

June 21, 2020

Psalm 13

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies
To the leader. A Psalm of David.

The Book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible. Eugene says that it provides us with the language for prayer: our responding to the God who speaks to us. "Prayer is not just what good people do and say when they're doing their best. It's the language by which we become honest, true, and personal in our response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God."

Psalm 13 is one of the most well known psalms of Lament: prayers offered to God when the person or group is hurting – feeling upset, betrayed, or abandoned. These prayers are both individual (as today's is) and communal, on behalf of the community of faith.

Psalm 13 is well known for its structure and unavoidable repetition. It has a three part-structure.

Part 1: verses 1-2 :is the complaint of the poet - God is distant, has God abandoned me?

Part 2: verses 3-4 : the prayer of the poet, petition for God to answer, to show up and speak out.

Part 3: verses 5-6 describing the salvation or deliverance of the poet, who abandons herself into the depths of God's unending love.

English Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (19 June 1834 – 31 January 1892) notes that the repetition of the words "How long?" four times in this psalm resemble cries; he creatively refers to this psalm as the "How Long Psalm"—or, the "Howling Psalm".

Some think this might be the prayer composed by King David when his son Absalom conspired against him (2 Samuel 19). Others think it could have been when David (or another person) is sick, fearful of death, without hope of healing. While the exact context in which this prayer is uttered is not described, it is easily identifiable. We all have been through such dark valleys of doubt, traversed such dark nights of the soul when all seems lost and God seems all too mute and deaf to our cries for help.

Something transpires between verse 4 in which the poet claims to be shaken, fearful, in sinking sand, without hope...and the beginning of verse 5.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today's psalm grabs you?
- What stories in the Bible does such a prayer of despair bring to your mind?
- How do you struggle today to see or hear God at work in our world, or in your life?
- How have you found salvation and joy in the moments of lament and feelings of abandonment by God in your own life? How did/has that experience of transformation reshape your life? Breathe resilience into our faith?
- How do you feel disoriented or lost today? Talk with God about it. If you're up for it compose your own psalm of lament or song of hope!

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,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

HOW LONG shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ Consider and answer me,

O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes,

or I will sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ and my enemy will say,

"I have prevailed";

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ **But** I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the Lord,

because the Lord has dealt bountifully with me.

Recovering the Fullness of Prayer: The Psalms of Lament as a Bridge to Healing

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

Psalm 13:1

“Psalms offer speech when life has gone beyond our frail efforts to control.”

- Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, pg. 19

“The Psalms are an assurance to us that when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage.”

- Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, pg. 23

DISORIENTATION AND LAMENT

Brueggemann proposes that life is a constant process of orientation (or equilibrium), disorientation, and reorientation – all experiences represented by different categories of Psalms. Psalms of lament emerge from the experience of disorientation. “They express the pain, grief, dismay, and anger that life is not good. (They also refuse to settle for things as they are, and so they assert hope.)”

PSALMS OF LAMENT BY TYPE*

Communal/Corporate	12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129
Personal/Individual	3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42, 43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142
Penitential	6, 32, 38, 51, 101, 130, 143
Imprecatory	35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140

*This is not a definitive list. You will observe limited variation in how some Psalms are categorized depending on the source.

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF A LAMENT PSALM**

Address, Complaint, Petition, Praise

- I. Address to God
 - sometimes includes an initial plea
- II. Complaint
 - the real lament – cry for help and description of the problem or crisis
 - sometimes ends with an affirmation of trust
- III. Petition
 - what the psalmist wants God to do about it
 - might include reasons God should answer the prayer
- IV. Praise or Blessing
 - acknowledges prayer has been heard
 - vow of praise or worship in anticipation of deliverance

**This structure is a broad generalization. There is much freedom and variety in the composition of lament psalms but a basic pattern can be discerned.

References and further reading

Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Fortress Press, 1984

Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed., Cascade Books, 2007

List of lament Psalms and categories adapted from <http://www.crivoice.org/psalmtypes.html>