

When the Bottom Drops Out
Psalms for the Summer – Psalm 13
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“How long with you forget me?” the psalmist asks God. He doesn’t ask politely. It was probably with crying, weeping and wailing. Like crying after a bad report from the doctor...or weeping after the news of a tragic accident...or wailing when a person realizes just how helpless they are. The bottom has dropped out and it hurts!

“How much longer will you hide from me?” implores the psalmist. “How long must I endure trouble?” These questions come from deep inside. We don’t know exactly what the psalmist in Psalm 13 was experiencing, but we’ve been in similar situations. Or at least we know someone who has.

Many of us have prayed agonizing prayers: How long will I suffer from chronic pain? How long will I be in debt? How long will this rain continue? How long will my family stay mad at me? How long before I find a better job? How long before the next crazed shooter grabs a gun and attempts unspeakable harm?

Psalm 13 is a psalm of lament. Laments normally come out of big, sad, mournful feelings. There are several dozen lament psalms in the Bible. It’s the most common type of psalm. Some are individual laments and others are communal laments, but all of them are filled with frustration and anger. It feels like the bottom has dropped out, and often the person didn’t see it coming.

Friends, if you’ve ever wondered if it’s okay to express raw and unfiltered feelings to God, the answer is yes. There’s no need to pretend that everything is “okay” or “fine” when clearly it’s not. No, pouring out your heart in lament is an ongoing part of a life of faith. Jesus himself pours out his heart on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” (Ps 22:1 NRSV).

In praying this ancient prayer from Psalm 22, Jesus points us to the psalms for those times when we too ask, “Why, Lord?” and “How long?” More specifically, Jesus points us to the lament psalms to find the words to speak when our hearts and minds are near the breaking point.

The words of a lament might seem like they easily spill out of the psalmist's mouth, but truth be told, they might have developed over weeks or months or even years of waiting and wondering. The laments often follow a typical pattern. We see this in Psalm 13. It begins with a *complaint*: "How much longer will you forget me, Lord? Forever? How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?"

Then comes a *request*: "Look at me, O Lord my God, and answer me. Restore my strength; don't let me die. Don't let my enemies gloat over me." Next comes an expression of *trust*. It sounds almost like wishful thinking, but it's more; it's affirming a relationship: "I rely on your constant love; I will be glad, because you will rescue me." Finally, the lament psalms almost always include a moment of *praise*. Psalm 13 concludes: "I will sing to you, O Lord, because you have been good to me."

Again, those are the elements that make up the lament psalms in the Bible: *complaint*, *request*, *trust*, and *praise*. During July and August, as you look for psalms on which to read and reflect, you will find additional laments with these elements. But the crux of the matter is this: when the bottom drops out, how can these psalms provide support for you and me when our own hard questions come? How can they help us with the "Whys" and the "How longs" that come from our own sleepless nights, and hospital rooms, and cemeteries?

Friends, when you wrestle with hard questions, here are three thoughts that might be helpful. First, in the psalms we discover that these hard questions are not directed to friends or pastors or the latest self-help book. They are addressed to God. Psalm 6 puts it like this: "I am worn out, O Lord; have pity on me!....How long will you wait to help me?" (Ps 6:2-3 TEV). Remember: questions like these don't suppress the "Whys" and the "How longs," as if the questions are impolite or irreverent. They encourage us to do as Jesus did, to address our hard questions to God.

A second thought: as we take a closer look at these questions in the psalms, we discover something quite astonishing: they are never answered. Never is a "How long?" answered with "Yet three more weeks." Never is a "Why?" answered with "Because that's what God has planned for me." The questions remain questions. Even Jesus didn't get an answer to the "Why?" that he cried from the cross. Some of our questions, it appears, will have to remain questions. The answers are hidden with God.

A final thought: the psalms don't end with the questions. They include affirmations of trust and words of praise. The questions do remain. But somehow, the one who raises them can go on with life and even join the company of believers in praising God.

Friends, there are going to be times for you and me when it hurts too much to pray. About all we can manage is an agonized "Why?" At such times, we need to keep in mind that we are not the first person to ask such a question. Others have been there too. The laments join us to those who've been struggling. And as we pray the laments, they might move us from complaint and request, to trust and even to praise.

