

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message Focus on God, Not on Circumstances

Scripture Psalm 13

Today our focus will be on Psalm 13. It is a short Psalm, only 6 verses long. In terms of the subject matter, it is classified as a “lament,” meaning it is an expression of “grief” or “complaint.”

If we are inclined to complain about our circumstances, then, for sure, we need to read about David’s experiences. Perhaps we will be encouraged when we discover that our circumstances are not nearly as troublesome as those experienced by David.

We will agree that there are times in the life of every believer when God seems far away, even though we are walking by faith and there is no known sin in our lives to account for the disruption in our relationship with God. At those times it seems that God doesn’t hear our prayers, or at least is unwilling to answer. We try to refresh our emotions by reading our Bibles, but the words seem to be dry and do not speak to us.

David had these experiences over and over. This week I read through the Psalms 1 through 12. I looked for those verses in which David sought relief from his enemies and the distresses in his life. Most of those Psalms were concerned with serious issues affecting David’s spiritual and physical wellbeing. Psalm 3 “How many are my foes.” Psalm 4 “Give relief from my distress.” Psalm 5 “Give ear to my words, listen to my cry for help.” Psalm 6 “Do not rebuke me, be merciful to me.” Psalm 7 “Save and deliver me from all who pursue me.”

Psalms 8 and 9 are exceptions to this pattern, but beginning again with Psalm 10 “Why do you hide yourself?” Psalm 11 “The wicked bend their bows and set their arrows against me.” Psalm 12, “Help LORD, the faithful have vanished.” If we were to look beyond Psalm 13 we would find many more examples of David’s desperate pleas for help in times of trouble.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Whenever you look into David's writings, you will somewhere or another see yourself. You never get into a corner but you find David in that corner. I was never so low that I could not find that David was lower; and I never climbed so high that I could not find that David was up above me, ready to sing his song upon his stringed instrument.” That quotation explains why the Psalms are a comfort to individuals who are experiencing difficulties.

There is an important characteristic about David’s Psalms that we should carefully note. Many of his Psalms begin with descriptions of the anguish of his soul, yet they usually end with evidence of his deep faith. That is the pattern as we will recognize as we read Psalm 13. That is the pattern that should characterize our lives when we are overwhelmed with circumstances.

Read Psalm 13

This short Psalm is easy to analyze structurally. There are three stanzas with two verses in each. In the first stanza, there are four repetitions of the question “How long?” There is an intensity in these questions. We don’t know the reason for David’s perplexity. There is no context in the Psalm itself. There is no indication that the gap in David’s relationship with God was caused by sin which was sometimes the reason for his sense that God was distant. In this Psalm, though, there is no confession, no contrition, and no acknowledgement of personal guilt.

Some commentators think David was very ill when he wrote these words, incapacitated in some way, and perhaps near death. Other commentators think that David was being pressured by enemies who wanted to remove him from his position of influence and authority. Some commentators assume that David was being pursued by Saul when this Psalm was written — that he was isolated out in a wilderness area, perhaps hiding in a cave, with lots of time on his hands and no sense of purpose. Whatever the reason, it seemed to David that God was not responding to his repeated urgent prayers and, as a result, David was in emotional and spiritual turmoil.

We can describe his state of mind as a “depression.” Verses 1 and 2 indicate three issues which were weighing on his thoughts. First was his relationship with God. This was his priority concern. Was the LORD displeased with him? If so, why? The LORD seemed to be ignoring him. For a person with a heart that was inclined toward God, as was David’s, this was the most significant cause of his emotional distress.

In verse 2 we read that David “wrestled with his thoughts.” I’m sure we can identify with what was happening. In times of distress, our minds often work overtime, racing from thought to thought, imagining good and bad scenarios, usually bad; trying to figure out what to do to get out of our particular difficulty. David undoubtedly explored many options in his mind, yet, it seems, none of his plans worked out, for “every day he had sorrow in his heart.” The implication is that he was on an emotional roller-coaster, moving between hope and despair, and longing for relief from his worries.

The third concern he had was in regard to his enemies. This was not a purely selfish desire. David knew he had been specially chosen by God, with a special calling to lead the people of God. As long as David was isolated and pinned down by his circumstances, his enemies were in control. He was a helpless victim. David recognized that the only way for the situation to change was for the LORD to appear and take action on his behalf. But as far as David was concerned, the LORD was not doing anything. Hence, his persistent question, “how long, O LORD.” “How long” will this situation continue?

I want to offer some perspective on this matter of waiting on the LORD to reveal Himself and take action. We need to recognize that there is a big difference in God’s timetable and ours. Sometimes the circumstances here on earth are so immense, so multifaceted, and so complicated that it takes a long time for God to develop the human resources necessary to deal with the problems. This doesn’t mean that the situation is out of God’s control or that He is inactive. God has His purposes and He controls the timetable of history. Often God works behind the scenes to qualify His people for service. Let me explain this point by giving a couple of examples.

When God wanted to get Joseph into a position of influence in Egypt, it was necessary for Joseph, as a teenager, to first be sold into slavery and then to spend years in prison even though he was innocent of any crime. Finally, because of his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph was elevated to his position second only to Pharaoh. We can assume that Joseph fervently prayed for many years, “Where are you LORD? How long before you act?” “How long must I be in this situation?” He did not understand God’s timing and process for many years.

Consider the Apostle Paul as another example. He was God’s apostle to the Gentiles. Paul wanted to take the gospel to Rome and then on to Spain. What happened? Before he could embark on this missionary journey, Paul was imprisoned on a false charge and kept in custody in Caesarea for two years. I’m sure he had many questions about his circumstances. Why didn’t God do something? Why didn’t He move the governor to release him? Wasn’t he walking by faith? Wasn’t he praying enough? Why did he have to be locked up for more than two years?

