

## **Psalm Thirteen**

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

*“How long will you hide your face from me?” – Psalm 13:1*

As our youngest daughter continues to grow, we are watching her slowly become more and more responsive. As it happens with infants, her capacity to react and interact with what she observes is gradually increasing. And so we have begun to try *peek-a-boo*, hiding our faces from hers (or hiding hers from ours), quickly revealing them again, and watching for her response.

Within the ancient Jewish view of things, the concept of “face” was associated with understandings of personhood and presence. And so to speak of God’s face being hidden, as the writer does here, is to give expression to an experience of separation and abandonment. That this is the case is seen by what we read in the surrounding lines. The writer senses that they have been forgotten (v.1a). They are filled with inner anguish, and have been ashamed by their adversaries (v.2). God appears to have turned away, and withdrawn. God no longer answers, but is instead silent.\* These are experiences that seem endless, lasting “all day long,” and resulting in the repeated question, “how long?”

You might be aware that there are theories about why exactly it is that children find this little game of reappearing so endlessly amusing. One of these relates to the concept of “object permanence.” Infants and toddlers have not yet developed the capacity to understand that when something (such as the face of an adult) disappears, it can return. Their understanding of time, if they have any sense of it at all, is still in the early stages of development. From their perspective, if a thing is briefly hidden from sight, it might as well be gone forever. And so to see their parent’s eyes reappear as the blanket drops, then, is wholly unexpected. For them, it is nothing short of a miracle. Each and every time.

We see something like that, in the prayer that makes up this Psalm, and in its progression - the timing, the unexpected sight, and the gleeful response. Distress turns so quickly to delight, in these verses. One moment, the writer is frantically pleading with a God who seems to have altogether disappeared from sight. The writer begs God to return and respond, lest death and their foes overtake them. And then all of the sudden, things shift, and we hear a declaration of trust in God’s “steadfast love” (v.5). The heart that was previously said to be sorrowing (v.2) now rejoices in God’s salvation (v.5). The voice that was strained with pain before (v.2) now belts out songs to God who “has dealt bountifully.” (v.6).

*What happened?* The blanket dropped, we might say, and there was in an instant a kind of recognition, and a kind of wonder-filled relief that spreads like a smile over our daughter’s face.

To be true, the writer’s experience and feelings were real, and should not be brushed aside with platitudes and pat answers. Even if we can say with confidence in this moment that God does not cease to exist when hidden from our sight. That is a risk, when playing with an analogy like this, as many people (and especially new parents, like myself) have.

The experience was real, and is real. We are, like newborns, bound by our limits of perception and grasp of time. And so when we encounter pain, our lament might faithfully be expressed as it is here. Because as harsh as they might sound to our ears, these verses express a deep longing to seek God’s face - to experience a life of presence, communion and conversation with God. They demonstrate an awareness of dependence, and speak to a relationship of love. They mourn the brokenness that has resulted in disconnect, and long for restoration, that God’s face might again come to “shine on us” (4:6).

\* *For this meditation, I relied on the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (InterVarsity Press)*