THE BEST WORSHIP SONGS EVER -
2. *Prayer can be wet*
(Psalm 6)

Introduction

I love most modern Christian songs that we sing in church, but I do think there is one area that we really lack – where are all the sad songs? Where are the songs that say, *"Lord, this week has been really crap! My Cousin committed suicide. My son is causing problems. I messed up big time. Everything's gone wrong. Arrg."*

Because life is often like that. And if our Christian worship is to real as well as inspiring, then where can we express that? 'Cos part of the problem is that we are all different. My week may have been awful, but maybe your week was great. Some of us are extroverts, we wear our hearts on our sleeves and want to pour out our emotions in prayer and song; and some of us are introverts, we want to respond with measured liturgy. Some of us pretend everything is great when it isn't; others quite enjoy revelling in their misery and their goal is just to spread the misery around.

This is the problem anyone leading a service has ever faced. How can a personal prayer be a corporate prayer too? Well that is why I love the Psalms … Psalm 6 is a great example. It is extremely personal and yet was written to be sung as a corporate song. It is sensitive and emotional and yet can hardly be called spontaneous. This is no extempore prayer. Look at the parallelism of verse 1; or the chiasmic structure in verses 2 and 3 – do you see the pattern? O Lord heal me / my bones are in agony / my soul is in anguish / O Lord, how long?

This is not just a spontaneous prayer. The title tells us that King David wrote it, and he has crafted it carefully. I don't know about you, but I don't know anyone who naturally converses in perfect iambic pentameter!

So this is a prayer which is both raw and emotional and also deliberately prepared for corporate use. There is much we can learn from it. Like the disciples for us we utter this request as we read Psalm 6 – Lord, teach us to pray.

1. THE AGONY HE KNOWS (v 1 - 3)

The Psalmist starts with the agony he knows in verses 1 – 3. There is no pretence here. He is in agony and he certainly does not conceal the fact. Three things appear to be causing him this grief. He faces three problems – the problem of God's discipline, the problem of his own weakness and the problem of God's delay.

- Problem of God's discipline (Verse 1)

Most fundamental is the problem of God's discipline – "O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath." Since David does not confess any specific sin here commentators argue over whether God is actually angry with David here or just that David thinks that God is angry with him!

What is the background to this plea we wonder? Is this Psalm, like Psalm 51 uttered by a repentant David following some terrible sin he has committed. Or is it more like Psalm 3 where David sees the rebellion of Absalom as the result of his own mismanagement of his family and kingdom?

I have to say that I favour Absalom's rebellion as the backdrop to this Psalm but it really doesn't make a great deal of difference. The important thing is that David saw God's discipline in all of life. He is in anguish at the moment and he sees the source of his agony as God's anger.

Now we have got to be careful here. If Absalom is the background David does not necessarily see his present

circumstances as a direct punishment for a particular sin he has committed.

Rather David saw that God allowed this pain in order to shape his character, his present anguish is the chisel with which the Lord wants to sculpt him. So we do not say that every evil in the world comes from God, but that he uses these circumstances to discipline us.

- Problem of weakness (Verse 2)

As a consequence of God's anger is his own weakness. "Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony." Once again we can't be sure whether David's illness is physical or emotional. And once again it doesn't really matter. When he talks about his bones and his soul he may be contrasting his physical and spiritual torment but equally it could just be a figurative way of describing his whole personality.

But that is the beauty of the Psalm. The underlining problem is common to us all. If we are in anguish today, be it mental or physical then we can pray this prayer with David. If our body is in great pain, or if we feel as if the walls are closing in around us we can use this to cry out to God.

- Problem of time (Verse 3)

And his final problem is that of time – "My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?" It is not just the pain; it is the on-going pain. He cannot bare it any longer. He does not put on a brave face, he pours out his soul to the Lord. How long, O Lord? I imagine that is a prayer that almost everyone here can echo about something or other. As we lift that situation that really bothers us to him, we cry out 'How long, Lord? How long?'

But the important thing to recognise in all the agony is what the key problem is. Often it is hard to see the wood for the trees. We are reeling from the blows and we can't tell which is up anymore. So re-orientate yourself with Psalm 6. David realises that the most agonising thing is to feel the anger of God or even to think that you are under the wrath of God. That is the key. If you pray about that problem then all the others will begin to fall into place.

