

April 21, 2024

“Pay Attention to Me!”

Psalm 13:1-6

Intro:

The world is an unfair place. One doesn't have to look far in the news or read what people post online to have this confirmed. There is war, there is famine, there are natural disasters such as flooding, earthquakes, and fires. There is inequality of power and wealth distribution among people. There are corrupt justice systems, and corrupt governments. There is racism, and persecutions of all forms and sizes. It is enough to make a person want to stop the world and get off.

But, this isn't the way it is for Christians, right? After all we believe in and serve a God who is good and who is trustworthy, and whose primary motivation is love for His people and creation. And so, we should not be concerned with what is unfair because we as Christians will always be on the receiving end of what is fair. (Well, we should be concerned in the sense that we should pray against the unfairness and we should look for ways to act against injustice.) We should be able to expect, from God, good things in our lives. We should expect blessing and everything we do to lead towards receiving a blessing in our lives. Right?

Hopefully you have recognized that I said that last bit in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

The reality for us is that life is just as unfair for the Christian as it is for the non-believer. Or it seems that way.

Before I get too far into the sermon, however, I want to clarify how I understand the idea of “fair” and “unfair” as it applies to us as individuals. “Fair” is receiving the good things in our lives that we feel we are owed, primarily by God because He is the one we look to. “Unfair” is when those blessings don't show up in the way we expected.

So, what do we do when we feel that life is unfair to us? How can we process things when things aren't going the way we hoped, and most importantly, when the God whom we serve and claim to love, seems completely absent?

This is the question behind Psalm 13, which we are looking at this morning. Just a heads up, this might not feel like a light-hearted sermon, but I do hope it will be a freeing one.

The Psalm:

Psalm 13 is one of what is known as a “psalm of lament”. That is, a song or poem written, often by King David, as a way of expressing disappointment with God. A lament gives the freedom to question and to show concern over the seeming lack of God's active presence in the world. David gives us great example in Psalm 13.

Hold on now, you might be thinking, how can I suggest that questioning God is acceptable? After all, He is God, and we are not. That is very true: we are not God. In the book of Job, God very pointedly reminds Job of that very fact. However, in the first 37 chapters of Job, we find a constant stream of Job questioning God.

Questioning God is not wrong. Questioning God is the common practice of lament. Questioning God is exactly what David is doing in Psalm 13.

“How long?” David asks – four times in fact. How long are you going to ignore me? How long am I going to have to wait to get an answer from you? How long do I have to suffer and endure the injustice of the world before you do something about it? How long are my enemies going to have the upper hand over me? All of this, and more, is in the anguish of the lament that David expresses. At the heart of those “how long” questions is a very real sense of belief that God has truly abandoned him. For David, in this moment, God has left the building. I wonder how many of those moments we have had in our lives. I wonder how many more we should have had, but we did not allow ourselves to think that way or express our true feelings...

David has no such fear. He is bold in questioning God. He cries out boldly for God to pay attention to him. He is lost. He is scared. He feels as though everything that could possibly go wrong in his life is going wrong, and the one being who should be concerned about this and doing something to end it has turned his back on him. From David's perspective, God is giving him the silent treatment. And all David can do in response is to yell back into the void "Pay attention to me!" (see verse 3: Turn and answer me, O Lord my God!).

Can We Yell at God?

Surely David isn't the only one in the history of the world to have these feelings about God. Surely he isn't the only one who questions God's approach to the experiences of injustices and suffering. Very likely, you have also had moments where you felt like God has abandoned you. I know I have! Where you have cried out in prayer for God to act and He has not. Where you feel that your life and work and family are all going so badly that it is like you are being pummeled by a professional boxer. You likely don't have enemies the way David had enemies. David's enemies were actual armies, and opposing Kings who wanted to take over Israel, and rebellious children who wanted to kill him in order to take the throne for themselves. Yes, David faced literal enemies.

But we too face enemies. The enemy that comes up to bury you in more debt every time you try to get your finances under control. The enemy of being passed over for a promotion at work – or of being let go from your job. It could be the enemy of family conflict and division. It could be the enemy of ill health, where just when you think you have healed from one ailment, two more settle in to take its place – and they are worse than the first. Those are all legitimate enemies. And where is God when you are surrounded by foes that you cannot beat on your own? That is David's question. And it is a question that you can ask as well.

And so, yes, we can yell at God. We can cry out in our frustration and our pain, asking how long we must suffer before God will step into the picture and do something about what is going on.

Trust in the Character of God:

But, and there is a big “but” here, David does not remain in this angry and frustrated place. For sure, he is feeling that way – and scared on top of it all, but he makes the intentional effort to remember and turn to what he knows about the character of God. Even when he feels that God is far away from him, that he is being ignored, David still holds to the trustworthiness of God’s character. He knows that the present circumstances do not reflect a change in who God is; they merely point out that we do not, and cannot, understand God’s full plan. But we can trust in his character. We can trust that the God who made a covenant commitment to bring grace and forgiveness and presence to his people, will in fact do that. In spite of our failure to live consistently in our commitment to following Jesus, God does act consistently with the commitment He has made.

And so, at the end of the psalm, David suddenly shifts and realizes that he can in fact endure all that he is going through because he knows that God is trustworthy. That He has not left the building and that He will ultimately be faithful to rescue him from the oppression that he is presently experiencing.

Nowhere in the psalm does David give a concrete timeline for that to happen. Of course he would like some action from God sooner rather than later. That’s why he is crying out in the first place. But David does not confine God to what he demands, only to what God’s character demands. This is faith.

Conclusion:

How then do we live this out? Well, the first thing is to remember that it is ok to yell out to God and to question Him. One way you might do this is to write out what you are feeling or frustrated about in a poem, or journal, or scrap piece of paper that you then burn. Another way to express lament in this way is to actually speak the words out loud. Get in your car and imagine God in the passenger seat and literally speak out the words you need to say. Or find a secluded, private place to have that conversation. Imagine God sitting in the living room with you when you home alone, or on the bench at the end of a hiking path, and speak to

him as you would another person. There is something healing about vocalizing how you feel.

The second thing is to hold the character of God in front of you. God is always consistent in who he is, and as such is trustworthy. If you are unsure about how God behaves, then take time (preferably before you are questioning Him), to learn more about His character. Look at how it is expressed in the Bible, and ask Him to reveal his character to you through prayer. Basically, spend time getting to know God so that when you are in a time of struggle, you will know God as a solid anchor in your life.

Finally, when you think God has abandoned you, take a moment to recall to mind all those times where God was faithfully present and brought blessing to you. If He has done so in the past, there is every reason to believe He will be faithful and do so again.

Let's pray.