

From Pit to Pulpit

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Date: 14 April 2024

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[0 : 00] Hey, Michelle Alexander will come and read to us from Psalm 13. 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?

Answer 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.

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.

Amen. This is God's word. Well, good morning. It's good to be with you here at St. C's. Let me just put my Bible here.

[1 : 07] It's a privilege and a pleasure to have the opportunity to share with you in worship and to share with you from God's Word to which we now turn in Psalm 13.

His name was Moses Donaldson, and he was a minister in South Lanarkshire for a number of years, I think from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

He conducted my great-uncle Johnny's funeral in Abington. He interviewed me for Lanark Presbytery when I applied for the ministry almost 40 years ago.

And he was a character. He was a man of irrepressible faith and exceptional enthusiasm. And he loved to tell his story, the story of how he became a Christian, how he ended up a minister of the gospel.

And he would often make an appearance at various church meetings, fellowships, women's guilds in the locality telling this story.

[2 : 13] His testimony would be accompanied not by bagpipes but by accordion music and songs of faith. And he would speak of how he began his working life down the pits as a coal miner and of how an underground accident which almost cost him his arm led really to a dramatic turn around in his life.

He came to faith after hearing Billy Graham preach at the Kelvin Hall in Glasgow in 1955 and his life was never to be the same.

And invariably at these meetings, his talk would always have the same title, from pit to pulpit.

And it's that title that comes to mind as I read through Psalm 13 because here is a Psalm that speaks about a journey of faith.

It's a Psalm that is to all intents and purposes a testimony, a testimony of faith. Because in this short Psalm, the writer David takes us on a faith journey from anguish to assurance, from darkness to light, from distress to delight.

[3 : 33] The Psalm moves inextricably upward from the lowest depths to scale the very heights of joy. It takes us from the pit of despair to the pulpit of praise.

The Psalm reminds us that if we are man or woman of faith, we will invariably, inevitably find our faith put to the test.

And in the Psalm, David shows us how to respond in such circumstances. And you'll notice that the composition is naturally divided into three parts of two verses.

I want to look at each of those in turn as we travel with David on this journey of faith. And our journey begins in the opening two verses where we see the distress faith feels.

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 I've sorrowed in my heart all the day.

[4 : 42] How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? David is in trouble. His fortunes are at a low ebb.

His mind and heart are full of questions. Four times here, he asks the question, doesn't he? How long?

How long shall You forget me? How long will You hide from me? How long am I to be in sorrow? How long will my enemies triumph over me? David here senses the absence of God.

He feels a sense of anxiety on his soul. He endures the arrogance of his enemies. His troubles are kind of pressing down upon him. He feels crushed and alone.

How long must all this go on for? He is here a man in great distress. And we're not actually told what it was that was causing David this anguish.

[5 : 36] We could, I'm sure, hazard a number of guesses. But the bottom line is we don't know. And perhaps in a way that makes David's words all the more applicable to us.

Because at various times and for a variety of reasons, we may all find ourselves in this self-same pit of distress and despair.

Because faith is not immune from such experiences. I know there are many who would hold if that if we have faith, then we shouldn't know times of suffering or trouble.

But those who espouse such views have a dangerously warped understanding of the Christian life. Faith is not a get out of jail free card.

Faith will inevitably know dark times of great distress. I've always been troubled by the verse in that great hymn, trust and obey, that says, not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, but a smile quickly drives it away.

[6 : 48] Not a doubt, not a fear, not a sigh, not a tear can abide while we trust and obey. Really? Not a shadow, not a cloud, not a doubt, not a fear, not a sigh, not a tear.

I don't think so. Does his smile always drive these things quickly away? No. Sometimes it's as we trust and obey that we're led into places of shadow and cloud where there are many doubts and fears and not a few tears.

Faith sometimes finds itself in a dark place. It's not always triumphant. Chapter 18 of the Westminster Confession puts it like this, true believers may have the assurance of their salvation in diverse ways, shaken, diminished and intermittent, as by God withdrawing the light of His countenance and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light.

And that's certainly David's experience here. He's walking in the darkness and he has no light. He feels cut off from God. It's as if God has forsaken him or maybe worse, turned his back on him.

He feels abandoned and alone. And sometimes that happens. God withdraws the light of His presence and we feel so far away from Him.