Because once you realise that you are under the discipline of God there is only one thing you can do – call out for his grace. We plead, like David, 'Be merciful to me, Lord'. We plead, because there is no where else we can go. My guess is that we can easily relate to David's anguish but we do not so readily think of God's anger. And that is why we cannot pray like David did. David's prayer is born out of frustration and anguish. Until we fully comprehend how great our need is we will never plead with the Lord like David did.

Dale Ralph Davis is an American OT professor. His commentaries are brilliant; and I found his thoughts on Psalm 6 particularly helpful. When looking at this passage he tells a story from his own childhood. When his older brother Wilson was a little toddler (so this must have been many decades ago!) he got in real trouble and received what Dale calls 'a good spanking' from their father. Dad went on back to his study to get on with some work and hadn't noticed that Wilson had followed him in. Before his father had spotted him Wilson had climbed up on to the chair and was about to give his Dad a big hug. 'I love you Dad', he said.

Now Dale tells that story because his brother Wilson had easily grasped something that many adults cannot comprehend. That is the same hands that struck him would also lovingly welcome him. The childlike faith of a toddler, is the same faith as the great king David. David knew the reality of the Lord's discipline, but he

also knew that the same hands that struck him would also welcome him. And so he prays, 'Be merciful to me, LORD … O LORD, heal me … how long, O LORD, how long?'

2. THE ARGUMENT HE BRINGS (v 4 - 7)

We must move on … to the argument he brings, in verses 4-7. There is no escaping the fact that David argues with God. As he petitions his maker he comes up with three clear reasons why God should answer his pleas. Three arguments why God should hear his prayer.

- The God I have (Verse 4)

He begins with God's character. Verse 4 flows out naturally from what has come before. He knows the God he worships – the same hands that struck him will also gladly welcome him. He knows that because it is God's very nature.

"Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love." Unfailing love … a translation of the Hebrew 'Hesed' which is God's covenant love, his steadfast love, his utter faithfulness.

David is so completely convinced of God's character that he brazenly demands that God acts according to his nature. What staggering presumption … what audacity.

Haddington, just outside Edinburgh is famous for being the birth place of John Knox, the Scottish reformer. Well in Haddington, during the 17th century a Scottish minister, one John Brown, was visiting an elderly lady who was near to death. "Janet," the minister asked, "what will you say if at this late stage God drops you into Hell?" To which Janet stuck out her chin and replied, "He'll lose more than I'll do!" What a response! Such an utter confidence in the unfailing love of God that she knew that if God did not remain faithful to his promises of the gospel that God's character and name would suffer badly for it. Unfailing love … that was her God, and she was sure of it.

What about you? What about me? Does the God I have cause me to pray like that?

- The praise I give (Verse 5)

If the first argument was partially expected, the second one certainly wasn't. Verse 5 – "No-one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from his grave?" David is using 'remember' in the technical sense of worship here. He is bluntly stating that dead people don't praise God.

What a thing to say to God! If I die there will be one less person to sing your praises, O Lord! My first thoughts were that David was trying to flatter God; that David was massaging to the Lord's ego and trying to get out of trouble by appealing to God's vanity.

Then I started to think through the implications of this verse. For verse 5 to be at all persuasive to God it must have some substance to it. God knows everything. He knows what he would be missing if David was no longer around to praise his name. If you want a battle of wits with God then you'd better be armed with a bit more than a bluff! In other words verse 5 only has any arguing power if David sees the purpose of his life as to praise his Lord. It is not very impressive if we say, 'If I had a cent for every time I praised God … I'd have … well I'd have 3 cents!' It's not going to impress God is it!?

It is a sobering thought. What would be wrong with my death? How would you answer that question? What would be wrong with my dying tonight? Is the first answer that comes to mind that

you would no longer to praise God here on earth? Could you really confidently ask God to bless your physical existence, to prolong your life, because you would spend that time extolling the great name of the Lord?

I cannot be certain, but I think that verse 5 also points to Absalom; that the background to this Psalm is the rebellion of King David's son. Verse 5 states baldly, "No-one remembers you when he is dead." Now Absalom was famous for erecting a monument to himself in the King's valley during his own lifetime for he thought, 'I have no son to carry on the memory of my name.'" (2 Samuel 18: 18)

In other words Absalom spent his whole life trying to make people remember him when he was dead. He wanted people to praise him, in life and in death. In contrast, David wanted his life to be a monument in praise of God. What will it say on your monument?

