

June 8, 2025

“Anguish”

Psalm 6:1-10

Intro:

A Bible College student was given an assignment to read through the Psalms and journal as they were doing so. Not too far into the journal the student wrote:

“What is it with these Psalmists anyways? What a bunch of whiners!”

Sometimes it seems like that when we read through the Psalms, especially in the first 89 psalms.

To counter this Debbie Downer impression when reading the Psalms, we tend to pick and choose what we read and gravitate towards the psalms, or portions of psalms, that are more upbeat or more focused on outright worship. This lifts our spirits, but it also denies us language to use in worship and prayer when life is not all sunshine and daisies.

And if you consider that over half of the psalms contain “whining”, it is reasonable to conclude that whining to God is an important part of prayer, worship and the overall life of faith.

This morning, we are starting a short series of sermons that look at a select few of the psalms. Specifically, we are going to touch on some of those psalms that are traditionally categorized as “the penitential” psalms.

The penitential psalms include Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. It was the practice of early Christians to sing or read these psalms on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, as part of their penance for sin.

With this context in mind, we are presented with a bit of a challenge. The challenge is that Psalm 6 doesn’t seem to have any elements of penance in it – there is no confession of sin nor prayer for forgiveness. This has led many scholars

today to recategorize this as an individual lament psalm. And yet it is still counted among the penitential psalms. So what does the Psalm offer us?

Unpacking the Psalm:

What this psalm offers us is language and hope in the midst of anguish. Have you ever been in agony? Most of us have at some point in our lives been in agony of some sort, usually physical. A comedian once remarked that he had been told that men have no idea how painful giving birth is. His response was “Lies. There’s a pain that men experience that can’t even be measured by the pain scale – and I’m not talking about the so-called ‘man cold’. I’m talking about the pain a man experiences when he sits down at the movie theatre with his date, puts his arm over her shoulders, and leaves it there for two and a half hours.”

The psalmist is in a whole new level of anguish and pain. It might be a physical pain, but more likely it is something much deeper and more spiritual. Look at the first 5 verses of Psalm 6: He cries out to God for grace and compassion. He needs more than just simple mercy; he pleads for restoration and a total removal of anguish. This is an agony that he feels in his very bones – the core of his physical being. In verse 3 he says “I am sick at heart”. Other translations, such as the NIV, phrase it as, “My soul is in anguish.” – which goes beyond the physical being and into the core of selfhood that was created and given divine breath by God.

It is the soul level of the psalmist’s anguish that makes this psalm into one of penance. It is no longer just an issue of physical agony – although that is part of what is being experienced, but it is the anguish of knowing something is not right spiritually. Relationship with God has been broken, and it is the desire to have that broken relationship fixed, or restored, that brings the psalmist to cry out. He cries out with the urgent “how long?” statement. His recognition of sin is immediate. The weight of it keeps him up at night weeping and crying out against the fear that there might not be hope.

This is the message the world wants us to believe – that there is no hope. That there is no God. The argument is, of course, that if God was real and if He was the

good God that He claims, then there would not be suffering and pain in the world. But because there is, and because so many people are unable to reconcile the idea that God can exist with the existence of evil and suffering in the world, they lash out in denial about hope and faith and God himself. This hopelessness is the enemy at the gate of our faith, and that enemy will win as long as we ourselves are at odds with God.

The psalmist feels this so keenly that he urgently calls for restoration. His call is not a brash demand, but a request that comes from the depths of his soul. He does not want to live any longer than he has to in this space of confusion and separation. He wants to have his hope restored. He does not want to be dead to his relationship with God any longer, and he knows that the only one who can turn things around is God. It is God who can heal. It is God who can restore. It is God who can replace rebuke and anger with grace and mercy.

Yahweh is at the center of the psalmist's concern and cry. It is in Yahweh that the psalmist places his hope. He might not see the end to his agony immediately, but as we get into verses 8-10, we find that the psalmist has answered his own question because of his confidence and faith in God. There will be an end to the anguish. There will be an answer to those who try and claim that there is no God and therefore no hope.

The Lord hears us when we cry out. He will answer our prayer. He will draw us out from the pit of anguish no matter how deep we think that pit is. We can know this and we can have confidence in this, not because the psalmist believed this, but because we know Jesus and Jesus knows our anguish and our pain.

Conclusion:

There is nothing in our lives that causes us more anguish than our own sin. Yes, we can and do agonize over injustice and wrong in the world around us, but it should be our own sin – that which severs our relationship with God, that should cause us the greatest anguish. Jesus understood what that anguish is like. Yes, he did weep for people and for Jerusalem, but it was the knowledge of what taking

on the sins of the world would mean that caused him deep and utter anguish. And yet, Jesus accepted this anguish because that was why He came to earth: to stand in our place to take the punishment for sin and to come out victorious on the other side so that we might have relationships and lives restored with God the Father.

We might, with the psalmist, cry out “how long?” when we look around us and continue to see a broken world, and when we take stock of our own lives and see the sin that continues to trip us up as we walk in faith, but there will always be the answer that Jesus has already gained the victory. It is no longer a question of how long – it is already done. Now it is a matter of holding firm to that answer of life that God has given to us.

And to that we say Amen and Amen!

Let's pray.