

You may or may not know this, but my wife, Larissa, is from New Zealand. We met in New Zealand when we were both a part of YWAM there. We got married a few years later in Minnesota. We knew that even though Minnesota was our home in that season, we would be going overseas to New Zealand and beyond for ministry purposes. Being a U.S. citizen myself, I had to apply for a visa to live and work in New Zealand, and the processing time that we were originally told was not very accurate. The weeks kept adding up and it got to the point where Larissa's American visa was going to expire and she needed to return to New Zealand with or without me. September 10, 2015 was a sad day. I had to see my wife off at the airport, uncertain of how long our time spent an ocean apart from each other would be. It was a really difficult time not knowing how long it would be until my visa would be granted and my passport returned to me. The continual question on my mind was, "How long?" I felt anxious, restless and sad. I was frustrated, I felt helpless and even angry that we were required to be separated from each other, and for an unknown amount of time.

Now, you may not relate to the exact circumstances of that story, but I think we can all relate to that longing, lingering question of "How long?" For example, "How long will I be out of work for?" "How long will the pregnancy tests read negative?" "How long until this storm in my life passes?" "How long until wholeness is brought to that relationship?" "How long until this health crisis is resolved?" "How long until I feel safe in my community?" There are so many "How longs?" that we may be asking ourselves, or even crying out to God about. These are real, serious and valid questions. The situations and circumstances that they represent are painful. They don't feel good. We don't tend to ask, "How long until this good moment goes away?" Or, "How long until this thing that I really like is over with?" It's like watching a movie. If we're

really enjoying a movie and we're completely engrossed in the plot, we don't want it to end. We don't check to see how much time has passed or how much of the movie is left. Sometimes the credits come on and we think, or say out loud :), "What?! That's it?! That's all there is?" But if we're watching a movie that we have no interest in and does not appeal to us, we are likely to ask, "How long is left?" Or we shut off the movie entirely. (Or walk out of the theater, remember those days? :) But our lives are not like a movie. When it comes to our lives we can't just select a genre that we like and find an interesting title. We can't just tune out and walk away when what's happening on the screen of our life's reality is undesirable or even painful. Sometimes in life, things do not seem to go our way. Any one of the circumstances I identified previously represent hardship and pain to some degree or another. And there are any number of other difficulties that we face as human beings and I am sure there are difficulties represented in this room or wherever you may be watching this. I wouldn't be surprised if I only got an example or two of "How long?"s out earlier and your mind went exactly to a hardship that you have been faced with or are currently facing. That's good, I'm glad your minds did that. I invite you to hold on to that thought and keep tracking with me. We will come back to those thoughts a bit later on.

It is in the midst of hardships that feel like they are dragging on for an agonizing length of time that we can feel the most hopeless. That is a difficult combination. Hardship and time. It's not just that we're experiencing something challenging and draining for a moment. The kinds of things that we are talking about are particularly difficult as they are not isolated incidents that we easily move on from. The amount of time that we are feeling oppressed compounds the pain and elongates the agony. It doesn't get over quickly and it doesn't get over easily. As such, we may feel alone and isolated. Whatever the "it" is may rob us of our communication and rob us of

our community. We may not feel that we are able to open up about it or that we even should share about it with others. We may feel that nobody cares. Maybe there are those in our life that really do not care or maybe it is mostly our perception that tells us that it's not worth telling someone else about it because they won't care and even if they did listen, it won't change anything. That is debilitating. When we feel as though there is nothing we are able to do to see the results that we are hoping for, that paralysis is crushing.

