



table of contents

psalm 6	2
meditation 1— psalm 6. ¹⁻⁷	2
meditation 2— psalm 6. ¹⁻⁷	5
meditation 3— psalm 6. ⁸⁻¹⁰	7
meditation 4— psalm 6. ²⁻⁷ (lent)	9

Psalm 6

meditation 1— psalm 6.¹⁻⁷

¹YHWH! Please don't correct me in anger!

Don't discipline me while inflamed.

²Have pity on me, YHWH, for I am incapacitated.

Restore me, YHWH, for I am shaken to the core.

³I am filled with great terror.

And I ask you, YHWH,

"How long will this go on?"

⁴Come back, YHWH! Deliver me!

Rescue me commensurate with your unwavering devotion,

⁵for in death there is no thought of you.

Who praises you in š'ôl?

⁶I am worn out from mourning.

All night long I inundate my bed with tears.

I flood my bedchamber.

⁷My sight blurs because of my anguish.

It dims because of my all-embracing distress (author's translation).

We have treated Psalms 3-7 as if each represents a single or similar experience. In each, the Psalmist is under assault, having his reputation smeared (3.³; 4.2) through accusation of wrongdoing (5.⁸⁻¹⁰; 7.³⁻⁴) and is thought to be outside the purview of God's interest and care (3.²). The Psalmist appeals to God to come to his defense (3.⁷; 4.¹; 5.⁸⁻¹⁰; 6.¹⁻⁵; 7.^{1, 6-11}). The attacks and the Psalmist's pleas last throughout the night (3.⁵; 4.⁸; 5.³; 6.⁶).

With Psalm 6, things seem to reach fever pitch. Psalm 6 seems darker than the other four laments with which it is associated. The Psalmist was certainly unsettled and troubled in Psalms 3-5, but we have not previously heard language as intense as this:

"I am shaken to the core.

I am filled with great terror."

"My sight blurs because of my anguish.

It dims because of my all-embracing distress."

The restful sleep that the Psalmist anticipated in Psalms 3 and 8 is nowhere present in Psalm 6, but has been replaced with sleepless worry and anguish.

"I am worn out from mourning.

All night long I inundate my bed with tears.

I flood my bedchamber."

So low are the Psalmist's spirits that death begins to loom before him as a very real possibility.

“For in death there is no thought of you.
Who praises you in š’ôl?”

This is all new territory for us in our reading of the Psalms. The Psalmist has doubted God (4.⁶), but the Psalmist has never questioned God or His intention to come to his aid. It has always been clear to the Psalmist who is responsible for his trial and suffering. But, in this Psalm, for the first time, the Psalmist seems to consider the possibility that God is somehow in league with his accusers.

“YHWH! Please don’t correct me in anger!
Don’t discipline me while inflamed.”

The Psalmist has had cause to wonder about the number of enemies who attack him.

YHWH! How my adversaries have multiplied!
How numerous are those that rise against me!
How many are those who say of me...”¹

He has wondered at the enemy’s persistence.

“How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?”²

But in this psalm, the Psalmist finds himself wondering about God and His commitment to him. God seems to have abandoned him.

“And I ask you, YHWH,
“How long will this go on?”
Come back, YHWH! Deliver me!”

This Psalm will end on a positive note as the Psalmist recovers his hope that God will come to his rescue. But, as the reader can see, the Psalmist suffers some bleak times between the beginning of the attacks he suffers and their end.

This psalm is numbered among a group of seven psalms that have, at least since the 6th century A.D., been known as Penitential Psalms.³ These Psalms have been used and prayed in the midst of sin and its accompanying repentance. They express the sorrow and worry and darkness that sin produces, the insuppressible trust in God’s unwavering devotion, and the hope of forgiveness and defeat of sin that comes through that divine devotion.

This psalm has been numbered among the Penitential Psalms even though there is no mention of personal sin in it. Perhaps I am not the first to sense that the question of guilt or innocence found in the surrounding psalms is the context for this psalm.

We too might find ourselves passing through bleak times. We too might find our character under assault. We ourselves may question our goodness. We too might find reason to question God and his treatment of us. In this and its four surrounding psalms, we might find expression for the anxiety we face as we join others in questioning our own integrity. But in them we can also find voice to an abiding faith that in the end God will come to our defense and take us to himself because of his unwavering devotion.

¹ Psalm 3.¹⁻²

² Psalm 4.²

³ Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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meditation 2— psalm 6.¹⁻⁷

As I have mentioned on several occasions in the past, I often chaff at our use or misuse of Nephi's encouraging words: "we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."¹ When we have finished with it, it is no longer comforting, but demanding nearly beyond endurance or possibility.² And "grace" is no longer "grace," but pure, unadulterated "justice." It transmutes God from the heroic bestower of "grace" because it is part of his magnanimous character, to the common dispenser of justice toward those who please him because they accomplish the heroic task of doing "all they can do." The confession of sin almost completely disappears and is replaced by an "I've-exerted-my-innate-power-and-done-all-that-I-was-ask-to-do" boast. This is such a perversion of inversion. Now, I don't have any issue with trying our best. But mercy is based upon the character of God rather than the character of the individual.

Nephi's comforting message and my response to our misinterpretation of it comes to mind as I consider today's Lent reading in which the Psalmist pleads for mercy. Such pleading is central to Lent. The Psalmist is "sore vexed." The vexation runs deep into his being. The vexation has brought a loss of sleep and a deep weariness. His nerves are shot. His bodily functions are disrupted. The vexation has become the dominate concern of his prayers. His prayers are accompanied with groans and tears. In his trouble, he knows of only one thing he can do. He pleads relentlessly for mercy. We are, perhaps, not surprised at the Psalmist's resort to God's mercy. Maybe we feel that under similar circumstances we would do the same. But we might wonder at the conditions that the Psalmist places on the requested mercy.

