

O LORD – How Long?

Psalm 6

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

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

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

³ My soul also is greatly troubled.
But you, O LORD—how long?

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

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

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.

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.

Sometimes We Know It's Our Fault

Sometimes, when we're suffering, we know it really is our fault. And it's not just Jimmy Buffet who's reluctant to admit it. We'll blame others, curse our circumstances, act like the innocent victim and do whatever else before we're finally ready to admit, "Okay, I know. It's my fault."

In Psalms 3-7, David is being pursued by enemies. We know the situations in Psalm 3 and in Psalm 7, but we don't know it for the rest of these psalms. Some have speculated that they were all written during the time when David was fleeing from Absalom – that the title from Psalm 3 should be understood as giving us the setting for Psalms 4-6 as well. We did see last week that these 4 psalms, 3-6, do fit together following the pattern of

morning, evening, morning, evening. However, we don't know that they were all written at the same time under the same circumstances.

I'm inclined to believe they were not all written at the same time, because David's attitude toward his circumstances and toward his enemies does vary from psalm-to-psalm. In Psalm 4, David is preaching the Gospel to his enemies. In Psalm 5, he wants to see them fall into their own trap and be removed. In both of those psalms, he seems to be focused on his own innocence. In Psalm 4, he is proclaiming it to his enemies, while in Psalm 5, he is declaring it to God while he calls on the Lord for justice. The tone of Psalm 6 is very different. Here, David is crying out to God because he knows he has sinned and his troubles are his fault.

In my opinion, the most likely setting for Psalm 6 is when David is fleeing from Absalom, and it is a time when David realized his own responsibility for what happened. That's a key difference between the two times when David was fleeing for his life from violent enemies: When King Saul was pursuing him earlier in his life, David was truly innocent. He had done nothing to deserve the persecution of Saul. However, when Absalom rebels against David, it is partly David's fault due to his poor managing of his household and poor parenting of his children.

While it was wrong for Absalom to lead a rebellion against David, and for so many of the officials in Jerusalem to support Absalom, and so David could cry out for justice against his enemies, I think when he laid his head down to sleep at night, the overwhelming sense of guilt and shame over his failures as a father were too much for him. He knew he was partly reaping what he had sown, that his son's rebellion was due, in part, to his neglect and failure to act decisively as father and king in his own household.

1. **Desire: Grace and Mercy, vv. 1-3**

Whatever the situation, David is facing the reality that it is not just his enemies who are against him, but the hand of God is also against him because of his sin. This thought deeply distresses David:

*O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath.
Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is greatly troubled.
But you, O LORD—how long?*

In the Hebrew in verse 1, anger and wrath are placed in the first position for emphasis, so it's "In your anger, O LORD, rebuke me not, nor in Your wrath discipline me." Some Christians think that God is only angry and wrathful in the Old Testament, but listen to the words of Hebrews 10:26-31:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. – Hebrews 10:26-31, ESV

This is what has David in such deep distress, the idea that God would not just discipline him as a loving heavenly father, but that He might justly discipline David in His anger and wrath. Such discipline could rightly involve David being permanently removed from his throne and from life in this world.

It's vital for us to see that God would be perfectly just to do this to David. David deserves it. That's what weighs heavily on his heart and mind. And so he pleads to God for gracious healing – "healing" here probably being a metaphor for forgiveness.

David is so distressed that he says "*my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled.*" These are two different ways for David to refer to his inmost self. In Psalm 35, David uses this combination to speak of deep joy and relief –

*Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord,
exulting in his salvation.
All my bones shall say,
"O Lord, who is like you,
delivering the poor
from him who is too strong for him,
the poor and needy from him who robs him?"* – Psalm 35:9-10, ESV

So, David is deeply distressed. He's so distressed that at the end of verse 3, he can't even finish his thought. He cries, "*But you, O LORD—how long?*" Who knows what he was going to pray – "But you, O Lord, are good"? "But you, O Lord, are my helper"? Whatever it is, it goes unsaid, as David breaks the pattern of His prayer, leaves the line incomplete and simply says, in exasperation, "How Long?"

"How Long?" is an exasperated cry, but it is a cry of faith. The cry, "How long?" occurs 16 times in the psalms and is the deep and yet faithful anguished plea of God's people. Notice David doesn't ask, "Why me?"

There's a world of difference between crying "Why me?" and crying "How long?" -

- "Why me?" is self-centered and entitled. David could easily say, "Why NOT me?"
- "Why me?" says "I don't deserve this." "How Long?" says, "You, O Lord, are right and just. But please remember that I am dust and cannot bear your indignation forever. In justice, remember mercy."
- "Why Me?" calls into question the justice of God, but "How long?" simply pleads for the mercy of God.
- "Why me?" questions God's love, but "How long?" simply pleads for relief.

Let us learn, in our times of anguish, not to cry "Why?" – a question we are not equipped to have God answer for us – much less, "Why me?" – a question we dare not ask a holy God as sinful people. But let us plead, "How long?" A faithful cry for mercy.

2. **Despair: Fear of Death & Sleepless Weeping, vv. 4-7**

Just because David is making a faithful plea doesn't mean his distress is any less:

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

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

*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.*

After David catches his breath at the end of verse 3, he continues to cry out to God, pleading for God to turn to him and to deliver him and save him. He fears that God is against him, and so he pleads for God to turn toward him – that is, to look upon him with favor. He knows his only hope for deliverance and salvation is from the LORD, so he asks God to deliver and save. But if he knows he is guilty, what could be his basis for asking God to turn toward him to deliver and save him?

