

## **A PSALM FOR SOUL TROUBLE**

### **Psalm 6**

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When I first read Psalm 6 to you it may seem like it's coming out of left field. Maybe you won't even feel one single emotion in your own life that the psalmist is feeling in his. But by the end of the evening hopefully as we've broken this psalm down we'll have a much clearer understanding. Not only of what the psalmist meant but how the Holy Spirit might use this psalm in our own life.

I'm calling this psalm this evening "A Psalm for Soul Trouble." Psalm 5 was a psalm for those in trouble last week. But this one is a special kind of trouble. The psalms are about people in various kinds of trouble.

Psalm for soul trouble.

Psalm 6:1–10 (NIV)

"O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long? Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes. Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace."

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I don't know if you caught it as we were reading through it but there is a dramatic change in the psalm in verse 8. Verses 1–7 are the words of a person who is in a great deal of misery. Suddenly out of nowhere verse 8 picks up in a note of hope. Instead of the psalmist concentrating on what is going wrong, and the deep grief that is in his life, he instantly seemingly has an answer to what is happening and has a new confidence in the Lord that was not reflected in the earlier verses of the psalm.

Perhaps it almost goes without saying that Psalm 6 is the psalm of person deeply troubled. And deeply troubled not so much over some external circumstance against them. But deeply troubled over the state of his own soul, his own spiritual standing with God.

It has been called a penitential psalm. Although the word “sin” is not mentioned in the psalm, it is clear that David is anguishing over the prospect of God's displeasure with him for some reason which David does not identify. God is ready to let him have it on some issues and he is hanging by a thread as he anticipates the action of God against him. Notice the trouble he is in by the phrases that are used in the first seven verses. Phrases like “I am faint... heal me... my bones are in agony...” Friends, when your bones hurt you're in a lot of pain. There's probably no worse pain than bone pain. You can have skin pain and nerve pain but when the bones are hurting... I don't know whether David is being symbolic in terms of expressing hurt or whether there's a literal wasting away of his bones that's occurring. But he is in a lot of pain.

“My soul is in anguish,” he says. Then he cries “How long?” (6:3, NIV). He uses phrases like “Deliver me!” It's clear that along with his anguish there is pessimism. “No one remembers you when he is dead...I am worn out from groaning” (6:5–6, NIV).

Then his grief in his life is one of volubility and physical expression. “All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow” (6:6–7,

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NIV). Remember Moses lived to 120 years and the Scripture says his eyesight was not dimmed, which is an indication that he was able to live full tilt into old age and didn't need glasses. Here, however, is David, at probably mid-stride in life already reflecting that whatever he's going through has so affected even the way he looks at things.

Then he takes note of all of his foes.

We ask as we read this psalm what particular occasion in David's life fits this psalm. There is such a tremendous agitation in his heart over a disturbed relationship he has with God. You go through the life of David in 2 Samuel, you perhaps can make some guesses. For example, his psalm would be an entirely appropriate psalm for him to pray after he had ordered the death of Uriah due to the sin with Bathsheba and his lost child born to Bathsheba. If I were picking instances that I would link to this psalm I should certainly say that would classify. God obviously has every right to be angry with him. There was absolutely no excuse for what he did. His hands had shed blood.

Some have thought that maybe this psalm reflects the tears which he had as he climbed up the Mount of Olives as he was fleeing Jerusalem from Absalom, 2 Samuel 15. Others have suggested that this is 2 Samuel 24 when David had numbered the fighting men of Israel and the Lord said, "Which do you want? Three years of famine, three months of being chased around by your enemies, or three days of plague?" David settles on the short term. Three days he says. That brought great illness and death to a lot of people and perhaps illness to David himself.

So any number of occasions could fit it. We don't know. The Holy Spirit is pleased to not tell us which one because there is a sense in which this psalm is meant to be taken universally by a person who finds himself in David's straights. That is, realizing that there is something on our conscience for which there is no excuse before God for what we did.

