

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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## Psalm 13 —How Long, Lord? How Long?

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 13

#### 1.1 Psalm 13 in History

- A story is told by Gregory of Decapolis about a noble Saracen who was converted to Christ. The Saracen sought a Christian teacher, learned all the Book of Psalms by heart, and returned to his native land to preach faith in Christ. His countrymen, however, refused his message and stoned him to death. In his agony he kept repeating Psalm 13:3, “Lighten my eyes, that I sleep not in death.”

– Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life*  
(London: John Murray, 1904), 13.

#### 1.2 Psalm 13 in the Psalter

- Of all the prayers for help in the Book of Psalms, Psalm 13 is the briefest.
- Psalm 13 is an individual lament.
- “And for thy comfort, know that he who began his Psalm with, ‘*How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?*’ comes to conclude it with, ‘*I will sing unto the Lord, because he hath dealt bountifully with me*’” (George Swinnock [1627-1673], in Spurgeon’s *Treasury of David*, 1:156).

## 2.0 Reading Psalm 13

13:1 A Psalm of David.

**How long**, O LORD?

Will You forget me forever?

**How long** will You hide Your face from me?

13:2 **How long** shall I take counsel in my soul,

*Having* sorrow in my heart daily?

**How long** will my enemy be exalted over me?

13:3 Consider *and* hear me, O LORD, my God;

Enlighten my eyes,

Lest I sleep the *sleep of death*;

13:4 Lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed against him”;

Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

13:5 **But I** have trusted in Your mercy;

My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.

13:6 I will sing to the LORD,

Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

To the Chief Musician.



## 3.0 Understanding Psalm 13

### 3.1 Outline

I. “Below Sea Level” Despair (vv. 1-2)

II. “Sea Level” Desires (vv. 3-4)

III. “Mountaintop” Delight (vv. 5-6)

— Adapted from *MacArthur Study Bible*

## 3.2 Notes

- v. 1 “How long?”
  - “Psalm 13 launches with an explosion of 4 ‘How longs?’ indicating another lament is about to begin” (*MacArthur Study Bible*, ).
  - “How long?” mixes complaint with petition.
  - “desperate questions ... are witnesses to the unbearable afflictions ... signs of a stormy impatience ... also of a great patience ... turned to desperate hopelessness” (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 214-15).
  - There’s a Babylonian parallel:



### *A Royal Lament of Nebuchadnezzar*

Yet how long with me,  
Yet how long in my land,  
Yet how long in my people?  
Until when, Lord of Babylon,  
This groaning and depression?  
This weeping and grieving?  
This lamenting and weeping?  
Do you tarry in the camp of the enemy?

- “by nature we do not acknowledge that God cares for us in our afflictions; but by faith we lay hold of His invisible providence.” (J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 1:180).
- “This is a state in which *Hope despairs, and yet Despair hopes* at the same time” (Martin Luther).
- How should we respond to the feeling of being abandoned by God?
  - Take our complaint to God directly – He is not offended by our questions and transparent feelings.
  - Seek the fellowship of fellow believers in the services of the church. Being in the worship service, we will hear songs of praise to God even when our own hearts are silent and feeling abandoned. Songs of praise will help clear our hearts and remind us that God has not actually abandoned us.
  - Take time to minister to others by helping them in the time of their need.
- v. 2 “take counsel in my soul”
  - This phraseology expresses the concept of worry.
- v. 2 “sorrow in my heart”
  - The psalmist “torments himself with worrisome thoughts” (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 215).

- Cf. Proverbs 26:24; 27:9.
- v. 3 “Enlighten my eyes”
  - Idiom expressing effect of God’s blessing (Willem VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 5:141)?
  - Physical support = “revive my power to live”?
  - Physical and spiritual?
- v. 3 “Lest”
  - “that I may not”; cf. v. 4.
- v. 3 “I sleep the *sleep of death*”
  - “‘or else I will sleep [in?] death.’ Perhaps the statement is elliptical, ‘I will sleep [the sleep] of death,’ or ‘I will sleep [with the sleepers in] death’” (NET Bible).
  - The psalmist’s enemy may have been a pending death due to disease.
- v. 5 “But I”
  - Contrast between defeated condition in v. 4 and confidence in v. 5.
  - “As for me”:
    - Emphatic: “But I”
    - Emphatic personal determination
    - Emphatic affirmation
  - “Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up” (Thomas Edison).
- v. 5 “mercy”
  - In the Hebrew the word is related to the word for “godly” that we have seen in Psalms 4:3 and 12:1. It may be translated “unfailing love” (NIV).
  - However, “the term has more of ‘loyalty’ or ‘enduring allegiance’ about it than the emotions we normally associate with ‘love’” (Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*, 279).

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 13

1 *O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.*



2 *O Light that followest all my way,  
I yield my flickering torch to thee;*

*My heart restores its borrowed ray,  
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day  
May brighter, fairer be.*

3 *O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.*

4 *O Cross that liftest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from thee;  
I lay in dust life's glory dead,  
And from the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.*

— Author: George Matheson, in the Church of  
Scotland magazine *Life and Work*, January 1882  
— Music: Albert L. Peace, 1884

## 5.0 Praying Psalm 13

- Lord, how long must I suffer with this pain/disease? [vv. 1-2]
- How long before my prayer is answered? [v. 1]
- Father, give me relief. [v. 3]
- Help me remain steadfast in faith. [v. 4]
- O God, thank You for my salvation! [v. 5]
- Let me sing of Your mercies. [vv. 5-6]



## 6.0 Applying Psalm 13

- We might feel forgotten and abandoned, but God has not forgotten us.
- Communal songs of praise help to remind us that God does not abandon His people.

***Nothing in the troubles of life and the experience of the absence of God cancels the privilege of faith to speak directly to God in confidence of being heard.***

James Luther Mays  
(in *Psalms*, 78)