

# Gamma 12

## Study 5

### Confession

#### PSALM 6

##### Introduction

Our next “class” of psalms will be those that major in a form of prayer called confession, repentance, or “affective” prayer. The two psalms we will study complement each other, though they are both penitential psalms. The first psalm conveys the white heat of an actual time of repentance. Its motives are somewhat mixed, though it is accepted by God. The second psalm looks back on a time of repentance. It provides a more theologically balanced perspective on the elements involved in a prayer of confession. Nevertheless, it is important to see that God accepts our repentance even when it is imperfect.

##### Psalm 6

**1. (a) What are some of the reasons why people weep and cry? (Who or what do we cry for?) (b) Why is it important to not simply weep, but to pray in our tears (or to “pray our tears”)?**

(a) What are some of the reasons why people weep?

Some of the healthy reasons we cry are: (1) Loss and grief. This occurs when we experience the loss of something real or potential that was good and beautiful. (2) Sympathy for hurt or injustice. This occurs when we enter into someone else’s misery so that we feel it ourselves. (3) Repentance and regret. This occurs when we know we have done something wrong.

Some of the unhealthy reasons we cry are: (1) Self-pity. Self-pity looks a lot like grief, but self-pity doesn’t want any help or solutions. It is inconsolable; it wants to go on feeling bad. Why? If we make a good thing into an idol — into an ultimate thing — we believe there can be no replacement for it. If we don’t get *this*, we don’t want anything else. (2) Manipulation. We are crying because others are present and we want to influence them in a particular direction. This doesn’t mean that the tears are not based in genuine sorrow, but they are overdone and used to get power. (3) Self-will. We are crying because our will has been crossed. The tears are an expression of fury and anger. (At the same time, we must remember that angry tears can be quite *unselfish*, as when we weep over injustice and evil in the world.)

(b) Why is it important to “pray our tears”?

Tears may be rooted rather simply in one of these reasons or motives. But often there is more than one root, and that makes sorrow and weeping more

complex. Usually there are both good and bad motives in our weeping. For example, we may start weeping in grief, but idolatrous self-pity may lengthen or magnify our weeping out of proportion. Or, we may start weeping in anger over injustice or in sympathy for another, but self-righteousness can make our tears bitter and vengeful. Or, we may weep over our sins, but a works righteousness understanding of faith could lead us to weep as a way to flagellate ourselves as we try to atone for our own sin. ("See how bad I feel, God? See how bad I feel, world? Surely I am worthy to be forgiven. Look how much I am suffering under my guilt!")

Therefore, to either indulge our tears or stifle them is an over-reaction and an unhealthy response. As Eugene Peterson expresses it:

Tears are a biological gift of God. They are a physical means for expressing emotional and spiritual experience. But it is hard to know what to do with them. If we indulge our tears, we cultivate self-pity. If we suppress our tears, we lose touch with our feelings... [But if] we *pray* our tears, we enter into sadnesses that integrate our sorrows with our Lord's sorrows and discover both the source of and the relief from our sadness." <sup>1</sup>

If we repress our tears, we may miss an opportunity to plumb our heart's inner workings and see our motivations, both good and bad. But if we merely ventilate our sorrow, we may only be encouraging some sins in our hearts. Thus, praying *in* our sorrow *about* our sorrow (that's what "praying our tears" means) can help us get perspective on our situation. It can help us overcome idolatrous, inconsolable grief while still expressing the sadness that is good and necessary to any loving heart living in this difficult world.

## **2. What are some reasons why the psalmist is (or may be) weeping?**

First, David may be weeping in response to the wrath and displeasure of God (v. 1). Notice that the psalmist does not say, "Don't be angry with me." He assumes that God is angry! He knows he has done something that has displeased God. He is only asking, "Do not rebuke... or discipline me in your wrath." He is asking for mercy "to temper the discipline he deserves." <sup>2</sup>

Second, he may be weeping because he is sick (v. 2a). This sickness may be simply the result of guilt. It is well-known that shame, guilt, and despondency can cause real physical breakdown (and not just psychosomatic symptoms). It is also possible that the sickness is itself a form of discipline or chastening from God — a way to bring David to his senses or to repentance. It is important to keep a balance here. In the Bible, sickness could be either an *effect* of a person's conviction of sin or a *cause* of it. On the one hand, John 9:1-5, Psalm 73:1-5 (and the whole book of Job!) teach that we must not think, in some nice, neat, cause-effect way, that good-life-leads-to-health and bad-life-leads-to-illness. Very good people can have lots of sickness and tragedy and bad people can have great quality of life. So we must not think that sickness is necessarily a punishment or that health is a reward. On the other hand, Hebrews 12 and many other biblical texts show us that sometimes God does use troubles and illness to bring us up short, humble us, and make us reflect on our errant ways. (See Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I obey your

word.”) Thus David’s sickness could be a debilitating result of his guilt and despondency, or it could have been a way God showed him his need for him.

