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Psalm 13

The Grace of Lament: Turning to God and Trusting Him

This is a wonderful time of the year, isn't it? Christmas time is a wonderful time - a time of joy and hope! It might seem odd, then, in the Christmas season, after singing Christmas songs (even Joy to the World!) and even lighting the Advent candle of joy, to then turn to *Psalm 13*, a psalm of lament. As I read those words just now, it might have seemed like a downer - it might strike us as odd, or at the very least, might seem awkward and out of place.

But I actually think it's quite an appropriate time to remember the place of *lament*. For many people, every year, Christmas can be a painful time - a reminder of those who *aren't* at the Christmas table with us this year. A reminder of broken relationships, marked by the empty chair and the phone that doesn't ring. A reminder of just how broken and lost our loved ones are. Of past wounds that haven't healed. Of how things have changed for the worse, or how things seem like they just simply *won't* change, no matter how often you pray that they will. A reminder of some of the most painful times of suffering and sorrow in your life that still effect every single day: a divorce, a life-altering illness or surgery, a rift in the family, the death of a loved one.

The holiday season can bring reminders of our deepest pains, sorrows, and personal tragedies. And for that reason, it's very appropriate for this time to also be a reminder of the joyful hope we have in Christ. But sometimes, the sorrow we experience can be so great, so overwhelming, that it just feels like it's going to crush us; but in those moments, when we need God the most, it might seem impossible for turn to God, because you just feel like He's not there, or if He is, like He doesn't care. Perhaps you've been there before. Perhaps you're there right now. Or maybe you haven't experienced such despair yet, but the question still remains for you: when that day does come, how will you respond? What do we, as Christians, do when *sorrows like sea billows roll over us, threatening to completely engulf, overwhelm, even crush us?*

What we need in such moments is to embrace God's gift of *lament*. Laments are found all throughout the Bible, *especially* in the Psalms - in fact, at least *a third* of the Psalms can be classified as lament prayers, or containing laments. And one of the most succinct examples and models of a prayer of lament is found here in *Psalm 13*. The practice of lamenting to the Lord is not as strong in American evangelicalism as it once once in past Christian generations. In fact, many of us might even be *uncomfortable* with the language of laments. Many of us grow

uncomfortable when we hear people talk about their grief and sadness in life; we might not know how to respond or what to say, so we awkwardly try to change the subject. Some might even think that lamenting is *wrong*. We might think that it's unChristian, maybe even sinful, to be sad, or to wrestle with sorrow and depression. We might feel guilty for our grief, and think we're just being negative or complaining, that maybe we're just being unfaithful, so we just try to cover it up and pretend like everything is ok. Yet the pain and grief we feel just continues to grow and become heavier in our hearts. Perhaps we don't know how to talk about the pain, sorrow, suffering, and grief that we experience, or that one another experience. Perhaps we don't know how to talk to God about it, either. And then, when we read honest, raw, passionate language of lament and mourning in the Bible - lament prayers like Psalm 13 - they might shock and startle us; we might not even know what to do with them. We might think, "Isn't this complaining? Isn't it wrong to question God? Is it really ok to be this honest and raw about our deepest pain and sorrow, about our questions and fears, about our doubts and confusion - even with GOD?"

Yet the prayer of lament remains for us a precious gift that God has given us. A pastor named Mark Vroegop wrote an excellent book on learning the practice of godly lament, titled *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. In that book, he defines lament this way:

Lament can be defined as a loud cry, a howl, or a passionate expression of grief. However, in the Bible lament is more than sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief. Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust. Throughout the scriptures, lament gives voice to the strong emotions that believers feel because of suffering. It wrestles with the struggles that surface. ...Think of lament as the transition between pain and promise. It is the path from heartbreak to hope.¹

That's Vroegop's definition for biblical lament: a prayer in pain that leads to trust. He goes on to point out a four-fold pattern repeated in most biblical laments: 1. First, it starts with *an address to God*, for laments are, first and foremost, a prayer, turning to God and bringing our pain and sorrow to Him; 2. Secondly, there is *complaint*, where the psalmist honestly and passionately pours out his heart and sorrows to the Lord; 3. Third, *requests are* made to God, to alleviate the anguish or suffering; and then, finally, 4. The lament turns to end on the final note of *hopeful faith, of trusting in the Lord*. That's the pattern of biblical laments: *turn, complain, ask, and trust*.²

¹ Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*, p.28.

² Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, p.29.

And that's exactly what we see here in Psalm 13. In fact, Psalm 13 serves as a *model* prayer of lament for us. It gives us language to turn to God in our grief, pain, despair, and sorrow, to pour out the complaints of our souls to Him, plead with Him to hear and answer our prayers, and then turn to *trust Him*, no matter what. That's how Psalm 13 teaches us to deal with our emotions of sadness, grief, and inner turmoil, even when it feels overwhelming. Psalm 13 teaches us to lament - to bring it to God, and learn to trust Him with it.

