

Main Idea: When you find yourself in great pain, Psalm 13 shows you in very autobiographical terms what to do. When you're in great pain you need to pray, and specifically, you need to pray and bring to God three things.

I. Begin by bringing your questions to God (1-2).

- A. When we feel overwhelmed, this is not natural for us.
 - 1. We tend to turn away from God rather than to Him.
 - 2. We're prone to try and figure things out on our own.
- B. When we feel overwhelmed, we need to do what David did.
 - 1. David asked the Lord how long he would feel abandoned.
 - 2. David asked the Lord how long the inner turmoil would last.
 - 3. David asked the Lord how long his enemy would prevail.

II. Then bring your requests to God (3-4).

- A. Here's what he asked.
 - 1. Look and answer.
 - 2. Give me light.
- B. Here's why he asked.
 - 1. I am afraid I'm going to die.
 - 2. I am afraid of what the enemy will say about me (and You) if that happens.

III. Finish by bringing your praise to God (5-6).

- A. David ends by affirming the truth regarding God.
 - 1. He affirms the truth of who God is.
 - 2. He affirms the truth of what God does (He saves).
 - 3. He affirms the truth of what God has done in the past.
- B. David ends with action verbs.
 - 1. He verbalizes, “I trust.”
 - 2. He verbalizes, “My heart rejoices.”
 - 3. He announces, “I will sing.”

Make It Personal: Some suggestions on where to go from here...

- 1. Memorize Psalm 13 (and other psalms).
- 2. Put Psalm 13 into practice.
- 3. Share Psalm 13 with others...gently.

You may not need this sermon today. You may not need this sermon this week, or this year, perhaps even this decade. But I'm sure of this. If you live long enough in this sin-cursed world, the day will come when you will need what you are about to hear.

I want to talk to you about how to honor God when you are in pain, not a little pain, but pain that consumes you to the point that you can't think about anything else other than that pain. It could be linked to the loss of physical health. It could be tied to the disintegration of a dream relationship in your life—watching your spouse or your beloved child or your dearest friend walk out of your life. It could be wrapped up in the loss of the dream job of your life.

The point is, it's usually some very significant loss. We're not talking about just having a bad day. We're talking about going through something you thought you'd never go through, with the result being pain that you'd never felt before. Intense, relentless, deep, consuming pain. And to complicate things, you're not sure what to pray anymore, not because you don't love God, for you do; and not because you don't pray, for you have prayed, many times in fact; and every time you say *amen*, you get up off your knees and realize the situation hasn't changed and the pain remains.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

What do you do when you find yourself in a season of life like that, a season of *pain* with no end in sight? I won't go into great detail, partly because the experience is so highly personal, and partly because the particulars would be so difficult to recreate with words, but I will say this. I have recently experienced what I have just described, and more than once.

I have hurt so bad that I found myself in the floor crying out to the Lord. A big part of it was the physical pain, and you know about the migraines. The pressure in my forehead and temples and eyes. The agony of being in the presence of any source of light or sound or scent. The inability to lay down and sleep. But it's not just the physical. About a month ago I remember feeling an overwhelming mental anguish with thoughts like, "I'm two-thirds of the way through a sabbatical from a generous church who've sent me to get help for migraines, and I'm no closer to being able to return to work than when I left in June. What good is a pastor that can't look at a computer screen, or read a book, or talk with people, who spends a huge chunk of his time just sitting in dark rooms?"

And then there were thoughts like these, "I've always loved studying God's Word and preaching and helping people know Him better. But now? I can't do those things, at least not in any predictable way. Why, Lord? What am I supposed to do? I keep looking for medical solutions to this problem and it doesn't go away. When is this going to end? *How long?*"

I hesitate to be so very transparent about my pain, for a couple of reasons. One, I don't want the focus to be on me in a worship service. We are here because of and for the worship of our great Savior, Jesus the Christ. However, though I'm hesitant, I'm sharing it because I think it's tied in to my privileged calling as your pastor. The reason Jesus gave pastors to His church, according to Ephesians 4:11-16, and the reason He gave me to you, is to equip you and help you grow up and become mature and resemble Christ. To do that I need to talk openly with you about things God is teaching me that will help you move from childhood to maturity. The subject we need to address today is the way you're responding to pain in life. So let my life and my life story be a window into that subject, but look through the window and then leave seeing Christ. Don't leave thinking about me, but about Him and what He's wanting to accomplish in *your* life.

