

Psalm 6—The Dark Night of the Soul

The context of David's lament in Psalm 6 has to do with evil enemies that were causing him quite a bit of grief. We have all been there when unexpectedly someone we trusted, stabbed us in the back. When we are innocent victims of slander, harassment, or persecution, it cuts deep into our heart. As bad as we may have been hurt, I doubt if many of us have ever experienced the kind of unfair persecution and injustice that David did. He risked his life fighting Goliath and the Philistines for King Saul, and Saul rewarded his faithful service by throwing spears at him, slandering him, and sending 3000 soldiers to kill him. David spent years hiding in caves in the wilderness with his life constantly in danger. What would that be like to know that "special forces" soldiers were coming to kill you?

I would wet my pants if the local bully was threatening me. In fact, that actually happened when I was 13 years old at summer camp. A big mean kid who looked like he had been "held back" about two years was terrorizing our cabin. This friend of mine told him that if he didn't leave him alone, I was going to beat him up. You can imagine my reaction---"Wait, what?" This kid was twice my size, and needed to shave. You remember the man-boys who went through puberty in 6th grade. This kid bragged about fighting in the golden gloves. He accosted me the next day in front of everybody by yelling, "I finally found someone who is willing to fight me, I will meet you tomorrow behind the cabin, and if you don't show up, I'll come and get you", with that he turned and hit the wall with his fist. My memory now is that he punched a hole in the wall where my face would have been. Naturally my friend yelled at him, "Don't worry he'll be there." I suffered for the rest of that day, and I did not sleep that night. All I could think about was what it would be like to have all your teeth knocked out, a broken nose, and black eyes, as well as the humiliation involved. I would be answering questions for a month about what happened to my face. Fortunately, a counselor heard everybody talking about "the big fight", and he managed to put an end to it so I am alive today and able to write this message. My point is that if I was terrorized for two days, what did David feel for like ten to twelve years?

Don't Give Me What I Deserve!

We don't know exactly the time of David's life or specific circumstances that Psalm 6 was written about, but clearly he is suffering at the hands of his adversaries. David has a strong sense of his own sin, so he pleads with God to not give him what he deserves, which is chastening and discipline. Although he was innocent of a specific sin that caused these consequences, David no doubt understood how God often uses adverse circumstances to mature us, humble us, and cause us to be more dependent on Him. Therefore David seems to link God's discipline and chastening to his situation. If you are like me you can relate to this. I usually get around to praying, "Lord what have I done to deserve this? Why are You allowing this to go on?" Then about a dozen things I have done in my life creep into my memory. From that point on, all I can do is say, "Lord, don't give me what I deserve, give me mercy and grace." This is what I think David is

saying in Psalm 6:1 when he wrote, “Lord don’t rebuke me in your righteous anger, or discipline me in your wrath.” David linked God’s failure to help him to a strong sense of personal guilt. Even if it is deeply repressed, I think we all have a sense of personal guilt, so in the bad times we wonder if God is either paying us back or purposefully not helping us. God is able to save us, yet He continues to delay.

Jeremiah 10:24 may help us figure out what David is expressing in Ps.6. Jeremiah said, “Correct me, O Lord, but with justice”, in other words, I know I need correction but don’t do it with evil jerks like Saul. Then Jeremiah said, “Don’t correct me with your righteous anger, lest you destroy me.” By this he was saying don’t give me justice, give me mercy. David also was expressing to God in Ps.6:1-4 that his circumstances were going to destroy him, so God needed to “return” and rescue him, not because he deserved it, but because of God’s hesed love. By saying “return”, David was letting us know his feelings of abandonment by God. When God doesn’t seem to answer our prayers according to our time table, we feel that He has withdrawn from us.

Let’s Make a Deal !

I can also relate to David’s bargaining in v.5. David points out to God that if he is allowed to die, he won’t be able to testify to God’s mercy, grace, and love. You can’t be a witness for the Lord if you are buried in the grave. Who among us has not tried to make deals with the Lord? At the worst times of my life I remember praying that if God would just get me out of this mess, I would serve Him diligently forever! This is what David is saying in v.5, that he can be of great use to God if God would deliver him. David, as king of Israel, would be quite a witness to God’s chosen people. Jesus said that David wrote his Psalms “in the Spirit”, meaning by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Matt.22:43), and Peter said that David wrote “by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:25). Doesn’t it make sense that God would prolong his life to serve the Lord? It certainly made sense to David so he reminded God of what a good idea it was in Ps.6:5

Hanging On for Dear Life

In Ps.6:6-7, David makes sure God understands the urgency of the situation by describing his condition. It’s not just fear and worry, his very body and soul are deteriorating. He progresses from weariness to what I assume is hyperbole (exaggeration for effect), by saying his bed is “flooded” with tears, and his couch is floating from his tears. Even his body is deteriorating, and he is aging rapidly. This is all being caused by his evil ruthless adversaries.

A Radical Change in Mood

In verse 8-10, David goes through a radical change in mood. This seems like a 180 degree pivot from gloom and doom to everything will be fine because the Lord has heard me. What could have happened? The logical explanation is that God made His presence known to David. Whether God changed his circumstances or just gave him some relief we can’t be sure, but you can feel the renewed assurance and confidence in David’s tone.

He knows that the Lord heard him, will shame David's enemies, and will deliver him. It reminds me of that great line in the Tom Hanks movie, "Forest Gump". They were in the midst of a terrible storm, and it seemed like all was lost, but then "God showed up". By reviewing all the stories of David in the Bible you can confirm that God did eventually deliver him from every adverse situation during his wild "roller coaster" life. In each situation God did hear David's prayers, and God did shame his enemies.

Unique Themes

Don't forget that the Psalms are unique in Scripture in that they are man expressing himself to God instead of God speaking to man. In David's Psalms, he often has at least three unique themes that make us think. First, he expresses the sense that rightness has "run amok". David complains an awful lot for a man of God. I thought godly people were supposed to be happy? The quality of life in 1000 BC was quite a bit different from ours. They lived with war in their own country, as well as famine, plague, high infant mortality, etc. There was also terrible injustice and depravity. David was expressing that the world was broken and needed God's help to be restored. Secondly, it seems like a good thing to bargain with God. David is always trying to make deals to get back in God's good graces. I think David uses this device to be transparent to God, like saying, "Lord I acknowledge my sin, but if you give me another chance I will serve you well." The historical accounts of his life tell us that he did just that. David always had contrition and was repentant. Thirdly, he rejected evildoers, and was always telling God to destroy them. This may be surprising because Jesus hung out with known sinners, and was very forgiving. Don't forget that in practice David was also forgiving and tenderhearted to Saul and Absalom. David was appealing to God based on God's absolute righteousness and justice. Surely God would not honor their evil against him? At the time of his appeal, he was threatened with death, and his enemies were unrepentant and practicing evil against God's law. The sinners Jesus hung out with were contritious and seeking forgiveness—just look at His parable in Luke 18:9-14.

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

Nobody can adequately answer that but God Himself, but let's ask some questions that might lead to some answers. Without the suffering, would David have contemplated his own sin? Would he be as aware of God's mercy and grace? Without the suffering, would he have been so devoted to prayer? Would we have his writings in the Old Testament? Would he have learned the life of faith? In spite of all appearances to the contrary, would David have been so confident in God's deliverance if God had not been so faithful in the past? I think Paul wrote of the same confidence in God in spite of hard times in Romans 5:3-4. Follow the progression, "we exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint".

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