So let's walk through this process of lament, starting with:

I. Turning to God with Our Honest Grief and Complaints (vv.1-2)

The beginning of this Psalm can be a bit jarring. We're told that the Psalm is written by David, and then he immediately jumps into a passionate, even painful cry of lament in verse 1: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" David is using startling language here to express that he feels *abandoned by God*. He feels like GOD isn't there, like GOD doesn't see Him; or, if He does see him, he feels like God doesn't care about him or the things he's going through. David is expressing, in a very raw and honest way, how he feels like God has forgotten him, like God's hidden His face from Him, and is refusing to pay attention to his life, hear his prayers, or care about all of the pain and sorrow that he bears. And notice that we're not given any details or context for what David is going through when he writes; and I think the reason for that is so that we can relate to these words, even use this prayer as our own, when we feel this same way. Maybe you can relate. Have you ever felt that way? Like God's abandoned or forgotten you? Like He just isn't there, or if He is, He just doesn't seem to care?

David continues, in verse 2: "How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" David is expressing this inner turmoil that he feels within himself, when he says "I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day." He's filled with deep grief and sorrow that just want go away. He goes to himself for counsel, which doesn't help, because he doesn't have the answers, so his soul is stuck in this place of inner turmoil, constantly worrying and fretting about what's going to happen or what he's going to do. This is the language of depression, of anguish; the language of a despairing soul. His heart is weighed down with grief "all the day." His enemy is being "exalted over" him, so that David is losing and his enemies are winning. As the king, defeat would be perilous not only for himself, but for his kingdom. And not only this, but David was

king over Israel - over *God's* people. So for his enemies to prevail would feel like God had forgotten his promises, both to David and Israel. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been stuck in a situation where you don't know what to do, your heart feels like lead its so heavy with grief all day every day, and you're starting to feel hopeless, wondering if GOD even hears your prayers?

This is why, when David feels this overwhelming grief and inner turmoil, even when he feels abandoned and forgotten by God, he cries out, "How long, O LORD?" He cries out this question to GOD four times just in these two verses. "How long will you abandon and forget me? How long will you ignore me and not answer my prayers? How long is my sorrow going to go on, so that my heart is filled with despair? How long am I going to suffer defeat at the hands of my enemies?" David is crying out to God, even *complaining* to GOD, asking when He is going to act.

Now, this kind of raw language makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? If you just read these words written by someone else, and they weren't in the Bible, we might even assume that this person was coming from a place of anger at God, not faith. But the essential thing to realize here is that *David is crying out to the Lord in the form of a prayer*. David is not shaking his fist at God in anger. Nor is he accusing God. INstead, he's *running to God* and being honest about how he feels, pouring out his soul to him, even in raw, honest language. But the most important thing is that, even when he feels abandoned and forgotten by God, he still *runs to God in prayer*. **Lament is an act of faith**. He's saying, "I feel like you're not there God, and that you don't care. But I know that's not true! And I know that you're the only one that can truly help me! So I'm running to you with these burdens and sorrows that I just can't bear on my own. I'm turning to you in faith, depending on you alone. I'm not going to try and bear these burdens on my own anymore - I'm going to hand them over to you." And the way David does that is by pouring out the contents of his hearts in an honest, even startling, way. He *laments to God*. And I think we're given Psalm 13 because we're meant to follow David's example here. In fact, I'm quite sure of it.

When we feel hurt, abandoned, and forgotten by God, the very thing we must do is *run to GOD with our pain and sorrow!* Now, this might seem like the obvious solution, but in the moment, it can seem very counter-intuitive. When your life is full of disappointment, when you're expectations haven't been met, when you're marriage isn't what you wanted it to be, or it completely fails, or when you watch your children walk through terrible suffering, or even walk

away from the Lord, or when you lose your job, or lose a loved one, or when it feels like everything is falling apart, and you feel like God isn't there, or isn't listening, or has forgotten you or doesn't care - *what do you do?* I think we're tempted to fall off the ditch on either side of the road, in two opposite errors.

On the one side, you may be tempted to *run away from God*. You might be tempted to actually *believe* the lie that GOD doesn't care about you, and you might be tempted to fall away. Or, at the very least, you might be tempted to let your relationship with God grow very cold, maybe harboring bitterness and anger against the Lord in your heart. But in those moments, the Lord is exactly the person we need to turn to! He's the only one that can bear these unbearable burdens of our souls! Turning away from God in the midst of our troubles is like turning away from food offered to us when we're starving to death! Like refusing to go to the doctor when we're sick!

