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How Long, O Lord? Psalm 13

Depression is an ugly word, and difficult to define. We've all faced it, some worse than others. For some, depression is a serious physical condition that requires medication. For others it is the understandable result of personal disappointment, relational dysfunction, financial stress, and a host of other problems. Even if we don't fully understand it, we know what it feels like. The confidence that God is always present, standing behind you to support and encourage you, has vanished. The courage to face anything life might throw in your path has given way to the horrifying suspicion that God has simply forgotten who and where you are. Worse still is the fear that he just doesn't care.

Where is he now when you need him most? Where is he when your life is enveloped in darkness and you can't find the light switch?

David was no stranger to depression. Listen to his anguished cry. Perhaps you may find in him a soul-mate.

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 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? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken” (vv. 1-4).

Although it's painful to read of someone suffering like this, I'm also encouraged by it. ***It tells me that the Bible is going to deal with me where I live, that I don't have to pretend everything is o.k. when it's not.*** I find hope in the fact that “there is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. There is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but a faith so robust it wrestles with God” (D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* 73).

Is life a struggle for you right now? Is it a burden? Is there an ache in your soul that won't go away? When you look up do you see hovering overhead that same depressing dark cloud that dogged your every step yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that? Has it gotten to the point that when someone like me comes along and says, “God loves you,” your first instinct is to punch 'em right in the nose?

“God loves me? You've got to be kidding! If he loves me so much, why won't this pain go away? If he loves me like you say, why am I all alone? If he loves me, why can't I pay my bills on time? He couldn't care less! And here I am, trying to believe, and all my enemies make fun of my faith in a God who seems to have forgotten where he left me!” Or to quote the famous words of the middle-school student: “If God loves me, why can't I get my locker open?”

Sound familiar, perhaps painfully familiar? What are we supposed to do when God and his love seem hidden and we're left all alone? David has some words of insight and encouragement.

Four times he cries out, “How long, O Lord?” ***Four times!*** Don't just read the words. Listen to the confusion behind them. “O Lord, will it ***ever*** end?”

It's important to note that ***David's feeling of abandonment is not related to some sin he's committed.*** We read of no confession, no contrition, no acknowledgment of personal guilt, no repentance that might shed some light on why God's blessings are missing. This isn't to say David was perfect. But at least ***in this case the cause for his turmoil must be traced to something other than overt transgression.***

As with David, ***there are going to be down times in your life that are unrelated to specific acts of sin.*** Unfortunately, this makes it even more difficult to handle! If you had sinned you could understand and live with God's absence, knowing you deserved to be chastised. But when God seems to disappear ***for no apparent reason***, the perplexity is unbearable.

David feels as if God has forgotten him. Has he? "Can the God of knowledge have a memory block? Can the only wise God be absent-minded? Is it possible that the Omniscient can forget, even for a moment, one of His children?" (Ronald B. Allen, *Praise! A Matter of Life and Breath*, 152). Are you and I like that pair of sunglasses or our car keys or a cell phone that we mislaid and now can't remember where we put them?

David is convinced that God can forget him. David is convinced he has! ***And he's frightened that God's forgetfulness might last forever.*** Note the word "forever" in v. 1. Note the temporal force of his question, "How long?" When will it end, Lord? Or *will* it even end?

But this was David's mistake. We must never permit our feelings to be the standard by which we measure biblical fact. God had most certainly ***not*** forgotten him, nor has he forgotten you.

Can God misplace one of his own children? Can God get so busy running the world and keeping the stars in space that he fails to remember our pain and our need? In all the complexities of life and the bustle of each day, can a Christian "slip God's mind"?

David sure thought so. He felt as though God had hidden his face from him. Since the "shining" or "showing" of God's face signifies blessing and favor (cf. Numbers 6:24-26; Psalms 4:6; 31:16; 67:1; 80:3), for it to be "hidden" is to suffer his withdrawal. Of course, God doesn't have a literal face because he doesn't have a literal body. At least that was true before the Son of God became a human in the person of Jesus. But the imagery behind this language is perfectly understandable. We are always encouraged and strengthened when we can finally make eye-contact with a friend or hear their voice or feel the reassuring warmth of a hug. But David sees and feels nothing from God.

A few years back a friend of mine had been rudely and unjustly dismissed from the pastorate of his church. Several families left the church with him and began a new ministry in the same town. He was describing to me how badly it hurt when so many of his former flock went out of their way to avoid contact with him. "For months," he said, "they wouldn't even look me in the face."

That's exactly how David feels. But in his case, it's worse. Here it is ***God*** who David believes has turned his face away. "You have said, 'Seek my face.' My heart says to you, 'Your face, Lord, do I seek. Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!" (Psalm 27:8-9).

He lies awake at night "wrestling" with his thoughts, searching his mind for some explanation of God's absence. But to no avail. "All the while, like slow, circling vultures, his enemies hover above, waiting for his fall – and their meal!" (Allen, 155).

David wasn't the only one of God's people to feel forgotten and abandoned. Consider ***Moses***. The first forty years of his life were anything but boring. He had been raised and educated in the palace of Pharaoh. He had access to all the power and prestige and wealth and entertainment and education that the greatest monarch on earth could provide. But it didn't last.