It is in these times that we may even feel as though God is distant. We feel small and disengaged, and at best, God feels far away and removed from us. We think thoughts like, "Why would he let this happen?!" "Why didn't he prevent this from happening?!" Or, "Why won't he just make it all stop?" It is in these times that we can really begin to feel helpless. Those feelings of helplessness may sour and turn into bitterness. Our hearts become burdened, our emotions are drained. We do everything we can within our power to turn things around, to see a different story written. But try as we might, our efforts seem to all be in vain. Positive thinking isn't going to take away a complicated, painful, stress inducing reality. These circumstances won't continue WITHOUT taking a toll on us in some form or another. An example of that toll may be that our relationships with others become damaged due to the stress and the "it" is constantly at the forefront of our minds. Our sleep will likely be affected. As will what and how we eat. The physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual toll that happens is exhausting. I hope I'm painting a real picture with these words. I think we can all relate to being at that really low level. The darkness feels so strong. We feel so weak. The circumstances facing us feel so overwhelming and all-consuming. God feels far off and it feels as though he won't do anything to help us. Sit with these words: Broken. Isolated. Forgotten. Weak. Small. Insignificant.

Overwhelmed. Oppressed. Weary. Worn. Not enough. Powerless. Shattered. These words are identifiable for all human beings. These words are not unique to any one person alone. In some form or another, every human being can relate to this. Apart from God, those words describe humanity. Additionally, this is not a human experience that is new to our time or new to our particular context by any means.

We read in the book of Psalms about these very kinds of circumstances.

Psalms 13 is a strong example, it reads:

“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? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,” lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. 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.”

Psalms 13 is a psalm of lament. Here the Psalmist is crying out to God in distress. We don't know exactly what the psalmist is being faced with, but it is apparent that there is a serious foe he is facing that threatens to utterly overtake him. The psalmist is at the end of his rope. There are no solutions for his difficulty that he can make for himself. Surely he has tried all that he can do on his own, and yet the all-encompassing reality of his enemy persists. He cries out to God, not merely as a way to express himself but in order that the Lord would hear his plea and answer him. It is a good sign that he is seeking God. He is feeling overwhelmed and even feeling that he is forgotten by God, yet he still cries out to him. The writer recognizes just how high the stakes are and that his very life is at risk. Any sense of goodness, wholeness, harmony or safety

seem to have left him entirely. He didn't stub his toe or spill hot coffee on himself, he is in the midst of serious difficulty. If he was able to overcome his enemy and circumstances on his own, surely he would have. Perhaps he has taken everything that he knows on his own and thrown it at this difficult circumstance, and yet the weight is so heavy he cannot bear it on his own any longer, nor is he himself able to escape from it. He cannot do it on his own; without God he will be defeated and his enemy will be victorious. Again, he recognizes the seriousness of his situation. He does not want to give an inch to his enemy, and he certainly does not want his enemy to be the one who finds victory in these circumstances. The psalmist does not confine himself to the kind of thinking that that says, "Surely God in his sovereignty is aware of my plight and there is no need for me to talk to God about it, what will be will be." No! The psalmist is all in. He is going to the one source who—though he may feel far off—is greater than the enemy that the psalmist is facing. Not only that, but clearly the psalmist has a relationship with God and he knows God's track record. The psalmist shares his plight openly, and quite probably loudly, before the Lord. "How long, O Lord?" "How long, O Lord?" He tells the Lord where he is at emotionally, what he is experiencing, what or who he is up against and what failure would definitively mean. Let me say that again. The psalmist tells the Lord where he is at emotionally. What he is experiencing. And what or who he is up against as well as what failure would definitively mean. The psalmist does not mince words here nor is he incredibly positive and optimistic. He is real and authentic before the Lord. He is still in the thick of it. The end of the story hasn't happened yet. It is always more enjoyable to tell our stories of challenge when we know that the outcome ultimately resulted in our favor. It's more difficult to tell the story when we're still in the midst of it and the conclusion feels unknown. For example, it is very easy for

me to tell you the story about waiting for my visa to arrive and being reunited with my wife. At the time, however, it was much more difficult. In Psalm 13 the psalmist is focused on the reality that is before him. That reality comes in two parts. One part of his reality is the current physical circumstances that he finds himself in. The other part of his reality is the reality of the God whom he serves. And just as a reminder, this all takes place in a psalm that is only six verses in length. It is relatively short but chock-full with so much for us as hearers and doers of God's word to take in and apply to our own lives.

