

A Calm Contemplation on Psalm 13

“How Long, O LORD ? Will You Forget me... ?”

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The Psalms: A School of Prayer

The beauty in the psalms of our teacher David the prophet lies in the fact that they express the spiritual life of man in a truthful manner. Moreover, what is exceedingly beautiful is that the words used did not come from man, but David spoke them moved by the Holy Spirit. In other words, these terms are used by man when speaking to God, while it was God Himself who gave them to man, so that man may to speak to God using them.

The psalms express the spiritual life of man in all of its phases and in all cases. Man finds in them words that are appropriate to the state of spiritual lukewarmness, weakness, falling, repentance and victory. He finds feelings of joy, thanksgiving, and hope. He also finds words that remind him of God's kind acts, and words which enable him to contemplate on God's marvelous act of salvation. Thus, the saintly fathers considered the psalms a school of prayer. They also considered them the spiritual life and a paradise full of good fruits. Monks considered the psalms their life and the most important aspect of their spiritual composition. However, this is not only the view of monks, but also of all religious people in both the Old and New Testaments.

The psalms were sung accompanied by tunes on the psaltery, harp, and cymbals of praise. David wrote them poetically in order that they be suitable as spiritual hymns and songs, performed with musical tunes in prayers that are full of emotions which emerge from deep feelings.

The church placed this Psalm 13 in many prayers. We pray it at matins, during the veil, and the first service of the midnight prayer. It is one of the most frequently repeated psalms. Since God knows how man can err and how many times he can experience feelings of despair and loss of hope, He gave him these soothing words as a prayer.

“How Long O LORD? Will You Forget me Forever ?”

Weaknesses and carelessness in the spiritual life recur frequently; and spiritual wars also recur. This is when despair begins to enter one's soul, and thus one cries out to God saying, *“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?”* or *“How long will You completely forget me”*; as though God had forgotten him.

What is wonderful about these words is the fact that God Himself is the One Who gave them to us, since they were written through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even words that are

considered words of gentle reproof, He has given us to use when addressing Him. Moreover, what is more wonderful is the fact that even words which are considered effective for waking God up when we suspect that He has neglected or forgotten us, are given to us by God in order to calm our hearts. God wants man to be involved in conversation with Him, within the limits of spiritual discipline. So it is not forbidden that conversation with God includes admonition, moaning, cries of despair and even words to awaken God. When the disciples awoke the Lord as He was sleeping in the boat they said, “*Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?*” (Mk 4:38). They did not say these words in anger or rebuke, but in gentle reproof when crying out and appealing for aid.

How long O Lord will you forget me forever? I feel that Your aid has abandoned me, and I consider this is forgetfulness on Your part. I feel that Your blessing no more aids or supports me; I feel lonely in the war. When I feel alone, I know how bitter it is to fall, and so I recognize my weaknesses.

“How Long Will You Hide Your Face From Me?”

When the face of God is towards us this means one of two things: In the first place, it means that His eyes are watching us, and that His care supports us. Secondly, it means that His face consoles us when we observe His glory or feel His presence. Feeling the presence of God makes man awesome, and gives him uprightness of heart. The grace of God supports man, and makes him feel that he is seeing God. So the blessing of having God’s face towards us is two fold.

When God was angry with His people Israel, Moses the prophet prayed to Him saying, “*If Your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here.*” (Ex 33:15). When God is angered by someone, the person feels as though God has turned away His face to avoid watching evil; God does not want to see sin.

How long will You hide Your face from me? When You forget me, O Lord, I fall. And when I fall, I feel that You do not want to look at me because of my sin. How long will I feel that You are hiding Your face from me as a result of my sin?

“How Long Shall I Take Counsel In My Soul, Having Sorrow In My Heart Daily?”

Counsel here refers to grief or sorrow. So in other words, the psalmist means, ‘How long shall I have sorrow in my soul?’ When man becomes weak, falls, and then sins against God, he feels grief attacking his heart and overwhelms his life. In turn, this causes him worry and distress. Feeling peace is one of the fruits of reconciliation with God. When man feels that there is no reconciliation in his relationship with God, he loses his peace. When he loses peace, then grief, sorrow, and sadness begin to enter his heart. Hence he says with the psalmist, “*When I kept silent, my bones grew old, through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me.*” (Ps 32: 3,4).

He says, “*When I kept silent...*”, for how can man speak to God when he feels that he is upset with Him. To keep silent means that he is hiding his sins or that he feels this rift between him and God. “*When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me, I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*” (Ps 33: 3-5).

