

Psalm 6
Psalm 6
Luke 1:57-80

“Learning to Lament”

December 11, 2022

Psalm 6 is part of a group of five Psalms (Psalms 3-7) that explore the theme of refuge.

Psalm 1 begins with the “blessed man” –
and then in Psalm 2 we see that the Messiah – the anointed King –
is the Son of God,
the one in whom we must take refuge if we wish to be blessed,
“blessed are all who take refuge in him!”

And then the next five Psalms (3-7) explore what it means to take refuge.
So this Advent we are looking at these songs of refuge!

Psalm 6 particularly teaches us the art of lamentation.

It is entitled:

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith.^[a] *A Psalm of David.*

“According to the Sheminith” could be translated, “according to the eighth”
(which is probably a musical term – perhaps even identical to our word “octave”).

The early Fathers recognized here the principle of the number eight.
After all, there are seven days in the week,
and so the eighth day is the first day of the new week.
Likewise, there are seven notes in the scale,
and so the eighth note is the first note of the next octave.

There are two Psalms that use this designation:

Psalm 6 and Psalm 12 – both of which are laments.

The octave – the eighth note – is particularly appropriate for a lament,
because the octave signals a new beginning –
and a lament recognizes that something is fundamentally wrong,
and so we *need* a new beginning!

Sing Psalm 6

Read Luke 1:57-80

Verse 56 notes that Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months.

This is after we are told that it was the “sixth month” with her who was called barren.
Which means that Mary stayed with Elizabeth until the birth of John.

That was common in those days –

as indeed it was common well into the 19th century! –
the womenfolk of the family would gather and remain for weeks
in order to care for a woman through childbirth.

But that also means that Mary was present that day when Zechariah's tongue was loosed!
Which may explain the opening line of his song!
"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us –
[and then his eyes turn to look at the woman
who was betrothed to a son of David]
in the house of his servant David..."

Zechariah was a priest – of the tribe of Levi.

The opening stanza of Zechariah's song has nothing to do with Levi –
but with the house of David.

He only speaks of his own in the second stanza –
"and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High."

The Song of Zechariah is very much the answer to Psalm 6.
Psalm 6 laments over my troubles –
my bones are troubled – my *soul* is troubled –
But you, O LORD – how long?!

Too often nowadays the church communicates the idea that what really matters is being "happy."
We have forgotten how to weep.

Don't get me wrong!
We do plenty of weeping!
But we have forgotten *how to weep*.

Psalm 6 helps us remember the art of lamentation –
and hopefully will also help us *practice* our laments!

We talked often about *complaints* – and the importance of complaints.
A complaint is where you recognize that something is wrong,
and so you bring a complaint to someone who can do something about it.
In that respect a complaint takes a legal form.
Here's the problem – here's what I want you to do –
now please do it!

A *lament* can be connected with a complaint.
Here in Ps 6, the language of lamentation and complaint are woven together.
But the lament does not need to include a complaint.

Psalm 6 teaches us how to lament – how to weep over our sin
and over the corruption that is in the world because of sin.

We start with the “art of lamentation” in verses 1-5.

1. The Art of Lamentation – Pleading with God (v1-5)

a. Is There Healing for Troubled Bones? “Be Gracious to Me, O LORD” (v1-3)

*6 O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath.*

I know what I deserve.

God is angry.

And he is angry for a good reason –

because I have sinned.

I deserve his rebuke.

This is an important place to start our lament.

We don’t start by saying, “I don’t deserve this!”

We don’t start by saying, “I’m a good person.”

We start by saying, “please, don’t deal with me according to what *I deserve*.”

Do not deal with me in anger.

Have you thought much about the wrath of God?

God is angry.

Why?

Why is God angry?

Because we have sinned.

But *why* is God angry because of our sin?

It’s because he loves us.

He’s not throwing a hissy fit.

He’s not upset because “we messed up his beautiful world”

and now he has to *come fix our mess!*

That’s not it at all!

God is angry because he loves us and he wants us to be with him!

The problem is that we don’t love him.

We don’t want to be with him.

We want to go our own way and create our own little kingdoms without him!

If God should rebuke us in his anger –

if he should discipline us in his wrath –

then he would give us exactly what we want!

You want you own little kingdom – all by yourself –
okay, you can have it.

Imagine that:

your own little kingdom – where everything happens the way *you want!*

Except – of course – there are no other people in that kingdom –
because they all get what *they* want too!

It has been rightly said that hell is the *best thing* that God can do for some people.

But David says – no, please don't discipline me in your wrath!

Psalms 6 never spells out the details of David's situation.

And that's why we can all sing Psalm 6!

