

# From the Anguish of Faith to the Assurance of Faith

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Preacher: Terry McCutcheon

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, now we're going to turn to our Bibles and our reading this evening you'll find in the book of Psalms and it's Psalm number 13. We're delighted this evening to have as our preacher Terry McCutcheon. Terry is one of our elders here, but he's the director of Hope for Glasgow, which operates just along there in a part of our building here. And we pray very much for the work there. We support it. And it's always great to have Terry occasionally coming to preach for us. And he's taking this Psalm, which begins with a very common question. Psalm 13, then we're told it's to the choir master. So it's obviously something to be sung. And it's a Psalm of David. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face far from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.

Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death. Lest my enemies say I have prevailed over him. Lest my foes rejoice because I'm shaken. But I have trusted in your steadfast love.

My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has dealt bountifully with me.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. I invite you to take your Bibles and to turn with me again to Psalm 13.

[ 2 : 10 ] And as you turn that psalm up, a brief prayer. Father, what we know not, please teach us. What we have not, please give us. And what we are not, please make us for our good and for the glory of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen. On Sunday the 2nd of September 2012, a man dressed in a black suit walked into the Kelvin Grove Park just at the end of the street there. He stood by a bench that overlooks a children's skate park area where a lot of children were playing at the time, cycling or playing in their skateboards or just running about.

He took a bottle of vodka from his bag, which he proceeded to drink. Afterwards, he produced a can of petrol, which he poured over himself. Then he set himself on fire and became a human fireball.

No one knows why he did it, but those who witnessed it said they could hear him crying, I just want to die. I can't live with the pain any longer. I just want to die.

No one knows what was causing him so much pain. Was it the death of a loved one? Maybe a spouse or a child? Maybe the pain of watching a loved one that was at one time so full of life, but now can't do anything for themselves. And life is slowly, agonizingly ebbing away. Was it the breakup of a marriage?

[ 3 : 53 ] Maybe due to adultery or being told, I don't love you anymore. I don't want to be with you anymore. Maybe the pain of living with a terminal illness or an addiction that he had failed in several occasions to overcome. Or maybe the excruciating pain of living with guilt and shame.

Whatever it was, it was real. It was real pain. It's a terrible story. A terrible story of real anguish and real pain that many people face daily, not just in this city, but all around the world.

They want to die because they can't live with the pain any longer. And friends, we know that as Christians, we are not immune from pain. Life is full of hardships, horrors, and heartaches for the non-believer and the believer alike. But surely, as Christians, we are immune from the type of pain that would make us think and say, I can't stand this pain any longer. I just want to die.

Well, that wasn't the case for the writer of our opening hymn, William Cowper. He was born in 1731. And in 1752, at the age of 21, he wasn't yet a believer at this time, but he sank into his first paralyzing depression. Many others would follow. In 1763, after attempting suicide three different ways, he was committed to St. Albans, a saint and saint asylum. But it was here in this place, of all

places, six months into his stay, he became a Christian. The light of the gospel invaded the darkness of his life. But ten years later, in 1773, triggered by another bout of depression, by what he called the fatal dream. Now, he didn't say what the dream was, but only that a word was spoken to him that reduced him to spiritual despair. And the word was something like this, it's all over with you. You are lost.

He had repeated attempts at suicide. And in 1786, he entered his fourth deep depression. And again, he tried to take his own life. The last days of his life brought no relief.

[ 6 : 24 ] In March 1800, he said to a visiting friend, I feel unutterable despair. He died just one month later, on the 25th of April, in the year 1800. It was the anniversary of his death on Thursday.

