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psalm 13

meditation 1— psalm 13.¹⁻²

Invocation/ complaint

¹How long, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?

How long will You conceal Yourself from me?

²How long must I suffer deep doubt,
deeply grieving day in and day out?

How long will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me? (author's translation)

In commenting on Psalms 3-7, we treated them as if they all addressed the same or a similar circumstance in which the Psalmist was the victim of character assassination and charges of guilt—guilt such as separated him from God and His assistance. Throughout, the Psalmist maintained his innocence and his faith in God's help. After a kind of apotheosis in Psalm 8, in which the Psalmist adopts a more global view, the Psalmist recognizes in Psalms 9 and 10 (one psalm) that enemies such as he had were a global problem. Those whom the Psalmist calls "malevolently immoral" attack all the planet's vulnerable people and populations. The Psalmist reflects on the past and on examples of God's history of deliverance. He hopes and prays that history will repeat itself in his own and other vulnerable individuals' lives.

Notwithstanding such expressed hopes, in Psalm 11 the threat of the malevolently immoral is very much present. Some have given up hope that the power of the malevolently immoral can be checked, and suggest that the Psalmist join them in their pessimism. The Psalmist rejects their pessimism and expresses faith in God and His deliverance. In Psalm 12, the Psalmist gives voice to the reality of the dominance that the malevolently immoral enjoy. They seem to be everywhere and to have grown their influence and prestige among the general population. But, in the midst of the Psalmist's lament over this sad state of

affairs, he hears God's voice. God promises that he will rise up and deliver the vulnerable from the threat the malevolently immoral pose. The Psalmist believes God's promise. Indeed, nothing can be as sure as this Divine promise.

Whether or not we read Psalm 13 as a continuation of the same or a similar threat against the Psalmist that we found in the preceding psalms, we should understand the Psalmist's desperate opening plea in light of Psalm 12's divine promise in which the Psalmist put such stock. God has not fulfilled His promise. The Psalmist has been suffering for a long time and continues to do so now. God is nowhere to be found. He seems to have forgotten and ignored the Psalmist's affliction and need. The divine absence and disregard causes serious doubt to enter the Psalmist's mind.

In Psalm 4, the Psalmist had questioned those who attacked him. "How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?" (vs. 2) In Psalm 6, a previous low for the Psalmist, he was so bold as to question God.

"And I ask you, YHWH,
'How long will this go on?'"¹

He again questioned God in Psalm 10.

"Why, Yahweh, are You now so standoffish?
Why do You remain absent during these distressing times?"²

But Psalm 13 reaches a new low. The Psalmist's questioning of God is more intense. He wonders, not once, not twice, not thrice, but four times "how long" his enemies will continue to thrive and "how long" his suffering will last. Though the Psalmist's enemies are not named, or the nature of their attacks specified, a wholistic, canonical reading of the psalms leads us to conclude that the enemies are the same class of malevolently immoral who have prowled the previous psalms and are found "absolutely everywhere" according to the Psalmist's view.³

I appreciate the Psalmist's questioning of God. It amounts, really, to a challenge. I appreciate the Psalmist's honest and faithful expression of doubt. I have from time to time felt doubts similar to his. I have doubted God, doubted His promises to right wrongs, doubted his interest or engagement with not so much my own difficulties as those facing all of humanity, especially the world's vulnerable and poor. I have chaffed at the dominance of the world's malevolently immoral, who seem to infest every nook and cranny of the planet, causing immeasurable suffering in every corner of the globe.

Many years ago, a friend suggested that I should go to the theaters and watch a movie. The movie's name was "Platoon." I self-righteously informed this friend that, as counseled, it was not my habit to watch R-rated movies. Less self-righteously, he informed me that it was not his habit either, but that this movie was one that addressed moral issues with which our world needed to wrestle. Somehow, his challenge moved me, and I ended up going to the theater and watching the movie—I smile now, remembering how I slinked in and out of the theater hoping that no one I knew would see me.