Because whatever difficulty – whatever trial you face – Psalm 6 fits that situation!

It would be easy to locate times in David's life when he could have written Psalm 6.

After his adultery with Bathsheba – as he watched his infant son die.

Or after Absalom had driven him out of Jerusalem (as we saw with Psalm 3).

But the Psalms were not written so that we could analyze David's psychology.

The Psalms were written so that we could sing them with him!

I tend to refer to the Psalmist *as* David –

but the text doesn't say that he was the one who wrote it.

Rather, we should think of the "I" of the Psalm as David.

When you think about the Psalms of David,

the singular fits the person of the king –

and the plural fits the people of Israel.

And of course, all of that is because the Psalms point us to Jesus and the church.

Indeed, even our Lord Jesus Christ could say,

"rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath."

Our Lord Jesus never sinned –

but on the cross, the anger of God burned against him –

he bore the wrath of his Father.

And as he prepared to go to the cross, Jesus could truly say:

² *Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.*

Be gracious to me.

If you treated me as I deserved, I would be destroyed!
(And as Jesus went to the cross as a sin offering –
He also could say this!)

Please, be *gracious* to me, O LORD,
“for I am languishing.”

I am weak.

But “languishing” does not simply mean “weak.”
It means to become increasingly weak and feeble.

It’s getting worse.

Have you ever felt that?

It keeps getting worse.
Maybe because of your own sin –
or maybe because of things that are happening to you –
you just feel that malaise – that despair and depression –
nothing works.

It just keeps getting worse.

“Heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.”

In other words,
this is not a superficial problem.
Your bones are the underlying structure that holds you together.
If your malady has reached your bones,
then it has reached the core of who you are.
That’s why my *bones* are troubled,

But...

³ *My soul also is greatly troubled.*

My bones are troubled.
My inward parts are languishing.
But even more my soul is *greatly troubled*.

Those three little words, “You have cancer,”
are referring to a physical problem.
But my observation is that the emotional and spiritual struggles that follow
are every bit as powerful as the physical trial.

Indeed, the Psalmist abruptly turns to the LORD and asks:

But you, O LORD—how long?

The Psalmist avoids specifics, so that you can put the particulars of your life here.
What situation are you facing?

Who is God – in the midst of that situation?

And what has God said that he will do about it?

b. “Turn, O LORD...for the Sake of Your Steadfast Love” (v4-5)

In verse 4, the Psalmist pleads with God:

⁴ *Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.*

As we saw last week,
the Psalms teach us to pray in the imperative mood.

“Turn, O LORD, deliver my life – save me”
Now, first, I should point out that the word “life” in verse 4
is the same word translated “soul” in verse 3!

Verse 3 says “my soul” is greatly troubled
Verse 4 asks “deliver my soul.”

This is important – because David is saying
please save the very part of me that is most greatly troubled!

And think about how David says this:

How can God save me?

Turn.

God must turn.

I’m languishing here.

I’m dying.

There’s nothing I can do to change my circumstances and make everything okay!

In other words,

*if God continues on his current course,
then I’m going to die.*

And so we plead with God to *turn*.

Change direction!

Now, let me ask you something:

Why should God listen to you?

Why should the Creator of the universe pay attention to what you want?

You need to understand this.

If you think that God will listen to you because you are somebody special,
then you have a major ego problem!

There is one person whom the Father listens to because he is somebody special –
and that's Jesus!

Jesus is the one-and-only Son (the unique, only-begotten Son of the Father).

God listens to *us* because of who Jesus is.

He listens to us because *he has promised to hear those who pray in Jesus' name.*

“Save me for the sake of your steadfast love!”

This is that great Hebrew word, *hesed* – steadfast love or covenant faithfulness.

God will save us – not because we are so good or special –
but because *he has promised.*

Quite frankly, if I had to be good or special in order for God to save me,
I wouldn't have a chance!

But over and over again throughout the scriptures,

God says that he will be faithful to his promises –
not because Israel is so good and faithful,

but for his own sake – for the sake of his own reputation, you might say.

That's what David appeals to in verse 5:

⁵ *For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who will give you praise?*

If I die, what will happen to your promises?

What will happen to your steadfast love?

What is David talking about here?

He's talking about what happens if he – the Lord's anointed – dies.

“In death there is no remembrance of you.
In Sheol who will give you praise?”

We're so used to living on *this side* of the resurrection,
that we don't think about what it was like on the other side!

But just think about it –

what would have happened if Jesus had died *and stayed dead?!*

There would be no resurrection!

That's what David is getting at in verse 5.

In death there is no remembrance of God.

No one praises God in Sheol – in the grave –
in the realm where death prevails!

If we all die – and there is no resurrection –

then what will happen to God's *hesed*?

