

*From Protest to Praise*

**Psalm 13**

John Breon

Bob Tuttle was at the gym talking to a man he thought he recognized. He thought the man was a musician he had spoken to some days earlier. Tuttle said, "If I were a musician, I'd use the Old Testament Psalms as a source for writing music." The man turned out not to be the musician, but a mathematician. He said, "But if I was a musician, I wouldn't use the Psalms. They're too old." Tuttle replied, "So's 2+2."

The point is that, old as the Psalms are, they remain true. As part of the Scriptures, they give us basic, essential truths. They continue to speak to us and help us. The Psalms are part of the story of God, of God's interaction with people, with us. They show us how people responded to God and interacted with God at a certain time in Israel. And that helps guide our interaction with God now.

The Psalms express a wide range of human emotion. They show us how to pray about everything and how to praise God in and through all situations.

Scholars classify the Psalms according to the kinds of prayers they are. The greatest number of psalms are what we call *lament* or *complaint* or just *calls for help*. There are community laments and individual laments. Psalm 13 is a prime example of a lament psalm.

It starts with the *protest*, the lament, the complaint. Four times the psalm repeats, "How long?" LORD, will you forget me forever?—How long will you hide your face from me?—How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and have sorrow in my heart?—How long will my enemy triumph over me? The desperation gets more intense with each phrase. There's the sense of, "God, I've been waiting a long time. How much longer do I have to put up with this? Will it ever get better?"

Do you ever talk to God like that? Can you imagine talking to God like that? I admit I have a hard time doing that. Even though there are so many examples of speaking so directly to God like this, I hesitate to, or if I start to, I qualify what I'm saying and try to make it sound less like complaining. We

get so good at pretending to be all right, at looking like what we think we're supposed to look like. We're afraid to let down that mask and show God what's really in us.

The one singing or praying this psalm has trouble with God, trouble with self, and trouble with others. One man said, "I only pray when I'm in trouble; but I'm in trouble all the time" (Isaac Bashevis Singer, cited in McCann and Howell, *Preaching the Psalms* 106).

When you're troubled, do you tell God? The psalmist felt that God had forgotten and abandoned him. Still, he kept talking to God. The speakers in the psalms of lament cry out to God. They ask where God is and why things are happening to them the way they are.

After Mother Teresa of Calcutta died, her journals were made public. They showed that she had struggled for years with a sense of God's absence, of not feeling close to God.

Her namesake, St. Teresa of Avila, who lived several centuries earlier, is reported to have prayed during a particularly difficult time: "Lord, no wonder you have so few friends if this is how you treat them."

After C. S. Lewis' wife died, he kept a little journal or diary of his grieving. It's called *A Grief Observed*. He didn't hold back. He lashed out at God. He poured out his sorrow and pain. But he kept talking to God about what he was going through and feeling.

Is there anything that makes you cry to God, "How long will this last? When are you going to do something? Where are you?"

Maybe you struggle with some sin that you can't get past committing. You've asked God to forgive you and help you, but you keep doing it. How long?

Is there a physical ailment you're tired of dealing with? You keep praying for healing and help. How long?

It could be an emotional pain. When will we get through it? How long?

You might feel a deep isolation and loneliness. How long?

Maybe there's a relationship you're praying will get better. How long?

Maybe you've been praying for a loved one to come to the Lord, to change. You can't change them, only God can. But when? How long?

During the Civil Rights Movement, the prayer was, "How long until there's really liberty and justice for all?" In light of recent events and tragedies, many of our African-American brothers and sisters still ask, "How long?"

Jesus even said to a crowd, including his disciples, "How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19).

The apostle Paul asked God three times to remove a thorn in his flesh that was tormenting him. He must have wondered how long he would have to deal with that.

We hear of tragedies like the young man from Southeastern whose parents and sister were killed in a car wreck that also took two other lives and we ask, "How long will things like that happen in this world?" We look at the troubles in our lives, in our community, in our society, in the world, and we wonder, "How long will it be like this?"