The movie was revelatory. And it wasn't simply the intensity of R-rated entertainment. I left the theater ashamed. Ashamed to be human. Ashamed to be a member of a despicable race that could act with such cruelty, brutality, and violence. More intelligent than apes, we acted little better than they, our moral capacities falling far short of our intellectual. I was embarrassed by our animal nature—a certain church

¹ Psalm 6.³

² Psalm 10.¹

³ See Psalm 12.⁸

leader of my younger years by the name of David O. McKay used to speak of our “animal nature” and the need to rise about it.

I have, since, watched a number of R-rated movies that I felt had redeeming social value. I recently watched the movie, “Oppenheimer.” Like “Platoon,” it is a movie that, in my view, perhaps ought to be mandatory viewing. It might provide a moral education for the natural man, the intelligent ape that resides within our species.

Anyway, after watching the movie, I felt, once more, ashamed to be human. But, this time, my shame extended beyond myself and my species. My shame extended to God, Himself. I was embarrassed for Him. What a lousy Father He must feel like to have sired such a despicable, self-destructive race! If God exists, I felt, thought, and expressed, what a failed parent He seems to be. Which is more likely? I wondered. Which is better: to believe in such a flawed and impotent God or to disbelieve in God’s existence? Sometimes I find both the belief in such a seemingly flawed and impotent God and the disbelief in God to be disconcerting. It was not a pleasant few days afterwards.

I am not fully reconciled to or with God. With the Psalmist, I wonder at His standoffishness. I do, though, find myself praying still. That’s something, I suppose. I find my mind repeating a certain Lamanite king’s prayer. “I’ve been told ‘that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou...?’”⁴ I have, as a loving father once did when he approached Jesus, pleaded, “help thou mine unbelief.”⁵

As scripture has done throughout my life, such scriptures provide a measure of comfort. They are a spiritual lifeline to which I cling. The Psalmist’s bold questioning of God gives me comfort. I am not alone among the doubting faithful. And like the Psalmist who continues to hope even in the face of doubt, I will continue to hope in my doubt. I will continue to question. I will continue to challenge. I will continue to hope. And I will continue to be grateful to scripture which has been the greatest influence in my life. And no Book has been more influential in helping me maintain faith and hope than the Book of Psalms.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

⁴ Al. 22.¹⁸

⁵ Mark 9.²⁴

Plea

³Pay attention! Respond to me, YHWH, my God.
Brighten my eyes, lest I sleep death's sleep,
⁴lest my enemy can boast, "I've defeated him!"
lest my adversaries exalt because I succumb (author's translation).

Psalm 13 began with a faithful expression of doubt and bold questioning, even challenging of God.

"How long, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?
How long will You conceal Yourself from me?
How long must I suffer deep doubt,
deeply grieving day in and day out?
How long will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me?"

The Psalmist follows up this quartet of bold and faithful questions with three pleas—tripartite pleas for divine assistance are common in the Psalter. The Psalmist's pleas that God "pay attention," "respond," and "enliven" him are surely in response to his earlier expressed feelings that God has ignored him and made Himself scarce, causing doubt to enter his mind. The tripartite pleas also give us insight into the intensity of the Psalmist's need. His suffering is a matter of life and death.

The potential death is not a passive one—one caused, for example, by illness. Nor should we understand the death to be a reflection of poetic metaphor. The death that threatens the Psalmist is not an accident of mortality. It is real and violent. It is a death that the Psalmist's enemies have actively planned and toward which they have worked. We have seen this before.

