

When Life Keeps Being HARD

Psalm 13

Rev. Heath McLaughen

June 29, 2025

My name's Heath, glad to be here. I feel like I know Christ the King pretty well. I've got some of your students in RUF at Virginia Tech, and I have in the past. Some of you have supported us or continue to support us. Your church supports us, so thank you for that. And then both, I'm sure some of you know Jason Little. He's my boss. So I know he and Caroline well. I ride bikes with Jason when I can. And then Penny is on the RUF committee, and so he's kind of my boss too. And yet it appears neither of them saw fit to come today. So I guess I can say whatever I want about those two. All joking aside, it's really, really nice to be here with y'all. I think it was either late 2019, I spoke, kind of gave a missions moment one Sunday, and then like a lunch afterwards, or very, very early 2020. I can't really remember, but it's been a long time since I've been with y'all on a Sunday morning, so it's great to be here. We're going to be in Psalm 13 today, so if you want to turn there in your Bibles, I don't know if it's going to be on the screen or not, but we'll see. Let's give attention to the reading of God's Word.

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,” lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

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.”

Let me pray for our time together.

Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that you saw fit that it would be written down, that thousands of years after David, we could hear from it and hopefully hear from you this morning. Father, we pray that your Holy Spirit would be with us now. That you would open not just our ears, but our minds and our hearts to hear the good news that is here for us in Psalm 13. Would we hear from you now and not from me? We pray this in the precious name of our Savior Jesus. Amen.

Back in January, I was asked to preach at Grace Covenant, our home church in Blacksburg, and I picked this text and I had planned this nice little talk about spiritual depression from a nice safe distance. Had this wonderful quote from Charles Spurgeon, who suffered from depression. Then on January 29th, while skiing with a friend, I guess I caught an edge. I don't really know what happened. And as my boot did not come out of the ski binding, I felt a pop and felt nauseous in my stomach. Laying there in the snow, a nice lady stopped and asked if I was okay. And I managed to say, “I don't know.” Well, I wasn't. I tore my ACL, had surgery at the end of February. And I guess Thursday was the four-month checkup from that. I didn't think about it at the time as I was laying there in the snow, but no longer would my preaching

that Sunday in February be on spiritual depression from a nice safe distance where I wasn't struggling with anything anymore.

If you knew me, if you knew my family, you would know it really hasn't been an easy six years since we moved to Blacksburg in 2019. Yes, right after we moved was COVID and everything that that did on a college campus. In 2022, starting to come out of COVID, I fell on the ice in my driveway and tore up my shoulder and had to have surgery. I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that year. And just for the fun of it, because I'm an adult and [insurance was] the deductible was hit, sinus surgery as well. In 2020, my dad was diagnosed with dementia. My dad passed away last fall in October and I had the privilege of preaching his funeral. And I really thought we were rounding a corner, so to speak, that we were rounding the corner away from the hard for a little while. And then there I was lying in the snow, right back in the middle of hard. I couldn't drive for 10 weeks. My blessed wife and many students drove me around for 10 weeks. Even Thursday at my four month follow-up, being told almost as a threat, that if I don't get the range of motion back, that the doctor is gonna have to do something called a manipulation where they sedate me because if I was awake during it, I would probably yell and scream things.

Psalms 13 has taken on a different light since what I thought it would be when I originally said I was gonna preach this text way back in February. It's become even more near and dear to me since then. So I wanna look at how do we keep going in the midst of really hard, in the midst of despair, depression. So three points this morning, the questioning of faith, the instinct of faith and the object of faith. So questioning, instinct, object.

Questions of Faith

Let's start off with the questioning of faith. Look with me at verses one and two. "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted?" Usually in the Bible, we see threefold repetition as a way to emphasize a point and here we've got it even one more, four times. We don't know how long it's been, but we do know that for David, it has felt like forever. Let's take a quick look at the three things that are leading David to this place of despair. First, he has a God problem. Thinks that God has forgotten him and this doesn't mean forgotten like we think of forgotten, like I forgot that guy that sat next to me in second grade. It tends to carry the idea of absence or withholding practical help. David is experiencing God in the midst of this really hard situation, which we don't know what it is, as distant, as God is not stepping in to help him. It feels like God has forgotten him and it's been going on for a long time.