Andrew Peterson sings,

And I know you hear the cries of every soul tonight  
You see the teardrops as they roll tonight  
Down the faces of the saints  
Who grow weary and faint in your fields

And the wicked roam the cities and the streets tonight  
But when the God of love and thunder speaks tonight  
I believe You will come  
Your justice be done, but how long?

How long until this curtain is lifted?  
How long is this the song that we sing?  
How long until the reckoning?

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/reckoning-lyrics-andrew-peterson.html>

The psalms teach us to bring all those questions and all those struggles to God, to voice them to the Lord. Several psalms include curses

on enemies. That's disturbing. But one lesson is that instead of resorting to violence and retaliating, we can express that anger to God, leave it with him and let him deal with it.

Psalms 13, and many of the lament psalms, move from protest to petition. *Petition* is another way to say *asking* or *praying*. This is the cry for help. We need to be honest. We need to be able to speak our complaint to God. But we don't stay there. We need to move on in prayer, to ask God to do something about it.

This psalm has said, "LORD, will you forget me forever?" Now it says, "Look on me and answer, LORD my God." It said, "How long will you hide your face from me?" Now it says, "Give light to my eyes." That may recall the blessing that says, "The LORD make his face shine upon you" (Numbers 6:25).

This is a desperate prayer. Lord, if you don't help me and give me light, I'm going to die. Then the enemy will claim victory and rejoice. Don't let that happen, God!

Have you ever prayed a desperate prayer, an emergency prayer? "I need help now! Five minutes from now is too late!" A lot of my prayers are general and unfocused. Now, I think God hears us however we pray, but when the stakes are high, our prayers become more clear. A couple of weeks ago, Eli got injured at work. He took a tumble off the tailgate of a moving pickup. Before we knew that he didn't have a concussion and hadn't broken anything, I prayed for him. My prayer was very simple, straightforward, and succinct. Maybe we could do with more of that kind of praying.

Besides the psalms, there are examples of people crying out to God in their need then receiving a word of assurance that their prayer was heard.

In 1 Samuel 1, a woman named Hannah was unable to have children. Her husband's other wife did have children and mocked Hannah. On the family's yearly trip to the Lord's shrine, Hannah was praying. The priest at first thought she was drunk, but she assured him she wasn't. The priest tossed off a standard blessing, maybe without thinking much about it: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." Hannah took that to heart. She was no longer sad and downcast. And, in

time, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son—Samuel, who became a great prophet in Israel.

Hundreds of years later, the king of Judah, Hezekiah, was faced with an enemy army surrounding Jerusalem. The enemy mocked the Lord and the city. They sent Hezekiah a letter boasting about their former conquests and demanding his surrender. Hezekiah took the letter to the temple and spread it out before the Lord. He prayed for help and deliverance. Then the prophet Isaiah came to the king with a message from the Lord. Jerusalem was delivered. Some time later, Hezekiah was ill and about to die. But again he cried out to the Lord who heard his prayer and extended his life (2 Kings 19; 20:1-11).

We can petition the Lord. We can cry out for help, for deliverance, for healing, for strength, for whatever we need. We can also trust that God knows what we need better than we do and God will give to us accordingly.

The last section of Psalm 13 (verses 5-6) reaffirms confidence in God and promises to praise him. This psalm, like many of the lament psalms, moves from protest through petition to *praise*. Lord, all this is going on. How long will it be? If you don't help me, it'll be a disaster and my enemies will rejoice.

*But I trust in your steadfast love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me—he has dealt bountifully with me.*

There's a turning point in these psalms from complaint and cries for help to confidence and praise.

A young man went to work on a ranch for the summer. It seemed like a good idea at the time—a great way to spend the summer and make some money to help pay his college expenses. He'd seen pictures of the ranch. It looked exotic and exciting, and the thought of being a cowboy for the summer seemed adventurous and "macho."

But when his parents drove him to the ranch, he was disappointed and disillusioned. It wasn't anything like what he imagined it would be. It was located way back in the hills—remote, cut off from civilization. The nearest Dairy Queen was seventy-nine miles away!