What a life, eh? A life that couldn't stand the pain of living, with goodness knows how many attempts at taking his own life. And yet, he produced hymns that we know and love, and sing to praise God, and encourage one another with. And friends, I think this is why generations of God's people love the book of Psalms so much. For in the Psalms, the writers pour out their hearts before God, and their outpourings contain frightening honesty, refreshing openness, and a very large dose of realism about the life of faith. It's no wonder then, as we read, we often take great comfort and great assurance from the experience of the Psalm writers. And if we are honest, the honesty, openness, and realism that we read in the Psalms, we often don't hear too much from one another. Maybe because we are scared to say anything about how we really feel, or how we really think, or how really broken we are. As everybody else in their family looks so happy, they all look as if they've got it all together. It's as if we are scared that thinking or feeling this way is somehow unspiritual, or shows a lack of faith. Well, I am so glad that David didn't just feel these things, or think these things, or say these things. No, he was inspired by God to commit these things to writing, so that they would be part of Scripture, in order that they would help and bring great comfort and assurance amidst the anguish of life to generations of God's people. I'd like to take the Psalm under three headings. Firstly, in verse 1 and 2, David's pain of struggling with his feelings. Verse 3 and 4, David's prayer for the defeat of his foes. And then thirdly and lastly, verse 5 and 6, David's praise to the God of his faith. Well, firstly then, verses 1 and 2, David's pain of struggling with his feelings. Note that this psalm is written by David, the great warrior king of Israel. He is the one who defeated Goliath the giant, who penned Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Well, here in this psalm, there is definitely a want with David. I think it's fair to say he wasn't having a good week. He certainly wasn't having his best day. He is definitely somewhat under the weather. Four times in two verses, in anguish, he screams to God, how long, Lord? How long is this going to go on for? Verse 1 and 2, how long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? These are the cries from the heart of a man who definitely can't stand the pain any longer. These four how longs make up three complaints that center on God himself and his enemies. You could say his complaints are theological, psychological, and sociological. Well, firstly, the theological, the complaint that centers in God. Verse 1, how long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

[ 10 : 22 ] Of all David's troubles, these troubles that he feels with God are surely the most agonizing. He feels deserted. Deserted by God, and that he is totally on his own. He feels forgotten and forsaken.

What a dark and distressing experience to feel that God has forgotten and forsaken you. Now, these cries could only come from a heart that had previously known fellowship with God.

Someone who had never known fellowship with God previously would ever say that this was the problem. And you see, friends, that's what real faith does. Real faith comes to God with its doubts about God.

And that is what David is doing here. In anguish, he is screaming, Lord, I feel forgotten by you. You are the God who remembered Noah. You remembered Rachel. You remembered Abraham. You told your people never to forget you, never to forget your character, never to forget all that you've done for us, never to forget your commandments. But Lord, I feel forgotten and forsaken by you.

[ 11 : 32 ] If David thought there was an end in sight, or that there was light at the end of the tunnel, it could maybe have hung on in there. But being forgotten by God, he feels will last forever.

God's face is also hidden from him. How long will you hide your face from me? David seems to be reflecting on the wonderful benediction that Aaron and his sons were to pronounce on the people, as during our baptisms tonight.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.

But this is not what David is experiencing. He is asking the Lord to give him the blessing he has promised. The blessing of God's presence.

Now, it's common for us to say to friends or family members that we haven't seen for a while, you know, I long to see your face. Well, I suppose it depends on the face. But we do long to see them. [12:38] But what is really meant by that expression is, I long to be in your presence. I long to be with you. David feels totally forgotten by God, and that the Lord has removed his presence from him.

Most of you will remember a couple of years ago, my wife Charlene was really unwell. Our son Philip was the other ten weeks premature by Caesarean section, and Charlene then spent the best part of four weeks on a ventilator.

Willie and I had a meeting with Charlene's consultant, and Charlene's consultant said, Charlene doesn't look like a woman who has been on a ventilator for four weeks. She looks great.

She looks great. To which Willie immediately replied, Aye, that's because she's four weeks away from Terry. Well, she did spend four weeks on a ventilator, and there were a few scary moments when things were touch and go.

But friends, do you know, I have never experienced the presence and closeness of God like I did during those weeks. I was in despair and great anguish about what the days ahead might bring into my life.

[13:51] But I knew that the Lord was with me. The Lord was at hand. And with his presence in my life, I would get through it, come what may. But that's not the case here for David.

His most severe suffering was that he felt God's presence had been withdrawn. The circumstances he faced were one thing, but being abandoned by God was worse than all of that.

Well, can God forget us? Well, best to let God's Word answer for him. We read in Isaiah 49, But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me.

The Lord has forgotten me. That was Zion's complaint. But here's what the Lord answered. Can a woman forget her missing child? That she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget. Yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands. Well, how do we square these two things up?

[14:54] Well, I think it's fair and true to say that pain and grief can have a way of clouding our thinking, our feelings, and our judgment. But I think, too, it's true.

The Lord allows for us to go through these times in order to refine us, maybe to discipline us so that He will teach us the value of His presence, or maybe to show us our own weakness, or to remind us of His great salvation, to remind us what it was like to be lost without Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2, verse 12, Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ. He wants us, He never wants us to forget what a wonder it is that God has revealed His beautiful face to us, removed separation, stepped in, lifted the veil, and made His face bright to us in the gospel.

