

A Song for Every Season (Part 9 of 10)

How Long O Lord!

Psalm 13

Mark Vroegop

*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?*

*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 (Psalm 13 ESV).

Last week I suggested to you that grief is not tame and it is common. If pain and the emotions that follow are like this, then it is a great mercy that God has given us Psalms of lament. They give voice to what we feel, but they also give us direction and guidance as to how we should think, pray, talk, and respond when grief comes our way.

It never ceases to amaze me how much pain is represented in this body of believers. A church member sent the following email to me, and it illustrates the urgency of the issue before us:

Mark, I am struggling. Struggling just to want to get up, struggling to pray and read my bible. Every time I start to pray I just start crying because I don't understand God's ways. I struggle with even questioning God's ways. Who am I to question His will for me, but I do question. There have been long dry spells where I don't want to read my bible or pray. Even writing things and opening up about my true feelings is hard. I just try to smile and act like it's okay. The word struggle certainly defines my life right now. People ask how I'm doing, and when I say it's a struggle, they look at me like I've just grown horns and a third eye. I feel as if they think I'm not trusting the Lord enough or my faith is weak. I have almost felt I was being sinful by still grieving.

This email highlights so many things, but there is one thing, in particular, that you can see and feel so clearly: **there is a very challenging tension in pain.** In fact, I think that this is the essence of the scary and untamable nature of grief; it puts you in the middle of seemingly irreconcilable

realities, truths, and emotions. When we were grieving the loss of our daughter, Sylvia, in 2004, I summarized it as best I could with this statement: **we are living in the tension between pain beyond belief and divine sovereignty beyond comprehension.** In other words, we found ourselves in circumstances that created painful emotions beyond what we could even imagine, and we were battling to cling to the promise of God's sovereignty – his control over all events – beyond what we could fully understand. The tension sounds like "This is so hard!" and "I know that you are good!" And they simply exist side-by-side or in tension.

Psalms 13, like few other Psalms, shows us this tension very clear, and I think that is why I love it so much. It is honest, but not static. It deals with the reality of what is happening in the heart of a man who is suffering but this Psalm also gives us a road-map to follow in our tension-filled journey through pain.

To make this process easy to remember and hopefully more useful, I'd like to suggest to you that the path of asking, "How Long, O Lord" involves three steps or thoughts: **pain, prayer, and providence.** I remember walking this pain-prayer-providence path almost every day – sometimes multiple times in a day. So I hope this is helpful to you today or sometime in the future.

Pain: Dealing Honestly with our Feelings

The first two verses identify very clearly the pain of the Psalmist. Some commentators call this section a "complaint," but the sense here is not that the Psalmist is complaining. Rather, he is simply acknowledging the real effects of pain in his life. These verses give voice to what is rumbling in his soul.

Four "How Longs"

Hopefully you will remember that repetition is a useful literary tool in the Psalms. In verses 1-2 we find that the Psalmist says, "How Long?" four times. Don't miss the significance of this. The pain is real; he wants it to be over; and he cries out to God. Notice what he wants:

- For his enemy to no longer be exalted over him (v 2b)
- For the internal wrestling and sorrow to be finished (v 2a)
- For God to be near to him again (v 1b)
- For God to see his plight and help him (v 1a)

We don't know what the circumstances that led to this Psalm were, but we get some clue here. Apparently an enemy seems to have gotten a victory over him which has led to internal wrestling and deep, daily, and continual sorrow. That's seems to be the direct cause of his pain. But there is a spiritual component that is equally challenging. This is complicated.

He is struggling with what seems to be the distance of God in these circumstances. The pain of his life has created a spiritual wrestling with God's purposes, plans, and care. It is safe to assume that this is not the first time he has cried out to God about all of this. The four-fold emphasis of "How

Long?" leads us to believe that the issue is not just the pain in his life; he is mourning over God's lack of immediate help and the effect on his soul.

Disturbing Spiritual Questions

Pain has led him to feel some concerning things about God. First, he feels that God is no longer blessing him – "how long will you hide your face from me?" Blessing and God's face go hand-in-hand throughout the Bible. One of the most important and famous examples of this is the Aaronic Blessing in Numbers 3:24-26.

The Lord bless you and keep you; 25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace (Num 6:24-26).

Secondly, it feels as if God has forgotten him. In the Old Testament, one of the most wonderful things about God is the fact that he is a covenant-keeping God. He makes promises, and he always keeps them. However, there are seasons when it seems as if God is not keeping his promises. I've called this season the "dark side of the will of God." Pain rarely feels like blessing nor does it feel like God is close by.

Third, he is afraid. When you are in that dark season, there is a real fear that it will continue. You wonder how long you can endure this pain, and it is an exhausting battle to not let your mind or heart slide into a self-defeating pattern of hopelessness. It is remarkable (and comforting) to me that the Psalmist doesn't just say, "Will you forget me?" He goes even further and amps up the language by adding the word "forever," a word that means continually, perpetually, or totally. This is a window into his soul as he expresses his fear that God will never provide relief to him.