What will happen to God's steadfast love – his faithfulness to his promises?

In this way, you can see how Psalm 6 is very much a song of the burial of Jesus.

When Jesus goes down into the grave,

he is forsaken by his Father.

Yes, he says at the last,

“Into your hands, I commit my spirit,”

but that is the prayer of faith.

In death there is no remembrance of you;

in Sheol who will give you praise?

And in the Christian life –

there are days like this.

No, that's not quite right.

Day implies that there is light!

No, in the Christian life, there are *nights* like this.

Nights of darkness when we cannot see hope or joy or peace.

We long for *shalom* – for peace and well-being –

but all we see is darkness.

This is why Advent is so important in the Christian life.

We're not just intellectually thinking about a time before Jesus came!

We recognize that in the Christian life, there are moments and places

where this is where we live.

And that's why we must practice our laments!

2. The Practice of Lamentation – Flooding My Bed with Tears (v6-7)

⁶ *I am weary with my moaning;*

every night I flood my bed with tears;

I drench my couch with my weeping.

⁷ *My eye wastes away because of grief;*

it grows weak because of all my foes.

Lamenting *well* takes practice –
because a good lament never loses sight of who God is – or who I am before him!

I don't know whether you have ever spent a night moaning and weeping,
but the Psalmist uses extravagant language to make his point.

I once was reading a letter from the 1830s –
a letter to Virginia Shelby telling her that her husband was dead.

The letter was well-worn – making it a little hard to read,
so I looked more carefully at the paper.

It was tear-stained.

And not only that –

there were *layers* of tear stains.

One round of tears had dried – and then she opened the letter again –
and stained it with her tears *again* and *again*.

The grief of her husband's death stained not only that page,
but her whole life.

My eye wastes away because of grief.

Moaning, tears, and weeping is the *right thing to do* when dealing with grief!
It's true that God works all things together for good
for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.
But that doesn't change the fact that we suffer –
and we grieve – we weep and we wail and we moan!

Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus!

He *knew* that Lazarus would be raised in a few minutes!

But he wept!

Sorrow and grief and mourning

are the proper response when your bones are troubled –
when your soul is *greatly troubled*.

(Why did Jesus weep – when he knew that Lazarus would soon be raised?

Because he knew that raising Lazarus was not going to solve the problem!

Oh, everyone would be happy for a few days – a few years –

and then Lazarus will die again...

As Jesus said to Martha – Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die –

Do you believe this?!)

This is why death continues to provoke our grief.

After my mother died, there were a lot of tears –
and now 16 years later, I can still be reduced to tears by a poignant memory.

Turning your bed into a sea of tears is perfectly appropriate!
And we, as a church, should weep with those who weep.
We should enter into their sorrow and grief –
recognizing that when our fellow Christians suffer,
we, too, suffer with them.

Psalm 88 will leave us there.

But Psalm 6 does not.
Psalm 6 teaches us the full pattern of lamentation.
Because a full lament sees hope at the end:

3. The Fruit of Lamentation – My Enemies Shall Be Ashamed and Greatly Troubled (v8-10)

⁸ *Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.*
⁹ *The LORD has heard my plea;
the LORD accepts my prayer.*
¹⁰ *All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.*

This final section takes the language of the rest of the Psalm and ties it all together!
First, the LORD hears the sound of my weeping (from verses 6-7).

Then when God turns to me (v4) – then my enemies are turned back (v10).

My soul was greatly troubled (v3) –
but when God hears my plea (also v3),
then my enemies will be greatly troubled (v10).

Here in the final section of the Psalm,
David addresses the wicked in verse 8.
Get lost, you workers of evil! –
because the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.

God has accepted me – and my prayers.

And he has accepted me and my prayers
because he has accepted Jesus – and his prayers!

When you were justified in Christ,
God accepted you in him.

God forgave your sins and imputed to you the righteousness of Christ.

But think about the implications of that!

If God has accepted *you* in Christ,
then God has accepted your prayers, your good works –
everything that comes with you!

Our Confession of Faith says it this way:

“the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unprovable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.” (WCF 16.6)

When David says that the LORD accepts my prayer,
he's not claiming that his prayers have been perfect.
Rather, he trusts God's *hesed* – his steadfast love.

And this is where Zechariah begins his song in Luke 1.

“Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our father Abraham,
to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

God has heard our lamentation.

And he sent Jesus to do for us what we could not do for ourselves!

After all, as Psalm 6 makes clear,
lamentation is *not the final word*.

The reason why we lament and bewail our sin and misery
is first, because we recognize that things are not as they should be –
and second, because we long for the day when Jesus will make things as they should be!

“because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”