“How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sadness and sorrow in my heart daily?” (Ps 13:2). The sadness mentioned here is due to defeat and shame. Sin causes man to become bare; to lose his dignity and his honor as the image of God. It can also cause him to lose some characteristics of human nature, leading him to despise himself.

“How Long Will My Enemy Be Exalted Over Me?”

The one who is weak in facing sin feels that the devil is superior to him, or that the devil is trampling upon him. As if Satan has power or might! Such a person says to himself, ‘How long will the devil humiliate me in such a way? How long will he be exalted over me? How long will he tread upon me?’

Here we recognize, as in many other psalms of David the prophet, that the psalm begins in a spirit of sorrow, weeping, groaning and crying, and ends in a spirit of hope and joy. This is the story of man since his creation and after his fall. It is a story that starts with the fall of man and ends with his salvation and redemption. This leads us to comprehend the power that lies in the following verse: *“Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.”* (Mic 7:8).

After presenting his pessimistic state, his weakness, and falling he then says:

“Consider and Hear Me, O LORD My God....”

The dark image of falling and weakness is supported by the illuminated image of God’s firm and unwavering fatherhood, accompanied by His steadfast Divine aid – an endless supply and credit.

I know, O Lord, that even if You forget me for a short while, You will come and have mercy upon me. It is written, “For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you. With little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you, says the Lord your redeemer.” (Is 54:7,8).

“Enlighten My Eyes, Lest I Sleep the Sleep of Death...”

O Lord, if my eyes are darkened and are not able to see the brightness of Your glory, I will live in darkness. My soul will slumber and not strive. It will cease from beholding the brightness of Your Divine grace, and from understanding Your sublime exalted economy. Hence, the psalmist says, “Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me...” (Ps 51:11).

The problem is not that man becomes weak on occasions, or that he falls into sin; but the real problem occurs when man reaches a state where he does not experience inner rebuke for his sin, and so he surrenders to it. What is worse, is that he would love sin and yield to it. This is what David the prophet feared, and this is why he said, *“Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me...”* (Ps 51:11). If God takes His Holy Spirit away from us, as He did to Saul, we may be refused and given over. It is written that, *“God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.”* (Rom 1:28).

Some people feel hatred towards sin; they fight it and strive against it, and when they fall they hasten to rise again. However, with other people, they allow their conscience to grow cold to the extent that they indulge in sin as they would indulge in drinking water. Of such people

the Lord says, “*And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.*” (Mat. 24:12).

“*Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death....*” (Ps 13:3). ‘The sleep of death’ here refers to the state of slumber. The soul that goes into the sleep of death, is the soul which darkness has overcome; thus it becomes a dark soul, void of any goodness. David feared for himself and was afraid to reach this stage, and so he cried out saying, “*Consider and hear me, O LORD my God...*” (Ps 13:3).

O Lord, I want Your Holy Spirit to continue working within me so that no love for sin might be admitted into my life.

“Lest My Enemy Say, “I Have Prevailed Against Him”...”

When the enemy attacks, his main intention is not to cause man to fall into sin. Falling into sin is not the problem, especially since Christ the Lord has fulfilled redemption and salvation and man can rise after he has fallen. Satan’s purpose is not to make man fall into sin, since he does not benefit if man sins. The real goal of the devil is to overcome and defeat the soul of man until it surrenders to him and worships him as a god. His objective is to cause man to experience despair and loss of hope, ultimately separating him from God. This is the goal which Satan aims to accomplish. To cause man to fall into sin repeatedly is only a means which he employs in order to reach his main goal. This is why the psalmist says, “*Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed against him”*” (Ps 13:3,4). What does “*prevailed against him*” mean? It means that man surrendered to the full power of Satan.

O Lord, I fear long periods of weakness and I fear remaining in a fallen state for a long time, lest the enemy prevail against me.

“Lest Those Who Trouble Me Rejoice When I Am Moved”

Satan rejoices whenever we are moved or whenever we fall, because this enables him to draw closer to his goal. Each time he is triumphant against a righteous person, he rejoices because he has taken a step closer to making him perish. David the prophet lamented Saul saying, “*How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon lest the daughters of Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.*” (2 Sam 1:19-20). The daughters of the Philistines are a symbol of the kingdom of Satan. In Gath and in the streets of Ashkelon they worshipped the gods of Philistines, like Dagon for example. When they overcame the mighty men of Israel, they offered sacrifices to the heathen god and considered this a victory of their god over Jehovah of Israel. Therefore David wept in sorrow saying do not announce or proclaim in Gath and Ashkelon lest the daughters of Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of uncircumcised triumph.

