
When life is hard & God seems far away...

Psalm 13

Introduction

(a story of Margaret)

Do you ever have dry spells in your spiritual life? Are there times in your life when God seems distant? Have you ever thought that God had forgotten you? When that happens, you're in good company. David, a man after God's own heart, had that experience. He pens a Psalm to teach what to do when life is hard and God seems far away.

Recap

Last week, some of you may recall, we began a series titled *A Call to Praise*. We started this four-part series by looking at Ps.113. This Psalm taught *Praise is due the Lord; for His incomparable name*. We noticed what praise was and when and where this ought to happen. Praise is to excitedly boast in public over an object of exquisite value. We saw in Ps.113 that nobody or nothing can match the majesty and mercy of the Lord. Therefore, wherever we are and whatever time it is we are to be speaking good and accurate and wonderful things about the matchless nature of our Lord so that others may hear.

That was last week. This week we will explore what happens when praise disappears in our lives. We know that we are to praise the Lord. But circumstances can be such and the way we view circumstances can be such that praise fades. This is a problem. And it is this problem to which we now turn our attention.

This problem is noticed in verses 1-2.

The Problem

This little poem has three movements to it, each of two verses. Listen again to the first movement as I read vv.1-2. Listen to a fourfold chant. (read 1-2).

“How long”? Did you listen to me read that chilling question four times in two small verses? You read it. Read the words aloud, softly and slowly. What tone and feel do you sense in these words? Do you hear pain and anguish? In awful repetition David chants: “How long, how long, how long, how long?”

These are the impassioned words of one who believes himself truly to be forgotten by God. But it gets even more terrifying than this.

This first movement is arranged in typical fashion of a lament. David organizes his thoughts around three “people”. He begins with You; referring to God. He continues with “I” referring to himself. He then talks about his enemy.

Let’s start where he starts; a look through David’s eyes at God. What he says about God is staggering.

You

Vv.1-2

He describes his view of God in three shocking and descending ways.

Forgot me

When life is hard and God seems far away, his first complaint was that God had forgotten him. His attention was diverted and he was no longer understanding of David’s situation.

Forgot me forever

The second way David describes how he is viewing God is with the word “forever”. He is implying that this season of difficulty and distance might last forever. Out of sight; out of mind is David’s assessment of himself with respect to God. And this “out of sight; out off mind” will never end.

Hid your face from me

The last way David talks about his plight is to use a word picture. He said that God had hidden his face from him. This clearly implies that David believed that God not merely had his attention elsewhere, but that he deliberately was avoiding him.

The point of the first movement is to suggest that there may come, even in the life of the believer, the feeling that God has forgotten. David said, long before our experiences in life, “God has forgotten; God has turned away”.

I

V.2a,b

If verse one described David’s problem by talking about God, verse two describes the problem by talking about himself. David continues his lament as he talks about himself. Notice the change in pronouns; from second person to first person.

Here in v.2 he is describing the effects of believing that God had forgotten him intentionally. We can summarize the effects like this. If we believe that God has forgotten us when life is tough, we will be forced to turn to our own resources. This will only compound the problem. Let’s look at how David patterns this response.

Must take counsel in my soul

David believes that he is forced to rely only upon himself. It is as though he were tossing upon his bed looking to himself for the counsel he needs amid this hardship. And we notice that sorrow upon sorrow increases as we think we have the resources needed to forge ahead when gripped by grief. When we rely upon our own counsel, trying to find some escape, some way out of our trouble, we end like David in v.2. His plans are futile plans; his counsel is worthless counsel. He is hurting and he knows no way out. He is at his dead-end!

Enemy

v.2c

Exalting over David

And all the while, like circling vultures, his enemy hovers above, waiting for his fall; waiting for his meal. And this victory for his enemy will allow his enemy to be exalted over David. This was his great concern.

David, we've noticed, structures his lament around his view of God (v.1), the resulting state of himself (v.2a,b) and now we see him describing his enemy.

