



We're continuing our study today in the book of Psalms. We've worked our way through the first five psalms and today we come to Psalm 6. Psalm 6 is another prayer attributed to King David. One of the things I hope we're learning together in this study is how to really pray. Learning to pray is kind of like learning language. Babies come into the world with strong desires and needs. They're very capable of expressing them in grunts, gurgles, squeals and sobs, but you can't really call that language. It would be tragic if at the age of 18 that was still the way they communicated. It would be even worse if at age 18 they were still asking for the things they wanted when they were four months old! But what happens as a child grows? They learn language. That happens as they take in and listen to the sounds their parents make and mimic them. Eventually, they attach meaning to words and weave words together into sentences. As they learn language, their perspective on the world changes. Language shapes us, and we use language to shape others.

In some ways, learning to pray is like that. It begins with us being able to hear God and listen to God. God speaks to us through his word, but then we have the opportunity to speak back to God and that's called prayer. Our prayers are shaped by the Word of God. Bonhoeffer once said, "The richness of the word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart." So when we pray the psalms, it's like we're learning God's language; we're learning to pray according to God's word to us. Like no other book of the Bible, the psalms are both God's word to us and our word to God. Even Jesus prayed the psalms. Several times as Jesus hung on the cross he prayed the psalms. "*My God, my God...*" is a quote from Psalm 22:1. "*Father, into your hands...*" is from Psalm 31:5.

Let's face it, when you open the Psalms and start trying to pray them you discover some of them are hard to pray. Again, it's like we're learning a new language. There are psalms that express things I can't relate to. In Psalm 26:1 David prays, "*Vindicate me, Lord, for I have led a blameless life...*" I have a hard time praying that. I haven't led a blameless life! Or how about when he prays his enemies would be "*blotted out of the book of life*" (Ps. 69:28). I have prayed **that** one a few times!

But most of us like to pick and choose our psalms. We read the psalms like we do an old high school yearbook, thumbing through it and looking only for the pictures of ourselves and our friends. But if we stick with the psalms, praying not only the ones

we relate to but the ones we don't relate to, something happens to us. The psalms change and enlarge our hearts, conforming them more and more into alignment with God's character and purpose. It's like the psalms are training wheels on our prayer bike, the only difference being we don't grow out of them. One writer said, "When I feel I cannot make headway in devotion, I open the Psalms and push in my canoe, and let myself be carried along in the steam of devotion which flows through the whole book. The current always sets towards God, and in most places is strong and deep."

Now that's a helpful perspective to have as we come to Psalm 6. Psalm 6 is another lament psalm and it's the most intense of all the lament psalms we've looked at. It's a psalm where David expresses some of the deepest sorrow we can imagine. It's like he has a broken heart and has begun to cry and he just can't stop.

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?

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 my 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.

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.

In the screen adaptation of the classic children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are* we follow the adventures of Max, an imaginative child who feels neglected by his mother and older sister. He escapes into a fantasy world of hairy, monstrous creatures.

Once these “wild things” threaten to devour him, Max pretends to possess magical powers and convinces the monsters to make him their king. The creatures come to believe Max has been sent to abolish suffering in their world and to establish permanent peace and happiness. So they ask him: “Will you keep out all the sadness?” Still playacting his role as king and miracle worker, Max declares: “I have a sadness shield that keeps out all the sadness, and it’s big enough for all of us.”

As we read this Psalm, it’s clear David had no such shield to chase away all his grief and sorrow. Let’s look closer at the condition he was in.

The Condition He Was In

Throughout this psalm he uses a variety of expressions to describe himself as one in immense pain. In verse 2 he says, “*I am faint.*” That’s a word that was used of plants withering from a lack of water. In the same verse he says, “*My bones are in agony.*” There’s a physical dimension to his pain. For that reason, it’s very possible at least a part of his problem is he’s suffering from some kind of lingering illness. But it’s not just physical. In verse 3 he says, “*My soul is in deep anguish.*” That describes a kind of shaking in dismay; a trembling fear. In verse 6 he says, “*I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.*” He’s using hyperbole here. He’s not really swimming in his own tears, but it feels that way. He’s used up a couple of boxes of Kleenex and has nothing left to dry his eyes. So he says in verse 7, “*My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of my foes.*” His eyes are bloodshot and puffy from a constant flow of tears.

Notice he mentions his foes here—his enemies. It’s very possible these foes were people around him who took a kind of sadistic delight in David’s illness. He might even be talking about people he once counted on as friends. It’s very much like what we see in the book of Job. Job’s body was afflicted with boils from head to toe. He’d lost his sheep and camels. Worst of all, all his children had been killed in a tornado. The man is completely undone; the wheels have come off. His wife tells him to curse God and die. His so-called “friends” show up at his doorstep and say, “Gee, we really feel bad for you, Job. We thought you were a good guy but it’s clear from all this tragedy that you’ve sinned against God. Stuff like this doesn’t happen to God-fearing people, Job. So search your heart and confess your sin.” That’s what David was experiencing.