I have a second hesitation for being so transparent, and it's this. I understand that my pain doesn't begin to compare with the pain that some of you have experienced. I'm a novice. Some of you have PhD's in pain. You could easily write me off and say, "You don't have anything to say to me. Wait till you really suffer for a while, then try again."

But think of it this way. Pain is sort of relative. The Lord made us, and the Lord knows what we can bear (1 Cor 10:13), and He has made us with differing "load capacities" when it comes to pain. So whether you think you've been handling something more or less than I've been carrying isn't the issue. When the Lord brings us through something, He wants to learn from one another, to "teach and admonish one another" (Col 3:16).

So when you find yourself in great pain, what should you do? I want to share with you a Psalm that has saved my life. Psalm 13 shows you in very autobiographical terms what to do. Quite honestly, I've shared this psalm with others before in counseling, and it's helped them. This year God has used it to help me. And I want you to know it and be ready to use it.

Psalm 13 is very simple, very straightforward, very memorable, very usable, very practical, very blunt, and very essential for every person in this room. When you're in great pain you need to pray and bring to God three things.

I. Begin by bringing your questions to God (1-2).

You'll notice from the heading that this is a psalm of David. He doesn't give us the specifics that prompted him to write this psalm. Maybe it was the time in his young life when his own father in law was trying to murder him. That's a gut-wrencher for a guy in his 20s or 30s to endure. Or maybe it was when he was in his 50s and his own son, Absalom, turned the nation against him and tried to take his life. Or maybe it was when one of his best friends, Ahithophel, betrayed him. Or maybe when the Ziphites betrayed him to Saul after all he'd done to help them. Or maybe it was the day he and his troops got to Ziklag only to find an enemy had robbed his every possession and kidnapped his family.

In my mind, any of those situations could create the kind of mental anguish that David expresses in Psalm 13. But he's intentionally vague about the specifics, and I think it's because he didn't write this to commemorate his experience. He wrote this, as led by the Holy Spirit, to help God's people honor God in their own painful circumstances.

This is for us, we who by the grace of God have been saved from our sins by the atonement Jesus Christ provided. When we're in pain, and those times do come even for Jesus' followers, what are we supposed to do? Pray, yes, but pray what? First, begin by bringing your questions to God.

I want you to count David's questions as I read verses 1-2, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

How many questions did you count? In the NIV there are five questions, and four of the questions begin, *how long?* How long? How long? How long? How long? You say, "Is it appropriate to ask God questions like that?" David did, and he was a man after God's own heart. I find it so very significant how David begins his prayer. Here's why...

A. When we feel overwhelmed, this is not natural for us. Think about it. When pain is smothering us, what do we often do? In working with people for many years and in my own experience with pain, I've noticed two things.

1. *We tend to turn away from God rather than to Him.* Oh, maybe initially we turn to Him and ask for His help. But when the help doesn't come quick enough, or in the way we want it, we figure we might as well look somewhere else for help. Maybe to people, or to a bottle, or a pill, or whatever. But something other than God.

There's another tendency I've noticed...

2. *We're prone to try and figure things out on our own.* God doesn't seem to be helping. And people don't seem to have any solutions. So we decide to hunker down and start depending on the only counsel we think we can really trust, *our own.* "I guess I'll just have to figure my way out of this mess all by myself!"

But we're creatures. And as creatures we weren't made to live independent lives. That means...

B. When we feel overwhelmed, we need to do what David did. In the midst of his pain David turned *to* the Lord, not from Him. He came to the Lord with everything he had, starting with his questions. You'll notice that David asked the Lord three very pointed types of questions.