It is as though David was saying, ‘Those who trouble me rejoice, cry out in joy and are happy. They congratulate and praise their God Beelzebub because of my fall.’

Do not forget me forever, O Lord, lest those who reproach me and reproach You, rejoice.

“But I Have Trusted in Your Mercy...”

I know that I possess a very big account of mercy in Your wide, loving heart. I do not say that I own an account of intimacy, of value, or estimation. However, the account I depend upon is one of your mercy.

How pitiable are the Pentecostals who are struck by pride; they consider themselves righteous and holy. They say that we should ask for our portion of mercy from God; that we should ask for our portion as saints. However, David the prophet, in the school of spiritual life, teaches us to say, *“But I have trusted in Your mercy...”* (Ps 13:5).

Lord, I do not own any portion; my portion is in your mercy. This I do not receive unless I am poor and needy. I depend upon this mercy.

“My Heart Shall Rejoice in Your Salvation”

It is nice that this psalm carries us from feelings of loss and weakness, to feelings of the joy of salvation and the joy of enjoying God’s mercy. One comes carrying all of his despair and sorrow for his sin saying to God, *“How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily?”* (Ps 13:2). But he concludes the psalm saying, *“My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation”* (Ps 13:5).

“I Will Sing To The LORD, Because He Has Dealt Bountifully With Me”

I know that God does not reject anyone who asks of Him. I entered to His presence, I received, and came out fully satisfied and carrying wealth. God is a benevolent God. Benevolence and generosity are a part of His nature, and so He deals with benevolence and generosity to all who pray to Him.

“And Will Sing Praise to the Name of the LORD Most High”

The Most High God is exalted in His attributes, and superior in His perfection. He is most high in His love, in the multitude of His compassions, and in His endurance. As Christians, we see the highness of God in His holiness, we see His highness in the degree of His love, and we also see His highness in His ability to endure the weaknesses of others. God is unique in His holiness. If we search all of creation and its creatures, we shall never find anyone who can save or redeem us except God Almighty.

Satan wanted to become god, but he causes all who follow him to perish. However, God came that we may have life and that we may have it more abundantly (Jn 10:10). Who then is deserving of divinity?

Satan claimed that God wanted to keep all of His divinity for Himself; that He loved to have authority and power, to dominate and to overcome. Therefore, he rebelled against God saying, *“I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... I will be like the Most High.”* (Is 14:13,14). Yet God does not like to empower or dominate. He proved this to all of creation when He emptied Himself of His privilege, concealed His glory, and endured disgrace and insult out of His love for His children and humankind. Thus the psalmist says, *“Sing to the LORD...The LORD reigns from the cross.”* (Ps 96:1,10). The Lord Himself said, *“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”* (Jn 12:32). This means that God took away the authority which Satan had sought after through love when He reigned over the hearts of everyone.

“I will sing to the Lord...the Most High.” He is the Most High and no body resembles Him in the degree of His love; the degree of His love is most high. These are the qualities that highlight the highness of God, and not qualities of dominance, tyranny, or arrogance. The Lord is most high because He is unique in His holiness. No one resembles Him in holiness, in perfect simplicity, in full purity, in perfect diaphaneity, in illumination and love, or in His unlimited perfection. This is what “Most High” means.

This highness of God does not separate Him from us, because He is the overflowing source of grace and prosperity. How? As an example, the higher the water tank is, the stronger the rush of water descending from it. If the water tank is low, the water would not reach the top floors. Similarly, the highness of God gives an unceasing strong flow of love and grace. Thus the psalmist says, *“I will sing to the Lord because He has dealt bountifully with me.”* (Ps 13:6). This Most High God is the God whose salvation is unceasing and inexhaustible, while His love is stronger than death.

In this psalm, we begin the prayer feeling remorseful for our sins, and when we repeat this psalm, we remember that God will never forget us. Even if our strife against sin is prolonged, God will save us. As we read, *“For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now I arise,” says the LORD; “I will set him in the safety for which he yearns.”* (Ps 12:5).

Psalm 13 gives us hope to continue in our struggle even if we strive for many years. We should not lose hope in our struggle, but we should forget those things which are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are ahead (Phil 3:13).

Glory be to our Lord forever and ever, Amen.