

Scripture: Psalm 13:1-6  
Message: How Long, Lord? (Abuse Awareness)  
September 24, 2017; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON  
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Psalm 13 is a psalm where we like to skip to the end and dwell on the last two verses. It's so great to celebrate God's unfailing love and salvation. We enjoy so much when we can sing to the Lord for his goodness.

But that would be an injustice to the psalmist and to the content of this psalm. Psalm 13 is a psalm of lament, a psalm of crying out to God. Charles Spurgeon, a 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher in England, calls Psalm 13 a "Howling psalm" with a play on the words how long. With those words, "how long" repeated four times, it sounds like howling.

A lament is a certain kind of complaint. It is expressed in the context of faith and trust in God. A lament identifies our struggles and pain. A lament cries out to God when life is hard and there are no quick and easy solutions. When that reality hits, we sometimes question whether or not it does any good to pray. God's Grand Story is not just filled with cheerful experiences where life is rosy. There is also pain, disappointment, hurt, lament.

David, who is credited with writing Psalm 13, is gutsy and honest. We are comforted to know that he also struggled with the "how long?" problem just as we do. His honesty invites us to be real about our emotions. When we feel that God has abandoned us, sometimes we act as though we're afraid to sin even more by being real with God about the vacuum we experience. God already knows how we feel, so we might as well not compound our problems by being dishonest about them or hiding or suppressing them. We can name them to God, knowing that he can handle it.

There are many experiences in life when we might ask the question "How long, Lord?" This morning I want to draw our attention particularly to the reality of abuse in relationships. Abuse can take many forms. It can be physical, emotional or sexual. It is a violation of a person's dignity as an image-bearer of God. It can be an active behaviour or a neglect of someone's needs.

Abuse is inflicted on children when an adult takes advantage of them. It can happen between adults when one inflicts control or pain over another. It can happen against elderly when they do not receive the care and dignity that they deserve.

Abuse is real. It has happened and continues to happen all around us, including within church families. Surveys which were done in our denomination over the years have shown that abusive behaviour is experienced within the church as much as outside of it.

Someone who is or has been abused can readily identify with these words of Psalm 13. "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" This is an idiom that suggests holding back one's kindness, or, even more painful, withdrawing it.

It may seem as if God has pulled back his love. He doesn't seem to want us to recover. If he did, wouldn't he send whatever or whomever is necessary to ease our pain and fix things up?

Where was God when the uncle was taking advantage of his little niece? Where was God when the alcoholic father was hitting again? Where was God when mother sat quietly in the other room while she knew what her husband was doing to her son?

If God really loved me, wouldn't he stop the sorrow or pain or suffering?

Why does God hold back his love? Must he punish us for some reason? How long must this punishment, this hollowness when we pray, this denial of our "needs," go on?

"Every day I have sorrow in my heart?" The words "every day" could have an unspoken parallel in the previous line, as if to say: all night I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart. How often do we not stay awake during the night trying to plan ways to end the pain? Then the day brings tiredness because of lack of sleep and mental tiredness because of thinking things through.

"How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

Who are our enemies? We could say that obviously the abuser is an enemy. We might also see as enemies those who suggest it was your own fault that you were abused. Or the people who simplify your pain by suggesting that you should just let the past be in the past and get on with life. Or the people who accuse you of being short-tempered and insensitive, without knowing why you are reacting that way. Or the people who gossip about you, exaggerating your troubles or judging you without knowing the whole story.

We can be our own enemy in our attitudes and fears for the future. A person may avoid what could be an enjoyable experience because of fear of the painful memories that might come up. There is fear of sharing feelings because previous risks have brought too much pain.

How long, Lord?

Abuse is real. It happens in our homes. It affects the lives of members of our church. The road to recovery from the pain and reality of abuse can be a long and lonely road. Much of that journey is affected by fear: fear of being misunderstood, fear of not being believed, fear of being taken advantage of again. Much of that journey is affected by guilt: guilt for having deserved the abuse or for not opposing it, or guilt from thinking God has allowed abuse as punishment.

How do we respond to this painful reality? As God's people, the church, we are called to bring the hope and peace of God to a broken world. We are called to bring the message of healing to a world that experiences broken trust in abusive relationships.

A first step is to name abuse as real and not avoid it.

