

My Complaint

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. It is great to be with you, although slightly terrifying to be up here with you. But that's just the way it is. If you have a Bible in front of you, please open it to Psalm 13 if you don't have it there already.

And as Neil was saying, if you've been with us over the past few Sunday evenings, we've settled into something of a theme as we've been looking at our soul-bearing Psalms.

Each Psalm has so far included something of God as creator. And we've seen God as the creator, as the king, as the governor, as the ruler.

But as we come to our Psalm this evening, we're brought up short. As we have read and sung, our Psalm does not open with a confident assertion that God is in control.

But with a despairing cry that implies God is nowhere to be seen. And I think the central theme of our Psalm tonight must be that on some level or another, the Psalmist's expectations of God have been failed.

[1 : 14] The Psalmist, in a word, is disappointed in God. But surely that can't be right. Doesn't the New Testament quote Psalm 22, saying whoever believes in him, that is in Christ, will not be disappointed?

I can assure you it does. It does it three times. But yet it is clear that the Psalmist is disappointed with God. The Psalmist clearly has expected different experience of God than what he is currently experiencing.

And that leaves us with something of a dilemma. Firstly, what do we do when our expectations are failed? Secondly, what do we expect from God even when we are disappointed?

And finally, why do we expect what we expect from God? I hope that as we work through this incredible little Psalm, we will find a good and biblical way of dealing with our disappointments.

But until we get there, we've perhaps got an interesting way to go as we look at this Psalm. Let's just pray before we go any further. Father, we come to you.

[2 : 42] And as we're found here this evening, we want to be satisfied in you. We long to know that you are a good and a faithful God.

That you are trustworthy. That you are dependable. And yet, perhaps as we have experienced in our lives, or perhaps as we look through the window of this Psalm, we can see that life doesn't always work out the way that we had hoped.

And you do not always answer our prayers in the ways that we want. Father, we long to make this right.

Father, we long to make this right. To understand what's gone wrong. And to know fellowship with you fully and clearly.

To be able to say with the confidence of the end of this Psalm. That we trust you. And that we are sure that you will bring salvation.

[3 : 51] So, Father, help us, we pray. Send your spirit to open our eyes and our ears. And enable us to see you through everything else.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So, what do we do when our expectations are failed? When we come to this Psalm, all of us have information about God in our minds.

Perhaps for some of you, that information has been maturing for 60 or 70 years of Bible study and prayer and relationship with God. For some of you, perhaps, what you know of God is just what you have thought.

What you've heard from others is maybe second-hand experience. And as we come to this Psalm, we are expected to have something of a backdrop in place.

We're expected to know something of the God that we find in the Bible. of a faithful God. A God who keeps His promises, who does not forget His people.

[5 : 04] Before we get to this Psalm, as we've seen through the previous Psalms in our series, we see a God who is absolutely reliable, who has a proven track record as creator and sustainer, whose words and whose works are good.

But what happens when all this seems contradicted by the sad realities of life? We cannot read these first two verses and be unmoved or callous in our estimation of the psalmist, can we? This is the heartfelt cry of a man who is broken about his circumstances. He's distraught that there's a breakdown of communication with God.

And we have to be careful that we're not like Job's friends. Don't we? Oh Job, it's so simple. Job, we have a soundbite of theology for your problem.

Job, don't you know that you're just a sinner and you're just getting your comeuppance? That's almost what some have said about this Psalm when they've been commenting on it.

[6 : 16] But we have no reason for believing there's any sin here. And so we ought to be moved with compassion for the writer. And we need to be moved with compassion for anyone who finds themselves uttering these words.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Perhaps even some of us have taken these words on our lips in times past.

Can't this be resolved? Whether illness or distress, whether a lingering situation at work or at home, inner turmoil or problems with people.

I think we should be able to take these words without any hesitation as Christians. But I suppose we need to wonder why do these come?

Why do we ever need to ask the question, how long, O Lord? Perhaps it sounds like a silly question to ask because it's obvious. It's instinctive to us.

[7 : 33] But for many, this question is alien and unusual. For the atheist, there is no God to ask. For the agnostic or the deist, there's no point in asking.

To the fatalist, this is subversive. To the prosperity gospel believer, this is a moot point. This should never happen. But to those who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, who believe in a good God who is sovereign, to us and only us, does it make sense to ask this question.

How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? However, this world is not as it should be according to the principles of a good God who's in sovereign control.

And only as we come to this understanding that we have of the fall and of sin and of the brokenness of this world will we ever be able to make any sense of this question.

However, as we come to an understanding of God's faithful dealings with His people, it dredges up a whole new level of this problem. Because here's the problem that this psalm is fundamentally dealing with.

[8 : 57] God is not treating the psalmist as the psalmist expects. The writer of these words is a part of the covenant people of God.

He's an Israelite. And as such, God has promised blessings and curses through the nation of God's. We can go back to Deuteronomy.

