



Psalm 13

For the music leader. A psalm of David.

- (1) How much longer, Yahweh, will you go on forgetting me?
Forever?
How much longer will you go on hiding your face from me?
- (2) How much longer must I lay plans within me
—agony in my heart by day?
How much longer will my enemy be lifted up over me?
- (3) Look! Answer me, Yahweh, my God!
Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death;
- (4) lest my enemy should say, 'I have trounced him!';
lest my adversaries rejoice because I stagger.
- (5) But I, I have trusted in your unfailing love;
let my heart rejoice in your salvation!
- (6) I will sing to Yahweh,
for he has cared so completely for me.







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FAITH: FROM ANGUISH TO ASSURANCE

My older brothers grew up in a small western Pennsylvania town where their father was the United Presbyterian pastor. (He was my father too, but that was a good bit later—I was an apparent ‘accident’.) They all went to what was essentially a one-room schoolhouse with at least eight grades all in the main room. Years later, as a young fellow, I loved the times when several of my brothers would be together and start reminiscing of school days in Sheakleyville. They told of items that were put into the school’s pot-bellied stove in winter-time. A bit noisy but nothing fatal. They would tell how older kids persuaded and goaded their youngest brother (at the time) to sass the teacher and how he got punished for it. They would rehearse one escapade after another; it was grand entertainment. Once, when I was a very young teenager—after our family had long moved away from the original scene of these crimes—and after one of these



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‘Remember when...’ sessions by my brothers, my mother strictly charged me that I was to disclose none of these stories to anyone! What was her problem? Her concern was that, though we were not ‘much,’ our family should be scrupulous about its reputation and the last thing we needed was a bunch of tarnishing tales from the past making the rounds. It was damage control. There were certain things that were not to get out. Now what if the editors of the Psalms had come upon Psalm 13 and said, ‘Whoa! This implies bleak despair may be part of believing experience. Do you think we ought to let that get out?’

That’s why this heading to Psalm 13 never looked so good! It tells us that this psalm was authorized for use in Israel’s worship. Some do seem to have problems with it. Charles Spurgeon at least chides David for the way he speaks in the opening verses, but even Spurgeon was wrong sometimes. And the psalm even made the cut in my own denomination’s hymnal: it’s right there, No. 641—*How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord, thou God of grace? How glad we should be to have these worn and tear-stained pages as a stated part of this prayer book of the Bible; how happy we should be that these desperate pleas with raw nerves hanging all over them escaped the censor’s knife!*

Let’s wade into this prayer behind David, who may well teach us to pray and show us something of the path from anguish to assurance.

Notice that right at the first David pulls us into the **weariness faith knows (vv. 1-2)**. He is in triple trouble—well, anguish is seldom simple. His trouble is with God (‘How much longer, Yahweh, will you go on forgetting me...will you go on hiding your face from me?’,

v. 1); with self ('How much longer must I lay plans within me—agony in my heart by day?', v. 2a); and with enemies ('How much longer will my enemy be lifted up over me?', v. 2b). I suppose you could dub these the theological, psychological, and sociological aspects of David's distress respectively, but I doubt that clinical analysis would help him much. Absence of God, anxiety of soul, supremacy of the enemy—that is the bundle of trouble he has. Without doubt, the first of those is the most galling and appalling of all.

Philip Yancey, in his book on prayer, tells of Karl, an Air Force officer who suffered head, back, and spinal injuries in a cycling accident. As a result, he was paralyzed from the chest down and began to endure life from a wheelchair, with no bladder or bowel control, facing muscle spasms and infections, having steel rods implanted in his spinal column. But that, Karl said, was not the worst. The most severe suffering was that God's presence was withdrawn. Karl said he still went on praying and believing but there was no sense of God's presence. Being decimated is one thing; being abandoned is far worse.

That may be the worst part of David's trouble but not all of it. He lays plans, with agony in his heart (v. 2a); that is, he conjures up possible options or 'solutions' to his troubles; he becomes consumed with proposed scenarios of plans A, B, C, etc., all of which are dead-end streets. And then to top it all off, there's the mockery and gloating of his enemy (v. 2b).

