

The trajectory of pain and confrontation that began in Psalm 3 continues in Psalm 6. The three day sequence of morning, evening, and morning prayers in Psalms 3-5 is climaxed in Psalm 6 by an intensely personal plea for deliverance from the threat of imminent death and God's wrath. Psalm 7 brings this long dark night of the soul to a cathartic and redemptive end. The psalmist makes his final appeal to God Most High, the Lord of righteousness, for vindication and deliverance on grounds of his innocence and integrity. This five psalm unit ends on a strong note of thanksgiving and praise: "I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High" (Ps 7:17).

The 2 Samuel narrative provides the historical landscape for David's cartography of the soul. The psalms reveal a soulful self in sync with a storied account of sin and judgment, betrayal and treachery, violence and hatred. This paralleling of history and spirituality is explicit enough for us to identify the occasion in David's life but implicit enough for us to commend these powerful psalms to our own circumstances and experiences. The psalms are rooted not only in a particular place and time but in the shared personal experience of our fallen human condition and God's redemptive provision.

After two introductory psalms Jesus' Prayer Book launches into David's Passion Narrative. It is not difficult to see how Jesus identified with these prayers in the days leading up to the cross. We imagine his troubled soul (Jn 12:27) taking comfort in David's dependence on God's deliverance. These are the psalms that he likely prayed in the morning as he faced another day of building tension and these are the psalms he prayed at night before drifting off to sleep. David gave him the words that matched his heart: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). When Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley and climbed the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane, he remembered David as he fled Jerusalem, his head covered, walking barefoot, weeping as he went (2 Sam 15:30). These five psalms born out of David's passion foreshadow Jesus' Gethsemane psalms. We pray these psalms today when the world, the flesh, and the devil seek to overwhelm us; when the world denies "that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant(s) for himself" (Ps 4:3); and when arrogant, bloodthirsty, deceitful, and deceptive enemies threaten to destroy the righteous.

Our tendency is to shy away from David's intensity. We are inclined to think that these prayers belong to an ancient era that is foreign to our modern world. Many view "Christianity" as a relief from this overly serious experience of God and the world. Jesus has come, or so they say, to bolster our self-esteem, improve our marriages, and give us our best life now. We are tempted to think of religion in the same way we think of sports and entertainment, as necessary mood changers. We go to church the same way we go to the movies, to lift our spirits, escape our troubles, and embrace a positive attitude. We find it hard to live without distractions. The impulse is strong to live in denial of sin and death. We are addicted to habits that divert our attention away from the harsh realities of living in a fallen and broken world. David's psalms make that escape impossible. He brings us face to face with our need for God in a very troubled world, an all too-real-world of malignancy, divorce, violence, deceit, abuse, manipulation,

dishonesty, and the list goes on.

### *Deep Anguish*

*Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;  
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.  
My soul is in deep anguish.  
How long, Lord, how long?*

Psalm 6:1-3

Matthew Henry wrote, “This psalm is like the book of Job.”<sup>1</sup> It is true, the broad outlines of Job’s experience are captured in this ten verse psalm. Psalm 6 is a prayer to be experienced now so we remember to pray it when life turns ugly. For it is only a matter of time before we need to pray this prayer. If David a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14) and God’s anointed king (2 Sam 7:5-16) suffered in this way, so can we! David is walking down a road that we all will travel.

Until now David’s complaint has been mainly against his many foes (Ps 3:1). Absalom’s treachery has played a significant role in David’s distress, but many others have also turned on the king, ranging from those who want him dead to those who question his ability to lead. These enemies reappear explicitly toward the end of this psalm, but most of Psalm 6 dwells on the extreme chastening David is experiencing from God. What is noteworthy is that David attributes his severe trial to the corrective and disciplinary actions of God. He definitely feels like he is the subject of God’s angry rebuke and wrathful discipline.

This adds a crucial dimension to this sequence of psalms that David acknowledged and wrestled with. He was the victim of Absalom’s betrayal, Ahithophel’s deception, Shimei’s slander, and all those who joined forces against the Lord’s anointed king. But David knew that the root problem was his own sin. Nathan delivered God’s judgment against him in words that must have reverberated in David’s mind: “Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take away your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this in broad daylight before all Israel” (2 Sam 12:12). His enemies were thoroughly evil and deserved God’s judgment. They would face the consequences for their actions, but the Lord used their evil to rebuke and discipline David. Although David had experienced repentance and forgiveness (Ps 51), the consequences of his actions were being played out in his family and kingdom.

