

Praying Your Frustrations

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It's good to see you this morning. Our sermon text is Psalm 13. Psalm 13. Let me read this text for us.

To the choir master, a psalm of David. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? 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. 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. Let's pray together.

[1 : 08] Our Father in heaven, we have heard your word. Now we pray that you would let us receive your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Lord Jesus.

Our rock and our redeemer. In your name we pray, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Well, when you're fed up, how do you pray?

When you're frustrated and angry, how do you pray? When you're feeling alone and forgotten or when sorrow and shame seems never ending, how do you pray?

Seriously, why don't we take a second right now and think just for a moment in our hearts. What has prayer life been like for us in those kinds of life experiences?

For many of us, it's hard to pray when we reach the end of our rope. You know, when trouble first comes, that often kind of ignites a desire to pray. We pray fervently in the beginning when troubles come.

[2 : 19] But what about when the circumstances don't change after a week or after a month or even after a year? Like when your place of work remains as toxic and dysfunctional as ever.

Or when your married life seems as hard and challenging as ever. Or when being single seems as lonely and pointless as ever. Or when your battle with besetting sin in your life seems as defeating and hopeless as ever.

When the problems grind on. When nothing seems to change. How do you then pray? How do you walk with God? How do you commune with God even then?

How do you pray?

How do you pray in those kinds of circumstances? Now the first stanza, verses 1 and 2. These verses give us what I'll call the permission to vent.

[3 : 44] The permission to vent. Let me read those two verses again for us. But let me read them in a paraphrase by Eugene Peterson. Long enough, God.

You've ignored me long enough. I've looked at the back of your head long enough. Long enough I've carried this ton of trouble. Lived with a stomach full of pain.

Long enough my arrogant enemies have looked down their noses at me. That's a prayer of frustration. Of fatigue.

Of being fed up at the lack of change. Now this is one example of many in the Psalms of what we call prayers of lament. But laments aren't only prayers of sadness.

Though they often are that. They're also prayers of deep discouragement. Of frustration. Of despair. And sometimes we need the permission to pray like that.

[4 : 44] You know, we can think that holy people only pray holy prayers using holy words with completely holy motivations. Right? Well, let's be honest. There was only one human being who ever fit that bill.

The Lord Jesus Christ. The God man. And he gave us the Psalms to pray. Because he knows that we aren't always perfectly holy people. And besides that, when Jesus was hanging on the cross. He prayed a prayer of lament. When Jesus was at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He sighed a deep sigh. Not just of sadness in that moment. But of anger.

And we know from Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit who seals us for the day of redemption. As we heard read earlier in the service. The Holy Spirit also groans within us as we experience life in our broken world.

You know, while the world is still broken. While we still battle our sinful nature. While we still experience conflict and suffering and even death. There will always be a place for prayers of lament.

[5 : 42] And you know, if we don't pray prayers of lament. If we aren't willing to take our emotions to God. And say things like, how long, oh Lord?

We've had enough. You know, if we don't pray prayers like that. Then inevitably, without a doubt. We will fall into some kind of idolatry. A prayer life without prayers of lament.

Will inevitably lead to a life riddled with idolatry. Now here's what I mean by that. As a Christian. I hope this doesn't come as a news flash.

You live in a fallen world. And you will live in a fallen world. Until you die and go to be with the Lord. Or until the Lord Jesus returns to judge all evil and make all things new.

And in this fallen world, you and I will experience frustration and pain and unanswered prayer. And there will be times when you will get to the end of your rope.

[6 : 43] And there will be times when you feel maybe as the Apostle Paul felt in 2 Corinthians when he writes, We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Those times will come for us believers in this fallen world. And in that moment, if you don't go to God with a prayer of lament, you will go to something else to fill the gap.

You'll bury yourself in work. Or we'll just kind of zone out with entertainment and media and distraction. Or we'll use food or drink or exercise or meditation or whatever to numb the pain.

Or, you know, you could even sort of develop the kind of self-confidence, the sort of stiff upper lip that says, You know what? I'm not going to let anything bother me anymore because I'm not weak.

In other words, what will happen in that moment is that you will go to some other substitute Savior to make things better. And that's the very definition of idolatry.

[7 : 48] It doesn't have to be a carved statue of a fake God. An idol is anything that takes the place of the true God in your life. Any substitute that you lean on to be okay, that you lean on to rescue you deep down in your soul.

