

Hope in Troubled Times

How Long, O Lord?

Psalm 13:1-6

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Scripture

Shortly after the statewide “Stay At Home” directive was implemented, Pasco County Sheriff Chris Nocco invited local pastors to attend a weekly telephone conference call. These calls focus on security information and concerns about our current situation. Sheriff Nocco caught my attention when he said, “During the current pandemic there is an increase in attempted and completed suicides.” Clearly, an increased number of people struggling with depression and despair.

Our current series of meditations, “Hope in Troubled Times,” is from the Psalms. The reason is that the psalmists capture the emotions of our own hearts. They express sorrow and joy, despair and delight. We find ourselves in the psalms.

Today’s psalm, Psalm 13, shows us how a believer moves from despair to delight in the Lord in a message titled, “How Long, O Lord?”

Please follow along as I read Psalm 13:1-6:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

¹How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How 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?

³Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep

the sleep of death,

⁴lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵But I have trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
⁶I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.
(Psalm 13:1-6)

Introduction

Psalm 13 was written by David. In the previous psalm, Psalm 12, David found himself abandoned by faithful friends and surrounded by many foes. But here in Psalm 13 David felt abandoned by God himself and opposed by a single foe. Because David did not pray for the destruction of this enemy, it seems that he wrote Psalm 13 when he was on the run from Saul (1 Samuel 26:9ff.) or his son Absalom (2 Samuel 18:5).

So, the setting for Psalm 13 is a time when David was running to save his life. He was being pursued by either Saul or Absalom. He was in danger of death. He was doing whatever he could to keep himself alive. And what made all of this so disheartening is that David felt that God had abandoned him. He felt a sense of despair.

The question is: How does one get rid of despair? How does one recover the joy of the Lord?

Lesson

Psalm 13:1-6 shows us how a believer moves from despair to delight in the Lord.

Let's use the following outline:

1. A Believer May Feel Despair (13:1-2)
2. A Believer Must Offer Prayer (13:3-4)
3. A Believer Will Experience Delight (13:5-6)

I. A Believer May Feel Despair (13:1-2)

First, a believer may feel despair.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines “despair” as follows: “to lose all hope or confidence.”¹ All of us lose hope or confidence at different times in our lives. I think this is common. But, despair is an intensification of lost hope or confidence because it is “to lose *all* hope or confidence.” We hear that clear note of despair in David, as he wrote in verses 1-2:

**¹ How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
² How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?**

Notice that David cries out four times, “**How long?**” Charles Spurgeon calls Psalm 13 the “How Long Psalm.” Commenting on the cry “**How long?**” he goes on to ask, “Does not the oft-repeated cry become a very HOWLING?”²

There may be several dimensions of despair. Let me suggest three to you that come from verses 1-2.

A. *The Despair May Be Spiritual (13:1)*

First, the despair may be spiritual.

In verse 1, David cried out, “**How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?**” David felt abandoned by God. He had no sense of

¹ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

² C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 1-26*, vol. 1 (London; Edinburgh; New York: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 151.

God's presence in his life. His soul had no connection to God.

One of the most remarkable biographies of a Christian that I have ever read is that of David Brainerd. Born in 1718, he died at the age of 29 in 1747. He was a missionary to the Native Americans, and had a very fruitful ministry. He died at the home of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards published a book titled, *The Life of David Brainerd*, which was basically David Brainerd's diary. I remember reading this book as a young Christian, and I was astonished at the sense of God's presence—or lack of it—in his diary. For example, one entry reads as follows: “Lord's Day, January 23.... None knows, but those that feel it, what the soul endures that is sensibly shut out from the presence of God: Alas, 'tis more bitter than death!”³ This kind of comment is repeated over and over throughout his diary.

My dear brother and sister: do you sometimes feel abandoned by God? Have you lost the sense of God's presence?

B. *The Despair May Be Personal (13:2a)*

Second, the despair may be personal.