Go back to chapter 30 and see that God promises life and prosperity to the obedient and death and adversity to the disobedient. And yet fundamentally, that's not what's happening here.

That's not what's happening in the case of this man's life. He is, to all the information we have, living in obedience. And yet we clearly see that he is in danger of receiving death and adversity.

Why? Why does the world not match up to what is expected of God's faithful work in his life? We need to recognize, I think, that those promises were to the whole nation and not to a disparate group of individuals.

[10 : 14] You see, the Old Testament doesn't work on a system of karma. You don't get what you pay for. If the nation falls away from God, both the righteous and the unrighteous fall under the curses that were prescribed.

And so, this righteous author is feeling the pain of God's righteous rebuke against the nation of an apostate Israel. I missed that when I read the psalm at first and perhaps you did too.

It's hiding there in the very first verse. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Isn't that an odd phrase? Why does the psalmist use this idea of hiding God's face? And perhaps as you start to think about that, you'll hear an echo of words in your mind.

May the Lord bless and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you. And if you thought of that, you're probably onto a good idea.

[11 : 28] It's a quote from number six, a blessing that the priests were to use. And this is a fuller version of the quote. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites.

Say to them, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace. And here's where it gets interesting. So they will put my name on the Israelites and I will bless them. This language of having your face turned towards or turned away from somebody, that's intensely covenant language.

And perhaps we in the 21st century think that that's awfully distant from us. perhaps that puts a little bit of distance between us and this psalm.

It's not so simple anymore. This psalm of David deals with an expectation of prosperity that has been failed. And we don't have that issue.

[12 : 45] We don't have that issue because in Christ we should have no expectations for material blessings on this earth. It isn't part of the Christian's deal.

We're promised good things from our Father, absolutely. We're intended to have our daily bread. But the Christian gospel has a promise of suffering, not prosperity in this life.

It's rather negative, isn't it? And perhaps you're wondering why on earth would I be saying this? Why on earth would that help us? Does that mean that we can never cry out these words because we should expect suffering?

Does that mean that this psalm and many others are interesting but basically historical and irrelevant? No. No, not at all.

I merely hope to show in that that beneath this psalm there is a depth of understanding that we could so easily miss. And now that we see the distance between us and the psalmist, perhaps we can see how near it is to our situations all the same.

[13 : 55] We ask the question, what do we do when our expectations are failed? We also ask the question, what do we expect from God even when we are disappointed?

Because despite the failure of the psalmist's expectations, he's actually still writing. even though disappointed by God's seeming abandonment, he is still crying out to God.

If he wasn't, we wouldn't have this psalm. And we see that in verses 3 and 4. He still has expectations of God.

What does he pray there? Consider me and answer, O God, Lord my God. Light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death. You see, the psalmist, he doesn't just throw in the towel because it's all gone wrong.

He doesn't turn his back on this God and go to find some convenient idol. Rather, he pleads with this true God and has a fresh hope in him.

[15 : 08] And that is so close to our lives because, again, we can ask what will we expect from God even when we are disappointed in life?

Will we expect answered prayer even if everything seems to go wrong? Will we expect God's presence even though there seems to be a chasm and eternity wide?

will we expect to be vindicated or will our faith be crippled and crushed by the weight and weariness of our life?

Dear Christian, hold on. Keep on going. Dear Christian, keep praying. Yes, and I don't say this lightly, our hopes and our dreams may be shredded.

and yes, it is far too much for any of us to deal with. I don't deny any of that, but yet we have a hope that is sure and certain.

[16 : 21] Yet we can expect from our good God recognizing that He is God and that we are not. and this is part of the great difficulty of the Christian faith.

We aren't the boss. We don't get to set the agenda and that rips and tears at the values that we have drank in since birth.

We aren't the center of the universe and our lives aren't conformed to our wishes, faith, but yet we can still return to God.

Yet we can still return to our source of life. We can still ask of our good God who gives good gifts. We can yet pray for the strength to last the trial.

That's exactly what the psalmist asks for here, isn't it? Light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death. Light up my eyes, refresh me, give me the strength to keep going.

[17 : 37] Show me your face so that even though my life is falling apart, I might still continue. And it's the puzzle of Psalm 13.

And I doubt that any sermon or at least any sermon that I can preach can take you into the depths of this tension. Here is a broken man at the end of his own resources looking into the surrounding circumstances that have utterly no light in them.

And his response is to turn back to the God who has been seemingly silent and laid out his case once again to the God in whom he trusts.

Neil pointed me towards a quote from C.S. Lewis from the Screwtape Letters. If you haven't read them, they're from an odd perspective. The speaker here is an imagined demon and so when it says our cause, it's the cause of hell.

And when it says our enemy, it means God. So try and adjust your mind to hear that. This is the quote. Do not be deceived Wormwood. Our cause, the cause of hell, is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our enemy's will, that still desiring to do God's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him of God seems to have vanished and still asks why he has been forsaken and still obeys.

[19 : 30] I'll read that again to try and get it across. Do not be deceived Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished and asks why he has been forsaken and still obeys.

