

# A New Year Prayer: When the New Year May not be Any Better than the Old Year

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**My remembrance of Dr. Bill Arp ZTz''L:**<sup>2</sup> Although Bill was not the most impassioned preacher, Bill's dry wit, consistent alliteration, and faithfulness to the argument of the author made every one of his NT and OT messages extremely beneficial. I remember one particular message in 2008. Bill had just been cut to part-time because of budget constraints. The following week he preached on Psalm 13, ending with complete confidence in God. Although no one except the faculty knew the backstory to his message, we recognized how personal this message was for him to live and preach. I offer my exposition of Ps 13 in honor of Bill.

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**A**s we stand on the brink of a new year, we are filled with hope that this year will be better than last. We hope the current year will not be filled with the frustrations, problems, sufferings and heartaches of the previous year. As we start the new year, we have hopes and dreams that this year will be better than the last. We hope we will not be followed by the same tribulations and concerns of the past year.

But what happens when the difficulties of the first year are not changed in the next year? What will you do when the calendar may have changed into a new work year, but your life situation has not?

Psalm 13 is a psalm that shows us how to respond to life when it does not look like the new year is going to change,

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<sup>2</sup> **ZTz''L** is a Jewish honorific. Generally, it is used for a deceased holy or righteous rabbi. It means, "May the memory of this righteous one be a blessing."

when a holiday as grand as New Years does not deliver on its promise to be better. We hope the change in calendar from December 31 to January 1 will put the question of “how long” to rest, but what if the question lingers into February, March and beyond? Let’s face it—we all have been there (or are there). We have all asked the question “how long?”

While the “how long” question is not unique to each of us, its exact wording is: How long must I put up with this problem? How long must I put up with his whining? How long must I put up with her? How long will life be hard? How long will I be without a job? How long must we live here? How long must I struggle to make financial ends meet? How long must I fight to fit one more needy person into an already too tight schedule? How long do I suffer the effects of his sin? How long must I deal with the stress at work? How long must I deal with the stress in the family? How long must I put up with yet another disappointment? How long must I deal with this physical or emotional pain? If you are over four you have dealt with the frustration of some part of life not changing.

How will you deal with life when the conflicts, problems, frustrations or disappointments of 2017 continue into 2018 or even beyond? How do you deal with life when this year does not look that much different than last? When life looks like it will never improve?

David’s lament in Psalm 13 is a model of prayer to be followed when believers face the unchangeable, unending, negative situations in life that seem determined to go on forever and may even threaten their lives.

### **Psalm 13: For the choir director. A Psalm of David**

The superscription of this psalm and the body of the psalm give no clear indication of the historical context for why David wrote this psalm. The readers are unsure what David was dealing with in his life to make him cry such a heart-wrenching prayer.

David may have mouthed this prayer as he was running from cave to cave, month after month from Saul who sought to kill him. Again, we are unsure. All that is known is that David

felt abandoned by all, even God and close to death. David was left to deal with his desperate, unending situation alone.

If the historical context of this psalm is vague, it is vague for a reason that it might reach across the centuries to speak afresh to readers today. This psalm gives voice to unspoken questions as we wait for God to deal with various nagging frustrations, unending sorrows and situations that seem destined to last forever.

This individual lament written by David for the choir director must have been a popular song even in ancient times because it captures succinctly the emotion of believers as they wait for God to put an end to their sorrows and disappointments that had gone on way too long.

### *Pattern of the Lament*

Although the pattern of the individual lament psalm is usually eight different elements, Psalm 13 has only three.

### **Three-fold Pattern for Prayer**

- I. David's Lament or Complaint to God (vs. 1-2)
- II. David's Petition for God to Answer (vs. 3-4)
- III. David's Confession of Trust (vs. 5-6)

### *David's Lament or Complaint (vs. 1-2)*

In his three-stanza psalm David had a threefold complaint: (1) He complained about the length of how long he had to endure God not remembering him (i.e., answering his prayer to end the uncertain distress). (2) He moaned about the length of how long he had to endure his sorrow. (3) He lamented the continuing exalted position of his enemy.

In the midst of what was for David unceasing suffering, he cried out four times within only two verses, "how long?" The repetition of the phrase "how long" drives home the emotion of seemingly divine abandonment and the struggle against unending suffering. Westermann explains, "The question is specifically the utterance of one who is experiencing a suffering

that seems determined to continue. Here, time, itself becomes the destructive force, wearing down a man's ability to hold out and intensifying the suffering to an inhuman level."<sup>3</sup>

David was not only battling against a seemingly unending trial that somehow involved an enemy but he was also battling against the feeling of being in the fight alone, without God. David's concern about being "forgotten" by God and God "hiding" his face meant the withholding of divine, practical help. The importance of God not hiding his face but "shining" his face on the individual is seen in Numbers 6:22-26:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 23 "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: 24 The LORD bless you, and keep you; 25 The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; 26 The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.'"