So if you're not willing to go to God and lament, if you don't have the permission to vent to God, you will inevitably fall into some kind of substitute God, some kind of idolatry.

And that, friends, will bring us not to a place of freedom, but to a place of slavery. Because every idol in our life promises freedom, but makes us a slave.

If we lean on work, we will have to work harder and harder and harder to be okay. If we lean on entertainment and distraction, we'll have to keep on distracting and entertaining ourselves more and more and more to be okay.

If we develop that stiff upper lip, which we're pretty good at at New Englanders, right? We like the stiff upper lip. But if that's our way out, we only will have to grow.

[8 : 52] We will have to grow harder and harder and harder to be okay. All of these substitute saviors will promise us freedom, but only ask for more and more and more and make us a slave.

So what I'm saying is this. Learning to pray with the permission to vent is utterly essential to the spiritual life.

Did you know that there are over 40 psalms of lament in the Psalter? Now, there's only 150 psalms in the whole Psalter. That's like almost one-third of all the psalms.

One-third are prayers of lament in one way or another. Another, clearly God wants this to be an important part of our walk with Him, an essential part of our walk with Him.

Almost one-third. Some of you were doing the math thinking, wait, wouldn't 50 be one-third? Almost one-third. So like David and like many other psalmists, we need to be willing to say, when we're feeling like we've had enough, when we're feeling like we're being forgotten, when we feel like nothing's changing, we need to be willing to say, how long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?

[10:04] And you see, what we're doing when we pray like that is we're actually inviting God into those emotions. We're not sort of rejecting or blaming God and then wallowing in the emotions.

And we're not rejecting or stuffing the emotions and then sort of pretending with God. No, no, no. We're neither ignoring God. We're not ignoring the emotions. We're inviting God into the emotions when we pray these prayers of lament.

You know, we're praying something like, you know, you know what this feels like, God? It feels like you've forgotten me. It feels like the only counsel I've got are my own thoughts spinning around in my head and I can't get off the hamster wheel.

It feels like my enemies keep on winning. God, how long is this going to be? You need to come in here. You need to be present with me. You've got to be present, not just in my mind, not just in my circumstances, but you need to be present in how I'm feeling too.

You need to come into that place as well. And for some of us, that's kind of new spiritual terrain. But you know, here's the good news.

[11:16] When God the Son became incarnate and took on our human nature, he didn't just take up our human body. He didn't just take up our human mind and intellect.

He didn't just take up our human will, our volition, what we do. He took up our human emotions too. You see, God's not afraid of your feelings.

He wants to come into those feelings, and he wants to come into those feelings so much that he took on a full human nature in the incarnation to do so. So yes, brothers and sisters, we have permission to go to God with our emotional life.

Permission to vent to God. But the psalm doesn't stop there. It doesn't stop there. When we've reached the end of our rope, Psalm 13 also shows us not just the permission to vent, but also a petition to bring, a petition to bring, something to ask for.

Let me read verses 3 and 4 again. David writes, Now, you know, if we're not careful, if we're not careful, prayers of lament can sometimes sort of bleed into two unhelpful directions.

[12:44] And just as handholds, I'll call one direction stoicism and one direction emotionalism. Now, what do I mean by that? Stoicism is sort of just simply resigning to our fate and trying to be as balanced and unflappable as we can in spite of it.

So we pour out our hearts to God and lament, but then we just sort of stop there. We realize nothing's changing. We become stoic, and we let come will come. And you know, sometimes if we're really not careful, we can sort of let theological platitudes sort of resign us in that place of just letting, you know, letting come what come.

But on the opposite end of the stream, if we're not careful, is sort of emotionalism, which is the opposite. We just ride the roller coaster of our emotions up and down and round and round.

And eventually what we end up doing is not talking to God, but we end up just kind of talking to ourselves about ourselves on and on and on and on. So how do we help from going in either unhelpful direction when we pray our prayers of lament?

Well, this is what the middle of Psalm 13 is all about. We bring our petitions to God. We ask God to bring about change.

[13:52] And the main petition here in Psalm 13 is, light up my eyes. Light up my eyes. You see, prolonged sorrow and anxiety have made David's eyes heavy.

He wants to sleep. He wants to give up. But he knows that such proverbial sleep will only mean death for him and victory for his enemies.

