

How Long?

Psalm 13

June 29 2008

Are we there yet? How much longer? When will we get there? Are we almost there yet? How much longer? Have these questions ever been asked of you? And of course they make a stronger impression if asked frequently! Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? How much longer?

We have a reading from the Book of Psalms, Psalm 13, that asks this same question. How much longer? How much longer? How much longer? If you didn't know anything about the Book of Psalms, from this reading you might conclude that it was written by a child who is tired of having to wait for things! How much longer until school vacation begins? How much longer until my birthday? How much longer until Christmas? How much longer do we have to deal with those things that bother us, worry us, frustrate us? Are we there yet? Why can't we be there yet?

So let me say a few things about the Book of Psalms. First, let's find it - if you open the Bible to the middle you will usually find the Book of Psalms. Second, how many Psalms are there? There are 150 of them. The longest one is Psalm 119. Speaking of children, Psalm 119, with 176 verses was one that Jewish children long ago had to memorize. Each paragraph begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet as an aid to memorization. Aleph, beth, gimel, dalet, hey, waw, zayin, het, tet, yod, kaf, lamed, mem, nun, samech, ayin, peh, tsade, qof, resh, shin, and tav. I haven't ever memorized Psalm 119, but I have memorized Psalm 117. Of course, it is the shortest of the Psalms, only two verses long.

***"Praise the Lord, all nations! Praise him, all peoples!
His love for us is strong, and his faithfulness is eternal.
Praise the Lord!"***

What is a Psalm anyway? It's a strange word, with that silent "p" at the start of it. The word "psalms" means "praises". But there are many forms of psalms. Some praise God - God you are so wonderful! Some ask questions of God - God, why do evil people get away with it so often? Some express anger and frustration to God - God why aren't you helping me? But nearly every one of them concludes with a word of praise to God, even if it starts out with weeping or angry words.

The psalms in the Bible may be 3000 years old, and it's absolutely amazing that we have so many of them. The most interesting thing about the psalms - to me - is that we still have all the words after 3000 years - but we no longer have the music that goes with them. There are musical instructions at the beginning of some of the Psalms, such as Psalm 46, but we no longer know what those instructions mean. Modern musicians have

written instrumentation and you may be familiar with some of them, but we have no idea about how they were originally sung. Let's listen to our organist play hymn 42, to see how a modern composer decided to set the 23rd Psalm to music.

Almost half of the psalms were written by David. Remember him? David as a teenager struck mighty Goliath with a small stone from his sling, and he became a great general, and later the King of Israel. In some ways David was very successful, but in other ways he made many mistakes. But he was also a poet and song writer, and he wrote many of the Psalms, some thanking God for successes, and some seeking God's forgiveness after making a big mistake. David's most famous Psalm is the 23rd -

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Psalm 13, our reading today, was not written by an impatient child. It was written by David. But it sounds like he had been having a difficult time. I've been waiting and waiting, God, why have you been ignoring me? My insides are full of pain - so where are you God? My enemies are dancing with joy at my failures - how can you allow this God? How long until you help me?

David says the very same kind of things that we sometimes say when things have not been going well in our lives. In fact, I think we're pretty good at reciting all of our complaints about God and life at great length.

But look at how David concludes Psalm 13: in spite of all my complaints, in spite of all the waiting, in spite of all my aches and pains, in spite of all my enemies, I am not defeated, I am not incurably bitter, I am not lost to hope. Instead, God, I throw myself into your arms counting on your rescue.

The Psalm doesn't answer all of the questions about why life is so difficult, but it shares a powerful feeling that you can always return to when you need it most. Remember the best hug you ever had, maybe on a day when everything had gone wrong, a day when you made many mistakes, a day that was an utter disaster, and how good that hug felt. David says, if you can remember a hug like that, then you know what it's like to turn to God. God, I am throwing myself into your arms.

How much longer? How much longer? Whether it feels like a few minutes or a lifetime, God is always ready to give you that long hug!

