

A Psalm of Lament for Christmas

Scripture Readings: Psalm 13 (text); Matthew 1:21-25; Luke 2:8-14

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • December 6, 2009

Songs: Psalm 30; Psalm 13; “Angels from the Realms of Glory”

Introduction

Today, we assemble together knowing that our brethren, Warren and particularly Cheer and their families, grieve over the loss of Cheer’s father, Mr. Roy Antonio. Mr. Antonio was a faithful servant of Christ, a loving husband, a nurturing father, and a loyal friend. Warren described Mr. Antonio with these words, “He was God's gift to us – being instrumental in the bringing forth of my wife into the world and raising her up in a manner that has benefited me as her husband and our kids as their mother – with his felicities transcending kinfolk, spilling over to the many people he has touched through the preaching of the Word, his social advocacies, and his long, drawn-out story-telling” What makes it more difficult for them is that his death was very sudden.

Some Christians have the wrong notion that when their beloved ones die, they should not grieve and mourn because they are now “in a better place” (assuming that they were also Christians). But the Bible is full of people of faith who mourned over the death of their beloved ones for many days after their loss. Jacob mourned over Joseph (not knowing that he was not dead). David mourned over his newborn child who died because of his own sin. Many of the psalms speak of God’s people mourning and sorrowing over sin and suffering.

In our text today, we read of David sorrowing over his sufferings. We may picture David as he laid awake deep in the night, unable to sleep, in a dark, damp cave in the wilderness of Engedi near the Dead Sea, wrestling with his thoughts. It seemed so long ago when, as a young teen, the prophet Samuel anointed him to be next king of Israel. He had all his plans laid out to be a great king then. King of Israel? How can he be a king now, a fugitive for many years, running from city to city trying to escape death by the sword of King Saul? His throne is a rock in this cold, dark cave, his kingdom a ragtag band of hungry men. Once, he had been a loyal servant of the king, playing music for him, fighting his battles, adored by the people. “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands,” the people sang. Now, feeling abandoned by God after many long years of running for his life, David cries out to God, “How long?” four times.

Why is David, a man after God’s own heart, sorrowing? Our text does not say why, but we know that David had many sufferings all throughout his life. He was continuously beset by persecution and distress before and after he ascended to the kingship of Israel. As an outlaw pursued by a jealous king, he fled from one hiding place to the next. As a king himself, his first son with Bathsheba died as penalty for his adulterous and murderous relationship with her. Later, his own beloved son Absalom forced him to flee from his throne in Jerusalem to live once more as a fugitive. Any of these occasions, in which his life hung by a thread through sword,

hunger, or sickness, could have been the occasion for writing psalms of lament that bear the name of David (Psa 6, 22, 35, 51, 69).

David's prayer in Psalm 13 is a prayer of one who feels abandoned by God and desperate. It is a lament, a cry of complaint, sorrow and grief.

Today is the first Lord's Day of the Advent season, and you may be wondering why preach from a psalm of lament on this "season of joy"? To keep you interested – and in suspense – that will be the last point in this sermon.

Psalm 13, like many other psalms of lament, follows a certain pattern: first, a complaint to the Lord of being abandoned and forgotten (verses 1-2); second, a plea for deliverance (verses 3-4); and third, a praise for the Lord's salvation and steadfast love (verses 5-6).

The Complaint of Being Forgotten

The psalmist opens with a four-fold complaint, "how long?" And each time, his feelings intensify as he feels the urgency of his desperate situation. "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?" All these years, David has prayed that God would put a stop to his persecution by Saul, and his running away from certain death seems to be forever, with no end in sight. For David, God's inaction seem to be a sign that he has forgotten and forsaken the psalmist, and his distress is so great that it seems that he has been in this situation forever. Jeremiah, lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, cries out to God, "Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" (Lam. 5:20)

No, God has not just forgotten him. He has actually hidden his face from David. He must have remembered all those times that the priest blessed the people, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his face upon you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24-25). Now, God has hidden his face, forgotten and abandoned him (Psa. 10:11), indifferent to his sufferings (69:17; 102:2; 143:7). Is God angry at all the sins David has committed in his life? After all, when God hides his face, it means that he is angry with him (Psa. 27:9a; 88:14). This is equivalent to our day's "turning your back" or "not looking at me." But here, the psalmist doesn't ask God to forgive him of sin, so indifference or abandonment is more a likely cause of the writer's despair, rather than God's anger or judgment of the psalmist's sin.