David cried out in verse 2a, **“How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?”** The *New International Version* expresses David's cry this way, “How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?” David's thoughts and emotions were getting to him. His mind was going over and over what was going on, and he was not getting any peace of mind. And he felt a sense of sorrow in his heart on top of this.

All of us have thoughts and emotions. Sometimes, these

³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit and John E. Smith, Corrected Edition., vol. 7, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002), 195–196.

thoughts and emotions can become very troubling to us.

Let me make two comments about this.

First, some people are more prone to emotional highs and lows than others. It would be very helpful for you to know if you are such a person. You find yourself worrying about various things, you don't eat well, you don't sleep well, and so on. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his excellent book titled, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, says that the "foremost" reason for spiritual depression is "temperament."⁴ Knowing that you are temperamentally inclined to depression will not cure your depression, but it will help you address your response to it.

And second, anxious thoughts and a sorrowful heart may be caused by physical factors. I remember one of my seminary professors, Dr. Kenneth Kantzer, say that when he was the Dean of Trinity College in Deerfield, IL students would sometimes come to him with their concerns. They would describe themselves as having knots in their stomachs, racing thoughts, and feelings of anxiety. He sometimes asked the student to come and see him after a really good night's sleep. Often, when the students returned, they said that their anxiety had lifted, and they no longer needed to speak with him!

Of course, despair is not always due to a lack of sleep. There may be other factors too, so, seek medical help as well.

C. *The Despair May Be Circumstantial (13:2b)*

And third, the despair may be circumstantial.

David said in verse 2b, "**How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?**" David was on the run from either Saul or

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1965), 14.

Absalom. They believed that David was cornered, and David felt that they were about to triumph over him.

The Bible often speaks of an **“enemy.”** It is hard for us to identify with **“enemy.”** Who is our enemy, for example? *The ESV Study Bible* is helpful in defining who is an **“enemy.”** It does so in the comment for verse 2: “The **enemy** is typically one who hates. Often in the Psalter, the hatred leads the enemy to want to do violence to the singer; in other places, as here, it leads the enemy to gloat over the singer’s misfortunes. Since the Psalms presuppose that their singers are faithful to the covenant, readers may safely assume that the enemy hates the singer’s faithfulness.”⁵ So, David’s **enemy**, whoever that may have been, hated him because of his faithfulness to the Lord.

You may have enemies who hate you because of your faithfulness to the Lord. I think of Andrew Brunson, for whom we prayed regularly as a congregation, who only a few years ago experienced tremendous persecution in Turkey because of his faithfulness to the Lord.

I think the reason I don’t seem to have enemies is because I don’t speak to unbelievers as much as I should. Oh, yes, they see my collar, and know I am a minister. But, I don’t share the good news of the gospel with them, and so they leave me alone.

Is that your experience too? Or, do you have enemies?

II. A Believer Must Offer Prayer (13:3-4)

Second, a believer must offer prayer.

Psalm 13 is divided into three sections showing us how a believer moves from despair to delight in the Lord. Prayer is in the middle section of the psalm, and it is the turning point.

⁵ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 954.

Prayer is the pivot from despair to delight. One commentator notes, “True prayer takes every side of need to the Lord.”⁶

Once again, there are three dimensions of prayer.

A. The Prayer Must Be Spiritual (13:3a)

First, the prayer must be spiritual.

David prayed in verse 3a, **“Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.”** David addressed God directly. He wanted a response to the spiritual despair he felt in verse 1. David wanted God to consider and answer him by remembering him and giving David a clear sense of his presence again.

When you are discouraged and depressed, it is hard to pray. But pray you must!