I think God was putting David through experiences similar to those of Joseph and Paul. David had been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel. He was a teenager at the time of his anointing, yet it was many years before he assumed the throne. Saul pursued him for about 25 years, seeking to kill him. David did not have a normal life. He was constantly under stress. Where was God? Had He forgotten that David was anointed as king? From a human perspective it didn’t make any sense to have to endure the circumstances. Hence the repeated questions, “How long O LORD?”

Joseph, Paul, David, and other Biblical characters all had to endure unpleasant circumstances, sometimes for years, during which it seemed that God had forgotten them. However, only later did it become evident that God was preparing them for important ministry activities. As these men were being stretched to the limits of their endurance and patience, they were growing in spiritual maturity. Through their experiences they learned to trust God. Just as it takes years to grow a tall sturdy tree, it takes years for people to develop the godly traits necessary to be effective leaders in the Lord’s work.

That's how God works even though it is not that way in our rush-rush world! We need to understand: when we are trapped in a frustrating circumstance, and we have become frustrated trying to figure a way out; when we observe the successes of wicked individuals while we languish and suffer; and when it seems like God is not responding to our prayers, then it may be the purpose of God to make us spiritually stronger and to prepare us to serve Him better. We must not assume that God is ignoring us. Rather, we must hang on to our faith and wait on God to take action.

The first stanza of the Psalm was all about the problem of perplexing circumstances. The second stanza, verses 3 and 4, helps us understand what to do while we wait: we are to pray. When God seemed distant from him, David called on God to answer him. The key thought in this stanza is the request, "Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death."

This is the verse which has led some commentators to think that David was experiencing a prolonged illness. "Lightening the eyes" was a Hebrew expression which referred to the revitalization of one's energy and vigor. Normally the expression referred to one's physical condition, but in the context of this Psalm, David could be referring to his spiritual depletion. The experience of anguish and grief is often described by God's people as a time of darkness, when the eyes grow dim, and there is clouded vision. On the other hand, the blessings of God give light to the soul. David wanted God to shine His favor on him.

Notice the three verbs in David's prayer: "Look on me," "answer me," "give light to my eyes." Because he thought that God was ignoring him, David requested that God look at him — to pay attention to his plight. Because David thought that the LORD was not responding, he pled for the LORD to answer and provide guidance. Because David was in an emotional depression, he pled for the light of the LORD's presence and favor to lift his spirit.

David wasn't just praying for deliverance so that he could escape from his problems and be happy. His fear was that the enemy would rejoice over his incapacity and helplessness. David recognized that he had no more personal inner resources to draw on. The expression, "sleep in death," represented the next step to be anticipated given his condition. It was an indication of the severity of his situation. David assumed that he would die unless the LORD somehow intervened.

In verse 4 David wrote about the possibility of his being “overcome” by his enemies and “falling.” The word “fall” infers a potential collapse because his load was too heavy to carry. It is important that we understand the basis of his appeal. It was generally recognized that he was God’s anointed king. If he was overcome by his enemies and could not stand up under the pressures of his circumstances, it would reflect not just on him, but on the character and ability of God to take care of His own. David recognized that God’s honor was linked to his deliverance. In this time of crisis, David was calling out to the LORD to defend His own glory and honor.

In the first stanza we were introduced to David’s problem — the LORD was not responding to his pleas for help. In the second stanza we thought about David’s prayer. He knew that he was spiritually and physically depleted, but his appeal was not for himself; it was for the honor of God. In the last stanza we read about David’s praise. Although he was experiencing deep despair, David held on to his confidence about God’s “unfailing love.”

David’s trust and confidence in the LORD is remarkable given his many difficult life challenges. As I stated earlier, many of his Psalms which begin with descriptions of the anguish of his soul end with evidence of his deep faith. The circumstances of David’s life did not change between verses 1 and 5, and his depression and perplexity had not changed, yet He was confident that the LORD would, sooner or later, deliver him. A sign of David’s confidence and trust was his eagerness to thank the LORD in advance for the answers to his prayers. This is another example that he was indeed “a man after God’s own heart.”

David placed his trust in the “unfailing love” of God. This Hebrew phrase combines several different concepts: “kindness,” “mercy,” “lovingkindness,” “loyalty,” “steadfastness.” God used that word to describe His covenant relationship with Israel: He promised to be loving and kind to Israel to a thousand generations (*See Deuteronomy 7:8-9*). The primary basis for David’s trust in the LORD was the LORD’s “unfailing lovingkindness,” and in this “unfailing lovingkindness” he rejoiced.

The secondary reason for David’s trust was the goodness of the LORD which had been shown to him. David recognized that the LORD had protected him and provided for him many times previously. The phrase “has been good” actually means “has dealt bountifully with,” and the reflection on this thought caused David to break forth in song.

There is a practical lesson in this Psalm. When David's thoughts were consumed with his circumstances, with his desire for a closer relationship with the LORD, and with his concern about his enemies, he was in emotional distress and anguish. However, at the end of the Psalm his thoughts were focused, not on his circumstances, but on the "unfailing love" and the "bountiful goodness" of the LORD, and his heart "rejoiced," and he had a song on his heart. Like David, we need to evaluate our circumstances through the character of God rather than through our earthly perspectives. What a change in attitude is possible when we do that!

Another lesson concerns the quality of our faith. The test of our faith is not when God's presence is real, when we see God at work in our lives. The real test of faith is when God seems distant. Sometimes God allows us to get on the brink of a precipice, so to speak, or to come to the end of ourselves, so that we learn to trust Him more. All trials are opportunities to bring us to a deeper trust in the Lord. At those times when it seems as if God is ignoring us, we must deliberately trust the fact that His love for us is an unfailing love, and that He will not forsake us.