1. *David asked the Lord how long he would feel abandoned.* "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

You say, "Is that reality? Did God really forget David and hide His face from him?" No, it's not reality, for an omniscient God can't forget us. But this is precisely how David felt. Forgotten. Abandoned.

So what are you going to do if you feel that way? What are you going to say to God when you pray? Are you going to deny it? That would be foolish. He already knows what you're feeling! So just tell Him. But make sure you do it the way David did. David was *reverently honest* with God about what he was thinking and feeling, so do the same. Be *reverently honest*.

2. *David asked the Lord how long the inner turmoil would last.* "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" That's vivid terminology, isn't it? Every been in a wrestling match with your thoughts? Not a pleasant experience. Nor is this. To go through a phase in life where you have sorrow in your heart *every day*. How long will this inner turmoil last? That's the second question David brings directly to the Lord. And the third...

3. *David asked the Lord how long his enemy would prevail.* "How long will my enemy triumph over me?" Again, we don't know which enemy David has in mind, and it doesn't matter, for we do know this. No enemy of David was any match for God, right? If there's any question about that, just remember Goliath. If David has an enemy, God is more than capable of eliminating that enemy, right? I mean, all God has to do is say the word and that enemy is out of the picture. So when is *this* enemy going to leave the picture? That's what David wants to know. *How long, O Lord?*

I find David's example so helpful, and I commend him to you. There will be times in life when you will feel abandoned and overwhelmed with pain. What will you do? You will feel like running from God. You will feel like trusting no one but yourself to get through the turmoil. But please don't do that. Not only is that course at its root idolatry, but it leads to self-destruction, and along the way it brings a lot of peripheral destruction on the people closest to you.

Far better to do what David did. David doesn't play games with the Lord. To use the language of Hebrews 4:16, he *came boldly to the throne of grace*. So do the same and come, first of all, with your questions. Bring your questions reverently right to the Lord. He can handle them—they're not too heavy for Him as they are for you. And it's okay to ask Him specifically, "How long?," for inherent in that question is the understanding that pain will not last forever, not for the child of God. We know that pain has an ending point. What we don't know is *how much longer*. And so we ask the only One who knows.

That brings us to the second movement of the prayer-psalm. When you're in pain, first bring your questions to God—that's verses 1-2.

II. Then bring your requests to God (3-4).

Listen for David's requests in verses 3-4, "Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall."

Let me point out a couple of things regarding David's petitions. First...

A. Here's what he asked. He's pretty straightforward, isn't he? No sugar-coating with God. No Milky-Way church talk. Just down to business, this is what I'm desperate for, please-help-me-God petitions. *Look on me. Answer. Give light to my eyes.* That's what I need, God...

1. *Look and answer.*

2. *Give me light.* Literally, "enlighten mine eyes."

In other words, "Lord, help me to see what I'm missing. I'm overwhelmed right now, and don't know what to do. I need You to look my way and answer my cry and cause my eyes to see what I'm not presently seeing, the way I need to go to get out of this helpless situation I'm in."

But David didn't just specify *what*. He also told the Lord *why*.

B. Here's why he asked. He mentions two reasons for being so bold in these requests. Reason one? "Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death." In other words, I'm asking You to do this, Lord, because...

1. *I am afraid I'm going to die.* Ever been there? "Lord, I'm hurting so bad that I'm not sure I can keep going. If You don't come now, I think I'm about to sleep the sleep of death itself!"

But there's another reason on David's heart. Remember, this man loves God. And so he says, "Look and answer and give light...or I will sleep in death..." and notice what will come after that in verse 4, "my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,' and my foes will rejoice when I fall." Hear what David's saying?

2. *I am afraid of what the enemy will say about me (and You) if that happens.* Lord, if You don't come through and deliver me out of this pain, what will people say about *You*? This is about *Your* reputation and fame and honor and kingdom purposes. So please act!"

