



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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**Suffering and the Saints:
When It Seems God Has Forgotten Us
Psalm 13**

Today I'm beginning a series of sermons that I'm calling "Suffering and the Saints." Over the next month or so we'll be looking at some key Bible passages that deal with the issue of suffering and how we as followers of Jesus can respond to it. You see, if we live long enough, the question is not, "Will we suffer?" but rather, "How will we deal with suffering when it comes?" We begin today by looking at Psalm 13.

Read text . . .

In a scene from the movie version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the hero Edmond is being imprisoned unjustly in the sinister Chateau d'If dungeon. As the evil warden Dorleac escorts him to his cell, Edmond sees an inscription on the wall: "God will give me justice."

When Dorleac sees that Edmond has noticed it, he sneers and says, "People are always trying to motivate themselves. Or they keep calendars. But soon they lose interest, they die, and all I am left with is a rather unsightly wall, I'm afraid. So I have conceived another way to help our prisoners keep track of time. Every year on the anniversary of their imprisonment, we hurt them. Usually just a simple beating, really. Although on their first day here—in your case, today—I like to do something rather special."

Dorleac keeps talking while his assistants chain Edmond's wrists and hoist him off the floor. Preparing his whip, Dorleac says, "And if you are thinking just now, 'Why me, O God?' the answer is, God has nothing to do with it. In fact, God is never seen in France this time of year."

Edmond answers, "God has everything to do with it. He is everywhere; he sees everything."

Dorleac responds, "All right, let's make a bargain, shall we? You ask God for help, and I'll stop the moment he shows up." And with that he begins to whip Edmond, defenseless and innocent.¹

Have you ever waited for God in a time of trouble, and it seemed that he was never going to show up, like he had *forgotten* you? That's how it was for David as he penned this lament we know as Psalm 13.

Lament in the Psalms

If you've ever spent much time in the Psalms, you may have noticed that there are laments everywhere. In fact, of the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms, 56 of them are laments—40 individual laments, and 16 community laments for the whole congregation.

Now you may be asking, "Exactly what is a lament?"

A lament is a complaint about one's situation (or that of the community) with the confidence

that God will hear and act to deal with it, and praise for what he will do. The context and basis for the laments in the Psalms was biblical *hope*. The Hebrew word for “hope” is derived from the word that means “to wait.” So to hope is to wait on God. Lament in the Psalms is always characterized by hope! Hope is a future confidence or expectation. Dr. Roy Honeycutt put it so well: “Biblical hope is bound up in who God is, what he can do, and the fact that the future is bound up in his hands.” The laments rest on hope in God, and based on this hope, the psalmists felt that they could pour out their complaints before God and expect that he would act on their behalf. These are not, then, psalms of deep despair, but psalms of great hope.²

But they are *brutally honest* about the way David or the other psalmists felt about their situation or the situation of the nation as they wrote. I have to admit that for a long time (until I learned to pray these laments), when I would read what some of the psalmists wrote, I would almost shudder at it! For instance, Psalm 10:1—

**Why, LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?**

Or Psalm 22:1 —

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?**

Or in today’s Psalm:

**How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?**

The importance of lament

Now sometimes we whine about our trials, our difficulties, our tribulations, and our suffering. We want others to feel sorry for us, or to join us in our misery. We complain to other people about our situation.

But that’s not lament.

Lament is when we address our complaint *to God*. We address it to him because we believe that he is the one who is ultimately *in charge*, and that he can do something about our situation. We address it to him when it seems like he’s *not* doing anything about it.

These psalms like Psalm 13 are very instructive for us when it comes to prayer. They show us that *we must express our feelings honestly to God* as we pray. He’s not threatened by these kinds of questions. But neither is he obligated to answer them! He knows that he has made us in such a way that we sometimes need to ask them.

On June 22, 2007 Daniel McConchie of Vernon Hills, Illinois, was the victim of a hit-and-run incident that left him paralyzed from the waist down. Daniel says that since that traumatic day, God has not healed his affliction, but he has taught him the power of lamenting to him about it. He writes:

To our detriment, one of the most overlooked portions of Scripture in modern-day America are the psalms of lament. However, David

repeatedly demonstrated that laments make obvious our intense faith in God, that he can and will intervene in our time of need. They demonstrate just how deep our relationship with the Father really is. After all, we don't communicate our grief and mourning to strangers. We save that for those we truly know and love.