"Oh save me *for thy mercies' sake.*"

No, "Oh save me for I've done everything I can think to do." No appeal to his own heroic, partially successful, but mostly failed efforts. No, the Psalmist does not ask to be saved because of who he is and what he has done. He asks God to save him because of who He, God, is. He knows that mercy is consistent and central to God's character. "Save me *on account of your mercy.*" "Save me *because of the mercy that is natural to Your Being.*" This invocation of the goodness of God rather than one's own "goodness" is central to our salvation. King Benjamin said it as well as any.

"And again I say unto you as I have said before, that as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel."³

During Lent and always thereafter, we would do well to ponder, meditate, and pray about this truth of God's character. But even more, we would do well to approach God in the spirit of full recognition and acceptance that He is drawn to us far more than we are drawn to Him; for it is in the very nature of His Being to draw to others no matter their state and standing before him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ 2 Nephi 25.²³

² For who ever said, "Well, I've done my best; done everything possible"? No, its always, "Shucks, I should'a, could'a done better."

³ Mosiah 4.¹¹

(edition: may 14, 2024)

meditation 3— psalm 6.⁸⁻¹⁰

⁸Leave me alone, all you, who would do me harm,
for YHWH has heard my weeping.

⁹YHWH has heard my cry for help.
YHWH has accepted my prayer.

¹⁰All my enemies will be disappointed and greatly dismayed.
They retreat. They are thwarted, in the blink of an eye (author's translation).

Psalm 6 is the darkest of the five psalms traditionally categorized as lament that stand together between the introductory psalms (1 & 2) and psalm 8, which might be viewed as a sort of apotheosis after the trials of psalms 3-7. Perhaps this darkness contributed to its being traditionally grouped with six other psalms as Penitential.¹

“Lament” has never sat quite right with me as a description of these five psalms—or many of the other psalms so labeled. “Complaint” might be better. And yet, all five psalms also express an expansive level of trust in God. As dark as psalm 6 is, it ends on a high note of trust in God and optimism about the future. The Psalmist is confident that God has heard his “weeping.” God has heard his “cry.” God has “accepted” his prayerful plea for help.

One of the requests that the Psalmists often make and one of the hopes that they have about the future is that their enemies and, indeed, all enemies of what is good and right will be disappointed, frustrated, thwarted, experience failure. The common Hebrew word for this is *bôš*. It is unfortunate that the KJV nearly always translated *bôš* as “ashamed.” When we think of being ashamed, we most often think of an internal feeling or sentiment. We think of embarrassment. But the Psalmist is not concerned with the enemy's feelings. The Psalmist's desire vis-a-vis the enemy is that they not find success in any of their vile and hurtful undertakings.

The enemy, as we have observed often, is a dominant theme in the Psalms. Outside of the Psalmists themselves, and God, Himself, the enemy appears more often than any other individual or group. The enemy portrayed in the Psalms is no cream puff. The enemy is numerous. The enemy is powerful. The enemy is committed and persistent. The enemy is dedicated to violence and harm. The enemy is against what is good and right.

The possibility that the enemy can be reclaimed or that the enemy will, of themselves, cease and desist is seldom considered in the Psalter. There is no thought that the enemy might repent or surrender. They will fight on until they either defeat their foe or are defeated. The enemies are likely mortal, though there are times in the Psalms when they take on an almost demonic intensity—Psalm 22, for example, comes to mind. These mortal enemies may be inspired by and pattern themselves after demonic beings who are inalterably committed to destruction and chaos—one thinks, for example, of Lucifer and his hosts of followers. So committed are they, that there is little or no thought of their repenting.

The Psalmists pray over and over again that the enemy will be disappointed in all their intentions and labors. They pray that the enemy will know only failure. This is not self-righteousness, or mean-spiritedness, or unrighteous judgement. This desire that their enemies and the enemies of all that is good and right fail in their attacks does not even reflect a desire for “vengeance” or “revenge.” It reflects the Psalmists' desire that what is good and right prevail; that evil and wickedness fail; that all that brings

¹ Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143

harm to creation, including God's greatest creation, humankind, ceases.

I, for one, share the Psalmist's desire. I pray every day for the failure of evil and wickedness, with which the world seems to abound. I pray that those who oppose God fail in accomplishing their deviant desires. I don't care whether they are ever embarrassed by their desires and efforts to undermine what is good and right and to harm others. But I do want them to fail. Their failure can't come soon enough or be too severe for my tastes. I do not feel the slightest hesitation to pray,

“^עlōhîm! Knock the fangs out from their mouth.
Shatter the jaws of lions, YHWH!
May they vanish away as flowing water.
When he shoots his arrows, let them become flimsy.
May they be like a slug that oozes away as it crawls along.
Like a woman's miscarried fetus, let them not see the light of day.
May they be like a thornbush that, before it grows thorns
and matures, a blazing heat blasts it.”²

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 14, 2024)

² Psalm 58.⁶⁻⁹

meditation 4— psalm 6.²⁻⁷ (lent)

- ²Have pity on me, YHWH, for I am incapacitated.
Restore me, YHWH, for I am shaken to the core.
- ³I am filled with great terror.
And I ask you, YHWH,
“How long will this go on?”
- ⁴Come back, YHWH! Deliver me!
Rescue me commensurate with your unwavering devotion,
- ⁵for in death there is no awareness of you.
Who praises you in š’ôl?
- ⁶I am worn out from mourning.
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- ⁷My sight blurs because of my anguish.
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“Rescue me *commensurate with your unwavering devotion...*”

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than one's own "goodness" is central to our salvation. King Benjamin said it as well as any.

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³ Mosiah 4.¹¹