But it's worse than that. Four times David asks, 'How much longer...?' It's also a problem of timing and he's wrestling with Yahweh's 'delays.' It's one matter



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to wade through crud and darkness and anxiety and mockery, but when you never seem to come out on the other end, when you seem to be marooned in the thick of the mess and hanging on by your fingernails and days pass and nothing changes and God doesn't meet your last conceivable deadline before you cave in—what then? 'How much longer?' The danger is not that we will blow out but wear out. Besides all else, we have troubles with God's timing—we go on in our troubles far longer than we think the mercy of God would allow. Tell me, then, as you read these two verses of Psalm 13—does the Bible understand us or what?

But then notice, secondly, **the instinct faith follows (v. 3a)**. Did you really hear verses 1-2? And now do you really see verse 3a? Do you sense a logical disconnect? Let's trace the psalm so far, as if it has been you who has been praying. You pray and pray and God does not pay attention; He hides His face, you say; you plead and cry and there is no relief. So what do you do? You go right on praying, of course! To whom? To the God who has not heard. Is there any other? This is lousy logic but excellent faith. You are convinced that Yahweh is forgetting you and hiding His face from you in your misery; and the next thing you do is to cry, 'Look! Answer me, Yahweh my God!' In one way, it seems senseless. You bemoan a God who is not paying attention to you and then in the next breath you nevertheless plead for Him to pay attention. It may not seem rational but it's revealing. Strictly speaking, there may be times when faith does not have its reasons, but it still has its reactions. I call this the instinct of faith. Even when Yahweh seems to turn a deaf ear to

us, a believer will simply keep coming back to Him. It's almost a spiritual knee-jerk reaction. And sometimes our instincts are very revealing and comforting.

I like that story Charles Spurgeon told about the woman in his first congregation at Waterbeach. He called her Mrs. Much-afraid. She was always doubting and fearful over her spiritual condition, though she had been a believer for fifty years and showed all the fruit of a genuine faith. She was faithful in worship, helpful to neighbors, willing to speak to the unconverted. One day they were talking, and she declared she had no hope, no faith, and feared she was a hypocrite. So Spurgeon told her to quit coming to the chapel, because 'we don't want hypocrites there.' He asked her why she came. She replied, 'I come because I can't stop away. I love the people of God; I love the house of God; and I love to worship God.' Spurgeon assured her that she was an odd sort of hypocrite. As the conversation moved on, he asked if she had no hope at all. 'No,' she said. So Spurgeon pulled out his wallet, and said: 'Now, I have got five pounds here, it is all the money I have, but I will give you that five pounds for your hope if you will sell it.' She looked at him, evidently puzzled, but then exclaimed, 'Why! I would not sell it for a thousand worlds.' And Spurgeon's editorial comment was: She had just told me that she had not any hope of salvation, yet she would not sell it for a thousand worlds! In short, her instincts assumed what her words denied.

Now, that is what you see in this psalm. Here in the pit may be the clearest evidence that true faith dwells in you—in this knee-jerk reaction of faith. Do you catch it? After the despair of verses 1-2, you simply keep calling



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‘Yahweh, my God!’ (v. 3a). You simply can’t leave Him. You must, then, be His.

Thirdly, we hear **the reasons faith marshals in verses 3b-4**. Now note David’s petition in these verses—‘Give light to my eyes.’ We usually don’t use expressions like that, so it may seem a bit puzzling. But we have an expression very like it back in 1 Samuel 14:29. There Jonathan, King Saul’s son, was going through a stretch of woods while charging after Philistines. He happened upon some honey there, stopped, and scooped some for himself. Those with him were aghast, because King Saul had placed the whole force under a curse should they eat anything before he had gotten vengeance on the Philistines. Jonathan’s answer was that his father had simply made trouble with that oath. See, he said, ‘how my eyes lit up when I tasted that bit of honey’ (NJPS). He was referring to the fresh surge of energy and stamina that a few calories had given him. So, here in the psalm, David asks for Yahweh to supply him with fresh strength and energy in the face of the assaults and troubles he is enduring.

