It's natural—and not wrong or sinful—to be frustrated while injustice prevails and afflictions persist. And it's *supernatural* to move beyond that frustration and trust by faith that righteousness will triumph and God will vindicate both Himself and His people. This psalm traces the pathway from that natural feeling of discouragement to the supernatural triumph of faith.

In the meantime, if you can undergo persecution and severe trials *without* feeling the sort of frustration and anguish David describes here, don't think it is because you are super-spiritual. It is probably because you are crazy, or masochistic, or something.

Nevertheless, David's initial, desperate groan is only the beginning of the story. Look at the remarkable contrast between the opening and closing verses of this psalm. It is amazing and wonderful that such an urgent, earnest wail for relief could turn so quickly into a song of faith and triumph. The psalm shows us in microcosm the benefit of our prayers.

Because we can be certain that David's *circumstances* did not change from the beginning of this prayer to the end. What *did* change? Only David's *outlook*.

And here is where I want to focus this morning. I want you to notice the change in David's perspective from the beginning of this psalm to the end. In these six brief verses, he moves all the way from despair to deliverance. And the only thing that changes is the way he is looking at things. Here is the lesson of this psalm: that victory for the Christian hinges on *how we look at our trials*.

There are three different perspectives in this psalm—one apiece in each of the three strophes I pointed out earlier. And I want to look at them one at a time. Perspective number one; David gives us—

1. THE INWARD LOOK (vv. 1-2)

Look with me once more at the first two verses of the psalm:

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?

Here David's vision is fixed firmly on himself. See how many times in these early verses he uses the first-person pronouns: "I," "me," "my," "my soul," "my heart," "my enemy." He speaks of taking counsel in His own soul (v. 2)—and the Hebrew expression implies a great inner wrestling. Verse 2: "I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart."

A literal translation says, "I lay up counsels in my soul and sorrow in my heart daily?" He has loaded his heart with human counsel. This is an interesting turn of phrase: "I lay up counsels." There's a similar expression in Proverbs 26:24: "Whoever hates . . . harbors deceit in his heart"—literally, "lays up deceit."

Here the Psalmist says he "*lays up counsels*." He means that when help did not come to him from on high, he sought the best *human* wisdom; he has pursued the most cunning strategies to try to thwart his enemies and put an end to their relentless pursuit of him. The idea of "laying up counsels" suggests there has been a long procession of many failed efforts to gain victory for himself. He has planned and contrived and carefully thought through every conceivable way to escape his trials and subdue his enemies—and the only result has been that the failure of

all his efforts has loaded his heart with more sorrow than ever. He is now in a place where the burden of his anguish is greater than he ever thought he could bear. By taking counsel in his own soul—by devising plans for his own deliverance—he only added more pain to his long ordeal. In addition to the stress heaped on him by the persecution of his enemies, he was now feeling the weight of his own failure. Sorrow upon sorrow. Verse 2: "sorrow in my heart all the day" Now he was just gasping for relief: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?"

Here's a secret: when we look within ourselves, the perspective is *always* bleak. This is in my opinion one of the most dangerous and frightening fallacies of modern psychology: people are inevitably counseled to look within themselves for answers to their problems, and that is not where the answers lie.

Our minds are darkened by sin. Our own hearts are "deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Inside ourselves is nothing but gloom and shadows. No wonder those who are perpetually introspective are so often depressed and dreary people. Don't fall into that pattern. It can breed a morbid preoccupation with your own inadequacies that will utterly debilitate you spiritually.

But there's a healthy kind of inward look that leads to confession of sin and the humble brokenness of which Jesus spoke in the Beatitudes. We're *supposed* to be poor in spirit, mourning over our sin, meek, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness. That sort of brokenness is an expression of true faith, and it is not possible if we do not properly examine ourselves and honestly face our own sinfulness.

