

HOW LONG, O LORD?

Psalm 13: 1-6 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

How long will the Palestinian-Israeli war go on? A Florida newspaper recently had a front page article that was touching. A Palestinian girl in a wheel chair, wounded by Israeli gunfire was beside an Israeli Jewish boy who was wounded by a Hamas rocket. The article said they had developed a close friendship. But the question that comes to our hearts is –“How long will this war go on?” How long suggests a long long time has already gone on. It’s like the children on a field trip to a retirement home. The children were asked if they had any questions. An inquisitive little girl pointed to one elderly woman and asked her age. Proudly the lady responded, “I’m 98. The child’s eyes opened wide with wonder as she asked again, “Did you start at one?” I read of a boy who had a pet bird that fell into a gallon of varnish and drowned. The boy told his dad, “That was a sad way to die, but he sure had a beautiful finish.” That’s what we all are concerned about—what kind of a finish are we going to have. How long will our anguish go on?

During the coming tribulation period on earth, a strange scene is pictured in Revelation 6: 9-11. “When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before You will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been?” That cry of “How long?” in heaven is yet to occur during the Great Tribulation yet to occur. Everywhere we look in the news and newspapers we find trouble. One person said reading the newspaper was like an endless hitchhiking through the Sahara Desert looking for a nickel’s worth of hope.

Throughout the Word of God there is a biblical pattern of negative and positive. It is the battle between evil and good, between darkness and light, between bondage and freedom, between exile and return, between crucifixion and resurrection, between Armageddon and New Jerusalem, and between sorrow and joy. Only those believers in life who have repented of the bondage of slavery to sin really ever come to rejoice in the unshackled-ness of freedom. Only those with David who have cried “How long, O Lord?” can ever know the ecstasy of shouting “Glory!” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, calls this psalm— Psalm 13, the howling psalm because the “how longs” in Psalm 13: 1,2 become almost an incessant howling. No one knows for sure the occasion of this psalm, but

I desire to venture a guess. It is in I Samuel 27: 1 when David said to himself, “Now I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul.” At that time, the storm had lasted too long. David was sadly giving up at the exact same time that God was wrapping things up for him. I Samuel 28 has King Saul going to the witch of Endor to inquire for her to bring Samuel back from the dead to speak to him. I Samuel 29 pictures all the Philistines gathering their troops together to Aphek to fight against Saul and his armies who were camped at Jezreel. Then I Samuel 30 speaks of a few of David’s followers saying they were going to stone David because they were embittered against him. That could also have been the occasion also of Psalm 13. But in I Samuel 31, after David strengthened himself in the Lord, Saul fell on his own sword on Mt. Gilboa, rather than allow himself to die at the hands of the uncircumcised Philistines. The Philistines cut off his head, stripped his body of weapons and they fastened his beheaded body to the wall of Bethshan, the enemy’s house of rest. Since we aren’t totally sure when David cried out, “How long,” God wants to use this psalm to express to us the feelings of the people of God who are tried and beset with terrifying troubles. Perhaps today, this psalm is being preached by God’s will just to you. Within Psalm 13, I have discovered three responses that God is looking for in us when we are caught in despair. What are they?

GOD IS LISTENING FOR A LAMENT THAT IS HONEST. (I.) I believe David’s lament is an honest lament, as God has inspired these words to be a part of sacred scripture. It’s all too easy for our deep desire for deliverance to degenerate into despair and impatience with God, and this often results in a bitter or murmuring spirit with God. Nevertheless, all the greatest saints have had times of crying out in an honest and sore lament to God, when their circumstances are vexing and taking them to the breaking point. It might be possible to read verses 1, 2 and think David is being irreverent. Nevertheless, beloved, an honest complaint before the Lord is more acceptable in His sight than dishonest piety and praising him outwardly, but not from the heart. Look at this honest lament. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide Your face from me? 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?” All of these how longs are David asking, “Until when, until when will this keep going on? David’s prayer suggests he felt like he was at his breaking point, for there seemed no end to his trouble nor a prospect of deliverance. David almost sounds like he is moments, hours or days from his impending extermination or death. Study with me for a few moments these four “how long laments.” **“How long will you forget me, forever?” (1)** v. 1—David is articulating his sense in his spirit that God had forgotten him. The devil was certainly getting in his licks at David here. But the sense of being forgotten by God spurred the deeper question. “If it’s true You have forgotten me,

