

Introduction

Psalm 6, a brief psalm listed among the “Songs of Prayer,” is more specifically one of the prayers of sickness and healing. This psalm is among the seven penitential prayers of the early church (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). Psalm 6 is attributed to David, either written or commissioned by David, possibly for performance at the Jerusalem Temple. The psalm begins with instructions for its musical performance, which direct the psalm to be played on a stringed instrument, and the word “Sheminith” most likely refers to a particular octave in which the song is to be played.¹ The language in the beginning of the psalm implies that it was written by a sick person, probably one who believed that this sickness was caused by God as a punishment for sin. Thus, at its very center, this psalm is a plea for healing of the psalmist’s physical and spiritual unrest by the life-sustaining mercy of God.

Structure

Psalm 6 can be divided into four sections for analysis, though there is some dispute regarding the points at which scholars divide the text. Hans-Joachim Kraus divides the Psalm this way: v.1-Call to YHWH; vv.2-5-Petitions of the Prayer; vv.6f-Description of the Situation of Distress; vv.8-10-Witness to Being Heard.² Other scholars divide the text into four sections thusly: vv.1-3; vv.4-5; vv.6-7; vv.8-10. For these purposes, Kraus’ division will be most useful.

This psalm was most likely written according to an already established

¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary Psalms 1-50 vol.19* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 90.

² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 160.

formula for songs of this sort. Because it is attributed to David, some scholars speculate that Psalm 6 may have even been written and performed in the Jerusalem Temple; still, we have no exhaustive evidence to prove such a claim. In any case, the psalm follows a similar formula to those that we notice in other laments, including the book of Jeremiah.³

An example of the formula we notice of Psalm 6 is the reverse inclusio observed in vv.2-4 and v.10. In v.4, the psalmist is literally asking God to “turn” from this wrathful rebuke. In vv.2-3, the psalmist says, “for my bones are shaking with terror (v.2)” and “My soul is struck with terror (v.3).” Later in v.10, the psalmist says, “all my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror; they shall turn back...” In this reversal of fortunes, the rebuke and terror that the psalmist has been experiencing is now cast upon the psalmist’s enemies instead.

Another example of the formulaic structure is the description of the psalmist’s symptoms in vv.2-3 and vv.6-7. In vv.2-3, the psalmist says, “my bones are shaking with terror.” Then, later in vv. 6-7, the psalmist says, “every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with weeping.” Kraus suggests that this hyperbolic description of the psalmist’s anguish is characteristic of the lamenting formula, in that it presents symptoms that are true of every illness, not just the one specific to this individual.⁴

Content

v.1-Call to YHWH

In v.1, The psalmist calls to YHWH out of great strife. As many scholars have noted, the language used to describe the plight of the psalmist implies some degree of guilt. Most ancient people believed that physical

³ Ibid, 161.

⁴ Ibid, 163.

ailment was directly related to a spiritual condition, be it guilt of having committed sin, having been cursed, or some other spiritual activity. The psalmist's use of the words "rebuke" and "discipline" in v.1, imply that the psalmist does indeed believe this illness to be the result of having wronged the LORD or broken a covenant with the LORD in some way. This assumed guilt sheds some light as to why the psalmist believes that YHWH's "wrath" has been cast down upon him. As Kraus has noted, "'wrath of God' means that Yahweh turns away from the human being, forsakes him, and casts him away (Psalm 27:9)."⁵ In some sense, the psalmist believes this condition to be the beginning of a total separation from YHWH.

v.2-5-Petitions of the Prayer

This section begins with a direct petition for YHWH's mercy. In the previous section, the psalmist identified himself as guilty and recognized this illness as the judgment of the LORD. The psalmist pleads with the same LORD who has just sentenced him to suffer to now show him mercy and release him from the suffering. In some sense, the psalmist recognizes YHWH as both the punisher and pardoner of his sin. V.2a is a very general statement about the psalmist's condition. Then, in vv.2b-3, the psalmist makes a very specific statement about the symptoms of his illness. He says, "O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror..." Here, the psalmist very clearly expresses the anguish of both his body and his soul. It is significant to note the repetition of the word "terror" not only throughout the psalm, but in these two verses in particular. The terror the psalmist is experiencing identifies the fact that the psalmist considers his condition to be life-threatening. Not only does the psalmist

⁵ Ibid

consider this illness to threaten his physical or earthly life, the psalmist recognizes a threat on his spiritual life, as will be noted later.

