

Summer in Psalms

“How Long, Lord”

Psalm 13

In the Book of Psalms, you encounter the full range of human emotion and mood. Certainly, the most popular psalms that are recited, and perhaps the ones we like to hang onto as inspiration, are songs of joy and celebration, praise and thanksgiving.

However, there are many other psalms that carry within them rather heavy and raw emotions, such as anger and anxiety, distress and despair, fear and terror, sadness and sorrow, confusion and disorientation, helplessness and hopelessness. They are filled with the anguished cries of those who feel forgotten and abandoned by God in the midst of their difficulties -- the pain, struggles and suffering that are ever-present in their lives.

You may be surprised to learn that these songs, known as psalms of lament, represent the majority of the 150 psalms that comprise the Book of Psalms. Some laments are communal, expressing people's deep sorrow for the desolate situation of their nation; but, most laments are individual, like psalm 13 that we have read together this morning.

This relatively short psalm of only 6 verses, which is attributed to King David, has the common structure of laments. These are Complaint - Petition - and Praise. In its first two verses, the psalm invokes God's presence and begins a series of questions that reveal to us the inner struggle of the psalmist in the midst of his trouble and God's silence. Let's hear again the 5 questions that are raised:

1. How long O Lord?
2. Will you forget me forever?
3. How long will you hide your face from me?
4. How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
5. How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Did you notice how many times the phrase “How long” is repeated in those questions? Four times! Over and over, David cries out to God, “How long, Lord?” This implies that David has been in that place of anguish and agony for quite awhile. So long in fact that he wonders if God is going to forget about him forever. He feels abandoned and defeated. For David, the pain of God's silence is unbearable.

Actually, David is not the only figure in the Bible to experience the silence of God. There are many instances where we hear the cries of abandonment lifted up to God.

Job says, *“I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand, you attack me.”* (Job 30:20-21)

Another psalmist says, *“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”* (Psalm 10:1)

The writer of Lamentations says, *“Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?”* (Lamentations 5:20)

Jesus says, quoting from Psalm 22, *“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”* (Mark 15:34)

C.S. Lewis, a more modern voice, talked about the silence of God he experienced after the death of his wife of only three years:

“Meanwhile, where is God?... [G]o to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.” (A Grief Observed)

There is an ancient phrase that is attributed to the 16th century mystic, St. John the Cross, which labels this phenomenon of God’s silence as “the dark night of the soul.” Usually, it is used to describe an experience of severe spiritual dryness, a lack of spiritual energy and rejuvenation, and a sense of feeling abandoned by God. And, this dark night of the soul is not an uncommon experience for Christian believers, even for deeply devoted people.

In your head, you know God is with you. But, you do not feel God’s presence in your heart. In your head, you know God loves you. The Bible tells you so, and everyone around you does too, but *you* do not feel God’s love in your heart. In your head, you know God forgives you. You believe God has already forgiven you. But even still, you feel guilty and terrible inside. You ask God why but receive no answer. You bring your troubles to God but hear no reply. The silence of God goes on and on, and you cannot help but feel completely abandoned.

Have you ever been in such times of despair? Do you remember a time when you encountered the terrible silence of God and the subsequent feelings of loss and abandonment? The fearful truth is that you too have asked, or will ask as you proceed on the journey of faith, the very same questions that David and many others have raised, “How long, Lord?” “Where is the end of this?” “Where are you, God” “Did you forget me?” “Are you going to forget me forever?” “Why are you rejecting me?” “I am dying inside. Do you not care?”

This dark night of the soul came to me during the time I lived with my mother-in-law. She and I were very different from each other in many ways. Everything from our personalities, our family backgrounds and life experiences. We had seemingly nothing in common. She was a single mother who had sacrificed her whole life for her only child, my husband.

It did not take long for me to realize the challenges we would face, living in the same house. No matter how hard I tried to be a good daughter-in-law, I could not make my mother-in-law happy. We both were too young to be mature in-laws to each other. Given the strict hierarchical culture, I did not dare talk back to her. We had no choice but to live together because my husband was a graduate school student and I had to work. We depended on her to provide child-care for our children.

I prayed for the situation to improve, but nothing happened. I prayed for God to change me so that I could accept my mother-in-law as she was and love her, but nothing changed. Soon, I began to feel guilty about

my inability to get along with her, and I became depressed. At work, I still put on a smily face, as usual. I continued to go to church with my children and mother-in-law. We appeared to be one happy family.

But, the truth was I was feeling horrible inside. I began to feel hypocritical about saying the Lord's Prayer because I could not forgive my mother-in-law and that I could not honestly say that I loved her. So, at a certain point, I stopped saying the Lord's Prayer. And soon thereafter, I stopped praying altogether. I felt so lonely and abandoned by God, yet I was too ashamed to tell anyone about my true feelings. It was a living hell. I was in the deep, dark night of the soul.

What is David, the psalmist's response when he is in that situation? He steadfastly turns to God in prayer: "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!," is his cry. You might be wondering, "How about when you can't pray any more, when you are completely exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually?" Perhaps words from the Apostle Paul can be a source of comfort. From Romans chapter 8 verse 26:

"And, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But, the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words."

This is what I experienced during the season of living in the dark night of the soul. When I could not utter even one word in prayer, I discovered that it was not I, but the Holy Spirit who prayed on my behalf!

Psalm 13 ends very differently from how it began. After the complaint and petition are raised to God, there is a great transformation in the mood of the psalm - from mistrust to trust, from despair to hope, from sorrow to joy. There is still no assurance that things will turn out OK. But, in the midst of the uncertainty, the lingering doubts and fears, the psalmist displays a willingness to trust in God's love and rejoice in God's salvation. Remembering past instances of God's deliverance, blessings and favor in his life, he decides to sing his praises unto the Lord.

In our broken world, there is much that causes us to grieve both communally and individually. It seems like every new day brings us sights and sounds from near and far that leave us saddened, frustrated, angry, and terrified. In what appears to be the dark night of the soul for our nation, may we be honest enough to lift up our cries of lament to God. May we join in the ancient song of the psalmist, crying out "How long, Lord? How long?"

For it is in our mourning that we shall be comforted (Matt. 5:4). And it is in our weakness that we shall receive the blessed assurance of God's grace, which says "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Therefore, remembering God's unfailing love, let us place our trust in God and rejoice in the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ now and the hope of eternal peace to come when God's kingdom reigns on earth as it does in heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may our songs of mourning turn into songs of praise, for God has been good to us. Amen.