

# How Long, O Lord? How Long?

Psalm 13



**Main idea:** In our deepest distress, we must seek the Lord, remember His lovingkindness, and look forward to His salvation.

For the choir director. A Psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup>How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?  
How long will You hide Your face from me?  
<sup>2</sup>How long shall I take counsel in my soul,  
*Having* sorrow in my heart all the day?  
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?  
<sup>3</sup>Consider *and* answer me, O LORD my God;  
Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the *sleep of* death,  
<sup>4</sup>And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
*And* my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.  
<sup>5</sup>But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness;  
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.  
<sup>6</sup>I will sing to the LORD,  
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

## Introduction:

At first glance, Psalm 13 may strike you as just a simple, short, plain, depressing psalm. One that you wouldn't normally run to when you're looking for an inspiring, encouraging word before rushing off to work. But a closer examination of this psalm should lead us to view this as one of the most interesting, amazing, and useful of the Psalms—a song that is worthy of our meditation and application as it interweaves emotion, theology, and the hard realities of life.

- **Matthew Henry**—This psalm is the deserted soul's case and cure.<sup>1</sup>

One of the interesting things about this psalm, you might not have noticed, is that while it is an expression of deep despair, sorrow, and depression, it is expertly put-together. You might think that when someone is overwrought with emotion and sadness, and they sit down to write a poem or a song, it would be all over the place. But, in this case the opposite is true.

- First, it's incredibly well-structured. It moves along, two verses at a time. There are two verses of questions (vv.1-2), with essentially three questions (though five question marks); two verses of prayer (vv.3-4), with three prayer requests; and two verses of expressions of faith, with three expressions (vv.5-6).

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Psalms. Commentary on the Whole Bible*, New Modern Edition, Hendrickson Publishers

- Second, its flow is amazing. In this psalm, *"A long deep sigh is followed, as from a relieved breast, by an already much more gentle and half calm prayer; and this again by the believing joy which anticipates the certainty of being answered. This song as it were casts up constantly lessening waves, until it becomes still as the seas when smooth as a mirror, and the only motion discernible at last is that of the joyous ripple of calm repose"* (Franz Delitzsch, 1:199).<sup>2</sup>
- Third, it conveys deep emotion throughout, so you don't even realize how well-structured it is.

In short, it's a perfect song. It makes me think of some of the greatest songs of our day. While songwriters have spent years trying to craft the perfect song, many of the best songs were written in just a few minutes. Songs with perfect lyrics, flow, structure, and emotion all wrapped up in one. Often, in a time of deep personal and emotional stress—they might say inspiration—they grabbed a napkin and wrote it out. When we are in heaven with all the saints, and when we ask David about his psalms, I wouldn't be surprised if he said of Psalm 13 that he wrote it five minutes on a napkin. It just flowed out, and in his case, it was true divine inspiration.

In Psalm 13, David bears his soul to God. He hides nothing; he is brutally honest about how he feels about God and his situation, but he is also very instructive in helping us find the path from the depths of despair to the heights of joy and praise.

**Main idea:** Here, we are taught that in our deepest distress, we must seek the Lord, remember His lovingkindness, and look forward to His salvation.

As we study this psalm, we will progress with David from despair, to prayer, to faith and praise.

- A. Questions for God (vv.1-2)
- B. Prayer to God (vv.3-4)
- C. Faith in God (vv.5-6)

## Exposition:

### A. Questions for God (vv.1-2)

- <sup>1</sup>How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? <sup>2</sup>How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

David begins this song with honest, emotional, hard questions for God that demonstrate the depths of despair that he is feeling. We aren't told when he wrote this, or what he was going through specifically, but we know he was at an extremely low point—that he had been going through something for a long while. We know he was depressed, distraught, despondent, dejected, and despairing. Four times he asks God, "How long?"

- How long will You forget me?
- How long will you hide Your face from me?
- How long shall I take counsel in my soul?
- How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

---

<sup>2</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament*

In Hebrew, they didn't use punctuation like our exclamation marks when they wanted to emphasize a point. Instead, they used repetition.