So how do we distinguish between the two kinds of self-reflection? What is the difference between a wholesome look inside oneself and the sort of morbid introspection or sinful preoccupation with self that we are to avoid? Here's the key: When we begin looking within

ourselves for solutions to the problems we find there, we have overstepped the line. *Solutions* to our problems do not reside in us, and it is positively sinful to think that they do. The righteousness that justifies us is a righteousness outside us that is imputed to us. Salvation is a gracious gift of God, not something that we find in ourselves. Even faith comes to us as a gracious gift from the gracious hand of God. Inside us is nothing but sin and wretchedness, and those who think otherwise have undermined the very foundation of faith. This is a crucial, foundational truth.

Now look at the substance of David's complaint in these first two verses. The intensity of his trial does not pain him as much as the duration of it. He does not complain that the trial is too severe, but that it has gone on too long. It is not his *love for the Lord* that is in danger of failing—but his *patience*.

By the way, the construction of that opening sentence in the Hebrew is unusual. Literally, it says, "How long O LORD will you forget me forever?" And that's an odd way to say it: "*How long are you forever going to forget me?*" The *forever* would seem to answer the question "How long?" It sounds like a solecism—a breach of good grammar or word usage. There are two possible ways to understand it. Most English translations take the approach of making it two questions: "How long O LORD will you forget me? Forever?" But it could also convey this sense: "How long will you treat me as if you intend to forget me forever?" "Forget me forever" is a phrase that speaks of utter abandonment. The same expression is found in Lamentations 5:20: "Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" So "How long will you forget me forever" is a way of saying "*How long will you leave me completely God-forsaken? Until when must I be totally abandoned?*"

Of course, no matter how you punctuate Psalm 13:1, it's the same basic meaning. But I like the sense of

making it one simple question: "How long will you absolutely forget me?" Because let's be clear: David was a man of faith, and he knew very well that the Lord would *not* forget him forever—for all time and eternity.

Turn back a couple of pages in your Bibles to Psalm 9:18. This is David writing as well. He says: "For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever." The Lord does not forget His people. Isaiah 49:14-16: "Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.' [But the Lord replies:] 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.'" Isaiah 57:16: "I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry."

But why is it that God so often seems to delay His comfort when we are going through trials? Remember the man whom Jesus healed at the pool of Bethesda? John 5:5 says he had his infirmity for 38 years! And the woman He loosed from a spirit of infirmity in Luke 13:11 had been in that bondage for 18 years! The woman with an issue of blood had been afflicted for twelve years (Luke 8:43). And Luke 8:27 simply says that the demoniac in the graveyard at Gadara had been demon-possessed for a "long time."

Why does God delay helping His people? There's no simple answer to that question. But we can know with certainty that God's timing is always right; His delays do not reflect any deficiency in His love for us, and in the meantime, He is able to make all things work together for our good.

Above all, *God does not forget his people.* Isaiah 44:21: "Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me." First Samuel 12:22: "The LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake." And listen to Psalm 77:7-9: "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast

love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" [And the psalmist doesn't even need to answer those questions. He just says,]Selah": "*Think about it.*" The answers are axiomatic: Of course God does not forsake His people. He might withhold earthly comforts so that we can better understand heavenly comforts. But He will always intervene at the right time. And in the meantime, we must not grow bitter or complain and murmur against Him.

Now, as I have been saying, there's a true sense in which the feelings expressed in these verses are natural, inevitable aspects of our humanity. They are what anyone would feel when suffering for righteousness' sake. *But such feelings are not to be wallowed in.* I've already spoken with appreciation about the honesty of David's lament. Psalm 102 indicates that it is legitimate for the afflicted to pour out their complaint before God. Psalm 102:1-2: "A Prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD. Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call!"

And now listen to verses 16-20 of Psalm 102:

For the LORD builds up Zion; he appears in his glory;

17 he regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer.

18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD:

19 that he looked down from his holy height; from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,

20 to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die.

It is right and good to cry out to the Lord in our distress, and we don't need to try to stifle the depth of our passion.

All of that is true. But don't get the idea that we are supposed to indulge in murmuring against God.

