

GOD ANSWERS PRAYER

Psalms 13, 57 & 86

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.30.2005

How long, O LORD; will You ignore me forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

How long will I have cares on my mind,
grief in my heart all day?

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Look at me, answer me, O LORD, my God!

Restore the luster to my eyes,
lest I sleep the sleep of death;
lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in Your steadfast love,
my heart rejoices in Your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,
for He has been good to me.

(Psalm 13, TANAKH translation with modifications).

This psalm divides into three distinct parts, and it is a classic example of a psalm of complaint. Like the psalms of complaint or lament, Psalm 13 shows us that prayer is a vigorous, active form of hope in God. This psalm moves from protest (vv. 1-2) to petition (vv. 3-4) to praise (vv. 5-6). Protest, petition, and praise—that's what prayer is all about.

At the outset, the psalmist protests, asking four questions. These questions are rhetorical questions: they do not seek an answer but rather accuse God for the trouble. "How long? . . . How long? . . . How long? . . . How long?" The fourfold cry indicates insistence and impatience, and blames God for the trouble. Not only is the psalmist in a desperate situation, God is responsible for that desperate situation. God is absent and apathetic. "Look at the mess I'm in!" pleads the psalmist, "And God, it is *your* fault because you have forgotten me, you have forsaken me!"

In verse 3, the LORD is named a second time. Here it is an address of intimacy: "*my* God." It is as if with the initial outburst, the pent-up rage is released, and now there is an opportunity to recognize and reaffirm the relationship that is so necessary to utter a

protest. “My God” indicates a relationship with God, a relationship that permits the psalmist to be bold and blunt in prayer. The prayer is based on the belief that the lives of those who belong to God matter to God.

Then the psalmist waits. It is a long wait after verse 4, a wait in the depths of desperation, a wait in the darkness of death, a waiting “until hell freezes over.”¹ There must be such a wait, perhaps a long wait, because there is no other court of appeal. One must simply wait until there is a response.

Then—and we do not know how long the wait was—prayer is answered and things are changed. The God who forgot has remembered. The God who forsook, has acted. Life erupts in praise. The Lord God has responded, giving the faithful what the faithful should and must have.

As people of faith, we will always find it necessary to pray, “How long, O Lord?” even as we at the same time profess that “the Lord has been good to me.”

Psalm 86 reads:

Hear, O LORD,
and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
Preserve my life, for I am devoted to You.
You are my God;
deliver Your servant who trusts in You.
Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for I call to You all day long;
bring joy to Your servant’s life,
for on You, Lord, I set my hope.
For You, Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on You.
Hear my prayer, O LORD;
listen to my plea for mercy.
In my time of trouble I call You,
for You will answer me.

There is none like You among the gods, O Lord,
and there are no deeds like Yours.
All the nations You have made
will come to bow down before You, O Lord,
and they will pay honor to Your name.
For You are great and perform wonders;

¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg, 1984), 59.

You alone are God.
 Teach me Your way, O LORD;
 I will walk in Your truth;
 let my heart be undivided in reverence for Your name.
 I will praise You, O Lord, my God, with all my heart
 and pay honor to Your name forever.
 For Your steadfast love toward me is great;
 You have saved me from the depths of Sheol.

 O God, arrogant men have risen against me;
 a band of ruthless men seek my life;
 they are not mindful of You.
 But You, O Lord, are a God
 compassionate and merciful,
 slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
 Turn to me and have mercy on me;
 grant Your strength to Your servant
 and deliver the son of Your maidservant.
 Show me a sign of Your favor,
 that my enemies may see and be frustrated
 because You, O LORD, have given me aid and comfort.
 (Psalm 86, TANAKH translation with modifications).

“There is none like You among the gods, O Lord, and there are no deeds like Yours”
 (v. 8). The psalmist does not explicitly say wherein the Lord’s uniqueness lies, but the
 body of the psalm suggests it is in the Lord’s attention to and action for poor, needy,
 desperate persons.

