

# FORMATIONS

## COMMENTARY BY CECIL SHERMAN

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January-April 2004

We hope you enjoy Cecil Sherman's comments each week. Our goal is to provide you, the *Formations* subscriber, with a variety of perspectives on the Scripture text for any given week. The Learner's Study Guide contains excellent commentary and structure to aid in adult faith formation. Cecil Sherman's commentary continues to widen our understanding by bringing his experience and insights to the Scriptures. His experience as a church leader provides him with a perspective on the Bible and congregational life that few others have. Dr. Sherman's wife, Dot, is experiencing a decline in health. A devoted husband, Cecil has needed to turn his full attention to her care, especially during the last several months. For this volume, Dr. Sherman wrote commentary for unit 3. Gracefully, Joe Marlow, Dan Bagby, and Jim Dant wrote the other units to complete the volume. We are grateful to each of them for their willingness to write on a short deadline. We are also happy to acknowledge that Dr. Sherman will write again next trimester.

A commentary on the Scripture texts for  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Cecil Sherman** has previously written adult Sunday school material for Smyth & Helwys. Presently, he serves as visiting professor of pastoral ministries at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. From 1992–1996, Cecil was coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He was pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, from 1985 to 1992. He was pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, from 1964 to 1984. Prior to these pastorates, he served in Georgia, New Jersey, and Texas.

Cecil is a graduate of Baylor University and is the recipient of the Baylor Alumni Association Distinguished Alumni Award for 1992. He graduated from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (B.D., Th.D.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (Master of Theology).

Cecil has been very active in church life and community service, and he has written extensively, publishing numerous articles and two books: *A Kingdom of Surprises: Parables in Luke's Gospel* and *Modern Myths* (sermons preached at First Baptist Church, Asheville, North Carolina). He has written Sunday school literature and other Christian educational resources for Baptists.

A native of Fort Worth, Texas, Cecil enjoys gardening and travel. He and his wife, Dorothy, are parents of an adult daughter.

January 4, 2004

# FOLLOWING GOD... IN STRUGGLE

*Psalm 13*

## Introduction

Life is not all fun. “Into each life some rain must fall” is not just an old love song; it is the truth. “Entitlement theology” is a part of our culture. Our songs, our entertainers, our movies, and our TV shows send the signal that all of us are entitled to be happy. If we have sorrow and sadness, then we are being treated unfairly. Built into “entitlement theology” is a God who not only loves, but is required by God’s own nature to treat us generously and gently and to spare us from difficult tests. Of course, the result of “entitlement theology” is disappointment. Sooner or later life is going to turn on us. Sometimes the suffering will continue endlessly. No longer is life beautiful and fun. Then life turns into an endurance contest. Two things are tested:

- Physical and financial resources—Can the family hold out?
- Faith—“Entitlement theology” raises faith questions. Either a more biblical theology will emerge or faith will die.

The struggle occurs on two fronts: Externally, there is real suffering; internally, faith is at risk. An illustration: A young man told me he had given up on God and church. I asked why. He said, “God let my father die when he was fifty-two years old. That wasn’t fair. I’m angry at God.” The idea that no one is entitled to a certain number of years of life never occurred to the young man. He bought into “entitlement theology.” God owed his father a certain number of years, and since God had not “come through,” the young man was excused from worship of a powerless, careless God who had not given his father a full share of life.

God gave Jesus a hard road to travel. God tested the apostles. God has often put saints in harm's way. This is what the Bible tells us, and it is confirmed in Christian history. We know these things with our heads; we have a hard time living them. Is this a new problem? How are we supposed to handle it? This session points us in the right direction; it is about "following God in struggle."

Fifty-six psalms lament God's absence or inaction. They petition God for relief. In some ways, everything has changed since the psalms were written: travel, communication, government, science. In other ways, nothing has changed: human nature, suffering, sickness, disappointment, limitation. Today's text points us toward healing and suggests helpful ways to struggle with life and keep faith. I need to read this text carefully. I suspect I'm not alone.

### **I. How Long Must I Suffer? 13:1-2.**

"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (Ps 13:1-2).

"How long" appears four times in two verses. It is as if the poet were saying, "I can stand anything for a brief time. It's not so much what is hurting me as how long it is hurting. Is there ever an end to my misery?" Suffering is one thing. What appears to be endless suffering is another. Life can dig in on us and core out our hope and faith until finally, even a godly person looks toward heaven and asks, "How long?"

Three things bothered the poet:

(1) It seemed God had gone away, abandoned him: "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (13:1). These questions raise a question. There are numerous places in the Bible where people lament that God has disappeared. Other places in the Bible (especially in the New Testament) tell us God is always near. I don't know a neat way to resolve this conflict. Jesus promised to hear our prayers and gave the Holy Spirit to lead and comfort us: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20). Yet there are dry seasons when God seems far away and prayers don't get beyond the ceiling. Worship has little meaning and faith is not a resource; it is a question mark. How long will God hide from me?

