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Gunnar Tesdahl

Defiant Hope: What Do I Do with My Despair?

Psalm 13

Good evening, everyone. I'm so grateful to be spending this Maundy Thursday evening with you via video. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Gunnar, and I'm the director of worship here at Chapel Hill. And I want to thank each of you for joining us tonight for a time of worship...

Maundy Thursday is a special tradition for us here at Chapel Hill. In fact, this is one of my favorite services of the year. And while I love this service, I wouldn't have ever expected to participate in it with you virtually! It feels like all our plans are totally different than we planned. I mean, I heard that even Jesus' plans for Maundy Thursday were totally thrown off this year. Here he is sharing the Last Supper with his disciples—take a look. Isn't that hilarious? They're all on Zoom! Not to mention, Jesus has his Purell ready at hand! So funny... The second I saw that, I knew I had to share it with you. We all need a little levity in these tough times.

Speaking of tough times, I think we'd all agree that this has been a challenging season for all of us. There's something about isolation, about being stuck in our homes, that is really challenging... In fact, I was talking with our counseling director, Shannon, this week and she shared some troubling statistics with me about how our health is impacted in a crisis like this.

Here's one of the quotes she sent me: "Social isolation has been associated with a significantly increased risk of premature mortality from all causes ... [There is also] a consistent relationship between social isolation and depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation." Those are some distressing facts.

But they are facts nonetheless. I've heard of more loved ones dying in the last couple weeks than I have in a long time. I've heard of folks struggling in their addiction recovery. I've heard of people struggling to make sense of life in this new, isolated reality... All these struggles, in many ways, define the world we're living in. And this world, this environment can lead us to a pretty tough spot.

If you've watched the news in the last couple weeks, you've very likely heard of something people are calling "the curve." What folks are talking about is the progress of COVID-19, and how the numbers are going up at a faster and faster rate over time. And so, the goal for all of us as a society, they say, is to "flatten" that curve—to slow the spread of the disease any way that we can.

That's what we could call the *disease* curve. But here's the question I want us to consider: where are you on the *despair* curve? In other words, as time goes on, is your curve at a high peak of

despair, a low peak? A slow incline or already picking up speed? Where are you on the despair curve? It can be tough for us to manage our feelings of despair—when we feel like we may lose our sense of hope, our sense of strength.

And so, we must ask: *what do we do with our despair?* How do we flatten the despair curve? What we're going to find in the Scriptures is that there is a spiritual practice that can help us work through our despair in a healthy way—a discipline that Jesus himself practiced in his final hours on earth. And we're going to discover this practice from the Psalms tonight.

So, let's take a look at Psalm 13 together and ask ourselves an important question: "What do I do with my despair?"

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
How long shall I take counsel in my soul,
Having sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;
Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
And my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.

But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
Because He has dealt bountifully with me. (Psalm 13, NASB)

Here is the main take-away from our passage this evening: *It's OK to not be OK. What matters most is inviting God into your despair, so that he can walk you through it.*

Essentially, I want to give you permission and a practice: permission to face despair—that it's OK to not be OK—and the practice of inviting God into your despair. The practice of inviting God into our despair is what Christians call *lament*—lament, very simply, *is processing your pain through prayer*.

Regardless of your unique situation, the answer to the question, "What do I do with my despair?" is the same for all of us: the answer is *lament*. When we feel down, when we feel discouraged, when we feel trapped in the depths of woe, the healthiest response is: *process your pain through prayer*. Express your pain, wrestle with your pain, be honest about your pain— all through prayer... Our Psalm tonight teaches us how to do that. And it does so by offering four movements of lament prayer that we'll explore one by one...

Movement 1: Invite God into Your Pain (v. 1a)

The first movement appears in the opening words of the prayer: “How long, *O Lord?*” (Psalm 13:1a). Here’s the first movement: *invite God into your pain*. We can’t overlook this crucial first step! Turning to God is so often a last resort for us, because we’re sinners!

We often opt to turn elsewhere. We can turn to *self*, which usually amounts to wallowing in our pain. We can turn to *others*, which usually involves complaining about our pain. Or we can turn to *activities*, which typically means distracting ourselves from our pain.

Now, certainly we can turn to those things *secondarily* to process, to receive counsel, to just take a break. But each of these responses need to be put in their proper place. We make a mistake when our first reaction to our pain is to wallow in it, complain about, or distract ourselves from it. None of those does us much good!

The writers of the Psalms exemplify the importance of turning to God, because all of the lament Psalm begin with some kind of address to God... The psalmists made it a practice to turn to God when they faced painful circumstances. They knew that this practice turns our complaint into an act of faith—it turns our *wallowing* into *worship*.