It doesn't seem necessary to try to identify this enemy of David. Nor is it profitable to place this Psalm within a known time in David's life. The Psalm is unspecific for a reason. His enemy is our enemy; his distress is our distress. At times, even his complaint to God may be found on our lips. His life? Distressing! His perspective of God distorted. The first point I desire to make from Ps.113 is:

Point #1: When life is hard and God seems far away our perspective of God has become faint and faulty.

Now before we leave this first movement and his description of his problem (Vv.1-2), there is one curious item that remains. Did you notice a break of logic?

There is something quite ironic occurring in these verses. So far, we've noticed David's thoughts. God it appears has been faithless. He believes that God had a case of amnesia; that he forgot one of His children in the midst of severe hardship. But even more frightening, he was entertaining the idea that the Lord intentionally turned his face from the one whose heart was in dire need. One, I doubt, could find a more chilling description of the Lord in the Scriptures than what we find here. And yet...

What do we see David doing? David is praying to His God. David's response shaped by a distorted view of God was sinful. Nevertheless, he still was praying. On this confusing, but all-to-familiar human pattern, Martin Luther once wrote, "Our hope despairs, and our despair yet hopes.". Luther said it well. Look with me at this type of prayer. We come to it in vv.3-4.

The Petition

Vv.3-4

The second movement of this Psalm serves as an essential transition between the lament of vv.1-2 and the praise of vv.5-6. This central section is the petition.

Hear me!

How he prays

Once again we have a typical pattern found in laments. There is a scream to God to hear followed by a call for Him to save. When we get into a true spiritual "down" period, so that we even begin to doubt God and His written, revealed attributes, we must pray for God to hear and to save.

Earnestly

First we should notice how David prays. When he is crying out to be heard and to be saved He says, "O LORD, my God". This is his emotional confession of trust. It is given even in the midst of his despair. The God who has "forgotten him" is the only God there is. The Lord, who has turned His back, is Yahweh alone. To whom else can we turn? It is always true that only He has life-giving grace.

David's prayer is impassioned. It is also trusting and hoping even amid despair. This is how our prayers must ascend to our Lord and God. We mustn't mumble a few words or perform traditional and ritual prayer. We must be real. We must be ardent. We must remember that the promise-making, promise-keeping God whose name is Yahweh is our only hope. When life is hard and God seems far away, trustingly we must come to Him in prayer.

Intentionally

The other thing I think is significant for us in vv.3-4 is to notice that David prays not only earnestly but intentionally. David strengthens his petition by placing a reason before the Lord to compel Him to respond.

There are actually three reasons why David believes God should answer his petition. They are found in vv.3-4. David says that if God does not answer his prayer, he will die. Not only will this be the death of one of God's servants but also his enemy will believe that he has won the victory. The implication of these words, in a polytheistic world, is that the enemy's god (who is no god) will have prevailed over Yahweh (who is God alone). Here, David's case becomes one of vindicating God's character. David, in effect, says that God's glory is in jeopardy. And if there is one thing which stands out from the Bible above all things it would be God's passion for His glory. The Bible says, "For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another" (cf. Isa.48:11).

David essentially says, "Lord, your reputation is attached to my destination. Your glory will be given to another should my enemy triumph over me. You love your glory above all. Don't let yourself be profaned. Save me, O Lord, save me!

You don't care. I can't comprehend. And your enemy will win!

David, like a lawyer, makes his case before God to hear and to save him.

Help me!

What he prays

Having looked at how David prayed, we now need to see more exactly what he prays. When David cries out to be saved he is asking for something a bit puzzling when we first read it. The request is "light up my eyes" (v.3b)

Though we cannot be certain from where he took this imagery, it appears that David is using an image from his experience as a soldier. David had a long experienced combat. David was familiar with death. Surely he had cradled the heads of fallen friends on his lap and heard their last words while looking into their eyes. He compares himself with one who was dying. Like fallen comrades before him, David speaks of eyesight slipping and hazy and becoming weak; an ominous sign of the end of life. When David screams, "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death", he is using the imagery of a slowly dying man whose life is fading. Unless the Lord were to restore his eyes, he would soon be dead.