The meaning of the first line of verse 2 is not very conclusive. The NIV renders it, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?" and other translations like the KJV, NASB, and ESV render it "How long must I take counsel in my soul?" This reading suggests that the psalmist tries to conceive of plans and ways to improve his desperate situation. But other readings render it "How long must I set (or bear) pain in my soul?" Here, the psalmist is grappling with pain, anguish, and sorrow in his situation. However we read it, the psalmist's despair and pain continue all the day, meaning day and night, and every day, without ceasing. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, sorrow is related to the death of a person (Gen. 42:38) or a nation (Jer 8:18). The context of this psalm, then, is a matter of life and death for the psalmist. He is near death, whether due to his enemies' sword, sickness, or hunger.

Who is the “enemy” in verses 2 and 4 that David says is gloating over his plight? What about the “foes” of verse 4? The singular word is used in 1 Sam. 24:4 when David’s men referred to Saul as “your enemy.” Or is the singular “enemy” death, as many others have proposed? The nearness of death surely makes one realize the hopelessness of his situation. Ever since sin entered the world when Adam sinned, death has been our enemy. We mourn with Cheer and Warren because of the death of their beloved Dad, because sin entered this world.

Still others believe that *enemy* is a collective word for a group of hostile individuals. From all of these, *enemy* is probably a general word for all of David’s enemies, whether it is Saul, death, or a group of people who want him dead.

Beloved in Christ, do you sometimes feel that God has abandoned you in your sufferings? In your pain and sorrow, do you sometimes want to cry out to God, “Do you hear my cry for help? Do you see the pain I’m going through? Are you even there?” Sometimes, we even challenge God’s sovereignty: “Do you know how it feels to lose a husband (or wife)?” “Why did you take away my job? How will my family eat and pay our bills?” “Why did you let our child destroy his life with drugs?” David shows that, yes, we can pray these bold, brutally honest complaints and petitions. We can pour out our sorrows, troubles, and complaints before him.

But we are not to take over God’s sovereignty over our lives by presuming we know more than God about what’s better for us. Although we cannot know the secret things of God (Deut. 29:29), the Bible reveals some ways in which God does or does not answer our prayers, and some of them might be troubling to us: (1) God answers us, but in ways we cannot see (Hab 1:5). (2) God denies our requests because he knows better, as when Elijah wanted God to take him (1 Kings 19:1-8). (3) God wants us to be dependent on him, as when Paul asked God to remove his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:8-9). (4) God delays because his own timing is different than ours, as when he delays going to Lazarus who was seriously ill (John 11:1-6). (5) Our sin hinders our petitions (Psa 66:18; Isa 1:15). All of these mean that God answers our prayers – one way or another, whether it is “yes,” “no,” or “wait.”

The Plea for Deliverance

After the psalmist lodges his complaints before God, he then pleads with God to look on him and answer his complaints. Because he feels that God is hiding his face from him – forgetting him, ignoring him – he now wants God to turn his face toward him and to look on him and answer him. He wants God to answer his four “how long” questions: “My God, you have forgotten me for so long. Put an end to my sorrow, affliction, and suffering!”

His first petition is for God to “light up my eyes.” But how can God light up his eyes if God’s face is hidden or turned away? This is because God’s face is the source of light: “the Lord make his face to shine upon you” and “the Lord lift up his face upon you” (Num. 6:24, 25; Ps. 31:16). What does enlightening the eyes mean? David’s request to enlighten his eyes is actually a plea for strength (Psa. 38:10).

David asks God to “light up my eyes,” to give him strength, for without strength, three awful things would follow: First, he will sleep the “sleep of death.” By “sleep of death,” he means physical death. Scripture frequently refers to death as “sleep,” as in Daniel 12:2 where it is said

that in the last days when the Lord will raise up “those who sleep in the dust of the earth.” Second, his enemy will mock him, saying, “I have prevailed over him.” His enemy will even taunt him continually, saying, “Where is your God?” (Psa. 42:10) Third, his foes will rejoice because he is “shaken” or moved. Some believe that being “shaken” is also another imagery for death, an occasion for rejoicing by the psalmist’s enemies.

Beloved in Christ, let this be our petition to God in our pain and suffering: that God would give us “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.” He is “our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.” He is our comfort, as he tells us, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psa 46:1, 10). Because God's steadfast love will never be removed and his covenant with his people will never be shaken (Isa. 54:10). The righteous psalmist is immovable, secure, and strong; for the Lord is his immovable Rock, secure Salvation, and mighty Fortress (Psa 62:2).