Joseph Scriven was born in 1819 in Ireland. He graduated from college in 1842. He was engaged to be married the following year, but his fiancée accidentally drowned on the night before their wedding. Two years later, Scriven left Ireland to go and live in Canada. In 1855, Scriven received news that his mother in Ireland was very ill. He wrote her a poem to comfort her that he called “Pray Without Ceasing.” Scriven never intended for his poem to be published, but years later it was. It has become a favorite hymn among millions of Christians, and was renamed, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Listen to the first stanza: “What a Friend we have in Jesus,/All our sins and griefs to bear;/What a privilege to carry/Ev’rything to God in prayer./O what peace we often forfeit,/O what needless pain we bear,/All because we do not carry/Ev’rything to God in prayer.”

⁶ J. A. Motyer, “The Psalms,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 494.

My dear friend, take everything to God in prayer.

B. The Prayer Must Be Personal (13:3b)

Second, the prayer must be personal.

David prayed in verse 3b, “...**light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.**” He wanted the thoughts with which he was wrestling and the sorrow in his heart to be lifted. He wanted the sparkle to return to his eyes, otherwise he felt that he would die.

Listen to the second stanza of Scriven’s poem: “Have we trials and temptations?/Is there trouble anywhere?/We should never be discouraged,/Take it to the Lord in prayer./Can we find a friend so faithful,/Who will all our sorrows share?/Jesus knows our ev’ry weakness;/Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

Take your trials and temptations and troubles to the Lord in prayer, and you will discover discouragement melting away.

C. The Prayer Must Be Circumstantial (13:4)

And third, the prayer must be circumstantial.

David prayed in verse 4, “...**lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.**” David did not want his enemy to prevail over him. He did not want his enemy even to think that he was shaken.

Listen to the third stanza of Scriven’s poem: “Are we weak and heavy-laden,/Cumbered with a load of care?/precious Savior, still our refuge,/Take it to the Lord in prayer./Do thy friends [or foes] despise, forsake thee?/Take it to the Lord in prayer;/In His arms He’ll take and shield thee,/Thou wilt find a solace there.”

III. A Believer Will Experience Delight (13:5-6)

And third, a believer will experience delight.

As I said, prayer will bring a believer from despair to delight. And just as there were three dimensions to despair and prayer, so there are three dimensions of delight.

A. *The Delight Will Be Spiritual (13:5a)*

First, the delight will be spiritual.

David said in verse 5a, **“But I have trusted in your steadfast love.”** God’s hidden face was replaced by **steadfast love** or “unfailing love” (according to the *New International Version*). David realized that he really did trust in the **steadfast love** of God, and that brought him to a sense of delight.

B. *The Delight Will Be Personal (13:5b)*

Second, the delight will be personal.

David said in verse 5b, **“...my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”** David’s heart-sorrow became heart-joy. He realized that he was the recipient of God’s amazing grace, and that made him **rejoice in the Lord’s salvation**.

C. *The Delight Will Be Circumstantial (13:6)*

And third, the delight will be circumstantial.

David said in verse 6, **“I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”** There is no mention now of David’s enemy. Instead, the presence of the enemy has been replaced by the presence of the Lord. I like Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of verse 6 in *The Message* where David said, “I’m

singing at the top of my lungs, I'm so full of answered prayers.”

One of my professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was Dr. Robert Coleman, author of *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. During his lectures he would often say, very passionately, “When you come to know Jesus as your Savior, he puts a spring in your step and a song in your heart!”

My dear friend, when you move from despair to delight in the Lord, you will discover yourself singing again! You will express your love to God in song again. That is why singing is so important in our Christian experience

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed a believer's lament in Psalm 13:1-6, if you feel a sense of despair, turn to the Lord in prayer so that you may move from despair to delight in the Lord.

Recently, Eileen and I were in Bogota visiting our grandsons. (We saw their parents too!) In the mornings, we were usually up before our grandsons, and we would listen for them to wake up. As soon as we heard them cry, we would race up the stairs with their milk to pick them up, change their diapers, and feed them. We were attentive to their cry for help.

How much more do you think your Father in heaven is attentive to your cry? Especially your cry of despair? Jesus once said, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11).

My dear brother and sister, turn to the Lord in prayer so that you may move from despair to delight in the Lord. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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