

Defiant hope on the dark nights of the soul

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Date: 02 February 2020

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 0 0] we continue this morning our series in the book of Psalms, looking at these first 12 Psalms, and we come today to Psalm 6, so do please make sure you've got that open in front of you if you can. I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I awfully forebode, I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die, or be better, it appears to me. So wrote Abraham Lincoln on the 23rd of January, 1841.

For Lincoln, that depth of sorrow was a comparatively short-lived experience, but for others it is more enduring. The great 19th century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, he endured waves of depression throughout his adult life. I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for, he said in a sermon in November 1858.

Ed Welch, in his helpful book on depression, he offers the following as part of his description of the nature of depression. Certainty. The only certainty is that misery will persist. If certainty of any good thing ever existed, and you can't remember when it did, it is replaced by constant doubt. You doubt that you are loved by anyone. You doubt your spouse's intentions. You doubt your spouse's fidelity. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you doubt the presence of Christ. You doubt the very foundation of your faith. For some people it is this kind of black despair. For others it's much greyer, perhaps less piercingly awful, but no less terrible. Not a bottomless abyss, but a sort of bleak, featureless plain. A cloud of grey fog that envelops, and nothing holds any interest. You are a barely walking zombie. Everything is drab, and lifeless, and tired. Why work? Why get out of bed? Why do anything? Why commit suicide? Nothing seems to matter. You're afraid that if one of your children died, you still wouldn't feel anything. Depression is a very varied experience, but it is all too common.

Estimates vary, but something like one in ten will be affected by depression during their lifetime. I don't think anyone's done statistical studies of it, but I don't think that rate is much different among Christians than in the population at large. This is a significant issue that we would do well to consider in light of the gospel. Now this is not an area where I have personal experience to offer you.

I've been sad. I've been melancholy. There have been times where I might have said I was feeling depressed, but they have been nothing compared to those kind of descriptions that I started with. I don't have personal insights to offer you. But folks, what you need if you are feeling these things, what you need if, like me, you want to understand and help and support those who are feeling these things, what you need is not my insights. What you need is God's insight into this experience. And I suggest to you that that is what we have here in this sixth psalm that we look at this morning. What we see here is a description of a man who is in the depths of sorrow, a man who is experiencing a dark night of the soul. And we see here in this psalm a description of how he responded to that experience. And we see the hope that he found.

[4 : 0 7] So this morning we'll consider first the depths of sorrow that we find here in this psalm, and then the response to sorrow, and then finally the hope that is to be found in the midst of sorrow. So the depths of sorrow, the response to sorrow, and hope in the midst of sorrow. So first of all, what is David feeling?

Verses 2 and 3, we see that his bones are in agony. His soul is in deep anguish. The word here for agony and anguish, the word in the Hebrew is actually the same applied to both bones and soul, which the NIV slightly obscures, which is understandable because there isn't really a satisfactory single English word that works to describe the experience for both bones and soul.

The ESV uses troubled for both, which has the advantage of being the same, but is utterly inadequate to express the extremity of what David is feeling. Troubled is far too vanilla a word. This

is more than feeling troubled. Agony, anguish. These capture the sense far better. Terrified would be a fair translation as well.

And David applies this. He applies this to bones and to soul. Not in the sense of kind of two separate, distinct areas, but rather a kind of all-encompassing view of himself. Every aspect of his being is suffering.

Mental anguish is so great that he cannot think straight because of it. We cannot say. Often we try to completely separate body and mind and soul, don't we? And a physician kind of needs to do that if he's going to hone in on the underlying problem. But for God and for us as believers, there's a greater sense perhaps of the person as a unified whole. The agony here is all-encompassing.

[6 : 09] And that agony, according to the second half of verse 3, that agony is compounded by the fact that there is no end in sight. There's this kind of broken, incomplete sentence. How long, O Lord? How long?

How long? Let this cry, how long? It's a common cry for the psalmists. For instance, Psalm 13. How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts? And day after day, have sorrow in my heart. How long will my enemy triumph over me? Psalm 74. We are given no signs from God, no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be. How long will the enemy mock you, God?

Will the foe revile your name forever? Here in Psalm 6, that question, how long, is incomplete. He can't even resolve and clarify what he's asking, what it is that he wants brought to an end.

