

Potomac Hills Community Church, PCA

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PSALM 13: HONEST WITH GOD

INTRODUCTION: *Abandonment and Despair*¹

It was Thanksgiving Day. What did she have to give thanks for? It was the fourth year in a row that she could not get out of bed to go to the table for the meal. It had to be brought to her.

“Ninety-four Thanksgiving days,” she thought to herself. “Eight in this Nursing Home ... Four unable to walk to the table.”

She had nothing and nobody left ... in the world. Her husband had died 34 years before. He worked himself to death, worrying about making ends meet. She had no desire to get married again. Besides, she still had her daughter. But her daughter died last year at the age of 73, a widow herself.

She was so tired. She just wanted to quit. “No one would care if I lived or died,” She thought as the tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks.

Her name was Melba.

He was busy cleaning the garage. He could hardly hear the phone over the music. He thought about not answering it, since he had to finish this chore soon, because he was supposed to pick up his daughter at the mall before 5:00.

“Hello,” he said, hoping it’d be a quick call.

“This is the police department. Are you the parent of Samantha?”

He froze in fear, “Yes, what’s wrong?”

“I’m afraid Samantha’s been picked up for shoplifting with some friends. You need to come down to the station for questioning and to take her home.”

After he arrived at the station, and waited an hour as the other parents were questioned, his sadness gave way to depression when the officer called him in and said, “Sir, it was your daughter who actually stole the merchandise.”

One phone call ... and he was plunged into a feeling more hollow and alone than at any other moment in his life.

His name was Richard.

She sat in silence in the counselor’s office. She couldn’t bring herself to

¹ Introduction is adapted from Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions About God, by Dan Allender and Tremper Longman, pages 17, 90, 133-137. This is an excellent resource when life is overwhelming you. Another good book for those times is Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts by Jerry Bridges.

answer his questions. Finally, the counselor softly asked, “In the quiet moments at the end of the day, when you’re not thinking of what must be done, when your mind is not filled with activity and noise, do you feel pleasure or fear?”

She just stared at him, completely blank.

He answered for her, “More often than not, I feel nothing but exhaustion.”

She looked up with an intense glare, “I feel fear when exhaustion has taken away my ability to remain numb.”

Her husband was gone, the kids were mad, and they were broke.

Overwhelmed doesn’t begin to describe her life.

Her name was Laura.

Three people ... they all feel abandoned ... they don’t just feel despair, they’ve made it their address.

You may not be plunged into despair ... at the moment. However, at one time or another, we all experience loss, loss of relationships, loss of respect, loss of hope. We try to cover it up ... for a time ... but sooner or later, reality intrudes and brings us face-to-face with emotions we don’t want to admit ... are our own.

Some think that sadness, despair, loss, abandonment are not things that describe a “real” Christian. But those who would tell you that ... are fools. I’m convinced that feelings of abandonment are far more common than it appears to be. Lots of folks feel abandoned – by other people first, but also, ultimately, by God. They feel that no one cares about him or her, and since no **person** cares, God must not care either. And that makes this a spiritual problem far more than a psychological problem.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it gives us stories of real people ... with real problems. People who love God and yet screw up their lives with astonishing professionalism. People who suffer and grieve and sin and sorrow and wallow in despair. Right there in the Scriptures where millions of people over thousands of years can read all about it.

And nowhere do we read more about feelings of abandonment and despair than in the Psalms. Perhaps no section of Scripture more poignantly exposes the inner world of our hearts and more vividly reveals our emotions than the Psalms. The Psalms are permeated with feelings of despair. The Psalmist voices the cry of the soul as he struggles honestly with his emotions, which suggest to him that God does not care.

Isn’t that what feelings of abandonment and despair are really getting at?

God ... where are **You**?

God ... don’t **You** care about me?

God ... why don’t **You** answer me?

God ... why have **You** abandoned me?

And the Psalms tackle those questions at a depth that we are too often afraid to go to. Theological propositions are necessary for understanding truth, but truth is ultimately relational, and relationships are the domain of poetry.

