

CRISIS SERMON: UNEXPECTED DEATH OF A CONGREGANT'S CHILD

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**Scenario:**

A well-known, well-loved family within the congregation has unexpectedly lost a child – perhaps due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome [SIDS] – late in the week. The family, the congregation, and the pastor had little to no time to prepare themselves for this loss. The church is small enough that all have heard the news by Sunday, and all are deeply grieving. Because there is no human individual or group to blame for the tragedy, the family, congregation, and pastor are confused and angry with God. The pastor will preach a funeral sermon to comfort the family the following week. But on Sunday morning, he wants to speak to the anger and confusion of the congregation.

**Call to Worship:**

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.**

[Psalm 13]

**Readings:**

**1. First Lesson: Isaiah 65:17-25**

<sup>17</sup> “For behold, I create new heavens  
and a new earth,  
and the former things shall not be remembered  
or come into mind.

<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever  
in that which I create;  
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,  
and her people to be a gladness.

<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem

and be glad in my people;  
 no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping  
 and the cry of distress.  
<sup>20</sup> No more shall there be in it  
 an infant who lives but a few days,  
 or an old man who does not fill out his days,  
 for the young man shall die a hundred years old,  
 and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.  
<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
 they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
 they shall not plant and another eat;  
 for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
 and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
<sup>23</sup> They shall not labor in vain  
 or bear children for calamity,  
 for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord,  
 and their descendants with them.  
<sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer;  
 while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
<sup>25</sup> The wolf and the lamb shall graze together;  
 the lion shall eat straw like the ox,  
 and dust shall be the serpent's food.  
 They shall not hurt or destroy  
 in all my holy mountain,"  
 says the Lord.

**2. Psalm: Psalm 13 [See Call to Worship Above]**

**3. Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26**

<sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.  
<sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who  
 have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the  
 resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made  
 alive. <sup>23</sup> But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who  
 belong to Christ. <sup>24</sup> Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father  
 after destroying every rule and every authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he  
 has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

**4. Gospel: John 6:35-40**

<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and  
 whoever believes in me shall never thirst. <sup>36</sup> But I said to you that you have seen me and  
 yet do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to  
 me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will

but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

**Prayer of Confession:**

Father, we confess that we are confused and angry – with you.  
We do not understand why you did not prevent Death from taking one of our youngest.  
In this hour, we feel like you have abandoned us.  
We feel like we hate Death more than you do.  
Have mercy upon us, Father, and forgive us.  
Forgive us for doubting your goodness.  
Forgive us for doubting your hatred of Death.  
Give us the strength to trust you,  
that we may ever praise you for your promised victory over Death.  
Amen.

## How Long, O Lord? – Lamenting Our Way into Worship (Psalm 13)

### [Introduction]

I did not want to preach today.

I was looking forward to a Sunday soon when I would baptize that baby boy who died on Friday. Instead, here we are on a Sunday morning, struggling to make sense of his untimely death. Grieving with our brother and sister, his parents, as they mourn at home.

Is anyone else in here confused and angry? Confused and angry with God? Or is it just me, the pastor? After all, how could God let something like this happen? Why cut a baby's life so tragically short? What did the family do to deserve something like this? I mean, we know them. They love God. And yet their firstborn child has died.

I don't know about you, but I hate Death. How come, this morning, it feels like we hate Death more than God does? And yet, we're the ones who have to die, while he claims to be powerful enough to do something about it! Why?!

Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Get up! Do not reject us forever.  
Why do you look the other way?  
Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression?  
[Ps 44:23-25].

O LORD, why do you stand so far away?  
Why do you hide when [we are] in trouble?  
[Ps 10:1].

What do you gain by oppressing [us]?  
Why do you reject [us], the work of your own hands,  
while smiling on the schemes of the wicked?  
[Job 10:1-3]

[We] cry to you, O God, but you don't answer.  
[we] stand before you, but you don't even look.  
[Job 30:19-20]

My God, my God, why have you abandoned [us]?  
Why are you so far away when [we] groan for help?  
Every day [we] call to you, [our] God, but you do not answer.  
Every night [we] lift our voice, but [we] find no relief. [Ps 22:1-2].

Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? [Mk 4:38].

