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HOW LONG, O LORD?

Psalm 13

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No one likes feeling helpless. We prefer to stay in control and solve our problems on our own. Yet even the smartest among us need rescuing from time to time. What happens when you come to the end of your own solutions, the end of your endurance, the end of your hopes, or the end of your rope? Psalm 13 is a model prayer given to us for times like these.

Angelina Atyam found herself in just such a situation some years ago.¹ A practicing Christian, “Mama Angelina” lived with her family in a small city in Northern Uganda, where she worked as a nurse midwife. Early one morning in 1996, news came that the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) had attacked the boarding school where her 14-year old daughter Charlotte was a student. All 139 girls had been kidnapped. Two school administrators courageously tracked the rebels through the bush and were able to secure the release of all but thirty of the girls. But to Angelina’s horror, Charlotte remained one of the captives.

The Atyams were heartbroken and terrified, knowing the LRA’s grim history of abusing children mentally, physically, and sexually. Mama Angelina was also angry. Not content remaining idle, she co-founded Uganda’s Concerned Parents Association (CPA) to fight on behalf of all the children—some 35,000—who had been abducted by the LRA. As President of the CPA, she took her cause to the airwaves, gaining widespread support. As the movement grew, she met with the Ugandan president, then visited European and American leaders, and eventually addressed the UN Security Council. Yet seven years later, her daughter Charlotte was still the concubine of one of the LRA commanders. That was when the indefatigable Mama Angelina finally ran out of gas and needed a prayer like Psalm 13.

In a moment of desperation, David cries out to God:

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? Psalm 13:1*

¹ Sherry Williamson, “As We Forgive,” *Faith and Leadership*, March 1, 2010. Accessed at <https://www.faithandleadership.com/we-forgive>. For further discussion of Atyam’s story in relationship to Psalm 13, see also Joshua Beckett, “Lament in Three Movements: The Implications of Psalm 13 for Justice and Reconciliation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 2016, Vol 9, No 2, pp 207-18.

We have no record of the occasion, though there are many possibilities. Perhaps it was early in David's life when he faced danger as a shepherd. Or maybe it was later, when he fled from the jealous rage of King Saul, or the treachery of his son Absalom. Unlike many of David's other psalms, we don't know any background details for Psalm 13. Yet I find that the absence of historical information works to our benefit, as it makes it easier for us to make this psalm our own in times of need. Like the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 13 is both history and liturgy. Historically speaking, it is a record of a prayer that David sang to God in a time of crisis. Liturgically speaking, God has provided us this prayer to use whenever our need is great.

MAKING SENSE OF PSALM 13, A LAMENT IN THREE MOVEMENTS

Just as there are many different kinds of music today, in ancient Israel there were different kinds of psalms. Psalm 13 is a particular kind of psalm called a *lament*. Laments are prayers of anguish, expressing raw, heartfelt struggles, sorrow, grief and regret.

Laments in the Psalms typically consist of three movements: a beginning, a middle and an end. It helps to know this structure for a couple of reasons. For one, this structure gives us a map, so that as we read we can anticipate where the psalm is going. The structure is also helpful as we pray, because it provides us with a model to emulate on our own. Prayer comes easily to some people; for the rest of us, learning how to pray can be a challenge. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, and Jesus gave them a model prayer for his kingdom. In the Psalms, we find other model prayers the Lord has provided. We often need to pour out our hearts to God, but how? By learning the three movements of Psalm 13, we learn how to cry out for help to God.

Here, then, are the three movements in Psalm 13:

1. **The Complaint** (13:1-2). The complaint is the lament's kernel. In these two verses David pours out his heart to God, asking four times, "how long?" He has been waiting for God for a long time, yet to David, God remains absent.
2. **The Petition** (13:3-4). In 13:3 there's a subtle transition from the complaint to the petition. After pouring out his heart to God, David's pent-up disappointment and frustration give way to an expression of immediate, urgent need. "Pay attention and answer me, my Lord! Help me! If you don't save me I'll die and my enemies will boast in celebration."
3. **The Promise** (13:5-6). David shifts his attention away from the present problem to future relief, anticipating God's deliverance, and promising how he will respond. "When you do rescue me, Lord, I'll sing your praises because of your goodness." It's a vow of praise for whenever God comes to the rescue.

Let's now consider each of these three movements in finer detail.

