

Christmas Psalms: Singing in Sorrow

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the assistant pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you.
- A special welcome to you if you are visiting with us or new with us. We're glad you're here, and we're glad you're here not because you are filling a seat, but because we are following Jesus together as one community.
- And as we're following Jesus, we've become convinced that there is no one so good that they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it. And so everyone needs to hear what God has to say.
- As has been mentioned several times this morning, we are beginning the season of Advent. And Advent is a word that comes from a Latin word, and that Latin word simply means to come or to arrive.
- To come or to arrive. And so we do two things at Advent. As I think of it. First, we celebrate the fact that Jesus did come. So we look back to his first coming, and we celebrate the fact that he came and he arrived.
- [1 : 0 8] But it's also a time when we look forward to his second coming, when he's going to come and arrive again. And so we're doing two things at once. We're celebrating, and we're also looking.
- We're looking back, and we're looking forward, and we have songs that sort of fit each of these. So Joy to the World would be a celebration song. Right? Joy to the Lord. The Lord has come.
- We're looking back that he's here. But then we've sung a more of a looking forward song today as well. We sang, O come, O come, Emmanuel. To ransom captive Israel. And so there's this two-way.
- I often think of Christians as people who are crossing the street, because we have to look both ways. We're looking back to what God has done in the past, and then we're looking forward to what he's done, he's going to do in the future.
- And if you're honest with yourself, this creates a tension. It creates a tension because while we celebrate Jesus having come, he hasn't come a second time yet. And so we live with all the struggles and sorrows that we still face in this life.
- [2 : 1 1] And so we have a tension between those two. On the one hand, we have sorrow as we don't yet see everything that God has done to right every wrong. But we don't want to let our sorrow get rid of our hope.
- And so we're always balancing sorrow and hope. And so as we are in the season of Advent, we're going to take a look at the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is essentially 150 different prayers that God has given us as models for how we should talk to him.
- And so these are, you can think of these as the standard operating procedure that God has given us for different situations in life. If you are feeling betrayed by a friend, God's given us Psalm 55.

If you are tempted to envy someone who is wicked but seems to be flourishing, God's given us Psalm 73. But this morning, we're going to take a look at Psalm 13.

Psalm 13 is what we would refer to as a psalm of lament. Now, lament's not a word that we use very often, especially as Americans. We might think about maybe grieving. Lament's a little bit different than that.

[3 : 12] It involves grieving, but a lament is something that mixes both sorrow and hope. And so it's not giving in completely to sorrow on the one hand, but it's not giving up hope on the other.

It's holding both of those in tension. And so that is part of what we do in the Advent season, is we hold both our sorrow for the fact that we still experience sin in this world, but also our hope that Jesus came and is coming.

And so God gives us these psalms in his word. And Psalm 13 is one of the shortest, one of the clearest psalms of lament that we have in the Bible. And so it helps us answer the question, what do we do as we live in the tension of Advent?

What do we do as we try to hold both hope and sorrow together? And so I'd ask you that you turn with me now in your Bible. The psalms is pretty close to the center of your Bible, not quite at the center.

It's also in your worship guide. And we're going to be reading from Psalm 13. And so read now with me. Remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold.

[4 : 17] And that it is sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so please read with me now from Psalm 13. Verse 5.

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.

Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Lord, dear Father in heaven, we thank you that you speak to us.

We thank you that you know that we struggle with sorrow and hope, that you're not unaware of that. We thank you that you meet us at that very place, that spot.

We ask that you would meet us there today, this morning, by your Holy Spirit, that you'd send the Spirit now to help us. We ask this in the name of your Son. Amen.

[5 : 56] The psalmist here starts out with an important question. How long? And then he goes on to use language that maybe you wouldn't expect to find in the Bible. Because he tells God that he believes that God has forgotten him.

And even more than that, he tells God that he believes that God has hidden from him. And what we have to understand here is that the psalmist is not using theological precise language here.

He's not writing a systematic theology. Instead, he is using experiential language. And so he's saying, God, it feels like all I see right now is the presence of sin.

But your absence. It feels like sin is winning in this world over and over again. And so from where I stand, it sounds like, it feels like you've forgotten me.