But on the other hand, we're tempted to fall off into the opposite error, of just trying to sweep our emotions under the rug and pretend like everything is ok. We might even think that it's wrong and immature, maybe even sinful, to feel this way, or especially to talk to the Lord about our complaints! And so we might try to put a happy face on it, to just suck it up, and pretend like we're fine. But if we do that, all the sorrow and pain we feel isn't going to go away - it will just fester in our hearts, until we either explode and turn away from GOD, or until our hearts grow cold with bitterness, and we settle for a shallow relationship with God where we never actually bear our souls to Him.

Brothers and Sisters, do you feel free to come to the Lord and actually be honest with Him? Do you actually feel the freedom to tell God how you feel - to be honest with God, even to use raw and passionate language, about how hurt and confused you feel? Maybe even that you feel like He's abandoned or forgotten you? If you feel that way, then run to God and tell Him so! YOU're not going to surprise or shock Him; He already knows! And you're not going to make Him angry, or shame or embarrass Him. We shouldn't feel guilty for doing this; even Jesus did this! As we saw from our time in Matthew, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane saying "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matt.26:38). In other words, he felt like his sorrow was going to kill him! On the cross, he even expressed feeling abandoned by God, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). God is our loving Father; He *wants us* to bring our problems, our sorrows, our grief and pain to Him! If you feel like GOD's

not hearing your prayers, if you've even lost hope in situations in your life, and are on the verge of giving up hope, then you need to *run to God and pour your soul out to Him!* Tell Him how you feel! Bring your complaints to God! And perhaps you're thinking, "Well, my situation isn't *that* bad." Whatever burdens your heart, *turn and take it to the Lord*, no matter how big or small. If you're anything like me, we never really run out of things to complain about, right? Instead of grumbling and complaining about them, let us turn to the Lord in lament. In my own personal experience, the times that I have fallen to my knees and poured out the anguish of my heart to GOD in prayer and with tears have led to the moments where I have felt the Lord's love and presence the strongest in my life.

No, lament isn't a license to be angry at God, to be bitter, or to accuse Him of wrongdoing. But it *is* a license to be honest with GOD about your feelings! If you're tempted to feel angry with God, to doubt His goodness and love, or to doubt whether praying does any good at all, then tell God that! Be as honest as you can! Pour your heart and soul out to the Lord! Let the language of the lament psalms be your guide. Cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Do so as an act of faith, by turning to the Lord in your pain.

But remember, we can't stop there, because the goal is *trust*. So the next step is...

II. Turning to God with Passionate Pleading (vv.3-4)

After letting God know inner turmoil and sorrow, David now prays and asks God to help him - to hear and answer his prayers, to do something to fix his situation, to heal his pain and take away his sorrow and anguish. He prays, in verses 3-4, "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed over him,' lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken."

David asks God to "consider" and "answer" Him, acknowledging that he feels like God doesn't care, but then also acknowledging that He knows that GOD *does* care, that God *is* there! So he's asking God to prove Himself faithful once more; he's asking God to listen and hear his prayers, even to answer and deliver him. He asks God to "light up" his eyes, a metaphor for encouraging and strengthening his heart, to revive his soul with joy and hope. He prays that God would hear him, answer him, and free him from this sorrow "Lest I sleep the sleep of death." Now, it's possible he's asking God to save him from literal death, perhaps from a physical enemy, or even from sickness. It's also possible he means that the pain and grief of his heart is so great that it feels like it's going to kill him. Either way, he's passionately pleading that God

would alleviate this intense burden of sorrow he feels, delivering him from being crushed. In verse 4, he prays that God would “consider and answer” him lest his enemy prevails over him and rejoices in his defeat.

Again, David is passionately crying out to God with his problems, not just venting, but asking God for help and deliverance, because he *really does believe* that GOD is there, that He cares, and that He is willing and able to answer our prayers, bear our burdens, and alleviate our sorrow and suffering! No matter what you’re going through today, GOD cares for you; He loves you and He sees you. And He wants you to turn and cast your burdens on Him.

Perhaps you feel like your prayers aren’t going through the roof and GOD doesn’t hear your prayers. Perhaps you’ve given up hope in praying, thinking, “What’s the point?” Perhaps you’re even scared to plead with God and ask him for what’s really on your heart. If that’s you this morning, don’t give up hope! Keep turning to God; keep pleading with Him! Keep crying out and praying, asking the Lord to help and deliver you! PASSionately plead with the Lord to act, and tell Him that you know that His intervention is your only hope, and you’re depending on Him alone! IN fact, that might be the very reason God has allowed your time of waiting and praying to go on for so long - because He wants you to completely trust in Him for it; because He wants you to have a fuller, sweeter relationship with Him.