THE COMPLAINT (13:1-2)

Laments typically involve three parties: You, Me & Them. God is "you." The psalmist (David) is "me." And David's adversaries are "them." All three are in view in the complaint.

"You, God." Psalm 13 begins with a bang:

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? Psalm 13:1*

No small talk or preliminaries. No holding back. David tells it like he sees it, and his leading complaint is God himself.

David's direct approach is shockingly bold. Instead of complaining first about "them," i.e. the enemies oppressing him, David starts with "you, God." We're not usually this direct, especially when talking with authorities. When I was mugged a few years back, I called the police. When they arrived, I complained to them about the two men who jumped me. I didn't even think to ask why the police hadn't been there during the attack. Yet David begins at the top in Psalm 13. His chief complaint isn't the presence of the bad guys; it's the absence of God. David feels abandoned by God. He's hurt, angry and frustrated. "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

I'm astounded to read these lines in the Bible, particularly as a model for prayer. What other religion, or government, or institution would teach its constituents to confront their leader in this way? Can you imagine finding this, for example, in the Guide for Counsel in cases to be argued before the Supreme Court? "Step One: Look the Chief Justice in the eye and ask, 'Why have you abandoned me?'" Yet this is what we find in Psalm 13.

In fact, what David models here in Psalm 13 becomes the way that Jesus prays during his crucifixion. Quoting from Psalm 22, another lament, Jesus complains directly to the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In crying out to God in this way, Jesus did not sin. He remained the spotless lamb of God, all the way to the end. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was the righteous and appropriate thing for Jesus to say.

When believers suffer, it's not necessarily resulting from our own sin or lack of faith. We face persecution, illnesses, accidents, setbacks, and God in his mysterious wisdom doesn't always rescue us from them. But he always calls us to turn to him in prayer. Crying out to God like this, even if we're asking where he is, is in itself an expression of faith. It's a way of acknowledging his presence, and asking him to do what only he can do: to bear our griefs, to carry our sorrows, to be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, for by his stripes are we healed.

The 20th Century Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way:

If I am guilty, why does God not forgive me? If I am not guilty, why does he not bring my misery to an end and thus demonstrate my innocence to my enemies? There are no theoretical answers in the Psalms to all these questions, as there are none in the New Testament. The only real answer is Jesus Christ. But this answer is already sought in the Psalms. It is common to all of them that they cast every difficulty and agony on God: "We can no longer bear it, take it from us and bear it yourself, you alone can handle suffering." That is the goal of all of the lamentation Psalms. They pray concerning the one who took upon himself our diseases and bore our infirmities, Jesus Christ. They proclaim Jesus Christ to be the only help in suffering, for in him God is with us.

Whenever we cry out, "How long, O Lord?" we're joining our voices with that of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus looked out on the cancers that cripple human life, and the sin that destroys us, and the sadness and folly of our lives, and he gave his own life as a ransom in order to make all things new. Now, as his broken body and shed blood continue to work their way into every crevice of our broken world, bringing resurrection life, he joins with us in asking "How long?" Just like us, Jesus awaits that great wedding day that will mark the consummation of his kingdom. The King wants it more than we do. He hears us when we call.

"Me, David." In 13:2a, David moves from "You, God" to "Me," in order to complain about his isolation. In 13:2a he asks, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and have sorrow in my heart all the day?"² Surely David must have been wrestling with his thoughts before he wrote Psalm 13. Even though the psalm begins with a complaint directed toward God, that's not where our hearts begin. As we try to figure things out on our own, we wrestle with our thoughts. We look for solutions, trying whatever seems promising. There's nothing wrong with our trying to solve our own problems; it's the way God made us. He has always intended that we serve as kings and queens under him, stewards of his great kingdom. There's no shame in endeavoring to do what we were made to do.

Yet sometimes we come to dead ends. We find ourselves in difficulties beyond our control—maybe due to our own sins, maybe due to the sins of others, or maybe simply because of the complexities and brokenness of our world. When we do, not only do we feel like David did, with "sorrow in our hearts all day" but shame can also be a factor. We may even think, "These feelings aren't okay. What kind of Christian am I if I feel like God has abandoned me?"

David's response is a welcome alternative to our shame. He says, "I'm tired of wrestling with my thoughts." He realizes that the ONLY thing he has left to do is to pray. So he prays, not because he has forgotten all hope, but because he remembers God as the one who can help.