My God, My God, why have you forsaken [us]? [Mt 27:46].

Why have you forsaken our friends, and their dear baby boy?

I did not want to worship today. I, like you, wanted to lament. But the fact that I've been drawing on biblical passages for the past few minutes – from Job, from Psalms, from Matthew and Mark – these glimpses of anguished outcries in the Bible give me hope that I, that *we*, can both lament and worship at the same time.

You see, the Bible doesn't shy away from the dark days of life and the dark nights of the soul.

Oh, *we* often do, by putting on masks and pretending like everything is OK. But the Bible doesn't shy away from evil, pain, and suffering. In fact, it gives us the words to express our deepest confusion and anger.

Of course, when suffering and Death come knocking at our door, we could always just forget about what the Bible says and give full vent to our anger and rage – especially if “what the Bible has to say” means trite truisms and clichéd answers.

But, no matter how angry you are this morning, I hope you'll agree with me that anger and bitterness are only temporarily satisfying. In the long-term, they are soul-destroying.

And the Bible offers a large middle ground between despair and cliché in the face of suffering – and that middle ground is called *lament*, where the expressions of the faithful attempt to match their frightening experiences in a world stained by Sin and Death.<sup>1</sup>

Would you step into that middle ground with me this morning, to consider how lament might lead to worship?

### [Psalm 13: An Instructed Lament]

Open your Bibles to one of the clearest laments in Scripture: Psalm 13. It's a short psalm with a poignant message, for in just six verses it makes the jump from “plea to praise,” as David struggles against divine abandonment.<sup>2</sup>

First, looking at verses 1-2, I'd like us to consider that, **when we feel abandoned by God, we must express our complaints to Him.**<sup>3</sup>

In other words, rest assured this morning, that it's OK for you to be exasperated and angry – and God would rather have you express these intense emotions to him directly, than tuck them away into an increasingly bitter heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 75.

<sup>3</sup> My explanation of the passage is primarily drawn from Ross, *Psalms: Volume 1*, 361-70.

The opening words of the psalm echo down through the ages: ***How long, O Lord?*** An exasperated cry if there ever was one! The psalmist openly expresses his intense frustration. He doesn't want mere information. Instead, he wants God to show up and start fixing things.

Instead, as the next question, ***Will you forget me forever?***, reveals, God has neglected to answer the psalmist's prayers for deliverance and aid.

So, for the second time, the psalmist cries out: **How long.**

***How long will you hide your face from me?***

For the Lord to "hide his face" is to withhold his favor, blessings, and protection.

For the third time, the psalmist cries out: **How long.**

***How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?***

For some time now, the psalmist had tried his hardest, externally, to escape his desperate situation. And, internally, he had tried to make some sense of all the evil which was happening to him. But he had been unsuccessful on both fronts, leading to intense grief.

For the fourth time, the psalmist cries out: **How long.**

***How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?***

Here we finally get a glimpse of what had been going wrong: David was being opposed by a literal, physical enemy – perhaps a powerful individual or group seeking to have him killed and take his throne.

Now, as far as I know, none of us have thrones, up for the taking by bloodthirsty assassins.

So, can we adopt David's lament if we lack the same enemy?

I think we can, for we do share a common enemy: DEATH.

Here our New Testament lesson's closing sentence can help us: ***"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."*** And we're still waiting for his final destruction, because he snatched one of our youngest from among us this past week.

In fact, Death is claiming individuals all around the world even as I speak. Lives – including many young lives – cut tragically short.

So yes, we can join David in raging against the last enemy, Death.

How long, O God, will you let the last enemy stick around and snatch our loved ones away?  
How long?

Having stated his heart-wrenching plea, the psalmist offers his petition in verses 3-4:

***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.***

Notice how direct and to the point David's prayer is. He doesn't beat around the bush or hedge his bets, and neither should we.

Are you angry and confused this morning, just like I am? Then, having expressed our emotions to God, let's go ahead and pray some direct prayers in the days ahead:

God, pay attention to our grief.  
God, stop Death in its tracks.  
God, give us joy again.

But, why? Why should God do this?

Some of the most fascinating parts of prayers in the Psalms are the motivations given for God to answer prayer. This is not crass bargaining, but the signs of a deep relationship between the pray-er and the pray-ee – mutual concern between David and God.