And there is no poetry like the Psalms.

So we're going to turn to one of these beautiful, yet haunting examples of poetic truth. It confuses us ... and yet somehow resonates with the heartaches of life. Turn with me to Psalm 13 ...

Now you may have noticed that the sermon outline today is a little different than normal. This is a chart I created for a small group Bible study we had at Layne and Teeki Hefner's last year. And as we go through this text, what I want you to do is check off if that part of the verse deals with that particular issue.

And feel free to add any issues there that I've missed.

And as we go through the text, I also want you to check off which of these issues belongs under the heading of **Mine?** And if it's an especially important or personal issue for you, you might want to put two checks in that box. And don't be embarrassed, I checked off all of them, so even if you only check off half of them, you're doing way better than me. In fact, if you only check off a few of them, you should probably be preaching this sermon!

Now, let's turn to Psalm 13 ...

Psalm 13:1-6, For the choir director: A psalm of David.

O Lord, how long will You forget me? Forever?

How long will You look the other way?

*[2] How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?*

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

[3] Turn and answer me, O Lord my God!

Restore the light to my eyes, or I will die.

[4] Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!"

Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.

[5] But I trust in Your unfailing love.

I will rejoice because You have rescued me.

[6] I will sing to the Lord

because He has been so good to me.

We don't often talk like that, do we? Certainly not to each other. I mean, if our friends heard us talking like that, they'd probably worry about us, shake their heads, and wonder if we're really Christians or not. And that's why it's so hard to talk to others about despair, depression, abandonment, or any negative emotion.

And yet David does. David, of whom the Bible says, **1 Samuel 13:14**, "...the Lord has sought out a man after His own heart." And again in **Acts 13:22**, "...David, a man about whom God said, 'David son of Jesse is a man after My own heart, for he will do everything I want him to.'"

Psalms 13 describes a time when David, *a man after God's own heart*, felt that **God** had left him entirely. And he doesn't hide his real feelings. He feels abandoned by God and says so. Well, if David says so, then we can say so too. Even more importantly, we can learn from him and can experience the same movement from despair to trust.

Psalms 13 has three parts ...

Verses 1 and 2 express David's feelings of abandonment.

Verses 3 and 4 are a prayer in which he asks God to turn His face toward him and to answer his questions.

Verses 5 and 6 express David's recovered trust in God, and in that, he can rejoice.

Let's start at the beginning, with David's question ...

v. 1-2: **HOW LONG?**²

How good it is then to find David talking about it. And David lays it right out there? He doesn't mince words, beat around the bush, or hint at the real problem, hoping we're astute enough to figure it out. Verses 1-2 ...

"O Lord, how long will You forget me? Forever?"

How long will You look the other way?

***[2] How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?***

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?"

When we read this Psalm, as with many Psalms, we notice that the Psalmists consistently return to the Lord with joy and in confidence. This might give us the false impression that their struggles were just brief episodes, when the reality is the transition from crying to rejoicing is the culmination of a long struggle.

The first thing to note about this stanza is the obvious one. The most important words, "**How long?**" are repeated four times. It's an effective way of saying that the struggle has been going on for a long time.

² The exposition of the text is adapted from *Psalms: Volume 1: An Expository Commentary* by James Montgomery Boice, pages 105-112. Lloyd-Jones quote is from his book, *Spiritual Depression*, page 14.

This is important, because we tend to handle it pretty well for the short term. When we're talking about days and weeks, we usually don't feel abandoned, but instead, we wrack our brains trying to figure out what's wrong. We're not hearing from God, we think He's silent in our lives, and we don't know why. Sometimes, we try to be patient and wait on God, but not nearly as often as we should.

But when that short-term experience becomes a long-term pattern, when the days and weeks turn into months and years, we begin to wonder whether God's silence may endure "*forever*." And that is what David says here, "*O Lord, how long will You forget me? Forever*"

We begin to imagine that this period of painful abandonment will **never come to an end**. It's become a prolonged struggle ... and we're tired.