This, then, becomes the petition. David is suggesting in v.3-4 that the problem isn't in vv.1-2 like we originally thought. It is found in vv.3-4. The problem of a "forgetting God" is not found in God but is in our view of Him. When we feel that God has left us; that God has intentionally turned his attention from us, when this happens we need

Him to answer our prayer. We need Him to “light up our eyes”. We need to have our eyes (the eyes of our heart; cf. Eph.3:14ff) refocused on the character of our God. The spiritual cataracts must be removed. We need to pray for a new view of Him; an accurate sight of His faithfulness. The second point I wish to make from Psalm 113 is this:

Point #2: When life is hard and God seems far away our prayers to Him must become fervent and focused.

And so, the first part of this Psalm suggests that there will come a time when God seems distant. The second movement urges us to pray for an enlightening of our eyes to receive a fresh perspective of God and His purposes in our lives. This transitional movement of vv.3-4 prepares us for the third section found in vv.5-6.

The Praise

Vv.5-6

Vv.5-6 could not present a stronger contrast with the mood of the preceding section. The change of tone is noticed first in the phrase, “But I” found in v.5a. This clearly signals a distinct change in mood. The only explanation is that God has answered the prayer of David. He has “lit up his eyes” by providing a fresh view of His character.

But I...shall rejoice

Vv.5-6

David has not yet been delivered from his trouble. Nevertheless, he has learned a new level of trusting response to the Lord in hardship. When his life was caving in and His sight of God dim he prayed. He yearned for help to his sight problem. Though his circumstances didn’t change immediately, he was reassured of something. V.5 starts off saying, “I have trusted in your steadfast love”. In these words the same David that charged God with being forgetful himself remembers. David remembers a basic and unchanging reality concerning God. The point of this whole Psalm hinges on the Hebrew word *hesed*; translated as “steadfast love”. The teaching of the Psalm is that *in the Lord’s steadfast love there is not forgetting.*

He cannot forget

We sometimes speak of a threshold of pain. Perhaps we might also speak of a threshold of faith. When our faith is put through testing, and God brings us through that test, we are then ready to believe Him more intensely than ever before; like Abraham on Mount Moriah or Jesus on Mount of Olives. We learned a couple of months ago in the Book of Hebrews that “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his rever-

ence. Although he was a son, *he learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb.5:7-8).*

It is difficult to accept this truth at the time of our own suffering. But when God stretches our threshold of faith through suffering, we can experience a fresh view of His most basic characteristic; His steadfast love. We realize that this thing called “forgetfulness” is not a God-thing but rather a people-kind-of-thing. We are the ones who forget. We are the ones who fail to remember that God cannot and does not forget. His love never fails (Lam.3:22,23; Isa.)! And it is at this time that he “lights up our eyes” so that we see Him afresh.

And so, I will trust and praise

And when we see Him afresh, He restores our obedience to Him. And the restoration of obedience is demonstrated in vv.5b-6. For reasons seen in the preceding vv., David ends in song the poem he began with a sob. While still not out of his distress, he knows that one day he will complete his vow of praise. (Read again vv.5b-6)

By these words of oath, David pledges to his loyal Lord that God will receive His due praise from him. We arrive at the foothills of the message of this Psalm. God loves His people with steadfast love. And there can be no forgetting in the steadfast love of the Lord. Therefore, let all of God’s people in all of God’s providential circumstances praise the flawless Father in Heaven. Let His people renew their passion to pray when their perspective of Him becomes distorted. Let all of God’s people cry out for renewed view of His steadfast love. And then, watch what the loyal Lord does.

From these verses I wish to make the third and final point from Psalm 113.

Point #3: When life is hard and God seems far away our praise over Him will become free and full.

Conclusion

In conclusion let me unpack some implications arising from the three points.

Concerning point #1

1. Life is hard.
2. When God seems unfaithful, know what is happening.

Concerning point #2

1. Amid trouble pray.
2. Pray earnestly and consistently for the eyes of your heart to be enlightened.

Concerning point #3

1. Amid trouble trust.
2. Look forward to the day when praise returns.