But I think the implication is fairly clear. How long, God, are you going to let this state of affairs continue? How long will you let this agony persist? How long must I keep suffering?

The psalms ask these how long questions over and over. But as Derek Kidner points out, the psalms that ask these questions also provide an answer to them. He says all of these, all of God's delays, all of the things of which we ask how long, all of these are maturings, either of the time or of the man. So for the first maturing of the time, he starts, cites Psalm 37. Psalm 37 is concerned throughout with this question of how long, and it responds to that with a certainty that there will be no future for the wicked, and invites us to be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

[8 : 20] And on the maturing of the man, you could see verse 67 of Psalm 119. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word. Time, particularly a difficult time, time cultivates obedience, matures the person. So Kidner's right that there is always an answer to the question, how long? Why do you permit this to persist? There is always an answer to that implied question, why is there this delay? But the fact that the answer is always there doesn't mean that we need to always glibly and immediately try to offer such an answer. The fact that the answer exists doesn't mean that it's wrong to feel the problem of the delay. It is uncomfortable when it looks like God is not acting. When it looks like God is unconcerned, we feel it. And here in Psalm 6, we see that God is not harmed by us coming to him with that sense of wrongness, with that sense of why the delay. God is not distressed by us coming to him with a desire that he will act.

We saw this a few years ago when we looked at the book of Habakkuk, where he grapples with the delay of God not acting to punish the wicked and not acting to vindicate the righteous. Friends, you and I in the midst of our sorrow and our struggles, we can ask, we can pray, oh Lord, how long?

David's description of the difficulty of his circumstances, it continues, kind of interwoven with the pleas for help. Verse 6, he describes his uncontrollable weeping and his sleepless nights.

All night long, I flood my bed with weeping. In fact, the wording he uses suggests not only that the mattress is soaked through his flood, but actually that the water levels of his tears have risen so far that the bed is floating around as if it was on a sea. Now, obviously this is hyperbole, but actually most of us can relate to the feeling that's expressed here, can't we?

Of crying so much that it feels like your body could not contain the amount of water that is coming out. Crying so much that your eyes are sore and inflamed. Weeping all night when you know you should be sleeping, when you desperately want to be sleeping. Uncontrollable weeping. Well, David knew that kind of experience. So often, for so many who suffer in all kinds of different ways, so often it is the long hours of the night that are the hardest, isn't it? As you feel isolated and alone, as though the warmth of human companionship is absent, and even the darkness itself feels oppressive.

[11 : 26] And then there's all that follows on from that sleepless night, all that goes with that, that gray fog of gloom and nothingness. The days that you're so tired you can barely get out of bed and get dressed. The idea of driving to work is an insurmountable barrier. The days when you feel so

low that the idea of seeing people at church and trying to make small talk is just inconceivable. And so you stay at home instead, and you hope that nobody will notice that you're gone, while simultaneously also hoping that everybody misses you. And if nobody does miss you, well, that's confirmation that nobody really cares, and all your worst fears are confirmed. And it spirals, and it cycles, and the loss of sleep, and the uncontrollable, piles in, and it builds, and it grows. Our grief in these difficult times, whatever the cause of it, these dark nights of the soul, they can be paralyzing, can't they?

Here's one more part of David's description of his experience, one final aspect that we should consider, and that's how David relates to God. We kind of skipped past verse 1 at the start, but let's go back there now.

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. Opinion is divided as to what's going through David's head at this point.

And so historically, down through the ages of the church, this has been classified as a penitential psalm, a psalm coming to say sorry, to ask for forgiveness, like Psalm 38 or Psalm 51, forgiveness of sin.

That may be true. Certainly David is conscious of the sinfulness of his heart in general times. We know that from elsewhere. He doesn't think he's perfect.

[13 : 12] But unlike Psalm 38 and Psalm 51, the idea of sin, if it's here at all, it quickly fades away. There isn't a description of specific sins that weigh heavy, for instance.

Alternatively, it might be that he's praying, that he's praying, God, don't be angry with me for bringing this prayer to you.

Maybe it seems presumptuous of me, a mere mortal. Yes, a suffering mortal, but a mortal all the same. It seems presumptuous to complain of this experience, because I know, God, that you've let this happen.

