

# The Puzzling Paradox of Praising in Pain (Psalm 13)

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[ 0 : 00 ] What pet should I get? So this is the title of a lesser-known Dr. Seuss book, published after he died in 2015.

So the book talks about the adventures of Jay and Kay as they pick out one pet to bring home from the pet store. This task becomes more and more difficult as they see more and more animals to choose from.

A dog, a cat, a bird, a rabbit, a fish. So for example, Then I saw a new kind, and they were good too.

How could I pick one? Now what should we do? We could only pick one, that's what my dad said, but how could I make up that mind in my head? So while this book is written for children, there's a clear idea that's running throughout.

The paradox of choice. The more choices that we have, the harder it is to choose. On the one hand, we think that lots of choices are supposed to make us happier.

[ 1 : 12 ] More options, right? But on the other, we find that in reality, it doesn't always. So a paradox is something that seems to contradict itself.

More choices, but harder to choose. It contains two opposite statements that are true at the very same time. Paradoxes sometimes make us uncomfortable, because it's easier to think of things as right and wrong, black and white, yes and no.

We all come across paradoxes in our everyday life. Here are the rules. Ignore all the rules. If we ignore all the rules, do we also ignore the sentence, which is a rule as well?

Don't go near the water until you learn how to swim. Is it possible to learn to swim without going near the water? And one paradox that I'm particularly guilty of is this one.

Social media disconnects us from each other. Social media was designed to be social, right?

Designed to keep us in touch with friends. But in reality, how many wasted hours have we spent scrolling through Facebook or Instagram, watching random videos on TikTok, instead of actually going out and socializing with people?

[ 2 : 38 ] So in the past few weeks, we've talked about what it means to be human and to suffer and to mourn. We've heard about the story of Job. We've heard about trials and perseverance in James last week.

But now we come to Psalm 13, a song that holds pain and praise in six short verses. What do we make of the psalm that seems like a paradox as well?

Have you ever felt trust in God yet still anxious? We ask ourselves, how can someone who is wrestling with his thoughts day by day, feeling sorrow in his soul, also be the same person who sings the Lord's praise and rejoices in his salvation?

Psalm 13 invites us to explore this paradox and to do three things as we sing along. One, to be honest in our pain. Two, to be hopeful in our prayer.

And three, to be heartfelt in our praise. And before we learn what it means for us to sing along to the psalm, let's pray. Father God, thank you for your word.

[ 3 : 59 ] Thank you that every part of scripture is breathed by you and that you give us songs to sing and to guide us, even when we are in our darkest valleys and lowest points in life.

Holy Spirit, would you draw out the truths in Psalm 13 and imprint them on our hearts in this time ahead, so that not only the words of our mouths and the prayers of our hearts, but also our emotional responses to suffering and pain be brought under the authority of your word.

And would you show us the beauty of your gospel, the ultimate reason for our praise. We come before you in humility, with hearts expectant that you will speak to us today.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. And so before we get to the psalm itself, if you guys look in your Bibles, you'll notice nine small words at the top that give us some bearings about when the song was sung and who sung it first.

For the director of music, a psalm of David. Who was this director of music? Or in some other versions translate, the chief musician. We notice that this little notation also appears in 54 other psalms.

[ 5 : 18 ] Some people think it's referring to God himself, while others think it was the leader of the musicians during David's time. What we do know, though, is that these psalms are public songs.

They are songs that are meant to be sung, whether sung as part of worship or recited by the leader of a choir. They are written for the director of music.

So from the very beginning, these five words give us an idea of our mindsets when we approach Psalm 13. This isn't a story about someone who once prayed or sang.

It's not a biography. It's a prayer that's meant to be prayed. It's a song that's meant to be sung. And then we get to the Psalm of David.

Those of us who have been at church for a long time know about this famous King David. We grew up with childhood stories of the second King of Israel. He was the one who was a young shepherd boy, rising to fame after killing Goliath at a giant.

[ 6 : 28 ] He was described as a man after God's own heart, and he wrote around half of the songs in the entire book of Psalms. His story starts at 1 Samuel 16, if you want to know more.

But in Psalm 13, we get a short snapshot of an emotional prayer to God during what seems like a very troubling time in his life.

So now that we've got some bearings, let's dive into the lyrics. Let's read Psalm 13, verse 1. The first two verses are quite difficult to get through, aren't they?

They give a sense of suffering, of intense emotion. There are no holds barred. Something has happened, and it's happened to King David. This enemy in verse 2, and later on we see these foes in verse 4.

We don't get a lot of detail about who this enemy is, and not all commentators agree. We can perhaps imagine David singing the psalm while facing military enemies, people who are looking to kill him in war.