That's why he says, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemies say I've prevailed over him. So he prays, light up my eyes, God. Now, what does that prayer mean?

I think there are many ways we could pray this prayer, light up my eyes. I think we can pray, light up my eyes physically. You know, prolonged turmoil, prolonged stress wears us out physically, doesn't it?

We grow physically weary and fatigued and we need strength. We need renewal. So we can pray, light up my eyes physically. Give me the strength. Give me the stamina to just go on.

[14:55] We can also pray, light up my eyes emotionally, right? We can ask for relief from anxiety, from despair, from anger. We can ask God for the clouds to part, for the joy to return.

We can pray, light up my eyes emotionally, God. But perhaps most importantly of all, we can pray, light up my eyes spiritually.

What we need most of all is a renewed vision of God. David has even begun to experience this when he prays, consider and answer me, oh Lord, my God.

God, God's already begun to light his eyes. After all, David's praying to the Lord, the transcendent I am who I am.

The Lord who created galaxies into being just by speaking a word. The Lord who brings nations to their knees like he did when he brought Egypt to its knees to redeem his people out of slavery.

[16:13] The Lord, Yahweh, the creator of all. The untouchable and infinitely holy one, the Lord. And yet David says, the Lord is my God.

You see, the transcendent holy Lord also comes near and gives himself to be known by his people. Do you see how unprecedented that is?

The infinitely holy one stoops to be known by us finite creatures. The timeless one comes down and lets himself to be known in time. The all wise one reveals himself to the simple like you and me.

The all powerful one reveals himself to the weak. The Lord lets himself be known and lets himself be called our God. And when our sorrows are tumbling over our head and wave after wave just keeps pushing us down, when we want to close our eyes and just sink, we pray, light up my eyes, O Lord my God.

Give me a glimpse of you. Like Peter stepping out of the boat and walking to Jesus. Do you remember that episode from the Gospel of Matthew?

[17:25] Like Peter, when our eyes get pulled away from the Lord, when the waves grow large, our Savior seems small and far away in that moment we sink.

And so we pray, light up my eyes, Lord. Light up my eyes. Let me see you. And that prayer leads to our third point here in Psalm 13.

Verses 5 and 6 lead us from permission to petition. Now it gives us a perspective when we see God. A perspective that leads to trust.

Verses 5 and 6 give us the perspective we need to be able to trust. Let me read verses 5 and 6 again for us. David says, 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. So what is the perspective that allows David to trust, even when his troubles grind on?

[18:27] What is it that he sees? What is the perspective from which he can put things in their proper place? It's what David calls here and what the Bible calls God's steadfast love.

I will trust in your steadfast love. You remember when Peter was walking to Jesus on the water and he began to sink, when the waves seemed bigger and stronger in his mind than the creator of the wind and the waves.

What happened in that moment when he was sinking? Peter cried out, Lord, save me! And what did Jesus do? He reached out his hand, took hold of Peter, pulled him up, and said to him lovingly, why did you doubt?

You see, friends, the steadfast love of God is not like our love. You know, we love things because they're lovely and because they're useful to us.

And our love kind of comes and goes, doesn't it? But God's love, in Hebrew, his hesed love, is a love that doesn't come and go based on how lovely or how useful the object happens to be.

[19:36] No, God's steadfast love is the love that he has pledged and promised and sealed to give us.

Why? Because he's God. That's why. And there's no turning back. I mean, think about it. There is nothing the all-knowing God could ever discover about you or me that would make him change his mind.

He already knows everything about you. Past, present, and future. He knows every choice you will make, every sin you will sin, every mistake you will make, every triumph you will have. He knows all of it.

There's nothing he's going to discover about you that he doesn't already know. And he loves you. Done. You know, the Lord Jesus didn't look at the sinking Peter and say, well, Peter, you had your chance.

Sorry, man, there's 11 more in the boat. We're going to see how those do. I'm going to go find another disciple. Sorry. No, he reaches down and he lifts him out.

[20 : 47] But here's the amazing thing, friends. The Lord Jesus would reach down even deeper than that, wouldn't he, to draw us out.

He wouldn't just stand in the midst of the wind and the waves and pull us out. The steadfast love of God doesn't just overcome the gap between creator and creature.

