

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) began his ministry at the Presbyterian church in Chester, England in the spring of 1687. On that very first Thursday he preached on Psalm 1 and he continued preaching on the Psalms every Thursday for the next twenty-five years. He went through the entire psalter five times.¹ Henry wrote on Psalm 13,

“In singing this psalm and praying it over, if we have not the same complaints to make that David had, we must thank God that we have not . . . [and] sympathize with those that are troubled in mind, and encourage ourselves in our most holy faith and joy.”²

Henry recognized that the value of Psalm 13 lies in its enduring message, not in our immediate emotional affinity with David’s lament. We may not be feeling today what the psalmist felt, but we pray this psalm in solidarity with those who do. Our situation may be vastly different from the psalmist’s, but invariably within the Body of Christ someone is crying out, “How long, Lord, how long?”

City Hymns on their *Fragments of Grace* album have a wonderful setting of Psalm 13 entitled, *How Long, O Lord?* My friend, a worship pastor shared how he had led his praise team in this song for several months before one of the members of the praise team was diagnosed with breast cancer. The song took on special meaning for her. She said, “I was so grateful to have a prayer for my moment of need. I needed words and language to be able to cry out to God in my pain.” The verse that gave her the words to pray goes, *How long shall my poor troubled breast / Be with these anxious thoughts oppressed? / My heart shall feel thy love and raise / My fainting voice to songs of praise.* Then the chorus repeats: *But I have trusted in thy grace / And shall again behold thy face.*³

The longer we spend in the psalms the more we realize how necessary it is to have their spiritual depth and their emotional range. In them we have the Holy Spirit’s guidance for life from the extraordinary to the mundane. The psalms work as our main tool for shaping our situational awareness. They give us a true understanding of God (theology), ourselves (psychology), and culture (sociology). Without them Christian spirituality is often fueled by emotions untethered to genuine faithfulness. This is why it is so important to take in the whole psalm and not just a line or two that catches our pious imagination. Plenty of devotional material appeals to the subjective self and focuses the “Christian life” on feelings. But the psalms locate our devotion to God in the logos, pathos, and ethos of the word of God. We need a better handle on the psalms because they cover life’s extremes and everything in-between. They are the Holy Spirit’s devotional literature. Psalm 13 may lead us where we do not want to go, but we pray this psalm on behalf of those who share in its painful lament and we pray this psalm because we know that we are never far from asking, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, vol. 5, 32.

² Henry, *The Psalms*, 64.

³ <http://cityhymns.com/track/how-long-o-lord-2>

The lament is as simple and as desperate as it could be. We do not know the circumstances that gave rise to this prayer, but we recognize the poet's craft in carefully constructing the lament. Three pairs of verses, composed mainly in monosyllables, give remarkable shape to David's heartfelt cry, his earnest prayer, and his resolute praise.⁴

Complaint

*How long, Lord—? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

Psalm 13:1-2

The up-front, four-fold repetition of the rhetorical question, "How long?" confronts us with the force of the psalmist's pain. The first sentence is incomplete: "How long?" is followed by a pause to let the message sink in. The psalmist does not need to finish his thought because "God knows precisely what the afflicted mean when they cry out, 'How long, O Lord. . . .?'"⁵ Nevertheless, the psalmist goes on to explain with escalating intensity the threats he faces. He feels abandoned by God, oppressed by his thoughts, and condemned by his enemies. On all three fronts, the theological, psychological, and the sociological, he's in real trouble.⁶

We can imagine fellow worshipers at a loss for words. They mean well, but any attempt to answer this lament with anything pat or glib is bound to fail. The question "How long?" is addressed to the Lord and not to just anyone in ear-shot. The psalmist is not looking for counsel or sympathy from his friends. If anything, he's asking for space to make his complaint. He's hoping for the companionship of silence. Wise friends will overhear his lament and pray with him.

The psalmist begins at the top with God and works through his depression and down to his enemies. Nothing in his life feels right. Everything is out of sync. And it has been that way for a long time. His perception of reality may be skewed but it is an honest perception. He links *forgotten* and *forever* in the same breath as two sides of the same experience. To feel forgotten by God will always feel like forever. No one complains about being abandoned by God *only recently*. Everything about being God-forsaken is interminable. Rejection is pictured with a metaphor: "until when will you hide your face from me?" Aaron's benediction (Num 6:24-26) described in reverse feels like a curse: "The Lord curse you and forget you; the Lord turn his face away from you and condemn you." The psalmist asks "how long?" because he knows he cannot live long apart from God's grace and peace.