The final portion of Psalm 13 is where the psalmist turns to hope. Previously, he has brought to God's attention what could happen if God did not act. Now he is reminding himself of what God has already done. I think this is really significant. We don't want to just tell God about the problems, we ought to also remember how God has acted in the past. As we go through our lives and our journey of faith with God, we begin to gather so many stories. Stories of God's goodness. Stories of how God provided. Stories of how God acted, showed himself faithful and the ways in which he expressed his love for us. Reminding ourselves of these stories is really beneficial to us and to others. Particularly when we are facing a new struggle, difficulty or hardship. The psalmist in Psalm 13 proclaims that God's love has proven to be steadfast; love that the psalmist can put his trust in. Yes, all of us are reading this psalm—as have countless others—but in the moment, the audience was the psalmist and God. The psalmist purposely chooses to speak to himself about God's goodness. Telling yourself the truth is a powerful thing which can lead to really positive shifts in the battleground of our minds. The psalmist looks ahead to the salvation that he believes is yet to come from God. The psalmist knows that God is his rescuer, even if he hasn't felt rescued yet. Even though his circumstances do not currently

line up with experiencing joy and salvation, he has faith to believe that the Lord's salvation will indeed come. This salvation is cause for rejoicing. The psalmist knows that God will rescue him. The psalmist is rejoicing about a future reality, and rejoicing about a current and constant characteristic of God—God will bring the rescue. The psalmist already knows that he is going to rejoice in God's salvation. He already knows that he will have something to sing about because of who God is and what God will do. That is faith. I'm not talking about "positive confession" and trying to speak into existence what you want to see happen in your life. I'm talking about knowing God, knowing God's nature and character through his word and experience with him, and declaring his truth OVER the circumstances of our lives and IN the circumstances of our lives. Aligning our hearts with God's heart. Reminding ourselves of who God is. Not duping ourselves or acting like what hurts us doesn't hurt us, but bringing God into the equation and even rejoicing in the difficult times because of God and who he is. That is something to sing about. In a matter of just a handful of verses, Psalm 13 goes from a grim present reality to the promise of praise, even though the current physical circumstances have not yet changed. That's a journey that takes place on the inside. At an inner level within the psalmist, and at an inner level within us if we so choose. The psalmist has present faith for a future reality. I want to have that. Faith now for a reality that God will bring about in the future. Again, I'm not trying to suggest a name it and claim it kind of mindset or approach to life and God. We're not talking about excess or possessions, but the declaration of God's truth and preaching that truth to our very souls as we align our hearts with God's. Reminding ourselves of who he is when it feels like he is not. Perspective is huge, and I'd even say that perspective is reality. If our perspective is only what we can see within just a few inches from our face, we miss so much by being that short-sighted.

The perspective we ought to take part in is one that is big enough to include God. The author of Psalm 13 demonstrated this well. In a short passage, the author travels the journey from lament to praise while affirming the goodness of God and trusting in him for salvation. Let me say that again. The author travels the journey from lament to praise while affirming the goodness of God and trusting in him for salvation.

Lament is powerful! Lament is something that is also probably lacking in the church as a whole. It is not unusual to be given space in a church service to reflect on ways that we have fallen short of the glory of God. Particularly during services with communion, we often pause to examine ourselves and take care of business with God. But do we often see space provided in Christian gatherings dedicated to lamenting? I would be curious to know if that has ever been your experience. We seem to come from backgrounds and cultures where the focus and emphasis is on God and his goodness, his redemptive work and his power. But we spend very little energy corporately on focusing on what does not feel good. Things that feel weak or perhaps they feel powerful but they are absent of goodness and God's power. To clarify, I believe the average Western Christian DOES spend a lot of time focusing on those things, but privately and often not done in healthy ways because of what has been directly or indirectly modeled to us. It would seem that a cultural norm has spilled over into our churches and communities of faith that says we are not supposed to focus on our pain, at least not outwardly. We may emphasize praising God in the storm, but we minimize grieving the reality of our storms WITH our community.