On Saturday, May 4, the bottom dropped out for my older sister, Bernice. Sadly, it came right after a baby shower for her daughter, Tina. The shower was in Omaha at my sister's home. It was a happy time. A grandchild was on the way – Bernice's first grandchild.

The shower ended with a piano duet. Bernice joined in. Then she walked into the kitchen. Suddenly she cried out, "My head, oh my head." She had searing pain and was nauseous. Something was wrong. An ambulance was called. Bernice was rushed to a nearby hospital.

A CAT scan was ordered. The scan detected a cerebral aneurysm. Blood was leaking into the brain. The aneurysm had a tear and it was in danger of rupturing entirely.

Emergency surgery was needed. Bernice was moved to a hospital better equipped for it. The aneurysm was wrapped in coils to control the bleeding and prevent further damage.

Word spread quickly to other members of our family. Texts were shared. Prayers were lifted up. There were lots of worries and fears. When Bernice woke up from the surgery, she was able to respond to questions from the doctors. But it was just the beginning of a more complicated journey.

A follow-up MRI was done. It showed some stroke damage. Vasospasms – a narrowing of the arteries – developed. An angiogram was done to administer the drugs needed to control the spasms.

A couple weeks later, a second major surgery was needed – to clip the aneurysm and seal it off. It was a long surgery, close to 8 hours. Doctors eventually returned with a report: the surgery was successful for the most part, but because of the size of the aneurysm and the danger of shutting off blood flow to nearby arteries, it wasn't a complete clipping. They'll have to keep an eye on things, including having another angiogram next year.

Later, they shared that additional stroke activity had been detected. Since much of the injury was in the left frontal lobe, Bernice's right side was significantly weaker, she had lost her ability to speak, and cognitively she was not quite the same as before. The diagnoses were preliminary, of course. There were far more questions than answers. But for Bernice's two girls, Tina and Maia, and the entire family, there was an abundance of anxiety and concern.

Bernice was released from the hospital on May 31. She spent a couple of weeks in a rehabilitation center. Physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy filled up Bernice's days. Eventually Bernice graduated from physical therapy. She didn't have the same fall risk as before. Still, she needed to continue with occupational therapy and more than a little speech therapy. The words were coming, but they were coming slowly and not spontaneously.

Right now, Bernice's girls, along with the rest of the family, have plenty of questions about what's coming next. There's been progress along the way, but there's no real sense of how much of the "old" Bernice is coming back, and when. We continue to keep Bernice in our prayers. We continue to wait by our phones for updates. And we continue to celebrate every little sign of healing and recovery.

How long will it be, O Lord? We don't know. Like the psalmist of old, we have more questions than answers. The psalms of lament seem particularly telling for Bernice at this moment in time. While she can't find the words to voice complaints and requests, her family can. And I know that many of the complaints and requests are coming from us on her behalf.

We often don't consider this, but an individual lament in the Bible didn't simply affect an individual person, but an entire family. And as I mentioned before, the prayers didn't last just a week or a month, but often much longer.

Friends, in the midst of all this trauma, there has been a glimmer of joy. Bernice's new granddaughter, May Gwendolyn Moessner, was born on June 19 in Kansas City. She was a healthy 8 lbs. 10 oz. Baby May was first able to meet her grandmother, Bernice, on July 4 in Omaha. It turns out that Bernice somehow knew that Tina was being induced on June 19, so she was up and pacing the floor on the night of the 18th, waiting for the news.

There have been sweet, tender pictures from July 4 of Bernice holding Baby May, taking care of her, rocking her back and forth, and I suspect, giving her little kisses. While Bernice doesn't have many words to speak, it feels like her heart has been fully present in these moments.

As Bernice continues to move forward, there are still plenty of questions, many of which have no answers. And someday there may be complaints and requests from Bernice, much like from the psalmists as they shared their laments. The bottom has dropped out for Bernice, after all, and she didn't even see it coming. But for now, it feels like moments of trust, and maybe even praise, are rising to the surface. And for anyone who's ever wondered "Why, Lord" and "How long," these feelings might just be enough to see her through.

Lord, may it be so! Amen.