David's spiritual depression is compounded by his inner thoughts and his futile efforts to resolve the situation. The more he wrestles within himself the greater the sorrow in his heart. His "day

⁴ Wilcock, Psalms, 51.

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 364.

⁶ Goldingay, Psalms, 206.

after day” brokenhearted sorrow corresponds to feeling God-forsaken *forever*. In his heart these two realities merge, the absence of God and the futility of his thinking. We know there were times in David’s life when he was overwhelmed by sorrow, but Psalm 13 ignores the narrative and concentrates on the soul. By freeing the psalm from a set of circumstances the psalmist invites us to identify with David’s sorrow. One of the ways “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” is by giving us the psalms to pray. The apostle’s comforting spiritual direction corresponds with David’s lament: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27).

The third factor in David’s lament is an unspecified outside force identified simply as “my enemy.” Speculation as to who or what constitutes this alien ascendancy ranges from physical disease and death to King Saul’s enduring tenure or Absalom’s rebellion. In the verses to follow (13:3-4) the psalmist appears to fear a life threatening enemy. Peter Craigie writes, “The singular enemy is no doubt the personification of death; the plural enemies are the psalmist’s foes in general.”⁷ The theological impact of the enemy results in an acute sense of feeling abandoned by God. The psychological effect of the enemy causes internal depression and sorrow. And the sociological impact of the enemy leads to the loss of all hope, public disgrace, and condemnation.

The power of this psalm lies in the fact that it gives voice to the shared experience of Christ’s devoted followers around the world, those who feel abandoned by God, who wrestle with their dark thoughts, and who are oppressed by enemies. Jesus had much to say about the opposition of the world that fits devotionally with Psalm 13. The spirit of the antichrist pervades the world but as Jesus’ apostle reminds us, “Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). The psalm invites reflection on what gives rise to the world’s opposition to the faithful follower of Christ. William Temple wrote, “The world hates anything which it cannot understand which yet seems to contain a judgment of itself.”⁸ John Chrysostom chalked it up to “the natural course of things,” because Christian virtue “engenders hatred.” “Let us not grieve,” Chrysostom wrote, “for this is a mark of virtue.” This is why Christ said, “If you were of the world, the world would love its own.”⁹

Dale Bruner’s reflection on the world’s hate is especially helpful. The world’s hate for the Word and the Church is “a great mystery” stemming from the fact that believers are rooted “in Jesus, his Father, the Paraclete Spirit, the Church, Holy Scripture, the major creeds, and world mission.” The world finds these roots provocative and translates each one into something to be despised: “an otherworldly Teacher, an unreal God, a specious Spirit, a hypocritical Church, a misleading Scripture, dogmatic creeds, and an arrogant mission.”¹⁰

Prayerful recognition of evil is the first step in dealing with the enemy. Jesus does not conceal the

⁷ Craigie, Psalms, 142.

⁸ Temple, Readings in St. John’s Gospel, 322.

⁹ Chrysostom, John, 302 (Homily LXXXII, sec. 1, 302).

¹⁰ Bruner, John, 991.

fact that the gospel draws enemy fire. By naming the enemy, Jesus lays bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. The example of his real prayer is an antidote to boring, placid prayers. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone, but we are not alone and we are under orders. Our deep concern and prayer should be that it is truly the Word of God that draws enemy fire and not any of our obnoxious and offensive ways. We have not been called of God to flee the world or fight the world. Nor have we been called to withdraw into our own tight-knit enclaves. We were never meant to impress the world as narrow-minded, opinionated separatists. The offense of the cross ought to be the most winsome and attractive “offensiveness” that human culture has ever known.¹¹

Prayer

*Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
And my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*
Psalm 13:3-4

The second stanza conveys the same monosyllable simplicity and tone of desperation as the first. All formalities are swept aside as the psalmist urgently makes his case. By placing the verbs up front he bypasses the usual reverence of the sanctuary for the urgency and intensity of the emergency room.¹² The imperative “Look at me!” begs God to turn his face toward him. The second imperative “Answer me!” earnestly entreats an end to God’s silence. On the basis of Yahweh’s grace and mercy David cries out to Yahweh – the covenant-keeping God. His bold access relies on the personal bond between them. His passionate prayer anticipates the new reality found in Christ when the people of God will “have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body. . .” (Heb 10:19-20). There is clearly no hint in this psalm of a “bootstrap, triumph-of-the-individual sort of mentality.”¹³