Because David was suffering for so long, he felt God had turned his face from him and forgotten him by not providing practical relief from his continual sorrow. "The sufferer is alone, and suffering in loneliness aggravates the anguish."<sup>4</sup>

We are not always as honest as David. We feel it is impolite to be this honest in church. So we suck up the disappointment and swallow our questions. Or if we do voice what we are feeling, we complain to others (but not to God) "how long" will my job be so bad or my relationship so unhealthy, etc. But David shows us that it is okay to be completely honest in our questions and our uncertainty with God.

In verse 2 the presence of continued suffering and the lack of divine help caused David to look inside his own soul for much needed relief. When David looked into his soul, he found he had no resources to deal adequately with his pain and the length of his suffering. Instead of relief when David looked inside, he found sorrow in his heart all day long. David was at

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<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1991), 5:140.

his wit's end emotionally and maybe even physically (v. 3). David could find no relief in himself nor was divine help on the horizon.

This continuing suffering, this continuing absence of God's help to relieve the suffering and the continuing exaltation of David's enemy over him, caused this man of God to cry and lament his suffering to God (vv. 1-2).

If you are in a situation this morning that seems destined to go on forever, David's lament in this song is yours. There are times or will be times that we will feel forgotten by God when our poor financial issues goes on week after week and month after month. When our prayers for healing go unanswered, day after day. There are times when we cannot see God's face or experience his blessing because life is simply tough.

At these times it is natural to look inside for answers to the question "how long" and we find nothing but more sorrow because we do not know how long we must put up with such a difficult situation. Additionally, we really believe that the situation will never cease, that God will never look on us with favor again. We believe we are destined to live life in a constant struggle without any resources. If we are honest before God, David's cry centuries ago is our cry today.

It is interesting that although David felt forsaken by God, he was moved to cry out to God. Think about this dynamic. He felt forgotten by God but he kept lamenting his situation to God by asking Him the question, "How long?" Why cry out to God who David did not believe was listening?! If God is truly not there, there is no sense to pray to him!

Although David felt he was left on his own to endure this seemingly ceaseless suffering, he knew God could hear his deep soulful cry. David did not confuse divine silence with divine absence. When my five children were toddlers, we used to play hide and seek in the house. Because the parsonage was a bit small, the only way to play the game well was to play it in the dark. So the kids would count to 10 and I would go and hide. Every time we played this game, the same dynamic took place. Even though my kids could not see me, even though they knew I would not answer, they knew I was there somewhere in the dark and they would always call very softly, "Daddy?"

“Daddy”? This illustrates the dynamic that David was experiencing. Although David saw no evidence of God’s working to eliminate his suffering (i.e., God hiding his face), David knew that God was there in the darkness. David did not confuse divine silence with divine absence. I think this is where believers stumble. They wrongly believe that divine silence equals divine absence and simply stop praying to God as though God does not care.

Nothing can be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, David’s lamenting to God is an act of faith. A lament such as this channels our heart-wrenching emotions to God and as such molds them into faithful expressions of our hearts. There is nothing wrong or unbiblical about voicing such raw emotions to God since they are voiced to him in faith. This knowledge that God was there in the dark moved David to the second section of his psalm.

### ***Your Petition for God to Answer (vs. 3-4)***

Keeping with the threefold complaint (vv. 1-2) David asked of God three petitions: (1) to “consider,” (2) to “answer,” and (3) to “enlighten my eyes.” David’s distress (whether it was physical or emotional) could only be lifted if God were to intervene on David’s behalf. No other resource was at David’s disposal to ease the unceasing burden that was weighing on him for so long and was so draining.

There is a sequence of events in this threefold plea to God. Once God considered or had regard for David’s burdensome state, God would then answer. With God’s answer, David’s eyes will be lightened with gladness because God had intervened on David’s behalf.<sup>5</sup> This reversal of God’s look (from hiddenness in verse 1 to looking at David in verse 3) was all that David needed to experience the gladness that had eluded him for so long (God’s face shining on him)

For David’s survival God must consider, must answer, and must enlighten soon because David felt death was very near. David was at the end of his proverbial rope!

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<sup>5</sup> Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 73.

Although the enemy was mentioned in verse four (4), readers are unsure what he or she did to David to cause a problem in the first place. What seems to be the current issue or an additional enemy for David was “time”—the seemingly certainty that this situation would last forever. But in the psalm, the enemy was one who would rejoice as long as this leader of God’s people was under such a weighty burden. The enemy of God’s people rejoiced whenever any turmoil (physical sickness, financial difficulties or emotional anguish) struck a leader and thus made him feel that God had left him alone to deal with life and ministry. David pleaded with God not to let death (the believer’s last enemy in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55) or the present enemy rejoice over him because then his trust in God would be shown to be unfounded.

David saw not only his own life at stake, but he also viewed God’s reputation and ability to deliver God’s own leader at stake as well. If David suffered much more, death and the enemy would win; God and David would have lost. I call this twisting of the divine arm.