But after he prays, ‘Give light to my eyes,’ David piles up these clauses—three of them—each beginning with ‘lest.’ (Actually in the Hebrew text the particle for ‘lest’ only appears twice, but when it is written in the first line, as in v. 4, it is meant to be ‘carried over’ in the second line—hence a total of three ‘lests’ in our translation.) What is he doing? He is supporting his petition with arguments, bringing reasons to bolster his request, why Yahweh should ‘give light to my eyes.’ The first argument, he says, has to do with my fate—‘lest I sleep in death’ (3b); the second, he would say, has to do with my shame—‘lest

my enemy should say, “I have trounced him!”; lest my adversaries rejoice because I stagger’ (4). Does Yahweh want his servant to meet his end (cf. Ps. 116:15) and see David’s enemies celebrating his downfall? The argument probably implies that what will be David’s shame would prove to be Yahweh’s shame as well, for David’s demise would imply Yahweh was unable (or unwilling) to deliver His servant.

But here in this psalm I am not so much concerned with the particular arguments David uses as with the fact that he uses arguments, reasons, in his petitions. For this implies, doesn’t it, that prayer is a *thinking* exercise? There is a sense in which prayer should be so terribly logical and rational. Do you pray that way? Do you press reasons upon Yahweh as to why He should answer your plea? Can you make an argument for the petition you bring?

But I want to go beyond this as well. Take in the whole of the psalm so far and see what a *model of proper biblical piety* you meet here. Do you remember the despair and terror of verses 1-2—the sheer *emotion* there? Then you read verses 3-4 and you are caught in an argument, you are hearing *reasoning*. Do you see the combination? In verses 1-2, there is especially the feeling, in verses 3-4, the thinking; in the former, emotion, in the latter, reasoning; in 1-2, the affections are laid bare, in 3-4, the arguments are pressed. Not either-or, but both-and.

It all reminds me of something John Bright once wrote, just as an aside, in one of his books. He said that when he got dressed in the morning he did not need to decide whether to wear a shirt or trousers—rather the properly attired man wore both. David depicts a similar



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point here in Psalm 13. Sometimes in our Christian or church ‘culture’ we get pushed one way or the other—some urging us, if we think of extremes, to swing and sway to the beat and bounce of Roop-tee-do ‘Songs of Praise’ and others to furrow our brows and get into brain-cell Christianity. But the psalm implies that especially in prayer you must hold both emotion and reason together. In a true knowledge of God they combine. At the throne of grace, tears fall from your eyes and arguments from your lips.

Finally, David shows us in vv. 5-6, **the anchor faith holds**. Actually, he shows us more than that, but I will only deal with the turning point in verse 5a here, because I want to focus on what makes all the difference in David’s trouble, what accounts for the ‘turnaround’ in these six short verses and why with his earlier despair he can be so confident of coming joy.

Pronouns are sometimes signals of turnarounds in the psalms, emphatic pronouns like we meet in the first part of verse 5: ‘But I, I have trusted in your unfailing love.’ Notice that David is not looking inward here. He is not saying that he has gotten a fresh shot of self-esteem or that he has begun to feel better about himself. No, he fastens on to Yahweh’s character, he has latched on to His ‘unfailing love.’ That translates the word *hesed*. Now what is Yahweh’s *hesed*?

You will run into a number of English translations for the word. The RSV and ESV use ‘steadfast love,’ the NASB ‘lovingkindness,’ others tend to use simply ‘love’ (e.g., NIV) or ‘mercy’ (cf. NKJV). The first matter you should remember about *hesed* is that it is a miracle. Perhaps

you can recall Yahweh's self-description in Exodus 34:6—'Yahweh, Yahweh, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and rich in *hesed* and fidelity.' Remember when He said that? In the wake of Israel's apostasy and rebellion of Exodus 32, when they had worshiped the golden calf in the very shadow of Sinai. Moses had not even gotten down from the mountain with the covenant documents before they had already shattered the covenant. It was like a bride being married and then going to bed with someone else that night. So Moses went about interceding before Yahweh for this flaky bunch of rebels. It seems more than one could hope for that Yahweh would renew His covenant with such a batch of sinners. Yet He does, and part of the inexplicable reason is that He is 'rich in *hesed* and fidelity.' When you see *hesed* in light of Exodus 32–34, you have to say that *hesed* has no right to exist. The dregs of Israel had no reason to expect it. So *hesed* always seems to have a tinge of *grace* about it. It's faithful love that should not be, except that it's the way Yahweh is in the depth of His being, in His *hesed*-rich nature.