In the Old Testament, when the language of forgetting is used and remembering, it's language of action. If God remembers his people, what the Old Testament is telling us is that he acted. He did something.

[7 : 04] If he has forgotten his people, it's a way of talking about this feeling that God is not acting. He's not intervening. And so the writer of this psalm, as he experiences life, as he lives day by day, all he can see again and again is the presence of sin.

Breaking him down. Breaking down the world around him. And he doesn't see God anywhere doing anything. This language of hiding of the face, the second thing that he tells us, is language that talks about blessing.

So if you've been here with us at Cheyenne Mountain for a while, you know sometimes we end our service with a benediction from Numbers chapter 6. And that benediction says, may the Lord make his face to shine upon you.

In other words, will you experience God's blessing? So the psalmist here is in a point in life where his experience of sin day after day after day has made him wonder how much longer he can take it.

How much longer he's able to hold on. And so he has this important question. If you have read the Bible, if you're familiar with it, you know that repetition is very important.

[8 : 10] And here in just two verses, the psalmist asks the question, how long? Four times. And so in other words, he's at a breaking point. The reality of sin day after day after day has broken him down.

He's not sure how much longer he can take it. And so the words of the psalmist, the question here of how long is the question of God's people. It was the question of God's people in the Old Testament, and it's also the question of God's people now.

It's the same question that we have to ask in Advent as we celebrate the past but also live in the present. And so we can ask this how long question as well. The psalms are, by the way, often intentionally vague, and they're intentionally vague because they're meant to be used by all sorts of people in all sorts of situations.

And so it actually would not be helpful for us if we knew exactly why the author of Psalm 13 felt this way. Because this is a tool, this is a tool for all of God's people to use when they feel this presence of evil is breaking them down day by day.

And so it's permitted, it's good, it's right for us to fill in the blanks here, to fill in the blank of how long. We could say, how long will my children stand far away from me and far away from God?

[9 : 28] We could ask, how long will I check the group text on my family to make sure everyone's okay? because I know that many of them live in another country filled with violence.

We could ask, how long will my spouse and I feel like roommates rather than lovers? How long will domestic abuse and suicide run rampant on Fort Carson, which is right next to us?

How long will my spouse lose her memory day by day and little by little? How long will there be people in Colorado Springs who don't have a place to live because they don't have the resources that they need?

How long will the culture around us call good, evil, and evil good? And how long will cancer and sickness take the people in our church?

So the psalmist's question of how long is our question as well. And to add on to that, we find out that this has caused him to, what he tells us in verse 2, take counsel in his soul. His thoughts are running wild, perhaps with the type of anxiety that we talked about in Philippians, perhaps with worry, perhaps with fear.

[10 : 48] But seeing sin win over and over again has made him turn inward. Now, I know some of you have experienced being separated, perhaps for a time, from someone you love.

It might be because of a deployment. It might just be a general job trip or it might be for other reasons that someone has to leave for a time. And if you're in a long-distance relationship like that, you know that there are many tools that people will use to keep their relationship alive to try to continue to grow intimacy and build intimacy.

And one of them that's most common is the open win letter. If you're familiar with the open win letter, you know it's something that one person puts together for another and it'll have a title on it.

For example, it might say, open when you feel stressed. Or, open when you are missing me. Open when you've had a bad day.

Open when you've had a good day. And the reminder, the important thing is that the person who makes them for you knows that there's going to come a time when you feel like that. There's going to come a time when you have a good day and they're not going to be there.

[11 : 57] And there's going to come a time when you have a bad day. There's going to come a time when you feel stressed. And so what do we do when we feel the question of how long?

We feel the tension of Advent. Well, the first is a reminder from this psalm that it is in the Bible. And so this is God's open win letter.

He is saying, I know that there will come a time when you are living in this world when you will encounter so much brokenness that you will wonder if I'm still there.

I know that. I know what life in this world is like. And so I put this here to remind you that I'm not ignorant. I'm not unaware of the struggle that you face.

And so the first things that the psalm of lament tells us is that God knows that we have sorrow. He knows that we have sorrow and he doesn't expect us to ignore it.