Verses 1-2 are only the *beginning* of this psalm. Having expressed his natural feelings, David doesn't stop there. He doesn't coddle those feelings. He doesn't gratify his fleshly passions by fixing his heart on the inward perspective. Now he turns his gaze outward, and sizes up his situation from a second perspective. This is:

2. THE OUTWARD LOOK

Let me read verses 3-4 once more:

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.

This is a moving prayer. David's heart is full of fear, and he expresses that fear honestly. He is in fear for his life (v. 3)—and the words imply that he fears death from sheer exhaustion because these trials have continued for so long.

I don't think David was merely being melodramatic here. There were times in his life when his enemies hounded him with such savage persistence that he may have literally been in danger of dying from fatigue. Most of us have not endured trials on a scale anywhere near what David endured, so we definitely need to have empathy for him as he expresses his fear of dying.

But still, this holds an important lesson for us, and I want you to see it. Contrast the David of Psalm 13 with the young shepherd boy who had the confidence to face the mighty Goliath—with no armor and only a few pebbles for weapons!

Remember David's words on that occasion? First Samuel 17:26: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" Everyone

else looked at Goliath, and they were thinking, *What an incredible giant!* David's vision was filled with an incredible *God*—so he saw Goliath as no match for God. That is why he had the courage to face Goliath.

But the prayer of these two verses reflects a markedly different perspective from David. For the moment, at least, he is looking at *this* trial in a completely different way. Here his focus is almost entirely on outward circumstances. That's understandable, because of the oppressively nonstop nature of this persecution. Fatigue figures in. These stalking enemies have hounded him without mercy and without relief. His vision is so filled with his troubles that it feels to David like God is hiding His face (v. 1). No wonder he is discouraged.

In stark contrast to the Goliath episode, this time David is fearful. We can sense his trembling, as he grapples with a paralyzing dread that this trial might continue so long that it will ultimately kill him (v. 3). He's focused outward, so naturally, this time it is the enemy that fills his frame of reference (v. 4).

Pay careful heed to several lessons we can learn from this: *First*, one great victory does not ensure future triumph. The fact that David was fearless in the presence of Goliath did not ensure that he would never tremble in the face of any enemy—even lesser enemies than a giant.

Second, fatigue often contributes to a defeated spirit. It's clear from the very opening words of this psalm that David's exhaustion was beginning to color his thinking.

The same thing happened to Elijah, didn't it? Remember his resounding victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel? It took great courage for him just to show his face. Ahab had placed a death sentence on him, and so when Elijah called for a showdown with the prophets, he was risking his life. He won the greatest victory of his life on that mountain, and 450 of the priests of Baal were killed in the aftermath of that showdown. But that enraged Jezebel, and she threatened to kill Elijah.

Here's what happened next: Elijah ran on foot from Mount Carmel (in the northern part of Israel, to Beer-sheba, in the extreme south—and then he went another day's journey into the wilderness, and collapsed under a juniper tree to sleep. An angel of the Lord awoke him, fed him a cake and a jar of water. Second Kings 19:8 says Elijah then traveled 40 days and forty nights with no additional food all the way south to Mount Horeb—which is in desolate, desert terrain in the wilderness near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula.

And it was there that Elijah made his little speech about being the only one left who was faithful to God, and pleading with God to kill him. Here was this mighty prophet, who had just confronted and killed 450 evil priests of Baal—and now he is fleeing for his life from a single woman. What caused him to go so quickly from victory to despair? Sheer fatigue *must* have been a huge factor.

There's a similarity there to what David is going through. *Both* Elijah and David succumbed to despair when their attention was diverted by circumstances around them—and to a large degree, I think in both cases, *fatigue* was a major factor.