[8 : 18] How long, O Lord, will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? There's more to David's distress than even that.

He endures agony of heart as he seeks a way out of this predicament. How long must I take counsel in my soul? Have sorrow in my heart all the day?

It's as if he keeps going over his problem again and again and again. He can't seem to think of anything else, it dominates his thought life, becomes self-absorbed, a prisoner of dark thoughts. There seems no way out. And then to top it all, there's the mockery and gloating of his enemies. How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

And here is the distress the psalmist feels. And it feels like it will never end. How long? He's marooned in the midst of the mess that he finds himself in.

[9 : 22] So everything is coming down upon him. There appears no escape, no relief. It's utterly relentless. He doesn't think he's going to be able to last out.

He doesn't think he can keep on going. How long, O Lord? He has faith in the pit. And friends, sooner or later we all find ourselves there, desperate days that we long to come to an end, days in which, like David, we question God.

Where are you? What on earth are you doing? I imagine in a group of this size, a number of you will be, have been through some pretty horrendous experiences.

Many problems of one kind or another. How all-consuming such things are. Ill health, tragic loss, a relationship breakdown, the pain of bereavement, false accusation and lies.

And you know something of the distress faith feels. But here's the thing, always remember that it is faith that feels it.

[10 : 40] It is faith that cries out to God. It's faith that asks the question, how long, O Lord?

We may find ourselves in a bad way, rock bottom down in the pit feeling utterly lost and alone. But even here there is a glimmer of hope and a flicker of light.

To quote that same chapter of the confession, it concludes, yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty out of which by operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived and by the which in the meantime they are supported from utter despair.

How long, O Lord? And there's faith in that. However faint and weak it may appear.

So from the distress faith feels, we move then secondly to the direction faith follows. And we have that in verses 3 and 4.

[11 : 55] Consider and answer me, O Lord my God, light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say I've prevailed over him, lest my foes rejoice because I'm shaken.

David feels far from God. God isn't answering his prayers. All his praying, all his pleading has come to nothing. He's found no relief. What does he do?

Does he pick up his ball and storm off the pitch? Does he throw in the towel and admit defeat? No, he goes on praying. Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.

He fixes attention upon God and appeals to him once more. The commentator, Dilrahaav Davis remarks, this is lousy logic but excellent faith.

At one level it seems crazy behavior, madness. We feel that God has forsaken and abandoned us. He's not paying us any attention. He's hidden his ways from us.

[12 : 58] So what are we to do? We're to call upon His name. We're to look towards Him with expectant faith. We are to pray and not give up.

Sometimes people say, you know, I'll pray when I feel like it, but no, we must pray even when we don't feel like it, perhaps especially so.

Sometimes we feel less than inclined to pray and seek the Lord, but we must go to the throne of grace. We must continually beat a path to our Father's door knowing that He will never, ever cast us away.

There's a sense in which prayer is to be woven into the fabric of our lives. How we need to discipline ourselves in this regard. Some years ago, Jim Packer and Carolyn Nystrom co-authored a little book on prayer.

It had the title, Finding Our Way Through Duty to Delight. And there is something of that here in this psalm because faith focuses on God.

[14 : 04] Faith is directional, it's faith in, faith into, faith towards, faith upon our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith looks away from the self to the Lord.

John Newton wrote, the duty, the privilege, the safety, the unspeakable happiness of a believer are all comprised in that one sentence, looking unto Jesus.

Are you looking to Jesus this morning? This is what the psalmist does. He looks again to the Lord. Oh Lord, my God, Yahweh, the great God of the covenant, the one who has bound himself to His people such that He will never, ever forsake them, utterly and completely dependable.

Resolve to be His people's God come what may. And it's the very instinct of faith to acknowledge that. Even when circumstances cause us to tremble and be afraid.

Where else can we go except to Him who is the words of eternal life? We cannot leave Him for deep down we know Him to be the God who will never leave us.

[15 : 22] So what does David ask from the Lord? He's looking to Him, asking that He consider His situation and answer His petitions.

He doesn't say, get me out of this trouble. He says, here and answer my prayer. And the thrust of His request is this, isn't it?

Light up my eyes or give light to my eyes. It's quite an unusual expression. What does it mean? Similar phrase is used in 1 Samuel chapter 14. There Jonathan dips the tip of his staff into some honeycomb and eats it.

