

Pain, Prayer, Praise, & the Person of Jesus Christ

Introduction

Singing with the Psalmist—Learning to Feel our Faith

- A. Before jumping into a sermon series through the Gospel of Luke (which will likely take us into the next decade), I wanted to preach through a few Psalms. Here would be an ongoing sermon series that we can move in and out of as the Lord wills—studying a Psalm here and a Psalm there.
 - 1. The word “psalm” comes from psalmos in the Greek, which is a translation of the Hebrew mizmor. Both the Greek and Hebrew word mean in English: “song.” This points us towards the historical reality that the Psalter essentially served as Israel’s songbook or hymnal to be used especially when they gathered for corporate worship.
 - 2. As one studies and sings the Psalms, he is taught, not only how to articulate his faith, but how to feel it. As far as the canon of Scripture goes, it is the Psalter that contain for us the most potent collision of both cognition and emotion, doctrine and doxology, faith and feeling.
- B. It is for this reason that, if I were to put an overarching title on this ongoing series through the Psalms, it would be: Singing with the Psalmist—Learning to Feel Our Faith.

I Know...but I Don’t Feel

- A. In church every Sunday, we talk, we pray, we preach, we sing about the unending, unconditional, unstoppable love of God for us in Jesus Christ—and we should—for there is no greater reality in all the universe, nothing more worthy of our attention and reflection.
- B. But what if you come in this morning and you just don’t feel like God loves you? You know it up here (head), but down here (heart) there’s a different story playing out. What if you’re a confused mixture of “I know He loves me, but does He love me?!”
 - 1. If you’ve been following Christ very long, I think it’s safe to assume you know what I’m talking about. There is this constant fight for faith, this constant tension between the flesh and the Spirit, between what we see in the world and what we see in His Word. We trust God but we doubt Him (sometimes even at the same time). At times we experience the sweet nearness of His presence, but there are other times when, though we know that He is still with us, we feel as if He has all but abandoned us.

The Church's Response

- A. So what do we do? How are we to respond to these experiences? I fear the church can often be more of a hindrance than a help at this point. Sadder still, than the fact that God's people must endure such fierce trials of faith on voyage to the heavenly shore, is the way the church often responds to and counsels such struggling saints.
1. There is often a sense given, whether spoken or not, that something is wrong with the person experiencing such feelings of abandonment and fear and doubt. We err here with Job's "friends." There must be a problem with you. You are feeling this way because your faith is faulty. You are suffering because you have been sinning. The church often slaps the wrists instead of sharing the tears.
 - a. Now, to be sure, there are times when the lines can be traced this directly and, in such cases, perhaps a rebuke or call to repentance is necessary. But we make a grave error when we assume all cases, even the majority of cases, are this direct.
 2. Even when the church doesn't draw such a direct line, even when they attempt to help, often those struggling with faith are treated as a nuisance, an annoyance, a problem to be quick-fixed rather than a person to be loved and walked alongside. We can dish out Scripture verses like band-aids instead of bullets. Band-aids say: "Let's cover this up and move on already." Bullets say: "Let's get in and fight!" Can't you tell when you've been given a band-aid and when you've been given a bullet?!
- B. When suffering Christians finds themselves in this kind of (direct-line, band-aid) church atmosphere, they are really left with only two options:
1. Fake it—They can put on a smile and act like all is well. Sadly, many churches offer this kind of plastic joy.
 2. Forsake it—They conclude that the church and it's God don't have the real solution for their pain, so they look elsewhere.
 3. Tragically, the only real option is strangled out: Fight for it—fight for faith in the mysterious love of the Lord, as we wait together for His salvation (that's what this sermon is about).

But What If This Is Normal?!

- A. What if such experiences of doubt and struggle are actually mentioned in the Scriptures? What if struggling in this way is, in some sense, biblical? What if the suffering and depressed, instead of being told to come back when they had the "joy of the Lord", were told that the church's doors and Christ's arms are open especially for them; that Christ Himself was a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"; that the church is more like an emergency room than a hall of fame; that every Sunday in the sanctuary there can be heard loud cries of praise and loud cries of pain, simultaneously, sometimes even from the same

person; that this kind of experience is even normal for the saint on this side of the new heavens and earth?!