Let me give you few simple reasons why you should turn to God first, and not elsewhere, when you’re facing despair: God is the only being in the universe who really understands what you’re going through. God is the only being in the universe who is truly in control of circumstances. And God is the only being in the universe who loves you perfectly and always, always has your best interest at heart.

Jesus knew these truths about the Father better than anyone else. And so, he turned to the Father in his darkest hour, in the Garden of Gethsemane... let me read that to you from Luke’s Gospel:

“And [Jesus] came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples also followed Him... And He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and began to pray, saying, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.” Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.” (Luke 22:39-44, NASB)

Here’s what Jesus demonstrated as he turned to his Father in this very intense moment: Jesus demonstrated that knew that his Father was the only one who truly understood, who was truly in control, and who truly loved him like no one else could... And so, Jesus poured out his lament to God— so intensely, in fact, that he sweat blood onto the ground. Jesus was clearly in agony over what was going to happen to him... Now, this is a huge relief to us because it shows us that *the perfect Son of God was not OK*. It’s OK to not be OK!

Knowing this is something that compels us to turn to God in our pain—the fact that Jesus, the perfect Son of God, did! If Jesus, most holy, most loving, most grounded and peaceful individual ever to walk the face of this planet needed to lament—we definitely need to! It’s OK to go to

God with your pain. In fact, God wants to hear from you. So, invite him in to your situation. Turn to God first— not to self, not to others, not to an activity. Turn to God...

Movement 2: Process Your Feelings with God (v. 1b-2)

The second section is where David really starts to question God. He really starts to express his dissatisfaction with his circumstances. This is where we learn the second movement: *process your feelings with God*. Here's what he writes... you can almost hear the tiredness in his voice:

"How long, O Lord?

Will You forget me forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

How long shall I take counsel in my soul,

Having sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long will my enemy be exalted over me?" (Psalm 13:1-2)

Did you notice the phrase that's repeated again and again? The thrust of this text is those two key words: *"How long?"*

This question is why I think this is one of the most fitting Psalms for our current situation! Because this is what we are *all* wondering! "How long?" How long is this going to go on? How long will I be stuck in my house? How long will my loved one suffer? How long until I can feel financially stable? How long until I don't have to hear about another person dying of this terrible disease? ... Really, Lord—*how long?* ...

In Psalm 13, we get an inside look into what it means to be really honest with God. In particular, we get to hear how David is genuinely feeling about his circumstances. Here are a few things he feels— and see if you can relate: He feels forgotten by God. He feels worn out from trying to find solutions to his problems. He feels depressed. He feels consumed by the conflicts he's having with others...

Unfortunately, I think many of us have a very unhealthy relationship with our feelings. We don't always know how to handle them... And this is why lament is so important! It's only when we're honest with God that we fully experience our emotions and learn how to work through them with his loving guidance. It's only when we speak to God openly about what we're feeling that he helps us process through it...

It was in Jesus' final hours that he faced the deepest despair of his life. Now, Jesus had faced some difficult things over the years. But none of them were nearly as terrible as what he was about to face... Jesus was about to encounter the most horrific experience a human could possibly endure. He would die by crucifixion, which is horrendous enough. But beyond that, he would take on the weight of human sinfulness—not to mention the wrath of God for all that sin. I mean, we can't even begin to fathom what Jesus would face physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And here's the worst part of the whole situation—*Jesus knew that this was coming*.

This is where we find Jesus on Maundy Thursday. In the depths of despair—despair that we can't possibly fathom. And so, who better to walk us through our despair than Jesus? Who better

to help us through our tough times than Jesus? He understands what you're going through, better than anyone else ever could.

So, here's my encouragement: *Process your feelings with God*. Be honest with him! He already knows you inside and out. There's nothing you can say that will surprise him or change his love for you. So, share what you're feeling with him and you'll be amazed at how he'll work in your life.

Movement 3: Petition God to Help You (v. 3-4)

Alright, so far in our Psalm, David addressed God, bringing him into his pain. And then he poured out his heart to God—he was brutally honest... And next, he makes a direct request of God: he asks God for help. This is what we're all called to do in the third movement of lament—to *petition God to help you*.

This is the part in the Psalm where we get a little more insight into what David's going through... and, again, it's quite appropriate to our situation! David was actually really sick when he wrote this Psalm. And he's concerned that this sickness is going to turn for the worst—that he is going to die. David's also really concerned about the way his enemies will read into his sickness, because David was a leader of God's people. So, anything that happens to David, could have implications for the people and on God's reputation.