Look at verse 4 – “save me for the sake of Your steadfast love” – *Hesed!* Again, David has no other hope for salvation and deliverance but in the Lord, and he has no basis on which to approach God for the salvation and deliverance he needs but in God’s own *hesed* – His covenant faithful love, His undeserved and yet firmly committed lovingkindness! God’s *hesed* is what sent Jesus to the cross for us, and Jesus’ death on the cross is what secured God’s *hesed* for His people forever!

David then appeals to God on the basis of the fact that, if he’s dead, he won’t be able to praise God anymore. David is not saying here that there’s no life after death. He’s appealing to God on he basis that, if he’s allowed to live and continue to reign as king, he can continue to lead God’s people in processions of praise to God and bring God greater glory here in earth than if he were gone from this life to the afterlife. In other words, David is concerned for the honor of God’s name in the world, which shows that his heart is in the right place with God.

David then concludes his appeal to God for deliverance by emphasizing his deep distress. A couple of weeks ago, we saw that David concluded Psalm 4 by praying

*“In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

But here in Psalm 6, in the depth of his distress, David is not able to lie down and sleep, he is only able to lie down and weep:

*every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.*

David’s language is powerful. He says he makes his bed swim or float with his tears. Now while this was obviously not literally true, it was a powerful way of describing his anguish.

When we’re in deep distress and our hearts are troubled with anxiety, guilt, and shame, we may be able to keep ourselves busy enough during the day to just keep going, staying occupied and not thinking about our troubles. But when we lay down in bed, the thoughts and turmoil come on strong, don’t they? David’s crying so much he can’t sleep or see.

And yet, even in his deep distress, he is crying to the Lord. His tears are directed toward God. In Psalm 56, David says:

*You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book? (v. 8, ESV)*

3. Declaration: The Lord & Our Enemies, vv. 8-10

As deep as David's distress is on verses 6-7, his attitude and outlook turn very suddenly in verses 8-10. This turn is so dramatic that some critical scholars have said that verses 8-10 come from a different psalm originally and were attached to the end of David's lament to give it a more hopeful conclusion. I don't think that's true, and if we're wondering why David has such a dramatic turn of perspective, he tells us himself. In fact, he says it twice, so we don't miss it:

*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.*

"The Lord has heard" – Remember the opening plea from both Psalm 4 and Psalm 5?

*Be gracious to me and hear my prayer! – Psalm 4:1
Give ear to my words, O Lord;
consider my groaning.
Give attention to the sound of my cry, - Psalm 5:1-2a*

Well, as Psalms 4 & 5 open with a plea for God to hear, Psalm 6 ends with the joyful and victorious conclusion that God has heard.

Because David knows God has heard his plea and accepted his prayer, he is able to respond with bold confidence to his enemies: "*Depart from me, all you workers of evil.*" The language of verse 8 is echoed by Jesus in Matthew 7:23, when He judges those who claimed to be His own but were not: "*And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*" This language from Jesus tells us that David's words in Psalm 6:8 are spoken as the anointed king and judge of Israel. This is a royal, judicial pronouncement, not a personal, vindictive statement.

David is able to conclude Psalm 6 with another royal declaration:

*All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.*

How does this apply to us? Well, we have enemies, right? And they surround us and attack us, don't they? What do we need? We need God to hear our plea for deliverance and salvation. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's definitive answer that He has heard the plea of His people and has defeated our enemies:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

– Colossians 2:13-15, ESV

Whether It's Our Fault or Not, Our Hope is the Same

Life brings many reasons for God's people to weep in deep distress but no reasons for us to utterly despair. The causes of our distress may vary greatly:

We may be struggling because we, like David, have rebellious children who are not following the Lord. (Hopefully, none of them are seeking to kill us.)

We may be feeling the deep weight of guilt over sin.

We may be struggling financially and wondering where we will get the resources to pay our bills.

We may be dealing with stress at work that we're bringing home and taking out of our families.

We may be dealing with the intense busy-ness of life, feeling unable to keep up with the expectations people place on us – or that we place on ourselves.

We may be suffering temptation or the guilt of having given in to temptation.

We may be having strain in our marriage relationship.

We may be feeling dry spiritually and distant from God.

Whatever our distress or its source, the answer from God in the psalms is clear: Seek Him, Cry out to Him. Pour out your hearts in faith before Him.

Now, this isn't the only thing you do, of course. God also gives us commands to obey, which may vary depending on our situation:

- We may need to be reconciled to someone.
- We may need to get medical help.
- We may need professional counseling.
- We may need to forgive someone or ask someone for forgiveness.
- We may need to get on a budget and manage our spending better.
- We may need to turn off the screens and stop listening to the world so much.

- We may need to exercise and get our stress out at the gym.

These practical things are necessary and proper but not sufficient in and of themselves. The Bible doesn't tell us to "Let go and let God," in some passive, irresponsible way. The answer to our problems is not a simplistic, "Well, you just don't have enough faith."

But the Bible does tell us to seek the Lord while He may be found, to cry out to Him, to pour out our hearts before Him. For we need Him to enable our obedience and to bless our efforts to do what we need to do. And we need Him to hear us and heal us in the deepest way, in a way that no human being or human system of help could ever help or heal. Human help is vain unless the Lord is in it. And the deepest needs of our souls are beyond the touch of human help. So, whatever our problem – whether its our fault or not – our answer, our hope must be in the LORD and in His steadfast love!