² I prefer the New International Version translation of this Psalm 13:2. Instead of the English Standard Version's vague "how long must I take counsel in my soul," the NIV asks, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?"

“Them.” Having moved from “You, God” to “Me, David,” now he turns his attention to his adversaries, “them.” At the end of 13:2 he asks, “How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” This question, and the petition that follows in vv 3-4, show that prayers like David’s aren’t selfish, and here’s why: When you become a Christian, God gives you a commission in his kingdom, as his field agent within our fallen world. Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” because these are Our Father’s mission objectives. Jesus also warns us that there will be opposition and persecution in serving him. If our adversaries succeed, it’s a setback for the Kingdom of God. So complaining to the Lord about our opponents is not ungodly; rather, it’s precisely what he wants us to do. It’s the righteous response.

The complaint Psalm 13:1-2 isn’t license for grumbling about anything and everything. Rather, it is an invitation from God to complain to him when he appears to be absent and we need him to accomplish the work that he’s given us to do.

THE PETITION (13:3-4)

What do we want God to do? The opening complaint in vv 1-2 comes out of disappointment and frustration with God’s inactivity. However, we mustn’t simply complain. Assuming God hears us and is willing to answer our request, what do we want God to do? That’s what the petition in vv. 3-4 is about.

Again, as with most lament psalms, vv 3-4 focus on 3 different parties: you, me and them. What does the psalmist want? First and foremost, he wants God’s attention.

“You, God.” In 3a, David says, “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.” He wants God to look and listen to him. Notice especially how David addresses the Lord as “my God.” David grew up in Bethlehem surrounded by pagans. Nearby Jerusalem was still occupied by Canaanites who worshiped Baal. Beyond Jerusalem were Philistines, who worshiped Dagon. For the people of the region there was an open question regarding whose gods were stronger.³ It’s in this context that David claims the Lord as “my God.” He reaffirms his loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, rather than Baal or Dagon. He’s not changing sides, and that’s why he needs the Lord to look and listen to him.

“Me, David.” In 3b, David moves from “you” to “me,” saying “Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death.” This is the sacrificial exchange that is at the heart of God’s salvation of his people. If we are to live, then the spotless lamb of God must take our place in death. Though David doesn’t know it yet, one of his descendants will someday come to fulfill and complete this task. By taking on our death and giving us his life, Jesus, the Son of David, will give light to

³ It’s the same today. Though we don’t often refer to education, beauty, wealth, popularity and power as gods, they are nevertheless the idols of our age, in whom we often misplace our trust for the good life.

our eyes to rescue us from eternal death. This is the rescue we all need. What David asks here is for resurrection life instead of death.

"Them." In v. 4, David concludes his petition saying "lest my enemies say, 'We overcame him' and they rejoice in my downfall." David's rationale for God's rescue is a very important line of argumentation, not only in this particular psalm, but throughout the Bible. David is an ambassador of God's kingdom. He needs the Lord's assistance and intervention, not only to save his own skin, but also to complete his ambassadorial mission. Thus, not only is it in the *David's* best interests for God to act, but it's in *God's* best interests as well. What's good for the kingdom is good for God as well. If God forgets us, then the wicked prosper, and God's kingdom is thwarted. What God wants aligns with the deliverance we need.

We shouldn't be afraid to reason with God in this way. Again and again throughout the Psalms, God's people come before him with head and heart. They cry out with passion and also with carefully reasoned arguments. We should learn from these examples, because all too often our prayers offer no explanation or rationale for what we ask. Just as it would be foolish to appeal to the head of state solely on the basis of emotion, so also we ought to come before God with our best arguments as well. Persuasive language in and of itself isn't wrong. It can be used for evil, but it can also be used for good. It's not sinful when children try to persuade their parents to provide them with good things. Likewise, it isn't wrong for us to reason with God about why he should help us.

In 2004, seven years after her daughter's abduction, Mama Angelina finally came to a dead end. After she had testified before the UN Security Council, both the LRA and the Ugandan authorities had come under tremendous pressure. Yet her daughter Charlotte was still enslaved. And so it was that she came before the Lord in her bedroom one evening with a complaint and her petition similar to Psalm 13:1-4. She said:

You are mighty, you are ever present, you can do anything. It is written in the Bible that the seventh year is the year of freedom...the year of all good things. Lord, we know you don't change, but have you changed today? Because seven years have elapsed, and my daughter and the other children are still missing.

