

How Long, O Lord?

Series: I Will Praise You In This Storm

Psalm 6

August 29, 2021

Welcome again to worship.

About a year ago, a police department in southern England was called, and officers responded to a report of a “large apex predator” – a black panther – in a public park. The department said the officers who arrived at the scene didn’t immediately realize that what initially appeared to be a black panther was actually a stuffed toy. They had guns drawn on a stuffed animal.

Well, you don’t always know what you will encounter in life. It might be a black panther that will tear you apart, or it might be a soft, squeezable stuffed animal.

Faith in troubled times is both easy and hard. It is easy when we know God is in control, and hard because we begin to wonder if He really does care for us.

The Psalms give us words to express our fear and worries in the face of the storms of life. Our series “I Will Praise You In This Storm” looks at five psalms to help us in the midst of our struggles.

We are on our fourth Psalm, so I invite you to turn in your bulletin to page 6, or if you are online, grab your spiritual journal and open your Bible to Psalm 6.

The first fact of Psalm 6 is that the directions are either for a stringed instrument or a chorus.

The psalm opens with directions regarding its use. “To the chief Musician on Neginoth, upon Sheminith.” The various interpretations given to this inscription, both by ancient and modern scholars, show us there is a great deal of uncertainty as to how to translate them. Neginoth is thought to mean a stringed instrument. Sheminith is believed to be a musical term meaning eight or octave, or a male chorus.

The New Living Translation says, “For the choir director. A psalm of David, to be accompanied by an eight-stringed instrument.”¹

Second, there are two different views of what this psalm is.

One view is that it is the first of seven “penitential” psalms. What does penitential mean in the Bible? Penitential is expressing sorrow for sin or wrongdoing and disposed to atonement and amendment. It is repentant or contrite. The seven penitential psalms are **Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51², 102, 130, 143.**

In other words, these psalms were written by people who were sorrowful for their sin and wished to in writing the psalm repent.

In modern music, Adele’s “Hello” could be called a penitential song. In 1977, Player released the song “Baby Come Back.” The lyrics went:

*Baby come back, any kind of fool could see
There was something in everything about you
Baby come back, you can blame it all on me
I was wrong and I just can’t live without you.*

¹ Psalm 6:1 (NLT)

² Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. (Psalm 51:1, NIV)

So, one view of Psalm 6 is that it is the first of seven “penitential” psalms.

However, other commentators suggest that **Psalm 6 is a psalm of Individual Lamentations, a “sick” Psalm**. They suggest this psalm was written when David was sick and praying to the Lord for healing.

Either interpretation is possible, so this psalm can help someone speak to the Lord either in response to their sin or their illness. Either way.

Finally, the structure of Psalm 6 is symmetrical. Write symmetrical, then write **3, 2, 2, 3**. There are a set of three verses that go together, then two verses, followed by another set of two verses, and concluding with a final set of three verses.

For Martin Luther, the 6th Psalm was very important. It illustrated various central points of his theology. He saw the psalm in three parts, each distinguished by the person. First, the psalmist addresses God, then speaks for himself, and finally speaks to his enemies. If we were Lutherans, those would make our three point sermon today. But we are Methodists, so we have four lessons, one from each section.

First, we see a call out to God.

Here is where interpreting the psalm as a penitential or a sick psalm comes into play. Verses 1-3:

*O LORD, don't rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your rage. Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak. Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony. I am sick at heart. How long, O LORD, until you restore me?*³

We see in this section how David expresses his distress. He says he is weak, that his bones are in agony, and he is sick at heart. Other translations use the words “faint,” “languishing,” his bones are “aching” or “shaking.” Consider the Message Bible:

*Please, GOD, no more yelling, no more trips to the woodshed. Treat me nice for a change; I'm so starved for affection. Can't you see I'm black and blue, beat up badly in bones and soul? GOD, how long will it take for you to let up?*⁴

Obviously, Peterson believed Psalm 6 was penitential psalm.

The point is that whether we are hurting because of physical ailments or because of our sin, we should call out to God. David highlights his anguish and begs for God's favor. And feeling increasingly overwhelmed by his great suffering, his petitions crystalize in a simple question of God: how long? If God's judgment has brought this suffering as we read in verse 1, God can also relent and end it.⁵

Wherever you are, no matter the source of your suffering, call out to God.

Second, we see a plea for mercy.

Verses 4-5:

*Return, O LORD, and rescue me. Save me because of your unfailing love. For the dead do not remember you. Who can praise you from the grave?*⁶

This section reminds me of a song I learned taken from Psalm 69:

Save me, God, the waters are up to my neck.

I'm sinking in deep mud and there's no solid ground.

I'm out in deep waters and the waves are about to drown me.

I'm tired of searching for Your help, and my eyes are failing.

³ Psalm 6:1-3 (NLT2)

⁴ Psalm 6:1-3 (MSG)

⁵ The Wesley Study Bible, Psalm 6:3

⁶ Psalm 6:4-5 (NLT2)

David is calling out, pleading for mercy. The Message Bible says:

*Break in, GOD, and break up this fight; if you love me at all, get me out of here. I'm no good to you dead, am I? I can't sing in your choir if I'm buried in some tomb!*⁷

The Hebrew uses the word Sheol. It was the place of the dead before judgment. It is not purgatory; there is no evidence of purgatory in Scripture. The idea of purgatory was a fundraiser tactic for building projects in Rome.