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This psalm is called a penitential psalm. There are seven such psalms. They're excellent psalms to use when there has been sin in our life and we want to fall back on a biblical prayer to cope with that sin. Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143. Five of those penitential psalms are clearly written by David. The superscription on the psalm says, "A psalm of David." Only Psalm 102 and Psalm 130 are not ascribed to David.

What are the enduring lessons that come out of Psalm 6?

**I. The first one that I would indicate coming from the psalm is that perhaps the deepest trouble in life is soul trouble.**

This may seem like an untrue statement if we're in other kinds of trouble. Financial trouble or marital trouble, all kinds of trouble. There is probably, however, no greater agony than the agony of soul trouble. Jesus reflected this as He went to the cross and began the task of taking on the sins of the world. He said to the disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful even unto death" (Matthew 26:38). The opening concern of David in the first words of this psalm is God's wrath. David is a good enough theologian to know that anyone that God pours out His wrath upon is lost. God's wrath, when it is poured out, is not redemptive in nature. It is totally punitive. Its purpose is to punish. It is not to rehabilitate. He is guilty of something which God has every right, he feels, to pour His wrath out upon him for.

**II. The second principle that flows out of the psalm is that our only hope lies not in our own innocence but in the mercy and the love of God.**

That's the focus of verses 2 and 3.

Here we're going to spend some time. When David is asking the Lord not to rebuke him in His anger and he begins to ask for mercy he does not come to God and remind God of all the good he'd done for God. David totally cast himself upon the mercy of God. And he simply prays that

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God's discipline will not stem from His wrath but will instead come out of His mercy and His love.

David recognizes that God does discipline. His concern as he faces the prospect of discipline for what he has done wrong is whether the discipline is going to flow out of God's wrath or out of God's loving-kindness, mercy, and love. We know from the Scriptures that God does discipline His children. In fact, Hebrews 12:6–7 says that this is one of the ways we know we are God's child, because the Lord disciplines us. Or chastises us. That can involve actual punishment or the correction that comes with words. But God does discipline us.

What is the difference when God disciplines out of wrath and when God disciplines out of love? The purpose of the discipline will differ. When God disciplines us out of wrath His purpose is to punish. When God disciplines us out of His love His purpose is to either prove, as in the case of Job, or to purify. So that having committed the wrong and being disciplined in the wrong God will purify our conscience and purify our life to do right.

The discipline that God gives—also the degree of the discipline—differs as to whether it flows out of God's wrath or whether it flows out of God's mercy and love. If God punishes out of wrath the punishment is unlimited. And it is overwhelming. There is no recourse from it. There is no life that can emerge from it. But if the punishment arises out of God's love it is what may be called a measured punishment. It exists for a season.

This is why David cries out in verse 3. He's crying out for a measured discipline. "Lord, how long?" He faced this in 2 Samuel 24 when the Lord said, "I am going to discipline you for a disobedient act. How long do you want it? Three years? Three months? Three days?" And David out of that experience—maybe he had more than one of those occasions with God—knew that

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when God disciplined out of mercy and love, His purpose was to purify him and it was for a season. Measured.

The effect of the discipline will also differ. If the discipline is a discipline that flows out of God's wrath then the effect is that it's going to destroy the person disciplined. If the discipline is arising out of God's love the effect is to perfect the one disciplined. Therefore it has a good ending to it.

David is not wasting words or being careless with words when he asks God not to rebuke him in anger or discipline him in wrath. But he calls upon God instead to "save me because of Your unfailing love" (6:4).

We must not expect that our penitence automatically suspends the discipline that is meted out. Sometimes we get the impression that if we have sinned against God in our life that all we need to do is ask for forgiveness and then that's the end of it. The Scriptures teach us that there is a difference between the grace of God and the government of God. The grace of God covers a sin but there are outworkings of that sin that we reap in consequences in our own life.

I see this in families where there has been sin, adultery, breakup. Then in the midst of that a person comes to God and finds God's forgiveness. But that does not nullify automatically the effects that have been produced in children and others that have been impacted by them.

