

August 7, 2022

A PRAYER FOR MERCY

Psalm 6

(2 of 12 in a series of selected Psalms)

When George W. Bush was campaigning to receive the nomination of the Republican party in the 2000 election, he had an interesting exchange one night when a moderator was asking each of the candidates questions. The specific question asked to the candidates that night was, "Who is your favorite political philosopher?" When the question was asked of Bush, he answered, "Jesus Christ," and when the moderator then asked why, he answered, "Because he changed my heart." The moderator then followed up one more time, asking Bush to explain what he meant for those who wouldn't identify with what he was saying, and he responded, "If they don't know, it's going to be hard to explain. When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart."

Now, I don't bring that up to praise or criticize Bush's answer or to suggest how he might have said more. Nor do I bring it up so that we might evaluate whether Bush's terms as President lined up with that confession. I simply bring it up because in his last response to all the moderator's follow-up questions, Bush said something we can all identify with. In trying to describe his own experience, he said, "If they don't know, it's going to be hard to explain."

Surely all of us have been there before in trying to explain something. Maybe it's a sickness you had or a loss you experienced or a joy you've known, and when you go to explain it you find yourself struggling, wanting to simply say, "Well, you'd just have to experience it," or, positively, "If you've experienced it, you know what I'm talking about."

That really gets at how I've felt this week looking at Psalm 6, and the reason why is because there's some disagreement among commentators on how to categorize this psalm. There are two basic ways that people want to identify this psalm. One, some commentators say that it's a psalm of personal lament. This is the most common type of psalm as you can see if you look through the Psalter. In those the psalmist typically begins by asking God for help in the midst of his suffering, then he expresses his pain, and finally expresses his confidence in the Lord. And if you paid attention when we read Psalm 6 you can see how it does fit that pattern. The problem, some say, is that David begins by asking God not to rebuke or discipline him, which seems like something you'd say if you're dealing with your own sin before the Lord.

Therefore, other commentators say that it's a penitential psalm or psalm of confession. This accounts for why David would mention rebuke and discipline from God. But then others will point out that there's no specific sin David confesses, and if you look at the other psalms of confession, you'll see the psalmist does actually confess sin, even if only generally making reference to his iniquity or rebellion. Consequently, many kind of throw their hands up, saying that this psalm doesn't quite make sense, either including an element they're surprised to see there or not including an element they're surprised to see absent.

But here's where I'm tempted to appeal to Bush's answer that night on the campaign trail. I want to say to each camp, "Even if it doesn't fit the category perfectly, haven't you actually experienced this kind of thing when you've prayed? Haven't you in those moments of intense personal suffering prayed that God not to abandon you, not to crush you, or pit himself against you, much like David asks God not to rebuke or discipline him in his wrath? It's not as if you forget the Lord's promises in those moments. It's, rather, that you feel as if you've got nothing left, like the only hope you have is that the Lord is for you, and so you say, "Please don't take from me the only hope I have in you." In that moment, you're not giving a theological treatise in prayer. You're simply battling hopelessness, trying to hold on to your only hope. It's the cry of a child saying to his Heavenly Father, "I need you and need to know you're for me." And so this could easily be a psalm of lament in my mind.

On the other hand, I can imagine David having sinned and having already confessed his sin, looking around at the painful consequences of his sin and crying out to God to take these consequences away. Such a prayer wouldn't necessarily include David's confession of sin, but it would likely include all the elements that you see here in Psalm 6. Therefore, I can easily see this as a psalm of confession in the sense that David is asking God to show mercy in light of his sin and all that it has brought about.

Now, because I can see how this psalm fits either category in my mind, I'm no closer to telling you the situation in David's life that caused him to write Psalm 6. However, maybe that's good for us. Because perhaps I can invite more of us in to see how much we need this psalm. Are you feeling overwhelmed because of what a wreck of your life your own sin has brought about? Then, Psalm 6 is a pathway for how to walk before and approach God in that. Are you simply suffering to the point that you feel like all you have is the Lord, and your suffering has hit so deeply in your soul, then you sometimes wonder if the Lord himself is against you? Then Psalm 6 helps you to know how to approach the Lord in that time. Either way, this psalm helps direct us as we find ourselves in times of difficulty, struggle, and intense suffering, which describes our lives far more often than we wish it did. So let me point out a few things that David does here that can be helpful for us in those moments of pain. First, David lives his life oriented toward God.