Lord, will You forget me forever?” You may see this as a poor faith statement on David’s part, but of one thing I am sure as I read this psalm. Feeling forgotten, David’s focus first of all went to the Lord. The New Testament promise of the Lord was put into music in 1889 by Charles H. Gabriel. “Sweet is the promise “I will not forget thee,” Nothing can molest or turn my soul away; E’en though the night be dark within the valley, Just beyond is shining an eternal day. Refrain *I will not forget thee or leave thee, In My hands I’ll hold thee, In My arms I’ll fold thee, I will not forget thee or leave thee; I am thy Redeemer, I will care for thee.*” **“How long will you hide Your face from me, Lord?(2)** v. 1 To have an aversion to look at someone or to feel that from another person is awful. David felt this aversion from God. Jesus felt this awful sting on the cross as He quoted David’s 22nd psalm—“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Remember something beloved. A hidden face is no sign of a forgetful heart with God. When Jesus died on the cross, it was in love for us that the Father turned away His face from the Son. Nevertheless, for a child of God to feel what David felt is terrible. Why? We long for the blessing Moses gave to Aaron and his sons to give to all the people in Israel. (Numbers 6: 24-26) “The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

“How long will I be left to futilely attempt to devise some earthly plan for my own deliverance, since You do not deliver me, Lord?” (3) v. 2. Notice David’s words, “how long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?” Charles Spurgeon said, “Runinating on trouble is bitter work. I echo my Amen. You and I know what it is like to consider and reconsider day after day a happy solution to a seemingly insolvable problem, humanly speaking. God often brings us to the end of ourselves, so that when we give up trying to find earthly answers , we start relying on God Himself. When his wife died when he was 84 years old, Vance Havner preached her funeral and it was entitled, “Shipwrecked on God, Stranded on Omnipotence.” **“How long will my enemy have the upper hand and exalt over me? (4)** v. 2. “How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” Satan longs to gloat over us. How long did Satan gloat over Jesus crucifixion and death? This gloating of the enemy is perhaps what Jeremiah called the “wormwood and the gall.” (Lamentations 3: 19) In the times when Satan gloats over us, we simply cannot see any plan or possibility for deliverance. God the Father Almighty heard the taunts of Satan when Jesus was crucified. It feels like the last straw when the enemy is making sport of our misery. In fact, most of us if we were writing our life story might have more lamentations 4-1 than words of praise. If Revelation 21, 22 were not in the Bible, we all might die in despair. In my times of lament, I turn to Romans 16: 19, 20 tells me, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under

your feet.” I love to sing this chorus with our youth. In our despair, let’s cry out our “how longs” or our howlings to God, crying to Him desperately for deliverance. God is listening for a lament that is honest. What else secondly, is God longing for from us in our times of despair?

GOD IS LONGING FOR US TO ASK FOR MORE NEEDED LIGHT (II.)

Notice verses 3, 4. “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,” lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.” God wants to bring us, as He brought David to the point that we give up looking for answers in the counsel of our own hearts. God wants to bring us to this second level of no longer assigning blame for our problem, either to God or to others. This phrase “light up my eyes,” is not the kind of prayer we find in Psalm 119: 18, “Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things out of Thy law.” This phrase is not the echo of an invocation song, “Open my eyes, Lord, I want to see Jesus. To reach out and touch Him, and say that I love Him.” No, this is a desperate prayer. It is the prayer of a dying man, “Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.” David is confessing in his prayer that unless God intervenes, the shadows of death are gathering and physically, the lights in his eyes are going out. The prayer in essence is, “Save me from the death which I feel is rapidly approaching.” I have been with scores of folk when they have died. Dimness of vision is one of the last signs that steals over a dying person’s visage. The eyes start to glaze over. Notice, as there were four “How longs” in verses 1, 2, there are three “Lests” in verses 3, 4. David pictured three scenarios ahead for him if God did not consider, hear him, and give him light.

“Lest I sleep the sleep of death/lest I die.” (1) v. 3 The issue here is not light or darkness. It is worse, light, life, or death. This trial was ready to end David’s life. Did you know that the temporary sense of God’s absence in verses 1,2 is the final eternal verdict for those without Jesus? The final absence of God is hell-fire. Just the feeling of a temporary absence from God brings us all to the outskirts and suburbs of hell. Have you ever been where David was? Fear is a legitimate apologetic God uses for sinners in prayer. Fear of death and hell has brought many to Christ. Paul speaks of the terror of hell as a motivator in evangelism as well as the love of Christ. For the believer, impending death is still a legitimate claim we can bring to God. It is not a claim of our rights, but it is a powerful claim in asking for grace. **“Lest my enemies say they have overcome and conquered me. (2) v. 4** Honestly, now, think with me. This fear or lest is one of the greatest fears we all have in trials. “Lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him.” It is an extension of the first lest—for it comes second to it. Imagine, dying, sleeping the sleep of death and knowing at the funeral that our enemies are boasting over us—using our