Remember, David is God's chosen king. God made a promise to David that He would be the link through which the Messiah would come into the world to provide salvation for sinners from every nation and language. David knows that. He's not praying a selfish prayer here. He's praying with God's great reputation in mind, for He knows God's reputation is affected by what happens to him.

That's true of you and me, too, isn't it? Indeed, it is. We, too, are in a covenant relationship with the Living God. We are His children, if we have placed our faith in His Son and His death, burial, and resurrection. He calls us by His own name. So if we go under, the world mocks Him, right? Friends, that's incentive to pray, and that's yet another reason to know He hears our prayer. He's passionate about His name and loves to work in behalf of those who pray for its honor.

And now we come to the third and final thing that David brings to God, which we need to do when we're in great pain. First, begin by bringing your questions to God. Then bring your requests, especially with His reputation in mind. And then...

III. Finish by bringing your praise to God (5-6).

I love what happens in verses 5-6, “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.”

Did you catch the change in tone? David began on his face in the pits. Now he’s got his hands raised and he’s praising his God. Notice two things about how David ends his prayer. First...

A. David ends by affirming the truth regarding God. It’s not his pain that captivates him now. It’s God’s attributes. Your unfailing love. Your salvation. Your goodness. In essence, David affirms three truths about God.

1. *He affirms the truth of who God is.* “But I trust in your *unfailing love*.” The KJV says ‘mercy, the’ ESV ‘steadfast love.’ The Hebrew is *hesed*. One Hebrew dictionary offers this definition of *hesed*, “a love or affection that is steadfast based on a prior relationship.”¹

That’s good. God’s affection toward us is steadfast, not because we deserve it, but on the basis of a prior relationship which He Himself established, first by creating us, then by rescuing us and adopting us into His family, all on the basis of the blood His Son shed as our substitute.

This past Thursday morning I was running in our neighborhood and saw an odd sight that caught my eye. I was just around the corner from our house and noticed a dog laying in the water in a 3-foot-deep ditch right by a stop sign. You couldn’t see him until you got right up to the sign. I looked down into the ditch and there he was, looking at me. He startled me, and to be honest, while I like dogs, I didn’t want anything to do with this dog. He didn’t have a collar on and looked mangy at best, and perhaps ready to jump out of his hole and bite my leg. So I thought it best to just keep my distance, not get involved in his predicament, and eventually went on my way.

That same day in the evening a car I’d never seen came into our neighborhood right by our house. A man was going house to house with a message. “I’ve lost my dog. Has anyone seen my dog?”

I headed for his car and told the man what I had seen that morning. “Oh, no,” he said, “that’s my dog! He loves the water. He’s always running away, too. I was just getting ready to bathe him. That’s why he didn’t have his collar on. And he doesn’t hear too well. He’s old. And he’s always running away... If you see him again, please call me at this number!”

And he frantically gave me his name and phone number and drove away. Later while getting ready for bed Sherry said to me, “Did you notice that man’s car? He’s been around our neighborhood at least two more times since that first time looking for his dog. You can tell he sure misses that dog.”

I’ve been thinking about how that, in a small way, illustrates this attribute of our God, His *unfailing love*. The truth is, I may feel like I am stranded in a ditch at times and forgotten, but the truth is, God’s love for me is steadfast because it’s based, not on my worth and merit, but on a prior relationship which He established by making me and redeeming me. He will never stop loving me. Oh, for reasons meant to bring about His glory and my ultimate good, He may allow me to feel forsaken and alone, but even then He is pursuing me and keeping me safe and in the end, He will bring me home.

¹ Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

When I'm in the pit of pain, I need to affirm the truth of *God's unfailing love*. That's who my God is. Not Someone who has forgotten me, never! But Someone who loves me with a love that can never fail, no matter how I feel.