David feels deserted by God. His second complaint, he feels depressed within himself, verse 2, How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day long?

He's saying, God, you're not listening. And I'm wrestling with my thoughts over and over again. He feels totally cut off and isolated, and that there is no one who cares.

[16:21] He has become turned in on himself, and it's like he's going over the situations and the circumstances he's in over and over again, all the while increasing the turmoil that he's in.

And he's talking to himself in ways that are totally unhelpful. Now, there are times when speaking to ourselves is called for and can be really helpful, like in Psalm 42 and 43, the psalmist speaks to himself in a helpful way.

Why are you downcast? Oh, my soul. But here in Psalm 13, it's unhelpful. He has turned in on himself, taking counsel in his own soul.

And his self-help is no help. He is, as we would say, stuck in his own head. And it's constant.

There are no breaks from this depression, sorrow in my heart all the day long. Sometimes throughout any given day, we can go through different emotions.

[ 17 : 23 ] And emotions may change. We maybe start off the day feeling pretty optimistic, and then discouraged in the afternoon, and then optimistic again in the evening.

But no, not here. There are no changes in his emotions. There is no relief for David. Sorrow in his heart all the day long. He feels deserted by God, depressed within himself.

And his third complaint, well, he feels defeated by his enemy. Verse 2. How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? We're not told who or what the enemy was, which is helpful, as we can fill in the blank ourselves.

But maybe as David is the king, he is facing opposition against his service to God. And you don't need to be David to face this kind of opposition.

His enemy is exalted over him. There is nothing worse than the sound of laughter coming from an enemy. It's horrible.

[ 18 : 28 ] It's hard to take in an enemy rejoicing over your demise. Maybe this fits perfectly with circumstances or situations that you face personally.

Friends, what we need to understand is this. Sometimes God allows this to happen to his people in order that we learn to trust him, that we might be taken into a deeper relationship with him and learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

Well, you would maybe think that David is done for. He is a man who is drowning, and he will definitely sink. But all hope hasn't gone, because David is still talking to God.

Faith hasn't disappeared. Faith is being exercised. Listen to this from our former minister and good friend, St. Clair Ferguson. When we begin to speak to God about the fact that he has deserted us, we are no longer at our lowest point.

The tide has turned. We are on our way up again. You see, friends, that's the difference between unbelief and belief. Unbelief turns away from God in anger, shaking its fist at God.

[ 19 : 41 ] But faith turns to God in anguish, lifting its hands in prayer. Firstly, David's pain of struggling with his feelings. Secondly, verse 3 and 4, David's prayer for the defeat of his foes.

David's prayer for the defeat of his foes. Well, what do you do when you are facing pain, struggling with your feelings, part of which you feel is that God has forgotten and forsaken you?

Well, I don't know about you, but I would often stay in bed and opt for the death by duvet approach. But what does David do? Well, David goes on praying. What else can he do? Where else can he go than back to the one whom he feels forsaken by?

It may be when the world has plunged you in its deepest pit, you find the Savior there. For when you are deep down in the pit, the evidence of true faith is revealed in you.

So what is the believer to do when God gives us no answers? We are to go on praying. We persist in our petitions. Look at verse 3. Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.

[ 20 : 53 ] Or as the NIV puts it, look on me and answer, Lord my God. Remember, he feels that the Lord has hidden his face from him. He's saying, Lord, look on me.

Turn your face to me. He hasn't given up on the Lord. He is hanging on to him. Look on me, O Lord my God. All through this psalm, David uses the covenant name of God, Yahweh.

Anytime you see the name Lord in capital letters in your Bible, it is referring to the covenant name of God, Yahweh. He is the promise-making, promise-keeping God.

The God who has bound himself to his people in covenant love. The God who has promised to save and redeem his people. David is praying, Consider me.

Look in me. Answer me. Turn to me. And listen to me, Yahweh. David is crying for God to listen to him, to look on him, according to the character of God.

[ 21 : 55 ] This is who you are, God. This is what you like. And also according to what God has already promised. And Lord, this is what you've said. And friends, we need to do this.

We need to store up the promises of God in our hearts, like a squirrel does with nuts getting ready for winter. We need to store up God's promises, so that when, not if, but when the dark times and the hard times come, we can stand on those promises by faith.

That's what the words from the hymn that we sang earlier encouraged us to do. Standing on promises. Words that can't fail. When in the storms of doubt, dark fears are sale.

