

# A COVID CHRISTMAS

A COVID Christmas \* Psalm 13  
December 13, 2020 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

In Matthew 4:16, Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:2 when he says - 2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. (Isa 9:2 NIV).

A few weeks ago, I read somebody who quoted Matthew and then said: "I think that this year we understand this better than ever before."

It feels a little like we've been walking in darkness, doesn't it? Nine months now, living, if not in the shadow of death, certainly in the shadow of COVID-19. It's been a long year.

And yet here we are now approaching Christmas time, the time when we celebrate that the light of the world came into the darkness to give us life and light.

And it got me thinking -

How do we acknowledge the difficulties of a COVID Christmas, while still celebrating the very real hope that it represents? How do we as followers of Jesus make sense of Christmas during a pandemic?

For some families, there will not be much around the tree because of lay-offs. Some families won't even gather – some for the first time ever. Some families will be struggling through Christmas, missing someone they lost and haven't really had time to grieve because of COVID restrictions. This will be a tough year for many.

And yet there is so much hope inherent in Christmas, isn't there? I got the sense that my neighbours put their Christmas lights up extra early this year, just to get a head start on lighting up the darkness. And of course, we have the birth of the Saviour to celebrate, which means that we have confidence that God will soon set things right.

So how do we hold those two things in tension as believers? How do we celebrate 'a COVID Christmas' – acknowledging its difficulties while celebrating its hope?

To answer that question, I want to make use of a lament psalm. There are 150 psalms in the Bible and about 1/3 of them are 'lament psalms.' And lament psalms all follow a pretty common pattern – there is an address (where you say 'God, I need to talk to you'), a lament or complaint ('God, here's what's wrong'), a request ('God, I want you to work in this way'), an expression of confidence ('God, I know you can do it because You've done it before') and an anticipation of hope ('God, I praise you because I know you'll respond'). They all more or less have the same five parts in common, so I want to use one psalm to show you how it works and then take that pattern and apply it to our experience now. We are going to learn about 'lament' through Psalm 13 and then apply its lessons to our COVID Christmas.

Psalm 13 is kind of a textbook lament psalm. It has all of the common features of a lament and they're pretty hard to miss. So verse 1 is the address; 1&2 is the lament; 3&4 is the request; 5 is the expression of confidence and 6 is the expression of hope. Let me show you what I mean.

Psalm 13, verse 1 starts in a dark place, doesn't it? How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? The psalmist is pretty clear that things are not going well and it seems as though he might even think that God has abandoned Him.

But here's the thing – who is he addressing this concern to? It's not Oprah. It's not John Tesh. It's not the bartender at the local watering hole. The psalmist is bringing his concern to God. And that's good. Even though he may feel all alone in this, he still has the wherewithal to realize that God is both capable and compassionate. Able and willing to do something about it. So he addresses his fears and disappoints to God.

And what does he tell God? Well, the true feelings of his heart – the lament proper you might say. He opens up his heart and says quite honestly – God, this is what's going on and I don't like it! Verses 1 & 2 - How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?  
2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

This is clearly a guy whose gotten knocked down, time and again. His enemies have been causing him trouble and he's dealing with the added burden of mental anguish, wondering 'why is this happening?' and 'why isn't God acting?' That's lament. Coming to God to say with the humblest and most honest of hearts – God, this is what's wrong.

And then you ask God to do something about it. The request. You can see it in verses 3&4 –

3 Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;  
4 my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall (Psa 13:3-4 NIV).

The psalmist is clearly in over his head and he says, 'God, deliver me. I can't do this but You can. So please, reach into this difficult situation and set things right.' That's the request.

But now here's where the psalm takes a turn and this is what makes it truly a lament in the biblical sense. The psalmist is brutally honest before God; he tells God like it is and lays out the utter discomfort of his situation, but then he turns his attention away from the situation, in order to fix his heart entirely on God. That's a biblical lament - not simply complaining about your circumstances, but instead acknowledging them and then expressing confidence in God's ability to handle them.

