# Psalm 6: Plea, Protest, Anger, Discipline, Weariness, Deliverance

# John Goldingay

Psalm 6 is a textbook example of a lament psalm, or protest psalm, as I prefer to call them. While lament is a key element in these psalms, it’s not the whole, and lament doesn’t need an audience, whereas protest implies that someone is the recipient of the remonstration. These psalms are addressed to someone; people are not just letting it all hang out. Typically of such psalms, Psalm 6 thus begins by addressing God, and urging God to do something; it is a prayer. And it argues and reasons with God. Then, before the end, it suddenly expresses the conviction that God has listened to this plea and is going to answer it. It has a heading with information about being the “leader’s” and “David’s” and about how to sing it; the terms of the description are something of a mystery, but they do indicate that what reads like an individual’s prayer found a place in the community’s worship.

Fifty years ago, I met a girl, fell in love with her, and in due course married her. But in between those two events we learned that Ann had multiple sclerosis. We then lived with that reality for over forty years. For the last few years she was wheelchair-bound and unable to do anything or to speak. It was obviously tough for her and for her parents and for our children; and for me. And I learned to pray psalms such as this one. Admittedly, Psalm 6 issues a plea for deliverance from enemies (v. 7 [8]), and although I can occasionally feel resentful towards a reviewer whose critique seems unfair, I don’t really have enemies. But the rest of the psalm resonates for me. I know what it’s like to be “weary with my moaning” and to “melt my couch with my weeping” (v. 6 [7]; translations in this article are my own).

I have used Psalm 6 in classes as a typical lament/protest psalm, and there are one or two questions it then properly raises. One is that its opening talk of Yahweh’s anger (v. 1 [2]) doesn’t imply that the person praying acknowledges that they have done something to deserve that anger; if it had implied that assumption, it ought to do some confession of wrongdoing. Its implication is more that Yahweh sometimes behaves like someone who is angry, and one not know why. The psalm does ask that Yahweh may not discipline me in a way that suggests anger. In due course I myself had to acknowledge that I couldn’t have complained if God had been angry at my waywardness. Although I stuck with Ann through those decades, I got closer to more than one woman than I should have done. So in an odd way, the psalm’s initial but incidental reference to anger and its unobtrusive raising of the question about waywardness became important for me.

But the psalm’s reference to anger links with its reference to discipline: it urges, don’t discipline me in a way that suggests anger (v. 1 [2]). It thus points to the idea that recurs in Proverbs, that discipline is important if one is to grow. Yahweh is not so much like a judge who punishes Israel as like a father or mother disciplining and correcting their children with a view to taking them to maturity. Athletes get nowhere if they fail to punish themselves and even subject themselves to punishing regimes from their trainers. Living with Ann’s illness disciplined me. It shaped me as a person. If anyone thinks I am a rogue now, they should imagine what I would be if it had not been for that discipline.

During those decades, I might have been appropriately inclined to say to God, “Give me a break” (and he often did), rather than to say, “Don’t discipline me at all.” I guess I did think, “Please stop disciplining me,” but on a good day I might say, “Okay, discipline is necessary, but go easy—not in your anger.” As the psalm puts it, “Be gracious to me, because I’m faint” (v. 2 [3]). Or as it later puts it, “deliver me for the sake of your commitment,” your *ḥesed*, that faithfulness of yours that never gives up (v. 4 [5]). I didn’t assume that Yahweh deliberately sent this hard experience to Ann and thus to me. Psalms and Proverbs, again, do speak of Yahweh deliberately doing such things, but sometimes speak of tough experiences simply being the way life is, without commenting on causation. The Scriptures do then suggest that Yahweh can take tough things that happen and turn them into things that have some meaning, by what he achieves through them. He did that for me, and he did it for Ann through the strange ministry she came to have towards people in her disability. But the discipline did become something that made me weary, as the psalm says, and made me weep and made my eyes waste away (v. 7 [8]), with longing for . . . . Well, I don’t know what I longed for. I stopped hoping that one day God would miraculously heal Ann, and I wasn’t hoping for the day she would die (and when she did die, as far as I can tell I felt as much grief as anyone does when their lover dies).

Deliver me, the psalm pleads, “because there’s no celebrating of you in death; in Sheol who can confess you?” (v. 5 [6]). I am writing in the days after Easter, which for a Christian both does and does not make a difference to that argument of the psalm. The psalmist knew the truth about death. When you die, your family puts your lifeless body in the family tomb, where you join other lifeless people. Israelites hypothesized (perhaps on the basis of occasional experiences of contact with dead people, such as the Saul and Samuel story illustrates) that your also-lifeless personality joined other lifeless personalities in a non-physical equivalent to the family tomb, called Sheol. You are secure and at rest there in the company of your family, as your outer person is in the tomb. But in Sheol there is no celebrating of Yahweh, partly because you can’t worship unless you have a body—it requires hands and feet and a voice. And there is no confessing of Yahweh, because confessing means talking about what Yahweh has done, and Yahweh doesn’t do anything in Sheol.