My hope is anchored fast within the veil. Sure, in his living word, I'll always prevail. But what does David pray for?

Well, he prays for light. Verse 3. Light up my eyes. He will give three reasons for this request in verses 3 and 4. And they are all in connection with the defeat of his foes.

[ 23 : 03 ] Lest I sleep the sleep of death. Lest my enemies say I prevailed over him. Lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. David prays, Light up my eyes.

This isn't a phrase that we would usually use, and it can seem a wee bit puzzling. But what he's saying is, Lord, let me see clearly your hand in all of this. Illumine my understanding that I may see your plans and purposes in all of this.

And give me fresh strength, energy, and stamina to face all the battles that I am going through. He doesn't pray and ask for the Lord to take these battles and difficulties away.

No. That's not my greatest need. My greatest need is to see all that you're doing through this. And to have the energy and strength and stamina to face it all. And that was the case with the Apostle Paul when he was in prison.

Many of his friends were distressed and discouraged by his imprisonment. But Paul was able to comfort them and encourage them with all that God was doing. And he wrote to the church in Philippi, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

[ 24 : 28 ] And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are more bold to speak the word without fear. Being in prison brought Paul great opportunities for sharing Christ.

And it's the same for us, friends. Some of the darkest and hardest times in our lives, things that we would never volunteer for, can often provide opportunities for us to grow in faith and grace and give us opportunities for sharing the hope and trust we have in the gospel.

Seeing these opportunities and all that God is doing doesn't come easily to us. And just like David, we will need God to light up our eyes so that we can have a divine perspective on our situation and to give us the strength and energy to endure it all.

Sometimes we won't see for years, if at all, what God's plans and purposes have been. And that was certainly the case with Joseph as we read his stories in Genesis.

Thrown into a pit by his brothers, sold into slavery by them, falsely accused of rape, and thrown into prison for 13 years. I am sure during all these years of darkness, Joseph felt deserted by God and probably cried out many times, How long, O Lord?

[ 25 : 52 ] Will you forget me forever? But by the end of Genesis, in chapter 50, verse 20, Joseph could say of that whole dark period in his life, As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

And that may be our experience too, friends, as individuals or collectively as a church. God's plans and purposes in the darkness and the difficulties we go through may only be understood by us years later, if at all.

David prays, verse 3, Light up my eyes. Give me strength, energy, and stamina to keep going amidst all these battles. And now he gives three reasons, or three arguments for this request, in verses 3 and 4.

And they are all in connection with the defeat of his foes. They all begin with the word lest, but I'm going to read them just another way.

David prays, Light up my eyes, so that I won't sleep the sleep of death, so that my enemy won't get the better of me, so that there will be no rejoicing from my foes, because I am still standing.

[ 27 : 16 ] I will not fall. David is praying, Lord, don't let me die. I don't want that mob dancing at my funeral. David is using arguments.

He is presenting his case to Yahweh as why he should answer his prayers. Do you pray that way? Do you give the Lord reasons as to why he should answer your prayers?

Can you make an argument for the prayers that you bring, and why God should answer them?

Again, when Charlene was ill, there were people praying for her all around the world, from America to Australia, and everywhere in between.

And there were a lot of non-Christians looking on. A lot of them were family members. And I mean, pouring out my heart to the Lord, saying to him, Lord, please deliver Charlene.

Please send her home to me. I mean, Lord, how can I look after four wee boys? I can hardly look after myself. That should have been argument enough.

[ 28 : 21 ] And Lord, what about the ministry of Hope for Glasgow? The ministry to those with addictions up and down the country? If I have to stay at home and look after these four wee boys, that work will fold.

Lord, there are huge implications for me if my wife doesn't come home. But Lord, there's more at stake for you in all of this. This will reflect badly in you.

All those non-Christians looking on will think badly of you. If you don't deliver her, they will say, well, all that praying was a complete waste of time. They will say that you are no real, or that you couldn't be bothered to listen.

They will say that you were either too weak to do anything about it, or not that you were weak, but that you're wicked, because you don't care. So Lord, deliver her, so that ultimately, it will be for the honor of thy name, Lord.

As much as David was concerned for his own needs, he was concerned even more with the glory of God. Tied up in this defeat of his foes is a concern for God's glory, for God's honor.

[ 29 : 35 ] David was reasoning in his prayer. He is making arguments in his prayer as to why God should answer him. If I die, they will triumph. And if I die, it will be because you won't deliver me.