Fortunately, however, David does not stop and give up. He doesn't fix his gaze on external things and throw his hands up in despair. He continues to pray in earnest. And the flow of his prayer is interesting. What he prays for in this second strophe are the very things he complained about at the start of the psalm. Verse 3: "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God." The Hebrew word literally means, "look," or "behold." "*Gaze on me intently.*" In verse 1, he had complained that the Lord's face seemed hidden. Here he says, in effect, "*Turn your face this way and consider me.*"

"Consider and answer me, O LORD my God."
Remember, his opening complaint in verse 1 was that the Lord had forgotten him—abandoned him. "Answer me" is

the remedy David longs for. *"Don't ignore me as if you have forgotten. I know You don't forget."* "Answer me."

Now of course, David is saying this with all due reverence, but it reminds me of what my mother used to say to me when she would get to the end of her tether if I wasn't responding very well to her discipline, or if I didn't reply very precisely to her interrogation. She would say, *"Look at me and answer me!"* That's the sense of David's plea, except that it comes as a last-gasp appeal rather than a curt demand with great authority behind it: *"Look at me and answer me."*

Verse 3, second half: "Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." Given the pathos of this psalm and the intensity of David's passion, I don't think he is being melodramatic here. The nature of his trials were such that I think he truly felt if he did not get relief, he would die.

And that prompts David to make this argument (v. 4): "Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken." *"If I die, Lord, the unrighteous will have a triumph to celebrate."*

Now, David was a humble man—a man after God's own heart. Remember in 2 Samuel 16 when Shimei, an evil, arrogant man, publicly insulted David, and Scripture says Shimei even threw rocks and flung dust at David? And Abishai, one of David's captains, said, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head." And David told his men to leave Shimei alone. He said, "Let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today."

So I don't think this petition in Psalm 13:4 reflects any concern on David's part over his own reputation. The problem in David's mind was that *God's* honor and *God's* will on earth were being shown contempt, and David wanted God to defend His own honor. It did not make

sense that He would delay when so much—including God's own reputation—was at stake.

Now I want to point out that when David prays, "Light up my eyes," that's not a prayer for *spiritual* enlightenment. He's asking that God give him *physical* strength. You have a similar expression in 1 Samuel 14:27, where Saul's son Jonathan, weary from battle, refreshes himself with a taste of honey: "He put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes became bright." That's what David is praying for in verse 3: physical refreshment, not spiritual enlightenment.

And yet the answer to his prayer came in the form of spiritual enlightenment. God gave him a change of perspective. God, who it seemed had been hiding His face, suddenly stepped into the very center of David's vision. Immediately, the inward look and the outward look gave way to:

3. THE UPWARD LOOK

Verses 5 and 6 contrast so starkly with the beginning of the psalm that if you showed this psalm to the typical 21st-century psychologist, he might diagnose David as *bipolar*. That, of course, is a comment on the utter failure of psychology to make sense of the human condition. It is not a sound evaluation of David's struggle. Secular psychology can give us no insight into the spiritual battle that was raging in the soul of David.

But there's an important lesson for us here that we *can* take into any trial or tribulation: When David looked inside, he saw only the hopelessness of his own sorrow. That's what verses 1-2 reflect. When he turned his focus outward and began to look around, all he saw was the bleakness of his surroundings. That is expressed starting with the final phrase of verse 2, through verse 4. It is not until David looks to the Lord that he sees the glory of divine salvation. Compare the two closing verses of the

psalm to verses 1 and 2. Those inward-looking personal pronouns ("*Me...I...mine*") have given way to praise addressed to God: "Your steadfast love . . . Your salvation . . . [It's all about] the LORD . . ." and His bountiful dealings with His people.

There's an interesting parallelism between the problems David lists in verse 2 and the blessings he outlines in this final strophe. In verse 2 he is concerned with the accumulation of frustrated plans that have burdened his soul, the daily sorrow he bears in his heart, and grief over the potential exaltation of his enemies. By the end of the psalm, he is trusting in God's love; rejoicing in His salvation; and singing to the Lord.

In other words, David has exchanged his sighing for a song; his sorrow for rejoicing; and his fear for trust.

And thus what in the beginning sounded like a dismal dirge of unbelief becomes an exhilarating hymn of faith. What's the difference? The trial has not gone away. David's circumstances have not changed—but his point of view *has*. Now his eyes are clearly directed upward.