David says "God, discipline me out of Your love."

**III. The third thing that comes out of this psalm is we reach the depths of soul trouble when we reckon on the possibility of eternity without God.**

That's where David is in verses 4–5. He's not only in soul trouble but he's gotten to the point where his grip on life with God forever is slipping from him. "Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?" (6:4–5, NIV).

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Here is where a very important principle comes into focus in interpreting the Bible. You can take this verse 5 standing by itself and say, “I can point to a verse that says there is no life after the grave. Therefore the Bible contradicts itself.” The resolution is to recognize that in the Bible there is a progressive revelation that God gives of Himself and over a period of time as the Scriptures unfold He reveals more and more of His character and more and more of human destiny. We start out with the law and the prophets and as the prophets’ ministry progresses through the history of Israel, the sun rose higher and higher in the sky until it came to Jesus and He shed light fully on salvation, grace, sacrifice, eternity. He especially shed light as it relates to this psalm on the subject of life after death. There does not appear earlier on in the Old Testament to be a real firm grasp of what happens to a person when they die. David in this particular psalm is not really seemingly even conscious of what may be facing him. Except that death will silence him. And that’s the end of life. So he’s crying out, “God, let me live! No one remembers You when he is dead. Who praises You from the grave?”

I’m going to spend some moments on this theme of death and “who praises You from the grave.” There’s some fascinating things that happen as we watch the sun of God’s revelation come up in the Bible on the whole subject of the afterlife.

There’s several words we ought to get into focus. *Sheol*, *hades*, *gehenna*.

*Sheol* is a Hebrew word and it means the place of the dead. *Hades* is the Greek word, which in the New Testament can be used as the equivalent of *Sheol*. *Gehenna* used by Jesus was the place of punishment. It started off geographically as the burial dump of Jerusalem. Jesus lifts it out of time and space and lets it represent that part of *Hades* in which there is eternal punishment.

In the Old Testament as it begins we find *Sheol* pictured in a number of different ways. For example all people go down to *Sheol*. All the dead are in *Sheol*. For example the wicked go down

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to *Sheol* when they die, Psalm 9:17. But they're not the only ones that go down there. The righteous also go there, Psalm 88:3. In the Old Testament in Genesis the patriarchs are described as being gathered to their people. In Genesis 37:35 when Jacob learned of what he thought was Joseph's death the Scripture says he refused to be comforted and said "I shall go down to *Sheol*, to my son, mourning." *Sheol* begins to represent a number of different things. A stronghold for example, a place where you cannot get out, Psalm 9:13. Jesus uses the fact of a strong place: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church" (Matthew 16:18). That would be a foreign thought to the Old Testament because in the Old Testament the gates of hell, the gates of *Sheol*, once you got in that city you weren't getting out. And Jesus says, "The church, My people, are going to crack that place and get out." It's a stronghold.

It's also a place of deep gloom, disorder, and darkness, Job 10:20–22. It is compared in Isaiah 5:14 and Jonah 2:2 and Habakkuk 2:5 to a ravenous beast of prey which opens its mouth and swallows people up. It's also pictured as a vast cavern of dead people. In biblical days they often buried people in caves. So Ezekiel 32:18–32 takes a whole half chapter to talk about where the uncircumcised unrighteous go. They go down to the caverns of *Sheol*.

With Ezekiel we begin to see that the Old Testament, as revelation progresses, divides *Sheol* into two parts. The upper part is not initially given a name in the Old Testament. The lower part begins, more and more as we come to the end of prophets and into Jesus' day, to be called *Hades* or hell. The unrighteous dead go down to hell. Initially *Hades* or *Sheol* referred to all of death. But now the wicked dead are seen as in the lower part. The upper part of *Sheol* is the bosom of Abraham.

When you use those terms that were in Jesus' day. Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom. The rich man was in *Hades*. And a great gulf was fixed between them. Was Lazarus in heaven? No, the

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Scripture does not say he was in heaven. He was in Abraham's bosom. Not in the Father's bosom. Not in the Father's care. But in Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:23).

