

**2020**

**Deeper places**

**“EXPERIENCING GOD IN  
THE PSALMS”**

**“HOW LONG...O LORD?”**

**PSALM 13**

**Preached by Rev. Tim Coleman on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020**



## Introduction:

Finding directions is not my spiritual gift. In fact my family prefers that I don't drive in big cities –unless they feel like taking a two hour detour. I remember having just arrived in Canada (2001) and visiting the big Yorkdale mall in Toronto, and then trying to find the subway station. Two panic-filled hours later, I found it. I was exhausted. What's the lesson? Ask for directions! That's just one of them. The lesson that stands out to me is a different one and one related to our lesson today – it is; ***“You can't get to where you need to go unless you know where you are.”***

Needless to say, when I visit a mall these days, my best friend is that big high resolution display screen with a map showing the various stores. I go stare right at it and locate my bearings—and the very first thing I search for, is the very big red dot that says, **“You Are Here.”** It's a relief to see that dot because once I know where I am then I can begin to map out how to get to where I want to go. It's the difference between a frustrating 2 hours, and a joyful 10 minutes of shopping.



Most of us don't get lost (direction-wise) like I do and I must say that, I do admire people who never get lost. But, there's another kind of getting lost that most of us will experience at some point in the course of life. It has been referred to as the "***Dark night of the Soul***"—a phenomenon taken from Roman Catholic spirituality, describing a collapse of a perceived meaning in life. It's a feeling of a deep sense of meaninglessness. In some cases the feeling is very close to what is conventionally called depression. Nothing makes sense anymore, there's no purpose to life. It's often triggered by an external event—a major disaster perhaps on a very personal level – for example, the unexpected death of a close family member or loss of a job could trigger it, an overwhelming event like the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that claimed a quarter of a million people, or even a sudden world-wide shutdown and quarantine that shatters our long-standing plans and way of life could do the same.

### **Transition:**

We are in the middle of a sermon series—*Deeper Places: Experiencing God in the Psalms*—where the Psalmist gives voice to our common feelings and emotions. Have you noticed that scripture often presents us with truths that are hard to digest?

Take the book of James for example; ***James 1:2: "Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds...."*** Really James! I would rather not. I have just lost my job, split up with my spouse, lost a loved one, been told that I don't have much time left to live—so forgive my lack of enthusiasm, I would rather sulk and hide in my duvet fort, thank you very much! Isn't that the truth! Should we skip over James in times of pain, crisis and despair? I'd answer, "Yes!"—read lamentations or Job or the psalms for now!" You need to find that big red dot I referenced earlier and say to yourself, "*I am here.... and, "I am not there yet!"*" And that's what the psalms of lament give us permission to do—not to fake our

way through pain and despair, but to acknowledge that human emotions – good and bad have a place in scripture too. Psalm 13 is written to be sung (minor key), please join me as we pray—**Psalm 13:**

**For the director of music. A psalm of David.**

**1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?**  
**2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?**  
**3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,  
4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.**  
**5 But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.**  
**6 I will sing the Lord's praise,  
for he has been good to me. – Psalm 13 (NIV)**

We don't really know the circumstances that gave reason for writing **Psalm 13**. Theodoret of Cyrus—an influential 5th-century theologian at the School of Antioch, taught that King David wrote it when his favourite son Absalom tried to kill him (**2 Samuel 15**), but English Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon calls that conjecture; rather, this psalm gives voice to feelings that arise in any of the many trials that we experience in life. He notes that the repetition of the words "How long?" four times in this psalm resemble cries; he creatively refers to this psalm as the "**How Long Psalm**" –or, the "**Howling Psalm**". What we know is that it was written by King David. **Psalm 13** inspired Canadian Christian singer-songwriter and worship leader Brian Doerksen who with others wrote the song we just sung, *'How long, o Lord!'*

**Body:**

Lament is a major theme in the Bible, particularly in the book of Psalms. To lament means *to express deep sorrow, grief, or regret*. The psalms of lament are beautiful poems or hymns expressing real human struggles. They comprise the largest category of psalms, making up about one third of the entire book of Psalms. These psalms are prayers that lay out a troubling situation to the Lord that then make a request for His help. There are two types of lament psalms: *community* and *individual laments*. Community psalms of lament deal with situations of national crisis—they describe problems faced by all the people of God (Israel). Psalm 12 is a good example of a community lament, that expresses sadness over widespread sin.