When Jesus prayed this psalm it was not the burden of his own sin that he wrestled with but the burden of our sin. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds are we healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:4-6).

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, Psalms, 38.

Psalm 6 challenges our denial of sin. The apostle John confronted this problem head on when he wrote, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). The author of Hebrews took up this matter as well. He wrote, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” He goes on to make the case for the Lord’s corrective and disciplinary actions. Our heavenly Father disciplines us in order to train us in holiness. God uses the hardships and disappointments of life “for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb 12:10). The author asks, “Have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as *his* children?” He quotes from Proverbs, “My dear child, don’t shrug off God’s discipline, but don’t be crushed by it either. It’s the child he loves that he disciplines; the child he embraces, he also corrects.” The pastor quotes two verses from the Septuagint version of Proverbs three (Prov 3:11-12), but he probably had the entire chapter in mind. The spiritual struggle encountered by Christ’s followers is not intended to shake their faith but to strengthen their faith. In the providence of God, suffering serves as a discipline fostering spiritual maturity and holiness. The pastor distinguishes between the Stoic ideal of self-sufficiency and the true objective of deeper dependence upon God. “God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s *training*, the normal experience of children” (Heb 12:5-7, MSG).

The Lord used Nathan to confront David over his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. But it appears the Lord used Absalom to confront David over his hardheartedness toward his son. After Absalom killed his half brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar he fled from Jerusalem and went into exile. After three years passed, David relented and allowed Absalom to return to Jerusalem, but the king refused to see his son. “He must not see my face,” he told Joab. Another two years passed and by now Absalom has grown bitter at his father’s abandonment and denial of mercy. Undoubtedly this building resentment played a part in triggering his attempted coup – an inexcusable act of treason but understandable given the mounting tensions between father and son. Eugene Peterson calls David’s refusal to forgive Absalom “the third monumental sin of David’s life.” He writes, “The adultery with Bathsheba was the affair of the passionate moment. The murder of Uriah was a royal reflex to avoid detection. But the rejection of Absalom was a steady, determined refusal to share with his son what God had so abundantly shared with him. Day by day he hardened in this denial of love.”<sup>2</sup>

David makes no explicit confession of sin in this psalm, but his passionate plea for mercy acknowledges God’s just rebuke and redemptive discipline. He knows he deserves the Lord’s chastening, but now he desires mercy if he is going to survive. He can’t hold on much longer. His bones are in agony and his soul is in deep anguish. There is nothing left to hurt. He is in pain within and without, from his head to his heart, from the soles of his feet to the depths of his soul. The acute bone-pain and heartache of his desperate situation is unrelenting. All he can do is cry out, “How long, Lord, how long?”

David’s heart-wrenching cry for mercy may correspond to his lonely agony over Absalom’s brutal murder. His troops are eager to celebrate the death of a traitor, but David is in anguish. He grieves the loss of his son. David is like our heavenly Father, “not wanting anyone to perish, but

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over the Wall*, 197.

everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). “The king was shaken,” the narrator writes. “He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, David said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33).

### *Loyal Love*

*Turn, Lord, and deliver me;  
save me because of your unfailing love.  
Among the dead no one proclaims your name.  
Who praises you from the grave?  
I am worn out from groaning.  
All night long I flood my bed with weeping  
and drench my couch with tears.  
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;  
they fail because of all my foes.*

Psalm 6:4-7

David’s only grounds for appeal is Yahweh’s unfailing loyal love. Mercy over merit makes deliverance possible. God’s grace is the only sufficient means for salvation. David knows that every self-justifying attempt is bound to fail. “For it is by grace are you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8), was just as true then as it is today. The Gospel of love pervades both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Nevertheless, David offers an incentive that is meant to underscore his last ditch effort to get God’s attention more than it is meant to impress God with a benefit. He says in effect, “I’m no good to you dead, am I? I can’t sing in your choir if I’m buried in some tomb!” (Ps 6:5).