- **Isaiah 6:3**—Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.
- **2 Samuel 19:4**—The king covered his face and cried out with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

And so here, when David cries out four times, "How long?" it is the strongest possible way he could have expressed his distress, anguish, and longing for relief from his trouble. He was being pressed, squeezed, crushed—a tortured soul. And he can't contain his emotions; they just burst out before God. And though there are five question marks, he really asks just three questions:

### 1. How long will God wait? (v.1)

- <sup>1</sup>How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

Of course, David knows enough about God to know that God does not, and cannot, mentally forget anything. He is omniscient; He knows all that ever was, all that is, and all that ever will be. For God to "forget someone" is a poetic expression meaning *He does not give His help to someone*. And for God to "remember someone" is to take action to help them. So, David asks God right up front, "How long will you forget me? How long do you plan on holding back Your help from me?"

David feels forgotten by God. His troubles, whatever they are in this situation, are overwhelming him, and it feels like God is out of the picture—like God has simply abandoned David for some reason. And He asks God if this will last **"forever."** Will this ever change? Will you ever come back to me or will I be suffering this way forever?

- <sup>1</sup>How long will You hide Your face from me?

This expression is more than just another way of saying, "How long will you ignore me?" For God to shine His face upon you was an expression of His favor and blessing—as in the famous Aaronic blessing:

- **Numbers 6:24-26**—The LORD bless you, and keep you; <sup>25</sup> The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.

For God to hide his face, then, was the opposite. It was an expression of divine disfavor, abandonment, or even curse. This expression meant that God, Himself, was against you.

- **Job 13:24**—Why do You hide Your face And consider me Your enemy?
- **Psalms 88:14-18**—O LORD, why do You reject my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? <sup>15</sup> I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on; I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome. <sup>16</sup> Your burning anger has passed over me; Your terrors have destroyed me. <sup>17</sup> They have surrounded me like water all day long; They have encompassed me altogether. <sup>18</sup> You have removed lover and friend far from me; My acquaintances are in darkness.

It feels to David like God has hidden His face from him. Like God is against him. Like God is actively disfavoring him. And David asks if this will last forever. How long will God wait?

## 2. How long will I grieve? (vv.2a-b)

- <sup>2</sup> How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day?

Here, David seems to be talking about the internal struggle with his own thoughts he has because of the trial(s).

- **NIV**—How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?

He's racking his brain to figure a way out of his trouble, and he can't come up with anything that works. He's wrestling and struggling with his thoughts. And as a result, he's growing more and more sorrowful to the point where he is **"having sorrow in my heart all the day"**—or "every day."

In times of real stress, distress, anxiety, and grief, our thoughts are prone to go wild. They are like restless horses in a corral—a tornado is coming, and they are panicking to get out. Stress and grief mingle in our thoughts and heart, and we're right on the edge, hanging by a thread. Our frustration and sadness are overwhelming us. We wake up in the morning, and it's still there. And the next morning, and the next, and the next. This is where David was, and so he asks God, "How long will this keep up? How long will I grieve?"

## 3. How long will they win? (v.2b)

The exaltation of David's enemies may be the cause of his deep sorrow and helplessness, or they may be a compounding factor. David never had a shortage of enemies. David's adversaries are getting the upper hand against him. This could be a foreign power like the Philistines, or it could internal foes like his son Absalom. Whatever the case, their rise over him is causing him deep grief.

### Application

Have you been there? Where the fog is so thick, you can't see the shore? Maybe this is just how it will be. God has forgotten me, and He's not going to remember me. Or worse, He's hidden His face from me—He's actually working against me. We know that, at one time, we enjoyed God's favor, blessing, and nearness, but now it's like He has taken all that away. Why? When will He bring it back? Will He ever come back?

How long, O Lord, will I have to deal with this bodily sickness, this physical pain? How long, O Lord, will my son or daughter run after this world and continue to endanger themselves? How long, O Lord, will my boss continue to overload me or malign me? How long, O Lord, will other people humiliate and make fun of me? How long, O Lord? I can't bear this; I just can't take it.