Individual laments like Psalm 13 address various isolated problems faced by one member of the people of God. There are 42 individual psalms of lament and 16 community or national psalms of lament. The psalms of lament were poetic hymns meant to be sung to God. They deal with issues that were and still are central to the life of faith for individual believers and the whole faith community. They express intense emotions, real human struggles, and the anguish of heart experienced by the people of Israel as they too lived out their faith individually and corporately.

The men and women of the Old Testament were as real as you and I today. They danced and sang; rejoiced and laughed; argued and confessed; lamented and mourned. They celebrated new birth and grieved death. They expressed their hurt and emotions to God like we do. And so, when we encounter hardships and need God's rescue, salvation, and help, the psalms of lament are a good place to turn. We know that Jesus himself did the same while on the cross: *Matthew 27:46: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* It is a lament taken from Psalms 22:1.

The psalms of lament follow a pattern that begins with suffering, but ends with glory. These songs start on a negative or complain note, and end on a positive, faith-filled note of praise. Four times in Psalm 13, David repeats the haunting cry, "*How long?*" There is no indication that he had sinned. But his enemy was closing

in on him. In spite of David's repeated prayers, God seemed unavailable. Have you been there? You desperately call out to God, but it seems like He took a poorly timed extended vacation with no cellphone reception. So David shows us what to do when God seems distant and silent. Psalm 13 falls into three stanzas of two verses each:

## I. LAMENT –ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM (vs. 1-2)

**<sup>1</sup> How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?**

**How long will you hide your face from me?**

**<sup>2</sup> How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?**

**How long will my enemy triumph over me?**

David feels alone, ignored, forgotten and overwhelmed—have you felt that way? Maybe you too have cried out; *“How long will I battle this addiction, or endure this pain, or tolerate my condition or be constantly disappointed...How long ...O lord?”* David vocalizes his anger and agony, and laments three things outside his control:

- **God's absence (vs. 1)**
- **His situation (vs. 2a,b)**
- **His enemies (vs. 2c)**

These three problems are interrelated and we find David questioning God—something some of us were taught never to do, instead we're to declare our faith and praise him, we were told. In reading the psalms, we find the opposite to be true and our own experiences in some seasons of prolonged suffering can't square with that unrealistic response. Ps. 13:1-2 highlight two valuable lessons about our problems:

### a) **God's timeline is different from ours**

Four times David cries out, “*How long!*” which in ancient times meant years –not days. We live in times that scream, “*Hurry, Now, Quick!*” Yet God whispers; “*Wait! Later! Slow down!*” We pray; “*Lord Give me patience, and I want it now!*”

We all know that feeling associated with waiting to eat. Regardless of how hungry we are, patience levels tend to fluctuate based on the circumstances and our degree of confidence that we will have some food close to the time we expect to eat. According to a scientific study, “The Neuroscience of Patience” Serotonin (a chemical found in the brain responsible for happiness & wellbeing) was found to increase “*the patience effect*” if a timely reward was 75% guaranteed. Translation: When we know that things will get better (God will answer), we are more patient.

### Illustration:

In the 1970s, Heinz ketchup was still being sold in glass bottles. Unlike the instant gratification of today's upside-down plastic squeeze bottles, the old glass bottles took some shaking, artful tapping, and patience before the ketchup would slowly ooze through the narrow opening at the top of the bottle. Madison Avenue ad executives realized the need to keep customers happy by making unavoidable “ketchup wait time” something that consumers should expect without becoming disgruntled. Brilliantly, the H.J. Heinz Company licensed Carly Simon's top 40 hit, “Anticipation,” and created the tagline “*It's Slow Good*” to increase consumers' subjective confidence that the ketchup would eventually dispense, but that it would take a few seconds. Knowing that the thickness of the ketchup was linked to higher quality made people more patient and less irritated by their delayed gratification.