No, in the Old Testament, they believed that when you died, you went to Sheol. Sheol is a place of darkness⁸, of silence⁹, of forgetfulness¹⁰. It is without remembrance or praise of God¹¹, or knowledge of what transpires on earth^{12,13}.

I believe Jesus clarified this understanding from the cross when He said to the thief:

*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*¹⁴

Then from 1 Peter 3:

*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.*¹⁵

Now, I could spend 20 minutes on this passage alone, but my point is this. I believe there is a Sheol – a prison as Peter calls it – where the dead without Christ go to wait until Judgment Day. It is dark and silent, and people have no idea what's going on until the bright light of God's holiness breaks through and they stand before Christ Almighty to be judged for their sins. You do not want to be in that place. But for the redeemed in Christ, I believe that when they died, they went immediately to paradise to be with the Lord. I devoted the final chapter in "Living Right Side Up" to that belief.

But all of us must plead for God's mercy. David realizes his predicament (either from sin or sickness), expresses sorrow over it, and demonstrates a fresh commitment to remain close to God. We don't know the cause of David's pain, but whatever the cause, he sought God for the remedy.¹⁶

Third, we see a cry of weariness.

Here, David's remaining strength is used up through ceaseless crying. Verses 6-7:

*I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears. My vision is blurred by grief; my eyes are worn out because of all my enemies.*¹⁷

Once again, listen to the Message Bible:

⁷ Psalm 6:4-5 (MSG)

⁸ Job 10:21-22; Psalm 143:3

⁹ Psalm 94:17; Psalm 115:17

¹⁰ Psalm 88:12; Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, 10

¹¹ Psalm 6:5

¹² Job 14:21

¹³ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

¹⁴ Luke 23:43 (NIV)

¹⁵ 1 Peter 3:18-20 (NRSV)

¹⁶ Life Application Study Bible, Psalm 6

¹⁷ Psalm 6:6-7 (NLT2)

*I'm tired of all this—so tired. My bed has been floating forty days and nights on the flood of my tears. My mattress is soaked, soggy with tears. The sockets of my eyes are black holes; nearly blind, I squint and grope.*¹⁸

John Wesley understood the value of crying out to God: “David’s tears had a voice, in the ears of the God of mercy. Silent tears are no speechless ones. Our tears are cries to God.”¹⁹

Now, let me address something here. If David was talking about an illness, then listen to me. Illness, like cancer or Alzheimer’s or anything like that may seem like a betrayal by God, an abandonment by the Almighty. Being diagnosed with a serious illness is frightening and disorientating. The future becomes uncertain, and your hopes and dreams are dashed while tears and grief abound. At the heart of seeking comfort in the midst of illness is the practice of prayer. In prayer, we are able to share with God our laments and pains, our feelings of betrayal and abandonment. In faith, we know that God has heard those prayers and we know that God is working for our healing and for comfort.²⁰

No matter the source or cause of the suffering, there is only one source of salvation: God.

Finally, we see the answer to prayer.

In verses 8-10, we see that David’s prayer has been answered, and he warns his enemies to back off.

*Go away, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD will answer my prayer. May all my enemies be disgraced and terrified. May they suddenly turn back in shame.*²¹

One more time from the Message Bible:

*Get out of here, you Devil’s crew: at last GOD has heard my sobs. My requests have all been granted, my prayers are answered. Cowards, my enemies disappear. Disgraced, they turn tail and run.*²²

Here is the key here: the Lord has heard our prayer.

That has been my experience. God has answered my prayers many, many times. He continues to hear my pleas; He does not turn a deaf ear from me. Hallelujah!

God accepts our prayers and grants them in the way and a time which His loving wisdom judges to be best.

John Maxwell writes in his book, “Partners in Prayer”:

In the summer of 1876, grasshoppers nearly destroyed the crops in Minnesota. SO in the spring of 1877, farmers were worried. They believed that the dreadful plague would once again visit them and again destroy the rich wheat crop, bringing ruin to thousands of people.

The situation was so serious that the Governor proclaimed April 26 as a day of prayer and fasting. He urged every man, woman and child to ask God to prevent the terrible scourge. On that April day, all schools, shops, stores and offices were closed. There was a reverent, quite hush over all the state.

¹⁸ Psalm 6:6-7 (MSG)

¹⁹ The Wesley Study Bible, Psalm 6:9

²⁰ The Wesley Study Bible, Psalm 6

²¹ Psalm 6:8-10 (NLT2)

²² Psalm 6:8-10 (MSG)

The next day dawned bright and clear. Temperature soared to what they ordinary were in midsummer, which was very unusual for April. Minnesotans were devastated as they discovered billions of grasshopper larvae wiggling to life. For 3 days, the unusual heat persisted, and the larvae hatched. It appeared that it wouldn't be long before they started feeding and destroying the wheat crop.

On the fourth day, however the temperature suddenly dropped, and that night frost, covered the entire state. The result? It killed every one of those creeping, crawling pests as surely as if poison or fire had been used, It went down in the history of Minnesota as the day God answered the prayers of the people.

That is an awesome story! But understand, it was NOT the first and certainly was NOT the last time that Almighty God answered the prayers of his people.

We bring our poor prayers in our hand to the great King, and He gives us audience, and graciously receives our petition. The Lord receives our prayer into His ear and His heart.

What a reception this is for a poor sinner! We receive Jesus, and then the Lord receives us and our prayers for His Son's sake.

So, praise Him in this storm.