[ 8 : 01 ] But we can equally imagine David crying out in pain because of illness or because of false accusers. Regardless of who or what it is, it's led to an outpouring of agony and torment.

How long, Lord? How long? How long? How long? How long? Each line starts with how long repeated four times.

It seems like time has slowed down for him because his suffering is so unbearable. Not only does it feel like forever, in verse 1, but his pain is continuous.

It's day after day. Each moment, each minute, each second is excruciating, filled with sorrow, verse 2, and efforts to wrestle his own thoughts.

How long, Lord? And what's worse, it's not just the length of time, is it? What makes it truly unbearable is that David is convinced that God has left him.

[ 9 : 13 ] He cries out, Will you forget me forever? Verse 1. How long will you hide your face from me? These aren't really questions, are they?

They have question marks at the end, but they seem to be more rhetorical. They don't want an answer. They want to make a point. They don't want to know, God, tell me the exact time all of this is going to be over, but rather, God, why are you not hearing me when I'm calling out to you?

Why do you not see the pain that I am in? What's so difficult is that David, in his mind and in his experience, knows that God listens and he hears, but for some reason, God isn't acting on that knowledge.

The pain comes from his feeling that God is just shrugging his shoulders. It feels like God has forgotten. What David is doing is bold, isn't it?

He's complaining about God's behavior to God himself. This is the same God we heard about in Job 38, the one who replied Job, saying, where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

[ 10 : 34 ] Tell me if you have understanding. So is there anything at all we can learn from David's outpouring of grief? I think one thing we can learn is this, that God's people, David included, will

face suffering, but they're invited to express their honest, most raw feelings to him in those times of suffering.

There is pain, yes, but there is also honesty. We are invited to be honest in our pain. We think back to the beginning of the Bible and we see that King David is in good company.

Some of you might be familiar with the life of Abraham, the founding father of all believers. God promised to Abraham that he would bless him and all his descendants, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But it wasn't until Abraham was 100 years old that his son Isaac was born. Day after agonizing day, year after agonizing year, Abraham would have cried out, how long?

Abraham was honest to God. What can you give me, Lord, since I remain childless? You have given me no children. And then several centuries later, not long before the empire of Babylon captured Jerusalem, one of the Old Testament prophets, Habakkuk, starts his own lament and conversation with the exact same words as King David.

[12:13] How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, violence, but you do not save? And then we remember our Lord Jesus, the one who suffered the most, his cry of abandonment and despair.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And what about you? What are your own how long moments?

Maybe we're surrounded by friends, dating, and in love, who have boyfriends and girlfriends and aren't afraid to flaunt it on Instagram. Everywhere we turn, every time we put on a playlist on Spotify, it's yet another love song.

It's getting so exhausting. When is it going to be my turn? How long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever? Or maybe we're sitting here now, surrounded by friends, but all alone because no one knows our secret.

No one can truly understand or imagine what we're going through, we say, and we keep telling ourselves that we need to hide it away, hoping that we'll be able to beat it, all by ourselves, one day.

[13:34] But time and time again, we trip up, and the failures, the shame, keeps piling on. Our prayers are looking more and more like Psalm 13.

How long, oh Lord, will my enemy triumph over me? And then, maybe there are those of us who are on their last emotional leg.

Everything seems to be falling apart. Work is bad. Family is even worse. Just when we thought we managed to keep our head above water, another massive wave comes crashing down.

And it's that drowning feeling all over again. It's nothing less than a miracle that we made it to church today. And what's worse, nobody knows that things are spiraling.

So we have to put on a brave face, smile, and fake it till we make it. Sometimes we just want to shout at the top of our lungs, how long will you hide your face from me, oh Lord?

[14:39] Will you forget me forever? For thousands of years, God's people have experienced trials and pain and suffering. And trials aren't less painful simply because we're his children.

But we're permitted, we're invited to vent and rant and pour out our feelings to him in times of suffering. As Netflix points out, it's okay to not be okay.

We don't have to have a stiff upper lip, nor do we need to put on a smiley face when things aren't really going okay. Crying out to God in pain doesn't mean we lack faith.

In the example of Jesus himself, we see him questioning God. Why have you forsaken me? But nonetheless, still submitting completely to him. So this psalm powerfully invites us to bring everything, even our very unbelief and lack of faith, into the presence and comfort of God.

Everything can be brought in honesty to God because he is a God of everything. But the psalm doesn't just stop there.

[15:59] It gives us permission to kick and scream and angrily cry out to God from the ashes, but we don't have to stay there in the ashes. In fact, we see the next two verses move from emotional cries to petitionary prayer.

We see that God's people are called to lift up every single thing in their lives, even their pain and their suffering, to him in a hopeful prayer. We're called not just to vent our feelings to God, but to pray our feelings.

Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death and my enemy will say, I have overcome him and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

There's three requests here made by King David. First, for God to look on him. Second, to answer. Thirdly, to give light to his eyes. He wants God's attention.

He wants God to act. He doesn't want God to just shrug his shoulders and turn away and hide his face, but to look on him, to turn his face toward him.

[ 17 : 14 ] More than getting God's attention, he wants God to answer. He is praying, pleading with God to speak to him, not to stay silent. Look on me and answer, God.

Give light to my eyes. Give me a sense of encouragement that you are here. And as we read on, we see that the giving light or the brightening of the eyes comes about because David is hopeful that the Lord will act.

If you're reading more literal translations of the Bible, you'll notice that the NIV version actually has one small word missing. In the ESV is this little word, lest.

Lest I sleep in death, lest my enemies say I have overcome him, lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. In the NET translation, they've translated it as or else.

Or else I will die, or else my enemy will say I have defeated him, or else my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

[ 18 : 23 ] Sorry. What King David is saying is that unless God comes to the rescue, unless he stages an intervention and does something, this will be the end of him.

His enemies will rejoice and mock him even when he falls. So for David, everything, his life, his identity, his reputation, all depends on God acting.

He is honest in his suffering, but he is also praying in his suffering. God is the only one who can save him now.

Everything, his sickness, persecution by his enemies, his taunts is brought before God and to God. So as I was preparing to speak with you all today, I was reminded of my own struggles to pray my feelings to God.

So right before I left Boston to fly to London in September 2019, I still had absolutely no idea whether I was making the right decision to go to London.

[ 19 : 32 ] I hadn't worked for a year, so I was very low on cash. For the past two weeks before I left, I had been sleeping on a friend's couch because my lease was up.

A few weeks before that, I was sleeping on a mattress in my flat because I'd sold all my furniture. I was unemployed. I was flying to start a new life in a place where I had no friends, no church community, no family, no permanent place to live, and to top it all off, I was sick.

It wasn't fun at all, and I was starting to feel really sorry for myself. I asked God, why did you abandon me right when I needed you the most?

Aren't you supposed to be a good father and a good God? Where are you now? Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Now as I think back and read my journal, I cringe at how much of a spoiled little child I was, like a child throwing a temper tantrum when I didn't get what I wanted.

But God and his grace and never-ending patience, he didn't tell me off, he didn't cast me away despite my honest prayers, instead he used those prayers in his time to help me become more aware of my own flawed ideas about my pride, my identity, what it means to wait, and what his goodness truly means.

[ 21 : 13 ] He comforted me with his presence and he told me that he understood. I don't know what you're going through right now in your life, whether it's similar to the struggles that I had or completely different.

But I do know that he gives the same authority for you to pray as well as his children, those who trust in Jesus' death and resurrection. We can pray with hope because we are confident not only that he hears, but that he understands.

We pray hopefully because we know that God will hear our prayers and will never turn away from us because he turned his face away from his only son, Jesus Christ, when he hung on that cross. And not only that, we pray hopefully because he understands. Hebrews 4 tells us that we have a high priest who is able to understand our weaknesses because he was tempted in exactly the way that we were but didn't sin.

And he suffered the most horrible and unimaginable pain one could ever feel on that cross, separated from God the Father for us. So while verses 1 and 2 give us permission to honestly vent and be upfront with God about our feelings, verses 3 and 4 say to us, hey, don't stay there.

[ 22 : 38 ] Instead, bring all these things, even your pain and your suffering, to God in hopeful prayer. Pray your feelings to God and trust in the hope that he will understand you and he will hear you.

And then finally, we arrive at the heart of this paradox. This very surprising and unexpected shift in King David's mood.

We notice that there seems to be some transformation in his heart. In verse 2, he says, there's sorrow in my heart and now in verse 4, it says, verse 5, it says, my heart rejoices in your salvation. So how does he arrive at this very strange destination? How do we explain this change? It doesn't seem like a lot of time has passed between verses 4 and 5. It doesn't seem like there's been a big change in his circumstances.

But for David, at least, it seems that through his pain and prayer, he remembered the faithfulness of God in the past, which allowed him to trust God in the future.

[ 23 : 50 ] In verse 6, we see David is singing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me. There's a sense of looking back in remembrance, thinking about God's faithfulness in the past.

He might have remembered how, as a young man, he was able to take on a giant and win. He might have remembered how, when he wasn't yet king, God saved him from the pursuit of Saul, the first king of Israel.

And by looking back in remembrance, David was able to look forward and trust. And so we see that he trusts in God's unfading love and his heart rejoices in his salvation.

But, unfortunately, King David, even being the great king that he was, could not praise God perfectly.

Praise means two things. It means telling and showing someone how good and beautiful and talented and lovely they are. But it also means telling and showing other people how good and beautiful and talented and lovely they are.

