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Psalm 6

**To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments;
according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David**

(RSV)

- ¹ **O LORD, rebuke** (condemn) **me not in thy anger,**
nor chasten (punish) **me in thy wrath.**
- ² **Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing** (wasting away);
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are troubled (NRSV: shaking with terror).
- ³ **My soul also is sorely troubled** (NRSV: struck with terror).
But thou, O LORD—how long?
- ⁴ **Turn, O LORD, save my life;**
deliver me (rescue me from death) **for the sake of thy steadfast love.**
- ⁵ **For in death there is no remembrance of thee;**
in Sheol who can give thee praise?
- ⁶ **I am weary with my moaning;**
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
- ⁷ **My eye wastes away because of grief,**
it grows weak because of all my foes.
- ⁸ **Depart from me, all you workers of evil;**
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
- ⁹ **The LORD has heard my supplication;**
the LORD accepts my prayer.
- ¹⁰ **All my enemies shall be ashamed and sorely troubled** (struck with terror);
they shall turn back, and be put to shame in a moment.

Psalm 6 is traditionally attributed to David. His preliminary note to the choirmaster is that the Psalm should be accompanied with stringed instruments. The Sheminith, also mentioned in the superscription to Psalm 12, means “eighth,” and may refer to an eight-stringed instrument.

This Psalm will have to be read in two ways that are ultimately complementary. On the one hand, it is quite clearly the prayer of someone who is severely ill (verse 2), and in perhaps even in danger of dying (verses 4-5), and whose grief is exacerbated by the fact that his enemies gloat over his misfortune (verses 8, 10). By the time he writes this Psalm the LORD has restored his health, and he rejoices that he lives to see his enemies put to shame. On the other hand, Psalm 6 is the first of seven Psalms which the Christian Church has designated as Penitential Psalms (the others are 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143), though there is no mention of sin or guilt in this Psalm. These serve as petitions of contrition and repentance, in the expectation of the LORD’s healing forgiveness. We should read the Psalm in this double perspective.

David addresses his prayer to the LORD, the God who has revealed himself as the God who chooses Abraham and his descendants as his own people and graciously leads them out of their Egyptians bondage. But he interprets his severe illness as a punishment and condemnation by God in his wrath and anger (verse 1).

The New Testament (e.g., Paul's epistle to the Romans 1:18 ff.) also speaks of the wrath of God, as it is revealed in punishment for all human wickedness and sin, and it is very clear that the wages of sin is death. It is through sin that death enters into human experience. And David knows that illness and sickness are harbingers, advance notices, of death. Thus illness is a kind of metaphor for sin; but more, it is also a sign of the impending wrath of God.

David feels himself wasting away (verse 2), and he is frightened in his bones and his soul, in body and spirit (verse 3). In this instance, bones and soul are synonymous terms stressing the Psalmist's total immersion in suffering. The parallelism of the Hebrew verses shows that the grace he longs for is the gift of healing and restoration. Because his need is urgent, the Psalmist pleads with God to be gracious without further delay. It is the cry of impatience; how long must he wait before he can feel the grace of the LORD? Although he feels the LORD's wrath and anger, he pleads for the LORD to deal with him graciously (verse 4).

The sinner who experiences the wrath and anger of God also is filled with terror before the God to whom he must give account, and he longs for the grace and healing of that forgiveness which can only come from the God whom he has offended.

The plea that God turn (verse 4) can mean either that God should turn away from his indifference to the Psalmist's plight, or that he should turn toward the dying man. The effect is the same; the Psalmist is pleading for his life. He asks for deliverance "for the sake of your steadfast love." God indeed is acting in wrath and anger; David asks that God act rather in steadfast love, for steadfast love is that divine characteristic by which his mercy trumps his anger. The LORD abounds in steadfast love, by which he forgives iniquity and transgression (Exodus 34:6-7). God's steadfast love is what the New Testament displays in the cross of Christ where Jesus is our gracious redeemer.

If we are to read Psalm 6 as a Psalm for repentance, we must spiritualize it. That would mean that the Psalmist's grave illness becomes a metaphor for the destructiveness and pain of sin, the healing of the illness becomes a metaphor for deliverance from sin, and his tears and weeping become a metaphor for genuine sorrow for sin.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 6:

Lord God, you love mercy and tenderness; you give life and overcome death. Look upon the weakness and grief of your Church; restore it to health by your risen Son, so that it may sing a new song in your praise; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.