When David closely connects a request for mercy (v. 2a) with a request for healing (v. 2b), we can conclude that the sickness is involved in his repentance, one way or the other. (That is, it is either a result of his guilt or a way to show him his guilt.) It is very difficult to discern the exact relationship between sin and sickness, and we should not be too quick to make sweeping statements one way or the other.

Third, David is certainly weeping because of his enemies (v. 7). Most closely tied to his statement about his tears is the opposition he is receiving from his enemies (“My eyes grow weak with sorrow... because of all my foes”). Since David is afraid of the grave (v. 5), it is possible that these enemies are out to kill him. Some think that this possibility of death is due to his sickness, but there is much less emphasis on his illness than on his enemies. When he receives his confidence that he is being heard in verses 8-10, all his rejoicing is over his escape from his enemies. *They* are the real problem he is facing.

In summary, David is struggling with a guilty conscience, a sick body, and a dangerous situation filled with enemies. We cannot be sure exactly how all three are related. We can’t know which factor caused which, for example. However, we can see that David believes that they are connected. He asks God’s mercy, healing, and help with all three of them, all together.

### **3. What does David ask for in this prayer? How does he make the case for his request?**

There is only one request in this psalm, and it is posed at the very beginning (v. 1). Essentially, David is asking, “Please don’t give me what my sins deserve!” We can probably fill the prayer out like this: “Because of what I have done, I deserve to have you abandon me to my enemies. But I ask, rather, that you forgive me and defend me.”

He proceeds to make his argument as follows: First, in verses 2-3, he asks God to be merciful because he is suffering and in pain. “Be merciful to me... for I am faint... in agony... in anguish.” This implies that God is compassionate and moved by suffering.

Second, in verse 4, he asks God to be merciful because of his covenant and promises. “Deliver me... because of your unfailing love.” Again, we must remember that when we see the phrases “*unfailing love*” or “*steadfast love*” (or in the AV, “lovingkindness”), it is translating the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which meant a love that is absolutely guaranteed and unchanging because of a promise and contract. Our word “commitment” is too weak to convey this term, but at least it begins to give us the sense. *Chesedh* has little to do with feelings and sentiment and everything to do with covenanted loyalty. It is the love that extends from a solemn vow. Third, in verse 5, he asks God to be merciful for the sake of his own glory. If God gives him what he deserves, his enemies will sweep over him and he will likely be killed. “Then,” he asks, “what good will that bring God, to lose a worshiper?” [Note: Though it is true that Old Testament writers had a more vague and shadowy understanding of

heaven and hell than later biblical writers, we must not think that David is trying to teach us something about the afterlife here. He is simply saying, "If I am dead, how can I serve you?"] So David makes his case, appealing to God's glory, but he leaves it as just that: an appeal and a question. "How can my death serve you?"

In summary, David builds his case on the attributes of God: on his compassion for the suffering (which leads him to alleviate misery), his covenant love (which leads him to unconditional positive regard), and his glory.

**4. Do you find David's attitude in argumentative prayer legitimate? Assuming it is basically legitimate, how does it contradict many common views on how to approach God in prayer and faith?**

Are David's attitude and arguments legitimate?

There is some debate over the legitimacy of David's arguments. Taken at their worst, he appears to question God's timing. "How long?" in verse 3 seems to be saying, "You've let this go on too long." But it is also an honest outpouring of emotion and a carefully discreet cry. (He doesn't say, "This *has* been too long!") Secondly, in verse 5 he argues that God should forgive and save him because God will otherwise lose a worshiper (see above). Some people believe that this argument is an unworthy one. Some criticize it, saying "How silly to imagine that God *needs* us. David is suggesting that God is vain and/or dependent on our praise." In reality, however, David is probably striking a balance here. He is right to insist that the *real* concern in any situation is the honor and glory of God. So it is right for David to say, "I ask you to spare my life because I think it will glorify you. I don't see how my death can serve your interests." However, though it is our right to pose this question, it is not within our rights or our capacity to answer it. Only God knows if an event will lead to his glory; we cannot insist that we can know this.