To this world that is utterly stupid. This makes no sense to the person without faith. It's incomprehensible to the person who does not believe in a loving God.

But this is exactly what Jesus did. We saw it didn't we when we were studying Psalm 22 before Easter. Jesus took those words on his lips that echo a different form of the cry that we get here. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? and yet he still intended to and he did finish the work for which he was sent by his father.

This Psalm then is an incredible challenge to us. Will we take the same attitude and continue faithfully when our expectations are dashed?

[21 : 03] will we still expect an answer from heaven when all trace of God seems to have vanished? Or will we allow our present circumstances to drown out the reality of God in our lives?

Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death.

We've asked what do we do when our expectations are filled? We've asked what do we expect from God even when we're disappointed? And we get into our third question, why do we expect what we expect from God?

As we come to the last stanza of the Psalm, we ought to be surprised by the speed of change of tone. I was chatting to Peter and he said it sounds wrong.

It almost sounds trite, this bit kind of tagged on to the end. I don't think this Psalm is one that naturally fits into our thinking about life and I don't think it's meant to.

[22 : 21] As we read verses five and six, we could so easily be forgiven for thinking that time has elapsed maybe or circumstances have somehow changed in that full stop or the Psalmist has had some monumental revelation from God which has transformed everything for him.

But I don't believe that that's the case. I think that verse five and six ought to be surprising because nothing has fundamentally changed.

changed. They are the answer to our third question. Why do we expect what we expect from God?

But I have trusted in your steadfast love. My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord and I think here's the kicker because he has dealt bountifully with me.

These verses form the rationale for what we've been thinking about so far. And without these verses everything that has gone before is a bit vague and a bit piecemeal.

[23 : 41] Without these last two verses there exists a God out there somewhere but we're given no real reason to trust him. But here is a God who has unfailing love.

who is loyal, who is steadfast in his care for his people. Without these last two verses there is some idea of a God who is willing to interfere in human affairs.

But who knows when or why. But here we find a God who saves, who steps into the fray for the sake of his people.

a God who will bring joy as he intervenes in our distress. Without these final verses we may think that the psalmist has some relationship with God.

But as we read that this is a God who accepts the praise of his people and a God who has a track record of good, then finally we have an objective basis for the faith that the psalmist has.

[24 : 54] It's only in the resolution of this very last verse that we see the reason why this change of tone has come at all. The psalmist is remembering who God is and that makes all the difference to his situation.

Yes, the threat of death may stand. Yes, the shame of defeat may still be a possibility. Yes, God is still seemingly silent, but God is a covenant keeper.

But God is enduring in his love. But this God is the God who saves. And so the psalmist trusts and even sings, even in the darkness of his situation, even in the very middle of disappointment and distress, he can yet praise God because he is absolutely sure that God will live up to his name.

For most of us, this is a hard message to hear. I don't deny that this flies in the face of our natural tendencies. When we're in the middle of a trial, the ending of this psalm seems utterly out of sync with reality.

And perhaps you're sitting here this evening and you feel like you're in the middle of what the psalmist is going through. Perhaps you can identify with verses one or two still smarting from the situation, unable to see any real situation at all.

[26 : 42] Perhaps you're just about able to muster the words of verses three and four. You know that God is your only option, but you're really unclear how anything can be resolved.

But see here that we can look back to God's goodness to us in the past, to God's track record, and we can be utterly sure that there will be salvation at the end of our trials.

For some of us, that salvation will come in a good death. For others of us, that salvation will come in God's strengthening us to persevere through a long and arduous trial.

But be sure that God will not disappoint us if we take him at his word. Amen. We've asked, what do we do when our expectations are filled?

What do we expect from God even when we are disappointed? And why do we expect what we expect from God? And I hope that we've seen that this isn't some fanciful dream, but a solid reality based on God's character and God's actions.

[28 : 12] I fear that the reality of our lives is that we expect from God what he never promises to us.

I don't think that's what's happened here with the psalmist, but I fear that's where many of our disappointments with God come from. And for many of us, I can think of a number in my own case, for many of us, this is an especially difficult lesson to learn.

But hear Paul's words to the suffering Christians in Rome as we finish. This is from Romans 5. We also exalt in our tribulations.

Did you hear that? We also exalt in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Yes, our circumstances may be hard. yes, there may be all sorts of reasons why we want to just clam up and not engage, but Paul assures us that we can have hope, even in the darkest of times, not because everything always works out beautifully, not because God has promised us a painless path through life, but because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who God has given to us.

[30 : 20] Let's pray. Father, many of us perhaps have prayed this prayer at times past.

How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? Perhaps many of us yet pray, how long will you hide your face from me?

And Father, we ask this evening that you would answer, that you would consider and answer us, that you would even give us the strength and the refreshment that we need to live in this broken world as your children who are full of faith, even in the hardest of circumstances.

Father, we thank you because you are a good God and we trust in you. praying these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.