In April 2008, nearly a year after his accident, Daniel wrote a contemporary lament that goes in part like this:

Oh Lord, my God! Why do you wait to show up?
I cried out to you when trouble struck.
I asked for your restoration.
I know that you heard me. I know that you answered.
Yet nothing—nothing of meaning happens again today.

....

Wearily I drag on
Tiring of the waste, hating the horror,
The pain, the suffering, the never-ending trial.
The endless story drags on, and on, and on.
When will the clouds break?
When will the night cease?
When will the tunnel end?
When will you smile again?
What a two-edged sword your voice is!
You speak. And then wait?
You give hope. And then vanish into the mist?
Have you forgotten me?
Have more important things arrested your attention?
Hope turns black. This evil I have seen.
Nightly my dreams show me restored,
And in the morning I am broken again
Cursed to relive the horror of suffering's first day.

....

Who am I that God should remember me?
My only salvation is that he should not forget his image,
Or let his word be broken.
He is faithful to us because he is faithful to himself.
There is nothing I can do,
In no way can I help.
I sit in the ruins and wait,
And take comfort in those who lie in the ashes with me.
But one day, by his promise, I will stand;
Restored as his message of hope is fulfilled.
The Lord will turn this horror into a fading dream,
And I will honor his name forever.³

Can you feel the *passion* of his prayer? Can you feel the *honesty* of the emotion of this man left paralyzed by someone who hit him, then ran? Can you feel *his cry to God*, the God he knows can do something about his situation, but seemingly doesn't? Can you feel the *faith* that he has, the faith in God that *has* to be there for him to be able to pray like this? That's the power of lament!

David's lament

Now we don't know what David's situation was when he wrote this lament in Psalm 13, and there's really no way to know the specifics. In some ways, that makes it all the more applicable to any believer who's going through a trial, doesn't it?

What we do know from the first two verses is that *he felt like God had forgotten him*, that God was hiding his face from him. Day after day he was wrestling with his thoughts and his heart was filled with sorrow. No doubt he was questioning why things were as they were, and wrestling with what he believed about God and how he works. Some kind of enemy had the best of him, and he was wondering how long God was going to let that go on.

For me, some of the most difficult, frustrating times of my life and ministry have been when I knew we were where God wanted us and doing what he wanted us to do, but nothing was going right. If I could have said, "Well, I just missed God's will"—I didn't understand what he wanted, or I had just been outright disobedient to his will—I think it would have been easier, because I could have seen it as a consequence of missing his will. But I *knew* we were where we were supposed to be, and things were *hard*. I have lamented to God about those situations on more than one occasion!

And that's what David was doing. But he didn't stop with the questions. He moved to a plea for God to intervene. He undergirded that plea with an affirmation of his trust in God's unfailing love, his covenant love that grows out of who he is. When David thought of that love, his heart rejoiced in the salvation he knew God could bring. And his complaint turned to songs of praise as he remembered how God had been good to him in the past. *David prayed honestly to God in the confidence that he would answer according to his own character and will.*

When we pray

And so it must be with us. We have to be honest with God in our prayers. Jesus was. He prayed and chanted Psalm 22 while he was on the cross. You remember how it starts: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**"

We must plead for the Lord's help, understanding that he is ultimately the only one who can give us the help we need.

And we must pray in faith, trusting in his unfailing, steadfast covenant love that brings us salvation, so that even in the face of our trials and difficulties, we sing the LORD's praise, remembering the ultimate good he has done for us already in his Son Jesus Christ through his life, death on the cross, and resurrection to save us and make us his own! Even when we can't see him, we can trust him because of what he's done for us in Christ!

We can pray honestly to God in the confidence that he will answer according to his own character and will.

This brief affirmation was reportedly found written on a wall in a concentration camp:⁴

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.
I believe in love even when I feel it not.
I believe in God even when He is silent.

And so, my brothers and sisters, when God is silent in your situation, he can take your questions. Maybe what he really wants, what he is looking for from us in those times, is a deep, settled trust in him, even when it *seems* he has forgotten us.

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¹ *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Touchstone Pictures, 2002), directed by Kevin Reynolds, screenplay by Jay Wolpert, based on a novel by Alexandre Dumas; <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2005/march/15850.html> (accessed 08-15-2017).

² Adapted from Dr. Roy L. Honeycutt's lectures on the Psalms at the 1984 Campbell University Pastors' School.

³ Used by permission of author, Daniel McConchie, Vernon Hills, Illinois; <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/july/1071210.html> (accessed 08-15-2017).

⁴ Alice Gray, compiler, *Stories for the Heart: Over 100 Stories to Encourage Your Soul* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 209.