

“Prayer In Distress”

13 September 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship:

Hymn of Preparation: MP 1046 Blessed Be Your Name

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Jennifer Wilson

Reading: Psalm 6

Sermon:

I had conversations with two colleagues this week who've been under great pressure: criticism of them, lies, family sickness and personal weakness due to illness. Those conversations made me realise these circumstances are really tough for them and their loved ones. Spiritually, you question yourself; physically, you wonder “how long? Will I get better or will this lead to death?”; and emotionally, you are tired all the time and just want a break. When I was speaking with them, I had Psalm 6 in my mind and thought wow, that is so relevant. It speaks directly into their situations and I have been praying for them in light of it and read part of it to one of them.

This is a psalm written by David. It has become part of the worship experience of the people of God and is instructive about this whole area of prayer while in distress. I also realise that, for many, the ongoing threat and restrictions because of COVID are placing a difficult burden upon us and many are under stress; our health is at risk and there is a fear of death. I am genuinely praying that this psalm will be a help to us as we navigate the next few months. Let us look in more detail at the content of David's prayer.

I. Anguish (v.1-3)

When we read these verses, we see that David faces many different causes of anguish.

- A. **God's anger:** David senses that God is angry with him. Maybe he links his troubles with God's anger towards him. If that is true, though he does not specifically say so, it is an exceedingly difficult thought to deal with. It is a miserable and tough place to be for the one who knows and believes in God. God's anger at sin is a problem. David knows that God is angry at sin. He cannot dwell in its presence, He is opposed to the sinner, and must turn away.

Does this help us? The point may be that when things do not go well, we need to take time to examine our hearts for the possibility of sin and honestly come before God and ask for mercy. I was once on an outreach team and things were not going well, according to the leaders (they probably knew things I didn't). They called us all to a morning of quiet reflection and prayer, to do business with God and ask for His mercy. My own personal experience is that God usually is clear about our sin, and if we are not aware of specific sin then I would accept the difficulty as the reality of living in a sinful world under the discipline and judgment of God.

So what can we do? We come to our merciful God and ask for mercy (v.2). We look to Him in our distress and, conscious of His anger, we simply say, “be merciful, Lord. Forgive, relent.” We see that any sin has been punished and dealt with by Jesus at

the cross and at that moment we are heard (v.9). We are assured that God is with us and will work everything out.

- B. **Physically weak:** in fact, he is faint, wiped out. He is conscious of a need for healing. He is sick and he is in pain, unwell, and it appears to be severe. It leads, as v.6-7 point out, to exhaustion and a feeling of wanting to just be rid of it or give up. Being sick, weak, and tired is a major cause of distress for all of us. I think we who are relatively healthy need to be aware that physical illness, especially chronic physical illness, is a very tough burden to carry.
- C. **Fear:** “My soul is in anguish.” This expresses a deep fear, being troubled, terrified. Again, David has much to contend with. The effect of the sense of God’s anger, his physical weakness and ongoing issues with enemies has taken its toll and he has become fearful, anxious and terrified. Life is overwhelming.
- D. **Time:** His distress goes on longer than he would like. Our time frames are usually never God’s. I admitted to you in one of my letters that I thought we would be done with COVID after the summer and September would see us back to normal. It is a strange reality that our short agendas are not God’s, that time is not His biggest issue, and so often His and our agendas clash. “How long, O Lord, how long?” is a common refrain.

David is in great distress; he is aware of the anger of God, he is physically weak, terrified and the problem isn’t going away. It could be COVID, it could be an illness, it could be enemies, it could be God’s opposition to our sin. It is a situation of great anguish and we are *encouraged* to look to God for mercy. *Be merciful to me.*

II. Argument (v.4-7)

Sometimes our children will come to us with a list of reasons why we should grant their request and hopefully, if we are reasonable and their arguments are good, then we will grant their request. Dale Ralph Davis argues that the same thing is happening here, and I want to lay that out for you because I think it leads us to a mature thinking and way of approaching God in relationship, which could lead to bigger and bolder prayers.