Psalm 86 guides us through what is involved in prayer as supplication to God.² First,
 prayer is the cry of a *servant* to his or her *Lord*. Second, prayer is made in confidence
 that God *will* respond. Third, prayer is made in confidence that God *can* help. And
 fourth, prayer is the voice of commitment. Prayer is not only a *plea* for life, it is a
submission of life.

The foundations of faith are not to be forsaken in situations of misery. Rather, faith
 works powerfully in such situations because the Lord is known to be a God who is
 especially attentive and able in seasons of distress. It is because the Lord God is known
 from His character and conduct to be a God of light, that He is uniquely needed in times
 of darkness. When we cannot see what lies ahead, we look back. When we look back,
 we see the presence of God and so we reaffirm that He is present now, now in the

²See James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1994), 278-280.

darkness when we cannot see Him. Because He *has been* there, we believe that He *will be* there. This is not blind faith. This is looking ahead with eyes that know what they have seen in the past. The eyes of faith enable us to see in the dark, for we know that light lies ahead.

This morning, before my sermon, we sang song number 61: “Be Exalted, O God.”³

This introduced to us our final psalm for study. Psalm 57 reads:

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,
for I seek refuge in You,
I seek refuge in the shadow of Your wings,
until danger passes.
I call to God Most High,
to God who is good to me.
He will reach down from heaven and deliver me;
God will send down His steadfast love and faithfulness;
He will frustrate my persecutors. *Selah*

As for me, I lie down among man-eating lions
whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongue is a sharp sword.

Exalt Yourself over the heavens, O God,
let Your glory be over all the earth!

They prepared a net for my feet to ensnare me;
they dug a pit for me,
but they fell into it. *Selah*

My heart is firm, O God;
my heart is firm;
I will sing, I will chant a hymn.

Awake, O my soul!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will wake the dawn.

I will praise You among the peoples, O Lord;
I will sing a hymn to You among the nations;
for Your steadfast love is as high as heaven;
Your faithfulness reaches to the sky.

Exalt Yourself over the heavens, O God,
let Your glory be over all the earth!
(Psalm 57, TANAKH translation with modifications).

In the three psalms we have read today, we have heard of hope that despairs and

³Lyrics and music by Brent Chambers (1977); arranged by Reid Lancaster (1993).

despair that hopes—both happening at the same time. You and I, we are frail, fearful, dying people who cannot find God where we want Him to be, *and* we are those saved by God who have a long, long history of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.

Psalm 57 expresses the remarkable conviction that God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are the pervasive, fundamental realities in the universe. It would have been easy for the psalmist to conclude otherwise. Likewise, it would be easy for us to conclude otherwise as we look upon a world full of hatred and hostility and that seems bent on destroying itself. But this is precisely the reason why Psalm 57 is such a crucial contemporary witness. It is a reminder that the rule of God has always been experienced and proclaimed amid opposition. The clearest reminder of this reality for Christians, of course, is the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross of Jesus Christ—it is the reason and the power that gives us the courage to face this world and pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven.”⁴

Psalm 57 is divided into two parts with this refrain: “Exalt Yourself over the heavens, O God, let Your glory be over all the earth!” (vv. 5 & 11). Exalt Yourself, God! What a bold statement! The psalmist is saying, “Look God, I know that You’re God in heaven. So, act like it on earth! Show Yourself to be God on earth!”

Who is it that presumes to pray like this? Who is it that assumes they can command the God of the universe to show that He is indeed the God of the universe? Who is that may be so bold as to challenge God to demonstrate His glory? It is the people of God, that’s who. For we have seen His glory time and time again, and we therefore long to see His glory again and again.

Because we, the people of God, trust that God ultimately rules the world and that God’s purposes for us will finally be fulfilled, we dare to perceive the mystery of love where others can see only the misery of life. Because we trust that love is the basic reality of the universe, we are able in the face of evil, sin, and death not just to sigh in silence, but to sing loud enough to wake the dawn.

“Exalt Yourself over the heavens, O God, let Your glory be over all the earth!” Let the people of God sing!

⁴Matt 6:10.