Lament is a healthy practice that I personally feel is lacking in my life. Perhaps that feeling resonates with you as well. And maybe some of that comes from me not always having a good understanding of what lamenting really is. To lament like how the Bible gives us examples



of is much more than complaining. Lamenting is being real and authentic with God. It is giving myself permission to be honest with God. It is being frank about the sorrow or pain that I feel, and it does not stop there. Like I mentioned before with Psalm 13, there is more than just the physical part of reality. The power of the lament is found in also being honest and real about the other truth—the truth about God—proclaiming God’s word, his truth, his nature and character. Speaking to your very soul to remind yourself about God’s steadfast love, his trustworthiness, his faithfulness and strength. Even when our circumstances are negative, we can proclaim God’s truth in our lives and something is going to change. What changes may not be the storm going on around us, but WE can be changed for the better by speaking the truth of God to our very being.

There is hope available even in the face of despair. Psalm 13 speaks about salvation from God. The God of the universe may feel distant, but he has actually come incredibly near. Jesus, the Son of God, coming to this earth amongst us human beings as a human being was all a part of God’s plan of salvation. Jesus lived and breathed in the midst of our brokenness and pain. He came and humbled himself so that we may be restored into relationship with the living God. Jesus endured a treacherous death that he didn’t deserve, bore the weight of all of our sin that he didn’t contribute to, and thus experienced death in a manner that no other human has or ever will experience. And the story continues. Jesus defeated death and he offers us true life with him. The war is already won. The results are in. Jesus reigns victorious and welcomes us into a victorious life with him.

This is a free gift for all of humanity to take hold of. It is not just about the end game, but can and should affect this very day and how we live our lives here on this earth. You can take heart and find encouragement from the One who knows the beginning from the end. He is not far

off. Be encouraged to come before the Lord with raw sincerity, crying out to him about whatever adversity you are facing. Keeping both lament and praise held in tandem; both ought to look toward the Savior. This is something that should not be overlooked and helps to reframe everything.

What would it be like if all of us approached the “How long?” that we feel, with all of this in mind and in practice? We would do well to follow the example set before us by the author of Psalm 13. May we cry out to the living God in our distresses and struggles. Let us not keep the pain hidden behind smiles or concealed due to concerns of burdening others. May we grow in this and not forget the rest. Even in the midst of great difficulty, the psalmist trusted God and put his hope in him. It is as though he reminded his very soul, to the depths of his being, that God is good. That God is worthy not only to be trusted but to be praised as well. That God’s love is sure and strong. With the eyes of faith he could see the Lord’s salvation even in the midst of dire circumstances. He knew that his God would not let him be entirely overcome but instead would lavish his goodness upon him and save him. That eventually the wait would be over and the victory of God would be his to partake in. This is powerful. This is something to not merely embrace and agree with intellectually but to fully step into in our lives. Even as we go through adversity, we go through it all with God.

Let’s take some time here to put this into practice. If you’re comfortable, find someone near you and lament. As you listen to each other, value the trust that is being extended to you. Come together and share the “How long?” that you may be experiencing. You don’t have to feel alone. After sharing, proclaim the truth of God, speaking to Him and even to your very soul.

What does his word say? What is his nature? What is his character? Cry out to him with the lament and cry out to him with the praise. After a little while we'll come back together and close. If you don't feel like you have a "How long?" still gather together with someone and declare God's truth and praise the Lord. If you're watching online I invite you to take part in this for the next little while as well as you are able.

Psalm 13:5-6 and Romans 15:13, "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."

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."