[13 : 01] He doesn't expect us to push it away. He doesn't expect us to plaster on smiling faces. One of the most upsetting things I hear from Christians sometimes is this idea that because we're a Christian, we're not allowed to have sorrow.

We're not allowed to grieve. Somehow we have to always plaster on a good face and pretend that we're happy because of what Jesus has done for us. And we do find joy in what Jesus has done for us.

That's what we talked about in Philippians. But we also live with sorrow in this world. And so God knows that. He's given us this psalm in his word to remind us that he's not unaware of the struggles that we face.

Remember last year during Advent we went through the book of Isaiah and we learned that Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And so we live in the tension and the first reminder here is we ask how long is that God knows.

He knows that we struggle. He knows that sometimes we don't know how much longer we can take it. He knows that sometimes we want to ask how long four times in two verses.

[14 : 10] And the second thing is that God wants us to bring that to him. The psalmist here is he's not cursing God. He's not blaming God. He's just simply being honest.

And so God calls us to the same honesty. When we find ourselves in a how long situation God wants to hear from us. He doesn't want us to ignore or pretend like something isn't there.

He doesn't want us to numb ourselves with the distractions around us. But he wants us to come and bring our whole selves all our sorrow before him and ask that question. And so it's good and right for us to say God I know that you're in control and you're sovereign but right now it doesn't feel like that.

And I'm not sure how much longer I can take it. God wants us to come before him and tell him that. Another piece of advice another application I can give you I don't talk about scripture memory very often.

This is an excellent psalm to memorize. And it's an excellent psalm to memorize first of all because it's very short so you can feel like you've memorized the whole chapter of the Bible just with six verses. But it's also an excellent psalm to memorize for the same reason that as a teacher if you work in a school one thing you get used to over and over again is going through fire drills.

[15 : 29] I cannot tell you how many fire drills I've been a part of but part of what happens at a school is every X number of weeks you have to make sure you have a fire drill and so that everyone is familiar with the procedures that are in place everyone knows exactly what to do so in case there is an emergency there's no chaos everyone's practiced this over and over again.

The psalms of lament are sort of a fire drill for the Christian. As we talked about in Ruth not all of us are going through suffering right now but if we live in this world all of us will.

And so the psalms are our way of knowing when it happens what we do. And so I'd encourage you to memorize Psalm 13 that when you get to a place in your life if you're not there now where you want to ask how long you have the map right in front of you.

You don't have to wonder what you do or how you respond to God but everything is there. And so first the first thing you do with this drill is that you cry out to God and you tell him that you are wondering how long.

The psalmist doesn't leave us there though we see the next step in verses 3 and 4 after he's told God that he feels like things are not sustainable he then asks God verse 3 consider and answer me so I feel like you're absent.

[16 : 46] It feels like you're not here right now. But he doesn't stay there he doesn't stay just in his sorrow but he cries out to God and asks him to rescue him. He says consider and answer me light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death lest my enemies say I have prevailed over him lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

Now just like the first two verses were very vague and broad here are the enemies we can take to be very vague and broad this psalmist seems to be encountering someone who's opposing him not all the situations we are going to face that this psalm is appropriate for not all our situations of lament are going to have a specific enemy some of them will but we can see this enemy we can see it as someone a person maybe someone who's spreading evil someone who's promoting evil could also be the greatest enemy it could be Satan himself the presence of evil it's not inappropriate to take this and see that there is an enemy that we have who seeks to prevail over us and so the psalmist pours out his heart to God tells him he's asking how long but then he also asks him and so the point here is simple but complex God wants us to ask him God doesn't just want us to tell him about the ways that we feel like we don't see him in this world but he wants us to ask him to intervene another tempting thing for Christians to believe is that since