Angelina's prayer is a great example of praise, passion, and theological argumentation. In essence, she was saying that God's behavior toward her was not in keeping with his character. Her petition was a challenge to God: "If you are indeed good, then show us."

Three days later, Angelina received a call from the authorities. Charlotte had escaped from her captors and was safe at a Ugandan army camp. "We just held each other and cried for a long, long time," Angelina said. "[Charlotte] is the Lord's answer to my prayers."

THE PROMISE (13:5-6)

In examining a psalm verse-by-verse as we're doing, it's easy to forget that the psalm was originally intended to be sung rather than read. However, the way we read straight through Psalm 13's six verses "1-2-3-4-5-6" probably wasn't the way it was meant to be sung. There's a huge emotional transition between vv 1-4 and 5-6. A number of biblical scholars have described the last two verses as a musical coda, standing apart from the initial four verses of the psalm. Some think vv 1-4 were sung first, then there was time for a musical interlude during which a sacrifice was offered. Then after the sacrifice, the singing would resume with the last two verses. In a similar vein, some have suggested that the first four verses were to be repeated again and again until there was a breakthrough—a sense of God's presence instead of his absence. Then the last two verses could be sung. Of course, all of these proposals are conjecture; we don't know how this psalm was sung. Nevertheless, vv 5-6 are clearly an enormous transition after the first four verses. Here David reaffirms his faith, and then promises his praise in response to God's deliverance.

In 13:5a he says, "But as for me, I have trusted in your steadfast love." This is a rededication of sorts, a reaffirmation of David's faith. "Steadfast love" (Hebrew **חֶסֶד**, *khesed*) is sometimes translated covenant faithfulness. The term describes the eternal bond between God and his people. In saying this, David is not only looking ahead to God's presence (rather than absence), but also his intimate, covenantal love. Emotionally, this represents a huge swing from urgent anxiety to confident peace.

In 13:5b David goes on to say, "my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." Though David doesn't know it, God's salvation (Hebrew **יְשׁוּעָה**, *y'shua*) for him will be a foretaste of the greater rescue that will come through the Son of David, Y'shua Jesus. The messiah king, born in the city of David, will bring salvation to all God's people.

Remember that in vv 1-4 there were three parties in view: You, me, and them. Now in vv 5-6, it is no longer God who is silent and absent. God is present in David's salvation, but his enemies have completely disappeared. This too will make David's heart rejoice.

Therefore, in 13:6, David makes his vow of praise: "I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me." Here, instead of David's adversaries rejoicing (as he feared in 13:4), David will rejoice because God delivered him from death and destruction. When God does come to the rescue, it will be such a happy day that David will sing for joy, celebrating God's good providence. Again, this is a win-win. David wants God's deliverance, and God wants David's praise.

I have a friend who contracted Lyme Disease in her early twenties, and was seriously ill for more than a decade. Like the bleeding woman who came to Jesus in Mark 5, my friend spent all her money and time trying to find healing, and at times she considered taking her own life. As a

committed Christian, she would sometimes pray vv 1-4 of Psalm 13. She told me, "I couldn't pray verses 5 and 6 then, in the midst of the darkness. I couldn't talk about trusting in His love, or rejoicing in His salvation, or believe that He had dealt bountifully with me. I couldn't even read those verses." But deep inside she said that she knew, some day, she would come back to what she describes as the "singing-trusting-rejoicing frame of mind." That's why in Ps 13 the Promise is framed as future rather than present. It's a rededication of grateful living before the face of God, after God's deliverance.

People sometimes dismiss such promises bargaining with God, as if we could trick him into rescuing us. It's pretty absurd if you think about it. Almighty God, sovereign over all things, who knows the future as well as the past, being outsmarted by his creatures? Here's a better way to think about it: not in terms of bargaining, but as more liturgy. God has given us the words of vv 1-4 to teach us how to bring our complaints and petitions to him. In the same way, God has given us the words in vv 5-6 to teach us how to respond to his rescue. These verses are there to help us when we've come to the end of our rope and it's so very hard to imagine a happy ending. In the absence of our own ability to hope, God gives us words to say by faith, trusting that he will indeed carry us through. Though we don't know how the brokenness could ever be resolved, we can nevertheless agree that if that day comes, we will sing his praises.

Even if you can't see it right now, that's where all this is heading some day. It won't be long. He will wipe away every tear when he makes all things new.