(2) “How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day long?” (13:2a). John Durham helped me with this verse. He said, “It is not necessary to emend the text of v. 2, as the RSV does, to achieve the reading ‘bear pain,’ which is probably foreign to the poet’s intention. The text literally means ‘raise questions in my inner being’ ” (*The Broadman Bible Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971], 193). “Raise questions in my inner being” makes sense to me. I don’t have trouble with theology; I can understand it. I have trouble when life punches holes in my theology. I don’t know which is harder—to suffer or to face up to the faith questions suffering raises. No one has resolved the Job question: If God is all-powerful AND God is good, then why do horrible things happen? Why doesn’t an all-powerful, good God do something? Life can make faith hard to hold on to. How long do I have to wrestle with unsettling questions that jangle my child’s faith?

(3) How long do I have to put up with mean people who delight at my discomfort? “How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (13:2b). This is treacherous material. William Taylor said, “Before a man can pray thus, he must be very sure of where he stands. The church unfortunately is not without those who persuade themselves that their position is right because it is theirs” (*The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 [New York: Abingdon Press, 1955], 74). What Jesus said about enemies needs to be put alongside this text (see Mt 5:43-48).

I have some sympathy for the poet. When I was pastor of a church, a few people so constantly opposed my vision for the church that I came to see them as enemies. I believed that their vision was a road to harm for the church, and I also believed that my vision was the way to health. I prayed those people would be frustrated and my vision would prevail. Could I have been wrong? Yes. But in this case, I wasn’t. Too many grown people believe a magic formula can be waved over every church dispute and “everyone will be happy.” That’s foolishness. For the good of the church, they needed to lose. This illustration is not about ego; it is truth set in the politics of congregational church governance.

## II. Help Me Soon, Lord! 13:3-4.

All through this psalm it seems the poet is looking at his watch: “How long must I suffer?” The man is counting the minutes. Now

we move to the second point and he is still staring at his watch: “Help me soon, Lord.” When people are hurting, time drags. The poetry that makes up the psalms was written over a long period of Israel’s history. There were bleak seasons in that history. The Philistine wars lasted more than 300 years—“Help me soon, Lord!” Some of Israel’s kings lived a long time and were hard on the people—“Help me soon, Lord!” The devastating siege of Jerusalem lasted eighteen months. Godly people in Jerusalem must have prayed, “Help me soon, Lord!” Captivity lasted for seventy years—a lifetime to those people. How many of them prayed, “Help me soon, Lord”?

The poet wanted help soon or two dreadful things would surely happen:

(1) I will die: “Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death” (13:3b). It is possible the person who wrote this piece was sick. The language suggests he was failing. Since we are human we have limits. We can stand but so much before we go down. Disease can be overcome, but sometimes it returns and eventually does us in. The poet prayed for relief before death.

(2) My enemies will gloat: “My enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken” (13:4). Ancient Israelites lived in a world where each nation had its own god (or gods). When a nation thrived and expanded, it was assumed that the god of that nation was more powerful than the gods of the nations subdued. Powerful gods lend their power to their subjects; weak gods cannot help their devotees. The poet’s death would be a reflection on God. Much of the Old Testament was a “god contest.” What Elijah did atop Mt. Carmel was a compression of the centuries-long contest between Yahweh God and the pagan deities that encircled Israel (see 1 Kgs 18:20-40).

The prayer for relief now could have been more personal. If that is so, we are back in treacherous stuff. I’m right; my enemy is wrong. I pray that God will intercede so that I can prevail over my enemy. I’ve thought those thoughts, but I’m never altogether comfortable with them. There’s always the possibility the other fellow may be right. Because of this possibility, I don’t like it when arguments among Christians use “God talk.” Such conversation makes it sound like one side is God’s side; if that be so, then what is the

other side? The psalmist didn't have these qualms. He assumed his enemies were God's enemies. It's not far from this attitude to arrogance.

### III. While I Hold On, I Will Remember, 13:5-6.

Something happened in the poet's mind between verses four and five. It was as if he said to himself, "I've got to hold on, not give up, because I remember":

- The nature of God. "I trusted in your steadfast love" (13:5a). The Bible doesn't speak to every situation. For instance, there is no specific word in the Bible on the spiritual condition of a baby (Ps 51:5 is not adequate base for a theology of depravity for the infant; no other teaching confirms it). Many Protestants reason that the child is innocent until "the age of accountability." This teaching rests on our understanding of "the nature of God." We reason that a good and gracious God would not hold accountable an infant who is not self-aware and who has not sinned by choice.

Generous confirmation of the "steadfast love" of God appears in the New Testament. So the poet says he will hold on because it is in the pattern of God to help hurting children. When I am hurting, I try to remember this idea.

- The history of Israel. "My heart shall rejoice in your salvation" (13:5b). Note the future tense. God's salvation has not yet come, but the poet remembers. In the past, God heard the cry of the children from Egypt (Ex 2:23-24) and moved to rescue them. Again and again, God acted to make things better. Since God has done that in the past, I will hold in present pain believing that God will "do it again." When life is hard, I try to remember the pattern of God.

- My personal experience. "I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me" (13:6). Reason with the author. Life is long. Most of life is good. The hard times are brief when compared to the good times. When life is hard, remember the good times. Unless I am a spoiled, pampered, me-first child, I have to remember all the years and years when we didn't call the undertaker, when accidents were spared us, when there was enough and more, when there have been joyful times. When life is hard, "count your blessings." It helps us get through the bad times and reminds us that bad times usually are not permanent conditions. The smile of God will come again. Take heart and hold on.