Then David has an emotional problem. "How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart?" This is introspection, but it's not really the helpful kind. The commentator D. Ralph Davis translates this verse this way, "How much longer must I lay plans within me, agony in my heart?" This is that constant mulling over of a problem or a situation that never leads anywhere. It's running the hamster wheel of anxiety in our minds over and over and over again, coming up with solutions that we know are not going to pan out and yet we just keep running that wheel and coming back to them. My wife, Jane, who's here this morning, tells me this is why she often cannot sleep. She will wake up in the middle of the night and just start running that hamster wheel, thinking what do I have to do tomorrow or what about this problem or what about this or that, or probably thinking what is he supposed to do that he hasn't done that I'm going to have to do? And she runs that same

terrain over and over and over again. And David is doing that in his mind, agony in my heart. And each time around it leads to nothing but despair. And then lastly, David has a problem with an enemy and we don't know who this is. We don't know the exact situation, but we do know that David sees God as the ultimate source of this. This is why he's praying to God. All this to say is that David's life is one of sadness, despair, hopelessness, maybe even depression. And maybe this morning, all of us are not experiencing depression as deeply as this, but I am 100% sure that many of us in this room do have feelings like this, even this morning. Even if it isn't depression, we can all relate to David's cry.

How long? How long until I get a job? How long until I can find another job that I like better? How long is my kid going to be sick? How long until we can have a kid? How long am I going to feel paralyzed by anxiety? How long until the kids go back to school in August? How long until I have a real relationship or get married? How long is all of this bad stuff, this hard stuff going to keep happening to me? Let me say this. It is okay to feel this way. We tend to avoid displays of emotions like this, both from ourselves and others. Davis puts it this way, that "here we have raw nerves hanging on the page in what was the hymn book of the Old Testament." This would be sung in worship. David's anxieties and depression sung in worship. It is okay that we are not okay. It doesn't mean we're defective. We have lots of company. If we call ourselves a Christian, it doesn't mean that we lack faith. Even if we feel like we need to hide these feelings from other believers, we don't.

Instincts of Faith

But even if we did, we're seeing that we should never hide them from God. Feelings like despair and depression and anxiety, questioning. These sorts of things do not, let me say that again, do not exclude us from the fellowship of God or with his people. And so it isn't just that these emotions are okay. I want us to notice what David does with these emotions. So let's take a look at the instinct of faith. We don't know how long David has been praying this way or praying the same prayer, but God hasn't answered him yet. So what does he do? He just keeps praying. This was described as the knee-jerk reaction of faith that no matter what is going on, the reaction is to pray. It's those physical exams testing our reflexes. I have none in my right knee anymore. David's reflex, no matter what, is to hit the ground in prayer.

Even with his questioning, with his ragged emotions. We've all heard that definition of insanity, right? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. One commentator said that's lousy logic, but excellent faith. No matter the circumstance, good, bad, indifferent, David's instinct is prayer. But notice how David prays. We've seen his incredible honesty, bringing his questions, his doubts, the how longs that resonate with our souls. But it's not just that he's honest with God here. He's rational as well. I mean, look how he prays in verses three and four. He's giving reasons that God should answer his prayer. He's saying, answer me, God. Light up my eyes. Give me some energy. Restore me or else I'm going to die, or at least it feels that way. And then he gives a second reason.

He says, if David dies, if the enemy triumphs, his enemies are going to win and boast not just over David, but David is God's anointed king. So they're actually going to be boasting over God that they triumphed over God himself. He's saying, "God, you're God. You get the glory. If they win, you're going to be mocked. You don't want that. God, heal me. God, help me. God, fix this situation, whatever it is."

I mean, is this how we pray? Honestly and yet rationally? I mean, even the quote from Acts for the baptism. Is that how we pray for our kids? This is the promise of God for our children. Is that how we pray? I mean, part of my own struggle with depression is often motivation and distraction to do, or distraction in my job to read ESPN, or I love biking, some cycling website or fly fishing to do my job to the very best without distraction. If I were praying like David, my prayers very simply would be something along the lines of, "God, if you take this away, you will get more glory. God, how much greater could RUF be if I wasn't reading some review about a fly fishing trip I want to take? You would get the glory. God, heal me. God, help me." So David prays emotional and rational prayers. I just think that is such an interesting combo that we don't often do.

Object of Faith

But why would David's instinct, in the midst of despair, why would his knee-jerk reaction be to pray? That takes us to our third point, the object of faith. Look with me at verse five. "But I have trusted." Literally it says, "But I have trusted." Emphasis on the I, David, but mostly on the object of his trust. David does not trust in himself. He does not trust in his willpower to get himself out of it. Just grit your teeth, clench your fists, and dig himself out of the hole. He doesn't trust in his own character. He doesn't trust in armies or might or strength to triumph over this enemy. It says, I've trusted in your steadfast love. If you have been coming to RUF for a little while, you would know that this word might be my very favorite in all of scripture. Probably would have heard my spiel on it, but you haven't, so I'm gonna give it to you. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*. And it means God's covenant promise, his made-in-blood, unbreakable commitment to his people. And I love how the Jesus Storybook Bible kind of renders this. The never-giving-up, never-changing, always-an-unbreakable, I'm-messing-it-up, I-should-have-written-it-down, love of God. David is trusting in God and his covenant promises to him and to his people rather than trusting in himself, even when it's hard. Why would David do this? I mean, his reflex is to pray, but why? David can look back at his own life. He can look back at the history of Israel since God first made this covenant promise and know that God has always come through. His steadfast love has never been broken. Even in the midst of despair, even in the midst of feeling like God is currently breaking that commitment, David can say that in his past, the end of verse six, God has dealt bountifully with him.