David lives his life oriented toward God

Now, I don't feel like that's the clearest or smoothest way to say this, and I actually tried to think of better ways to say it and struggled, so let me just explain to you what I mean with an example. I remember when I was growing up, I might find myself interested in a girl and all of the sudden everything in my life began to be directed toward her. I would pick out my clothes for the day thinking about what she might find most attractive. I'd find myself doing things that I hoped she'd find impressive. When the phone rang, I'd answer the phone with a deeper voice just in case she'd happened to call. Or, if we indeed became close, if anything in my life happened, I wanted to talk to her about it. That happened at times in my life, and I'm so utterly thankful that the Lord ended up directing me to Lili eventually and spared me from some immature thinking. But that's dynamic is what I mean by orienting one's life toward another. Every decision is

informed with an eye toward that person, every thought and feeling you want to talk out with that person, etc. Your life is oriented toward that person. Well, when you read the psalms, it seems clear to me that David's life is oriented toward God.

Here he is again, suffering intensely, and what does he do? He sits down and writes out a poem, a song to God. He tells God everything. He pleads with God. He mourns before God. He hopes in God. Why not go and just complain about your circumstances to a friend? Isn't that the first thing many of us would be tempted to do? But not David, and it's because no relationship means more to him than the one he has with God. He lives all of his life before God and directed toward God.

But we don't see this just in the fact that he's written this psalm to God in his time of suffering. We also see it in an implication of verse 5. David is asking God to deliver him from his struggles—which we'll look at in more detail shortly—and he's telling God why he should deliver him from these afflictions. So, he says, "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?" (v. 5). Again, his point is, if he dies is in the grave, then he wouldn't be able to keep praising the Lord. But, obviously, the only way this argument carries any weight is if his life is filled with praise of God now. And it is. Just look at the Psalter. It's full of psalms of praise.

So I just want to begin there. What David is demonstrating here shouldn't be unique. He's not one of those extraordinary believers whose life is oriented toward God so that all that he does is informed by his Lord and all of life is lived before and in relation to his Lord. This is what the life of any believer is supposed to be. We can get so used to that not being the case that when we see it, it looks extraordinary. But it shouldn't be. This is what Christ calls us to when he calls us to himself. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this is seen in the great commandment.

The greatest commandment we have from our God—and don't miss the weight of this just because it's familiar to you—is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. All your heart, your soul, your life, and your strength are to be spent in loving God. And so let's ask ourselves if that characterizes us. Would someone be able to look at your life and say of you what we're saying of David? Would your children say they can tell all of your life is oriented toward God? Are we obeying the greatest commandment?

David's orientation to the Lord may well be a startling reminder to us of what our lives should be about, and it's good for us to see it. But I also want us to see the specifics of how David approaches the Lord in prayer during his time of immense suffering that is instructive for us as well. David casts his cares on the Lord.

David casts his cares on the Lord

I want to address David's specific requests to the Lord next, but note how he casts his cares on the Lord, unloading every burden he feels and struggle he is facing. And he unloads his burdens with great detail. He tells the Lord, "I am languishing . . . my bones are troubled. My soul also is

greatly troubled. . . . I am weary with moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes” (vv. 2-3, 6-7).

This isn't David trying to hold back or be measured in regards to the Lord. He's sharing with the Lord, in detail, every struggle he's facing. He's suffering so deeply that his bones are hurting. But if you think it's just physical, then he makes clear that his soul also is greatly troubled. And it's not as if he's hurting but handling it without much outward expression. He's crying so hard while lying down that he feels like he's flooding his bed and drenching his couch with weeping. Were you to see him in this time, David's eyes would always have been red. And he's unfolding all of it to the Lord. He's unloading it all onto the Lord. He's doing what Peter commands you and me to do, as he writes, “[Cast] all your cares on [the Lord], because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

At some point in my life I realized that if I didn't want to know, then I shouldn't ask my grandmother how she was doing. The reason is because if I did, then I'd give me a list of all her physical ailments (which were many). I remember on occasion, saying, “Granny, how have you been doing?” and then instantly biting my lip, thinking, “Why did you ask that?” The reason, of course, is because I selfishly really didn't want to know.

But the Lord isn't like me in that way. He does want to know. He invites us to cast all our cares on him. And so David unloads all of his burdens on the Lord because he knows that the Lord wants him to. He casts his cares upon the Lord because he knows the Lord cares for him. He wants to hear those things that are a concern to you. So unload your burdens, as we see with David.

You and I both know of individuals who once professed to be believers and followers of Jesus Christ who walked away from the faith because they went through a situation very much like what David is describing here. They could have read this psalm and said, “I know what David is experiencing in a way that very few others might relate to.” I've heard the stories and so have you. And yet I also have known and walked alongside believers whose faith has grown deep during similar times. They've found the Lord to be an anchor for them during times when they were being tossed about. And though there are no doubt many variables in which some hold fast and some walk away, I think what we see with David is always present in the lives of those who hold fast through tragedy. They turn to God in the midst of their heartache. They don't try to suppress the pain, act like it's not there, or simply share it with others. They take it to the Lord. They unload their burdens on him and cast their cares upon the one whom they know cares for them.