- B. The Psalter is gold at this point. Because, in it we find that the Psalmist does not just sing Psalm 145's (praise); he sings Psalm 13's (lament). The joyful and the depressed find language for their worship here!
1. You can turn to Psalm 13. And when you get there notice the superscript: "TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID."
 - a. We often neglect them, but (1) every known Hebrew & Greek manuscript of the Psalms has them; and (2) in these manuscripts, they are given verse numbers, treated as part of the Biblical text.
 - b. This tells us that the Psalms were not merely for private prayer but for public participation in the temple worship of ancient Israel ("To the Choirmaster..."). This Psalm was meant to be sung by all of God's people. It did not secretly slip into the Psalter. Rather it was divinely inspired by God and officially recognized by His people, to be used in shaping our worship of Him...to teach us how to feel our faith! What this tells me is that God is not afraid of our questions, our struggles, our doubts, but is ready and willing to walk with us through them! Let Him do this with us today...as we sing this Psalm together!

The Text

Psa 13

⁰ TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID.

¹ How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

The Outline

- A. This text gives us permission to be human. To feel. To be honest. But it also tells us how to handle those feelings, where to go with them, what to do. This morning, we will be looking at the Psalm two verses at a time, attempting to follow David...
1. From Pain (vv. 1-2)
 2. Through Prayer (vv. 3-4)
 3. To Praise (vv. 5-6)!
- B. My prayer is that we will move with him, not only intellectually, but also, and especially, emotionally.

(1) Pain

What Was the Occasion?

- A. Now, before we unfold these two verses, we must at least ask the question: What was the occasion in David's life that gave rise to such hopeless words? Of this, we cannot be certain. Some of the Psalms give indication of their occasion in their title or content, but this Psalm gives us nothing specific to work with.
1. Perhaps this generality is helpful in the cause of preaching. For there is room for your own particulars to fill out the words of this Psalm. There is certainly more than one experience of suffering represented in this room this morning. Each of you has your own story, your own experience, your own pain.
 - a. So why do you feel this way with David? Perhaps there is an illness you are dealing with and you don't see God's reason for it. Perhaps you have recently lost a loved one. Maybe it's a relationship that has been riddled with miscommunication, offense, and heartbreak. Maybe you don't have relationships and you feel the silent pangs of loneliness. And on we could go. There are many occasions which could give rise to such a Psalm and God wants to meet us in them today!

What's the Pain?

¹ How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

- A. As we come to the verses now, we cannot help but notice first that four times in these two verses David cries out those same words which begin this Psalm: **How Long?...How Long?...How Long?...How Long?** This question is asked of God 18x in the psalms alone, showing that it is certainly common to human experience as they relate with God. But here we find the most potent clustering of the question making this the classic articulation of it.
1. It is important to note: in these two little words, you can sense the anguish, you can sense the sorrow, you can sense the confusion...but can you see the faith?!
 - a. There is such a thing as a faithful doubt! The two are not always to be polarized against each other. Faith is not so monochromatic. Faith can doubt. It's a different color of faith. Faith is not always a deep-rooted oak, sometimes it's as small as a mustard seed, even the wind threatens to blow it away, but it remains; we don't always run into the throne room of God's grace boldly, sometimes we come like smoldering wicks, like bruised reeds. Sometimes we come doubting. But we are still coming! There is such a thing as a faithful doubt.