The Praise for Salvation and Steadfast Love

So with this assurance of God’s steadfast love and his salvation, David’s complaints are stilled. We don’t know how this assurance came so suddenly in this psalm. Could it have been delivered by a prophet or a priest? Or was it a word that God delivered to him directly? Or was he looking forward to a previous promise of a future deliverance, even in the midst of the painful, raging storm in his life?

However this abrupt change came about, whether through a prophet or through faith, the object of his trust and confidence is God’s steadfast love, goodness, and faithfulness. In Psalm 31:7, he writes again, “I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul.” With renewed confidence in God’s salvation and steadfast love for his people, the psalmist’s complaints and pleadings are reversed. No longer is his heart sorrowful all the day, but his heart will rejoice in God’s salvation. No longer will his foes rejoice, but his heart will sing to the Lord. No longer will his enemy be exalted over him, but God will reward him fully. David’s frame of mind now anticipates future deliverance, even in the midst of the painful, raging storm in his life. In the midst of distress, he realizes that he can be confident of God’s steadfast love, because God had delivered him from danger at other times, as he mightily delivered his forefathers from their enemies, the Egyptians.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord Jesus Christ prayed to his Father in heaven with anguish, pain, and sorrow in his heart. Because he knew that during the next few hours, the wrath of God on the sins of his people will all be poured out to him. “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,” he would say to his disciples (Matt. 26:38). “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done,” he would plead with his Father (Luke 22:42). As he hung on the cross, his enemies mocked him because they thought they had “prevailed over him.” Unknowingly, they were fulfilling what was written in Psalm 22:8: “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let him come down now from the cross. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him” (Matt. 27:42-43). He would be abandoned by God, so that we, his sinful people, will not be abandoned by God. In anguish at the covenant wrath poured out on him, Jesus cries out to God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – the same words of agony that David would cry in Psalm 22:1.

Was David lamenting the sin in his life? No, he wasn't; rather, he was complaining that his sufferings have continued for a long time, and he is weary of his troubles. Not that he was not a sinful man—he had many grievous sins in his life. But in this Psalm, he is a picture of our righteous savior Jesus Christ. God promises that when we come to Christ in faith, he will give us his perfect righteousness in life and in his sufferings.

Conclusion

Beloved in Christ, in Revelation 6:10, we read that the souls of believers in heaven pray to God, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" How were their prayers answered? They were told to "rest a little longer" until God's salvation plan is completed, until the number of God's people is complete.

But how is all of this related to Christmas? God's salvation plan was fully accomplished when Christ died on the cross. But your salvation would never have been finished if Jesus was not born in a lowly manger on that first Christmas night. Without being born as a human being, he would not qualify as your Savior. The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 16 says "Why must [the Mediator and Redeemer] be a true and righteous man? Because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should make satisfaction for sin; but one who is himself a sinner cannot satisfy for others." Only Jesus qualifies to be our Savior, because he is the only sinless person in this sin-infested world—a perfect Lamb, spotless and without blemish.

The angel commanded Joseph to name Mary's baby "Jesus," because the English name "Jesus" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name "Joshua." And "Joshua" means "Yahweh saves." So Matthew tells us that the baby's name means that he is the Savior whom God has sent to save his people from sin.

This is why we celebrate Christmas. This is why we have joy at Christmas. This is why we could say with David, "My heart shall rejoice in your salvation!" This is why the angels in heaven rejoiced at the birth of Christ, because his birth was "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Now we can glorify and praise God with the angels and shepherds because salvation came with the birth of our Savior.

As you celebrate the birth of our Savior in the midst of suffering in this world, remember that your Father in heaven hears us when we send him your pleas and requests.

Do not doubt God's salvation and steadfast love for a moment if you don't see an answer. You may not like his answer. You may not see his answer in your lifetime, maybe not even in the generations to come. He may say "No" to your request. You may not even know he already answered your prayers. But the word of God assures you that Jesus your Mediator is pleading for you before the Father in heaven. And as you rest a little longer, waiting for his answer, consider his steadfast love and the blessings that he has already bestowed upon you in times past. Persevere in doing the good works that God prepared beforehand, that you should walk in them. And look forward to the unsearchable riches of Christ that await you in the heavenly places. Amen.