David isn't just asking God to answer his prayer because it sounds like a good idea. No! His life is on the line! "***light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.***"

And, as if that weren't bad enough, God's reputation is on the line! If David were to die, then his enemy and foes would claim the victory – the victory over David, his faith, and his God.

Friends, we can pray like this today. We can pray that God would stop Death in its tracks, not just because Death is unpleasant, but because Death is God's ultimate enemy!

The longer Death demonstrates apparent dominion over the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve, the longer doubts linger about whether or not God's story will have a happy ending.

The longer babies die in infancy, the harder it becomes for us to picture the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy – a coming day when children will not be born unto calamity, but rather unto prosperity. When infants will no longer live but a few days, but rather a length of days. When dying at one hundred years old will feel like a crying shame.

God, would you stop Death in its tracks, not just for our sake, but for your sake?! Let Your kingdom come! Let your will be done! For we know that Death will not reign in your coming kingdom.

That is our plea. And now it is time to make the turn to praise.

Verses 5-6 read:

***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 don't know if you caught it, but there is an unmistakable change in tone between verse 4 and verse 5 in this psalm. What happened?

Well, it is possible that God answered David's prayer for deliverance, after which David wrote the final section. It is also possible that David is here making a "vow of praise," in utmost confidence that the Lord will answer his prayer, although it technically had not yet taken place.

A third possibility, given the context of the psalm's use at the temple, is that this final section was meant to be read by the worshipper after something like an oracle or a promise of God's deliverance had been recited by a priest.

Friends, remember, I am just as angry and confused by the death of that baby boy as you are. But I would be failing you as your pastor if I neglected to remind you of the following:

***God hates Death more than we do.***

Let me repeat that, because it's so easy to forget when tragedies like this take place:

***God hates Death more than we do.***

How do we know this? Well, I don't think any of you would object to me saying that the grief of that baby boy's parents is currently deeper than my own for him. Why? Because they were directly involved and invested in his new life.

By analogy, the same is true with God. He hates Death more than any of us do, because he is directly involved and invested in the life of his creation. He is the Father of each and every one of the 108 people, on average, who die every single minute.<sup>4</sup>

That means that, in the time it takes me to say this sentence, over 10 people have died. People who were knit together in their mother's womb by the Almighty. He takes no pleasure in Death.

How do we know? Because he died to get rid of Death.

And no, we do not know why God has not yet removed Death's presence from the earth, from our church. We still have great reasons to cry out, in lament, "How long?!"

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<sup>4</sup> Source: CIA World Factbook, "FIELD LISTING: DEATH RATE," 2015 estimates.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2066.html>.

But we must not forget that Christians cannot consider the problem of evil from a sanitized distance. Why? Because our God did not do so, but rather he dove headlong into the muck and mire of our sin-stained and death-gripped existence, to set us free from Sin and Death. So, we must view the problem of evil from the perspective of Christ's Cross.

By the Cross and Empty Tomb, Death's ultimate victory has been snatched away and given to Jesus Christ. And we can therefore make the turn from lament to worship, from plea to praise, because Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

He will come again to wipe away every tear – the tears of the babies taken too soon, and the tears of the parents left to grieve their absence.

He will come again to completely and finally defeat our ancient foe – the last enemy will be utterly destroyed. Christ will have the full and final victory over Death.

And this, sisters and brothers, is the reason why we can express our anger to God about Death: Because he hates Death more than we do!

This, sisters and brothers, is the reason why we can pray boldly to God about Death: Because he has promised to defeat it in a way we never could.

For these reasons, if you really hate Death this morning, you should worship the God who hates Death even more. We may worship with tears, we may worship with clenched fists and heavy hearts, but we worship all the same, claiming the words of our psalm's last two verses:

**We** trust in God's steadfast love;  
Our hearts rejoice in God's past, present, and future salvation.  
We sing to the Lord,  
because he has dealt, is dealing, and will deal bountifully with us.

### **[Closing Benediction]**

And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in the **trust** and **worship** of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, **who has laid Death in its grave, and promises to raise us from ours;** and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among us and remain with us always.

Amen.

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