

At the age of 22, Charles Haddon Spurgeon had already become the most popular preacher in London, preaching weekly to a church of thousands. In fact, his congregation had outgrown the 1200 seat New Park Street Chapel, so Spurgeon leased the Surrey Gardens Music Hall which was much bigger.

The opening night arrived, October 19, 1856, and the Surrey Gardens Music Hall was packed with a crowd of 10,000 people, eager to hear *'The Prince of Preachers'*, as Spurgeon was called.

But soon after the service started, mischief makers cried "Fire, Fire!" In the ensuing panic, seven people were trampled to death and almost 30 more were seriously injured. When Spurgeon realized what had happened, he passed out. At least one newspaper reported that he died; others held Spurgeon to account for the tragedy.

Spurgeon was devastated. He fell into a deep depression, and he wondered if he would ever preach again. After just 2 weeks he did go back into the pulpit, and he went on to have a very successful ministry – over his lifetime he preached more than 3,600 sermons that were circulated widely, and translated into different languages. Spurgeon had an impact on generations of Christian believers.

But that event, that tragedy, became the trigger for a lifetime of mental anguish and suffering that never left Spurgeon, until his early death at age 57. He lived with sorrow, suffering and depression, despite his deep faith in Christ.

Our Psalm today intersects with the experience of Spurgeon, and I suspect, the experience that many of us have had with sorrow and mental anguish. Psalm 13 reminds us that this is not something new – it is something that God's people have always had to contend with.

Spurgeon once said (quoted in your handouts):

"The Road to sorrow has been well trodden, it is the regular sheep track to heaven and all the flock of God have had to pass along it."

So today I want to delve into that space of mental health (and depression particularly), and to see what light the Bible can shine into the darkness.

Bear in mind this is the beginning of a conversation, not the end, and it's a conversation that I want us to keep having as a church. I also understand that this topic might raise issues or feelings for people, and you may need to get up and take a break during the sermon. That's OK – let me give you permission to do what you need to do. This sermon is recorded, so you can

listen later. I do have some great books and resources that I'll be sharing later, because this is such an important topic to talk about. And our passage of scripture really helps us think rightly about our experience of sorrow.

So why don't we pray that God would speak into our lives and our hearts, as we open Psalm 13.

Our heavenly Father, the Bible says that you know everything about us: you know our hearts, and you know our sorrows. We pray today that you would speak into our lives, with words of understanding and words of hope. We pray that you would use this time to make sense of suffering, and to equip us as a church family to love and support one another in every season. We pray for your Spirit to be with us now, ministering in our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Well, we are in the middle of our summer teaching series, making our way through some of the Psalms. The Psalms are a collection of songs, written by God's people, that make sense of the world the way it is. I love the Psalms because they don't shy away from the real challenges of life. They record expressions of great joy and praise and worship. But they also take us into life's darkest moments and the cries of the heart, as God's people call out to him in desperation.

And that's the context for Psalm 13. David cries out to the Lord in restless torment:

¹ How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)

How long?

How long? Have you ever noticed that when things are going badly, time seems to slow down?

In the first year that Jo and I were married, she wound up in hospital had to undergo a pretty major surgery. Then there were complications, and by time she healed enough to go home, it had been 10 days that she had been in hospital.

I do not have the patience of a saint, and it felt like a lifetime of waiting and worrying.

But we were lucky, I guess. Within a few months, Jo was back to full health. Plenty of people battle health conditions that are ongoing, and exhausting, and oftentimes don't have a happy ending.

How long, Lord? I wonder how many people have asked that question over the millennia?

Just in the Psalms alone, I counted 21 different times that the Psalmists cry out to God, wanting to know how long the suffering will go on for? How long will we have to wait? How long until you answer our prayers? How long until this is over? How long until rescue?

In Psalm 13, David begins with that same question. How long will the suffering last, he asks God.

BTW we don't know the specific cause of David's suffering. In this Psalm, he doesn't tell us.

But we do get an insight into David's experience of suffering. David's suffering focuses on God, himself and his enemies, the first 2 verses show us.

Look at v1 with me:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13:1)

In his suffering, David feels like God has forgotten him. Like God is deliberately hiding his face, or deliberately ignoring him. Twice he asks how long God will be absent from his suffering.