There are a few things for us to learn from this. First, it’s just a reminder we live in a fallen world. This world is bent, flawed, tainted, broken and maimed. We know one day God will straighten out this bent world. We know Jesus is alive and at work in this world, even today. But that work isn’t finished, and meanwhile no one escapes the brokenness. So from time to time we should expect to find ourselves in a condition similar

to David’s—completely undone. We live in a world where we get sick, where loved ones die, where marriages crumble, where people let us down and we let others down, where children get off track, where hurricanes and earthquakes kill people, where corrupt people in power get richer and the poor get poorer, and where two-year-olds get shot by random gunfire. On top of all that, we have our own sin to deal with.

One of the things we should ask ourselves here is, Are we really willing to face and admit our deep pain? Sometimes Christians are the worst at this. We put a smile on our face and “praise God” on our lips and go on our merry way. This is nothing new. About 400 years ago Blaise Pascal wrote, “As men are not able to fight against death, misery and ignorance, they have taken it into their heads, in order to be happy, not to think of them at all.” But sometimes the sheer force of the harsh realities we have to face are such that we can’t help but think of them and they do us in. I’m not talking about wallowing in self pity; I’m talking about being real about your pain.

I wonder if we have a church where people can be real about their pain, about their struggle, about their sin, about their doubt? Are we real with God? Are we real with one another? Do we have to come into this room and wipe on a smiley face while inside we’re dying? I like it when people ask the second question. You know what I mean:

“How you doing?”

You usually get the standard answer, “I’m doing fine, thanks. You?”

“No, how are you doing, really?”

Is this a place where people get asked the second question? How are you doing, really? Is this a place where you can say how you’re really doing without being given pat answers, quick solutions and little Bible verses?

Joe Bayly was an author who lost two sons. After his second son died, he said, “I was sitting torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I know were true, I was unmoved, except to wish he went away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn’t ask any leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.” He needed someone to be with him, and in times like these so do we.

The Requests He Made

This was the condition David was in. Look next at the requests he made, because remember, this is a prayer. David felt free to pour his heart out to God and come to him with some requests.

He starts out in verse 1 and asks, “*Lord, don’t rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.*” It’s this request that’s

caused this psalm to be listed as one of seven penitential psalms along with Psalms 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143. Perhaps David sees his suffering as a kind of discipline from the hand of God. He doesn't say don't discipline me at all, but rather don't discipline me in your wrath. Any father or mother knows the difference, right? How many times do we discipline our children in wrath? The fact is, God disciplines all of his children, but not in wrath. His discipline arises out of his love and his desire to see us grow and mature into whole people. As a child of God, whatever suffering you're experiencing, it isn't retributive, it's corrective. It's from the hand of a loving Father who wants to make you more into the image of Jesus.

Then starting in verse 2 he asks for something that goes with that, ***"Have mercy on me, Lord."*** He's not asking God to give him what he deserves. He doesn't come to God like we go to an ATM machine, knowing we've got money to draw from. He's bankrupt. He comes to God for mercy. He knows he's both needy and undeserving, but our God is a God of mercy. God said through Isaiah, ***"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"*** (Isaiah 49:15).

And it's because he knows God is merciful and compassionate he can ask again in the last part of verse 2, ***"Heal me, Lord."*** Then he adds in verse 4, ***"Turn, Lord and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love."*** When he asks for the Lord to turn it's like he asks him to return, as if God had deserted him. When he asks for God to deliver him it's like he's drowning and begs God to snatch him out of the water and save him. These are requests punctuated by heaving sobs.

But he manages to offer God two reasons for his requests. First, he says, ***"Save me because of your unfailing love."*** God's unfailing love is his *hesed*. *Hesed* means God's loyal, faithful committed love for his covenant people. He's reminding God of his covenant promises. That's why in the midst of these requests repeatedly he addresses God as LORD. Did you notice that? ***"LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger... Have mercy on me, LORD... Heal me, LORD... How long, LORD... Turn, LORD..."*** When you see LORD in capital letters that means he's addressing God as Yahweh. That's the covenant name God gave to Moses at the burning bush. It's a reminder not only that he's the great I AM but that we're his people, the sheep of his pasture. He'll never leave us nor forsake us. When you come to God, remind him of that.

But then he gives a second reason. He says, ***"Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave?"*** I'll bet you never thought of that as a reason for God to save you from death! Scholars tell us that the Jewish people didn't have a well developed idea of heaven until later. So David has this idea that when you're in the grave (Sheol), you're in a kind of state of limbo where you lack the richness of a relationship with God. But

what's important about this is that the one thing David seemed to live for was to praise and proclaim God's name, and he's afraid that if he dies he won't get to do that anymore. It's like, "Lord, if you let me die on this bed I'll never get to do that again." That's the greatest loss he could think of. He doesn't say, "Lord, if I die I'll never get to walk my daughter down the aisle." Or, "Lord, if I die I'll never get to see my grandchildren." A long time ago I was a youth pastor and whenever we would talk about death or even about Jesus coming back they'd be like, "I hope that doesn't happen soon. I want to get married first. I want to have sex first." But the greatest loss David can think of is not being able to praise God's name.