If you are reading this Psalm like you should and with all its emotion, there will likely be a question that will come out of this verse: "Is he allowed to talk like that?"

Are Painful Words Sinful?

This raises a question that many of you have asked about the Psalms. There are times in this wonderful book that people say disturbing things. Sometimes there are disturbing statements to God about himself. At other times there are disturbing statements to God about others – often called imprecatory Psalms. For instance, Psalm 56:3 says "O God, break the teeth in their mouths" and Psalm 137:9 says "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock." These are painful words, and it seems odd that they would be in the Bible, doesn't it?

Why would God put this kind of language in the Bible? I think what you find in these statements is the harnessing of the pain to and through God verbally, rather than to anyone else.¹ There is something very helpful and spiritual about honestly talking to God about what is really going on in your heart. The reality is that he knows that it is there anyway, right? So tell him.

¹ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1982), 182.

Some of you are wondering, "So is it possible to sin with what you pray?" Sure it is. And I don't know where the line is. But what I do know is that even Jesus, in his pain, asked for something that he knew was not a part of God's plan. In Mark 14:36, Jesus goes so far as to say "All things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me."

You see I have found that people in pain stop praying. Do you know why? Because they are uncomfortable with what they are feeling and struggling with. I think that is a huge mistake, and I think part of the problem is that we have this mentality that we have to pray perfectly, in control, and come to God with everything cleaned up. Listen! God knows you are mess. He knows what's going on in your soul. He's heard every thought. Tell him you are hurting. Tell him that you are frustrated. Tell him that you are scared. Tell him what you want to do to those who've hurt you.

When my wife was mid-labor with the twins, she lamenting. It had been 20 hours, she was weary, and she said, "We are never doing this again!" That was not the moment to analyze that statement for its accuracy or truthfulness. It was a lament in pain, and it helped her to say it – even if we both knew that it really wasn't what she wanted.

Be honest with God. But – and this is enormously important! – don't stay there. Make pain a part of your lament, but don't make it all of your lament. Again, Jesus helps us in Mark 14:36 – "Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will."

Prayer: Calling on God in our Hurt

Pain should lead to prayer. That is the point of a lament. We don't lament for lament sake. We are not sad just to be sad. Nor do you wait until you are no longer hurting, no longer under the press of hard circumstances, no longer struggling to cry out to God in prayer. Pain creates great prayer!

When you look at verse there are three things that emerge that the Psalmist is praying and longing for. These are incredibly common desires for people when they are in pain.

Care for Me

Verse three begins with the important word "consider." The NIV translates this as "Look on me." The Hebrew word means a careful, sustained, and favorable contemplation. The word is first used in Genesis 15:5 where God tells Abraham to look at the stars of the heaven as he tells him that his descendants will be as numerable as what he sees. So the idea is to look with great meaning.

God's "looking" has everything to do with his concern and his care. For example, Psalm 9:13 says "*Be gracious to me, O Lord! See my affliction from those who hate me, O you who lift me up from the gates of death.*" The idea is for God to see and know what is going on – for him to come near so that he cares for his people.

This is what every person in pain wants to know! That God cares. It is one thing to be in pain. It is another thing for the pain to be pointless, random, and cruel. The cry here is for God to see, to know, and to care.

Speak to Me

The next request is for God to answer him. Not only does he want God to see what is going on, but he also wants God to answer him. He longs for God to speak, to act on his behalf. The silence and the unexplainable reasons behind pain are very hard to deal with. Therefore, he longs for God to answer him, to speak.

Strengthen Me

The final thing he prays and longs for here is that God would give him strength. The phrase “light up my eyes” is a figure of speech to describe his vitality and endurance. You can see the problem if you read a little further: “lest I sleep the sleep of death.” He feels so weary, so exhausted, so run-down that he feels like he is dying. He needs God to help him so that he finds strength.

If this doesn’t happen, he sees that evil – specifically his enemy – will think that they have won and rejoice over his collapse. Without God’s care, his word, or his strength the Psalmist is sure that he’s not going to be able to make it. This is what every grieving person wants and needs: to be loved, to be instructed, and to be encouraged. There are few things as frightening as the thought that pain is capricious, pointless, hopeless, and ultimate.

So notice how, on the one hand, he is brutally honest about what he is feeling. And yet, on the other hand, he is asking God for specific help. Although he is expressing the depth of his pain, he is still fighting by asking God for help.