So God, don't be angry with me for coming with this prayer. Maybe. But I'm worried that if that's true, then that means David is approaching God as an unpredictable tyrant who might fly off in a fit of rage, rather than approaching him as a loving father.

So it doesn't quite sit right for me as what David's going to be doing, and certainly not as a model to follow. Here's my alternative.

[14 : 24] Remember that quote earlier about certainty. Nothing is certain anymore. You doubt the presence of Christ. You doubt the very foundation of your faith. You doubt on these dark nights of the soul, I think you doubt the goodness of God.

If he exists at all, then in your head he is that angry tyrant who's full of wrath and anger and nothing else. And God has turned his back on you. So I think David does here feel like God is angry with him.

But I think it's an effect of his sickness. Not that his sickness is actually caused by God's displeasure. It's that that's what he's spiraled round to in his head of thinking that God is angry with him.

And I'm sure most of us, we have. We have days and seasons when we believe that God could not possibly care for us. We believe that we are too wicked for him to contemplate redeeming.

Days when we despair of deliverance. In many ways, this can be the most crushing blow, I suspect. That even as you know in theory about God's love and mercy and grace, still in the depths of those dark nights of the soul, God feels like a distant tyrant who is angry with you and who is permitting or even deliberately inflicting this tremendous suffering.

[15 : 58] When that is how it feels, how do we respond to this kind of sorrow? What do we say to ourselves? What do we say to one another in these dark days and these nights as the tears flow?

I think often, I think when we're faced with suffering and we're faced with struggles, I think often we try and explain it away.

We try and reinterpret it. We see the evidence of a fallen world, a world in which evil too often holds sway. And we feel the evidence of that evil in our own lives.

And we give it a more palatable name. We describe it as divine discipline, as a test of faith, as an opportunity for growth. Now suffering can be all of those things.

There is good reason why we talk about it in those terms. After all, Paul writes to the Romans, not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance.

[17:03] Perseverance, character, and character, hope. And he writes to the Philippians to rejoice in the midst of suffering. So it isn't wrong to see suffering in these kind of terms.

As divine discipline, as a test of faith, as an opportunity for growth. It is these things. But that is not all. And when we focus on that aspect of it, there's a danger that we are ungracious and ungentle with one another and ungentle with ourselves.

the danger that we lose sight of another important biblical truth. Suffering is not good.

Evil is not good. The fallenness of this world is not something to be celebrated. And we have to retain that sense of the fundamental wrongness of pain and suffering and oppression.

The Psalms, God's word as a whole, uses that kind of language. God's people cry out to him to bring an end to their suffering. They cry out for him to intervene on behalf of the oppressed.

[18:16] And when evil and oppression and suffering become in our minds only another means by which God accomplishes his purposes, then we lose sight of just how contrary to God's will, just how at odds with his intention for his world and his people, these evidences of evil actually are.

This is not how things should be. When Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

When Joseph said that, the fact that God brought good doesn't remove the fact that what his brothers wrought was evil. To say with Paul, in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purposes.

Romans 8, 28. It is to affirm that evil, whether it is natural evil or human evil, whether it is physical or emotional, to affirm that evil does not have the upper hand.

God can reshape the evil that we experience and bring forth good. To let our broken lives and our disordered world move back to the fullness of his purpose.

[19:41] So we affirm that evil, suffering and oppression will not win. They can be reshaped. But we also mourn their present reality and seek to put an end to suffering in any way that we can.

Wilson says, we can and should allow distress and oppression to provide opportunities to shape our dependence on God, to create a fierce loyalty to him. But they remain evil just the same and do not become good by the fact that God can turn them to our good.

So I suggest we ought not to fall into that Christian error of treating evil as if it were good. There is also another error that we must avoid and that is, I guess, the prevailing error of our age in this regard.

To regard the pain we experience as something to just be dismissed as part of the necessary fabric of a godless world of chance and accident.

That it is just what happens. That's just how life is. Que sera, sera. To throw our hands up in despair. Evil is just part of life.

[21:00] Well, no, that is not our attitude. The psalmists, they have this sense of rightness, of what should be, that demands that God act to establish his intended order.

And so the psalmists feel free to come and to ask God, what are you doing? Where are you? And as they hurl these questions at God, they align themselves with the kind of worldview that the world in which we live now is not the world as God intended it to be.