- A. **God's character:** (v.4) We saw this last week in Psalm 5. The request was driven by the character of God. David knows God and he appeals to His unfailing love. The word in Hebrew is a particularly important one, *chesed*, it is the love of covenant promise. Karen and I celebrated our wedding anniversary on Wednesday past, 27 years of love and faithfulness to the promises we made to each other before God. God is *better* at keeping His promises, His unfailing love never ceases, and reminding God of that is a basis for asking for Him to return and deliver. The love of God is our rock. It is eternal, unchanging, unwavering, strong and always, always, *always* has our best interest at heart. It is seen in every aspect of the created world and primarily in the sending of His only Son to be our Saviour. When life is tough, the temptation is to question the love of God, but in reality the love of God is our rock. It is dependable and it enables us to approach God with great confidence.
- B. **“I can’t praise you if I’m dead”:** (v.5) His argument is about Sheol, translated grave in the NIV, a dark underworld where God is not praised. He is saying, “if I die (he must have been aware of possible death), then he cannot remember God, in the

sense of recall God, so that He can be praised. Simply, “if I die, I cannot praise you.” The implication is important and hard hitting for us all. The reason we live is to praise God. The purpose of life is God, we are to live life with God, walk with God, be in relationship and enjoy Him. In Sheol, he cannot do that, and he doesn’t want to go there because he wants to live in relationship with and praise God. Surely that is a challenge for us all. We may know that Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, *but do we want to live it?* David did and Jesus did; do we?

- C. **He cannot keep going (v.6-7):** He is exhausted, not sleeping, crying, sorrowful, physically weak. The reference to eyesight reminds that our eyes are an indicator of poor health; they are the window to our bodies. And in this state, his enemies just keep coming at him. “Lord, I have had enough, I cannot keep going, I have reached rock-bottom, and so I am asking that you would deal with this as I cannot.”

The Christian is a child of God. God is our Father and His going to respond to such honest, heartfelt, and thought-through requests. The encouragement is to reverently bring our reasons and arguments to God in prayer; in other words, develop our relationship with God. That is the deeper purpose of suffering - an honest, dependant, and acceptant relationship with God.

III. Assurance (v.8-10)

- A. **God hears our weeping:** David appears to have received an answer; we are not told how (some think in the context that the priest has brought a word of assurance from the Lord). The picture of God hearing our weeping is moving (v.8). He understands our tears, knows what motivates them and registers them. It points to a level of empathy and compassion that is tremendously reassuring.
- B. **Tenses:** The tenses of the words are important in these verses to help us understand what has happened and what we might expect when we pray in a similar way through the anointed Son of God, the Lord Jesus.

He has been heard, past tense. The prayer offered has reached God and it has been registered because he goes on to say, “the Lord accepts my prayer”, present tense. Most commentators see this as future tense, *will accept*, and this goes with “my enemies will be ashamed, dismayed and turn back in disgrace”; all are future tenses.

So what has happened is that he is assured, he has been heard and that the prayer has registered with God. All the rest will follow, but crucially what has been asked for is not granted now, but will be in the future. This tension is a reality of what we have in Christ and what we will have. For David, there has been no miraculous change in the circumstances, but his assurance of being heard and answered gives him real confidence.

You see, his confidence and assurance do not come from a change in the circumstances but from his position of having been heard, of God accepting his prayer and of God dealing with all the troubles that have assailed him. We may or may not live with these things for a lifetime, yet God gives us the confidence to say, “away from me, all you who do evil.” God is on my side and my future is assured now and into eternity.

It is true, as Dale Ralph Davis says, “prayer doesn’t change things, it lays hold of God who changes things and who, in prayer, changes you.”

David’s life prefigures Jesus, God’s Son, who the writer of Hebrews tells us, *“During the days of Jesus life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission”* (Hebrews 5:7).

All who are children of God, by faith, can offer up similar prayers with the absolute assurance of being heard and that is our true hope in all the anguish we experience in life.

COVID is not going away, but we have a God who with promised love listens to our prayers. Our battle with sin is not going away, but we have a God who listens to our prayers. Many of us struggle or will struggle with ill health and it may not go away, but God in His mercy hears our prayers. In living for Christ, we will sadly experience an increased hostility to the teaching and will of the Lord Jesus and we might have enemies who are just relentless, but God hears our prayers and the promise remains of victory. The resurrection of Jesus was the first-fruit and heaven on earth is the promise with a perfect, healthy and untiring physical body lived in love and total absorption with the remembrance and praise of God.

Let us keep on praying in our distress, considering the love, the mercy, and the victory of Jesus over all enemies. To Him be the glory. Amen.

Hymn of Reflection: IPH 646 Great Is The Darkness

Prayers for Others: Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Closing Praise: His Mercy Is More

Announcements

Benediction: And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now, and for evermore. Amen.