And Jesus tells the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). But when Jesus is resurrected from the dead and He meets the women and Mary starts to grab Him He says, "Don't keep on touching Me. I have not yet ascended unto My Father" (John 20:17). He's been in paradise. Why hasn't He ascended? Because paradise is down and not up. We get kind of an idea of what Christ really did for us when the New Testament tells us in Ephesians 4:7-10 that Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth and when He ascended He led a host of captives.

What Paul is telling us is that by virtue of the resurrection of Jesus and His ascension into heaven He emptied paradise out and took it with Him. So that when Paul the apostle faces death he is not saying "I am going down to *Sheol*." He is not saying, "I am going to paradise." He's saying "To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord" (see 2 Corinthians 5:8). He is looking forward to going up, not going down.

One other thing should be noted. In Luke 23 Jesus tells the thief on the cross, "Today I'm going to be with you in paradise." That was in *Sheol*, the place of the righteous dead. But then 1 Peter 3:19 tells us that when Jesus was taken down from the cross He went down and He preached to the spirits that were in prison who had been disobedient in Noah's day. What was Jesus doing? He also went down to the lower part of hell. What was He preaching? There are two words in the Greek for "preaching." One means to proclaim or to announce. The other means to preach with an aspect of saving, to preach so that someone may be saved. To announce good news. When Jesus went to the lower part of hell He did not go to announce good news. He went to make a proclamation. The proclamation He made was "What Noah preached to you was right. I'm here

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to seal your doom.” He pronounced, he proclaimed in *Sheol*. The New Testament gives us evidence that Christ in His death went to paradise, the place of the righteous dead. And He went down to *Hades* (1 Peter 3:19) and as a result of His resurrection and ascension He totally emptied out Abraham’s bosom or paradise so that now as Christians when we die we don’t look to going down, we look to going up.

We don’t understand all the mystery that’s associated with the resurrection of the body and how our spirits after death can be immediately with Christ. Yet the completion of our body waits. But David had none of this kind of knowledge when he says what he says in Psalm 6:5. As he looked at the afterlife he saw little ground for hope. In fact we know from reading the Old Testament what some of his ideas were of *Sheol*. He believed that death silences our worship, Psalm 6:5. There are five references in all in the Old Testament to the aspect that *Sheol* is one in which no one could praise God. The place of the dead. Psalm 6:5, 30:9, 88:10 and 12, 115:7, Isaiah 38:18–19. There are people today who say, “I would serve God for sure if I knew that there was really an afterlife. I’d want to get ready.”

It’s interesting how David’s perspective on that was. As he is intervening with God to not experience God’s judgment he says, “God, please don’t pour Your wrath out on me because if I die I won’t be able to praise You and I want to be able to praise You in this life”(6:1–5). He totally flips the thing on end and does kind of reverse thinking. Instead of “I’d praise God if I knew there was an afterlife,” David is saying, “This is the only life I’ve got. Let me praise You in this life.”

He knows as an Old Testament person that *Sheol* shatters our plans. Psalm 146:4 gives indication of that. *Sheol* cuts us off from God and from one another. Psalm 88:5, “God no longer remembers us in *Sheol*.” And *Sheol* makes an end to us, Psalm 39:13. No wonder David, as he

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contemplates the future, is very pessimistic at this point. “No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”(6:5, NIV).

The New Testament ends up in Revelation 21 by telling us ultimately this whole place of *Hades*, which is now totally the place of the unrighteous dead, a New Testament saint no longer goes to. But this whole kingdom is thrown at the end of the day with death into the lake of fire. It’s an awful prospect to contemplate an eternity of nonexistence. That’s what David faced. Even worse would it be from the New Testament perspective. To face an eternity without God.

He knows his sin has brought him to that place. It’s an honest recognition. It’s not a popular theme today to talk about—punishment and hell and separation from God. The emphasis today is on being positive. But the New Testament has the view that the world is on fire and it’s a mistake to tell people in a building that’s burning down when they can get out of the room, to stay in their room and think good thoughts. If the building is on fire, tell people to get out.