death as their proof that they are right. If this seems like a marginal fear to you, think again. Most of us have thought or even prayed, “Dear Lord, I have followed You. Don’t give the enemy one bit of momentary satisfaction that he was right when he was dead wrong.” **“Lest my tragedy becomes the comedy of my enemies.” (3) v. 4** We read, “Lest my foes/adversaries rejoice because I am shaken.” This third lest seems to include a slim line of hope. It isn’t about death, but about us being moved or shaken from our steadfastness and firmness in the Lord, making us appear to be beaten and overcome by the enemy. David is crying out for God to be his handle to hold on to in life’s tragedies. It is like Vance Havner has put it so well, “When we cannot trace God’s hand, we can always trust His heart.” In 1943, E.J. Rollings wrote a mighty hymn I love. (1) Are your crosses too heavy to carry; And burdens too heavy to bear? Are there heartaches and tears and anguish; And there's no one who seems to care? (2) Are there shadows of deep disappointment, And trusts that have proven untrue? Has the darkness of night settled round you, Has your hope and your faith wavered too? (3) Has the storm over shadowed your sunshine, And life lost attraction for you? Have the dreams that you cherished been broken, Is your soul filled with bitterness too? Chorus: Standing somewhere in the shadows you'll find Jesus, He's the Friend who always cares and understands. Standing somewhere in the shadows you will find Him, And you'll know Him by the nail prints in His hands.” Beloved, when your foes are gloating, rejoicing, and saying they have prevailed, look past their obvious presence. Look up and see the One who stood up from His throne as Stephen was stoned. Look for His face. He will be standing –not sitting, somewhere, perhaps not even in the shadows. God is listening for a lament that is honest, He is longing for us to ask for more needed light, and thirdly and lastly, what is He looking for?

GOD IS LOOKING FOR AN OUTLOOK THAT WILL PUT OUR CONFIDENCE IN HIM. (III.)

This outlook never comes without a discipline of our focus. This discipline I find in verses 5, 6. “But I have trusted in Your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me.” What is this three-fold discipline of focus? Whatever it takes, ask God to learn or be taught this three-fold discipline of focus. **“We need an honest backward look.” (1) v. 5** I read, “But I have trusted in your steadfast love...” You may remind me that Paul tells us in Philippians 3: 13 to “forget those things which are behind.” That is right and proper. But there are times when we are to reflect upon the past. We are to go back and recall how many times all has seemed hopeless and lost before God finally stepped in and saw us through. That’s the genius of the mighty hymn of John Newton, Amazing Grace— v. 3—“Through many dangers, toils, and snares...” Or I think of the old Tommy Dorsey song, “How many times, have I wounded His heart, how many times, have

I disobeyed, How many times, have I fallen down, how many times have I been close to the ground. How many times has Jesus lifted me up, how many times is He my burden bearer, how many times has He forgiven my sin, and when I reach, reach, reach, reach those pearly gates, He'll let me in." Beloved, we need an honest backward look. We need to ask ourselves, "Has God ever failed me? If not, remember, He won't fail me now." Some trust in chariots and some in horses, some trust in alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and tranquilizers. But there is an honest backward look, that says—Where have I found relief in the past? Remember we all have found relief living by faith, trusting in the Lord, who's never failed us yet. He has proved forever faithful. David says, "But I have trusted in Your steadfast love." **"We need a hopeful forward look of faith. (2) v. 5.** Notice, "My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation." This beleaguered traveler, David has been to the mercy-seat. He has been so refreshed there that his weeping has turned to singing. It's the saga of sighing to singing. This is the embodiment of Song of Solomon 2: 12— "The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in the land." This is when we experience springtime in our souls. In light of the past, there is now every reason to look confidently to the future—to catch a glimpse of a coming day of rejoicing. We can start to sing, "And when the battle's over, we shall wear a crown, yes, we shall wear a crown, yes, we shall wear a crown..." When the shadow disappears and the mist is rolled away, the presence of God who has never left us becomes very real and wonderful. The future look is the hopeful forward look of faith.

"We need a present look that is indebted to God, and beholden to Him. This is a look of praise today. (3) v. 6 "I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me." David now had what we need—a deep indebtedness to God. This indebtedness to God turns the corner in our trials and calamities and we remember the storms God has brought us through before. The sorrows we remember then sweeten our present joy in Jesus. The tears flood our eyes and soul. Like a drowning mariner clinging to the mast of the ship, we now are safely clinging to our faithful God. David has been renewed by looking looking back, looking ahead, and he is ready to face today and tomorrow. The clouds are lifting at the end of this psalm, the sun is breaking through. What has changed? Not a lot except his perspective is finally an outlook of confidence in the Lord. God does have the last word and that word is a good word. Howling has turned to singing. Faith has turned heavy weights into wings. This isn't a long prayer, but it is powerful. Brevity is born of urgency. Storms seldom give way to calm before God rekindles our hope and strengthens our faith, exchanging our sighing for singing. God doesn't make us repent for the howling—but requires that we give up the spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise. Christ Returneth—sing it. Amen.