You know, the most important thing about your prayer life is how you think of God. Do you think of God as one who loves you with an unfailing love? Do you think of God as one whose name you love to praise? This goes back to something we see often in the psalms and that's the idea that we ask what we ask because of his name or for his name's sake. Psalm 23:3: ***"He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."*** Psalm 25:11: ***"For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great."*** Psalm 31:3: ***"For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me."*** Psalm 79:9: ***"Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!"*** I could go on and on. The point is the more you can understand, appreciate, love and glory in the name, reputation and the person of God, the more power and purpose you'll have in your prayer life.

The Solution He Found

We've seen the condition he was in, the requests he made. Finally, we come to the solution he found. You don't have to be a bible scholar to see that something happened to David right around verse 8. It's like the tears have stopped and he says, ***"Away from me all you who do evil..."*** Now he's not talking to God, he's talking to his enemies. Something has given him a note of clarity and confidence. He then says, ***"...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..."*** This is what's changed him. He's come to an assurance God has seen his weeping and heard his prayers and will answer them.

But how did he come to this assurance? There's really nothing in this psalm to tell how David came to that assurance. Some say David went to the place of public prayer and there met a priest or a prophet who gave him a word from the Lord. During his years of rebellion, St. Augustine's devout mother, Monica, went to a bishop and begged him to talk to her son and try to get him to change his ways. He refused and said her son wasn't ready yet. But Monica wouldn't let up. Augustine said she "urged him with repeated entreaties and floods of tears to see me..." Then

the bishop who had lost his patience said, "Go your way; as sure as you live, it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish." I'm sure Monica walked away encouraged. Maybe David got similar assurance.

Although that's possible, I think it's something else. I think it was prayer itself that changed David. I think when we come into the presence of God and pour our heart out to him, holding nothing back, not only does he hear us but he gives us the assurance he's heard us. It's rather mysterious; you might even call it mystical. It's definitely a Holy Spirit thing. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 1:4 that our Father *"comforts us in all our troubles."* How does he do that? Paul writes in Romans 8:15–16 about the Spirit who cries from within us, *"Abba, Father."* Then he says, *"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."* So we come to our Father and the Spirit of God ministers deep in our heart and gives us the assurance that we're his children and he hears us.

It's like a kid who is out on the soccer field and every time he kicks the ball or makes a tackle he looks to the sidelines for his dad. He wants to make sure his dad sees. And every time he looks, sure enough dad is there and gives him a little nod or wave. It's the same way with us. We come to prayer and we find that he sees and not only does he see but he cares and not only does he care but he understands.

The greatest evidence God understands is to look to Jesus. In Mark 14 Jesus prayed a prayer much like Psalm 6. He was in the garden and he was overcome with grief. Mark writes, *"... he began to be deeply distressed and troubled."* He then said to his friends, *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."* Then he went a bit further into the garden and it says, *"he fell to the ground and prayed"* (Mark 14:33–35). You see, when you're completely undone and you go to pray that's the one that greets you, one who gets it.

In her book, *The God Who Hung on the Cross* journalist Ellen Vaughn retells a story of how the Gospel came to a small village in Cambodia. In 1999 Pastor Tuy Seng (not his real name) traveled to Kampong Thom Province in northern Cambodia.

Most villagers there had cast their lot with Buddhism or spiritism. Christianity was virtually unheard of. But much to Seng's surprise, when he arrived in one small, rural village the people warmly embraced him and his message about Jesus. When he asked the villagers about their openness to the gospel, an old woman shuffled forward, bowed, and grasped Seng's hands as she said, "We have been waiting for you for 20 years." Then she told him the story of the mysterious God who had hung on the cross.

In the 1970s the Khmer Rouge, the brutal, Communist-led regime took over Cambodia, destroying everything in its path. When the soldiers finally descended on this rural, northern village, they immediately rounded up the villagers and forced them to start digging their own graves. After the villagers had finished digging, they prepared themselves to die. Some screamed to Buddha, others screamed to demon spirits or to their ancestors. One of the women started to cry for help based on a childhood memory—a story her mother told her about a God who had hung on a cross. The woman prayed to that unknown God on a cross. Surely, if this God had known suffering, he'd have compassion on their plight. Suddenly, her solitary cry became one great wail as the entire village started praying to the God who had suffered and hung on a cross. As they continued facing their own graves, the wailing slowly turned to a quiet crying. There was an eerie silence in the muggy jungle air. Slowly, as they dared to turn around and face their captors, they discovered that the soldiers were gone. As the old woman finished telling this story, she told Pastor Seng that ever since that humid day 20 years ago the villagers had been waiting, waiting for someone to come and share the rest of the story about the God who had hung on a cross.

In the midst of our tears, even our great wailing, that's the God we pray to—the God who hung on the cross. When you can't stop crying, come to him and remember his unfailing love.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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