Have you been there? Times of prolonged stress and distress can drive even the strongest of believers to these kinds of thoughts and questions. Some of the greatest preachers were there; some of the greatest theologians, missionaries, and hymn writers were there. The question isn't, "How did you get there?" The question is, "Where do you go from there?"

Follow David, because he goes to the right place. He goes to God in prayer. His deep suffering and depression don't drive him away *from* God, but *to* God. Even though he feels like God has forgotten him and hidden His face from him, he knows that he has nowhere else to turn; no other refuge to run to. So, he runs to the Lord His God.

## B. Prayer to God (*vv.3-4*)

- <sup>3</sup> Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, <sup>4</sup> And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," And my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.

In verse 3, David voices three prayer requests, and then in verse 4, he tells us what motivates his prayer. And these prayer requests are simple, almost childlike, requests.

5

### 1. Consider me. (*v.3a*)

He asks God to "consider me" (lit. "look intently at me"). This is the opposite of God hiding His face. For God to "look" at you was an expression of His favor toward you. Take notice of me. See my suffering—please God, just look at me.

### 2. Answer me. (*v.3a*)

David asks God to hear his groaning; to answer his questions. Answer me by telling me that You haven't forgotten me; that You aren't against me. Tell me that You understand what I'm going through and that Your love is still set upon me.

### 3. Enlighten my eyes. (*vv.3b-4*)

The eyes are a wonderful window to the soul. Some say you can tell a lot about a person from their eyes. Eyes express joy, sorrow, pain. David asks God to "**enlighten my eyes.**" That is, to "Make my eyes to light up with the light of life." Because without that, he feels that he will sleep the sleep of death. Without God's intervention, David cannot last. This is how bad it is, or at least how bad it feels. He needs God's help, and he needs it now, or he will perish.

- <sup>4</sup> And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," And my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.

If God does not answer and does not intervene, David is finished, and his enemies will boast at his defeat.

But we need to understand that, for David, it was not just his honor at stake, it was God's. Who was David? He was God's man, the King, chosen by God to rule over God's people. His enemies were God's enemies, and therefore, if David is "shaken," his enemies will have ammunition against him and against God. So, he is asking God to help him, because that will also honor and glorify God.

We have to move, then, from despair to prayer. You aren't going to get anywhere by your counsel or by willing your problems away—they will only get worse, and your spiritual life will decay. Instead, we must go to God as David did: consider me, answer me, and light up my eyes with the light of life. Not just for my sake, but for Yours, Lord, for I belong to You. Don't let me stay here wallowing in darkness.

And we have to persevere in that prayer. We can't give up on that kind of prayer. God desires persistence in our prayers. Keep seeking, keep asking, keep knocking, and He will lead you out of the darkness to the light of the world—Jesus Christ.

And He knows the suffering you're going through. Remember, Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He knows what it's like to feel deep anguish of soul and body. He knows, He cares, and He's ready and willing to lift up all those who call upon Him in faith.

### Illustration

One of the most recognizable names of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Neil Armstrong. Most people know him only as being the first man to step on the Moon. But prior to Apollo 11, there were many test flights. On one of these, Gemini 8, included Neil Armstrong along with astronaut David Scott. The purpose of the flight was to accomplish the first-ever docking with another spacecraft in space. Well, they did the docking flawlessly, traveling at 18,000 mph 150 miles above the earth. Everything seemed to be going as planned until, unexpectedly, something caused the spacecraft to start spinning uncontrollably. And when you start spinning in outer space, you don't stop. Without air resistance or gravity, you just keep spinning and spinning and spinning.

So, Armstrong and Scott were in a very bad situation—spinning out of control. They tried one thing, but that only made it spin faster. They released the other craft they had docked with, but that made it spin even faster, now at one rotation per second, and they were starting to lose consciousness—and if that happened, they were dead. Suddenly Armstrong remembered one more thing he could try; he could fire the backup thrusters in the opposite direction of the spin. It seemed risky—since that was the only fuel they had left to get back to earth—but if he didn't do it, they were surely dead. So, he fired the thrusters, and it worked. He was able to stop the spin, and just barely had enough fuel to make a safe landing.