That this world is broken and it needs divine help to be restored. So the psalmists, they consistently come and they appeal to God to remove oppression and suffering and evil and restore life as it should be.

That doesn't mean they're unrealistic. They don't think that that restoration is going to magically happen just as they desire. But what they are is consistently clear in their declaration that it ought to be so.

So what does David model for us in the midst of this dark night? What is the better response to sorrow? Have mercy on me, Lord. Verse 2.

[22:22] Heal me, Lord. Verse 2. Turn, Lord, and deliver me. Save me because of your unfailing love. Verse 4. What does David do with these tears that flood out throughout the night?

He brings them to God. He comes and he appeals for grace and for mercy. He's dependent upon God's unmerited favor, the mercy of verse 2. In his weakness, he needs God.

He feels faint, the agony of his bones, the unending tears. And so he asks for mercy on the basis of his weakness. Psalm 103 tells us, God knows how we are formed and remembers that we are dust.

It's because God knows our weaknesses. It's because God knows what we are going through. Knows our every experience. It is because he knows what we are that he has compassion on his children.

David knows, verse 4, his hope is in God's unfailing love. The unfailing, steadfast love here, this hesed, the covenant mercy that we've encountered before, not least in Psalm 5 a couple of weeks ago.

[23 : 34] This is his hope. David knows his faithfulness is fundamental to God's character. There's no getting away from it. There's nothing, nothing more vital to you and to me than that we know the character of our God.

It is that that means David can bring this prayer because he knows God's character and we may do likewise. So that's David's first argument as he appeals for mercy.

He appeals to God's character. But the second one in verse 5 is a little less usual, isn't it? Among the dead, no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave?

Here David argues, he argues on the basis of God's glory, doesn't he? On one level, on one level, the greatest tragedy of human death is not that people are missed by their loved ones.

The greatest tragedy is that their voice is no longer heard here on earth proclaiming God's name and glorifying him and singing in praise and adoration. For if man's chief end is not only to enjoy God but to glorify him forever, that is hindered by death.

[24 : 55] And so, argues David, God would be wise to preserve him. I wonder how you feel about the idea of offering arguments and reasons in your prayers as to why God should act as you wish.

That's a whole other topic that I don't really have time to dig into because it's already later than it should be at this point. But very briefly, here's what Dale Ralph Davis has to say.

I don't want to reduce prayer to an exercise in logic but I would guess that too few believers give much thought to the use of arguments in prayer. None of us can fail to see how highly emotional Psalm 6 is.

And yet, with the place that it gives to argument in prayer, Psalm 6 is also highly rational. Pushing ourselves to bring reasons for our requests may help us see how shoddy some of our petitions are. Or it may encourage us if we seem to muster a cogent case. It might show us that we are praying the wrong things if we can't argue for them.

[26 : 05] Folks, if you can't pray your prayer as, Lord, do this thing that I'm asking because it accords with your revealed will and character, then maybe we shouldn't be praying it at all.

Our knowledge of who God is, it guides our prayers. It causes us, first of all, to come, to come in prayer. But our knowledge of God's character also equips us to pray prayers in line with his will.

So David's chief response to his sorrow is to come before his God in prayer. Okay. Deaths of sorrow, proper response to sorrow, a few thoughts on hope in the midst of sorrow.

Firstly, there is hope to be found in shared experience. How are we so very far awry? Okay.

There is hope in shared experience. Friends, when the black dog is at your door, when you are in the cave of your depression, when your bed is flooded with tears, when your mind is full of grey fog, when that is your experience, it can be unbelievably isolating.

[27 : 20] That even if people are nearby, they feel distant and remote and disconnected. And it is easy to believe that no one understands, no one else feels this way. But friends, that is not the reality of the situation.

there is hope to be found in shared experience. That King David experienced some of what perhaps you are experiencing. David knew those dark nights of the soul.

And friends, this is not an unsuccessful, weak person. King David experienced this and was mightily used by God.

Depression is not a sign of weakness. darkness. Martin Luther, the great reformer, instrumental in that recovery of gospel truth after centuries of darkness. Martin Luther was inclined to depression.

There were seasons when he doubted his salvation. There were days when he doubted the rightness of the reformation that he was bringing about. I could mention countless others.

[28 : 22] It may help you to remember you are not, in fact, alone. Others have been where you are. Others have known similar sorrows. And in many cases, God has used them wonderfully, despite and even in the midst of, even through, even because of that very experience.