- The misery I know (Verse 6)

And then, quite simply, David appeals to God's sympathy. "I am worn out with groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears." This is where prayer gets wet. I am emotionally shot. I'm exhausted through sheer pain and misery. So David assumes that the Lord will be touched by his suffering.

Lord, don't you care that my bed is wet from my tears? Are you unmoved by my misery?

And again to voice the request in public forces us to think through how true it is! 'The misery I know' is only an argument to bring to God if it really is misery. You see Psalm 6 is a healthy mix of the rational with the emotional. It is real and raw. David is not afraid to pour out his emotions before the Lord. And yet it is a clearly argued case. A healthy prayer life will be a well-argued one. We bring arguments in prayer … especially in corporate prayer … because sometimes it is only when we hear our requests out loud that we realise how ridiculous they are. Some of us could honestly pray verses 6 and 7 this morning, others would be fooling no one except themselves. "My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes." Can you say that? If you can, then use it in prayer, if not then don't kid yourself, you certainly won't be kidding God!

So when you pray, build an argued cased for your petition. Explain to God why you think he should answer your request. Because if you find that you can't make a good case for your petition, then you shouldn't be asking for it!

'Dear Lord, please may I be successful in that job application that I've applied for … because … you see I *need* that job … because …. I want that extra money … er … no that's not going to impress God …. Because it will make me more important … no, try again' … and so it goes on.

3. THE ASSURANCE HE FINDS (v 8 - 10)

But after he has prayed, look at the wonderful answer he receives – the assurance he finds, in verses 8-10.

- Future vindication (Verse 10)

In verse 10 he speaks of his complete assurance of future vindication. "All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace."

- But based on present confidence (Verse 9)

A future hope, but based firmly on present experience. "The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer." He doesn't tell us how he knows that God has heard his prayer simply that he

is sure that he has. He knows the character of the God he prays to, he knows the persuasive of the arguments he has used and so the matter is settled. The Lord has heard his prayer. God will answer him.

- The prayers of my tears (Verse 8; Romans 8: 26)

In particular the Lord has heard the prayer of his tears. "Away from me, all of you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping." Isn't that wonderful? God can even understand the prayers of my tears. Every salty drop that snakes its way down my cheeks is a cry for help that is heard by my heavenly father. He hears my prayers even when I don't know what to pray. Those times when the pain feels as if it is crushing me and I can't breathe let alone think… in those times God listens to the cries of my tears anyway. He answers my unspoken prayers. Or as the Apostle Paul put it in Romans 8, "… the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

So, can we pray like David did? Do we know the agony he knew? Can we argue like he did? Do we have the same assurance that he had? Some of us may not be convinced. After all this is an OT Psalm and we are Christians, not Jews. All this talk of discipline, of anguish, suffering, tears and weeping … it seems fairly remote from the experience of the average Christian.

THE EXAMPLE WE FOLLOW: Hebrews 5: 7

But if you think that then there is something terribly wrong. If we don't find Psalm 6 as simply describing the normal Christian life then there is something seriously wrong with our Christian faith. And my guess of what is wrong would be the assumption of happiness. Most of us assume that God's goal for our lives is happiness. And so when life is good why pray, 'cos well, that must be a sign of God's favour?

But, if anyone thinks that Psalm 6 is no longer relevant to the life of the Christian then they should meditate on Hebrews 5. Keep your Bibles open at Psalm 6 and look at the Psalm through the experience of Jesus.

"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 from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered… "

There we go. Jesus lived a perfect life of obedience. I hope we can all agree that you will not find a better example of a Christian than Jesus! And yet his experience was just like Psalm 6. His prayers were wet.

Jesus suffered on earth, and he was disciplined by his father through that suffering … he learned obedience from what he suffered. Like David Jesus responded by offering up prayers with tears and weeping because he knew that his heavenly Father was the only one who could save us. If we are to follow the example of Jesus then we must follow the example of David. Psalm 6 is our prayer too. Prayer can be wet.

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