It will reflect in you, Lord, your reputation, and your name. So vindicate your servant, and make yourself known. David's pain of struggling with his feelings, David's prayer for the defeat of his foes, and thirdly and finally, verse 5 and 6, David's praise to the God of his faith.

David's praise to the God of his faith. But I have 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.

I read these verses, and I think to myself, what's going on here? Is this the same guy? I mean, one minute he's given it, how long, how long, how long, how long?

And now he is declaring, I will trust, I will rejoice, I will sing. What's going on? Is he unwell? Does this guy have like a spiritual bipolar or something?

[ 30 : 53 ] I mean, one minute he's full of anguish, and now he is full of assurance. There is a total turnaround in the tone of these verses from that of verse 1 and 2.

In verse 1 and 2, he was overwhelmed with grief. But now verse 5 and 6, he is overwhelmed with goodness. He has changed from a man who was screaming, how long?

And he is now really declaring, as long as it takes. Well, why? Why this change? What has happened between verse 4 and verse 5?

What has changed in his circumstances? Well, if you look with me, can you see it there between verse 4 and 5? No, and neither can I, because there is nothing there to see.

There is nothing. Nothing has changed. Not a thing. But he has changed. His prayers of verse 1 through 4 may not have changed his circumstances, but they have changed him, which is always a far better result.

[ 32 : 06 ] He gets a hold of himself with God's help, and he says, the hand I've been dealt is the hand I've been dealt. And with God's help, I'm going to trust, I'm going to rejoice, and I am going to sing.

The man who was wrestling is now trusting. Why? Well, because of the Lord's hesed, the Lord's steadfast covenant, unfailing love. Instead of sorrow in his heart all the day long, his heart is filled with rejoicing.

Why? Because of the Lord's salvation. The man who has been screaming to the Lord is now singing to the Lord. Why? Well, because the Lord is good, and he has dealt bountifully.

He has been good to me. David is declaring here the same as he writes in Psalm 23. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I want us just to note that there has been no deliverance yet for David. No, that's still a long way down the road. But it's like it's already taking place in his experience.

[ 33 : 19 ] Well, what is the basis for this? Well, it's the character of God. David has remembered Yahweh, and he is trusting him.

Friends, it's not about how much faith we have, but the object of our faith, where our faith is placed, what our faith is resting on. And David is declaring hearing praise to Yahweh.

I am leaning on your proved, tried, and tested character. That's the basis of my praise. Because that is the way you are. God's character is the basis of his praise, and God's character is the basis of his assurance.

And friends, that is one of the greatest needs that all of us have, is to know what kind of God God really is. He is the God whose character has been proved, tried, tested, and never once found wanting.

Friends, some of you may be going through real darkness, real difficulties, just like David. You may feel that God has forgotten you and forsaken you. Well, let us learn from the experience of David, of what got him through the difficulties and the darkness.

[ 34 : 33 ] What brought him through pain, through prayer, to praise? How did he overcome the inward struggle with his feelings and the outward danger of his foes? Well, he did so by the upward look to the God of his faith.

David remembered and trusted himself to the character of God. When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace.

In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. The circumstances you face may not change. But standing on God's Word, storing up his promises in your heart, standing on them, remembering his unfailing love and his unchanging grace, rejoicing in his wonderful salvation, and singing to the Lord, because you have been overwhelmed by his amazing goodness to you.

Friends, these things will always see you through. But there are some here this evening that these truths won't get you through the darkness.

These truths won't do you any good. And do you know why? Because you have yet to taste and see that the Lord is good.

[ 35 : 54 ] You come to this service often. Maybe you come every week. You're convinced by the truth of the gospel. It looks good. But you've never tasted.

Why don't you taste the thing and experience the goodness of God? The goodness of God that was fully expressed in the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He really was forsaken on the cross so that we might be forgiven. God really did hide his face from Jesus. And Jesus really did face the darkness of God's wrath so that he might bestow on us the light of God's love.

Today would be a good day to trust him. Why don't you do that today? Let us pray together. Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

Father, we give you great thanks for your great goodness to us. And we ask that you would help each of us to store the truth of this psalm deep in our hearts.

[ 37 : 24 ] We may not be experiencing the darkness of feeling forgotten by you today, but one day we will. And so help us to know that there is a hope that lifts our weary heads, that lifts our eyes beyond the beckoning grave, to see the matchless beauty of a day divine, when we shall behold your face.

In Jesus' name. Amen.