

How to Complain to God

Psalm 13

Introduction – To Complain or Not to Complain

Nobody needs to tell us that life is tough. From the moment we come out of the womb, life is full of events that shock our system and challenges we have to face. Some cynics have said, “Never trust anyone who smiles...it makes you wonder what they’re up to!” If we take life as it comes at us, it is very easy to become negative and complain about everything. Of course, constant complaining doesn’t cultivate many friendships. Most of us know that a positive attitude about life brings a multitude of benefits. Those in the medical field will readily confirm that a positive attitude is a critical factor for healing. Even in the midst of great troubles, a positive attitude helps us to count our blessings anyway and seems to make life a little better. Besides, doesn’t the Bible tell us to “count it all joy...when we encounter various troubles?” (James 1:2)

So when it comes to dealing with our troubles, we who are trying to follow Jesus wrestle with internal tension. On the one hand, we do want to “count it all joy” and face our troubles in faith and a positive attitude. Such an approach appeals to the “heroic” in our spirituality, but it can also make us stoic and inauthentic. We put on a happy face when we’re dying inside. We don’t share our troubles with anyone because we don’t want to appear spiritually weak. We don’t complain to people and we don’t complain to God. But the reality that we are living is something completely different. We are hurting. We may face very difficult or even dangerous circumstances. There may be people who genuinely hate us and wish us ill.

What do you do with that? If you bottle it up and just tough it out, frankly, you risk mental illness in the long run. Does God allow us to complain to him? Can we accuse him of deserting us or not being fair when we honestly feel that way? This is real life as we experience it. We need a prayer language in which we can approach God with our troubles.

Our spiritual forebears, the Jews, were very good at complaining. I love the musical, *The Fiddler on the Roof*. After the opening credits roll, the film continues with the main character,

Tavye, complaining to God.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8q9Eli863c>

I think this scene is hilarious. But when the Jews complained during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, God didn't think it was very funny. They complained and they doubted him. You can read the story in the Book of Exodus. But as the Hebrews began to know and trust God, they eventually learned how to complain about their circumstances even while expressing strong faith in Him. We need that kind of faith-language today. Psalm 13 is a very helpful example of how to complain to God in faith. In the Old Testament tradition, these psalms and prayers are called "laments."

Text – Psalm 13

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 the 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.

How Long?

Psalm 13 is one of the psalms of David. We don't know the exact circumstances of its writing but it was certainly a time of deep struggle for him. It could have been when he was on the run from King Saul, or later in life when he chased out of Jerusalem by his own son, Absalom. Whatever the case, it is clear that he is facing real danger. This psalm is typical of laments, having the dynamic of a three-part relationship between the believer, his enemy, and God. The psalmist is war-weary and begins with the cry of desperation: "How long?" It is a common cry in Scripture. It occurs in at least eleven different psalms and was often on the hearts and lips of the prophets. "How long," the persecuted saints of Revelation ask, "before you will judge ... those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10)

Have you ever felt that way? You have endured your troubles for a long time and there is no end in sight. You need a solution and you need it now. You are weary of the struggle. That's exactly where David was. I like the way *The Message* puts it: "Long enough, God – you've ignored me long enough." Seems impertinent and disrespectful. How is it that God allowed David to speak to him like that – much less include this in the Bible? (That's why we're dealing with this psalm this morning.) David is demanding. He needs an answer and he needs it now. He can't take it anymore. (Is this resonating with any of you?)

He has four "how long" statements. Have you forgotten me, God? When he questions whether or not God is hiding his face from him, he is asking why God has removed the blessing of his presence from him. In the Old Testament, to have God's presence removed is to lose the guarantee of blessing and protection. In his struggles, David feels abandoned. He has no one who understands and who can counsel him. He is alone in the isolation of his own dark thoughts. His enemies are winning the day.

Can you feel the desperation in these words? This is the language of feeling. It's a language that we need in our relationship with God. I'm certain that David knew God was aware of his problems. I'm certain David knew the fact that God was still sovereign and in control. David

knew it in his mind, but he didn't feel it in his gut. (Ever feel that way?) It takes a lot of chutzpah to pray to God like this – to accuse Him of abandoning you. But didn't Jesus say the same thing as he hung on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These are words exploding with emotion. They are strong words - risky words.

Long enough, God. I've had it. I need you to act.

The Prayer

And so David asks God to "consider." Consider what? As we said several weeks ago, Psalm 1 is the key to unlocking virtually all the other psalms. It's short. Let's review it:

Blessed is the [one]
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

David, in Psalm 13, believed that he was holding up his end of the bargain – living according to the principles and the covenant of Psalm 1. It was God who was renegeing on his part of the deal. So David asks God to weigh things in the balance – to consider – and see if he isn't deserving of God's intervention.

