

# PSALM 13: HOW LONG, YAHWEH?

## INTRODUCTION

Psalm 13 is a textbook example of what scholars refer to as an *individual lament*. It is the lament of a single individual who is pouring his heart out to God, lamenting over his circumstances and asking God to intervene. What makes this particular psalm unique is that it is the shortest of any prayers for help found in the Psalter. Within just six verses, the mood and tone of the psalm changes dramatically. Kidner remarks, “The three pairs of verse climb up from the depths to a fine vantage-point of confidence and hope. If the path is prayer (3f.), the sustaining energy is the faith expressed in verse 5. The prospect from the summit (5) is exhilarating, and the retrospect (6) overwhelming” (Kidner, 93).

### Structure

To understand lament psalms better, consider Longman’s words on the genre:

The Psalms may be grouped into three major categories: psalms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. The first group refers to psalms of pure praise to Yahweh. No obstacles stand in the way of the psalmist’s relationship to God. The second group is composed of psalms of lament. Something has happened to disturb the divine-human relationship. The psalmist may feel that God has abandoned him, or perhaps, he may be experiencing God’s hostility (Longman, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 198).

Longman goes on to write:

The lament is a prayer of disorientation. It is distinguished primarily by its content and mood and secondarily by its structure. In the case of a lament, content and mood are intertwined. A lament may be recognized quickly by expressions of grief, sorrow, fear, anger, contempt, shame, guilt, and other dark emotions. Laments often involve some kind of turn toward God and hope in the form of statements of confidence or hymns of joy (ibid).

This is exactly what we see happen in Psalm 13. The psalm begins with cries of desperation—clearly, the author’s circumstances have profoundly affected his relationship with God. He is caught between two poles—God and his enemies. The psalm then moves from his plight to his prayer, where he pleads for God’s help to rectify his situation and restore his relationship to where it should be. The final portion of the psalm then moves to a renewed sense of confidence in God’s faithfulness and a trust that he will come to the psalmist’s aid. The structure of the psalm proceeds in like fashion:

1. The Psalmist’s Despair (13:1-2)
2. The Psalmist’s Plea (13:3-4)
3. The Psalmist’s Confidence (13:5-6)

## Theme

Every believer—whether new or old, mature or immature—can find comfort, encouragement in Psalm 13. It is a model of a true believer experiencing the hardships of real life and how those hardships affect his relationship with God. We are unaware of the specific circumstances that led to the psalm’s composition—but that’s okay! The psalm in itself is both encouraging and instructive, which is why it shows up here in the Psalter.

The fact that it was deposited in the sanctuary for the Levitical choirs to sing indicates that it was written for the purpose of encouraging other afflicted believers who felt abandoned by God and at their wits’ end, and not simply to remind people of an event in the psalmist’s life. There were many who needed encouragement for they too found themselves crying to God, “How long, O LORD?” (Ross, 362).

## Translation

<b>I The Psalmist’s Desperation (13:1-2)</b>	
1	A psalm by David How long, O Yahweh? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
2	How long must I take counsel in my soul, <i>Having</i> sorrow in my heart daily? How long must my enemy be exalted over me?
<b>II The Psalmist’s Plea (13:3-4)</b>	
3	Look! Answer me, O Yahweh my God! Brighten my eyes, lest I sleep <i>in</i> death,
4	Lest my enemy says, “I have prevailed over him!” <i>and</i> my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
<b>III The Psalmist’s Confidence (13:5-6)</b>	
5	But as for me, I will trust in your loyal love; My heart will rejoice in your salvation.
6	I will sing to Yahweh, Because he has dealt bountifully with me. For the Chief Musician.

## 1. The Psalmist's Despair (13:1-2)

*"How long?" (vv. 1 [x2], 2 [x2])*

- This phrase is repeated 4x in these two verses
- These explosive phrases reveal several aspects of the psalmist's physical and emotional circumstances:
  - The psalmist's situation has been prolonged...it has been going on for some time without relief, and God has continued not to answer (cf. "forever" in v. 1 and "daily" in v. 2).
  - The undue length of time led David to the heightened level of desperation
- Their location in each verse is also important—each is placed at the beginning of a phrase, leading to further emphasis.
- This type of expression finds parallels in Babylonian poetry:

### ***A Royal Lament of Nebuchadnezzar***

Yet how long with me,  
Yet how long in my land,  
Yet how long in my people?  
Until when, Lord of Babylon,  
This groaning and depression?  
This weeping and grieving?  
This lamenting and weeping?  
Do you tarry in the camp of the enemy?



- Don't miss the hope underneath the despair! David would not be crying out to God if he had no hope that God would act. His cries come from his perplexity over how long God is taking to act.
- "This is a state in which hope despairs, and yet despair hopes at the same time" (Martin Luther).

*"Will you forget me...hide your face from me...?" (v. 1)*

- "Forgetting" relates to the parallel concept of divine "remembering"
- God "remembering" is active, not intellectual—he remembers his covenant promises and acts accordingly

- Thus, “forgetting” means God does not come to their aid
- “Hide your face” is a parallel expression—turning away the face and thus withholding favor.