The next forty years were of a different order. After killing an Egyptian, he fled to Midian to save his skin (Exodus 2:11-14). For the next ***four decades*** he toiled in utter obscurity, tending the sheep and goats of Jethro, his father-in-law. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, sheep and goats, goats and sheep, for ***forty long, tedious, quiet, boring years***.

Gone? Yes. Forgotten? No. ***Simply because one of God's own is, for the moment, unused, does not mean he is unloved.*** J. I. Packer tells us that "one of the disciplines to which the Lord calls us is the willingness, from time to time, ***not*** to be used in significant ministry" (*Rediscovering Holiness*, 217). It may seem as if

God has forgotten us. It may seem as if we've been interminably shelved (no doubt Moses thought this of himself). But not so. Packer gives us an example to consider.

"Imagine, now, a devoted and gifted Christian woman, whose ministry has been precious to her, finding that for quite a long period the Lord sidelines her so that her potential is not being used. What is going on? Is this spiritual failure? It is probably not spiritual failure at all, but a lesson in Christ's school of holiness. ***The Lord is reminding her that her life does not depend on finding that people need her. The prime source of her joy must always be the knowledge of God's love for her*** -- the knowledge that though he did not need her, he has chosen to love her freely and gloriously so that she may have the eternal joy of fellowship with him. Regarding her ministry, what matters is that she should be available to him. Then he will decide when and how to put her to service again, and she should leave that with him" (217-18; emphasis mine).

God hadn't forgotten this lady. He hadn't abandoned Moses or David. Nor has he forsaken you. So what can be done in the meantime?

Thankful for the Emotional Spectrum of the Psalms

I am deeply grateful for what I call the ***emotional spectrum*** of the psalms. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, the psalms come to us in ***a variety of spiritual colors***. Some are glorious, green, glad-hearted hymns of praise. Others are filled with bright blue, unrelenting gratitude. There are psalms of confidence, of remembrance, wisdom psalms, kingship psalms, and even the crimson of imprecatory psalms that call for God's judgment against the wicked. The psalms are full of highs and lows and everything in between.

But nothing can compare with the dismal grey of the psalms of lament. These psalms are "the polar opposite of the hymn on the emotional spectrum" (Tremper Longman, 26). Their mood is unmistakable (see Psalms 3, 6, 12, 13, 26, 28, 30, 42, 43, 77, 142, just to mention a few).

Scholars have noted a distinct passion in these psalms, as the author pours out his complaint to God. It goes something like this (see Allen, 154):

"I'm hurting!"
"They're winning!"
"You don't care!"

But there's also a clear progression in such psalms that reflect the struggle and growth of the psalmist. They typically move ***from pain to praise, from sighing to singing; though helpless, the psalmist is never hopeless.***

I can't imagine a more representative psalm of lament than Psalm 13. We have already taken note of David's anguished cry, his lament, his pain and sighing, his palatable sense of God's absence when he needed him most (Ps. 13:1-2).

It is, however, in the midst of his deepest anguish, when all seems lost, that ***David breaks forth in prayer.*** But why? If it is really true that God has turned away, why pray to him? If God has forgotten, why bother? Yet, David *does* pray. He can't help but cry out to the God who, deep down, he knows is still there, loving him:

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

I doubt that David is talking about physical death. ***To "sleep the sleep of death" is most likely a reference to depression or some form of spiritual anguish.***

Despair can often be seen in someone's face. Their voice may sound o.k., but their eyes betray them. My father was often able to discern if either I or my sister was sick, or perhaps attempting to conceal some sin, simply by looking into our eyes. If we didn't look well "in our eyes" we probably weren't. Evidently ***David's***

emotional anguish was visibly noticeable. He requests that God would restore a spiritual sparkle to his eyes. "O God, make my eyes gleam with your grace and mercy once again."

But more was at stake than just David's sense of well-being. God's reputation was on the line! David prays, "O Lord, don't give the enemy any excuse to blaspheme your name. Don't let them gloat over my condition and slander your name when they see the defeat of your servant" (v. 4).

Sometimes the frustrations of the present threaten to undermine the trust that comes from remembering the past. We are so lost *now* that we forget what happened back *then*. "What good is *yesterday* when I'm hurting so badly *today*?"

That is where faith comes in. *Faith in the God who we've seen act in the past renews our hope for the future.* David knew it. So he makes a choice, the same choice you and I must make. He decides to entrust himself to God's pledge of undying love. Make David's confession of faith your own:

"But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me" (vv. 5-6).

Yes, on occasion God does seem hidden from view. His presence feels like a fast-fading memory. His love seems to have evaporated under the hot summer sun. When that happens, do what David did. Take yourself in hand, and contrary to every fiber of your being that demands you say otherwise, declare to the heavens: "*But I trust in your unfailing love!*"

God's love will not fail! It has not nor will it ever die. Though hidden from view, though far from what you're feeling, God's love for you lives. Go ahead if you want and punch me right in the nose! I may stop loving you (for the moment), but God won't.