Having defended David's basic motives and argument, I think it is also good to learn that though our language can be intemperate and our motives mixed, God will still hear us (v. 8).

How does it contradict common views about approaching God?

First, it contradicts a fatalistic view of God and faith. Many people might say, "God is sovereign, and he has his plan all laid out and set. You are not going to change his mind! So just wait patiently to see what happens." However, though David has a most respectful attitude toward God and makes nothing like a real demand, he is very insistent about pressing his case. He acts like his prayer really matters and will make a difference.

Second, it contradicts a legalistic view of God and faith. A more authoritarian and strict view of faith would counsel, "Don't you dare ask God to let you off the hook! You should humbly say to God, 'Do to me whatever my sins warrant.' Since you have sinned, you deserve the problem you have with your enemies. It's God's will and his punishment. Just take it." David, however, vigorously appeals to God's love, grace, and mercy to deliver him from his troubles. Despite his own sense of guilt and his willingness to take responsibility, he nonetheless knows that his enemies are wrong, unjust, and wicked. He does

not collapse and let them walk all over him because of his own sense of unworthiness. He contends with them. He does not need to feel virtuous in order to fight for justice.

Third, it contradicts a relativistic, “liberal” view of God and faith. Today, a significant number of people (including churchgoers) are dismayed by any talk of the wrath of God. They say, “God loves everyone. We all slip up and sometimes we do very bad things. But God forgives always; that is the way he is. He is a God of love. So it is wrong to talk about his ‘anger’ and ‘wrath’ (v. 1). It is especially wrong to wait to see if he is going to ‘let you off the hook.’ Of course he will!” However, David has a far more respectful attitude toward the justice and holiness of God than that. Though he is begging for mercy, he all along admits it is just that — mercy, undeserved favor. He never says, “Deliver me because what I did isn’t really all that bad.” How can we ever ask God to deal with our enemies for their wrongs if we aren’t willing to take responsibility for our own?

Fourth, it contradicts an overly optimistic, “super-spiritual” view of God and faith. David is not doing any confident “claiming” of blessing. He is making his case – more assertively than the legalist would think appropriate, but more modestly and humbly than many other Christians would think appropriate. As Eugene Peterson observes:

Our culture emphasizes... the happy Christian and the have-it-all-together saint. Are we missing something? ...Tears are often considered a sign that something is wrong with us... and therefore either to be avoided or to be cured. But what if they are a sign of something right with us? <sup>3</sup>

#### **5. When are tears (of sorrow) a sign of spiritual strength and character? Are David’s tears a sign of spiritual strength?**

There are at least three things it is wrong *not* to weep over. First, we should weep over our sins, which offend and grieve God and others. A lack of tears over our sin shows we lack a clear and proportional sense of what sin is and what it means. (It shows a lack of holiness in us.) Second, we should weep over injustice and evil in the world. The brokenness of the world and the troubles of humankind continually bring sorrow to God’s heart. Jesus was constantly weeping in sympathy for the misery of others. A lack of tears over injustice and suffering shows a lack of love in us. Third, we should weep over our own losses and disappointments. Why? A person who never weeps over losses is probably someone who does not want to know his or her own heart. Maybe we have too little a sense of the reality of God to admit how devastated we are. Maybe we need to think of ourselves as extremely strong and unflappable. Maybe we simply cannot bear to admit how fragile we are. These all reflect a lack of humility and self-knowledge.

David does have tears over all three things. He weeps over his guilt (v. 1), over the injustice of evildoers (vv. 7-8), and over his own losses and pain (vv. 2-3), both physical and spiritual. But the importance of “praying” our tears is so that these three valid, spiritually strong forms of sorrow do not “go bad.” Repentance can easily become a self-flagellation in which we become

inconsolable and try to pay for our own sin, rather than looking to God. Sorrow over injustice can easily become bitterness and self-righteousness that make us feel justified in treating someone vengefully. And grief can easily become self-pity.