That includes adopting a Safe Church policy for our church ministries. There is some inconvenience in having to get police checks and be interviewed and fill out forms and answer questions. But this is more than an administrative duty. This is our message to each other and

our community that we care about each and every person. We want to give the message that this church is a safe place.

But our Safe Church policy is not only about abuse prevention. It is also about respect for each other. Therefore we are also called to bring hope and healing to those who have been abused. We bring hope and healing to those who are abusers. We desire to bring the grace of God into the lives of those who bear the wounds of sin.

The message of Psalm 13 is certainly one of lament. How long, Lord? Will you forget me? We listen to the cries of the pain of abuse. We face the reality of abuse in our families and neighbourhoods. We don't deny it or cover it up. We hold accountable those who have abused others. We walk with the abused and the abusers to find the hope of healing and restoration.

God's Grand Story is a story of reconciliation. This is first of all a reconciliation, a restored relationship with God. That is where the lament of Psalm 13 leads. The cry of longing is not a denial of God. It is a cry of hope. The psalmist expresses his hope as he speaks of his trust in God's unfailing love in the midst of his pain.

'Unfailing love' is a powerful word in the Hebrew language. This unfailing love is the unfailing steadfastness of knowing that God has *not* forgotten us. This is the steadfast, covenant love of the Lord that weaves through God's Grand Story, the amazing grace of his infinite kindness and compassion toward us, his people.

Don't just take my word for it. Look at the table beside me. There are symbols that point us to this word of God. In a couple of weeks, God invites us to eat and drink and be nourished in this relationship of grace and forgiveness as children of God. We don't have to be good enough or have everything fixed up in our lives. We come by grace, forgiven, at God's invitation. See the baptismal font, the reminder of God's promises to love us and adopt us as his children. The water of baptism, the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper speak to us of God's unfailing love. This is not just a word. This is the work of Christ for us. This is the love of God shown in sending his own Son for us to forgive our sin, to adopt us as his children.

'Unfailing love' means that God will not forget, he will not hide his face, he will not let the enemy triumph, he will never withdraw his support from us. It may seem so when he does not grant us what we ask or when he doesn't take away our seemingly never-ending sorrow, but his infinite wisdom and love are always present with us and on behalf of us.

When we depend on our own thoughts to figure things out, we will always struggle. When we give in to the unfailing love of God, admitting our own helplessness, we will let God bring to us the gifts of his love.

Then we can sing, not because we have it all figured out, but because the Lord has been good to me. Then we can sing, not because we have taken care of all the pain and the memories, but because we know the goodness of the Lord.

This is not a simple journey. We must face the pain of abuse. This is a spiritual battle.

The enemy, the devil, will want us to gloss over the sin of abuse. But we must face the dirtiness, the guilt, the terrible wrongness. And in the face of that pain, we find God's presence and strength.

It's not so much that a person has to 'get over it.' It's that someone can see themselves as God sees them, his child, loved with an unconditional love. You are a dearly loved child of God.

It is not a simple step of forgiving the abuser. It is coming to see the abuser as God would see them, a person in need of God's blessing and grace. That doesn't mean that everything will be fine between an abused person and their abuser. It does mean that one's own feelings of anger, desires for revenge, bitterness, have been given to God.

What does this message say to us today?

To those who have been abused, Psalm 13 is permission to cry out to God, to find hope in God, to work through your pain in the hope and strength which God can give. It is a reminder that God not only faced our pain, but took our pain and injustice upon himself on the cross. His resurrection gives us hope of new life. God loves you with an unfailing love. As unworthy as you may feel, God says "My child, I love you!" You are a dearly loved child of God.

This is also an invitation to trust someone with your story, to allow someone to walk with you in this journey of healing.

This message today speaks to each one of us to be caring and compassionate to one another. Walk patiently with someone who says they have been abused. Support them as they get the professional help which they need. Listen to the laments and cries and do not deny them or belittle them. Be a living reminder of the hope of the victorious Christ, but don't rush someone to grab that hope. Be a living reminder of the unfailing love of God, the gracious salvation of God, the goodness of God.

Will you listen to someone as they share their pain?

Will you let someone help you and walk with you?

Will you look to the Lord, a God of unfailing love? See the cross and the empty tomb. God loves you, and he is our source of hope and healing and victory.

Amen.