- i. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this kind of faith is in that request of the forlorn father in [Mark 9: “I believe; help my unbelief!” \(v. 24\)](#). This is clearly what David has here. For if he truly thought God had abandoned him, he wouldn’t still be talking to Him, he wouldn’t be running to Him!
 - b. Do we have the faith to make it to the 2nd, the 3rd, even the 4th [“How long?”](#)?! Or, after asking once, have we moved on in search of another savior?
- B. So now, what precisely is this pain? How does David describe it? Looking more closely at the two verses, we find that we can describe this pain as 3-dimensional—(1) Upper, (2) Inner, and (3) Outer.
1. We see in v. 1 that David feels forsaken by God Himself. I am identifying this as pain in the upper dimension. And we notice his description of this increases in intensity as he goes on:
 - a. In the first case, David asks [“Will You forget me forever?”](#) It seems here that David feels God is no longer taking an interest in him or his circumstances. This feeling is devastating enough.
 - b. But there is more. Not only does God feel absent, it feels as if He is actively hiding Himself! [“How long will You hide your face from me?”](#) Not only does it feel as if God has stopped pursuing him, it feels as if God is avoiding all of David’s pursuit of him as well.
 - i. It’s as if David, no longer receiving phone calls from a close friend, purposed to visit him, assuring himself that nothing was the matter. But when he came to his friend’s house and knocked on the door, he could see the friend pull the blinds tighter and hear the sound of the deadlock being engaged. The intimate friendship David once enjoyed with God now feels twisted and confused. In his prayers David can almost sense Him crouching behind the curtain of His front window, waiting for him to leave, as a man hides himself from an unwanted visitor. You might expect this from another man, but David never expected this from His God!
 2. There is also an inner dimension to David’s pain. David describes himself as [“tak\[ing\] counsel in \[his\] soul” \(v. 2a\)](#) by which we can understand that he has tried and tried to find a solution to his plight but only come out more confused. Thus, the [“sorrow in \[his\] heart all the day” \(v. 2b\)](#). There is a hopelessness. It feels God has abandoned him in the upper dimension, and he is lost, confused, hopeless in the inner dimension.
 3. And, of course, he feels overtaken in the outer dimension: [“How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” \(v. 2c\)](#).

- C. This is the 3 dimensional pain of King David. This is the 3-dimensional pain that we all so often experience. It is the kind of pain that gives rise to Psalm 13's: "How long?!"

(2) Prayer

Where Do We Turn?

- A. Now, with the pain 3-dimensionally defined, we must ask the inevitable question, what do we do with it? Where are we to turn in the midst of it? Where do you turn in these moments? Where do you go with your pain—when the enemy is approaching, when there's internal turmoil, when it feels YHWH isn't working?
1. May we not be like the man in Psa 52: "See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!" (v. 7). When we look to anything else but God to save us we are seeking refuge in our own destruction, we are attempting to find our security in disaster, we are building our house upon sand, we are contradicting our end with our means.

Where Does David Turn?

- A. May we rather be like David here. Even after the 4th "How Long?", he's still coming:

³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

1. Though David has felt abandoned and forsaken by God, he knows he has nowhere else to run. God is not merely one option among many, He is the only option! There is no other Savior, Strong Tower, Fortress, Rock, Shield, Refuge (to steal his language from other Psalms). His only hope in times of trial is that God might, in mercy, "consider" him, that God might, in mercy, "answer" him. Though God seems to be deaf to his cries, he does not turn to other gods (which are not really gods), but he resolves to get all the louder and redouble his efforts to capture the attention of the one true God! "How long?!" never becomes too long.

- a. "Give him [God] no rest until...(he establishes Jerusalem)" (Isa 62:7a).

(3) Praise

The Hinge

- A. And then it happens!

⁵ But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

The transition from v. 4 to 5 in this Psalm is what every person in this room, indeed, every person in the world is after: for a heart that was filled with “sorrow...all the day” (v. 2) is suddenly and “rejoic[ing]” (v. 5). David’s pain has given way to praise! But how?! How does David get from v. 4 to v. 5? How do we follow him there?