I can relate to a comment by the preacher, *Phillips Brooks*. Normally, he was a calm man. But one day he was clearly agitated as he paced the floor like a caged lion. A close friend asked him, “What’s the trouble Brooks?” To which he angrily replied, “*The trouble is, I’m in a hurry, but God isn’t.*” Do you ever feel that way?

I do. And so did Abraham, Elijah, Moses, David, prophets, the early church, etc.  
We are not the only ones who have a wrong E.D.T (Estimated Deliverance Time).

### **b) God invites and welcomes our honesty**

The need to be honest with God is such a refreshing feeling we find in the psalms. David uses phrases that seem to accuse God like; <sup>1</sup>....***Will you forget me forever? ....will you hide your face from me?*** Because he is very honest about his feelings about God, he can be honest with himself saying; <sup>2</sup> .....***I wrestle with my thoughts and daily I have sorrow in my heart?*** These are raw, unedited feelings – not bottled up inside, but rather, poured out in despair. The good news is that God welcomes them because he loves us; he can take it and already knows how we feel. David doesn't try to impress, pretend or tell God what he thinks God wants to hear, instead, he is honest and later God would say of him; “*a man after my own heart.*”

## **II. PRAYER – SURRENDERING THE PROBLEM (vs. 3-4)**

<sup>3</sup>**Look on me and answer, LORD my God.**

**Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,**

<sup>4</sup>**and my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”**

**and my foes will rejoice when I fall.**

One of the reasons we wrestle with maturity in our faith, has to do with how we react when we face hardship. I began by saying that James appears unrealistic in his expectations but with the same token he tells us that there is a purpose to our hardship–maturity (**James 1:4**) Instead of crying out to God, we often turn our back because we are hurt, disappointed, and then return to the world. We medicate our pain with alcohol, entertainment, work, buying and acquiring more stuff, sex, food, or even try and fix our problem, but come up empty – and the problem is still there.

David didn't do that. When he thought that God had forgotten or ignored him, he called out to Him. Instead of turning his back to God, he turned his face to Him. Instead of complaining to his friends about God, he complained to God about

his enemies. For a man who may have had other options at his disposal, David petitions, prays and pours out his broken heart to God and in the process:

**a) Surrenders his control – God is still in charge**

Someone said, *“The trouble with prayer is that it doesn’t fix the problem.”* I counter by restating; *“The reward of prayer is that it always fixes the problem – it fixes me!”* The problem isn’t that David’s enemy was going to kill him– after all David like all of us is going to die at some point any way; the real problem is that David has lost sight of who his God is – because if he didn’t, he would know that no one is going to kill him until God okays it. The problem isn’t out there –it’s me.

David describes God as *the one who gives light to my eyes–vs. 3* in other words – the author of life. Now, I don’t wear glasses anymore even though I wore them in grades 5-7 and lost about 4 pairs in that time. But something I remember about wearing glasses is that whenever I forgot to wear my glasses, everything looked foggy and in my case, my eyes hurt. Those prescription glasses would allow me to see things clearer – the issue wasn’t that the person I thought was a tree was indeed a tree –it was that my eyesight needed to be corrected so I can see things for what they really are. Sometimes, perpetual emotional hurt has to do with our sight. Is the person who hurt us in charge or is it God? Is the economy in charge or God?

**b) Surrenders his comfort – God’s Honour in the end**

David isn’t just praying for deliverance so he can escape from his problems and be happy. His fear was that the enemy would rejoice (vs. 4). Since David was God’s anointed king, if he died prematurely at the hands of his enemies, it would make God look bad. God’s honour was tied up with David’s deliverance. Do you remember that Moses appealed to the same sense in Exodus 32:9-14 – when God wanted to destroy the people after the golden calf incident? To defend His honour, God relented. So in a time of crisis, I can call out to God to rescue me, not just for

my relief, but that God will be glorified. God delights to honor such prayers. Our prayers ought to be preoccupied with the honour of God and not just our happiness.

