THE GOD WHO NEVER FORGETS: FROM ANGUISH TO ASSURANCE

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"How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me? Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved. But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me" (Ps 13:1–6).

At times in the Christian life, God's providence seems almost inscrutable. Prayers ascend without any discernible answer, adversity persists despite our earnest supplications, and the consolation formerly enjoyed in communion with the Lord seems strangely inaccessible. The mind struggles to reconcile the assurances of the Bible with the vicissitudes of experience, while the heart, wearied by protracted disappointment, begins to entertain misgivings which calmer reflection would ordinarily repudiate. We believe that God hears us but wonder why he remains silent. We acknowledge his goodness but cannot comprehend the suffering which his providence has permitted. We know that his promises are immutable, although their fulfillment may seem exceedingly remote.

Such perplexities are not peculiar to Christians of inferior spiritual attainments. The Bible records the sorrows of men whose faith and fidelity have furnished examples for succeeding generations. David, the sweet psalmist of Israel **(2 Sm 23:1)**, endured the malignity of Saul **(1 Sm 18:10–11; 19:9–12)**, the perfidy of trusted companions **(Ps 41:9; 55:12–14)**, and the domestic disturbances which attended his later years **(2 Sm 13–18)**. The shepherd whom Samuel anointed king **(1 Sm 16:11–13)** was later compelled to seek refuge among the rocks and caverns of the wilderness **(1 Sm 22:1–2; 24:1–3)**, while the throne divinely appointed for him remained occupied by a man determined to destroy him. Nor did his accession to royalty exempt him from further sorrow. The conspiracy of Absalom **(2 Sm 15:1–12)**, the treachery of Ahithophel **(2 Sm 15:12, 31; 17:1–23)**, and the manifold consequences of his own transgressions **(2 Sm 12:7–14)** acquainted him with grief in forms which few men have been called to experience.

The historical occasion of the thirteenth Psalm is not disclosed. Its six verses, however, reveal a dramatic progression from disconsolate inquiry to confident rejoicing. David begins by questioning the duration of his ordeal, appeals to the Lord for preservation, and concludes with a song of thanksgiving. The psalm contains no intervening account of a defeated enemy or a removed difficulty. This profound transformation occurs within David himself, as he learns to contemplate his troubles in the light of the Lord's mercy.

I. THE ANGUISH OF SEEMING ABANDONMENT (Ps 13:1–2)

"How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?"

The fourfold repetition of **"How long?"** conveys an anguish which ordinary description could scarcely communicate. David is suffering, but the indefinite duration of his affliction has

rendered his condition especially oppressive. A man may endure considerable privation when assured that relief is approaching. Deprive him of that assurance, and even a comparatively modest burden may acquire an almost intolerable weight. Time, ordinarily the great mitigator of human sorrow, becomes another instrument of torment when each succeeding day brings the same unanswered questions.

Consider that David's foremost concern is the apparent concealment of God's countenance. His enemy has not yet entered the complaint. The adversary's hostility is implacable, but the supposed withdrawal of God's favor constitutes a more profound affliction. David has known the sweetness of communion with the Lord, and its apparent interruption has occasioned a sorrow more acute than any inflicted by the malice of his persecutors.

Can the omniscient God forget? The very suggestion is incompatible with his nature. David's interrogation expresses his inward disquietude rather than a theological conclusion consciously affirmed. Indeed, the distinction between God's actually forgetting and man's perception that he has been forgotten is indispensable to a proper understanding of the passage. The Lord may withhold an immediate manifestation of his favor without withdrawing the affection from which that favor proceeds.

Our judgments concerning God's dealings are frequently vitiated by the narrowness of our perspective. We behold the present adversity but cannot perceive the innumerable events which have contributed to it, much less the purposes which God may accomplish through it. Jacob, believing Joseph dead and Benjamin imperiled, exclaimed, **"All these things are against me" (Gn 42:36)**. Unknown to the patriarch, the very son whose loss he mourned had already been elevated to a position through which the family would be preserved from famine **(Gn 41:39–57; 45:5–11)**. His conclusion was understandable, but altogether mistaken.

David proceeds, **"How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?"** Here the psalmist describes the exhausting occupation of a mind unable to discover an adequate remedy. He ruminates, conjectures, revisits former decisions, anticipates impending adversities, and labors to devise some means of extrication. The process becomes interminable. His own thoughts, instead of providing placidity, perpetuate his inward perturbation.

