

“How Long, Lord?”

Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 7:15-25a;
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30; Psalm 13

July 13, 2014

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This summer, we are working our way through Psalms. I've chosen a few psalms I think are representative of the whole set of psalms, which is almost impossible to do, but we will hear the different kinds of psalms and their way of speaking to us. I remind you again that as we think about the psalms, they are poetry. Poetry is different than a propositional kind of truth. They invite us into what's going on and to experience it, to hear it, and then to think about it. So as we read this psalm, I invite you to do that. First let it simply wash over you and then we'll talk more about it. This is Psalm 13:

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

How long will you hide your face from me?

*²How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?*

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

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

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

⁶I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

The story of Esau and Jacob is an interesting one, and when I looked back on the passages for this Sunday, I almost didn't keep it because I wasn't sure how it was going to fit. And then I realized that it is a story that is so familiar to all of us, not simply because it is in the Bible and we have read it before, or not because I have actually sold my birthright, but because of the sense of loss I'm thinking about with Esau. You think about Esau coming in and you wonder: Did he really think that Jacob was going to take his birthright? Did he really believe that was going to happen, even after Jacob made him swear? Or was he really just so hungry he didn't care? Did he really think he was going to die? He ended up losing his birthright. The Bible said he despised it because he lost it. But I wonder about after that had happened. There's a story later on about Jacob being worried about coming back and seeing Esau because he doesn't know how Esau is feeling about him. So if we think about a little later on, is Esau thinking, “What in the world happened? Why did I do that? My life is going to you-know-where.” At that point, I wonder if Esau couldn't have written this psalm because this is a psalm about that disappointment, or things going wrong,

Last week we talked about the wonder of who God was. We had that image of God wrapped in a garment of light. It's one of those images that gets me thinking. I can't quite imagine it because I don't know quite what it would look like, but it gives me a sense of wonder. And then we run up against life, and we think, how do I deal with that wonderful God? How do I even praise God when I'm feeling so bad, when I get to a point where I want to simply complain?

It's not hard to do. I don't know about you, but there are all kinds of things in life that go wrong. You get up in the morning and stub your toe. Something else goes wrong. You butter your toast and accidentally drop it, and which side lands face down? The buttered side every time, or at least it seems that way. In that moment, I could hear myself saying something like this psalm: Why me, God?

Maybe it's not really just the bread. It is frustrating to have it land buttered side down, but it's not just this instance. It's all those other instances where you didn't feel like you could say anything at the time, but now all that built up emotion comes spilling out because now you can say something. Know what I mean? There's this frustration that things just didn't go the way I expected today or at this point in my life and I can get pretty upset. Do you ever get to the point where you feel like saying, "*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*" There are those moments, and the wonder about the psalm is that here it is, that kind of experience.

*²How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

Now, there's real pain and sorrow in our lives, isn't there? And I think the psalms are full of those instances that show that we can express that pain and sorrow to God. I do want to say, however, that in this particular psalm, I began to wonder what the pain and sorrow really was.

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? It began to make me wonder if the problem really was that somebody laughed at me when my bread fell on the floor, or maybe something more serious. It's about some way someone else is getting what I should have, or someone else is putting me down, or someone else is better. Someone else, someone else... This psalm is saying "What about me, Lord? What about *me*?"

*³Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
⁴and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

This psalm ends up going to that place where it just seems to be about whether I'm winning, about whether I've got the stuff I think I should have. I began to wonder why in the world this psalm is here. Have you ever been outside of a relationship, watching people and seeing how they interact, and you say, "Uh-oh. I see something happening that's not going to come out nice." It feels like this psalm is like that. This psalm is looking at the relationship between God and this person, and the person comes and just starts complaining.

I don't know about you, but I have probably been there myself with people in my life. I just come and start complaining. It almost suggests to me that it's a record of us as human beings liking to complain. God's big enough, of course, to hear the complaints. We wouldn't be here if God weren't big enough to hear our complaints, but it also

reflects on us and gives pause and reason to wonder. Sometimes we have deep pain and sorrow we need to bring to God. We have real complaints and we need to cry out, but other times? Notice how much about this is about me. I'm not getting what I want. God, don't you appreciate me? Don't you care for me? Is there anything besides me?

This psalm drew me into an interesting place. How often do I get so focused on my own expectations to the point of saying, "God, that expectation wasn't met. You're doing it wrong." That's a pretty drastic thing to say, when we think about it. But we get pretty close, and even find it easy at times, to go there. God, you're doing it wrong.

This part of the psalm doesn't seem to have the self-reflective thoughts of someone like Paul. "God I know I do not do what I want to do..." And the whole thing begins to sound like the Abbot and Costello skit, "Who's on First." You can't figure it out. But isn't life like that sometimes? I do the things I do not want to do; I don't do the things I want to do. You get confused. Did I do the right thing? But there's this self-reflective sense in Paul about trying to figure out where to turn.

The beginning of the psalm doesn't seem like that. It's not about me at all. It's "God, you haven't fixed this for me." And what does Jesus say? He doesn't say, "I'm going to come into your life and turn it around." He says, "Come with me and we'll turn things around." He doesn't just say, "I'm going to fix life." He doesn't say there are no more yokes and no more burdens. They are light and easy, but they're not gone.

As we encounter life, life is not always easy in the way we want it to be. It doesn't always meet our expectations, and we can complain about it. God will hear. But we have children complain about things to us, too, and we hear it and we recognize it's not appropriate to respond, or not in the way they want. I don't think it's a problem with God's hearing.

Maybe this invites us to think differently about our own complaints. Maybe we should look and say "I don't like what's going on. This didn't meet my expectations." Do I just say, "God, you didn't meet my expectations," or should I say, "Were my expectations wrong? Is there something here for me to learn?" The psalmist seems to recognize in the end that perhaps there is something beyond him, and it is the thing he really holds on to—the steadfast love of God, the salvation that comes from God, and that's what allows him, in the end, to say:

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

⁶I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Yet it leaves the question for me, can I get past those moments when I think God has done it wrong? Can I get past thinking that I should have it better than somebody else, or that it's about me winning? Can I get past that and quit putting my hope in my own expectations and instead put my hope in God and the salvation God gives? It's a simple question, but it's incredibly hard to do sometimes, to put that trust, to remember it's not all about me and that my real hope is in God—the steadfast love of God, the salvation God gives us.

Let's pray:

Lord, I suspect we have all experienced those times when we do not do what we want to do, but do the very thing we don't want to do. Expectations of ourselves and our lives have been disappointed. Sometimes we blame ourselves; sometimes we blame you. Lord, guide us beyond our disappointments, our complaints. We recognize that sometimes there is real, deep pain and sorrow and still the best approach is to turn to you—whether it's to look beyond our simple complaints or to bring you our deepest pain and sorrow—to look to you and to know that when we come you have steadfast love for us. You have a salvation that will lift us up. You can take the burdens we bear and lighten the load. You can lead us into a yoke that is easy. Lord, help us not get stuck in our own perspective, but look to you to know the help you bring, the grace you show, the future you bring into our lives. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.