And so we read there, he put out the tip of his staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth and his eyes became bright.

[16 : 23] And Jonathan said, see how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. It's the same phrase. In 1 Samuel 14, Jonathan has been weary, he's been worn down, his resources depleted, things at a low ebb.

But tasting the honey injected him, you see, with a fresh surge of energy and stamina. Maybe like having an energy bar or maybe a kind of red bull, I don't know.

And his eyes become bright. The honey revives him. And that's what David is asking for here. He's asking the Lord to refresh him and supply him with strength in the midst of his present weakness. In his distress, he's looking to the Lord to brighten his countenance. In this day of trouble, light up my eyes once more, O Lord.

Invigorate and strengthen my faith. Now you'll notice how David adduces three reasons why the Lord should do this.

[17 : 34] Three clauses are used in verse 4. Lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say I've prevailed over him, lest my foes rejoice because I'm shaken.

So what is David doing here? He's supporting, he's bolstering his petitions with reasons. Doesn't want to succumb to death.

He doesn't want his enemies to shame him and triumph over him. And he re-reasons that Yahweh himself doesn't want this to happen. He expects God to act in such a way that he, his anointed servant, might not be put to shame and disgrace.

And the kind of unstated implication is that if David is dishonored and defeated, that will reflect unfavorably upon the honor of God's name and glory.

The point I'm making here is that David's prayer and petition is not a mindless repetition of platitudes. It's not a pile of vacuous spiritual phrases.

[18 : 40] It's actually a reasoned argument because prayer is not mindless babbling. It's a thinking exercise that involves us using our minds.

It's a serious engagement with the living God. In prayer, we take God at His word. We take out His promises to us. We spread them out before Him and we plead with Him on the basis of those promises.

What was it John Newton wrote in his hymn? And thy promise is my only plea with this I ventured nigh. Thou callest burdened souls to thee on such, O Lord, am I.

And yes, of course, there is emotion here. We see that in the opening verses, but there's not just emotion. There's reason here because in prayer, both of these things go together.

Mind and heart, emotion and reason, feeling and thinking. They're combined together. We have to be aware of a Christianity that is misshapen and lopsided.

[19 : 46] All heart and no mind, or all mind and no heart because Christian faith involves both feeling and thinking.

Again Dale Ralph Davis observes, at the throne of grace, tears fall from your eyes and arguments from your lips.

And so this is the direction that faith takes. It keeps going back to the Lord. It keeps pleading before the throne of grace.

And sometimes it feels irrational and crazy. It makes no sense. But when troubles and trials come our way as they invariably shall, what else can we do than beat a path to our Father's door?

The distress faith feels. The direction faith follows. And then thirdly here, the delight faith finds in verses five and six.

[20 : 55] 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.

But a change of mood from the opening verses of the Psalm. It's a real turnaround here, isn't there? Before despair, distress, now joy and delight. What has happened? What has changed?

Well notice that these final verses are shot through with personal pronouns. I have trusted. My heart shall rejoice. I will sing. He has dealt bountifully with me.

And in the Psalms, the appearance of such pronouns often indicative of a significant change. And that's certainly the case here.

[21 : 52] David's not navel gazing. He's not looking inward. He's not claiming to have recovered his sense of self-esteem, have bolstered his own self-image.

It's not that he's feeling better about himself. It's not even that his circumstances have changed. It is rather that he has fastened himself upon the character of his God.

He's trusted, latched onto Yahweh's steadfast love. That's the Hebrew word, hesed, translated here as steadfast love, sometimes loving kindness or mercy, sometimes simply as love.

It's God's faithful, undeserved covenant love for His people. This faithful love is what lay at the heart of the very existence of God's people.

Exodus 34, it mounts Sinai. The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed the Lord, the Lord a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

[23 : 04] Deuteronomy 7.9, know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments.

Now think of the famous words at the end of Psalm 23, goodness and mercy, it's the same word, hesed, shall pursue me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It's a love that is utterly committed and dependable, a love that will not let us go, a love from which we can never be separated.

Everything comprises us away from this committed, faithful love of Yahweh. And this is what, in a sense, recaptures David's heart and imagination.

This is what he came to realize. This is what lightened or brightened his eyes. This is what renewed his perspective. This is what strengthened his resolve, the steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases.