2. *He affirms the truth of what God does (He saves)*. "My heart rejoices in *your salvation*." Notice how David focuses on God's salvation. God is a saving God. Again, the pain is still there, but this is now David's focus. My heart rejoices in *your salvation*. You saved me, Lord! I don't know if David is talking in big picture salvation terms about the day God saved him from his sins, or maybe one of those lesser saving experiences, like when God delivered him from the bear and lion and Philistines. It doesn't matter. What David's doing now is what we need to do when we're hurting. He's affirming the truth about God. Our God saves us! That's what He does. And this...

3. *He affirms the truth of what God has done in the past*. "You have been good to me." When you're in pain, you're inclined to feel you're getting raw deal out of life. That's not true, says David. No way. "You have been good to me, Lord." In other words, says David, "I may not understand what You are doing *now*, Lord, but I choose right now to interpret my painful present in light of Your past goodness to me."

Let me give you an example of what a difference this can make in a person's life in what is perhaps the most painful situation you could ever face, the loss of a child. Earlier in the week I was listening online to a message on prayer that John MacArthur preached a week ago, and was challenged by a story he shared about Richard Cameron. Here's the story:

One of my favorite heroes of the Scottish covenanters is Richard Cameron... Richard Cameron was a great preacher of the gospel, and the English tried to force Scotland to become Roman Catholic. The Scottish resisted that and they fought against the English to maintain their commitment to the gospel and the faith of the Reformation. And they did it by signing a national covenant. Tens of thousands of them signed a national covenant to be faithful to the Reformed faith and not succumb to Catholicism.

The Catholics came against them; [there] was a great slaughter. The conflict lasted for decades. People died, and mostly Scottish blood was shed. The preachers and pastors had to leave the churches and go and preach in the moors and the hillsides because they were hiding...

But one of the most famous of them was Richard Cameron. One day he was at his house where he was secluded and kept to escape from death, and a messenger came to him with a box and he opened the box, and you may remember the story. In the box were two hands, and they were the hands of his son who was also a gospel preacher. And he made a comment about those are my own son's hands; he recognized them. And soon after that, another box came and had his son's head in it. It was delivered to him as testimony to what was going to happen, continue to happen, if they didn't align with the Roman Catholic Church.

The historians have written down that this was Richard Cameron's response: "It is the Lord's will and good is the will of the Lord; He has never wronged me," end quote. In the midst of an unspeakable tragedy, there is nobility

in the confidence that the will of God is everything, everything. That's prayer as worship.²

There's a man who interpreted a very difficult painful situation in the present (the brutal killing of his own son) in light of God's past goodness. That was the rock that sustained him. *It is the Lord's will and good is the will of the Lord; He has never wronged me.*

And I would suggest, he didn't start responding that way on the day he heard this tragic news, nor will we. We need to start right now to interpret whatever present pains we're experiencing in light of God's past goodness to us.

On that note, I want you to notice that David does something else as he finishes, something very significant, and we need to follow in his steps.

B. David ends with action verbs. This is so important. When you're in persistent pain, after a while it starts to wear on you and even wear you down. But you cannot afford to be passive when in pain. You must do something, do something God-pleasing, like David did.

Notice how David takes action in the final movement of this prayer-psalm. He does at least three things.

1. *He verbalizes, "I trust."* He doesn't just *think* it. He *says* it. *I trust in your unfailing love.* A moment ago he was asking the Lord, "How long!?" Now he's saying, "I trust You." And this...

2. *He verbalizes, "My heart rejoices."* "My heart rejoices in your salvation." Is it possible to rejoice when your body is in pain, and your most cherished earthly relationship has gone sour, and you can't see any way that this life is going to get any better? Can you rejoice then? David did! How? There was something more important to him than health, and spouse, and children, and job, and anything else this world has to offer. *My heart rejoices in Your salvation!* You saved me. I used to be Your enemy, God. But no longer! Now I belong to You, and nothing can ever change that! So right now, I choose to rejoice in that!

3. *He announces, "I will sing."* Here's the climax. "I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me."