And so, David doesn't hold back—he asks for what he wants, starting in verse 3:

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;
Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
And my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken. (Psalm 13:3-4)

Like I said, this message is a lot about giving us permission. I've told you that it's OK to not be OK. It's OK to be honest with God about your problems. And here's another one in this section: *It's OK to ask God for what you want!*

God actually commands us to ask for things—directly. Jesus said, "Ask and you"—*what?*—"shall receive"! It's OK to ask for things from God! And it's OK to ask for what you actually need...

Let's consider Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane again... Remember, Jesus asked, "Let this cup be taken from me." In other words, "Take this suffering away from me, God" ... Here's what's especially profound about this scene: *God didn't grant Jesus' request*. Did you notice that? When Jesus asked to be spared from the suffering of the cross, the Father didn't say, "Yes." And here's why: Jesus' prayer for help *wasn't* answered, so that yours *would be*. You see, God turned his face *away* from Christ so that he might turn his face *toward* us. Jesus experienced the ultimate *rejection* so that we might experience the ultimate *acceptance*.

Friends, you can bring all your requests to God because of Jesus. God will, in one way another, in his perfect timing, come to your aid, because of Jesus... So, in this crisis, *what do you really need from God?* Think about your situation. Think about your job, your family, your friends. Think about the problems you don't know how to solve. And then turn those thoughts into requests—turn those *problems* into *petitions*... That's the third movement of lament: make your petitions known to God.

Movement 4: Praise God for His Care (v. 5-6)

Now, the final movement is really crucial. It's crucial because it's what distinguishes Christian lament from any other kind of prayer or meditation out there: The lament we find in the Bible concludes with *praise*. We are called to *praise God for his care*. This is what we find in the final verses of our Psalm:

“But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.” (Psalm 13:5-6)

The idea of giving heartfelt praise to God may seem impossible when you're facing real despair. And, honestly, I can understand that! It wouldn't be natural to move from utter desperation to jumping up and down, praising the Lord! But I think that's what many of us expect of ourselves—that we need to move immediately from *pain* to *praise*.

It's only through this process of lament that we can be carried gradually from *pain* to *praise*. It's only through the process that we're reminded of who God is to us. And as we are reminded of who God is to us and how he cares for us, praise usually is a natural outpouring of our souls to God. This is why we need the first three movements before we get to praise.

But when we arrive at praise, it is actually quite the *gift* for our souls. It's when we praise God that we find ultimate comfort in who he is. We can find rest in the fact that, even though our circumstances change, *God does not*. Even when our lives feel overcome by evil, *God is not*. Even when we grow weak and weary, *God cannot*. Even when we feel like we have lost control over our lives, *God has not*. We serve an unchanging, good, all-powerful, sovereign God... And best of all: *he loves you...*

All good lament includes praise—praising God for who he is and what he's done. It's through praise that we're lifted up—even if just for a moment—from the worries of this world to the wonders of the next; from the depths of woe to the heights of heaven. Even if just for a moment: we get to praise our God and find rest in his presence...

So, let me give you permission one more time: It's OK to take a break from focusing on your pain and simply praise God. It's OK to breathe in God's presence, to find solace and rest.

Conclusion

I got a great insight into what all of this looks like practically from one of my family members recently... I got to enjoy a conversation with my grandmother over the phone a week or so ago, and it was really encouraging to me. My grandma lives alone and so one of the things we got to discuss was how she is filling her time during this isolation. When I asked her about that, I wondered if she had any books she was reading or shows she was enjoying. Instead, she shared with me how she was filling a good deal of her time at home with prayer. Several hours in prayer, in fact! That was such an encouragement to me—I mean, what an incredible example!

And as we continued our conversation about what was going on in the world, I could tell that she had such a unique perspective. Instead of complaining about her situation, she cared about what others were experiencing. Instead of worrying about herself, she was grateful for all the good things God had done for her... I couldn't help but notice that there was some connection between her *prayers* and her *perspective*. If we want an eternal perspective, if we want lasting peace, the only way we're going to find it is by *processing our pain through prayer*.

Friends, *it's OK to not be OK. What matters most is inviting God into your pain...* So, let me ask you what we started with: Where are you on the despair curve? My hope and prayer for you is that you would take your despair to God through this practice of lament, and that he would grant you the comfort you're longing for. That he would flatten the despair curve in your life.

If you want to give this lament practice a try, we're going to take a few moments to do that right now... We're going to give ourselves permission to not be OK and to invite God into our situation. We'll take it one movement at a time. Would you join me in a time of prayer?

1. Invite God into Your *Pain*
2. *Process* Your Feelings with God
3. *Petition* God to Help You
4. *Praise* God for His Care