Cry out to the Lord and passionately plead with Him to deliver you from the sorrows and pain you’re bearing! Plead with GOD, ask Him for very specific requests. Tell Him what’s wrong and what you’re worried will happen if He doesn’t act and change the situation. Plead with God for your marriage, which you know will only be mended by God’s help; for your spouse, children, or parent, who seems to be wandering away from the Lord, and you’re absolutely terrified they’re on their way to Hell, apart from the Lord’s intervention; plead with God for that job you feel like you need, tell God why you think you need it and ask Him to provide. And we can do so because, even in the midst of our pain, tears, doubts, and fear, we know that *God is there, that He loves you, and that He cares for you!*

And this is the bridge that finally leads us to the last step of lament:

III. Turning to God with Confident Trust (vv.5-6)

This is exactly what David models for us as he ends the Psalm. After crying out to the Lord with a sense of abandonment and grief, wondering if God would act, he makes an abrupt turn in verses 5-6: “But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your

salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” Now, it seems reasonable to conclude that David’s circumstances haven’t changed from the time he was writing verse 3 to the beginning of verse 4. So how can he move from verses 1-4 to this stance of trust, rejoicing, even singing in the final two verses?

It’s because David is turning to the unchanging character and unfailing love of GOD. He is grounding His trust in the faithfulness, love, grace, and salvation of God. The goal of lament is not just to express our pain and sorrow, or ask God to help, but ultimately to *turn and trust Him*, with no matter what we’re bringing to Him. And we do this by remembering the character of GOD: who He is and what He has done.

Even though David feels overwhelmed with sorrow and despair, even feels abandoned and forgotten by God, like his prayers are going unanswered, he continues to trust in God; he has turned to him in prayer, even this prayer of lament, because he has confident faith in God. He is trusting in the unchanging character of God Himself: “But I have trusted in your steadfast love.” GOD’s love is steadfast and faithful; his loving kindness endures forever and does not waver. Even when we struggle to see it, we know it’s there, because God is love and He does not change; God is faithful from generation to generation! God’s steadfast love endures; and this means His covenantal promises of redemption and salvation will never fail! So David remembers the unchanging character of God - His unwavering, steadfast love. He is confident of the Lord’s salvation. He will rejoice and sing, remembering how the Lord has proved His faithfulness in David’s life over and over again, “because he has dealt bountifully with me.” In other words, David is proclaiming, with confident faith, that he knows and believes that God truly does care and is with him - that he has not abandoned or forgotten him, even though it feels like it sometimes. So he concludes with proclaiming this statement of faith in God, trusting in the enduring love and faithfulness of our Lord and Savior.

And this isn’t just true for David - this is true for anyone who comes to the Lord in faith. In fact, we know that God’s steadfast love and salvation have been most clearly revealed in the gospel - in the life, death, and resurrection of the God-Man, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ was born, it was a beautiful moment - God the Son taking on flesh, GOD with us! God stepping down into the darkness and brokenness of our world, to bear our burdens, our sorrows, our pain and suffering - even our sin itself! - to save, redeem, and deliver us! Jesus fulfilled all the promises of God by going to the cross, dying in our place, and rising again,

victorious over the dead! He identified with our suffering and sorrow, and conquered over it. He secured the sure hope of redemption, healing, and eternal life for all who trust in Him alone!

If you're trusting in Christ this morning, that means we are Christ's people. We are part of His New Covenant, based purely on his grace. And in this covenant, God has made us promises in Christ *that will never fail*. He has promised to always love you! He has promised He will also be with you and will never forsake or abandon you - no matter what life looks like! One of the most beautiful chapters in the Bible is Romans 8, where Paul speaks of the wonderful assurance we have of God's steadfast love in Christ Jesus. In v.28, we're promised: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." Then, in vv.35-39, we read, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Brothers and sisters, *nothing can separate you from God's love in Christ*. If you're trusting in Christ alone this morning, He has promised that everything in your life - no matter how painful, no matter what you're walking through - will be used for your good. God has not abandoned or forgotten you. God loves you so much more than you know! He did not even spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us, to save us from Hell! How much more will he give you the grace you need to persevere in this life? So when sorrows like sea billows roll, let us turn to God, lament our pain and complaints to Him, plead our requests to Him, and then rest in confident trust in Christ's steadfast love for us, no matter what our circumstances may be. Cry out to the Lord and trust Him!

In fact, maybe you need to do that for the first time this morning. Perhaps you've been running from God and haven't ever truly trusted Him. Cry out to the Lord this morning in faith; turn to Christ and trust in Him alone for salvation! Trust Him with your life and soul! Then, make your faith public through baptism and join a gospel-believing church. If you have questions about this, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.