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Psalm 13: To the Choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

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Psalm 13
To the Choirmaster. A Psalm of David.
(NRSV)

Introduction to Psalm 13

Psalm 13 belongs to a category of psalms often called Psalms of Lament. It is a very good example of this type. Verses 1-2 direct a complaint to the LORD, a complaint which intensifies through the repeated question, "How long?" Verses 3-4 then are a prayer for help from the LORD, again intensifying through three imperatives: consider, answer, give light. And finally, verses 5-6 express the Psalmist's confidence in the LORD, perhaps recalling an earlier occasion when he had received help.

The superscription attributes the Psalm to David. David had attracted the hatred of his predecessor, King Saul. He experienced opposition from many of the surrounding small nations whom he had annexed to his domain. And David suffered the pain of rebellion from his own son Absalom. There is nothing in the Psalm that would help us understand what specifically it was that had caused him to complain to the LORD. Was it illness? Was it a political crisis? Or were the enemies (verses 2 and 4) a poetic, non-specific convention?

Christians may appropriately use this Psalm when they are sick or when they are seriously ill or in other danger. It is at time like this when we feel abandoned by God and suffer the pain, sometimes physical, sometimes deeply emotional, of such apparent forsakenness. It would be easy to think of Jesus as praying this Psalm during his Passion.

Vv. 1-2

¹ How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I bear pain in my soul,

(Alternate: How long must I hold counsels in my soul?)

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Of course our well-catechized mind tells us that God will never forsake us. God may have abandoned His only-begotten Son on the Cross on Good Friday, but that was so that He would never have to abandon us – really – who have our faith in Him. And yet the experience of believers ever since the time of David teaches us that there are those times when we *feel* as though God has completely forgotten us. The worst part of such a feeling is that it would appear as though those who wish us ill will have the last laugh. Or the cancer will have the last word.

The alternative translation, which you will find in the notes of your Revised Standard Version Bibles, is actually the better translation according to the Hebrew text. According to this translation the Psalmist would be saying something like this: "How long shall I continue devising plans in my mind, that is, plans to improve my situation?" The New International Version translates: "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?" It suggests that, because I have the feeling of being forgotten by God, I have dark thoughts in my mind, and I must fight to dispel these unthinkable thoughts. But how long?

Vv. 3-4

**³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,**

Because bright eyes were (are?) considered a visible sign of vigor, stamina and good health (see 1 Samuel 14:27-29), this is a prayer for restoration of strength, health, and vigor. Sickness or sorrow was (is?) a cause for the eyes to grow dim (compare Psalms 6:7, 38:10, 69:3 88:9, Lamentations 5:17, and Ezra 9:8).

**⁴ and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.**

Were he to die, to sleep the sleep of death, his enemies would have cause to gloat at his downfall, whether literal or metaphoric. The Psalmist is concerned that by his death, the unnamed enemy could have occasion to mock his trust in God.

Vv. 5-6

**⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.**

Here this Psalm turns from lament and despair to hope and trust. In spite of how dark the situation seemed at the time, the Psalmist anticipates rescue and the restoration of joy. Salvation means rescue, and it is frequently used in the Psalms of rescue from physical illness and political distress. Hence, while we tend to think of salvation as the final rescue from sin, death, and the power of the devil, the Psalmist here thinks more of this-worldly, earthly kinds of divine rescue.

**⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me** (treated me generously).

It is easy to hear David pray this Psalm which begins with the four-fold lament, “How long?” We can also imagine Jesus praying this Psalm as he was surrounded by those who sought his life. But in Jesus we can also see how the Lord, his heavenly Father, dealt bountifully with him by vindicating him in his resurrection from the dead. So also today there are those Christians who face prolonged danger to property and life because they are in Christ, faithful followers of Jesus. They too call out to the heavenly Father from the depths of their suffering, “How long, O Lord?” It is in solidarity with such fellow-Christians that we pray this Psalm, asking the Lord for his steadfast love and bounty.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 13:

Lord our God, by the light of the resurrection of your Son you have helped us see that we shall not sleep in death forever. Look upon the sufferings of your Church, so that our hearts may rejoice in your saving help and sing you songs of praise; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Nugget

Paul Gerhardt was Lutheran pastor and a prolific hymn-writer who lived from 1607-1676. The verses that follow are from one of his hymns, "Befiehl du deine Wege," translated in TLH #520, but was not included either in LW nor in LBW. It is a long hymn, but the following verses will show you how it is a hymn modeled on the Psalms of Lament. It may be sung to the tune, "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded."

1. Commit whatever grieves thee Into the gracious hands
Of Him who never leaves thee, Who heav'n and earth commands,
Who points the clouds their courses, Whom winds and waves obey,
He will direct thy footsteps And find for thee a way.

9. A while his consolation He may to thee deny,
And seem as though in trial He far from thee would fly;
A while distress and anguish May compass thee around,
Nor to thy supplication An answering voice be found.

10. But if thou perseverest, Thou shalt deliverance find,
Behold, all unexpected He will thy soul unbind
And from the heavy burden Thy heart will soon set free;
And thou wilt see the blessing He had in mind for thee.

11. O faithful child of heaven, How blessed shalt thou be!
With songs of glad thanksgiving A crown awaiteth thee.
Into thy hand thy Maker Will give the victor's palm,
And thou to thy Deliverer Shalt sing a joyous psalm.

Walter E. Keller

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