In a similar way, prolonged grief, sorrow, and suffering can get us spinning out of control. And our thoughts can run away with us, so that we spin and spin and spin like that spacecraft. And the only way we can stop that spinning is to hit the right button; remember the right maneuver. And the right maneuver is prayer; the right button is Truth. Without these things, we will spin uncontrollably with our stresses, sorrows, and griefs. But with them—prayer to God and the Truth of God—we are led to a stability in our faith.

Prayer accesses the ear and power of God. Truth shows us and reminds us who God is, what He has done, and what He promises yet to do. And armed with prayer and with Truth, we trust in the Lord, and we can even rejoice in Him and sing praises to Him—not because our earthly situation has changed; not because our problems have magically disappeared, but because our eyes are not focused on those things anymore but on Him; on Christ.

- **Colossians 3:1-4**—Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

### C. Faith in God (vv.5-6)

- <sup>5</sup> But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. <sup>6</sup> I will sing to the LORD, Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

**“But I”** is emphatic. Despite his desperate situation, David chooses to trust the Lord. Why? What makes him able to trust the Lord in this distressing situation?

## 1. Faith in God's lovingkindness (v.5a)

He simply thinks back to the Lord's lovingkindness to His people and to himself, personally. Lovingkindness (  $\text{ḥḥḥ}$  ) is translated "steadfast love" (ESV, RSV) or "unfailing love" (NIV). This is the special, specific covenant love that God has for His people, whereby He chooses to love them, and He is faithful in His love. It is loyal love.

David has trusted in the unfailing love of God. And God has never failed His people or David before. Why then does he think He might do so now? His faith allows him to wait on the Lord. And because of God's unfailing love in the past, David is now absolutely confident of His unfailing love in the future.

## 2. Anticipation of God's salvation (v.5b)

- <sup>5</sup> My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.

David anticipates what God will do. He is confident that God will save him, because this is what God does. He is a saving God. He is a Savior. Therefore, my heart will rejoice in His salvation. God had proved Himself to be a saving God over and over again to Israel and David. He had saved them from slavery in Egypt; He had saved them from the armies of the Philistines and other groups; He had saved David from wild animals, from a giant, from a king, and from his own sin.

Do you know His salvation? If so, rejoice in it. If not, He offers it to you—salvation by His grace through faith in Jesus. Not by works, good deeds, or anything else, but by faith in Jesus alone. And if you have experienced this salvation in Christ now, then you have the sure hope of His salvation in the future.

## 3. Praise for God's goodness (v.6)

- <sup>6</sup> I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me".

This is amazing. From where David began just five short verses ago—in utter despair and depression—to singing praises to the Lord because He has dealt bountifully with him. David looks forward to what he knows to be true—that God will yet pour out His goodness upon him; He will lavish His grace on him. And it makes David just want to sing to the Lord!

In his distress, David looked back at the lovingkindness of God demonstrated in His people and in his life personally, but he also looked forward to what God was going to do. He would save and deal bountifully with him.

And we must do the same. In our distress, we must look back at the faithful lovingkindness of God in our lives—the salvation He has given in Christ, the blessings of His people in the church, the countless answered prayers. But we must also look forward to what He has promised still to do—to keep us, to grow us, to love us until the day when our final salvation comes with the appearing of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

How do we have the right perspective in distress, in suffering, in trials and tribulations? How do we get out of the slough of despond even when our earthly situation remains unchanged? We go to Him in prayer, and we persist in prayer until He gives us a glimpse of light—that is, of Christ. And we

remember what God has done in Christ to save us and shape us, and we believe His promise that He is coming again to save us finally and eternally.

And then, we can persevere, trust, and even rejoice, knowing that these momentary light afflictions are producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (*2 Cor.4:17*).

Amen.



© October 25, 2019 The Church at South Mountain

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction.

For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by The Church at South Mountain. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:

© The Church at South Mountain. Website: [casm.org](http://casm.org)

While all reasonable attempts have been taken to trace the literary and biblical sources used by the author, due to the nature of some of the original materials (old audio/radio or live preaching events), some have been impossible to locate. Any information regarding the origin of any unreferenced statements or quotations is welcomed and will be included in the next revision of the study.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible: 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.