Verse 5 – BUT I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

"The world around me may be crumbling" the psalmist says. "But I, I will trust in Your unfailing love." He chooses to dwell not on the situation but on the loving God who is willing to DO something about His situation. My heart rejoices in your salvation – that's probably a reference to the Exodus – and if not, then certainly to the ways that God has saved Him before and so really, the psalmist is saying – 'You've saved me before; I know that you'll do it again and even if it's different from what I expected, I still know that your unfailing will never harm me but eternally prosper me' so I will trust in Your unfailing love.

And so reflecting on God's faithfulness in the past, the psalmist expresses His confidence in God now and then, verse 6, we get an expression of confidence in the future – that is, an expression of hope - 6 I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.

No matter what the circumstances are now, the psalmist can look back and recognize God's faithfulness and then look forward and know 'it won't always be like this. God will make things right.' And so the psalm, which began in a very dark place, ends with an expression of hope, with certainty that God will reach in and work for good in the psalmist's life. He will look back and say 'Praise God for intervening in my life!'

So that's psalm 13, that's a lament psalm. Now let's take that and apply it to our COVID Christmas.

What's first? The address, right. We go to God with the sorrows of our souls and ask Him to do something about it. We don't whine to our friends, we don't overburden our co-workers; we got to the sovereign God of the universe, the God who is great in compassion and abounding in steadfast love. We address our fears and frustrations to Him.

And then we tell Him what's on our hearts. We bring out lament to Him. We say – this is a real bummer. This sucks not being able to see our families in person. It's a real pain to have to wear masks around and get sanitizer in the cracks in your skin. And beyond that, COVID itself is scary! We know people who have died because of COVID; we have lost friends and relatives to it. This is not a great situation.

And so we put it all out there. I'd encourage you, be honest before the Lord; be open with Him. Don't let resentment fester but put it all out there in your prayer time and say – God this is so hard. You might instinctively think – you can't say that sort of thing to God; you can't be that open and unguarded – but look at the psalmist – How long o Lord, will you forget me forever? He is brutally upfront about it. And this always makes me think of Derek Kidner. On just this sort of thing, Kidner writes "The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to his understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate."<sup>iii</sup> And so go to Him and tell Him the honest truth about how you are feeling.

And then ask God to do something about it – this is the request part, right? Make a way for us to gather; protect our loved ones from the virus; let the vaccine roll out be smooth. Protect the weak and the vulnerable and the marginalized. Bring your requests to the Lord and invite Him to intervene in your life.

And then, turn your eyes from your circumstances to the God who can do something about it. If everything was as it should be, then Christmas would never have happened. But Jesus coming into the world means 'this is not how it should be.' COVID, racism, poverty, disunity – this is not the way God created the world to be. And so He came into the world to make things right. Look at the baby in the manger and realize that not only did Jesus enter His Creation to redeem it, He will come into your life to bring you through. Think about how God has worked in the past and let that give you confidence for the future.

I spoke with Nellie Palmers a week ago and we talked about Christmas when she was a kid in Holland; she recalled Christmases with nothing but potatoes, where they couldn't go to church because the Germans were stationed in the building; the men couldn't participate in the 'Christmas Eve' because then they'd be arrested for gathering with others. She said 'Look, God brought us through that. He'll bring us through this.' Let that confidence fill your heart.

And then look forward to a time when we will all be able to gather again. Where we can shake hands and hug and get within six feet of one another. That day is coming. And by the grace of God, it will be soon.

And you know what, God is doing some neat things through this. I think that our circumstances have caused us to question why we do certain things at Christmas. Not being able to just pop out whenever we want is giving us an opportunity to think about the consumer aspects of Christmas and it's giving us I think an opportunity to focus on the Christian part of Christmas. It's giving us opportunities to reach out and bless people through Friendship House and Why not and the Food Bank. This 'COVID Christmas' is not just darkness; it's a time to shine a light for the love of God. What's that saying? Don't complain about the darkness; instead, shine like a light.

How do we celebrate a COVID Christmas? Well, we open our hearts to God to acknowledge the hard parts and renew our confidence in God's unfailing love.

5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

6 I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.

#### BENEDICTION

2 Cor. 13:14 - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

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<sup>i</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Inter-Varsity Press), page 176.