

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Psalm 6 – A Song of Painful Anguish

Max Lucado begins one of his books, *In the Eye of the Storm*, with a story about a parakeet called Chippie...

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said 'hello' when 'sssopp!' Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie – still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do... she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. 'Well,' she replied, 'Chippie doesn't sing much anymore – he just sits and stares.'

It's hard not to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over... that's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

Can you relate to Chippie? Most of us can. One minute you're seated in familiar territory with a song on your lips, then... The pink slip comes. The rejection letter arrives. The doctor calls. The divorce papers are delivered. The check bounces. A policeman knocks on your door.

Sssopp! You're sucked into a black cavern of doubts, doused with the cold water of reality, and stung with the hot air of empty promises.

The life that had been so calm is now so stormy. You're hailstormed by demands. Assailed by doubts. Pummeled by questions. And somewhere in the trauma, you lose your joy. Somewhere in the storm, you lose your song.

King David, who wrote Psalm 6, might have felt a little like that. It seems clear as we read the psalm that he was suffering physical pain of some kind, inner emotional turmoil, fear about the future; he was faced with death, threat from enemies, and hanging over it all was a sense of God's anger... Apart from that, he was fine!

Have *you* ever hit rock bottom? Ever arrived at the place in life where things appear to be so bad, it looks like there's no way forward? Perhaps when problems came at the same time: relationship problems, work problems, money problems? Those sorts of things *can* result in physical sickness and mental illness, when people drag their body through the day, lie awake at night, until morning comes, ready (well, not really...) to start the whole thing over again. Well-meaning family and friends think you're being lazy; you feel guilty; hopelessness sets in; you're too weary to pray, there's no joy in relationships, and you wonder if there is any purpose in life. This psalm reminds us that people, like parakeets,

have moments, sometimes long moments, like that.

It's yet another reminder, if we needed it, that believing in God and following Jesus is not all 'happy, happy, dance and clappy'. Let's not carry on trying to believe the lie which says that we shouldn't suffer – as human beings or as Christians – and that we need to walk around beaming Hollywood smiles all day.

We've seen this to be the case even this short distance into the Psalms. To be sure, we start confident enough in Psalm 1 and 2: we *know* that the Lord watches over our way (1:6); we *know* that all who take refuge in him will be blessed (2:12). But, it's not long before David is saying at the start of Psalm 3, 'O Lord, how many are my foes!' (3:1); and at the start of Psalm 4, 'Answer me when I call you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress' (4:1); and at the start of Psalm 5, 'Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help' (5:1-2).

Of course, the great thing about those psalms is that they also remind us suffering is not the total story. There is anguish, but there is also assurance; with suffering goes security; with harassment comes hope. And we have that same pattern here in Psalm 6, where it seems that David moves from *discipline* through *distress* to *deliverance*. We'll see that, I hope, as we go through the psalm.

So, we begin with David talking about a time of *discipline*, and in this time, crying out to God for mercy.

1. Discipline: a cry for God's mercy (6:1-3)

David is suffering, and he does what we have seen him do in every other psalm so far: he brings it to God; he intentionally invites God into the centre of his life.

Although it's not as explicit here as it is elsewhere, this is one of seven psalms where David confesses sin. (The classic 'penitential' psalm, as they are sometimes called, is Psalm 51.) He is aware that, like any loving parent, the Lord gets angry, and could rebuke him; he is aware that the Lord is wrathful and could discipline him.

But he doesn't run away from God in his moment of discipline; he runs *to* God.

And what does he ask? Verse 2 tells us. He asks that God will be *merciful* to him. He's not saying here, 'I'm innocent; I've not done anything wrong', although he does express that sentiment in some of the other psalms. But here, there is a sense in which he is saying that he knows he deserves what's happening, and asks for mercy. And the great thing is that, although we have no claim on the mercy of God, yet he shows us mercy (see also 1 John 1:9).

David wants mercy because his body is in pain and his soul is in anguish (6:2-3). Interestingly, not all pain in the body is bad; some pain is necessary to protect us. Our sensitivity to pain tells us to stop, listen, pay attention. Illness and suffering can sometimes have that effect – of making us reevaluate our life and our priorities.

So, in the moment of discipline, he turns to God, asking for mercy, asking for healing, asking the Lord, 'How long... how long?'

2. Distress: a plea for God's love (6:4-7)

It's clear that this time of discipline was also a time of *distress*. We can see this in verses 4-7.

What does David pray here? The start of verse 4 tells us: 'Turn, O Lord, and deliver me.' In his painful anguish, David is saying to God: 'save my life.'

In verse 2, he asks for mercy because he is faint, and his body and soul are in agony. On what basis does he ask for deliverance here? The second line in verse 4 goes on to say: 'save me because of your unfailing love' (6:4b). This is the same word used in Psalm 5:7, which speaks about God's loyal and steadfast love, his covenant commitment to his people. It is like a marriage vow which God will never abandon, because he loves his bride and remains committed and faithful to her.

We don't know for certain how much God's people in Old Testament times knew about life beyond the grave. But it does seem from verse 5 that David thought he might even die, and he reminds God that he won't be able to praise

him from the grave (6:5). David believes there is still life to live, and he wants to spend that praising the Lord.

For the moment, though, he is in distress, as he says in verses 6 and 7. These verses give a feel of uncontrolled sobbing, of someone crying their eyes out, which again suggests more than just physical suffering. In some of the earlier psalms, he speaks about sleeping through the night in peace (3:5; 4:8). But not here.

Yet, in his time of discipline, he cries for God's mercy; and in his time of distress, he pleads for God's love. And he seems to find hope that his time of discipline and distress will give way to deliverance.

3. Deliverance: a hope for God's favour (6:8-10)

There appears to be a change in tone here at the end, where he says that God has responded to the cry and the plea. God has heard what has been said (6:8-9), and so he is confident to say in verse 10 that all his enemies will be ashamed and dismayed, and will turn back in sudden disgrace.

Interestingly, the psalm shows us different causes of suffering. He recognises some level of personal responsibility in his suffering, that God might be disciplining him, and he asks for mercy. But he's also suffering because of his enemies. Even David's trusted friends abandoned him, and his own son rebelled against him. And yet, he is able to visualise his restoration and the shaming of his enemies.

Although he has prayed, nothing has changed the circumstances by the end of the psalm. But he is certain that the prayer has been heard.

There is a sense in which a confidence that we have been heard by God brings a sense of relief and hope. We turn to the Lord, and that in itself leads to an assurance that we have been heard, and that he will answer. It has been the experience of many Christians that this confidence and peace comes about inexplicably at some point in prayer. Because we know that the Lord not only listens, but also acts. We know that even when God might be the *source* of the suffering, he is also the *solution* to the suffering.

People need hope. *We* need hope. Generally speaking, people can't live without some sense of meaning and purpose. Hope sustains life. The message of the psalm is that in those moments of discipline and distress, the hope of deliverance comes only from God.

And it's no surprise that in the New Testament, Jesus seems to take the words of this psalm on his lips, when he says – as he faces the cross – that his soul is in anguish (John 12:27). Yet he makes his way there, for you and for me, so that we might receive the mercy and love and hope the psalmist sings about. So, we need to ask, Where do we go for mercy we don't deserve, for faithful love when all else fails, and for hope of deliverance? In God alone, and in Christ alone. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 7 September 2008.