In v. 3, the Psalmist speaks with a sort of stammer, like that of someone truly terrorized. V.3b appears to begin to question YHWH's actions, but the Psalmist quickly retracts his line of questioning, probably out of a fear that questioning the LORD will only worsen his condition. The psalmist says, "My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O LORD-- how long?" This verse is reminiscent of the sort of complaint we find in other laments where the author literally brings a case before YHWH, even accusing the LORD, as in Jeremiah 12. Yet, in this song, the author stops himself short of accusing YHWH of wrongdoing. Still, the impending accusation is implied.

Vv.4-5 couple to form the heart of the psalmist's plea. In v.4, the psalmist makes a direct appeal for YHWH's saving mercy. The psalmist, for the first time, expresses plainly his fear that his life might actually end. In vv.4-5, the psalmist begins to plead, not just for the end of his suffering, but for the salvation of his life. This appeal is directed to the "steadfast love" of YHWH. Again, it is apparent that the psalmist experiences some paradox in how he approaches YHWH in this matter. To begin the psalm, the author is cautious, admitting his guilt and recognizing the LORD's role as judge over him. But now, in vv.4-5, the psalmist appeals to this same judge for mercy and pardon.

Some have suggested that the psalmist's plea in v.5 is a direct appeal to YHWH's ego. The psalmist says, "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?" Still, this is most likely a limited understanding of the psalmist's true intentions. Ancient peoples understood death to mean a complete separation from the LORD. Quite literally, Sheol,

for the ancient Hebrews, was a place where YHWH could neither be seen nor heard from; and it is also true that YHWH could neither see nor hear those who had passed into Sheol. So, the psalmist's plea is so much more than an appeal to YHWH's desire to be praised. Jurgen Moltmann has noted, "In this modern world, with its modern 'sickness unto death,' true spirituality will be the restoration of the love of life- that is to say, *vitality*. The full and unreserved 'yes' to life, and the full and unreserved love for the living are the first experiences of God's spirit."⁶ As Moltmann has addressed for the modern person, the psalmist's plea is for the continuation of life, and thereby a continued relationship with YHWH.

These verses are not only evidence of the psalmist's earnestness, but also an indication that this plea may be part of the formula he is following. There are similar statements in Isaiah 38:18: "For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness." Also in Psalm 30:9: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?" Surely, in these statements, we understand that these people have found meaning for their lives in the ability to praise the LORD and tell of YHWH's faithfulness. Now, faced with death, the author of Psalm 6 makes a direct appeal for YHWH to sustain their relationship, maintain his life and thereby give him another opportunity to tell of the LORD's faithfulness.

It should also be mentioned that these verses foreshadow the hopeful ending that is to come in vv.8-10. The psalmist's desire for life marks a shift in the focus of the psalm. For these two verses, the psalmist stops the complaining that has preceded in vv.1-3. It seems as though the psalmist

⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 97.

has found a better way to question YHWH than he abruptly ended in v.3b. Now, the psalmist, instead of questioning YHWH's activity or even absence, as in the book of Job, appeals to YHWH's relationship with humankind, and with the psalmist in particular. In some sense, the psalmist finds a new way to question YHWH; questions that demand answers.

vv.6f

These verses mark a shift from the hope foreshadowed in vv.4-5 back to the complaints of vv.1-3. Here, with even greater intensity, the psalmist uses hyperbole to dramatically emphasize his suffering with phrases such as, "every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief..." It should be noted that praise of YHWH most often occurs in the Psalms amidst strife and weariness. So, it should not come as a surprise that the lines that immediately follow the psalmist's desire to praise YHWH describe intense weeping and weariness.

vv.8-10

Most scholars are quick to derail any interest in the idea that vv.8-10 are the result of some change in the psalmist's situation. Rather, most insist that the hope and assuredness of vv.8-10 are the mark of a great faith in the LORD's mercy and attentiveness. Some say that the shift transpiring in vv.8-10 may be the result of a Priestly oracle after the performance of vv.1-7 in the Jerusalem Temple. Still there is no evidence that this is the case, so it is most helpful to read vv.8-10 as though the psalmist's conditions have not changed, and yet there is an assurance that they will.

