



*First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2016
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Send Us Your Light: Prayers in the Darkness

Psalm 13

Welcome to Advent! Five weeks from now, we will gather for Christmas Eve. We will light candles and sing "Silent Night." We will blow out our candles... except for the candle rebel in the balcony! Then, I will relight the Christ candle with these words: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!"

It is a beautiful symbol of Christmas; that moment in history when, finally, the Savior blazes onto the scene. But it was a long wait... long, painful, centuries of darkness, waiting for the light. But here's the deal: only darkness reveals light. Only when I am straining to see can I appreciate the brilliance of a single flame. That's Advent—the four weeks before Christmas. It's not shopping season. It is a time of anticipation, of longing, of eagerness that prepares us for the good news of Bethlehem. It is about darkness, into which bursts the inextinguishable light!

This Advent, we are going to pause in the darkness. We aren't going to jump too quickly into the light. For one thing, it's more exciting. When the lights go down in the theater you feel the anticipation as everyone gets ready for what they know is coming. Darkness makes you lean in and look for the light, but it's also about reality. Despite the trees and lights and songs and parties, for some this is a tough time. You might be told, "Tis the season to be jolly," but some of you aren't. That's okay. Your forefathers weren't always jolly, either. But we can learn from them how to pray in the darkness... how to pray when we are waiting or feel abandoned or even depressed, because we know the light is coming!

Sometimes, we have to wait. Two weeks ago, Cyndi and I were on the long flight back from my birthday getaway. We were in non-reclining seats, so I was particularly excited when I saw the Space Needle and knew we were on final approach! We were a few hundred feet above the runway when suddenly, the pilot firewalled the throttles and we started climbing and pulled sharply to the right. That was exciting! Everyone was paying attention! After being this close to landing and being home, suddenly we were circling again—back in from the north, passing the Space Needle, the ferry dock, West Seattle... frankly, our second time around seemed to take forever! I wanted to go home! But, as we found out later, some pesky Sky West airplane decided to play chicken with us... so one more time around. We just had to wait.

But I'm not a great "wait-er." It's not one of my spiritual gifts. I once paid a lot of money for faster internet because I didn't want to wait 20 seconds for the red Netflix bar to move from left to right. We now have service called On Demand—isn't that what we expect in our culture? We want everything right now... on demand!

But sometimes you wait. Sometimes God makes you wait. Apparently, it is good for us. Apparently, God uses waiting to refine us. But I still don't like it.

So on this first weekend of Advent, this season of waiting, I want us to listen to a "waiting" prayer of King David. Apparently, he didn't like waiting, either. In fact, the first words of the prayer, repeated four times, make it very clear that he is sick and tired of waiting for the Lord to come through. Ever been there? Let's see what our big brother, David, can teach us about how to wait.

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.

So what words give us a hint that David is tired of waiting? "How long!" Four times the phrase is repeated. In fact, this is known as the "How long psalm"—although the great Victorian preacher, Charles Spurgeon, suggested that we re-name it the "Howl-ing Psalm" because David is howling at God in frustration. How long, how long, how long, how long, how long???

We don't know when David wrote this, but he is under attack by his enemies and he's tired of it. David was often under attack. In his early years, King Saul attacked him because he was jealous. In his later years, his own son, Absalom, attacked him because he was greedy. In between, the Philistines attacked him. David was sick of it! He was waiting for God to deliver him, and so far, God was a no-show!

The first verse captures this sense of unremitting suffering. "How long will you forget me forever?" It's a weird sentence. English translators have tried to make sense of it using punctuation. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" says the ESV. "How long, O Lord, will you forget me? Forever?" Says the New Living Translation.

But the Hebrew has no break in the sentence. "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?" Can you hear the endless frustration? "Hello, God; I'm supposed to be

your anointed one. But you don't seem to be listening to me. And I'm just wondering; is this ever going to end? You keep hiding your face from me! I look like an idiot...and my enemies look great. I am tired of waiting for you to come through, God. How long will you forget me forever?"

I won't even ask if you can relate to this. This frustration is common to all ages. The toddler who wants a certain toy and wants it now. The teenager who is the last one picked for the team or the last one picked for the dance. The young woman who wonders if she will ever meet someone who is marriage material. The man who wonders if he will ever get the job he has trained for? How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?

Sometimes it's even more serious. The man waiting to hear if his wife will give him another chance. The couple waiting for news about their fertility treatment. The woman I heard from Thursday waiting two more months to find out if she has breast cancer.

I understand a little bit about waiting. I came here as a single guy. I longed to be married, but when I hit the ripe old age of thirty, I was pretty convinced I would be a life-long bachelor-pastor. Then there was that lawsuit that began in 2007 and lasted seven years. Painful! And just this year, I had a four-month wait to find out if I had prostate cancer.

Waiting. We've all been there. Could every frustrated wait-er raise their hand? That's what I thought. Every one of us has cried out, "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?" So what does this prayer in the darkness teach us about how we should pray in our seasons of waiting?

First, it teaches us to be authentic. This prayer is absolutely authentic, isn't it? Unvarnished transparency. David isn't trying to hide anything. He is tired of waiting for his deliverance, he is in pain, humiliated, sleepless... and he's not afraid to admit it. In fact, after the four "how longs" we arrive at what we might call the "Come on, God!" section. Verse 3: "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!" "Are you listening up there? Throw me a bone! Say something, Lord!!!!"