The steadfast love of God overcomes the infinite gap between his holiness and our sinfulness. You see, when David spoke of the steadfast love of God, you know, he could look back on his life at many times when God had rescued him from his enemies and David knew he didn't deserve it. He knew he was just a kid from the field and was a sinner and he didn't deserve any of God's favor to him. But David only saw in shadows in that moment the greatness of the love of God for us and for his people.

Because when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son. Not just to walk among us so that we could see what God is like, but to die for us so that we could be reconciled to God.

[21 : 57] You know, our sins and our flaws and our moral failures, they're not just little nicks on our record that someday might get weighed out. No, friends, our sins against the Holy God deserve death.

We deserve to sink under the waves of God's justice. But Jesus went down into the waves for us and on the cross bore the wrath our sins deserved. And in the resurrection, he came back up again, defeating sin and death once and for all.

Now, when Jesus takes hold of us in his steadfast love, we have nothing to fear. Think back through the first couple verses of Psalm 13.

You know, sometimes it feels like God has forgotten us. But from the perspective of God's steadfast love, we know that God could never forget us.

If the Father gave his only son for us, how could he ever forget you? Think of something that's most precious to you. Maybe you have a son or a daughter.

[23 : 05] Could you imagine giving that thing away in order to gain something else? Would you ever forget that moment? You would never forget. God the Father will never forget you.

He's given his son for you. How could he forget? And it might feel like there are times when God hides his face from us, when his favor seems so far away. But remember at the cross when the sky went dark and the Son of God died.

We sing, the Father turned his face away. In that moment, the Father did turn his face away. Why? So that his face would never be turned away from you. The face has already turned against our sins at the cross.

So now, though you be a sinner, friends, though I be a sinner, God's face will always shine on us. He'll never turn his face away. And though it might seem like our enemies are constantly exalted over us, though it might seem like sin and death have the upper hand, we know that ultimately our enemies are fighting a losing battle.

It's 100 to 0 in the fourth quarter and there's only a couple seconds left and we're on the winning team. And they're still going to fight and they're still going to try, but it's a losing fight.

[24 : 19] Why? Because the risen Lord Jesus has conquered sin and death, is seated at the right hand of the Father interceding for us and he is seated and will reign until all things are put under his feet.

How much more can we say with David, the Lord has dealt bountifully with me? Even in the midst of prolonged sorrow, in Christ, we are still heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ, awaiting the day when our faith will become sight.

We will receive our full adoption at the resurrection and the creation along with us will be released from its bondage to decay. We will see God's face and we will reign with him forever. That's why Paul can say in Ephesians 1, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.

He's saying that right now. Not just some spiritual blessings, not just a couple depending on how well your week went. No, in Christ, the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing he has dealt bountifully with us.

You know, when we're in the valley, when we're amidst the waves, I think it can feel really hard to pray verses 5 and 6, right? I've trusted in your steadfast love.

[25 : 56] You know, when we're really down and out, it can feel like that's a prayer for the super spiritual, right? The super spiritually mature. I could never sort of lift myself and pray a prayer like

that.

But don't you see, friends, that's why we have this psalm. The words are here for us, for weak sinners like you and me.

God gave us these psalms so we don't have to be spiritual superheroes. We can pray the words of this psalm as our own.

We can lean on these words when our words fall short. We can take up this perspective, this perspective of trusting God's steadfast love. And we can even let these words find us when we can't find the words.

You see, even the pages of scripture are God's grace to us saying, let me pick you up and carry you through and even give you the words that you can pray when your prayers fall short.

[26 : 59] God's inviting us into this perspective of trust. He wants you to come into that so deeply that He's literally given you the words. Even in the midst of lament, even in the midst of petition, He's inviting us to trust.

So brothers and sisters, when we're fed up, when we're frustrated, when we're feeling alone, this is how we can pray. And God will lead us into a place of permission and petition and finally perspective and trust in His steadfast love.

And that will give us the strength we need to persevere until our King comes again. Amen? Let's pray. Amen. Lord Jesus, thank You for the Psalms.

Thank You for giving the medicines our weary and weak souls need when we are weak and when we are buffeted by the winds and the waves when we are feeling alone. Lord, remind us this week of Your comforting presence.

Help us to pray this week and be attentive to Your Spirit this week as we encounter all the situations of our life. God, help us not to forget that Your providential hand is always at work and help us to develop the rhythm of going to You in prayer in every moment of every day.

[28 : 23] Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.