But *hesed* not only carries this notion of *surprise* but has overtones of *steadfastness* as well. You can sense it in some attempts to translate the word: 'steadfast love' or 'faithful love' or, here in Psalm 13, the NIV's 'unfailing love.' It is not merely love but loyal love, not merely kindness but dependable kindness, not merely affection but affection that has committed itself. It is not simply love but love that has 'stick-um' on it, love that refuses to ever let go. And so *hesed* has a sustaining, assuring element about it. 'If I say, "My foot slips," your *hesed*, Yahweh, holds me up'



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(Ps. 94:18). But you have a far more familiar text than that to conjure up. Remember Psalm 23:6? You are familiar with ‘goodness and mercy,’ but the traditional ‘mercy’ there is actually *hesed*. So David says, ‘Only goodness and *hesed* will pursue me all the days of my life.’ It’s almost a humorous picture. The verb ‘pursue’ (‘follow’ is too weak) is frequently used of enemies pursuing someone to do harm. But here David stands that verb on its head. He says he is so cared for that it’s as if Yahweh has two special agents, Goodness and *hesed*, and these two Yahweh-commissioned agents stay in hot pursuit of David, always seeking to waylay him and heap more of God’s kindness and goodness upon him! Do you see what *hesed* is in Psalm 23:6? It is the unguessable and lavish friendliness of Yahweh, with which He pledges to dog your tracks all your days.

What might it feel like to be the object of *hesed*, of faithful love? Here I often think of a story William Still (see his *Dying to Live*) tells of the earlier days of his pastorate in Aberdeen. He recalls a period when the dominant theme of his preaching seemed to be judgment and hell and the consequences of turning a deaf ear to the gospel. He kept hammering away at this (and he was convinced the Lord had led him to do so), but he knew it was getting the people down. Mr. Still had a dear aunt who served him as cook and housekeeper, and one Sunday at lunch during this hell-as-the-theme-du-jour period she voiced her concern. ‘I am sitting there with them in the pew,’ she said, ‘and taking it all.’ She went on: ‘I feel for them. Oh, Willie, is there no love in the gospel?’ Still admitted that her query had shaken him, but he responded that he could preach

nothing but what the Lord had laid on his heart. ‘Well,’ his aunt replied, ‘if it goes on, there will soon be no one there but you and me!’ ‘And will you desert me then?’, Mr. Still asked. ‘Never,’ she shot back: ‘I committed myself to you and the Lord’s work here and I will never leave you.’ That’s *hesed*. And if you are not swallowed up by the darkness or swept away by the distress, it will be because in the midst of it all you have a God and Savior who says, ‘I have committed myself to you and I will never leave you.’ Just to be assured of unfailing love makes all the difference.

You may still be unsure whether you ought to pray prayers like this. Let’s come at the matter in a back-door sort of way. Paul Johnson has an intriguing statement about Vladimir Lenin in his book *Modern Times*. ‘He never visited a factory or set foot on a farm.... He was never to be seen in the working-class quarters of any town in which he resided.’ But what does Lenin have to do with a psalm like this? Well, compare Paul Johnson’s statement about Lenin with the way the writer of Hebrews depicts Jesus: ‘In the days of his flesh, he offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear’ (Heb. 5:7). Jesus had no part in the stand-off, sanitized conditions Lenin evidently enjoyed. So don’t be ashamed to pray these prayers. Jesus wasn’t—He was right down here in the darkness, praying ‘working-class’ prayers like this. How dare you say that you are somehow above these cries!