*“take counsel in my soul...sorrow in my heart” (v. 2)*

- “take counsel in my soul” refers to the inner turmoil of worry
- Difficult circumstances tend to produce anxiety and turmoil in our thoughts
- This represents the opposite pole of what he will resolve to do in vv. 5-6, as he determines to trust, rejoice, and sing praise
- “Sorrow in my heart” is the product worry—sorrow and despair which effect not just the emotions, but the mind and the will

*“how long must my enemy be exalted over me” (v. 2)*

- It’s unclear who the “enemy” is referencing
  - It could be personal enemies, as David faced many foes throughout his life
  - Craige suggests this singular enemy is actually death (cf. “death” in v. 3), and that David’s plight may be due to a grave illness which threatens to kill him
- Regardless, apart from the prolonged nature of his circumstances and the inner turmoil he faced, another contribution to his desperation was the thought that his enemy—whether human or death itself—would prevail over him
- “Exalt” means to raise up in power or superiority—to find victory

## **2. The Psalmist’s Plea (13:3-4)**

*“Look! Answer me” (v. 3)*

- This phrase is “toned down” in the ESV (“consider and answer me”), but in the Hebrew it is abrupt and urgent.
- Both terms are imperatives, which give commands to inferiors and urgent pleas to superiors.
- “Look” is a term calling for close examination of the psalmist’s problem
- “Answer me” is a call for action based on David’s repeated, ongoing lament and pleas for divine aid. So far, God has not acted. David’s circumstances are urgent. God needs to act now!
- These types of urgent pleas leave believers uneasy, but they uncover the boldness and tenacity that comes with genuine faith and personal relationship with God.

## Psalm 13: How Long, Yahweh?

### *“O Yahweh, my God” (v. 3)*

- David uses the personal covenant name for God in his plea—he is pleading on the basis of his personal relationship with him.

### *“Brighten my eyes” (v. 3)*

- The verb has a causative force—“cause light to shine, illuminate, enlighten”
- Sometimes, it can refer to illumination through instruction
- Here, it probably refers to physical support—revival of strength and stamina (cf. 1 Sam 14:27-29; Prov 29:13; Ezek 9:8).
- Perhaps there is also a spiritual/emotional component as well

### *“Lest” (vv. 3, 4)*

- This particle occurs 2x with a third implied in the syntax (“lest I sleep,” “lest my enemies,” “[lest] my foes”).
- The term essentially means “or else,” or “that I may not”
- The term expresses “negative purpose” (Ross, 367), and to introduce two motivations for his plea: avoiding death and avoiding the prevailing of his enemy.

### *“I sleep [in] death” (v. 3)*

- The first motivation for his plea
- The phrase literally reads, “lest I sleep, death”
- The phrase appears to be elliptical: “unless I sleep [the sleep of] death” or “sleep [in] death”
- The enemy mentioned in v. 4b may be a personified death brought on by illness
- Paul uses this same personification to refer to death as the “last enemy” which Jesus will ultimately destroy (1 Cor 15:26).
- “The psalmist represents himself as a dying man, as one already half gone, who soon will be wholly overwhelmed with the darkness of death, if the LORD does not give him new power of life” (Hestenberg, 1:201).
- “Whether verse 3 means that illness was the cause or the effect of this low ebb in David’s affairs, these two verses show what were the two poles of his world: God, but for whom life would be insupportable, and the enemy, because of whom any wavering (4b) must be unthinkable. Awareness of God and the enemy is virtually the hallmark of every psalm of David; the positive and negative charge which produced the driving-force of his best years” (Kidner, 94).

*“My enemy says, ‘I have prevailed over him’” (v. 4)*

- The second motivation for his plea
- If this enemy is literally “death,” then this line extends the personification further
- If this is a human enemy, then David’s death would allow his foes claim ultimate victory

### **3. The Psalmist’s Confidence (13:5-6)**

*“But as for me” (v. 5)*

- There is a strong contrast here in the syntax—a major shift occurs in David’s attitude and resolve. Whatever worries he is experiencing (cf. v. 2), his spiritual focus is shifting.
- David resolves to not experience spiritual and physical defeat—he will continue to trust in God’s goodness and loyal love.

*“I will trust in your loyal love” (v. 5)*

- “Loyal love” is deeply covenantal in character—God acts in a loving, beneficial manner because of his loyal fidelity to his covenant.
- This reality is what spurs David to move from a condition of defeat to confidence.
- “However great the pressure, the choice is still his to make, not the enemy’s; and God’s covenant remains. So the psalmist entrusts himself to this pledged lover, and turns his attention not to the quality of his faith but to its object and its outcome, which he has every intention of enjoying” (Kidner, 95).

*“My heart will rejoice...I will sing” (vv. 5b-6)*

- “The changes in tone in the development of this little psalm are amazing. Delitzsch notes that the composition begins with a deep sigh, followed by a gentle prayer, and concluded with great joy” (Ross, 362).

*“because he has dealt bountifully with me” (v. 6)*

- The idea of God dealing “bountifully” is actually *completeness*.
- It expresses the notion that God gives beyond man’s needs—he exceeds his requests and his expectations.

## Psalm 13: How Long, Yahweh?

### Applications

- It is quite possible for believers to experience times when it feels like God has abandoned them
- The path out of sorrow is a fervent prayer and a renewed confidence in God's sovereign, loyal love
- This confidence is rooted and emboldened by one's theology of God and knowledge of the Word
- "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:35-39).
- Additionally, when we sing songs together that praise God for his love and faithfulness, it reminds us that God does not abandon his people.