

THE HOW LONG PSALM

Psalm 13

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I was going to do two psalms in one but I got so caught up with Psalm 13. And the psalms are unlike one another too. Psalm 13 and 14 have a lot different pattern to them and different subjects. I didn't feel at liberty mixing them. It's a short psalm.

It's another psalm used in worship, a psalm of David. This is his twelfth of the thirteen psalms. Only the first psalm has not been attributed to him.

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me” (Psalm 13:1–6, NIV).

I call this for want of a title the “How Long Psalm.” Maybe another is the howling psalm—some nights seem to last forever. There are periods of the soul and periods of life when it seems like we're in a long night. This psalm reflects that as do many of the psalms. Each kind of approaches those dark nights in different ways.

There are days it seems like nothing we do works. Everything we do is wrong. That's why we call Psalm 13, David's “How Long Psalm.” Nothing is working.

If you read the first two verses carefully you know the phrase “How long” is repeated four times. The phrase indicates that David is passing through a period in his life when there does not appear to be immediate remedies. We'd say how long if we were going through something that didn't

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yield a quick solution. Some problems don't resolve with the speed of a microwave. We do not know here David's particular problem. Was he sick? "Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death" (verse 3) suggests he's severely ill.

Others think it's a problem with relationships. That's why he's wrestling with his thoughts. Some suggest that maybe there's a series of reverses that's occurred in his life. The psalm is not pegged in to any particular incident we can identify. It may be that the Holy Spirit in His wisdom has in mind that we not know the specific problems so that whatever our problem is we can identify with this psalm. We can say it applies to us because we can bring to it whatever problem we have.

Another thing we ought to note is any time we're dealing with any particular psalm it may not match where we are in that particular moment in our life. I'm sure there were times in the Early Church that parts weren't applicable. But when you come to the end of the Book of Acts, 21–28, Paul has this lengthy imprisonment experience. I'm sure Psalm 13 had to be somewhere in his prayers. "How long?" as he sat in that terrible jail.

So psalms may strike us in different ways. I have to always be careful not to universalize. Some of you are experiencing Psalm 13. For others of us it may be something we file away.

Psalm 13 is appropriate to a winter in a particular day, a set of days.

The psalm is divided into three stanzas, each consisting of two verses.

One commentator has called this a stairway from desolation to delight. It begins on the bottom rung of really feeling low. Then he takes one step to get out and the second stanza and the last stanza is the one that gets him completely out.

I. The first two verses consist of a complaint.

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The complaint is built around the four-fold repetition of the words “How long?” Each “How long” has its subtitle. The way that it is different from another “How long?”

A. The first “How long” raises the question whether or not God has forgotten. Interesting that David does not contemplate God ceasing to exist. “God, are You there?” He had a deep-seated belief that God is. The question is not “Is God?” but “Has God forgotten me?”

David didn’t have the advantage we have with the Lord saying he knows you so intimately he’s got all the hair on your head counted. And when the sparrow drops to the ground he’s aware.

David does not have the advantage of all that teaching. Maybe there are times in our own life when we have that advantage we have the doubts and the problems. “God, have You forgotten me?”

B. Then the question, “How long, LORD, will you hide your face from me?” (verse 1). The first “How long” is a lament because David feels forgotten by God. The second lament is because here is no longer any delight in his relationship with God. The whole idea of “face turned toward us” indicates a sense of intimacy, of communication. One of the most intimate forms of communication a person can have is to look the person in the face. Eye to eye. Perhaps when we want to establish with a close relationship to a person there is nothing more distracting than when they won’t look us in the eye.

It’s important when we’re meeting with people that we look at one another. Or else people will assume we’re not interested in any kind of relationship. I have to fight the tendency to bring the newspaper to the table.

David has this feeling about God. “God, You’ve hidden Your face from me. You’re not looking at me any more. I’m not in any kind of relationship with You. There’s no delight in the

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relationship. I have a feeling You're looking off somewhere else. Would You focus Your attention? God! I'm here. How long will it go on like this?" (verses 1).

C. A third "How long" is the fact that there is struggle and sorrow in his life. "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (verse 2). That's profound. "Every day have sorrow in my heart." I imagine it would astonish us how many of us would raise our hand at this phrase "Every day I have sorrow in my heart." There is often a dichotomy between the outward façade that we wear of congeniality and the inner pathos and struggle we're having with life. David, the one place he's honest is with God. He has to play the kingly deal when he's with people but when he's writing his poems to God he's honest.

When you look at David's life, he was kind of messed up. He did some things that if you did there would be real reason for having sorrow in the heart. But there are often situations we have sorrow over of which we have no control but it's there. We struggle and have sorrow. David is talking about wrestling with thoughts.

I think it's always important to take a moment and overlay the New Testament on top of the Old Testament. Lest we be guilty of taking the Old Testament as an isolated unit and not interpreting adequately in light of all Scripture. What do we do if every day we have sorrow in our hearts? I think the real solution is not just within Psalm 13. Although the answers begin to come. The New Testament sort of makes David's path a great avenue. So that we can really understand how to deal with this everyday sorrow in the heart.

The best place we can look at is Romans 8 for dealing with sorrow in the heart. Romans 8 from about verse 24 on lays out four great principles that we are meant to live with when we are dealing with this sorrow every day.

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The first is the coming glory is greater than the present suffering. We put them on a scale.

Someday glory will outweigh suffering.

Second, the Holy Spirit is helping us to pray when we don't know how to pray. When we feel crushed down by life. The Holy Spirit is taking over in our life and praying. Like automatic pilot.

