***HOW LONG?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

July 2, 2023

Texts: Psalm 13 and James 5:13-18

In the church in Slippery Rock, PA in which I grew up, we had a tradition, carried on here at Covenant, of having a hymn sing to open services in the summer. To even offer that opportunity requires a skilled pianist, like Chris, who can play without practice ahead of time whatever hymn happens to be selected by the congregation that morning. That is probably not a problem when someone chooses *Holy, Holy, Holy* or *How Great Thou Art* that Chris can play in his sleep, but it may be a bit more challenging when the choice is *Sound a Mystic Bamboo Song* or *Dream On, Dream* On with its Korean roots which we sing less often, as in only during the hymn sing! Whether in Slippery Rock or here, the hymn sing offers an opportunity to sing some new hymns and some old hymns and even some Christmas carols out of season! Those are the kinds of choices that folks in my dad’s church made each week with one exception: every Sunday someone would choose *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. They chose it, not because they loved it, but because the whole congregation knew it was my dad’s least favorite hymn.

It wasn’t so much the text that annoyed my dad – though the image of Jesus as *friend* can seem trite and is relatively rare, except in the book *The Shack* that portrays Jesus as a fishing buddy, and that line in *There is a Balm in Gilead*: “Don’t ever be discouraged for Jesus is your friend” which emphasizes Jesus’ human nature. Rather it was the music that irked my dad, for he had too often heard it played at a sloth-like pace, that with three verses, seemed to last forever. So, every week we sang it to the glee of the congregation, with my dad encouraging that it be played as fast as musically possible – to ease his pain!

*What a Friend We Have in Jesus* is not really a hymn about your buddy Jesus. It is a strong affirmation of the blessing we enjoy in being able to pray, to share with the Lord whatever is weighing on our hearts or minds. It is the promise of God’s patient ear always ready to hear us and God’s Spirit always ready to help us through whatever challenges we face – like a faithful friend. It is the same affirmation made in the hymn we will sing shortly, *Come Ye Disconsolate*. Both hymns encourage us to pray, urge us to pray, not as an obligation imposed by God, but as a blessing bestowed upon us by God.

Do you take advantage of that opportunity, that blessing God has extended to you? Do you believe that God hears your prayers, and for what then do you pray, when you pray, if you pray? A few weeks ago one of our folks confessed that she was having trouble praying, not for lack of confidence that God was listening, but because she did not know what to say to God. Paul tells the church in Rome that even when we cannot find the words, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. God hears us even when we cannot find the words to say what we want to say, for God knows our hearts. As Samuel Wells puts it, “*prayer is not essentially about words.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) But is there any help for us in finding words with which to pray?

The Psalms have been called the prayer book of God’s people, for in them we hear a wide range of prayers raised to God – songs of praise and thanksgiving, cries of lament, and pleas for help and rescue. Psalm 13 which we heard this morning is, to paraphrase one of my seminary professors, a virtual paradigm of the essential features of a prayer for help.[[2]](#endnote-2) In it we find a framework that may be helpful to us in our prayers when we turn to God for help and don’t know what to say. It is not a mandate for what our prayer should be, but rather an exemplar of a prayer attributed to David that might be helpful in our prayers for help.

The prayer begins with an expression of the psalmist’s frustration and pain – *How long, O LORD, how long?* He is frustrated with his circumstance, but also with God. “*Will you forget me forever?*” he asks. “*How long will you hide your face from me?*” Some years ago in Richmond, I met with a woman who was struggling with her faith. She was angry with God for the losses and difficulties in her life, and somewhere along the line she had been told that she dare not voice that anger to God – that such venting would be a sin. To her surprise she found in the voice of the psalmist the very anger and frustration she had been holding back, being directed at God. “*How long, O Lord, how long will you forget me?*” She too had felt forgotten, and in the psalmist’s words she found permission to vent her pain ***to*** God and ***with*** God; and in so doing, she found the balm for which she had been searching.

God is big enough to handle our rants, our frustration, our anger. Far from being sinful, such expressions may clear a barrier to our praying; for such cries reveal what we are feeling deep in our hearts – a place God already knows well – and by expressing the pain and anger we may better hear or see how God is at work in our lives. That cry of “how long” by the psalmist expresses his sense of a broken relationship with God that he longs to be restored, and in giving voice to his pain, he takes the first step on that path to healing.

The psalmist also uses those words – *how long*? – to voice his frustration at his current circumstance: “*How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*” he asks. He does not indicate who or what that enemy might be though we can imagine the enemy might be:

a human foe who threatens to do him harm or ridicules him,

a friend who has betrayed him,

an illness that threatens his life,

an unrelenting addiction that will not let him rest,

the devil who dangles temptations before him that will lead to his ruin.

Perhaps the psalmist is intentionally vague to allow that model of prayer to meet the needs of the pray-er regardless of who or what the enemy might be, in whatever circumstance the pray-er finds herself. In the words of the hymn:

*Come, ye disconsolate,* ***wher-e’er*** *ye languish,*

*Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.*

*Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;*

*Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Whatever the circumstance, whomever the enemy, we are urged to take it to the Lord in prayer in order to find healing for whatever ails us.

“*Dear God*,” writes a young boy, “*My name is Robert. I want a baby brother. My mother said to ask my father. My father said to ask you. Do you think you can do it. Good luck, Robert*.”[[4]](#endnote-4) How many children have raised such prayers – for a baby brother or sister to arrive, or perhaps to be rid of a brother or sister once they do arrive – trusting that God will hear their prayer? During the pastoral prayer one Sunday morning there was a loud whistle from one of the back pews. A horrified mother shushed her young son into silence and after church asked, “*Whatever made you do such a thing?*” “*Well*,” the boy replied, “*I asked God to teach me to whistle…and just then God did!*”

From our earliest years we are taught to pray, to ask God for what we want or need or ache to know. While some of the prayers are as simple as a plea for a baby brother or a lesson in whistling, others raise more heart-rending queries:

Why did my mom have to die?

Why did the storm smash our house?

Why did I have to get this disease?

Why can’t we all just get along?

How long, O Lord, how long?

They are hard questions for us, and perhaps they are hard questions for God as well. But as hard as the questions might be, God still invites us to ask –

for whatever we want,

for whatever we need,

for whatever burns in our hearts.

It is an invitation to conversation with God that is bound only by the limits of our imagination, faith, or time. As you heard in the passage from James, prayer seems to be the appropriate response to any and all circumstances:

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any sick? They should call the elders and have them pray over them*… *For the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective – powerful and effective*,” he says.

The psalmist too seems to believe that God can help him. “*Answer me.* *Give light to my eyes,*” he prays to that same God who he claims has forgotten him. A Russian proverb says people usually pray that two and two may not make four. In other words, we pray for the impossible or at least the improbable. Perhaps, but too often we fail to pray even for the eminently possible, for those things that can change us or change the world. God invites us to pray for whatever is on our hearts, and God promises to hear our prayers – whatever they may be. Trusting God’s promise, assured of God’s love, confident in God’s salvation, grateful for God’s faithful response – we pray, as the psalmist did. Sometimes with words, sometimes without words, we pray. And perhaps then we will experience what the psalmist did. For, his prayer that began, “How long, O Lord, how long?” ends with a song of praise. And what did he sing? Perhaps this: “*What a privilege it is to carry, everything to God in prayer!*” Amen

1. Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, Eerdmans Publishing:2017, p.24 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. James L. Mays*, Interpretation: Psalms*, John Knox Press:1994, p.13 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Moore; alt. by Thomas Hastings, “Come, Ye Disconsolate” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Children’s Letters to God*, compiled by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample (1966) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)