Some of the language used to describe the psalmist's own situation in vv.1-3 are used in a reversal of sorts in vv.8-10. Where once it was the psalmist who was terrified by YHWH's wrath and pleading for YHWH to turn

from this wrath, now the psalmist is assured that it is his enemies who will be struck with terror and forced to turn from their pursuit of him. This reversal of fortunes is one way the psalmist marks the fact that his cries have been heard and his pardon has been issued. One scholar has suggested that the repetition of the words “ashamed” and “shame” in v.10 is significant. V.10 begins, “All my enemies shall be ashamed...” and ends, “they shall turn back, and in a moment be put to shame.” This suggests that the enemies of the psalmist might actually be surrounded by the shame of their relentless pursuit of the psalmist.⁷

Themes

As noted before, the essence of Psalm 6 is in the plea for the life-sustaining relationship with YHWH that the psalmist experiences. Clearly, the psalmist has found the greatest meaning of his life in praise of YHWH’s faithfulness, and while the threat of physical death is frightening, it is the threat of spiritual death that truly terrorizes the psalmist. It has been noted that v.6a is duplicated in Jeremiah 45:3, where Baruch laments, “I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.” In response to Baruch, the LORD says, “I will give you your life... in every place to which you may go.”⁸ Baruch’s assurance of life, and more importantly life with the LORD, is the same promise the psalmist is confident of at the end of Psalm 6.

Kraus notes that a paradox in Psalm 6 is that one must be crushed by the wrath of YHWH’s judgment and face the threat of eternal separation from YHWH and life in order to appeal to YHWH’s life-giving mercy. Only when the psalmist has recognized his own guilt and the severity of his punishment, even to the point of questioning its severity, is the psalmist able to recognize

⁷ “Psalm 6:1-10, O LORD-HOW LONG?” *NIB vol.4* (Nashville: Abbingdon Press, 1996), 705.

⁸ *Ibid*

that the LORD is not only his judge and potentially his executioner, but that somehow the LORD is his only hope for pardon.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note the fact that, according to the psalmist, YHWH is either for him or against him. The psalmist recognizes his guilt as a punishment, and a consequence of his guilt is the fact that his enemies have risen against him. Seemingly, YHWH is on the side of the psalmist's enemies in vv.1-7. Yet, in vv.8-10, YHWH switches sides and the psalmist becomes convinced that the LORD has forgiven his transgression and is now ready to throw off the psalmist's enemies. It is very characteristic of ancient Hebrew texts to maintain this "us or them" mentality when it comes to YHWH's loyalty to the Hebrew people. Rarely if ever in Hebrew texts does it seem that the Hebrews are in the LORD's favor while their enemies also triumph. This paradigm of ancient Hebrew literature appears in this psalm in the psalmist's inability to comprehend YHWH's universal concern for humankind, that is, the fact that YHWH wishes to have this life-sustaining relationship with all of humanity, as opposed to the very local concern the psalmist believes YHWH feels for himself and the Hebrew people.

Conclusion

Psalm 6 is a rich text that beautifully demonstrates the life-giving relationship with the LORD as experienced by the faithful throughout history. While this text is melancholy in tone, it ends with a triumphant assurance of YHWH's faithfulness and mercy for those who seek it. Probably written to follow a formula for psalms of sickness, Psalm 6 employs a unique approach to the relationship between human guilt, the punishment of the LORD and the ensuing mercy issued by the LORD. All those who face the anguish of physical or spiritual violence should seek refuge in the words of

the psalmist, “for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. The LORD has heard my supplication; the LORD accepts my prayer.”⁹

⁹ Psalm 6:8-9