Paul says when we don't know how to "drive" as we ought, when we don't know how to get through life, the Holy Spirit is in there praying. You can count on it.

Then Paul tells us thirdly that God's working everything for good in our life. No matter how bad the present night is God is working it for the good. If we'll just hang in there we'll see God work it for the good.

The fourth thing he tells us in Romans 8 is that nothing can separate us from God. Not death, not life, not angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor any creature can ever separate us from God. To really understand Psalm 13, therefore, and David's wrestling and having sorrow in his heart every day to get an adequate answer to what he's struggling with one has to spend time in Romans 8 and get the New Testament dimension to the particular problem stated here by David.

D. The fourth element of his complaint in the "How long?" is that he is experiencing defeat. First he is forgotten by God. Secondly there is no delight in God. Third he has struggle and sorrow.

And fourth there is defeat. "How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (verse 2).

I suggested when we read the word "enemy" we substitute the word "problem" instead. That'll help us understand it better. How long will my problem triumph over me? Wouldn't it be nice if there were an easy answer to this? Isn't it interesting that in the psalm there is no answering word of God? When he asks the Lord, "How long will my problem triumph over me?" There is no

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prophetic answer that says, “Thus sayeth the Lord...” There are times when the Lord does do that. But there are many times when there is no immediate answer to it at all.

We do not know the length of our tunnels. It'd sure make it a lot easier to get through some tunnels if we knew how long they were. Or maybe it wouldn't. The tunnel could be longer than we think we have the strength for and therefore we'd despair. Or it could be shorter than we think and the qualities which are being developed in our lives would be short circuited if we knew we were going to get out of it so soon. The Lord most of the time does not tell us how long our tunnels are.

This is the lament and complaint. We're grateful that the psalm does not end here with these two verses.

II. The second step in the psalm is a request.

Verses 3–4. “Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall” (NIV). David's request is nothing less than to be safe from death. He's explicit in it. The idea of “give light to my eyes” is really suggesting that people cannot live without some kind of hope. He is saying, “God, I need something to latch on to here.” We need God to light up our life. Earlier in the psalm he's complained that God isn't looking at him. Now he prays God to give light to his eyes. David is saying, “I want a special look in my eyes again. And I want You to look at me. I want You to say in Your look, ‘I care about you. I like to be with you. You're special. I'm proud of you.’ Look at me God, and give me reason to live. Give me hope.”

I have a feeling that the psalm is not written as quickly as we read it. In fact, I would suspect that if the truth were known there are hours that go by between breaks of thought in a psalm while David is sort of “chewing” on what he has been thinking. I think for a number of hours he was

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perhaps chewing on this “How long.” Then he began to say, “What can be done about this? Lord, You’ve got to put some hope back in my life. You’ve got to give me a reason to live to fight this thing through lest my problem overcome me.”

He’s at that stage. Then I think a number of hours go by and as he begins to reflect more and more on who God is we come to the third part of the psalm...his confidence.

III. “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me” (verses 5–6, NIV).

What a tremendous turnaround these verses show compared to the first two verses. But as I said, they happen so fast when we’re reading them. But they couldn’t have happened that fast in working through them. Mentally and spiritually. Things just don’t turn around that quick in our emotional life. It takes some time to work through them. But he comes from a position of mistrust to trust. From feeling that God is forgetting and hiding to an understanding that God has a love that doesn’t fail. From sorrow where he has every day sorrow in his heart to a place where “my heart rejoices.” Once again this great thing going on in the psalms which as we keep going through but not one thing externally has changed in his life. All the changes have been internal. God hasn’t suddenly removed his problem from him, but has suddenly given him a fresh way of understanding it in light of the truth that God does care for him.

What David is really telling us is that day after day in our life we’re called upon to trust God again with our lives. Anew with our lives. We must keep wrestling with our doubts and our fears. And keep coming back to our faith. And to His unfailing love and to His salvation. So he decides to close this little reverie by singing to the Lord, which is a good way to complete the coup de grace of depression anyway. “I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me” (verse 6, NIV). Coming back to trusting in the Lord.

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The things I really treasure most in life are the times when I had been the most down. Those are the things that stand out in life. It's when I've been the most down it seems like the greatest things in life have happened. I'm not looking for something down but I think that David is at that place in Psalm 13. I think he's at one of those points where he's saying, "God, this isn't fair. I feel abandoned by You. Yet here's what I'm going to do in this situation. I'm going to not just grit my teeth, I'm going to relax my faith. One more time I'm going to trust You. Not just one more time like if You let me down again but I'm going to trust You again, Lord. I'm going to trust You again. I do it gladly. And You're going to make my heart sing. You'll work this out. What's my fretting going to accomplish? Not really do anything for me or for You. My dark thoughts of You anyway aren't true. You really haven't hid Your face from me, God. You really have not become my enemy. You know me right well. I will trust you."

That's the best David could do in the Old Testament. I admire his faith because he doesn't have all the information we have. We have the added information. God loves us so much that He gave Christ. God is so powerful that He's demonstrated that power in the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. There is no weapon formed against us that can prosper. We have the armor of God. And with it the power to resist the evil one. In all those things we have and David did not. Yet there's that pure faith coming from his heart. "I'll trust You. I'll believe in You. And I'll see You do Your good work in my life yet again and anew. How long? That question isn't as important any more because I trust You. So whatever the time is that it takes it's ok. My heart's at rest."

This psalm may not fit you at all tonight. If it doesn't, file it away. I hope there will never be a day when you need it. If there is, use it. If you need it tonight, may God use it to lift your heart.