God is in control it's not worth asking him and yet God has sovereignly in control set up the world in such a way that our prayers matter and so he wants us to ask him he wants us to cry out to him and he promises that our prayers make a difference but there's a catch here the psalmist is only willing to pray he's brought to the point of prayer in verse 3 why because he believes he has no other hope he says he's crying out lest I sleep the sleep of death in other words what's driven the psalmist to prayer is the realization that God is his only hope in life and in death and so while verses 1 and 2 are a comfort God knows that we experience sorrow in this world he wants us to tell him that verses 3 and 4 are a challenge because it's difficult and challenging for us to come to a point where we actually believe that we are desperate enough that only prayer is going to help us true prayer prayer that lasts day after day over and over is desperate prayer because to pray we have to believe that that is more important more effective and more powerful than our money than our resources than our ability to work hard than our problem solving skills than our experience in other words the psalmist has come to a place where he understands that the problem he's facing is something only God can solve and so the first challenge of verses 3 and 4 is that we have to actually believe that God has the power and realize that we don't but the second challenge is we have to bring it to him rather than going anywhere else so on the one hand a temptation might be to get busy we're going to fix the problem we're going to solve the problem the other temptation might become to become simply cynical talk about that in verses 5 and 6 it's not even worth thinking about doing anything about there's no hope in this world but then the other temptation is to run away and numb now there are more respectable ways and less respectable ways of numbing to avoid sorrow here that the psalmist is heading straight into his sorrow he's not just telling

God he has it but then he's asking God and so he's choosing that over every other option that he has on the one hand he's choosing it over trying to fix the problem himself but then on the other hand he's choosing it over trying to pretend like there's no problem and so there's a lot of us all of us at some level who have ways of living life without Jesus and all of them involve ways of pretending that there's no problem and so I use the term numbing it's a way that we look for places where we don't have to feel the sorrow that the psalmist feels so intensely in verses 1 and 2 for some people it's something respectable like pouring themselves into their work their career if we can just stay distracted enough and busy enough we don't have to acknowledge the sorrow and the pain for other people it's real substances that help us not to feel anymore I have two very very close friends of mine consider them some of my best friends in the world who before I met them both of them at various points in their lives spent I think at least a year each of them using drugs as a way for them to not have to feel anymore one of my friends would tell me this story he would work at a restaurant and he would keep his bag of weed behind the soap dispenser in the bathroom and so when he had a break he could go and pull it out and go behind the restaurant and no one would know what he was doing no one would ever be able to find it now it's tempting for us to some of us to just judge people like that as I got to know my friends more and more

I learned about the things that they were facing in their lives as this was going on my friend who would hide in the soap dispenser in the bathroom he said this would spike in his life as he and his wife were separated as their marriage was on the rocks that was how he knew to deal with it he knew how to numb he didn't know anything else my other friend told me that he spent I think at least a year of his life he was basically high all day every day and it just happened to be the time in his life when his parents marriage was disintegrating just as he was turning 17 and 18 trying to become an adult and I tell you these stories not to be dramatic but to name the reality here of the difficulty of verses 3 and 4 it's easy to say pray and take our request to God but it's hard to actually do it because the temptation to numb and do away with our sorrow is so great and yet the psalmist has decided to do something else he's decided to take it straight to God knowing that he is powerful enough and good enough and so he names his sorrow he asks the question how long in verses 1 and 2 but then he actually moves the next step he takes it before

[23 : 25] God in verses 3 and 4 by the way those friends of mine that's not part of their lives anymore they've various points they came to know the Lord and to realize that they could take their sorrows their how long questions to him it's been a lot of years since those things happened and yet they still have some how long questions they still have places in their lives where they are not sure how much longer they can keep walking and yet now they know that they can take these things not to numb them or suppress them they can take them to God and believe that he's their only hope and so that's where we end up in verses five and six we have kind of a three step path that the psalmist presents for us here first he brings his sorrow to God then he asks God for his intervention but then in verses five and six he trusts God and he uses that very word in verse five but I have trusted in your steadfast love this word steadfast love is the same word that we saw in the book of Ruth it was the never stopping never giving up unbreaking always and forever love and so as the psalmist is trying to have hope and sorrow at the same time he has to root his hope in something and so while he doesn't see God acting in the world right now well it feels like evil is winning he remembers the steadfast love of God rooted in what he has done and so for the psalmist this would be God's great acts of redemption of Israel out of Exodus but for us as the believer our hope in God's steadfast love is what we look back to at Advent it's the reminder that we saw in verses 1 and 2 that God knows he's not unaware and he has come to be with us and so as we look back and celebrate Jesus' first birth excuse me his birth his first coming we see that as God's steadfast love to us and as we focus on that at Christmas we cannot also forget