Matthew Henry wrote,

What a surprising change is here in a few lines! In the beginning of the psalm we have him drooping, trembling, and ready to sink into melancholy and despair; but, in the close of it, rejoicing in God, and elevated and enlarged in his praises. See the power of faith, the power of prayer, and how good it is to draw near to God.

Notice: prayer is the key to the change in David's perspective. He did not wait until he felt better to go to God in prayer. That's the whole point of this psalm, I think. David honestly and straightforwardly took his complaints to the Lord and laid out His case. And in the process *God* changed his heart. It was God who gave him the new perspective. David did not simply *will* a change of heart. Rather he laid out his heart before the Lord, and it

was the Lord who expanded David's vision and turned his focus upward, in response to his prayer.

You can sum the whole lesson of this psalm up in words borrowed from Psalm 3:8: "Salvation belongs to the LORD." That goes for deliverance from trials as well as salvation from sin. No other truth emerges from everywhere in Scripture so definitively. If we look around or within—or anywhere but to God—for a way of escape, we are condemned to disappointment and ultimate failure.

It is *God* who provides the way of escape—not out of our trials, nor around them, but rather through them. He enables us to *bear* testing, not avoid it (1 Corinthians 10:13). And He uses our tribulations to accomplish His wonderful purpose in us (Rom. 5:3-5, James 1:3-4).

Thus God works all things—including our hardest trials—together for our good. That's the ultimate victory, and it's how even in the darkest hour of earthly anguish, we can fix our eyes on Him and say confidently with David, "I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me" (v. 6).

What was David talking about there? Surely it's his own redemption from sin and guilt. God had redeemed David's soul from hell, and that puts every earthly trial in perspective. Psalm 118:6: "The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

OK, but David might legitimately say in the midst of *this* trial, these men who are persecuting me might actually kill me. Jesus has the answer for that possibility: "*Yes, wicked men might kill you, but if your eternal soul is in God's hands, that's not really much of a problem.*" Luke 12:4: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"

David's thoughts have clearly shifted that direction. Notice this carefully: the hope he found lay not in any

personal merit. It lay not even in the reality that his case was just. His hope was in the Lord's lovingkindness (v. 5): "I have trusted in your steadfast love." He found the remedy for his despair in the grace and goodness of God. God's love is *steadfast*, and we can hold that truth by faith, even when we don't "feel" the truth of it.

It's significant that David speaks of the Lord's blessing to him in the past tense—not as though God's goodness to him had now ceased, but he is speaking of a greater deliverance than deliverance from a temporal, earthly trial. God's salvation—the grace that redeemed David from the guilt and punishment of his sins—was already an accomplished reality. And David is reminding himself here that he has an eternity of pure, bountiful blessing to look forward to, regardless of how this trial worked out. Even death could not take that away from him. David was claiming the promise of the gospel, "That whoever believes in [Jesus Christ] should not perish but have eternal life."

That's a safe way through trial: Remind yourself that Christ has already "suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." He bore the guilt of sin and paid the price in full, so that "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." That is 1 Timothy 1:15, and it speaks of the only kind of deliverance that truly matters.

That is the promise that made David sing. It is the reality that lifted him out of despair. It was not that he *deserved* deliverance, or even that justice demanded God's intervention on David's behalf. Neither of those things was true. God owed David nothing. He owes you and me nothing. But David's mood changed when he remembered that God had *already* given him everything of eternal value. Lay hold of faith like that, and it will make all the trials and pains of earthly life fade into irrelevance.

Father, You have dealt bountifully with us. May we learn to trust in your steadfast love; may we rejoice in your salvation, even when the afflictions and anguish of this life threaten to overwhelm. Teach us to keep the eternal good news of gospel in view, even when the temporal bad news of this life seems to surround us like a fog. Thank you for Christ and the salvation He purchased with His blood. May the joy of that salvation fill our hearts and minds.