Who has not experienced something of this wearisome exercise? A vexatious difficulty intrudes upon our waking thoughts, accompanies us through the day's occupations, and returns with renewed requisition when the distractions of ordinary life have subsided. We rehearse conversations, contemplate contingencies, and torment ourselves with possibilities which may never materialize. The imagination, when surrendered to foreboding, possesses a prodigious capacity for magnifying present troubles and inventing future ones.

We must guard, however, against the supposition that every such experience betrays an absence of faith. Job's afflictions were not evidence of the concealed enormities alleged by his companions **(Job 1:1, 8; 4:7–8; 8:4–6)**. Paul himself acknowledged being **"troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Cor 4:8)**. The Bible makes no extravagant promise that communion with God will render the Christian insensible to grief. There is a considerable difference between surrendering to unbelief and struggling to maintain confidence under the pressure of circumstances which severely exercise it.

The historical anguish of David also possesses a doctrinal significance which ought not to escape our attention. The Psalms belong to the oracles of God committed to Israel **(Rom 3:2)**, and their language frequently corresponds with the sufferings and anticipated restoration of that nation. Moses foretold that the Lord would hide his face from Israel in consequence of her apostasy **(Dt 31:17–18)**. Centuries afterward, Zion would exclaim, **"The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me" (Is 49:14)**. God's answer refutes the accusation with exquisite tenderness: **"Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee" (Is 49:15)**.

The correspondence becomes especially compelling when considered in relation to Daniel's Seventieth Week. Israel's future suffering will culminate in that unparalleled period designated **"the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer 30:7)**, a period further described as **"a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation" (Dn 12:1)**, when the abomination of desolation introduces the terrible persecution described by the Lord Jesus Christ **(Dn 9:27; Mt 24:15–22)**. The faithful Jewish remnant, confronted by the temporary dominion of the Beast and the ferocity of his confederates, will have abundant occasion to inquire how long their oppression must continue. The martyrs beneath the altar employ essentially the same interrogation when they cry, **"How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rv 6:9–10)**.

David's distress must first be understood in its historical setting, without requiring him to possess an exhaustive comprehension of subsequent prophetic events. Its doctrinal correspondence with Israel's future tribulation, however, is both natural and instructive. The Christian may appropriate its spiritual lessons without appropriating promises which concern the national restoration and earthly inheritance of Israel.

The practical admonition is sufficiently plain. We must not permit the apparent obscurity of God's providence to become the measure of his faithfulness. The inability to discern his purposes is no evidence that those purposes have ceased to operate.

II. THE APPEAL OF AN AFFLICTED SOUL (Ps 13:3–4)

"Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death."

Having exhausted the resources of inward reasoning, David directs his petition to the Lord. The transition is elucidative. His perplexities have not been resolved by the ingenuity of his own counsels, and he now appeals to the God whose knowledge encompasses every circumstance which eludes his understanding.

"Consider and hear me." There is an affecting simplicity in this supplication. David presents neither an elaborate vindication of his conduct nor an attempt to dictate the precise means of deliverance. He implores the Lord to regard his condition and attend to his cry. The urgency of his language arises from the extremity of his circumstances, not from any imagined deficiency in God's knowledge.

Particularly significant is his continued acknowledgment, **"O LORD my God."** Whatever fears have disturbed his mind, David has not relinquished his personal trust in Jehovah. The God

whose countenance he fears to have been concealed remains the God to whom he belongs. His distress has not severed the relationship which makes prayer possible.

Job expressed a comparable resolution when he declared, **"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15)**. The patriarch was ignorant of the unseen heavenly transactions which had occasioned his tribulations **(Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7)**. His friends supplied explanations as erroneous as they were uncharitable, while his own attempts to comprehend God's dealings with him yielded little satisfaction **(Job 42:7–8)**. Still, he would not renounce the God whose ways had become so difficult to understand.

David petitions the Lord to **"lighten mine eyes,"** an expression suggestive of renewed vitality in the face of approaching exhaustion. Sorrow possesses an enervating influence upon the entire man. The mind becomes oppressed, the spirits languish, and bodily strength may decline beneath the accumulated weight of mental anguish. David fears that his suffering may culminate in death, and his appeal is correspondingly earnest.