In Psalm 5, the Psalmist was charged with wrongdoing. His accusers' "throat is an open grave."¹ The danger the accusations pose for the Psalmist were no less real for the poetic imagery in which they are expressed. The accusations brought against the Psalmist were intended to do more than undermine his place in society. They were intended to end his life. The Psalmist's enemies intend to

"catch me, and stomp my life into the underworld;
establish my abode in death."²

All too aware of his enemies' intentions, the Psalmist reminds God,

"in death there is no awareness of you.
Who praises you in š'ôl?"³

The Psalmist's enemies have carried out their deathly plans far enough that he must plead

"respond to the mistreatment perpetrated by those who oppose me,
raising me from death's door."⁴

¹ Psalm 5.⁹

² Psalm 7.⁵

³ Psalm 6.⁵

⁴ Psalm 9.¹³

In the 10th Psalm, the Psalmist comes to the realization that the threats he faces face all the world's vulnerable people. His use of metaphor to represent the threat is intense.

“They sit in ambush outside villages.
From concealed places they slay the innocent;
their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.
Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
They crouch low, hunch down,
and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.”⁵

The threat against the Psalmist and his vulnerable brothers and sisters worldwide is likened to that a lion presents. Of course, the threat can be metaphorical for judicial attacks. It can be metaphorical for economic attacks. Judicial and economic threats against the vulnerable can end in reputational and financial ruin. But they can also end in death. Poor, vulnerable people do die because of judicial and economic injustice. Lifespans are shortened by society's immorality. We try to ignore this reality. The reality of a kind of “passive murder.” But our ignoring the reality only deepens our crime and intensifies the consequences.

Adding to the tragedy is that those who attack, causing suffering and even death, do not have a moment's second thought. They feel no guilt. Quite the opposite. They are boastful: “I've defeated him!” They are exultant when their prey succumbs to their violence.

As we watch such scenes play out before our eyes, we cry out, and that repeatedly. We not only cry out, “How long?” We also plead that God pay attention and respond. That he put an end to those who feel justified, rewarded, and happy when others suffer at their hands.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁵ Psalm 10.⁸⁻¹⁰

meditation 3— psalm 13.⁵

benediction/ assurance

⁵But I have placed my trust in your unwavering devotion.
Most certainly I will fully rejoice in your deliverance.
I fully intend to sing of YHWH
when He has restored me (author's translation).

As he was in Psalms 3-7, 11, and 12, and as he and all the world's vulnerable were in Psalms 9 and 10, in Psalm 13 the Psalmist is under the threat of attack by those who are enemies. The Psalmist has boldly and repeatedly expressed his confusion and doubt over God's absence.

“How long, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?
How long will You conceal Yourself from me?”

How long must I suffer deep doubt,
deeply grieving day in and day out?
How long will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me?”

He has pleaded for God's help and deliverance.

“Pay attention! Respond to me, YHWH, my God.
Brighten my eyes, lest I sleep death's sleep,
lest my enemy can boast, “I've defeated him!”
lest my adversaries exalt because I succumb.”

The Psalmist's plight is most dangerous and his feelings most desperate. But into this darkness a light shines. God's “unwavering devotion” pierces the darkness of the dangers and desperation. The Psalmist fixes his sight on this light, on God's unwavering devotion.” He intends to remain fixed on it, believing that God will act consistent with his unwavering devotion. He will yet know the joy of God's deliverance.

And like so many others who have experienced the joyful deliverance of God's unwavering devotion, he will not be silent. He will sing of God. He will sing aloud. He will, as Oliver Cowdery was counseled “not suppose that he can say enough in my cause” but “at all times, and in all pleas, he shall open his mouth and declare [good news] as with the voice of a trumpet, both day and night.”¹

The Psalmist will want God to hear his song, of course. But he will want others to hear his song. He will want others to learn from his song. He will want others to learn to put their faith in God and in his unwavering devotion—“gospel,” good news indeed.

Millennia later, that Oliver Cowdery was promised that as he opened his mouth without reserve God would “give unto him strength such as is not known among men.”² The strength of the Psalmist's voice, the strength of the Psalmist's song as carried through the millennia. I have heard it. It has borne fruit in me. May his song bear fruit in you too!

¹ DC 24.^{10, 12}

² DC 24.¹²

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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