It may help you to know of others down through history and in the pages of God's Word. And I suggest it may also help you to know that you are not alone today. Folks, if this is your experience

right now, please hear you are not alone.

that there are others who know something of your pain and sorrow. I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up if you've ever taken antidepressants. But I strongly suspect that if I did, many of us here would be surprised at the number of hands that would go up and surprised at whose hands would go up.

I will not ask you to put your hands up here in public, but I will ask you this. Be honest with one another. Don't hide your pain and struggles. Maybe you think you're protecting other people, but I do not believe it is for the common good that you keep your struggles to yourself.

The knowledge that others are struggling or the knowledge that others have come through and out of this valley of despond, that knowledge can be a great encouragement. So if this psalm resonates with your experience today, please know you're not alone.

[29 : 55] Please know that there are people to talk to. Reach out to me, to the other elders, to medical professionals. Speak to someone, please. There is hope in shared experience. Secondly, there is hope in the God who hears.

Have a look at the last few verses of the psalm. Suddenly, suddenly after all the pain and the sorrow and the tears, suddenly there is confidence from verse 8.

David confidently dismisses the evildoers. He asserts God has heard him. He does accept his prayer and the enemies will be dealt with. This change of tone is so abrupt, even jarring, that some suggest two different psalms of being kind of combined together.

Others say maybe at this point a priest, a prophet has offered a word of encouragement and therefore David comes to this fresh way of thinking. Well maybe, but I think it's simpler than any of that.

Why the change? Because God has answered his prayer. David's attitude changes because God is at work. He knows God really has heard him. His cry for mercy has not gone unanswered.

[31 : 09] He knows that the anguish that he felt in his bones and his soul at the start of the psalm that that anguish will never be the lot of his enemies, verse 10. He knows that where he began with frustration calling out, Lord, how long will you not act?

Now in verse 10, the enemies will be suddenly put to shame. Now sadly, it may not be always quite so obvious to us when God has heard and answered.

but still we can rest confidently in his promises and in his character. God does promise to hear and to answer and God always keeps his promises and therefore it's right and it's proper that we feel this same kind of confidence that David feels here in these last few verses because our hope is in the God who hears.

Thirdly and finally, we cannot pass on from this psalm without considering Jesus. The New Testament tells us Jesus himself had the kind of experience that David has here in this psalm. Hebrews 5, during the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

[32 : 32] Jesus himself prayed with cries and with tears. Think about the garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus was in anguish such that his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Folks, Jesus knew the breadth and the depth of human experience. He knew the pain of being parted by death from those whom he loved. He knew the mental anguish of being locked into this course of action that brought him so much great pain even as he continued to deliberately choose that course of action.

Jesus knew sleepless nights. He knew the pain of being deserted and being abandoned by those who were closest to him. Friends, as you go through the dark nights of the soul, when you flood your beds with tears, know please that Jesus knows and understands your pain.

I don't want to pretend this morning that there is an easy answer. I wouldn't want to suggest for a moment that true Christians are never long depressed because the evidence of history is clearly to the contrary.

Like Paul's thorn in the flesh, maybe you will continue to suffer. But here is what I say. God knows the depths of your sorrow.

[34 : 03] There is great value in responding to that sorrow in prayer. And there can yet be hope. Hope not only for an end to the sorrow, though for that we pray, but also hope in this life, hope in the midst of sorrow.

Hope in that shared experience with other believers, but especially hope in the God who understands. Hope in the God who entered into human existence. Hope in the God who hears and answers prayer.

Let's pray to this God. Lord God, almighty, Lord God, our heavenly Father, Lord, you know every detail of our experience.

You know our darkest nights. you know those of us in this room who are struggling with grief, with sorrow, with sickness, with oppression.

You know that experience in all of its fullness, having experienced these things yourself. Lord, thank you that in these things we are not alone.

[35 : 24] that you place us in the family of the church, in the company of the saints. That we have your Holy Spirit present with us at work within us.

And that we stand before a God who knows us and who loves us. Lord God, keep that spark of hope alive in us, we ask.

Give us that kind of defiant hope that even in the midst of the sorrow we may yet hope in you.

We may yet be of service to you. Lord, heal us we ask. Amen.