

Leader Notes

Text: Psalm 13

Thanksgiving

Context and Background

Background: The psalms are the ancient hymnbook of the Hebrews. They contain the honest reflections and heart cry of God's people. Like modern collections of poetry or song, the Psalter (the collection of psalms) is comprised of psalms by many authors. The superscripts or small words at the beginning of each psalm in our Bibles are actually the first lines of each psalm and record for us the author and the setting, musical instructions, and, or circumstance behind the psalm. We have no reason to doubt these superscriptions as being anything other than accurate. As one reads the psalms it is hard to miss that they are not all celebratory in nature. This is somewhat surprising to some. Are not songs of worship supposed to be celebratory? Perhaps as few as a third of the psalms are what we might call "upbeat." Approximately half of the psalms have a wintry feel as they deal with honest, hard issues of life. Many of these "wintery" psalms are a specific type of poetry called "laments." A "lament" is simply a heart-felt cry of despair, often directed toward God. In these psalms of lament, it is not unusual for the author to speak quite boldly to God regarding their circumstances. The presence of these bold outbursts within these psalms indicate the honesty and integrity with which the psalmists approached God offering insight into how God desires all of His people to approach Him. God's people can be honest with Him, about life, their feelings, and their faith. God's people can pour out their hearts to Him and it is all worship. A second interesting feature of these lamenting psalms is the presence of words of thanksgiving. Often, the psalmist found the ability amidst their pain not only to cry out to God for help but also to lift up prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Often these words of thanksgiving are founded upon God's faithfulness in the past and hope for the future through the projection of such faithfulness into the future. The presence of these words of thanksgiving and gratitude are interesting, an indication that the psalmists were able to transcend their immediate circumstances and earthly point of view to glance upon their reality through a heavenly lens. Their example provides us with insight into the process of transcending our own circumstances and reality for the purpose of lifting up our own prayers of thanksgiving.

Context: Psalm 13 is a psalm written by David. The exact circumstances surrounding the psalm are unknown. Certainly David feels overcome, perhaps threatened by an enemy or series of enemies. One might imagine Saul, Absalom, or even death itself as the enemy in view (See verse 3). However, David never specifically identifies his opponents. What David does include in his psalm is an honest cry of dependence upon God that gives way to an offering of thanksgiving and gratitude that transcends his immediate circumstances.

The Text

Lamenting Life (1-2): Life is hard. That's reality. However, sometimes life gets downright grueling. This was no less true for David. David opens his prayer to God with four phrases that indicate a depth of pain that is common to humanity. David starts out by indicating that he feels forsaken, abandoned by God. To him, it seems as if God has forgotten him, treated him as an item of low importance left behind by its owner. David goes deeper, further exploring his true feelings. It isn't just that he feels forgotten. David feels forsaken. God hasn't just forgotten where He has misplaced David. In David's present experience, it feels as if God has intentionally turned away from him. Feeling abandoned and alone, David is left to wrestle with his present reality, a reality that is full of anguish. David reveals that he is experiencing a great range of distressing emotions that grip the very core of his being. These emotions seem to revolve around the experience with an enemy, one that presently is triumphing over David. David does not identify his opponent, leaving room for the possibility that the enemy could be external, that is a person or circumstance, but also leaving for the possibility that the opponent was within, a part of David's own psyche. David's prayer begins with a lament, a lament over the painful reality of the experience of life.

Expressing Dependence (3-4): David feels forsaken, intentionally abandoned by God, left to the wiles of his opponents or inner demons. Hope is slipping. Life literally seems to be ebbing away. With one last gasp, David cries out to God, begging for His attention. Would God look upon him and answer? Would that God only insert Himself into the situation and bring life (light to David's eyes). Apart from such a movement of God, David sees no hope, the experience of death itself. Such an experience would be tragic, the overcoming of God's anointed, the opportunity for David's opponent to rejoice. David is at the end of his rope. He has no strength save for that with which he casts himself upon God in full dependency.

Offering Thanksgiving (5-6): Having expressed his deepest emotions in brutal honesty to God, David's tone suddenly changes. This change begins with a simple choice, the choice to trust in the unfailing love of God. This choice is rooted not in David's circumstances and experience but in the nature of who David knows God to be. This choice, though certainly difficult, leads to rejoicing amidst David's pain, rejoicing over salvation that David knows God will bring. Further, David finds himself able to praise God, not for what God is presently doing but for what God has done. It is this praise, praise for the past that gives David hope for his present and future. With the making of the choice to trust, David finds his heart in tension, now filled with both sorrow and joy. This tension leads to his ability to live in tension, to express thanksgiving and gratitude amidst his suffering.

Application: Life is hard, sometimes downright grueling. We find ourselves overcome, beaten down, at the end of our rope. In these moments the first thing we need is hope and the last thing on our minds is offering praise and thanksgiving to God. However, in our choosing to trust God in the midst of our suffering we find that which we need and that which seems impossible, hope and the ability to express praise and thanksgiving.

Prayer: Brings God into Life

Discussion Guide 4

Psalm 13

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- When have you ever found yourself overcome? Can you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstance.” (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18a) Right. Sure, that’s great advice when everything is running along without any hiccups, when life is smooth sailing. It’s easy to be thankful for good things. Here’s the cold, hard truth. Life isn’t always smooth sailing. Instead, life can seem to be a series of hiccups, or sometimes just one big hiccup. Life isn’t easy. It’s hard. Sometimes it gets downright grueling. Give thanks? “Sure thing. I’ll be sure to do that when things get better.” Somehow giving continual thanks and the realities of life just don’t seem to fit well together. Life is full of pain, suffering, anguish, disappointment, and sorrow, not really the stuff that thanksgiving is made of. David knew how we feel. He too experienced pain, suffering, anguish, and his own share of disappointments and sorrow. And yet, somehow amidst it all he was able to lift up an offering of thanksgiving to God. Somehow, David found the strength to live in tension, a life marked by the comingling of sorrow and thanksgiving in his heart. Just how did he do it? Was he better than us, or did he just know something, something deep and true that can change one’s life if they grasp and orient themselves around it? What was it that gripped David, that brought about the presence of thanksgiving in the absence of pleasant circumstances? Can people like us be gripped by this same thing as well?*

- Read Psalm 13.
- In what ways does David feel overcome?
- What sort of responses does David make in his experience of being overcome? Which, if any, of David’s responses stands out to you? Can you elaborate?
- What overcomes people today?
- In what ways do people respond to being overcome?
- Where might you feel overcome? In what ways do you find yourself responding? Can you elaborate?
- David responded to his experience with trust and thanksgiving. What might it take for you to respond in a similar manner? Can you elaborate?
- Group thanksgiving exercise: (1) Have group members close their eyes and imagine the area in which they are feeling overcome. (2) Read Psalm 13.5-6 slowly asking members to imagine God’s love pouring down over them, surrounding and enveloping them. (3) Ask your members to consider making the choice to rest in God’s love and faithfulness. (4) Ask group members honestly to verbalize their thanks to God. (This can be for anything, even if it seems unrelated and simple. Allow moments of silence to stand, leaving room for additional responses.) (5) Conclude by rereading Psalm 13.5-6 as your closing prayer together.

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)