Observe how David resolves to rejoice in God's salvation (deliverance), even though it has not yet come. He's *still* depressed. It's as if he says, "O God, I'm trusting in you to create the occasion when I can again look on your acts of deliverance and rejoice in your saving power."

From what he recalls of God's faithfulness in the past, there arises in his heart the calm of anticipation: "O God, you did it once before. I am confident you will do it again, because your love is unfailing!"

Let's remember that encouragement from the Lord sometimes comes in small doses. It's always there, but not always easy to discern at first glance. When lingering storm-clouds obscure the sun's rays, we begin to wonder: "Will I ever feel its warmth again?" Then we remind ourselves of the laws of nature and wait expectantly for the skies to break.

God's love for you always shines bright. But if clouds of pain and rejection and shame have for the moment blackened the sky, rest assured that gracious winds will again blow strong and the warmth of his passionate love will renew your once cold soul.

In anticipation, go ahead and sing like David did. Who knows, you just might hear God join you with a song of his own (see Zeph. 3:17)!

The Healing Power of Worship

Why is worship or praise so essential to David's recovery from spiritual depression? Let me answer that by saying two things.

A huge element in the experience of depression and despair is the tendency to become fixated on ourselves, our own state of mind, our own feelings, our personal sense of abandonment and rejection and isolation. You can see this in the lament of David here in Psalm 13. This is why one of the keys to moving out of depression and despondency is turning our attention *away from self and onto something infinitely greater and more glorious*. When you are awestruck by something inescapably beautiful or are enthralled with something

unavoidably and immeasurably majestic, you instinctively lose sight of self. *Your sense of true worth and value is suddenly found in your encounter with something unfathomably greater than your own self. And that something is a someone: God!*

David knows that the key to deliverance from his depression and self-pity is to set his sights on God: his “*steadfast love*”, his “*salvation*”, and the countless ways in which God has dealt “*bountifully*” with him in the past. It is in the enjoyment and celebration and praise of God that David discovers who he really is. *It is in focusing all ones thoughts and desires and dreams and energy on another that one discovers a true sense of personal identity and ultimate purpose.*

This is what C. S. Lewis discovered as he wrestled with why God in the psalms is always calling on people to praise him. This was almost more than Lewis could stomach. What kind of “God” is it who incessantly demands that his people tell him how great he is? Said Lewis:

"We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and horrible, both of God and His worshippers, threatened to appear in my mind. The Psalms were especially troublesome in this way – 'Praise the Lord,' 'O praise the Lord with me,' 'Praise Him.' . . . Worse still was the statement put into God's own mouth, 'whoso offereth me thanks and praise, he honoureth me' (50:23). It was hideously like saying, 'What I most want is to be told that I am good and great.' . . . It was extremely distressing. It made one think what one least wanted to think. Gratitude to God, reverence to Him, obedience to Him, I thought I could understand; not this perpetual eulogy. . . ."

I suspect this strikes us as problematic, as it did Lewis, because we want to think that God is preeminently concerned with us, not himself. We want a God who is man-centered, not God-centered. That certainly appears to be how David was feeling, at least in the first four verses of Psalm 13.

Worse still, we can't fathom how God could possibly love us the way we think he should if he is so unapologetically obsessed with the praise and glory of his own name. How can God love *me* if all his infinite energy is expended in the love of *himself*? Part of Lewis's problem, as he himself confesses, was that he did not see that . . .]

"it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men. It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together."

Lewis continues.

"But the most obvious fact about praise – whether of God or anything – strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that *all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless* . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses [Romeo praising Juliet and vice versa], readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. . . . Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . . I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value."

What Lewis is touching on here is how the love of God for sinners like you and me is ultimately made manifest. God desires our greatest good. But what greater good is there in the universe than God himself? So, if God is truly to love us, he must give us himself. ***But merely giving us of himself is only the first step in the expression of his affection for sinners. He must work to elicit from our hearts rapturous praise and superlative delight because, as Lewis said, "all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise."*** That's the way God made us. We can't help but praise and rejoice in what we most enjoy. The enjoyment itself is stunted and hindered if it is never expressed in joyful celebration. Here's how Lewis explained it.

"I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because ***the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.*** It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with. . . .

If it were possible for a created soul fully . . . to 'appreciate', that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme beatitude [which is the absolute antithesis of depression!] . . . To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God – drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy is no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."

So, if I understand Lewis correctly, he's telling us that God's pursuit of my praise of him is not weak self-seeking but the epitome of self-giving love! If my satisfaction in him is incomplete until expressed in praise of him for satisfying me with himself (note well: with HIMSELF, not his gifts or blessings, but the intrinsic beauty and splendor of God as God), then God's effort to elicit my worship (what Lewis before thought was inexcusable selfishness) is both the most loving thing he could possibly do for me and the most glorifying thing he could possibly do for himself. For in my gladness in him (not his gifts) is his glory in me.

And that, I suggest, is why David turns to praise in the midst of his emotional anguish. The next time you find yourself asking yourself the same questions David did, ***look outwardly, away from yourself, and gaze into the glory of God and worship him!***