[ 25 : 06 ] I can praise my best friend to his face, telling him how awesome he is. And I can tell all my other friends about how an awesome best friend I have.

King David clearly did the same. He sang many songs of praise all throughout the Psalms about how good and beautiful and glorious God was. But that second dimension of praise, telling and showing how good God is, bringing glory to God in his actions, David wasn't able to do that. His adultery with Bathsheba and how he designed an elaborate cover-up leading to the murder of Bathsheba's husband is one of the many examples of his failures.

And for about a thousand years, there was no one else who could praise God fully, completely and perfectly, until a child, Jesus Christ, was born in Bethlehem.

A child, fully God, fully human, who would one day take on all the sins of the world on the cross. And just like King David, he knew what it was like to be separated from God as Father, to feel loneliness, and to have praise over a vicious enemy.

[ 26 : 34 ] And it's the gospel of Jesus Christ, the biggest paradox in all of human history, which is the reason we can be heartfelt in our praises. The gospel, if you think about it, is filled with paradoxes.

It's so simple that it can be understood by a child and those who don't have any education, yet so profound that it has changed the entire course of human history.

It's based on something that's centuries and centuries old, yet still has the utmost relevance for us today. And at the very heart of this gospel paradox, at the cross of Jesus Christ, we see pain, yet also a reason to praise.

We look and see the pain endured by Jesus. We see a perfect human, one who knew no sin, become sin for us.

We see our sins heaped on his willing body. And we watch in horror on that dark afternoon on the hill of Golgotha when the beautiful, loving face of God the Father, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, who can tolerate no wrong, transform into a glowering, punishing face of wrath.

[ 28 : 03 ] we hear that body on the cross cry out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? We weep when we remember that very pain was supposed to be ours.

That eternal separation, that emotional desertion was supposed to be our fate. We were supposed to be the ones crying in pain.

in anguish. And yet, in the midst of this intolerable pain, there is a reason to praise.

And that is the magnificent beauty of this paradox. Because Jesus was forsaken by God, we are forgiven by God. Because he was abandoned by his Father, we, as outsiders, are adopted into his family as his children.

because God the Father turned his face away from Jesus, it means he will never turn his face away from us. And because Jesus was not finally forsaken, because the tomb is empty, because he was raised to life on that third day, we can have the promise of victory over sin and our own glorious resurrection in Christ.

[ 29 : 30 ] Our salvation has been completed. It is finished. We only need to turn from sin and trust in Jesus' death and resurrection. If we do so, we have everything, absolutely everything we need to face sorrows and pain daily, yet rejoice and sing in heartfelt praise.

Let's remember that we have a better reason than King David to praise. This, this gospel paradox is the reason why we praise in pain.

At the end of Dr. Seuss' story, we never get to find out what pet they picked. After agonising over what pet to choose, the narrator makes up his mind very suddenly and very quickly.

These are the last two pages. I will do it right now, I will do it, I said. I will make up the mind that is up in my head. The dog or the rabbit, the fish or the cat.

I picked one out fast and then that was that. And then that was that. The narrator got to go home.

[ 30 : 48 ] The struggle to decide was finished. And just like that, there was no more paradox. But that's not the case for us. For those of us who are followers of Christ, our identities are shaped by a very big paradox.

We live in between pain and praise, suffering and singing, agony and adoration. As Paul points out in 2 Corinthians, our lives, our very lives are a paradox.

We are sorrowful yet always rejoicing, poor yet making many rich, having nothing and yet possessing everything. As Christians, we don't get to just call it a day.

Because Jesus' call to his disciples is a paradox too. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. So Psalm 13 reminds us that we live in this paradox of knowing that, yes, we'll experience pain and suffering as long as we are alive in the sinful world.

[ 32 : 05 ] But, we can be completely confident in Christ's victory and his eternal promises. The rain and the wind and the storm might come now and tears might flow, but there will be a day, one day, when God will wipe every tear from the eyes of his people and where there will be no more death, no more mourning, and no more pain.

They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. We are both people of the cross and the resurrection.

And because of Jesus who died on the cross and was resurrected, we can embrace this paradox knowing that we can be honest in our pain hopeful in our prayers and truly heartfelt in our praises both now and forever.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for this paradox of the gospel, for willingly taking up our sins upon yourself and enduring the pain of separation with your Father so that we might be able to praise your salvation and resurrection.

Holy Spirit, would you help us to be more honest in our pain, more hopeful in our prayers and more genuine and heartfelt in our prayers. When we are surrounded by storms and feel like our strength is almost gone, would you remind us of the beauty of the gospel and our eternal security in Christ so that we can praise you no matter how big the waves are around us.

[ 33 : 49 ] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.