The second cause of these feelings of abandonment is an extension of the first: there has now been a prolonged period in which the blessings of God which we used to have ... seem to have been taken away. I think this is what David is talking about in the second line when he asks, "*How long will You look the other way?*" The English Standard Version more accurately translates that, "***How long will you hide Your face from me?***"

This is more than being forgotten by God, which was addressed in the first line. To say that God's face is shining upon us is a way of saying that God is being favorable to us, that God is blessing us. So, if God is hiding His face, then the time of blessing has been stopped for the time being.

And we can see how this happens in our own lives ...

It happens at **home**. The happiness of the early days of our marriage has been replaced by the stress of personality conflicts and financial difficulties. It may involve your family. It seemed so much easier when the kids were younger, but then they turned **thirteen** and you don't know who this kid is anymore.

It happens at **work**. When you started out you were making rapid progress, but now you've entered the middle period of your career and things have stagnated, while you watch others pass you by.

It happens at **church**. Growth levels off, times of harvest are replaced by times of testing and seasons of plowing, and it's not as much fun as it used to be.

And it happens in our **spiritual lives**. We used to read the Word a lot, but that time has gotten pushed aside by work, school, kids, and all their activities. And we feel like we've been in a spiritual slump. And now the slump has turned into a valley, and we don't see how we're ever going to turn it around.

The third time David says, "***How long?***" he refers to a combination of what we might call **dark thoughts** and uncontrollable emotions. He says, "***How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day?***"

We know God isn't blessing us anymore and we feel like failures and we

take an emotional nose-dive. And when our emotions take over, it's hard to get back on level ground.

And that's because the best means of doing this ... our faith in what God has done in the past, and His love for us in the present ... have been swept away into despondency. And our hope for the future has gone with it. And without faith, hope, and love we can't settle down enough to remember who God is and what He has done ... for us.

A few points about this ...

One, some people are more prone to depression than others, and it's helpful to know that, especially if you're one of them.

Two, a plunge into emotional upheaval can be caused by physical problems. Illness drains people emotionally as well as physically. Fatigue wipes out our ability to be attuned to the things of God. Just ask any mom who's been up half the night with a colicky baby. It's hard to be spiritual when you're struggling to keep your eyes open.

Three, there's usually a let-down following some strong spiritual effort. That's why right after a retreat is always a disaster week. A spiritual high is followed by a spiritual low. It happens to most of us.

And then David says, line 5, "***How long will my enemy have the upper hand?***" David had been chased by King Saul for years. He sought refuge among the Moabites; he escaped to the wilderness of Ziph; he hid as an outlaw in the cave of Adullam; and even hid by serving in the army of the Philistines; all the while fearful of being killed by Saul. So we can understand when he says, "***How long will my enemy have the upper hand?***"

Some of us don't have literal human enemies, at least not ones serious about killing us. But if you're a follower of Christ, then you **do** have one great spiritual enemy far worse than any other person. And that's Satan, the deceiver, about whom the Apostle Peter wrote, **1 Peter 5:8**, "*Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour.*"

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote about this in his classic book, Spiritual Depression, "The devil is the adversary of our souls. He can use our temperaments and our physical condition. He so deals with us that we allow our temperament to control and govern us, instead of keeping temperament where it should be kept. There is no end to the ways the devil produces spiritual depression. We must always bear him in mind."

Looking at this long list of reasons we feel abandoned by God is helpful, because first of all, it shows us that these feelings are not unique to us. David had them and so have countless others throughout the long history of the church.

But knowing that others have suffered too isn't enough. We need to get out of the valley and recover a sense of God's presence in our lives. And, if you read the end of Psalm 13, it's pretty clear that David gets to that point.

How? Well, he prayed. A blunt, honest, straight-to-the-point, get in God's face prayer. Which begs the question ... when you're down, just how **honest** are you willing to get?

v. 3-4: HOW HONEST?³

We may be depressed to the point of feeling abandoned. But the fact that we feel abandoned means that at some level we understand that we've been abandoned by someone. And if we're going to cry out to God about it, then we have to admit that God is there and He can hear us.