In due course, many Jewish people came to believe that there would in due course be a resurrection and that Sheol would not be the end, and Jesus apparently accepted that assumption in speaking of God being (still) the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; they must therefore still be alive, then, mustn’t they? (Mark 12:26–27). As a Pharisee, Paul would have held that belief, and in due course he became convinced that Jesus has already been resurrected and that his resurrection signifies the beginning of that broad resurrection of Israel, and of other people who get adopted into Israel. It thus makes it possible for anyone who might otherwise be skeptical to believe in the prospect of resurrection,. But meanwhile the psalm is right; if resurrection will come in due course, that doesn’t alter the reality of what happens in the meantime. We are all destined for a long sleep.

In connection with Sheol, the psalm likely carries another implication. “Turn, save, deliver” (v. 2 [3]), the suppliant pleads. When psalms testify to Yahweh having turned, rescued, and delivered, they can say that Yahweh brought me up from Sheol (30:3 [4]). It’s as if the experience of oppression, persecution, separation from God, or pain is an anticipatory experience of being in Sheol. It wouldn’t be surprising if the psalmist implicitly pictures things that way. But three-quarters of the way through, a dramatic change comes over Psalm 6. Suddenly, it urges the enemies to go away, “because Yahweh has listened to the sound of my weeping. Yahweh has listened to my prayer for grace. Yahweh receives my plea” (6:8–9 [9–10]). When such a change of tone occurs in psalms. occasionally they imply that someone such as a priest or prophet has brought a message from Yahweh assuring the suppliant that Yahweh has heard the prayer, and I have occasionally been on the receiving end of such a message or been the means of giving one. But more often the sense of having been heard has come to me direct from God rather than via a human messenger, and I imagine Psalm presupposing the same dynamic. One evening at the end of a particularly tough week, after I had helped Ann get to bed, I slumped on the sofa, spent. I can’t remember exactly what I said to God, but I do remember then being overwhelmed by a sense of God embracing me, perhaps like a father or mother embracing their child. And I could unwind and in due course sleep in a relaxed way. I picture that as an experience of the kind that took the psalmist from “my whole body shakes in great dismay” to “Yahweh has listened.”

While the extraordinary transition that takes place in Psalm 6 could happen within ordinary experience, there is also another version of it. When Ann died, it meant that I was alone, and needed just to get used to it. There was an occasion a year after her death when I took my bike and some JSOT Supplements to the beach, and as I lay in the sand reading, I thought to myself, “I can do this, this being on my own.” A couple of months later I met Kathleen and fell in love and we married, and thus I found a new life. It was another expression of God listening to my prayer for grace.

It also led in due course to my finding new significance in the psalm’s reference to enemies. The heading of the psalm points to the likelihood that ideally you don’t pray protest psalms on your own; your family and friends pray them with you, maybe when you come to the temple to pray and offer a sacrifice. In that setting, as a member of the family you might pray about the suppliant’s enemies as if they were your enemies, because you identify with the suppliant. Thus protest psalms can become psalms you pray on behalf of other people in need. Kathleen’s daughter, Katie-Jay, gave a dozen years of her life to working among Darfuri refugees in Chad, and a psalm such as Psalm 6 became the way we prayed for the Darfuri and against their oppressors. (Katie-Jay and her husband Gabriel were killed in an auto accident in Los Angeles a few months ago, which has given us another reason for protesting in the manner of the protest psalms.)

My second choice psalm might have been Psalm 30, which pairs nicely with Psalm 6 as a thanksgiving or testimony psalm that could have been the kind you used when you came back to give praise and testify, when Yahweh had answered your prayer. I find students are inclined to think that the person who says “I will never fall down” (30:6–7 [7–8]) must be showing an inappropriate self-confidence (they like to compare this person with the Pharisee in the parable in Luke 18:9–14), and I try to get them to see that the psalm is usefully ambiguous and that it is important to recognize that people who are confident that God has made them strong like a mountain are not necessarily wrong to think in that way; it’s probably how I felt before Ann got ill.

We have written further about all this in:

John Goldingay. *Psalms Volume 1*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

John Goldingay. *Psalms for Everyone Part One.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013.

John Goldingay. *Remembering Ann.* Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2011.

Kathleen Scott Goldingay and John Goldingay. “The Sting in the Psalms.” *Theology* 117 (2014): 403–10 and 118 (2015): 3–9.

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