1. As a side note: We don’t know how much time passed from v. 4 to v. 5. Don’t be simplistic here. If we don’t read this Psalm right it could actually bring salt not salve to our wounds. This journey can take time. It took Job 35 chapters. Don’t expect your emotional life to transition with each verse. This Psalm is not a quick fix (there is only one: when Christ returns with the sound of a trumpet and we are all changed in the twinkling of an eye!) but a road map. It may take days, months, even years for God to restore you to faith and joy in Him. But don’t stop walking this road. Take your pain to God through prayer that He might lead you into praise.
- B. It seems that all of this hinges on one word: “steadfast love” (two words in English, but one in the Hebrew: *hesed*). This word, *hesed*, when traced through the Old Testament is clearly connected to the covenant God has made with the Patriarchs, Moses, and even with David and his offspring. It is for this reason that some define it as God’s “unrelenting covenant love.” It is the central feature of His name, His promise, and His activity!
1. So when David is laboring to trust in God’s steadfast love, he is doing more than trusting in some general attribute of God, He is trusting in the covenant God has made with him to love him with an everlasting love and see him through every trial and tribulation. Because of this love He is able to rejoice and sing, even before circumstances change. By faith in God’s covenant made in the past, he anticipates the salvation of the Lord for him in the future, and thus joy erupts from his heart in the present!
 - a. This north star of God’s covenantal love does not change, even when the constellations of circumstance have shifted around it, even when the fog of our emotional life dims its visibility, it keeps its fixed place in the sky. It is still our guiding principle, our hope in times of trial. No matter “how long” the trial may be! As Samuel Rutherford wrote from the belly of his prison cell some 400 years ago: “Your heart is not the compass Christ sails by. ...Your thoughts are no parts of the new covenant; dreams change not Christ.” We may feel as if God has abandoned us, but our feelings change not the rock solid reality that He hasn’t!
- C. So, it is here, at this point of trusting in God’s steadfast love, that everything in our Psalm hinges.

(4) The Person of Jesus Christ

How Love?!

- A. This then begs another, final question: How did David become the recipient of God's steadfast love? Or perhaps even more important for us here this morning: how do we become the recipients of God's steadfast love? If it is God's covenant love alone that orients a person in the wild storms of circumstance and emotion, how does one go about becoming the recipient of it?!

This seems to me to be the most looming question in our psalm. It is not asked directly, but anyone reading David's words, observing this glorious hinge upon which sorrow is turned to joy, is left with its haunting. More important than "How long? How long? How long? How long?" is "How love?!" How do sinful men get this steadfast love? Truthfully, the floor should just fall out after v. 4 and the fire of God's holy anger consume us. We do not deserve God's steadfast love, but His wrath. We do not deserve Psalm 13's, to have a God who listens and saves. So, how love?!

1. The answer, of course, is Jesus Christ! [Luke 1:72](#) states upon Jesus' coming into the world that this was happening "...to show the mercy [eleos] promised to [the] fathers and to remember his holy covenant..." Jesus came to show, seal, and secure forever God's covenant love for His people. He is, as it were, the steadfast love of the Lord incarnate. O what a thought. The steadfast love of the Lord is not merely some abstract attribute, some word, some action. Most climactically and perfectly the steadfast love of the Lord is a Person. And His name is Jesus.

And "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" ([Joh 15:13](#)). He came to die. Because, by nature, we are covenant breakers, we are God haters, we are enemies of God, not friends, sons of the devil and not of God. If we are going to become recipients of God's steadfast love, our sins must be punished. God's anger must be propitiated. And it was.

- a. You see, Jesus lived this Psalm. Jesus fulfilled this Psalm. He experienced the anguish of the Father's forsaking. He knew the soul's sorrow, "even unto death" ([Mat 26:38](#)). On the cross His enemies surrounded Him, the demons laughed. He came to the Father with His pain in prayer: 3 times He asked for the cup of God's wrath to be taken from Him. He trusted the Father, even when all seemed lost. The night He was betrayed, even knowing what was about to take place, He sang a hymn to God with His disciples. And though He was crucified and in the grave three days, God rose Him from the dead!
 - i. And as He burst forth from the grave, it's as if there was a "fountain opened for the house of David" and for us to cleanse us from our sin ([Zec 13:1](#)). Jesus is the fountainhead of God's steadfast love. And this love flows backward to David from the cross, and forward to us here today. Jesus makes this psalm possible for David and for you and I. He took upon Himself our sin that we might be given His favor with the Father. And walks with us now by His Spirit, from pain, through prayer, to praise!

Closing Exhortation

- A. Non-Christian: [V. 4](#) falls out beneath you. Come to Christ, the only way to get into the Father's steadfast love.

- B. Christian: Come to Christ afresh. Don't stop wrestling with God, waiting for Him, voicing your distress, as we await the only true quick fix—His return. Let's be a church that comes around the suffering and walks with each other through the verses of this Psalm! Let's sing this Psalm together!