

Psalm 6

Wet Prayer

Amington St Editha

Sunday 18 June 2017

The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life (6)

from Dale Ralph Davis' book

For the sick

A little girl was in church with her mother when she started feeling ill. 'Mummy,' she said, 'can we leave now?'

'No,' her mother replied.

'Well, I think I have to throw up!'

'Then go outside and around to the back of the church and throw up behind a bush.'

After about 60 seconds the little girl returned to her seat.

'Did you throw up?' Mum asked.

'Yes,' replied her daughter.

‘How could you have gone all the way to the back of the church and returned so quickly?’

‘I didn’t have to go outside, Mummy. They have a box next to the door that says, “For the Sick.” ’

Healing problems

Today we are looking at Psalm 6 and thinking about healing. We have a strong healing ministry at our church, as I hope you realise from the regular announcements about healing services.

They are open to all, but I would like to start bringing more of that ministry into our main services.

Our focus this morning is really the time of prayer, which we will move into after this sermon. So I will (try to) be brief, and look at a couple of aspects of healing that sometimes people find difficult.

We are also nearly halfway through our series looking at the first twelve psalms – today is Psalm 6, and the title is ‘Wet Prayer’, because of the raw emotion and tears that David talks about.

David is desperately upset, and there are four problems that he’s come up against: God’s wrath, his own weakness, fear, and time. These problems often stop us coming before God in prayer.

Wrath (v1)

First: God's wrath. David says, **Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath** (1). Like many of the psalms, we don't know the circumstances that led to David's prayer. He we can assume he's messed up in some way, and is now suffering – and so he goes to that place that I'm sure many of us have been to before: I am so bad, God must be punishing me. And so we shy away from prayer, believing God is angry and hates us.

This is a complicated subject in the Bible, which often connects suffering with **discipline**. Unlike the modern world, the Bible is honest about the reality that we are not perfect and all deserve to be disciplined and punished by God, who *is* perfect and holy.

But – and it is a very big but – that does *not* mean that all suffering is a direct punishment or discipline from God. We can only look with horror at the awful Grenfell House fire this week, and say, 'Of course those residents weren't more sinful than the rest of us; God wasn't punishing them, he was and is there with them.' Jesus himself made that point when a tower collapsed.

I think David is saying to God, 'Look, don't forget that I am human and weak, don't pile more on me than I can handle.'

Weakness (v2, v7)

The reason I think that is because of verse 2: **have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint** (2), and verse 7: **my eyes grow weak with sorrow, they fail because of all my foes** (7).

David has reached his limit, the end of his tether, he's up to his eyeballs, he's had enough, he can see the last straw falling. And I suspect that many of us here today can understand that feeling. It may be that you feel like that, right now.

This is the problem of *weakness*. Too often we human beings like to pretend we are strong. We keep going out of misplaced and foolish pride. We refuse to acknowledge there is a problem, even to ourselves, let alone other people, and so we don't pray.

How often have you replied, 'I'm fine, thanks.' when people ask how you are, and the truth is the exact opposite? If I thought I could, I would probably ban that answer from church! Sunday morning isn't always the appropriate time to share our deepest feelings and needs – which is why it is so important that we have home groups and close friendships within our church family, so we can share our weakness with others, and together pray to God.

That's one reason why our new slogan is: following Jesus *together*.

Fear (v3)

Two gas company servicemen, a senior training supervisor and a young trainee were out checking meters. They parked their van at the end of the street and worked their way to the other end. At the last house a woman looking out her kitchen window watched the two men as they checked her gas meter.

After they read the final meter, the senior supervisor challenged his younger co-worker to a race down the road back to the van, to prove that an older guy could outrun a younger one.

As they came running up to the van, they realized the lady from that last house was huffing and puffing right behind them. They stopped immediately and asked her what was wrong.

Gasping for breath, she replied, 'When I see two gas men running as hard as you two were, I figured I'd better run too!'

The third problem that stops us praying is *fear*: **my soul is in deep anguish** (3) – that is a really strong word, not merely 'dismayed' but 'terrified'. David is *really* scared. Whatever trouble he is facing sounds life-threatening.

Again, I imagine fear is something many of us here can recognise. It may be the fear of death, or the fear of a loved-one dying.

It may be the fear of loneliness, the loss of health or our fierce independence. It may be the fear of change, as we feel the ground shifting beneath our feet – the fear of the unknown. Fear is a powerful emotion, and it is paralysing.

People often talk about fight or flight – but stress experts are now talking about a third response to stress: freeze. Like a rabbit frozen in a car headlights, when we face difficult circumstances, which overload our emotional capacities, our primal brain responses take over, and we are unable to think, or make rational decisions.

Friends, this is when we need our Christian brothers and sisters more than ever. When we are so afraid we are unable to think, unable to pray, we need to fall on our church family to pray for us, to carry us through those difficult times.

Time (v3)

Finally we have the problem of time: **how long, O Lord, how long?** (v3). This is one of my besetting problems – impatience. Sometimes we pray and pray and pray and then we stop praying because it's taking too long for something to happen. We give up.

It's a particular problem for those of us who are used to the instant gratification of modern life – but it's a new phenomenon.

How many of us have stopped praying for someone a long-term illness because they haven't been cured? How many of us have stopped praying for a friend or family member to come to faith, because we've been praying for years and they still haven't found Jesus? How many of us have stopped bringing our temptations and failings and addictions to God, because we have so many times and they keep coming back?

When Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow, who kept banging on the door of her neighbour until he answered, his point wasn't that God is reluctant to answer, until we've reached a certain level of nagging, so he gives in and responds.

No. Jesus' point was: keep praying.

David's response

David had all four of these problems, all at once: the problem of God's wrath, the problem of his own weakness, fear and time. All four of those stop us coming to God in prayer.

But they did not stop David.

David was in a bad place: **I am worn out from my groaning... I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears** (6).

But he still came to God in prayer:

Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony...

Turn, Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.

Psalm 6.2, 4 (NIV)

This is not a fake prayer, but instead came from David's innermost pain and **anguish** (3), he is **faint**, and **in agony** (2). He was real, and honest with God. That's what God wants: he wants us to come to him in prayer, but he wants the *real* 'you', not the *pretend* 'you' that acts as if everything is 'fine'. He wants the *real* 'you', with all your struggles and hurts and pains.

Assurance

So what should we expect when we pray?

The Lord has heard my weeping.
The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer

Psalm 6.8b-9 (NIV)

Throughout the psalms, God promises that when we bring our true needs, pains, joys, sufferings and delights to God in prayer, he *will* **hear** and **accept** our prayer. He *is* listening. Even when it feels like he isn't, even when it feels like God could not be further away, he *is* with you, beside you, surrounding you, holding you.

David's knowledge that God has **heard** and **accepted** his prayer is called *assurance* or *peace*, and it is the first thing God gives us when we pray. At the wholeness and healing services, people say how peaceful they feel – *even if the situation hasn't changed*. Dale Ralph Davis puts it like this:

Prayer doesn't change things, but prayer lays hold of God who changes things and who, in prayer, changes you.

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Prayer is not about finding the right magic word to make happen whatever you want, like a divine version of Harry Potter. Prayer doesn't change anything – prayer is simply talking and listening to God. And *God* – he *does* change things. He doesn't promise things will be easy, and he doesn't promise to give us whatever we ask for, but he *does* promise to be with us always, to hear our prayers, and to give without limit his peace that transcends understanding.