

## Psalm 6: LORD, Have Mercy

A quick read of **Psalm 6** shows a person in anguish, in a valley, at the end of themselves, suffocating from the sins and wounds of life. This person pleads to God for help. How can we pray this psalm in Christ with understanding, feeling and conviction?

Let's look at the structure of **Psalm 6**. It is a *lament*, a special kind of *lament* called *penitential*, which means it helps us recognize our sinfulness, express our sorrow, and ask for God's forgiveness. *Penitential psalms* are psalms relating to *confession*, to agreeing with God about our self-determined ways.

However, most laments in the Psalms do *not* approach life crisis from the perspective of sin. Instead, they appeal to God as protector of the weak and defender of the oppressed, drawing on understandings of God built from the Exodus experience.

But in the *penitential psalms* possible moral or covenantal failure is considered at the heart of the lament. The prayer is explicitly or implicitly related to forgiveness for the failure to rely on God and obey him, even when the immediate problem is some other crisis. While there may be petition for deliverance from those other problems, the *forgiveness of sin* is at the heart of the prayer. This grouping of seven *penitential psalms* was begun by Augustine with four psalms and completed with seven psalms by Cassiodorus in the 500's AD in his commentary on the Psalms written for monks who prayed them every day.

1. What do you learn about **Psalm 6** from its superscription and its placement the Psalter? (**Psalms 3-7** are very personal psalms of struggle and suffering, showing faithful Israelites how to walk through adversity. **Psalm 6** is an intimate, individual plea for grace, for mercy, perhaps from King David's experiences.)

**Psalm 6** is divided into four parts, four strophes (stanzas) of poetry in verses of Hebrew parallelism. Most translations reflect that division. Look for any clear breaks or changes of tone.

In this lament, who is the object of the psalmist's complaint? Does he focus on himself, his enemies, God?

Which of the seven "building blocks of a lament" are found in **Psalm 6**? (invocation/address, plea/petition, complaint, expression of confidence/trust in God, confession of sin or assertion of innocence, imprecation/cursing, praising or blessing God)

What *repetitions* do you notice?

2. What do you learn about the psalmist in **6:1**? The Hebrew word order of **6:1** is striking: “O LORD, not in your anger reprove me, and not in your wrath chasten me.” What is he asking of YHWH in **6:1**? What does the psalmist seem to think is behind his suffering?

What is your response to this statement from a commentary on **Psalm 6**?  
“While there may be no direct correlation between individual sin and individual suffering (John 9:1-3), all suffering is the result of sin.” (Ash, Volume 2, 38)

This is the second mention of YHWH’s *wrath* in the Psalter; the first is in **Psalm 2:12**. (See also Psalm **95:11**, the end of a warning to listen and to stay open-hearted to God instead of hardening your heart with distrust and independence.)

Christ experienced the “wrath of God” on our behalf on the cross in the defeat of sin and death. All of God’s Holy love for us, his image bearers, was directed in holy indignation/anger against sin. (I think of God’s *wrath* as His consistent opposition to evil in all of its manifestations.) Ponder where you are in your understanding of God’s wrath against sin in Lent 2022.

2. Like the humble tax-collector of Jesus’ parable in Luke 18, our psalmist knows his need for God’s correction and discipline. He combines these *petitions* with repeated mention of God’s anger/wrath and then a description of current intense suffering (**6:2-3**).

**6:3** starts with the psalmist telling us that “my soul,” his whole being is “greatly troubled.” “But you, O LORD” in 3b contrasts with it sharply. This question is unfinished. The sentence is simply broken off because of the extreme frustration and stress.

When he starts praying again in **4a**, what is the *basis* of his request?

Recalling that most important truth about the LORD in **4b**, how do his thoughts progress in 6:5-7?

3. What descriptions of his great need for the LORD’s help resonate most with you? (6:2-7) What puzzles you? (“Remembrance” and “praise” are parallel in verse 5 and refer to public worship—speaking well of the LORD, boasting about him in the assembly. A dead person can no longer publicly remember God and thank God for his love and care. The psalmist’s death would deprive God of this person’s public remembrance and praise.)

Also remember how Jesus, David’s Greater Son, knew what it was to have a troubled soul. (“Now is my soul troubled. What shall I say? Save me from this hour. Father, glorify your name.” John 12:27-28)

4. Not only is the psalmist suffering mentally, physically, and emotionally (perhaps from lingering consequences of his own sin), but also his *enemies* are “piling on,” taking advantage of his weakened condition. (6:7, 8, 10)

Like many laments, the mood changes abruptly in 6:8. “Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.” (See Jesus’ use of these words in Luke 13:27 in his description of “the narrow way” and of the “evildoers” who think they know him but actually only know “about him” and have not entrusted themselves to his keeping.)

What does the psalmist seem to be understanding about the role of his *enemies* in his suffering? How does this help clarify his identity, his covenant relationship with the LORD?

Pouring out his grief to God about both his pain and the hostility of his enemies brings him back to God-centeredness, back to faith and trust, back to depending on God to make things right.

5. What are your thoughts about these quotes?

This is an individual lament... especially suited to one whose hard circumstances have led him to see his sins and to repent of them. (ESV Study Bible, 1060)

What makes this psalm unique is that the intense suffering seems also to be divine chastening for sin. Not all physical suffering or affliction at the hands of enemies is chastening for sin. However, when devout believers find themselves in such trying situations, they naturally will do some soul searching to see if they in fact are being chastened (Ps. 44). (Ross, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 271)

The recovery world calls this “cleaning up our side of the street.” Lent is a time to clean up our side of the street, not to earn salvation, but to remember that Jesus came to meet and identify with our deep need for repentance and forgiveness of sin.

Because of God’s faithful love (*hesed*), we humbled sinners find relief and refuge, comfort and peace in Him...no matter what, because of the eternal gift of Jesus Christ. He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God. (1 Cor. 5:21)

6. What do you think Jesus did when psalms of penitence were recited as he worshipped in the synagogue and Temple in his earthly life? How can we follow his model of praying in solidarity with sinful and suffering people?