His concern extends beyond personal preservation. **"Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved."** The prospective triumph of his adversaries introduces another consideration. Their exultation would proclaim the apparent success of those who opposed the Lord's anointed. David therefore contemplates the dishonor which his downfall might occasion, as well as the destruction which threatens him.

The prophetic parallel is again worthy of consideration. During the latter half of Daniel's Seventieth Week, the Beast will be permitted to make war with the saints and overcome them **(Rv 13:7)**. His dominion will be formidable, while the remnant of Israel endures a persecution so severe that the Lord Jesus Christ declared, **"Except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved" (Mt 24:22)**. Nevertheless, the duration of that tyranny has already been circumscribed by God's decree **(Dn 7:25; Rv 13:5)**. The persecutor's apparent invincibility cannot invalidate the decree which determines his destruction **(2 Thes 2:8; Rv 19:19–20)**.

Daniel declares that, during this unprecedented tribulation, God's people shall be delivered **(Dn 12:1)**. Jeremiah, having announced the time of Jacob's trouble, immediately adds, **"but he shall be saved out of it" (Jer 30:7)**. The adversaries of Israel may exult in their temporary supremacy, but their vaunted triumph will come to an abrupt end with the intervention of the very God whose purposes they have presumed to frustrate.

The Bible repeatedly demonstrates the futility of measuring divine providence by the immediate success of wicked men. Joseph's brethren supposed that selling him into bondage would extinguish his prospects, although their malice became instrumental in accomplishing the very elevation they sought to prevent **(Gn 37:18–28; 50:20)**. The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to consummate the victory of his enemies, when in reality they were fulfilling the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God **(Acts 2:23–24)**.

How frequently do we misinterpret the progress of events because we insist upon evaluating an unfinished work! We contemplate the immediate hardship without considering its possible consequences, the adversary without remembering his appointed limitations, and the delay without acknowledging the wisdom which governs it.

There is no impropriety in employing prudent measures to alleviate our difficulties. David did not remain passively exposed to Saul's murderous designs. He sought refuge, exercised discretion, and availed himself of opportunities for preservation **(1 Sm 19:11–18; 22:1–5; 23:14–29)**. But human sagacity has its limitations, and no accumulation of precautions can render us independent of God's providential care.

The Christian possesses an inestimable privilege in approaching the throne of grace **(Heb 4:16)**. Prayer ought not to be postponed until anxiety has exhausted every conceivable alternative. Indeed, the very anxieties which so often engross our thoughts should impel us toward the Lord, whose resources are inexhaustible and whose understanding is infinite. David's petition teaches us to carry our perplexities beyond the confines of our own reasoning and commit them to the care of the God who comprehends what we cannot.

III. THE ASSURANCE OF ABIDING MERCY (Ps 13:5–6)

"But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation."

The fifth verse introduces a pronounced contrast. The psalmist who began with four anguished interrogations now declares his confidence in divine mercy. His language has undergone a decisive change, although nothing in the narrative indicates that his adversaries have been subdued or his condition materially improved.

The explanation is found in the words, **"I have trusted."** David recalls a trust already exercised, founded upon his previous acquaintance with the Lord's goodness. His present adversity cannot efface the testimony of those former dealings. The same God who preserved him from the lion and the bear **(1 Sm 17:34–37)**, sustained him before Goliath **(1 Sm 17:45–50)**, and delivered him through innumerable dangers has not become less worthy of his trust because another difficulty has arisen.

Here we encounter a distinction of considerable practical consequence. The Christian's confidence must be governed by the declarations of the Bible rather than the fluctuations of his own sensibilities. Our emotions are susceptible to exhaustion, disappointment, bodily infirmity, and the manifold pressures of ordinary existence. To make them the arbiters of divine faithfulness would be to exchange the immutability of God for the instability of human experience.

The Lord has promised, **"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb 13:5)**. Such an assurance does not exempt his children from bereavement, persecution, illness, or those protracted seasons of incertitude which so severely exercise patience. It does establish that their afflictions cannot dissolve the relationship secured by his faithfulness. His presence is not rendered contingent upon our uninterrupted enjoyment of its consolations.

David continues, **"my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation."** His faith anticipates deliverance. That deliverance has not been described as an accomplished event, but he already contemplates it as an occasion for rejoicing. His faith is not founded upon an assurance that every circumstance will develop according to his own preference. It rests upon the mercy of the God whose purposes cannot miscarry.