Each of these false, excessive kinds of sorrow comes from forgetting the bad news of the gospel (that we are more sinful than we dared believe) or the good news (that we are more loved and accepted than we dared hope). Repentance and grief need to hold onto the good news, or we may refuse to be consoled out of self-punishment or anger at God. Sorrow over others' trouble needs to hold onto the bad news (that we are all sinners), or we may become proud and vindictive. David seems to have kept both his anger at his enemies and his humility and shame before God. Without the gospel, he would have lost one or the other.

Ultimately, we know that tears can be a sign of spiritual strength because Jesus, our perfect older brother, was "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Is. 53:3), who wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and his friend Lazarus' tomb — even when he was about to raise him from the dead (John 11:35).

#### **6. Does David get an answer to his prayer? How does he get it?**

This is a difficult question to answer. It is clear that in verse 8, the tone changes markedly. David says, "The LORD has heard my weeping" and the Lord "accepts my prayer." Yet verse 10 shows us that God has not done anything at all yet. David says, "My enemies *will* be ashamed and dismayed," meaning that nothing has happened yet.

How then does David know God has answered? Derek Kidner gives us insight.

This sudden access of confidence, found in almost every suppliant psalm, is most telling evidence of *an answering touch from God*, almost as if we saw the singer's face light up in recognition. In subsequent liturgical use God's reassurance was possibly conveyed (some have suggested) by... a [prophetic] oracle... but this is a conjecture, and has little if any bearing on the writing of these psalms, which show the same characteristics whether their titles emphasize their liturgical use (as in Psalms 4-6) or in the crises from which they sprang (e.g. Psalms 3, 7, etc.). <sup>4</sup>

Kidner is saying that the psalmist gives evidence that a penitent can receive in his or her own heart a sense of God's forgiveness and assurance of his love. This may not come immediately. We often must "wait" in repentance (see Ps. 38:15). This means that, even if we have an intellectual confidence that the covenant God's unfailing love will not cast us off, we may not demand or expect an immediate restoration of spiritual fellowship after we have sinned. We patiently wait for a restored sense of God's love and beauty, which might not return for some time. Eventually, though, we experience what Kidner called "an answering touch."

Psalm 32

**1. Verses 1-2 describe the blessing of being pardoned by God in four ways. What does each metaphor contribute to our understanding of what God does about our sin? Compare Romans 4:7-8.**

Four things are part of the “blessedness” and joy of those whose sin has been dealt with by God.

First, God *forgives* our transgression (v. 1a). In general, to forgive something means to lift it up and throw it away — to remove it. But second, God *covers* our transgression (v. 1b). This metaphor is different from the idea of forgiveness. When we cover something, it is still present, but we are not letting it affect us in the same way. We take it away from our attention.

It is quite important that these two ideas are kept together. If we only thought of our sin as forgiven, we might think that as soon as God pardons us, our sin will be gone and will not trouble us anymore. If, on the other hand, we only thought of our sin as covered, we might think that, once God pardons us, we can live any way we like. But together, we can see that in a Christian, sin cannot condemn us and it has lost much of its power over us, but it is still present. We must not imagine that we are completely free of it

Third, God *does not count our sin against us*. This is the most clear and specific of all the metaphors. It uses accounting and legal language. We are told that God does not “count” (or “reckon” or “impute” in the older translations) us as sinners. Though we have sinned, God does not treat us as if we are sinners. Paul quotes Psalm 32:2 in Romans 4:6-8. There he says that in Psalm 32:2, David “speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” That is an extremely interesting reading of verse 2! David says only that God does not count a repentant believer as a sinner. “But,” Paul is saying, “that means that he must be counting us as *righteous*, apart from our actual record.” Paul then reads verse 2 as saying, “Great blessedness comes to the one whose sinful record is not counted, but rather is treated by God as if his record is one of perfect righteousness.”

Surely the Old Testament readers would have found this claim marvelous and wonderful — but extremely mysterious. How can God take our sin from us without giving us any consequences for it? And even more, how can he treat us as righteous, as sinless? We know what Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21, namely, that it was Christ who was counted as sinner for our sakes so that we could be counted righteous for his sake. He is treated as our record deserves, and we are treated as his record deserves.

Fourth, we are told that the person who has his sin forgiven and covered by imputed righteousness has a spirit in which “is no deceit” (v. 2b). This does not mean that a forgiven person is perfect, but rather is honest, not hiding or covering his or her flaws from God, self, or others. The question may arise, Is this transparency/honesty the *result* of the pardon or the *means* of it? The answer is both. It takes transparency to be pardoned (see v. 5). At the same time, the sense of being accepted (v. 2a) makes it possible to admit flaws and sins freely.