And we can look back in the Old Testament and see God's steadfast love to his people throughout. As I was preparing for this, one commentator pointed out to me, and I love this idea, that the idea of steadfast love is always tinged with grace. In Exodus 34, it's in your bulletin as one of the reflections. This is two chapters after the golden calf incident. [God,] Moses says, I wanna see you and God said, you can't actually see all of me. That would be too much. And so he kind of puts Moses in the rock and covers him up and God passes by. And this is what God says about himself. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." And he said this after maybe one of the high-water marks in Israel for sin, idolatry and breaking their covenant with God, that he is a God of steadfast love. Again, the commentator Davis says, "*Hesed* has no right to exist, except it does. It's faithful love that should not be except that it's the way Yahweh is in the depth of his being." And let's go back a little bit and just look. Steadfast love shouldn't exist. Adam and Eve, they're basically told one thing, don't do this. Okay. And they do it. Abraham, who the promise is given to, he is a liar who does not trust God and takes things into his own hands on multiple occasions. I mean, Israel in the Exodus, I would like to think, I'm probably

wrong about myself, but I would like to think if I got to witness the 10 plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, that days later, I wouldn't be grumbling and complaining to God and then going and making an idol of a golden calf. I'm pretty sure I would do that, but I would like to think that I wouldn't. I mean, Israel's entire history basically is just this cycle of idolatry and sin over and over and over again. Read the book of Judges and it's that history, that cycle in miniature. I mean, think about David. This is the man after God's own heart who commits adultery and lies and murders to cover it up. And yet he can say, I trust in God's steadfast love for me. It shouldn't exist. Think about us.

You and I, we are covenant breakers. We sin all the time in ways we don't even realize. I've probably sinned more this morning that I don't even know about. There should not be steadfast love for us. And yet what David is saying is that God's steadfast love for him, for Israel, for us still exists. It has not stopped. Guys, this is bonkers. When we realize this, when we feel this, it should cause us to hit the floor. The term amazing grace isn't enough. And we have something David didn't have. We can look at the rest of the Bible and see the culmination of God's steadfast love for his people. We can see a God so committed to his steadfast love that he literally suffers poverty, injustice, despair.

Think about Jesus in the garden on the night before his crucifixion. Is there any other way? So anxious that he is sweating blood. He is so committed to his steadfast love that he suffers death on a cross rather than break his promises to you and to me, rather than be separated from his people. God is committed to his promises to the point of death on a cross. On our behalf, in our place, what we deserve, he took. David can look back at what God has done for him and say, look at God's steadfast love to him and say that God has dealt bountifully with him. How much more can we, this side of Jesus and the cross, look back at God's steadfast love hanging on a cross for us, for you, for me, and say that God has dealt bountifully with us? Maybe we need to believe that for the first time today. If that's you, come talk to me or Tobias afterwards. Here's the big takeaway.

In the midst of physical pain, emotional distress, sickness, grief, sorrow, depression, whatever circumstances that make David's cry of how long resonate in our hearts, our guts, our souls, even in the midst of that, we can look to God's steadfast love hanging on a cross for us and know that God has dealt bountifully with us. He cannot love us any less than he did that day hanging on a cross. It's impossible. Even when it's hard, even when it feels like God has forgotten me and I'm laying in the snow, both literally and metaphorically again, face down and in pain, and it feels like God has forgotten and turned away, it is impossible. We look to Jesus on the cross and see that it is impossible, that God's steadfast love is forever. God is more loving and committed to us today no matter what's happening in our lives than we could ever dare hope or dream. And that's the good news for us this morning. Let me pray for us.

Oh, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, how long? Life is hard in any number of ways. How long? But Lord, we give you thanks and gratitude and praise that you are a God of steadfast love, no matter what. And that when we believe in you, your steadfast love rests upon us. And even when life is hard, even when we cry out, you have not forgotten us, you have not left us, you have not turned from us. How could you? When you are willing to die for us. So Lord, we thank you for your steadfast love. We praise you for it. We praise you for our savior Jesus who we see hanging on a cross for us. And it's in his name that we pray, Amen.