We are told that millennials value transparency. Well, you aren't going to get much more transparent than David in his personal prayer life. But wait, there's more, because this isn't just a personal prayer of David. Could someone tell me the heading at the top of this psalm? "To the choirmaster. A psalm of David." In other words, David wrote these words and gave it to his version of Margie Dickerson. "I want you to set this to a catchy little tune. Turn it into an anthem for the choir to sing to the whole church!" Can you imagine? Maybe the bass section is singing, "My life sucks. My life sucks. My life sucks!" While the sopranos are joining in, "Why doesn't God ever answer my prayers? How long. How long." How uplifting! Not exactly anthem material, right?

But David puts his raw feelings on display for the church to see! When we are frustrated with God because of our long wait, David gives us permission to be authentic about it! It's the truth; it's how you feel. Hiding won't make it better. And you can't hide it from God, anyhow, so tell him. And tell your LifeGroup, "I am tired of waiting. I feel like I have been forgotten by God." Be authentic. What a relief that we don't have to pretend in order to keep God happy or to protect His reputation. Be Authentic!

Second insight: Avoid bad advice. You may have missed this one. Verse 2: "How long must I take counsel in my soul?" The Hebrew means to "layer plans." Plan upon plan; idea upon idea. This is a man trying to think his way out of a problem. Of course, there is a place for that. We need to live wisely—to think and plan and work to that plan. In this area, I have no problem. I am the planner... and fixer. I think through every possible scenario and spin out ten different solutions to the problem. But David warns: "When God is slow in answering you, don't be too quick to fill in the blank!"

Let me tell you another airplane story. On November 11, 1965, Delta flight 227 was on final approach for Salt Lake City, but it was too high and coming in too fast. The tower suggested the pilot go around again. The co-pilot said the same thing. But the pilot decided he didn't want to go around; he could land it with a steep approach. In fact, at one point, he told the co-pilot to "Shut the F*** up" because he was going to land that airplane. And he did land the plane—340 feet short of the runway; 43 people were killed including my wife Cyndi's father... coming home on his 35th birthday. All because one man had made his plans to avoid going around again... to avoid waiting.

When God doesn't come through fast enough for you, when you don't want to circle the airport one more time it is tempting to "lay up plans" of your own or listen to the plans of others. Tired of waiting for the person God has prepared for you? Well, don't! Go ahead and sleep with a boyfriend; everyone else does. Tired of waiting through the stress of college? Why not numb the pain with alcohol or weed; everyone else does. Tired of waiting to be noticed at work? Why not accelerate your advancement by backstabbing your colleague; everyone else does. Tired of waiting through a lousy, loveless marriage? Get a divorce; everyone else does.

Nobody likes to wait, especially if the waiting is painful or frightening or unremitting. It is easy to lay up your own plans or listen to the advice of others... advice that might bring an end to the waiting but could result in a flaming catastrophe. Don't do it. Wait for the Lord!

David teaches something else about waiting. Tell your feelings what to do. We've already seen that it's okay to be honest about our feelings. Tell God. Tell your Church. Get it out. But at some point, you need to talk to your feelings. You need to tell them who is in charge. We discover this in the last verse of the psalm. "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."

I listened to one preacher on this psalm who said that, in 6 verses, David moves from frustration and fear to rejoicing; because he prayed, suddenly, his feelings were changed. Hogwash. David still feels the same way he felt at the beginning of the psalm; but he chooses to change his attitude. He tells his feelings what to do.

Notice the head to heart to mouth progression. First, he remembers what has happened in the past. He remembers the trustworthiness of God's steadfast love, how he has always been there for him, how he has never let him down. Yes, David is in waiting right now. Yes, he is mad at God right now for not coming through on his timeline. But he makes his head remember God's faithful dealings in the past.

Then with that a memory in hand, he tells his feelings what to do. He tells his heart to rejoice because of how God has saved him again and again. Notice it is the head telling the heart what to do. You might say, "That's not possible. Your feelings are real. What you feel, you feel." That's true, but take it from me: if you wallow in your feelings, if you coddle your depression, you only send yourself into a steeper tailspin. I call it "toilet-bowling." Round and round, down, down, down, faster, faster and faster.

You can, in fact, tell your heart to behave... to re-joyce—to "joy" again. How do I know? Because of Philippians 4 which you are memorizing. "Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I say, rejoice!" Do you remember where Paul was when he commanded the Philippians to take "joy" in the Lord again and again? He was in prison waiting to be executed. Surely he was scared, but Paul took his feelings—his heart—in hand and told them what to do.

Head, to heart and finally, to mouth. David says, "I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me." The final step in triumphant waiting comes when, with our mouths, we speak or sing of what our head remembers and our heart celebrates. We trade whining for blessing. We speak of God's bounty. We pray thanksgiving for his faithfulness. We recite to our friends, not just the woes of our waiting but the wonders of God's kindness and faithfulness—the bounty of his blessings.

How often we find reason to complain because we have to circle the airport one more time! And we forget to speak words of praise and gratitude to and about a God who has poured out every possible blessing upon our lives. Words like I am encouraging you to memorize in Philippians 4:8: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things!"

A perfect reminder this Thanksgiving weekend, right? The Lord has dealt bountifully with us, even if you are in God's waiting room circling the airport. We rejoice for our salvation. And we sing to the Lord for his bountiful blessing. So let's sing one more time... ending it as Jesus did.