So the psalmist reflects this terrible sense of what it’s like to face an eternity without God.

**IV. This brings a fourth principle out of Psalm 6 which is the prospect of our lostness brings the deepest of sorrows.**

By the time you get to verses 6 and 7 in this psalm David is now really getting emotional about what he’s going through. He says, “I’m worn out from groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.”

**V. Then there comes this fifth principle of the psalm. The dark night of the penitent heart ends with assurance.**

Suddenly after he has contemplated the prospect of being disciplined out of God’s wrath and come to God and pled for God’s mercy and then considered his end and become all the more deep in his trouble and then gone to the extent of emotion inexplicably there is a change in his

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attitude. “Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace” (Psalm 6:8–10, NIV). The tone changes.

What has happened? Some think when this psalm was used in corporate worship that maybe one person sort of led with the choir accompanying in the background and sang the first seven verses.

That was their lament, their penitence as they came to God. Then with the beginning of verse 8 there was a different voice coming through speaking to them. Still using the words of David but cutting in this terrible feeling of soul’s trouble and saying, “God has heard you. God forgives you.” That may well have been how the psalm was used in its original setting. We don’t know.

But it is for sure—and I found this to be consistent with the grace of God—that there comes a time when we have felt we have so let God down and failed that when we have really been at the end of ourselves and been deeply repentant, there is a moment that comes when God gives His assurance. “I will discipline you out of mercy. I will hear you. It will be ok. You can get up from this place of repentance with joy in your heart.”

The psalmist has that experience. Good for David that he didn’t start out the psalm by addressing his enemies. He waits and talks to God first. When he has talked to God first and gets his own life in order and resolved his own struggle with God, he’s able to face his adversaries in life. And he confidently expects that God is now going to give him victory over external forces since the Lord has given him victory in his internal life.

We have little time in our busy world for introspection but Scriptures talk a lot about introspection. Out of the time in God’s presence come all of the ghosts of the past that haven’t been dealt with in forgiveness.

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#### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, all of us here need mercy. That's why when we come to You, we plead the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We have something that David didn't have. We have David's Son whoever lives to make intercession for us. So we don't have to be in doubt like David was as to whether or not You would answer mercifully. Thank You, Lord. Lord, when we draw close to You, You really throw a floodlight on our life. You make us very uncomfortable with ourselves. When we lived before we became a Christian we weren't nearly so troubled with the things we'd done as we are now. Things that happened to us as Christians that are wrong would have never troubled us when we were not Christians. Then our conscience was not alive to God. But now our conscience is alive to God. We can scarcely live with sin. Help us, Lord, to never be comfortable with sin in our life. Help us to treat each sin as a betrayal of massive proportion. Each small fault, may it be to us like the betrayal of Judas. May it horrify our soul. May it be abhorrent to us. May we like Isaiah tremble in Your presence. Deliver us, Lord, from the easy righteousness which takes satisfaction in comparing our well-being with someone else's perceived righteousness and jotting down that we're in favorable shape because we stack up better than they. Help us to go through that exercise of soul that the psalmist goes through that sees our own life in light of the absolute moral purity that dwells in Your presence. And horrifies us that we could have treated Your grace cheaply. Save us, Lord, from cheap easy platitude in Your presence. Which would commend ourselves to you. Instead we come as did the psalmist and ask humbly and penitently always for Your merciful kindness to us. Lord, You've commended a man who prayed that way when he said, "Be merciful O God, unto me a sinner." You said that man who prayed that prayer went to his house justified because he was an honest man in the presence of eternal God. Give us that honesty and that deep desire in our heart to drink from the well of Your righteousness and to

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let our soul be purified by You; at the end when we're all done praying, may our hearts rise  
cleansed and free and thanking You for Your great mercy. According to Your great mercy You  
have loved us. Be with those here this evening, Lord, and bring Your healing and Your grace  
into every area of our lives. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.