It seemed like a desolate, gloomy, lonely place, and he wanted to go home. But he had signed a contract, so he felt he had to stay—at least for a while. His parents fretted all the way home.

He cried himself to sleep that night, and his first few letters home were sad and pitiful. But during the second week of the summer, the daughter of the rancher came home from college. And the tone of the boy's letters began to perk up! Soon he was describing that ranch as the most beautiful spot he'd ever seen, and by September, they could hardly get him home to start back to school! (James Moore, *Is There Life After Stress?* 133-34). There was a turning point and he was surprised by something good in an unexpected place.

The psalmist is threatened and suffering. But he cries out to God. He trusts in the Lord's unfailing love. That's covenant love and faithfulness. He feared that his foes would rejoice in his fall, but now he rejoices in God's salvation; he celebrates being rescued by the Lord. He remembers how the Lord has been good to him and dealt bountifully with him, so he promises to sing the Lord's praise.

Sorrow and joy mingle together. Happiness and suffering aren't opposites; they can exist together. If blessedness and suffering go together, then suffering isn't punishment from God (McCann and Howell 105, 106). When you're troubled, when you're struggling, it doesn't mean God has abandoned you or is punishing you. You may actually be closer to God in those times. Even in the midst of trouble, we keep walking with the Lord, trusting the Lord, rejoicing in the Lord. And, when the trouble has passed, when God has rescued us, we have even more reason to rejoice and celebrate.

One of the students who was on the mission team visiting here last week gave his testimony. When he was a little boy, his older brothers started getting into self-destructive behaviors. They eventually became addicts and drug dealers who also were diagnosed with some mental illness. During his lifetime, his brothers have been in and out of rehab and in and out of jail. One brother is in prison now. His parents weren't prepared to cope with all that and so couldn't help him. He's literally cried out to God for help. He's been scared and angry. But a friend brought him

to a church youth group and he's found brothers there who can help him and show him a better way to live. This young man is still in the midst of struggle. He has to wonder, "Lord, how long?" It's an effort for him to believe, but he does. Telling all that, he drew on Paul's writing to the Romans: "We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (5:3-4). If you think of it, pray for Noah and his family to know God's presence and help.

As usual, Jesus shows us how to live the truth of the Psalms. Jesus represents and fulfills the role of the righteous person in the Psalms who suffers and cries out to God and is vindicated. Three of the longest and most intense psalms of lament are connected to Jesus, especially his suffering and death.

Psalm 69:9 says, "Zeal for your house consumes me." The Gospel of John quotes that when telling about Jesus driving the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple (2:17). What Jesus did in the temple angered the leaders who would accuse him and condemn him to death.

Psalm 69 also talks about betrayal and mockery. Jesus experienced those. Verse 21 says, "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst." On the cross, Jesus was given vinegar to drink.

Psalm 22 opens with, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As Jesus took our sins and absorbed the worst that the power of evil could do, he felt that and cried out those very words (Matthew 27:46). Some think that Jesus was praying many of the psalms while he was on the cross, that he didn't stop at that verse but went on to pray all of Psalm 22. It describes great suffering, but it ends with God's righteousness and deliverance and praise.

On the cross, Jesus also quotes Psalm 31, including the verse that says, "Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful God" (verse 5; Luke 23:46).

Jesus didn't just imitate the psalmists or fulfill some predictions. He was living out the trust in God, the dependence on God's love and faithfulness that the psalms exalt. In the midst of suffering, as he endured the worst that humans and evil spiritual powers could do, Jesus kept

looking to the Father. He kept trusting. And though it seemed like he died abandoned and alone, broken and defeated, God remained faithful and raised Jesus from the dead. His trust was validated and Jesus was vindicated.

When we suffer, we can keep trusting. We can call on the Lord. We can find ways to rejoice and praise God whatever happens. Like Jesus, we can have joy. I like how the New Testament book of Hebrews puts this:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (12:1-3)