This is essentially an accusation against God, isn't it? David is accusing God of abandoning him...

It seems like dangerous territory... But it shows us that David's relationship with God is not polite, and formal, and impersonal. David trusts God with an impassioned plea from the depths of his heart, confident that God will not judge.

Tim Keller says,

"It is almost a howl, and the fact that this is included in the Bible tells us that God wants to hear our genuine feelings, even if they are anger at him."¹

Timothy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*

And that's our first big takeout idea for today. When things are difficult, keep crying out to God, even if it is in anger. The Psalms give us permission to do that. They even give us a language to use when we can't describe what's going on inside of us. When our thoughts seem unutterable and unmentionable and unconscionable, we often find those very thoughts expressed in the voices of the Psalmists.

I've put some book covers on the back of your handout today. First I wanted to mention Paul David Tripp's book *Suffering*. I think this is an excellent book that anybody could read. Tripp writes as someone who has recently gone through his own life-changing health crisis, and so

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, p19.

the book is not an abstract or academic work about suffering. It is very real for the Tripp, who is a renowned pastor and author.

He writes about the way the Psalms give voice to our suffering.

Suffering is real, and its physical, spiritual and relational effects are real. We should all take comfort in the fact that the Bible never treats suffering as anything but a real, significant and often life-changing human experience. The content of the Bible is again and again punctuated with stories of suffering. Scripture records the real travail of people. Disease, rape, weakness, murder, corrupt government, racism, famine, domestic violence, injustice, war, torture, betrayal, poverty and death are some of the things that the Bible presents as the real suffering of real people.

Not only does Scripture record the history of sufferers, but a large portion of Scripture is dedicated to giving voice to their cries. I have always thought that the psalms are in the Bible to keep us honest about the messy nature of faith in this broken world. [...] In a real way, the psalms record the emotional and spiritual drama of everyone who has ever suffered.²

Paul David Tripp, *Suffering*

So that's the first big idea – keep crying out to God, just like the psalms teach us to do.

The Heart of Sorrow

The second big idea comes in v2, when David describes his experience of personal suffering.

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart? (Psalm 13:2)

A few years ago I met up with my triathlon team for a long bicycle ride. We were planning a training ride through one of the national parks in Sydney – a 50 mile ride with spectacular coastal views and some big climbs. This was a fairly regular thing.

Only on the day I'm thinking of, we got about 10 miles into the ride and one of my friends was visibly struggling. I pulled up alongside him and he said, "I just can't stop crying. I don't know why."

This guy was handsome, athletic, successful, he has a great wife and kids. He was a much better triathlete than me. But on that day, his depression told him none of that mattered. He was at the bottom of a deep hole. And it wasn't the last time I saw him like that.

² Paul David Tripp, *Suffering*, pp44-45 (Crossway, 2018).

Depression is a common but serious mood disorder. Sometimes called major depressive disorder or clinical depression, it causes severe symptoms that affect how you feel, think, and handle daily activities, such as sleeping, eating, or working.³

Depression affects about 8% of adults each year in the US, and those numbers are much higher for teenagers and under 25s.⁴

And I think Psalm 13 gives us a little insight into the lived experience of someone with depression. In v2, David asks how long will he have to wrestle with the thoughts going around and around in his head. How long will the sorrow remain, sorrow which is his daily companion.

There is no one quintessential experience of depression, but this psalm seems to capture the idea of *prolonged mental anguish and sorrow*.

Reading the Old Testament, we see that depression is nothing new. We see signs of depression in King Saul, in the prophets Jeremiah, Jonah, Elijah, Job. And of course, David who wrote our Psalm.

Now I don't have the time or expertise to speak too deeply about depression, but if you want something a bit more clinical than Tripp, I can recommend Ed Welch's book, *Depression: Looking up from the Stubborn Darkness*.

Ed Welch is a licensed psychologist who has counseled for over 30 years. However his specialty is Biblical counseling, and there are some excellent certificate and Masters courses offered through the college that he has helped to shape, CCEF (Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation).

What I love about Welch's book is that he sits Biblical wisdom alongside the best clinical practice, and that he doesn't jump to quick and easy solutions. Because depression doesn't work that way. But he does suggest ways forward, both spiritually and medically.