Since the coming of Jesus, we do not approach God on the basis of our own righteousness. The Apostle Paul said, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness,

but according to His mercy... (Titus 3:5). We come to God not on our own merits, but by faith in Jesus Christ and his merits. That's why we pray (hear me) "in Jesus' name." Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 1 and we come to God by faith in Christ. When we come to the Father in distress and pray in Jesus' name, he doesn't weigh our righteousness or good deeds. If that were the case, we would all be doomed. In our own righteousness, we have no standing before God. But when we come to him in Jesus' name, he sees the righteousness of Christ in our stead. And that is why we can come boldly before the throne of grace and present our lament and our request to him: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

...and so David boldly prays,

"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."

The Pivot Point

It is at this point that the psalm dramatically shifts. And it is the same for virtually every psalm of lament in Scripture. The psalm shifts from complaint to an affirmation of faith. It is a contrasting conjunction. A language expert would call it an "arresting adversative." It is arresting because it stops the direction of thought abruptly. It is adversative because the direction of the thought is opposite of what had preceded it. Everything rides on this change in direction:

- "Lord, I can't take it anymore...but I still trust you."
- "Lord, I am fearful for my life...but I still trust you."
- "Lord, I don't know how this is going to come out...but I still trust you."
- "Lord, unless you intervene, this will be a catastrophe...but I still trust you."

Each phrase in this affirmation of faith is a rich store of spiritual understanding.

“...I have trusted in your steadfast love;”

God’s “steadfast love” is his covenant love. Another word for it is “lovingkindness.” It is the agreement that God made with his people. God’s love will never fail and he will never break his covenant. His love and his promises are forever. And so the psalmist “trusts” – he pins all his hopes on this one thing: God’s love never fails.

“my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”

Remember David’s condition. He felt like God had abandoned him. He was constantly depressed. But in faith, he looks forward and declares, “my heart shall rejoice!” This kind of faith mocks today’s troubles and seizes tomorrow’s promise of rescue. And in faith, David amplifies his rejoicing with singing.

*“I will sing to the Lord,
Because he has dealt bountifully with me.”*

There’s history here. Just as Jeremiah would write years later in the midst of his country’s devastation:

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:21-23

David knew the goodness of the Lord in his life. He remembered that God had a track record with him. He recalled God’s benefits in the past and it brought hope for the future for him. Are

you understanding the richness of this prayer language? David could lay out his bold complaint before God because he had an unshakable trust in him. Friends, this is the language of spiritual intimacy. We can only pray like this if we know God intimately.

Next week, we're going to talk in very practical terms about how we can grow in spiritual intimacy with God. We're going to consider the pathway of grace – the richness and diversity of spiritual disciplines. One of the spiritual practices that I frequently engage in is journaling. And if you were to read some of my journal entries, many of them would read like Psalm 13. I'm very good at complaining. And since no one is going to read my journals – it is just between me and God – I let it fly from the depths of my soul. There have been times when I've felt really lost. There have been times when I've wondered where God was. I knew he hadn't abandoned me, but it sure felt like it! And my journal entries reflect my occasional desperation. But God has been very present in those times. Sometimes, when I'm writing, it feels as if the Holy Spirit is guiding my hand. He often speaks loudly through the silence of a pen stroke. Inevitably, the direction changes. I am reminded of his faithfulness and I express my trust in writing – just as David did. Those moments of desperation, when the goodness of God overwhelms my thoughts are very profound. They are some of the most moving experiences in all my spiritual life.

Friends, we need the intimate language of lament. God invites our gut-honesty. He can withstand our complaints, our cries, and even our whining when we do it while affirming our faith. In fact, (and hear me on this) it takes more faith to complain to God than it does to keep our problems to ourselves. When we complain in faith, we know that God is there and that he hears us. We know that he will act on our behalf.

If you are a Christian, you need to learn to complain like David. Moreover, we as a church need to learn how to complain in faith in this way together. Indeed, this world is really messed up and there is much to lament.

But I want to speak for a moment to those who may not be Christ-followers this morning. I'm so glad you came today. You need this message as well. I'm sure you have your complaints.

Everyone does. If God seems far away, it is because you have no relationship with him. But it doesn't have to stay that way. God invites you to come to him. You were made for relationship with him. You don't have to face your troubles alone. God has a listening ear to hear and a ready hand to help those who know him – as David did. If you don't know God in that way, we would love to introduce you. Our mission here at First Baptist is simple: we want to help you find and follow Jesus. And it is through Jesus alone that you will find your way back to the God who loves you and made you for himself.