You see, Psalm 6 is God's Word. The Spirit moved David to write these words so that the very words David wrote are the very words God wanted us to have and read. So, in a mysterious working of God's sovereignty and our responsibility, David wrote exactly what he wanted and felt and God moved David to write precisely what God wanted written. Why, then, did God move David to write about his bones being troubled, soul hurting, and tears flooding his bed and

drenching his couch? It's because the Lord wanted to show us how we can approach him when we're feeling the same way. I'd love to be able to say that if you can't resonate with David here, you never will, but that's quite unlikely. The reality is that if you haven't already, you one day will find yourself right where David is—perhaps many times. And you can know on that day that the Lord moved David to write down how he cast his burdens and cares on the Lord so that we might have a picture of what that looks like as we need to do the same. The Lord is inviting us to do that. Cast your cares and unload your burdens on the Lord. Third, David asks God to be merciful to him.

David asks God to be merciful to him

Psalm 6 isn't simply about David unloading his burdens and casting his cares on the Lord. He asks God repeatedly to do something about them. Whether the pain he's in is the Lord disciplining him in a corrective way because of his sin or simply in a formative way—bringing difficulty into his life to shape and mold him—David asks God to back it off, not let it be an expression of anger, but to show grace.

David writes, "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" (vv. 1-2). He wants God to deliver him from what he's suffering. To David, it seems that these circumstances suggest that God is against him, and so David prays for God not to show his anger or wrath in rebuke and discipline. In verse 3, as he shares that his soul is greatly troubled, he writes, "But you, O LORD—how long?" It's almost as if he cuts off what he wants to say. Maybe he set out to say, "But you, O LORD can deliver me," or maybe ask God why he hasn't delivered him, saying, "But you, O LORD, seem distant." But instead he simply says, "How long?" as if that's all he can get out.

And yet, that question carries a request, doesn't it? If one of our interns is turning off the lights after the service, but he's waiting for everyone to leave first, and I'm the last one in here, taking my time, not giving any indication that I'm heading out, he might ask, "How long are you going to be in here?" And if I say, "I'm not precisely sure how long," then I've missed that he wasn't simply asking a question, was he? If he says, "How long are you going to be in here?" I'd do better to answer, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm headed out now." And that's because I know that his question carries the request that I leave (however graciously I know he'd ask it!).

And so it is here with David. He asks, "How long" because he's requesting that God wait no longer but change his circumstances quickly. He's saying, "Lift your discipline, show your grace, heal me, deliver me, save me, and don't wait any longer to do it." But note in verse 4 *why* he thinks he has ground to make such requests. He says, "Turn, O LORD, and deliver my life; save me *for the sake of your steadfast love.*"

David doesn't root this request in his own merit. He's not saying, "I deserve good things, and on that basis I appeal to you to change my circumstances. I deserve better." David is asking God to demonstrate in David's life his steadfast love because he knows that God loves his covenant

people. He is faithful to his promises, committed to his people, and directed toward glorifying himself through them. And so on that basis of his steadfast love, he asks God to save him from his suffering.

Again, for us, the Lord invites us to do the same. Remember, he's the one who gave us this psalm. He wants us to see that he is eager to hear our requests and wants us to make them in confidence that he loves us and is committed to our good. So, don't ignore the Lord in your suffering, but turn toward him, cast your cares on him, and ask him to be merciful and gracious toward you. And, finally, we see that David expresses confidence in the Lord.

David expresses confidence in the Lord

As David ends the psalm in verses 8-10 the psalm takes on a noticeable change. No longer is David drowning in his tears and sorrows, crying out to God to save him. Rather, he is defiantly telling his enemies that the Lord has heard and will act. If his enemies had been mocking David because it seems that God has abandoned him, David tells them to mock no more. He writes, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled; they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment."

Now, some have seen these verses and suggested that David's circumstances must have changed in the midst of his prayer. Maybe he felt his fever lifting or the like. I don't. It seems to me that verse 10 tells us that David is saying that he thinks his deliverance will come about in the future (note the future tense of the verbs there). But he knows that God hears him. He knows that God accepts his prayer, and he trusts that God will act. And in David's case, perhaps he was reminded of God's promise to preserve his line on the throne.

And we should have no less confidence. Now, by that, I don't mean that we should be confident that everything we request in prayer will happen as we desire. But we know that God hears us as we pray, loves us, will work for our good, will use everything to make us more like Jesus, will not withhold one thing from us that would be for our good, and will preserve us until he brings us to our eternal home. And he tells us that our prayer accomplish much. So we too can pray with confidence, knowing that the one in whose authority we pray is the one who lived, died, and was raised for us.

So, this morning, let's make sure that our lives are oriented toward our Lord and run to him at all times but especially in our suffering, knowing that he cares for us and hears us. And let's remind ourselves why he hears us as we remember the work of Christ in coming to the table. Amen.