How Jesus Fulfills all Three

If you step away from the Psalms a minute, it is really amazing to consider how Jesus became the fulfillment of what is longed for in Psalm 13. I hope it is enormously encouraging for you to think about the way that Jesus is the greatest source of hope for those who are in pain. Let me explain:

- Hebrews 4:14-15 tells us that Jesus, by becoming a man, is able to sympathize with our weakness. He understands what it is like to live in a fallen world; he knows pain. And when we come to him in prayer, he gets it. He really cares.
- Hebrews 1:1-3 tells us that while God spoke in the former days by the prophets, he has now spoken to us through his Son – *“who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”* That verse is so loaded with the Gospel, the glory of God, and victory. In other words, God has spoken. He has told us what is happening, and the Bible is full of the revealed will of God. God is not silent.
- Hebrews 4:16 tells us the implications of the revelation and incarnation of Jesus. Since Jesus is the Son of God, since he has won the victory over sin and death, since he has made reconciliation possible, since he understands, and since he is the interceding for us – then

“come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” In other words, he can give you strength.

So your comfort in the midst of pain is not an idea, concept, or theory; it is a person - a real person who really understands, who has spoken to us the Word of God, and who is able to give us spiritual strength. So if you are ministering to a person in pain remember two things: 1) personal presence not your pithy comments are what is most helpful, and 2) there is a place of a person’s heart that only Jesus can touch – but he’s able and willing to do so.

Providence: Trusting God to Keep us Trusting

So far we’ve seen how this lament from Psalm 13 leads us through the honesty of the pain to prayer where a man calls upon God to help him while he is still hurting. All of these things exist in tension.

We come to the end of Psalm which gives us the other side of the tension. Laments are written for people who are dealing with pain beyond belief and, at the same time, are trusting in divine providence beyond their understanding.

This is the sacred ground that laments should lead us to, and in this way pain can become a platform for the glory of God. Undergirding our pain is the firm assurance that God is in control and that he is worthy of our trust. Years ago I heard someone summarize it like this: “keep trusting the One who keeps you trusting.” Let me show you this in verses 5-6.

Keep Trusting

There will always be a wide gap between what you “know” and what you “feel.” That is especially the case when it comes to pain. And it is an act of faith to not only believe in a truth, but to live on the basis of that truth. In other words, faith bridges that gap between what I know to be true and what I feel to be true.

Notice how the Psalmist clearly tilts the direction of his life toward trusting in God even while he is in pain. There a clear sense of intentionality here:

- “I have trusted” (v 5a)
- “my heart shall rejoice” (v 5b)
- “I will sing” (v 6a)

In other words, there is a clear choice that he is making here. While there are many things that a person in pain cannot control, there is much that they can control. What can they do? They can keep trusting.

Now there is no indication in the Psalm that anything remarkable changed in the circumstances that caused him to lament in the first place. Instead it seems that he is choosing to trust, choosing to rejoice, and choosing to sing.

Further, I think that this Psalm shows us that he is doing all of this trusting, rejoicing, and singing while he is still hurting – even wondering “How Long, O Lord?” So it seems possible that you could be deeply struggling yet still trusting. You could be deeply hurting yet rejoicing. You could be fearful yet singing.

Victory over pain and sorrow doesn’t mean that they are necessarily gone. Rather, it means that they do not permanently define and control you. You discover how to live in a “new normal” where you still do all of the things that you did before, but you do them in faith because you feel like a person with a hole in your soul. So if you are in pain, but you are here – singing, worshipping, trying – you’re doing far better than you probably realize.

The One Who Keeps Us Trusting

Trust is only as good as the object the hope is set upon. Notice that he puts his hope in God based upon who God is:

- “have trusted in your steadfast love” (v 5a)
- “shall rejoice in your salvation” (v 5b)
- “dealt bountifully with me” (v 6)

Everything he lists here are the past works of God. Steadfast love is the covenant love of God that he has seen in his lifetime. Rejoicing in your salvation is based upon what God has promised to do. And dealing bountifully with me is what the Psalmist can see when he looks back on his life.

He is banking his future on God’s ability to give him grace in the future. If God has been faithful in the past, then he will surely be faithful in the future. If God has been gracious before, he can be trusted to be gracious in the future. The point of this is simply that we are a part of God’s plan, and he can be trusted. He is trusting in God’s ability to be God.

The circumstances may not change. The pain of the moment may be very strong. But, in the midst of his pain, he looks back and sees that God has proven over and over and over that he can be trusted. Even though your faith is weak, you still trust – knowing that it is only by his power that you can think trusting thoughts. This is the same God who today is worthy to be trusted, the same God who keeps us trusting too.

Pain, Prayer and Providence

Psalm 13 is a powerful, honest and helpful lament because it shows us what it looks like to live with pain beyond belief and divine providence beyond comprehension. It shows us a lamentable path that some of you are on today and one that some of you will be on in the future. So if you find

yourself hurting today, listen to Psalm 13. Be honest about the pain. Tell God all about it. Call out to him in the midst of your hurt. And then – keep trusting the One who keeps you trusting.

I know that you know the song Amazing Grace. But I want to remind of you of what John Newton said between “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound...” and “When we’ve been there ten thousand years..”

T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
and Grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me.
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

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Summer Challenge:

- Memorization – Psalms 34:19-22
- Reading:
 - — Psalms 138-140
 - — Psalms 141-143
 - — Psalms 144-145
 - — Psalms 146-147
 - — Psalms 148-150