My favorite chapter is for families and friends of those experiencing depression. There are a couple of little insights that really helped me examine myself in the way that I interact with people experiencing depression. It can be hard to have empathy for something you haven't experienced personally, and it can be hard to be patient when depression lasts days and weeks. But that's what Psalm 13 tells us depression is like. Persistent mental anguish and sorrow.

The Enemy

And that brings me to a sensitive topic, but one that's important to talk about. Suicide.

³ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression>

⁴ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>

If you buy Ed Welch's book, you'll see he has a chapter that talks about suicidal thoughts. Zack Eswine has a similar chapter in his book.

Rather than stay quiet on the subject, they acknowledge the feelings that often accompany major depression. It can be quite confronting as an outsider, but mental health workers regularly ask the question: have you had any thoughts of self-harm?

At the end of v2 in our psalm, David asks:

How long will my enemy triumph over me?
³ Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
(Psalm 13:2-4)

Now David could have been talking about a physical enemy – he had plenty of those. But some commentators suggest that the enemy here is death. I wonder if the enemy is depression.

David asks how long will his enemy triumph over him. He cries out for God to answer, for God to turn his face towards him, and to restore his watchful gaze over David's life (c.f. Numbers 6:24-26). David asks God to give light to his eyes – to shine some hope into the darkness, to give his eyes something positive to look at. Otherwise, David worries that he might not be able to take it much longer...

How long is a question that my triathlon friend asked a lot. How long do I have to feel this way?

If you are in that dark place today, can I encourage you to talk to someone about it. A loved one. A professional. You can come and talk to me, or I can help you find someone who can help.

Because help is available.

And this psalm doesn't end at v4. It goes on to give a testimony of David's hope in the midst of the darkness.

And that's our final big idea for today: remembering the good.

The Good

I told you that my triathlon friend was a much better athlete than me. He would often invite me out for a training run, or a hill session in the local sand dunes. Actually on the bicycle, when we would ride up big hills, he would often ride right beside me and keep my mind off the pain in the legs. He was so fast that he would unclip one foot and pedal one-legged...

But one of the reasons my friend did so much exercise was that it was good for his mental health. He knew it helped. And so he would train, even when he didn't feel like it.

And I think David does that in our psalm today. In the middle of his mental anguish, David does what he knows is good for him. He remembers the goodness of God. He holds onto the promises, and reminds himself of what is true, even if he doesn't feel it.

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
⁶ I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me. (Psalm 13:5-6)

David reminds himself of God's unfailing love – his *hesed* – the promise that God had made to his people to show kindness towards them.

When it feels like God isn't listening, or that God has turned his face away, it simply isn't true. God has made a covenant with his people, an unbreakable promise to be with us; to be for us. He has said that nothing can separate us from his love that is in Christ Jesus. Nothing! Not life or death, not angels or demons, not depression, not suicidal thoughts. None of that puts you outside of the realm of God's perfect care for you. His *hesed* love is unfailing, even when we sin.

David knows that God will save him, even when it doesn't feel like it.

There was a worship song that was popular a few years ago called *Waymaker*. It had a line in the bridge that said:

Even when I don't see it, You're working
Even when I don't feel it, You're working
You never stop, You never stop working

You sing that bridge 3 or 4 times, and it starts to teach your heart what is true, even if it doesn't feel like it. God is still working to bring us to salvation in Jesus Christ, even when the world feels like it's falling apart.

Sometimes we just need to be reminded. Sometimes we just need to sing the Lord's praise, like it says in v6 of our psalm, because God has been good to us, and we need to keep that truth close.

It may not make the depression disappear. Psalm 13 is not a magic formula for curing depression. But it might make it easier to endure.

It might also help to remember you are not alone in your suffering.

Jesus knew what it was like to experience overwhelming sorrow, even to the point of death, in the garden of Gethsemane. He faced the taunts of his enemies who wanted him dead. On the cross, he experienced the abandonment of God, calling out: My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? He faced death alone, and in pain.

And yet in all of this he trusted in the unfailing goodness of God, and his promise that he would not sleep in death forever. The light of the world rose to life after 3 days, and now he shines hope into the darkest corners of our souls. He promises life forever, in a kingdom where the enemy will no longer triumph, where death and darkness have no more place.

That's something to hold onto, isn't it?

Shall we pray?