

Psalm 6

Monday Week 1 Readings

The psalmist is grievously ill. His physical pain is accompanied by inner anguish and fear of death. He is feeling vulnerable before his enemies. Seeing his suffering as God's punishment for his sins, he turns to YHWH and pleads for forgiveness so that he will not die. For this reason Psalm 6 is traditionally listed among the penitential psalms (along with Psalms 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143). Setting aside the aspect of sin, the lyrical power of the pleading recalls the description of Jesus' prayer by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death.

– Hebrews 5:7

The title reads: 'To the leader: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith. A Psalm* of David'. 'Sheminith' means 'eighth' and seems to refer to a musical mode.

**¹YHWH*, rebuke me,
but not in your an-
ger*; discipline me,
but not in your
wrath*!**

Translating poetry is notoriously difficult. We can get close to the ideas, but it is not possible to reproduce the rhyme and rhythm of the original. It may interest the reader to hear how this verse sounds in Hebrew. Using English letters, it goes like this:

YHWH 'al-b^e'ap^ekā tôkîhānî,
w^e 'al-bah^amāt^ekā t^eyass^erānî

See the article 'Anger of YHWH' in the Introduction. The sentiments of this verse are echoed by Jeremiah:

Correct me, YHWH, but in just measure; not in your anger,
or you will bring me to nothing.

– Jeremiah 10:24

**²Be gracious* to me,
YHWH, for I am
languishing.
Heal me, YHWH, for
my bones are shaking
with terror.**

His pain is mental as well as physical. He pleads for YHWH's favour and healing. See the article 'Grace' in the Introduction. The image behind 'languishing' is that of a flower losing its bloom. If you would like to get a feel for the sound of the Hebrew lyric, it goes like this:

honnēnî YHWH kî 'umlal 'ānî
r^epā'ēnî YHWH kî nibh^alû 'ašāmāy
w^e napšî nibh^alâ me'ōd w^e 'atâ YHWH 'ad-mātāy

**³My whole being*
is racked with pain
while you, YHWH –
how long?**

'Whole being' in verse 3 translates Hebrew *nepeî*, and refers to the self as vital, longing for fullness of life (see the article 'Being' in the Introduction).

‘Life’ translates nepeš. The psalmist wants not to die. He wants to be able to feel the pulse of life once again. See the articles ‘Kindness’ and ‘Saving Help’ in the Introduction. Compare the following from Jeremiah:

Heal me, YHWH, and I shall be healed;
save me, and I shall be saved.

– Jeremiah 17:14

The psalmist is bargaining with God. If he dies, God will be the loser for God will miss out on the psalmist’s praise! See the article ‘Resurrection’ in the Introduction on the development of Jewish ideas on life after death and the resurrection. In later Judaism the idea expressed here gave way to the belief that those who die in communion with God live on beyond death. The resurrection of Jesus made this a central tenet of Christianity.

The Psalmist is weeping because of all the opposition he is facing. We find similar sentiments in the following:

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to YHWH: Remember now, YHWH, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

– Isaiah 38:2-3

My life is spent with sorrow,
and my years go by in sighing;
my strength fails because of my guilt,
and my bones waste away.

– Psalm 31:10

Jerusalem weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her.

– Lamentations 1:2

Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night!
Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!

– Lamentations 2:18

‘My eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of my people.
My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite,
until YHWH from heaven looks down and sees.
My eyes cause me grief
at the fate of all the young women in my city.
Those who were my enemies without cause
have hunted me like a bird.

– Lamentations 3:48-52

**⁴Turn, YHWH, hold
back my life (from the
grave); in your kind-
ness* save* me.**

**⁵For in the realm of
death no one calls on
you; in Sheol who can
give you praise?**

**⁶I am exhausted with
my groaning; all night
long I drench my pil-
low with tears; I soak
my couch with weep-
ing.**

**⁷My eyes waste away
with grief; life is ebb-
ing away. Everything is
against me.**

Evil shall not be victorious

⁸Depart from me, all you who do evil. YHWH has heard my weeping.

⁹YHWH has heard my supplication. YHWH has welcomed my prayer.

¹⁰They fall back, all my enemies, struck with terror; they are foiled, confounded.

The psalmist has certainty in his heart because he knows YHWH. His plea is in response to a movement of grace:

‘Come, seek his face!’

My heart says to you:

I am seeking your face, YHWH.

– Psalm 27:8

He is confident that those who do evil will not prevail. They cannot avoid the effects of their sin.

Jesus revealed a God who does not hold back love from a sinner. Love, however, cannot impose itself. God respects our freedom, and if we obstinately reject grace, we cannot avoid the consequences of this rejection. Of those who fail to love, Jesus says:

I will declare to them, I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.

– Matthew 7:23 = Luke 13:27

Jesus is not rejecting anyone. Rather, he is warning us that it matters how we live, and that what we do has consequences now, and, if we are obstinate, for ever. God respects our freedom, and constantly pours grace upon us that we may turn away from sin. If we are obstinate in rejecting his love we, too, will ‘fall back, struck with terror’.