David shows us how to confront the denial of death by stating its stark possibility with clarity. Death looms large in the Samuel narrative. Uriah is murdered. David’s newborn son dies. Amon is killed by his brother Absalom and Joab murders Absalom. Ahithophel commits suicide. All of this death pervades the story. Now, David faces the real possibility of his life ending abruptly in tragedy not testimony. It is not surprising that David pleads for more time to proclaim God’s name. Instead of thinking about his own name and legacy, he is intent on praising God. It did not occur to him to do what his son Absalom did. Absalom erected a tower in the King’s Valley as a monument to himself and called it Absalom’s Monument. Since he had no son to carry on the memory of his name, he wanted people to remember him with his monument (2 Samuel 18:18). A line from William Faulkner may help to clarify, “A monument only says, ‘At least I got this far,’ while a footprint says, ‘This is where I was when I moved again.’”<sup>3</sup> David was intent on leaving a testimony of faithfulness; Absalom was afraid he would be forgotten.

David gives vivid description to his weeping: “All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow. . .” (Ps 6:6-7). For seven days and nights David pleaded with God to spar his newborn son. He fasted and spent the nights lying in

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Holmes, *Annotations to William Faulkner’s Hamlet*, Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 1996, 16.

sackcloth on the ground crying out to God (2 Sam 12:15-17). When Amnon was murdered by Absalom, King David “wept bitterly” and “mourned many days for his son” (2 Sam 13:36-37). And when David fled Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley, and continued up the Mount of Olives, he was “weeping as he went” (2 Sam 15:30). Once again this sequence of psalms and David’s experience reminds us of the Lord Jesus when he wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and when he wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and when in Gethsemane he was “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” and wept so hard “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Matt 26:38; Luke 22:44). This psalm is a reminder to us that it is impossible to follow Christ without tears. We weep because we live in a fallen and broken world. We weep because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We weep because of our human frailty. We weep because we take up a cross and follow Jesus. We weep because our Lord and Savior wept. We weep because the Lord hears our weeping.

### *Defiance*

*Away from me, all you who do evil,  
for the Lord has heard my weeping.  
The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;  
the Lord accepts my prayer.  
All my enemies will be overwhelmed  
with shame and anguish;  
they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.*

Psalm 6:8-10

The psalmist suddenly shifts from a visceral sense of defeat to a vigorous dismissal of his enemies. One moment he is weeping and the next moment he is boldly warning the wicked, “Get out of here.” He sends the evil opposition packing. He switches from despair to defiance in a blink of the eye. The sudden change comes not because his situation has changed but because the Lord has heard his cry for mercy. He repeats this game-changing assertion three times for emphasis. Knowing that the Lord has heard him changes everything. It is as if he suddenly realized in the middle of his lament that the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away. They are on a path that leads to destruction (Ps 1:5-6). John Calvin insisted that we take notice of David’s confidence and learn from him: “From this, we are taught that there is nothing in the whole world, whatever it may be, and whatever opposition it may make to us, which we may not despise, if we are fully persuaded of our being beloved by God. . . .”<sup>4</sup> “This sudden access of confidence,” writes Derek Kidner, “is the most telling evidence of an answering touch from God.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus alluded to this psalm in the Sermon on the Mount when he described the outwardly religious types who seemingly performed well but did not do the will of his Father in heaven. “I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. *Away from me, you evildoers!*’” (Matt 7:23). By echoing Psalm 6 in this way Jesus demonstrated that the eschatological judgment of the gospel is in harmony with the eschatological expectation of the psalmist. The redemptive trajectory is

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *The Psalms*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Kidner, *The Psalms*, 62.

tracking along the same path. Jesus' use of Psalm 6 confirms and validates the theology of the psalmist and further opens up the practical pastoral and the theological use of the psalms for his followers today. Jesus used this psalm twice: first to describe his path to the cross (John 12:27), and second to affirm the eschatological judgment for those who refuse to come to him (Matt 7:23).

David ends the psalm on such a strong note of confidence that we may forget how the psalm begins, "Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath." But it is important that we keep in mind that the arc of redemptive resilience begins with our own sense of culpability and sinfulness even when the opposition against us may be blatantly evil. David's defense of Shimei is significant: "Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today" (2 Sam 16:11-12). Like the psalmist we pray, "See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139:24).