Habakkuk furnishes an illuminating illustration of the same principle. Having contemplated the impending devastation of Judah **(Hb 1:5–11; 3:16)**, the prophet acknowledged the possible failure of every ordinary means of subsistence. The fig tree might cease to blossom, the vine yield no fruit, the fields produce no food, and the flocks disappear from their folds. His resolution, however, was unequivocal: **"Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation" (Hb 3:17–18)**.

What a sublime confession! The prophet does not deny the devastation or pretend that privation is pleasurable. He recognizes that the loss of earthly provision cannot impoverish the character of God. The foundation of his assurance remains when the visible evidences of prosperity have vanished.

For Israel, the prophetic consummation of this principle will be especially glorious. The faithful remnant, having endured the persecutions of the Beast and the apparent abandonment of the nations **(Rv 12:13–17; 13:7)**, will behold the intervention of the Redeemer. The Lord shall fulfill his promises concerning the deliverance and restoration of his people, and the cries of the afflicted shall give place to rejoicing. Isaiah foretold that **"the Redeemer shall come to Zion" (Is 59:20)**, while the prophetic assurances of Israel's ultimate preservation remain inviolable **(Jer 31:35–37; Rom 11:25–29)**.

We must distinguish this promised national deliverance from the present calling and heavenly hope of the Church. The Christian does not inherit Israel's prophetic identity by spiritualizing the promises made to her. He may, however, behold in God's unwavering fidelity toward that nation a magnificent demonstration of the character of the Lord in whom he has believed.

David concludes with an expression of thankfulness: **"I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me."** The man who began by contemplating his apparent abandonment now surveys the bounty of God. His present sorrow has not erased the record of the Lord's beneficence.

There is a wholesome lesson in this recollection. Affliction tends to narrow our attention until a single difficulty assumes a disproportionate place in our estimation. The mercies of preceding years become obscured by the disappointments of the present. Prayers formerly answered, dangers providentially averted, necessities supplied, and blessings received with scarcely adequate gratitude are forgotten beneath the pressure of an immediate concern.

How readily we allow one unanswered petition to eclipse a multitude of answered prayers! A single deprivation may occupy our thoughts more completely than innumerable benefits already bestowed. We become so intent upon what the Lord has withheld that we neglect to acknowledge what his goodness has furnished.

David's determination to sing is especially noteworthy because it precedes any recorded deliverance. Praise need not await the resolution of every uncertainty. It may ascend from a heart still burdened by sorrow, provided the sufferer has learned to distinguish the constancy of God from the instability of earthly conditions.

The Christian who has passed through prolonged adversity will recognize the difficulty of such an exercise. It is comparatively easy to acknowledge the Lord's goodness when his dealings appear congenial to our desires. The severer examination comes when our expectations have been disappointed, our efforts frustrated, and the prospect of relief remains obscure. Can we still confess that the Lord has dealt bountifully with us? Can we remember his former kindnesses without requiring an immediate explanation of our present sorrows?

David has not furnished us with a facile remedy for every human sorrow. His own opening complaint forbids such an interpretation. The agony was genuine, the forebodings formidable, and the peril sufficiently imminent to render death a very real possibility. His example is valuable precisely because his confidence was exercised under circumstances calculated to disturb it.

The thirteenth Psalm begins with a man overwhelmed by what he cannot understand and concludes with that same man acknowledging what he has already experienced of the Lord’s mercy. Between those two conditions lies the exercise of faith, which rests upon the God who governs all things without demanding an exhaustive explanation of his purposes.

We may be unable to discover why a particular prayer remains unanswered, why a trial has been prolonged, or why the Lord has permitted events which appear altogether inimical to our welfare. Such ignorance is a consequence of our finite understanding, not a defect in his infinite wisdom.

The God who remembered Joseph in the dungeon **(Gn 39:20–23; 41:14–16)**, preserved David in the wilderness **(1 Sm 23:14)**, and has never relinquished his purposes concerning Israel **(Jer 31:35–37)** is no less faithful to those who now belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. His providence may elude our understanding, but his promises remain unaltered.

And when the heart is tempted to repeat David's anguished inquiry, **“How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD?”** let it also remember the assurance which sustained the psalmist's concluding song: **“I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me” (Ps 13:1, 6)**.