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Desperation, Persuasion, and Hope

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Desperation, Persuasion, and Hope

Abstract

"Like Job and like David in this psalm, I pray because I seek counsel with God himself, not because, like brushing my teeth, prayer is good for me."

Posting about earnest prayer to God from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/desperation-persuasion-and-hope/>

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Comments

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June 27, 2017

Howard Schaap

We were in a foreign country, about as far from home as one can get on Planet Earth, and my son was sick with a high fever. We seemed about as far from modern medical treatment as we could be. I did have access to the internet, however, which took the fears I had—and lit them on fire.

So, I did the only thing left to do. I prayed earnestly, madly.

Psalm 6 sounds kind of like the prayer I prayed then, and that's one of the reasons why I love this psalm. When you or a loved one is desperately ill, you pray prayers that leave the bed drenched with tears, as verse 6 says. I recognize that desperation.

Then, I love this psalm because it's so bodily. Where verse 2 in the ESV reads "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled," the NIV translates the last phrase, "for my bones are in agony," and the NRSV, "for my bones are shaking with terror." We are meant to feel the pain down in the writer's bones. I prefer the way "agony" in the NIV extends into "anguish" in the writer's soul in verse 3. In pain and sickness, we feel our mortality, experiencing how little control we have over life itself.

I also love Psalm 6 for the way it attempts to move God, to persuade him. "Turn, O Lord, deliver my life," verse 4 begins in the ESV, "save me for the sake of your steadfast love." This is the best kind of argument to make with God, it seems to me: one based on his own character. It doesn't say, "God, save me because I'm special," but rather, "Save me as a testament to your steadfast love—proving it even more."

Verse 5 gets even stronger in its persuasion and once again broaches the issue of mortality. "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?" This verse seems to echo—pre-echo, I guess—the Westminster Shorter Catechism. "If human life gives glory to God," the writer seems to be saying, "and if I can only give praise to you when I'm alive, then you should keep me alive and out of Sheol" (the nonexistence/haunted abyss that to me is easily the scariest word in Scripture) "so I can praise you." That sounds persuasive to me.

Perhaps most of all, I love Psalm 6 for how it uses prayer. I'm not satisfied with the idea that "prayer changes us." I mean, I get it—that is, the point of prayer is not what we get at the end, like a letter to Santa Claus—I accept that. But like Job and like David in this psalm, I pray because I seek counsel with God himself, not because, like brushing my teeth, prayer is good for me.

No, prayer can't work this way—if it did, our best writers and orators would have the longest lives (though that would mean job security for me, a writing teacher)! However, Psalm 6 strikes me as the kind of prayer that sincerely believes it can change God's mind, and I like that.

There's one more reason I like this psalm. I like it for its non-solution ending. While many psalms end with the Lord suddenly arising to vanquish foes, this psalm ends not with results but only with hope. There isn't really victory at the end of Psalm 6, just an emphasis that "The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer" (vs. 9, NIV) and the promise that "my enemies *will be* ashamed," that "they *will* turn back in sudden disgrace (vs. 10, emphasis mine), even though these things have not happened yet. This certain hope is future tense.

Often, we are in the habit of saying that God answers prayers through everyday things. For example, my earnest, mad prayers for my son on the other side of the world were answered by an old communist doctor who assured my wife and I, "This child is so well-vaccinated that there isn't really much to worry about." That's an answer to prayer for which I was certainly grateful.

However, as with every prayer we utter in the midst of grave illness, the real issue is, “What if God doesn’t arise to save us?” What if my son had sickened further and died?

Then, all we have is our faith and hope in God’s character. God hears. Your tears do not go unnoticed. The eternal God will arise—he’s promised as much, even giving us a down payment in a Son who *has* risen. We know the end to the story because we know the character of God.

That is the slim, beautiful hope of Psalm 6—and it’s enough.