And if God is there and He can hear us, then perhaps He hasn't abandoned us after all. And that gives us hope.

So what do we do? We pray, just as David does.

This doesn't mean not getting help from others. This doesn't mean we shouldn't seek out the counsel of pastors, elders, or other counselors. We often need help to hang on and begin to work through the dark thoughts.

But above all, we need to go to the One who made us. We need to go to the One who redeemed us. We need to go to the One who promised, **Hebrews 13:5**, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" (ESV)

We need to pray. And we need to pray honestly. We're talking about blunt honesty, direct to God. **Psalm 62:8** says, "*O my people, trust in Him at all times. Pour out your heart to Him, for God is our refuge.*" Be transparent in His presence. Express your thoughts and feelings, your doubts and questions, your joys and sorrows, your groans and sighs. Put your suffering into words. Tell God **exactly how you feel** ... He already knows anyway. You can't shock God. You can't embarrass Him. You can tell Him anything and everything ... without fear of rejection. He can handle it.

Your spouse can't handle it. Your friends can't handle it. Lord knows there's days your pastor can't handle it. **God** can handle it.

So go to Him. Look at David's prayer, verses 3 and 4,

“Turn and answer me, O Lord my God!

Restore the light to my eyes, or I will die.

[4] Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!"

Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.

David starts right out with three big requests ...

3 Small parts of this section are adapted from The Trauma of Transparency by J. Grant Howard, pages 125-126, the article, "Anger against God," by Robert Jones, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Spring 1996, page 20; and Old Testament Theology by Walter Brueggemann, page 29.

- **Turn to me** (NIV - Look on me)
- **Answer me**
- **Restore the light to my eyes**

His feelings tell him that God has turned away from him, hiding His face. So the first thing he asks God to do is to turn around and look in his direction again.

His feelings tell him that God is no longer speaking to him and will never speak to him again. So the second thing he asks God to do is to answer his questions.

His feelings tell him that all is lost and that his enemy will triumph, probably killing him because God is no longer blessing him. So the third thing he asks God to do is to give light to his eyes, that is, to preserve him and restore him to full physical and emotional health. This is the net effect of God's blessings returning to him. A man relieved from his troubles and blessed with God's protection, peace, and favor now shows his inner spiritual condition in his outward appearance.

We need to note the place of prayer in this Psalm. It occurs right in the middle. And it's the turning point. I would guess that's an important thing to know. You see, this psalm is often considered a Psalm of Lament. One Old Testament scholar reminds us that "the laments are refusals to settle for the way things are. They are acts of relentless hope that believes no situation falls outside Yahweh's capacity for transformation. No situation falls outside of Yahweh's responsibility."

Apparently, David is reassured that God has answered, or will soon answer, because David is able to finish with an equally bold assertion that he trusts God. He knows God's love; He knows God's salvation; He knows God's goodness.

Which once again begs the question ... when you're down, just how much are you willing to trust God?

v. 5-6: HOW MUCH TRUST? ⁴

"But I trust in Your unfailing love.

I will rejoice because You have rescued me.

[6] I will sing to the Lord

because He has been so good to me."

Although David has experienced deep despair, he doesn't give up. His feet do not slip. He holds on to the promise of God's covenant love; the unfailing love of Yahweh, His ***ghesed***, usually translated as "loving kindness," or "everlasting

4 Part of this section is adapted from The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 5, "Psalms" by Willem VanGemeren, pages 139-142; and Calvin's Commentaries: Volume 4, "Commentary upon Psalm XIII," by John Calvin, pages 186-187.

mercy,” and whose New Testament equivalent is “Grace.”

He starts with the emphatic, **“But I,”** which is a surprising response from the heart of a depressed soul. Because life may be so bitter for some, it is only by God’s Grace that the heart of faith may groan, **“But I.”**

He responds to this unexpected confidence in God by saying, *“I will rejoice because You have rescued me.”* He can see his salvation coming and that leads him to rejoicing in the unfailing love of God. He knows who his rescuer is.