### III. PRAISE – OVERCOMING THE PROBLEM (vs. 5-6)

There is an amazing shift in David’s response in verses 5 & 6. David says:

**<sup>5</sup> But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.  
<sup>6</sup> I will sing the LORD’s praise,  
for he has been good to me.**

#### a) He makes a deliberate choice – God’s praise rather than protest

It didn’t happen accidentally, either! *“But I trust....”* (vs. 5) is emphatic (in the Hebrew) and points to David’s wilful choice to rely on God’s love. So in vs. 6, he says, *“I will sing”* it denotes a deliberate choice. As Steve Cole says, *“He chose to interpret his circumstances by God’s love rather than to interpret God’s love by his circumstances.”* In a time of trial, Satan tries to get us to doubt God’s loyal love so we can complain. But, we have to resist the temptation and affirm **Romans 8:28**: *“God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God...”* We too have to choose to trust in God’s loyal love. The Hebrew word for *“trust”* that’s used here has the nuance of relying or leaning upon someone or something. So, does that mean that, “God is a crutch?” In a sense, Yes!...and thank God, we are the cripples!

Just three verses earlier, David was overtaken by panic and worried that his enemies would be the ones rejoicing after his downfall, and yet here we find him rejoicing in God’s salvation—there is the proof—**God can take us from depression to praise; from heartache to laughter; from pain to healing; from despair to total joy.**

But, this raises a great question: How does one turn from Lament to Praise so quickly? It's a question that has puzzled scholars, theologians and psychologists for at least a hundred years. A very common explanation is psychologist German Theologian, *Friedrich Heiler* suggests that as one pours out their soul to the Lord, a “*wonderful metamorphosis*” takes place, leading to a change of mood. Another more popular explanation was that as the speaker was pouring out their heart in the temple, the priest delivered an oracle promising salvation—like what happened with Hannah (Elkanah's wife and Samuel's mother) and the priest Eli in **1 Samuel 1**. It was Hannah's knowledge that the prayer had been granted that changed her mood.

The problem is both explanations lack textual evidence. In the end we don't really know what caused the change other than the psalmist poured out his lament to the Lord and as he did so, there was a change. Maybe ...the act of lament itself was the grace which caused the change as David is reminded of God's goodness.

#### **b) He looks back to look forward—God's consistent faithfulness**

In case you are wondering, David's circumstances haven't changed one bit from the start of this psalm when he felt alone, confused, rejected, depressed, ignored by God—he has not yet been delivered. In fact, his enemies are still there, God hasn't showed up, his circumstances are the same – yet David trusts in God's unfailing love – why? God has delivered him before, so he can rejoice as he thinks of the deliverance which God will bring in the future. By faith, David counts God's future deliverance as past and says, “*I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me*”-vs.6 Faith calls those things that are not as if they are (*Hebrews 11*).

So what changed? David's focus changed –from himself and his problems at the start of the psalm –*How long... “Why me?” (Oh...poor me!)*, to God's loyal love and salvation to “*What has God done for me in the past*” That shift in focus moved David from sadness, confusion and depression to purpose, joy and praise!

And very appropriately, David sums it all up by saying; *He [God] has been good to me—vs.6b*

### Conclusion:

Most of us can identify with the emotions of David in this psalm. We too sigh in frustration and disappointment and wonder how long we will have to wait for good health, or for a job or the salvation of a loved one we've prayed for years or the change in a long tense relationship or just the end of Covid-19. We can learn from how David handled his frustration—He turned to the Lord and he transformed his attitude from one dominated by fear and anxiety to trust and faith. Maybe, you can journal like David about your own despair—journaling allows us to process our pain and see God's faithfulness. God has promised to hear us, let me conclude by leading us in acknowledging some of our shared laments as a faith community:

- To graduates who will miss their right of passage graduation or students who were hoping to return to school and see their friends but may not go back until the fall, for youth/kids who won't get the chance to build memories at camp, we lament with you;
- To those who were supposed to be celebrating a major milestone anniversary with a spouse or at your work and will not get the chance to do so, we lament your loss too;
- To those who were supposed to be getting married, moving or retiring this summer but have been forced to postpone and extend your stress by waiting, we lament with you;
- To kids and adults who've had to celebrate their birthdays, or new baby arrivals away from family and friends that make these celebrations so special, we lament with you;
- To community groups that lost funding, the unemployed, or any whose businesses shut down—not sure if they will reopen as you stare at bankruptcy, we lament with you;
- To the sick whose surgeries or important medical procedures were postponed hence leaving you in pain and despair, longer than you had expected, we lament with you;

- To those who planned a trip of a lifetime –maybe to see family, only to be cancelled, leaving you with just disappointment rather than great memories, we lament with you;
- To seniors in care homes unable to see their families and to singles feeling isolated and unable to be in the nourishing company of friends and family, we lament your pain too;
- To all who've lost loved ones and were unable to grieve properly, we lament with you.

**Take a minute and add anything that you'd like to lament.....LET US PRAY!**

### **Prayer for the world based on Psalm 13**

How long, O Lord,  
can we hide our faces from the headlines of injustice, violence and tragedy?

How long, O Lord,  
will nations in the M/East, S/America & in Africa be displaced by conflict?

How long, O Lord,  
will the earth be destroyed by hurricanes, floods, famine, disease & poverty?

How long, O Lord,  
will our First Nations communities feel marginalized and forgotten by us?

How long, O Lord,  
will Covid-19 turn our world upside down with fear, anxiety & uncertainty?

How long, O Lord,  
must we bear the pain of trauma and loss, and be sorrowful every single day? How long, O Lord,  
will racism, misogyny, greed, violence, sexism, abuse, tear our world apart?

Merciful God, Consider and answer us quickly.  
Give us strength to endure so tragedy will not prevail,  
Heal our city, our province and our nation morally and spiritually.  
Guide our decision makers who are navigating uncharted waters.  
Grant compassion to hearts weary with fatigue, despair and loneliness.

For those who can't see a way around their circumstances,  
Give light to their eyes and patience to their hearts to trust you.  
May we pray, act and give generously of ourselves and our resources,  
In partnership with those who are comforting, preparing and repairing,  
what social-economic violence, man and natural disasters are destroying.  
And let our hearts rejoice in your salvation as we declare your goodness.

God of restoration, we bring this –our laments to you,  
That you may comfort us with your love and faithfulness.  
We choose to go forward with hope that one day you'll write all wrongs.  
Bring us to that place where we joyfully sing with the psalmist  
declaring:  
I'll bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my  
mouth.

For we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our forever good Lord.  
Amen!

#### **SOURCES:**

- **How Long, O Lord? *Reflections on Suffering and Evil* by D. A. Carson**
- ***PSALMS: A pastoral and contextual commentary* by Federico Villanueva**
- **A sermon “*Psalm 13 – When God seems distant*” by Steve J. Cole**
- **Making sense of God by Tim Keller**
- **An article; “The Neuroscience of patience” by Christopher Bergland**

#### **Benediction [Based on Psalm 13]**

God is with us – And as you start a new week:

Live in the truth that He hasn't forgotten you  
For He is the God who always sees your pain  
Remember those that feel alone & forgotten  
And share His concern for those who feel unseen

May the Lord give light to your eyes and faith to your heart,  
To stand strong even when circumstances are overwhelming.  
May God answer your prayers and remove your fear & anxiety,  
So that you can become a companion to those who are suffering.

Rooted in his unfailing love, may you rejoice in God's salvation,  
And sing the Lord's praise, for he has been and will be good to you.

Go into the world with the assurance of the Lord's goodness & presence.  
Amen!