

How Long?  
Psalm 13  
John 6:35-40

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Doug Browne  
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Psalm 13

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

How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,  
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';  
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I 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.

John 6:35-40

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'

Have you ever been convinced that your entire life was completely destroyed and worthless, and there was nothing you could do to fix it? That either it was completely what someone else had done to you, through no fault of your own, or that it was all your fault?

I've been there.

If you look around this room, you'll see a few other people who have been there, too.

You can recognize them because they're nodding their heads right now.

I wasn't there when the decision was made to put the Psalms in the Bible, but I am convinced that that kind of situation is why they are in there. Roughly a third of the 150 psalms are prayers for help. They are cried "out of the depths"<sup>1</sup> or when "the waters have come up to my neck."<sup>2</sup> Those images mean even more when you remember that most people in the ancient world did not know how to swim.

These psalms express the deepest moments of human pain. If you have ever even thought that you might not be able to tell God what you thought or felt, read the psalms. You'll find that other people have said what you're feeling, or worse.

Psalm twenty-two doesn't say, "Excuse me, God, but I don't think we're on the same page, here." It doesn't say, "It feels like we're drifting kind of far apart here, God." It opens with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The word, "forsaken" goes beyond not being there. Forsaking someone is breaking promises and abandoning them, right when that would hurt the worst and do the most damage. And this psalm accuses God of doing that. This is the psalm Jesus cried from the cross, after the crowd had cried, "Crucify him!" After every one of his disciples, the people he had hand-picked from all of Judea, had abandoned him.

The dictionary defines the word "lament" as "feeling or expressing sorrow or grief." "Lament" is not a word we use much these days. In fact, we don't use the word because we don't

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 130:1

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 69:1

do it much these days in Western culture. The dictionary definition is too mild – as Mark Twain would say, it is defining lightning by using a lightning bug.<sup>3</sup>

To lament is not the same thing as to *kvetch*, or whine, or complain. To lament is to purely express your sorrow and grief, without concern for who is watching or what they might think. To say the things that are on your heart, without regard for whether they are fair, or dignified, or whether they will embarrass us later.

Perhaps because of generations of heroes who are always cool and collected, we tend not to express our emotions. We hide them. We distract ourselves from admitting that we're feeling them. We even pretend that they don't exist.

When our life circumstances get difficult, we seek out false saviors and false solutions. We bury ourselves in work, or entertainment, or alcohol, or ice cream. We'll do anything rather than face the pain and heartache that we feel.

But the Bible is full of lament. The prophets lamented how God's people wandered away from God's path, and they lamented how God punished them. The book of Lamentations is one long lament. Jesus lamented in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross.

A lament, in the Bible, starts with crying out to God. The writers of laments come to God as they are. With tears running down their faces, their hair a mess, whatever. They don't clean up the mess of their lives before seeking out their heavenly Father. God already knows what is

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<sup>3</sup> “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—’tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.” – Mark Twain, quoted in George Bainton, *The Art of Authorship*, pp. 87–88 (1890).

going on in their minds and hearts, so they don't pretend that their lives are any better than they actually are.

They say how they feel with vivid description: "I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping."<sup>4</sup>

Then they ask God for help. They beg God to rescue them. They ask for relief from their pain. They ask for help and salvation. Whatever their needs are, they ask God to step in and provide for them: "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed'; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken."<sup>5</sup> "O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me!"<sup>6</sup>

Then they praise God's character. His past acts of salvation. His power and wisdom. His love and faithfulness. They express their trust in God, their trust in God to be God and to take care of them.

For us, reading the psalm, this can seem like an abrupt change. Most of us don't do emotional turns on a dime like that. How do they go from feeling like their life is ending, or at least not worth continuing, to praising God?

The answer is that the psalm is not in real-time. It was written over a period of time.

The writers of these psalms eventually go from lament to praise, but it takes some time. And that's OK. In the process of writing these psalms, the writers have gone through a journey of fighting with their emotions and their grief, to get to the place where they can praise the Lord.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 6:6

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 13:3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 71:12.

So, what does this mean for us?

First, we in the West could use permission to lament. We bottle up our emotions and pretend that we don't feel pain or grief or anger. The reward for that is high blood pressure, strokes, and heart attacks. All the stereotypical "Male" health issues of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Of late, more and more women are having high blood pressure, strokes, and heart attacks, so they're headed toward being equaled out across the genders. I don't believe that's the best way to achieve equality.

If you feel it, you can say it to God. God is big enough to take it. God already knows what you're feeling, so why not say it? It would mean admitting to yourself what you're feeling, but that would be good for you.

I don't often get this explicit, but in this case it's necessary. In the name of the Almighty God, I tell you, you have permission to be mad at God. You have permission to tell God exactly how angry you are, and why. It doesn't matter if you'll eventually figure out that God isn't the problem here. It doesn't matter if you later calm down and decide that the whole situation was someone else's fault, or even your own.

Tell God what you feel, when you feel it.

If you're having trouble with words, that's OK. Pray some of these psalms. Psalm 13. Psalm 22. Psalm 69. Psalm 130.

God will still love you. I promise. God still loved the people who didn't just pray those psalms, they wrote them down for other people. Some of those were written by King David, a

man who enjoyed God's favor far beyond anything he deserved, but who had some hard times, too.

God will not think less of you. God already knows you better than you know yourself. And God still loves you.

Second, ask God for help.

Every lament psalm explicitly asks God for help. It says, "God, please help me!"

If you know what God could do to help you, ask for it! God may not choose to act in that way, but you'll never know until you ask. And asking God for specific help might just point you to what you could do yourself, if you were thinking clearly.

If you don't know what God could do to help you, that's OK. Ask for help anyway! "SOS" is a prayer. "God, Help!" is a prayer.

Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."<sup>7</sup>

You might get help and what you need without asking for it, but God has promised that you will get what you need if you ask. And God knows what we need better than we do.

Third, praise the Lord!

You may not get to this point immediately. Grief and pain are nasty stuff, and they can take a long time to get under control. The process is different for everyone and for every occasion.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 7:7-8.

That's OK. Keep repeating steps one and two, lamenting and asking God for help. You'll get there. Will pain completely go away? Not likely. But it will calm down, and get under control.

Because God is with you, and God gives you what you need, whether you know what that is, or not.

Thanks be to God, who is worthy of all praise and honor and glory.

AMEN