[24 : 15] I wonder if that strengthens and brightens our eyes this morning. Samuel Rutherford said of Christ, his love has neither brim nor bottom.

How blessed are we to enjoy this invaluable treasure, the love of Christ. Nor rather allow ourselves to be mastered and subdued in his love so that Christ is our all and all other things are nothing.

We sometimes sing that old Scottish paraphrase of the words at the end of Romans 8, nor death, nor life, nor earth, nor hell, nor times destroying sway, can ere if face us from his heart or make his love decay.

That's Hesit. That's what we see at the cross. The steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases. His mercies that never come to an end.

The love of the Savior for undeserving sinners like ourselves. A love that can never be destroyed. A love that endures forever. And it's that love that we come to know and experience for ourselves at the cross of Christ, the surprising, overwhelming love of God.

[25 : 42] And this great and wonderful love of Christ for us is to be the very anchor for our souls. We used to sing in the boys brigade when I was a young boy, we have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll, fasten to the rock which cannot move, grounded, firm and deep in the Savior's love.

Notice how David is again able to rejoice in the God of his salvation. My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me.

I wonder if that's our testimony this morning. David delights in God, sings his praises, proclaims the exonerations of the one who has called him from darkness to light.

His faith is renewed and strengthened not so much by a change of circumstances. But rather by a renewed sense of God's unfailing love for him.

If I can put it this way, it's the Savior's love that leads him to the place of praise.

[27 : 02] What about us this morning? Where are you on the journey of faith? What is your testimony?

Things difficult and hard things come our way. Perhaps because of bad choices we've made along the way, perhaps not.

And when hard and difficult things happen to us, it can be hard to understand, it can be impossible to fathom. Seemingly without warning, we're plunged into some difficulty or another.

We can't make any sense of it. The pit seems deep and dark. Because there appears to be no way out. Maybe some of you have read or heard the story of Cory Ten Boom.

Our most famous book is called The Hiding Place. Holland during the Second World War, she and her sister Betsy were imprisoned for trying to rescue Jewish citizens from the Nazis.

[28 : 05] They eventually found themselves incarcerated in the Ravensbruck concentration camp and amidst brutal conditions, abuse from the guards, the murder of fellow prisoners, these two sisters ministered to others and shared the gospel with them from a small smuggled Bible that they had brought with them.

We had a powerful ministry in that place. And yet even as many fellow prisoners turned to Christ, Betsy fell ill.

And on her deathbed, she took her sister Cory by the hand and told her, tell people what we have learned here.

There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper still.

No pit so deep that Christ is not deeper still. For we worship and serve one who has plumbed the very depths of human experience.

[29 : 25] One who as the apostles creed the clairs descended into hell. One who entered the grave and made it a seedbed of hope for all who would place their trust in Him.

So whatever you may be facing or dealing with today, be assured of this, Christ's love and grace are greater still.

For friends, if we're not swallowed up by the darkness or engulfed in despair or swept away by distress, it can only be because we have a God and a Savior who is greater and deeper than all these things.

One who has said, you are mine, I'll never leave you, I'll never forsake you. And who has written that promise in nothing less than his own precious blood is written in an indelible ink.

It cannot be erased. Nothing in heaven or on earth can eradicate it. Knowing the Lord's steadfast love makes all the difference in the world.

[30 : 36] His love can hold us steadiest and keep us even in the most testing of days. Yes, sometimes we do indeed fear that our faith will fail.

Our troubles will overwhelm us. We cannot go on. And it's then we must remember the great and wonderful truth that Jesus Christ always holds His people fast.

When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast. He surely will. Whatever your circumstances, whatever your situation may be, come to Jesus Christ this morning, give your life to Him, bring Him all that you are to the one who has demonstrated his own precious love for us, the one who's plumbed the very depths and has now been raised to the highest place.

Remembering always that it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us. This may a knowledge of God's love in Christ hold you fast.

Take you from the darkness into the light, from the pit of distress to the pulpit of praise. May David's journey of faith be yours also.

[32 : 02] Let's pray together. But in times of distress, be to us our comfort and strength.

Lead us always to Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Like David of all, take us on that journey of faith so that we can rejoice once more in the love of the Savior and declare the praises of Him who called us from darkness to light through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.