The third imperative, “Give light to my eyes,” calls upon Yahweh to renew his life. “The psalmist represents himself as a dying man, as one already half gone, who soon will be wholly overwhelmed with the darkness of death, if the Lord does not give him the new power of life.”¹⁴ Whether the “enemy” was a physical illness or acute depression or an internal conspiracy or an external military threat the psalmist felt his days were numbered. His only hope was divine intervention. “When his eyes were enlightened, both spiritually and physically, he would not fall into the sleep of death which seemed so imminent.”¹⁵ Implicit in David’s appeal is a renewed experience of Aaron’s priestly blessing:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you*

¹¹ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, see day 26.

¹² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 207.

¹³ Brent Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, 72.

¹⁴ Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, quoted in Ross, *Psalms*, 367.

¹⁵ Craigie, *Psalms*, 142.

*and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. Numbers 6:24-26*

The expectation of divine action will find its ultimate blessing and brightness in the face of Jesus. The Son of David who is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb 1:3) will fulfill David’s prayer.

David’s appeal for divine intervention is for the purpose of his testimony and witness. His desire is to bring glory to God and defeat his enemies. It is not the fear of dying that motivates his plea as much as it is the fear of God. If David falls and his enemies triumph over him, God’s reputation is defiled and his glory tarnished. Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 corresponds with David’s prayer. Jesus prayed to the *Holy Father* for protection, “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). David wants for himself what Jesus wants for his disciples, “deliverance from the evil power of the world” and “immunity from evil.”¹⁶ When we factor in the redemptive trajectory of salvation history the apostle Paul echoes a similar concern when he says, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me” (Phil 1:21-22).

Praise

*But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord’s praise,
for he has been good to me.*

Psalm 13:5-6

Trust in God alone is the only explanation for the dramatic change in tone from desperation to devotion and from anxiety to confidence. Although there is no indication of a change in circumstances the psalm ends very differently than how it began. What has changed is not the situation, but the psalmist’s perception of the situation. In worship he has voiced his lament and turned to God in prayer. “The confidence is expressed within the tension which exists between past experience and future hope.”¹⁷ Instead of feeling his way into worship, David has worshiped his way into feelings. His God-directed, God-centered lament has both challenged and comforted. David has been “faithful in pain and problem, faithful in prayer and petition, faithful in praise and song.”¹⁸ Calvin encouraged believers to follow David’s example: “We must so wrestle against temptations as to be assured by faith, even in the midst of conflict, that the calamities which urge us to despair must be overcome.”¹⁹

The third stanza begins with the force of an exclamation: “But as for me.” Trust is a deliberate

¹⁶ Temple, Readings in St. John’s Gospel, 318.

¹⁷ Craigie, Psalms, 143.

¹⁸ Brent Strawn, Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary (Eerdmans, 2009), 72.

¹⁹ Calvin, Psalms, 182.

act, willingly embraced by the psalmist. Until now the focus has been on adversity (theological, psychological, sociological), but in prayer David's attention shifts to the steadfast love of the Lord, the fullness of salvation, and the story of God's goodness to him. The psalmist's lament, "How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps 13:1) is effectively answered in the psalm's last line: "I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me" (Ps 13:6). Christ's followers can identify with this psalm. In six short verses the psalmist foreshadows the apostle's message in Romans 8. The psalmist's four-fold lament, "How long, Lord?" corresponds to the apostle's "wordless groans" (Rom 8:26). In stanza two, David's prayer parallels the apostle's encouragement, "He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (Rom 8:27). In stanza three, the initial lament has turned to songs of praise for God's unfailing love, the joy of salvation, and the blessings of God's goodness. Or, as the apostle testified, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). We worship by faith, just as we live by faith. "We may not be wholly free from sorrow," wrote Calvin, "but it is nevertheless necessary that this cheerfulness of faith rise above it, and put into our mouth a song on account of the joy which is reserved for use in the future, although not as yet experienced by us."²⁰

²⁰ Calvin, Psalms, 187.