Jesus' death on the cross that he paid the penalty for our sins that he lived the life we could not for us and he died the death we should have for us so that we can live with God and so the psalmist takes hope here not because all the ends are tied up not because all the T's are crossed or I's are dotted but he takes hope here because he knows that even though at the moment he does not feel God's presence or see God his steadfast love is still real and his steadfast love is real and so he asks himself he urges himself this language he uses here my heart shall rejoice or I will sing it's more like let me rejoice let me sing he's encouraging himself he's working himself up knowing I'm in the middle of sorrow right now but I'm not going to stick there I can't just have sorrow God wants to hear it from me he invites me to come and speak to him he is willing to hear me cry out to him and ask him to change things as they are and as

I do that I also have to hope I have to hope that God is powerful enough and as we see all throughout the Psalms he knows that God is going to solve the problems that the psalmist faces he's going to solve the problem of sin he's going to do it sometimes in the world that we live here right now and he's going to do it always in the future and so that is the psalmist's hope that is how he mixes hope and sorrow he names his sorrow he asks God to intervene in what is causing his sorrow and then he takes confidence and hope in the fact that he knows that God's steadfast love is there even in the midst of sorrow but God has not abandoned him or left him and then finally in verse six and let's not overlook this he sings the psalmist's final act of hope in God is to sing and this is not poetic language this is not metaphorical language the psalms were the hymn book of Israel and so what the psalmist does in the midst of his sorrow the way that he ends is by singing to God that's how he does what he talks about in verse five that's how he trusts in

God's steadfast love because he knows that music is so powerful so connected to his emotions that he is going to be able to sing and in that remind his heart of what is true remind himself of God's promises of his steadfast love to him and remind himself that there is hope for him in the midst of sorrow if you are someone who has questions or doubts or objections to Christianity this hope that the psalmist has is a great and real hope it's a real hope that's rooted in the real events of Jesus coming to earth as a baby of him being born and living life on this earth as a man perfectly and then dying and paying the penalty for all of our sins and so this is not a general hope this is not a I'm going to be more positive during the day to affect my emotions and hopefully have a better outlook hope but this is a real in time and space and history hope that the psalmist has and so the only way that he is able to find hope in the midst of sorrow the only way that he's able to avoid distracting and numbing but instead to name his grief and come to God is because his great belief in God's actual real real life real time real space redemption and so first of all he names his sorrows rather than ignoring them he comes to God and asks him to intervene rather than believing he can solve it himself or he has to numb the pain that he faces and finally he takes hope in what God has done both in the past and in the future as he lives in the present and so he ends with a song a song to God reminding himself and others of God's faithfulness in his love in his book the

[29 : 43] Tech Wise family Andy Crouch tells the story of the people of Haiti in January of 2010 as we know they experienced a devastating earthquake which killed over 200,000 people and put over a million people without a place to live NPR ran a story on it and they said for the western hemisphere's poorest country the earthquake that hit Haiti in January was an especially cruel blow despite this it's hard to find a Haitian who does not profess a belief in a loving God and Crouch says this when you've lost everything in fact you still have song all over the hills of Haiti those first terrible nights under the starlit sky the voices of the people of Haiti rose up in grief and lament in prayer and hope and so that's what we do as Christians when we find ourselves in sorrow we take confidence and hope in God's steadfast love knowing that sometimes we will see things set right now but ultimately we will see everything set right and so in the meantime we keep hoping and trusting telling

God our sorrows and trusting him enough to hope and so we sing that and so we're going to do that now I'm going to pray for us and then we're going to sing a song just as the psalmist encourages us to dear father in heaven we thank you that you know that there will come times in our lives where we feel like you're not there thank you that you know this enough and care about it enough that you've given us this psalm you've given us a song to sing when we're sad we thank you that you don't leave us there you listen to our prayers you hear us most of all you redeem us so we ask that you would build us up and strengthen us now even as we sing to you we ask all of this in the name of your son amen