What's that? Sing? Did David say *sing*? How can a man who is in the deepest pit of his life *sing*? Is he out of his mind? Has something snapped? No. He's bringing his swirling mind back into submission to truth now. He began by sharing how he felt, with his head spinning in the clouds. Now he finishes his prayer with his feet on the ground, and he's doing what a man of God is created and redeemed to do, *sing to the Lord.*

What's so important about singing to the Lord? When we sing to the Lord we are choosing to use what He has given to us—our voices, our minds, our breath, our time, our focus, our energy—and go vertical with it, to bring attention to Him. We're reminding ourselves why we're here. When we sing, we're engaging mind, soul, and body—the whole person—we're not just thinking, we're not just talking, we're *singing*. And this pleases our God greatly. And the by-products for our benefit are tremendous.

It's hard to keep moping in despair when you're singing about the goodness of your God. It's hard to keep rehearsing your list of complaints when you're expressing out loud in song the past works of your God in your behalf.

² John MacArthur, Aug 26, 2012, <http://www.gty.org/resources/print/sermons/90-447>

And I don't have to feel like singing to do it. David finishes by simply saying, "I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me." I *will* sing. I am going to do it. And I don't think he intends this to mean he's going to do it *one time* and be done with it. I think he's saying that he intends to start singing and to keep singing until this dark season of life ends, and then beyond.

Brothers and sisters, it's vital that we who know Christ be a singing people, and I'm not just talking about on Sundays now—that's a given. I'm talking about in the privacy of our own walk with God.

How do you begin your day? I urge you, in addition to reading your Bible and praying, sing to your Savior. Sing a song about the cross as you begin your day ("Before the Throne of God Above"). And how do you end your day? Again, why not sing a song to Him? Sing a song about His faithfulness ("Great Is Thy Faithfulness"). And how do you navigate through tough times during the day? How about finding a quiet spot, taking 60 seconds, and singing ("O How He Loves You and Me")?

Prayer isn't about getting God to do for us what we want. Prayer is us worshipping and adoring God for who He is, even when He's doing things our tiny minds can't understand. Why would I expect a great big, infinite, eternal, all knowing, wise, universe-shaping God to work in ways that always make sense to my finite, very limited 51-year old brain and understanding of reality?

So when I don't understand, then I need to do what David did in Psalm 13. I need to bring to God my questions—but not stop there. And my requests—but not stop there either. I must not stop until I bring Him, and then keep bringing Him, my praise, praise that He deserves, for who He is, for what He does, and for what He has done in the past.

You'll notice that as Psalm 13 ends, David's circumstances have not changed one iota. David is apparently still in pain. David's enemy is still on the attack. But something has changed. While David was down on his knees crying out to God, bringing his questions and requests and praise to God, *David* has changed.

Do you see it? The whole tone of the psalm is different at the end. He begins by asking the Lord four times, "How long?" And now he ends with a series of God-exalting actions that climaxes with this final announcement, "He has been good to me!" And there's no indication that the Lord gave him any answer to his hard questions, nor any relief to his painful circumstances. None of that changed. But this man of God changed. He's no longer on his face. He may still be in pain, but he's affirming his trust, and he's rejoicing, and he is making plans to sing!

Make It Personal: Some suggestions on where to go from here...

1. *Memorize Psalm 13 (and other psalms).* When the times of pain come, you will want this psalm tucked away in your heart. So hide it there now.

2. *Put Psalm 13 into practice.* By that, I mean, when you pray, follow the pattern you see here. Bring your questions to God, then your requests, then your praise. Don't leave out your questions, or you're not being real. And don't leave out your petitions, or you're not being dependent. And don't leave out your praise, or you'll rob the Lord of what He so deserves (and end up staying in the pits of your own painful misery). So pray through Psalm 13. Follow the pattern. Let the points guide you like hand-rails into God's presence.

3. Share Psalm 13 with others...gently. You may not need Psalm 13 right now. You probably know others who do. Care for their souls by sharing what you've learned with them. But do it very gently. They don't need a sermon from you, just some encouragement to follow David in a very and reverent honest conversation with God.