John Calvin writes about this verse, “Although he is severely afflicted, and a multiplicity of cares urges him to despair, he, notwithstanding, declares it to be his resolution to continue firm in his reliance upon the grace of God, and in the hope of salvation.”

And then he ends, *“I will sing to the Lord because He has been so good to me.”* Again, Calvin writes, “The word [so good] signifies nothing else here than to bestow a benefit from pure grace.”

Much like the Apostle Paul, who said in **2 Timothy 1:12**, ***“I know the One in whom I trust, and I am sure that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until the day of His return.”***

CONCLUSION: “Come, Lord Jesus.”⁵

On May 2, 2001, there was an ugly baseball game. The game took place in the Minnesota between the Twins and the Yankees. The left fielder that day for the Yankees was a man named Chuck Knoblauch. Knoblauch used to play for the Twins. At the end of the 97 season he asked to be traded. He went to the Yankees and was a great player for them for several years.

But that day, some fans took it upon themselves to register their disdain for Knoblauch. They began pelting him with bottles, golf balls, hot dogs, and anything else they could throw. The stadium announcer pleaded for calm. The umpires pulled the team off the field. They threatened to call the game and give the Yankees a forfeit victory.

After ten minutes went by, the umpires asked the Yankees to give it one more shot and try to finish the game. Everyone was afraid that Knoblauch’s reappearance would set off a new round of ugliness.

When the Yankees began to cautiously return to the field, the manager of the Twins did a great thing. This man who was so highly respected by his own team and by their fans walked out to left field with Chuck Knoblauch and just stood there beside him, talked with him, and said, “Hang in there, Chuck.”

Nothing was thrown. And many of the 37,000 fans in attendance gave them

⁵ The first part of the conclusion is adapted from the email newsletter, *“The Fax of Life,”* by Rubel Shelly, June 11, 2001.

both a standing ovation.

When I heard the story of the two men in the outfield, I thought of the Incarnation. And I thought about you. And I thought about me.

Life can be nasty sometimes. We bring a lot of it on ourselves. Some of it seems to come out of nowhere. All of it is dangerous to our spiritual lives. Then we find out that God has come among us. He has been tested by the very same things we face. He overcame it all – even death on a cross. And today, He promises to stand next to you, to hang on to you, even in your most difficult times.

You know, I was struck this week, at our congregational meeting on Tuesday, which, as most of you know, was a pretty emotional meeting.

At the end of the meeting, I asked Mark Rist to close us in prayer. And I don't know if you remember how he ended that prayer, but he ended it with these words, **"Come, Lord Jesus."**

I did a quick little study on where those words come from.

And as I'm sure many of you know ... they are the words of the Apostle John at the end of the Book of Revelation.

In Revelation, chapter 6, the souls of those who were martyred for their testimony for Christ and are now with God in heaven cry out, **Revelation 6:10**, *"They called loudly to the Lord and said, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, **how long** will it be before You judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us? When will You avenge our blood against these people?""*

These saints, in heaven, are distressed at God's seeming reluctance to act. And yet, although these are the souls of martyrs for the faith, they are told to be patient ... to wait a little longer. If the martyrs can be asked to be patient, how much more those of us who have suffered so much less?

The second scene comes at the end of the book. Here we're not explicitly told what the saints are saying, but it appears that they are longing for the end, yearning for the return of Christ, who seems to be far from them, because Jesus speaks to them several times, reassuring them that the end will not be delayed long.

His words are ... **Revelation 22:7**, *"**Look, I am coming soon! Blessed are those who obey the prophecy written in this scroll.**"*

Revelation 22:12a, *"**See, I am coming soon...**"*

Revelation 22:20, *"He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, **"Yes, I am coming soon!"**"*

To which they, and the Apostle John, and all who believe replied,

"Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"

Revelation 22:21, *"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all."*

Amen and Amen.

Numbers 6:24-26

*"The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make His face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn His face toward you
and give you peace."*