### ***David’s Confession of Trust in God (vs. 5-6)***

It is important to realize there was a distinct change of mood between verses four (4) and five (5). Although the change of mood was quite evident, it is important to realize that David did not have his burden lifted. He was still in the midst of a significant and seemingly unending trouble in his own life. Nothing had actually changed in his situation from verse 4 to verse 5. David was still suffering greatly. Nothing had changed but his perspective! “The ‘but’ marks a step forward...it indicates a step forward into trust which the suppliant takes in face of his suffering and in spite of the persistent force of that suffering.”<sup>6</sup>

At this point David was willing to trust in God’s covenantal love (*hesed*) although his present circumstances seem to indicate otherwise. David was clinging to God’s promise to

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<sup>6</sup> Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 74.

love and be faithful to God's people (Deut 28-32). David was going to cling to God even when it seemed God was not there to cling to!

Folks, this shows the importance of God's word as a testimony of God's *hesed*. When I am lost waiting for God's face to shine upon me, for him to answer me, his Spirit drives me back to his word to demonstrate that he never forgets his own. Although he may be silent for a season (and I may feel forgotten), my feelings are not reality and divine silence never equals divine absence from my life. This is the importance of being in his word everyday. So God can use it in my life when the need arises.

But there is more. Not only has he chosen to trust in God's *hesed* (v. 5)—a one time completed action, he will sing (and ongoing action) because he has remembered the numerous past times that God had dealt bountifully with him.

Craigie summarizes this dynamic so well: "The present reality was of such a nature as to undermine the past experience of trust, but it is the nature of confidence to transform the present on the basis of past experiences and thus to create hope for the future."<sup>7</sup>

This is something that David had forgotten. If you look in verses 1-4: the first person (me, my, I) is used 15 times in the NASB. Pain is always self-centering. David had forgotten his past with God because of his present pain.

While it is not stated, there must have been a ministry of the Spirit in David's life. The Spirit must have reminded David "Oh, wait—God was with me in the past and in reality as I look back on my life he has dealt bountifully with me. If he has done that in the past and his *hesed* is still in force, then no matter what I am experiencing now, I can trust God and sing his praises."

This clinging to God's past activity in his life and his promise was the only resource that gave David a hope and a future. Clinging to this truth kept David from being overwhelmed with his unending situation. And this truth of God's faithfulness is the only thing that will keep us from being

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<sup>7</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC 19 (Waco, Texas, 1983), 143.

overwhelmed as well. In times of difficulties (that seem to stretch on forever) we have the choice to either lower our view of God or to raise our faith based on his word and past experience and not our present experience. David chose to raise his faith based on God's *hesed* and past blessings.

The present individual lament turns to a promise of future individual praise as David held tightly to God's promise of salvation/deliverance. David who could only speak within his own heart at the beginning of the psalm (v. 2) now looked forward to sing publicly because he trusted in God (v. 6).

Even though David was in the throes of suffering (remember verses 5 and 6 are not from a position of deliverance but of present pain: his confidence is based on a change in belief not physical well being), his mindset was such that he believed God was going to deliver him from his present troubles. The question, "How long?" was not answered but he knew who would answer it! The present raging anguish of the soul of the leader was becalmed by the knowledge of God's love for his own.

How long, O Lord? How long must I suffer being misunderstood? How long must I suffer financially, emotionally, geographically? How long must I..... (you fill in the blank)?

Although the situations differ in each person's life, this question has haunted the sleepless nights of every person's soul. David in the midst of his pain of abandonment and distress lamented his helpless condition to God. In the midst of the complaint David recognized God's unconditional love for His people. With this promise David took his eyes off the present situation and looked to a God who is faithful and looked back on his own life which was full of God's activities on his behalf.

As an application I would like to offer a personal example of how this psalm can be used as a pattern for prayer.

**(My Complaint)** *O, God, how long, how long, how long, must I put up with constant disappointments? If it is not one thing, it is another. How long must we as a church take two steps forward in growth and excitement and take two steps back by having supposedly solid people leave for no good reason? I don't know*

*how much more I can take or want to take. It is tough enough to struggle with people. Now finances are a problem again. How long must we live this hand-to-mouth existence? When will we be able to stop thinking about money? How long must we just struggle to keep the ministry afloat or at least drifting forward? I don't want our ministry to die and Your reputation and mine become a laughing stock.*

**(My Petition)** *O, Lord, I need you to answer me. I feel like I am all-alone. No one understands, no one comes along side and no one even cares what I feel. Lord, you are the only one who can turn these situations around for me. But lately my prayers have bounced off the ceiling. They go nowhere. I need you to hear and be merciful and bless me.*

**(My Confidence)** *Lord, I know You are there in heaven and here beside me. Your word encourages me that I am not alone. You have delivered me in the past. Although this situation looks bleak and unending, I know you will work again on my behalf. I will praise you now for the work You will do in the future on my behalf. Please do it quickly!*

## Conclusion

I would encourage you today if you are facing a situation that seems determine to last forever, rewrite Psalm 13 in your own words and pray it back to God as I offered mine above. Share your complaint and offer your petition and as God enables through his word and your own past experiences with God, express your confidence to him.

Why is it important to for you to pray this lament back to God? The reason that lamenting to God is so vitally important is that as David proved in his lament, “The one who laments his suffering to God does not remain in his lament.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 69.