**2. Verses 3-10 are a very complete guide to actual repentance. What must we do when we repent? (Try to find at least four elements.) How can we pray these things in Christ with even more power and understanding than David could?**

First, there must be a very simple *honesty* (v. 5). As someone put it, "If we cover our own sin (v. 5), then God will expose it; but if we uncover our sin, then God will cover it (v. 2)." But honesty alone is not repentance.

Second, David fills his heart with a sense of the *danger* of sin. He enumerates the problems and bad consequences of sin. One danger (v. 3) is (as we saw in Psalm 6) that his sin and guilt are bad for his health. His strength, probably spiritual as well as physical, is sapped (v. 4). Another danger is that God might abandon him. In verse 6 David talks about praying "while you may be found" that "when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him" (v. 6). He seems to be saying that when troubles come, God will not be with you if you sin.

Third, however, David fills his heart with a sense of the *guilt* of sin. If we don't think of the danger of sin, we may not initially be motivated to repent. But if the only motivation for repentance is the avoidance of consequences, we are not really going deep enough. We are to repent for our *sin*, not simply for the *consequences* of sin. Are we sorry for what we did, or sorry we got caught? If we are only sorrowful for our own pain and inconvenience, we will find that we have gained no self-control at all. As soon as it is possible to do the sinful act without consequences, we will find ourselves back in it. But David says, "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you" (v. 9). This is a powerful metaphor. The horse or mule does not love you, nor does it understand your mind and heart enough to come to you just because you want it to come. It must be "controlled" through rewards and punishments. It will only come if you can make it worth its while. The horse and mule will only come for *their* sake, not for yours.

We are to be willing, then, to leave our sin simply because we love God. We should want to do it for his sake. That means we should turn from sin, not primarily because it is dangerous to us, but because it grieves and offends our Lord. We should sense the guilt of our sin before God, not just the danger of its consequences.

Fourth, David prays in *hope of unmerited mercy*. In verse 10 he says that "the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him." This again is a reference not to God's love in general, but to his *chesedh*, his promised, covenanted, unconditional love. To truly repent, you certainly need emotional humility — a sense of the danger and guilt of your sin. If you don't have that, you won't experience the life-changing freedom of repentance. But, on the other hand, to truly repent, you need also emotional "wealth." You need a deep hope and assurance of God's commitment to you, his love and mercy toward you.

You can't *only* know yourself to be a worthless sinner. That will not produce repentance, only self-pity and self-flagellation. There will be no "answering touch" (Ps. 6:8). There will be no release and relief. Not only that, but it is not



really possible to be honest about how sinful you are unless you have the confidence that God loves you. If you base your self-image on your record and performance, it will be too traumatic to admit the extent of your sinfulness. You will be in denial, rationalizing and screening out evidence of deep character flaws. Unless you believe that “the LORD’s unfailing love surrounds” you, you will not be able to repent. It takes the good news of the gospel as much as the bad news to lead our hearts to admit what we really are.

When Christian believers get to this third element in repentance, we have a far greater resource for hope than David did. He knew of the remarkable promises of God to bless us no matter what (see Genesis 15). But we have Jesus Christ on the cross. As one theologian put it, “The fact of Jesus coming is the final

and unanswerable proof that God cares.”<sup>5</sup> This is the ultimate assurance of unfailing love. In light of this infallible assurance, we have the emotional wealth to admit our sin. When we know Christ, we truly have a “hiding place” (v. 7). As Moses was sheltered by the cleft in the rock so he could be in the presence of God, so we are now “hidden in Christ” (Col. 3:1-3), for the rock of Moses is a type of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

Fifth, David hears God saying *he must now live an obedient, changed life*. In verse 8 David hears God saying, “I will now tell you exactly what I want you to do.” In verse 11, he calls us to be “upright.” In other words, the last element in repentance is a very concrete resolution to change behavior. Repentance is not simply expressing sorrow for sin, it is changing the life — obeying. Notice that the call to obey (v. 8) is connected to a call to do so out of love for God (v. 9). If our hearts understand how our sin has grieved God and what it has cost him (on the cross), we will find that our hearts *want* to obey God. Sin will lose its attractive power over us. We will not be obeying simply out of duty or out of a series of rewards and punishments.