

## Psalm 5

### Introduction

This morning, we're going to visit another one of the Psalms – Psalm chapter five. Many of the Psalms are actually laments. The Psalmist is in some kind of distress because of some trouble or danger, and so we hear him crying out to the Lord for help. Remember that the Psalms are divided into five books. After the first two introductory chapters of Book I, the majority of Book I is lament! The first five chapters (3-7) are lament. Nine of the first eleven chapters are lament – cries for help in the midst of danger and trouble. Maybe this is a little bit disconcerting for us. Was there something wrong with the Psalmist – that so many of his prayers should fall into the category of lament? Shouldn't he just be singing happy, feel good, praise songs all the day long? Actually, we'll see time and time again that it's the Psalmist's lament that shows just how in tune his heart is with the heart of God. Lament is the expression of a heart that's patterned after God's own heart. Lament is the expression, too, of a heart that understands it's constant and desperate need for God. So maybe it's actually the absence of lament in our own prayers that shows there's something not quite "right" with us. How much of our prayer is characterized by "lament"? But lament in the Psalms is not ultimately an expression of despair, but of *hope*. It's not ultimately an expression of despondency—not in the end—but rather of a wonderful, unshakable confidence. We'll see that this morning. So how much of our prayer life is characterized by confident, hope-filled, lament? If we need help in this area, then we have a ready made prayer right here in Psalm five. The Psalmist begins in verses 1-3:

**I. Psalm 5:1-2** — Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.

Obviously, the Psalmist is in some kind of distress. He asks Yahweh to give ear not only to his words, but also to take into account the unintelligible sounds that he's making – his groaning and his murmuring. Together, his words and his groans amount to a desperate cry for help – "Give attention," he prays, "to the sound of my cry." At this point we can only wonder what kind of distress or trouble he's in. But we may already have a clue.

Even in the very midst of this cry for help, the Psalmist makes a very clear statement: "It is to You, O LORD, my King and my God that I pray." The Psalmist is very carefully aligning himself with God. The Psalmist is identifying himself already as one of *God's* people. So in the midst of his desperate plea for help, the Psalmist confesses that *Yahweh* is his King, and his God – Yahweh, *and no other*. In the midst of his desperate cry for help, the Psalmist confesses his devotion to the Lord, and his desire and commitment to walk in His ways. What might this imply about the trouble the Psalmist is facing? What might this say about the kind of distress the Psalmist is in? "Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray." In verse three, we get another clue:

**II. Psalm 5:3** — O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I lay out my prayer to you and watch.

One commentator explains: “With the dawn of each new day, prayer is renewed...” (VanGemen) In other words, the point isn’t that on this one particular morning the Psalmist will pray, but rather each and every morning (cf. NLT; NCV) the Psalmist will lay out his prayer before the LORD, and cry out for help. But why is this? Why, every day, apparently the same cry for help? Is this just in the event that the LORD doesn’t respond on the first day, or the second, or the third, or the fourth...? (cf. VanGemen) But there’s no hint of this in the text. There’s no “How long, O Lord?,” and no, “Why do you stand afar off?” In fact, there’s every appearance that it’s expected that the LORD *will* answer on the very day that the Psalmist prays. “O LORD, in the morning *you hear my voice*; in the morning I lay out my prayer to you *and watch*.” Many translations say, “and watch *expectantly*.” (NET; NIV; HCSB; NLT)

So then, why, every day, apparently the same cry for help – if, in fact, each day the LORD is faithful to hear the Psalmist’s voice and to answer his prayer? What is it that the Psalmist is every day so desperate for? What are his groanings? What is his cry for help each and every morning of each and every day?

**III. Psalm 5:4–6** — For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

In other words: “For you, O Lord, are *holy*.” In six different ways, the Psalmist says the same thing about God. But in each of these six statements, he says the same thing a little stronger and more forcefully than the time before. So, despite what anyone may ever tell you, and however things may ever look, God does *not delight* in wickedness. To the contrary, evil of any kind whatsoever *may not dwell* with God. In fact, the boastful shall *not even be able to stand* before His eyes. Indeed, the LORD *hates* all evildoers. The LORD doesn’t just hate evildoers, He actually *destroys* those who speak lies. And if all of this has not yet made clear God’s disposition towards all wickedness and evil, the Psalmist concludes in the sixth statement: “The LORD *abhors* the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.” One commentator summarizes: “God is so incompatible with evil that even the most temporary coexistence is utterly impossible.” (Wilson)

But what’s the point of saying all this? And why does the Psalmist speak these things *to* the LORD as a part of his prayer? For *you* are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with *you*. The boastful shall not stand before *your* eyes; *you* hate all evildoers. *You* destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. Is this a comfort to the Psalmist, and a reason for confidence and hope? Or is this something sobering and overwhelming to the Psalmist, and actually a cause of his groaning and his daily cries for help? As the Psalmist thinks about God’s holy revulsion to all forms of evil and wickedness, is this the reason for his confidence, or is this the reason for his groaning – or both? As you consider the holiness of God, what does this produce in you – confidence and hope, or groaning and cries for help, or both? The Psalmist continues in his prayer:

**IV. Psalm 5:7** — But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you.

The Psalmist does not say, “But I *am not like* those wicked, and evil, and boastful, and lying, and bloodthirsty, and deceitful men, *therefore*, unlike all of them, *I* may dwell with You.” Far, far from it! The Psalmist’s words are full of a deep sense of unworthiness, and even a fear and a trembling. “But I, *through the abundance of your steadfast love*, will enter your house. I will *bow down* toward your *holy temple* in the *fear* of you.”

The Hebrew word for “steadfast love” is “*hesed*,” and it’s translated all sorts of different ways. The NET Bible translates “hesed” as “faithfulness.” The NIV translates “hesed” very simply as “love.” The NKJV translates “hesed” with “mercy.” The NASB is famous for its translation of “hesed” as “lovingkindness.” *Love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness*... “hesed” is *all* of these things! There is no *one* English word that can really capture the meaning, and loveliness of that Hebrew word “hesed.” But maybe in the end, we could summarize by saying that God’s “hesed” usually refers to His *covenant* love in *all* of its myriad forms and manifestations. So God’s “hesed” is His covenant love that He pours out upon His chosen people not because they are deserving (far from it), but rather because of His own *mercy* and *grace*. Because God’s “hesed” is His *covenant* love, therefore it is *steadfast*, and *unchanging*, and *unfailingly faithful*. And because God’s “hesed” is His love, it is therefore full to overflowing with *kindness, and tenderness, and compassion*. What a wonderful word is that word, “hesed”! What a wonderful God is our God! And so now we can appreciate more fully when the Psalmist prays with these words: “But I, through the *abundance*(!!!) of your *hesed*, will enter your house.” If the wicked cannot dwell with God because they are wicked, then we might expect the Psalmist to say that he *can* enter God’s house because... he is righteous. But this is not what he says. To the contrary, he may enter God’s house only through the *abundance* of God’s “hesed.” He may enter God’s house because, though *he* is sinful and undeserving, yet *God* is abundantly gracious and merciful, and full of tender kindness and compassion and faithfulness toward all those who are His own.

The Psalmist goes on to pray: “I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you.” There’s still no hint of the Psalmist being better or more righteous than anyone else! To the contrary! He’s full of a very real *fear and trembling* as he, a fully *undeserving* sinner, *bows down* toward God’s *holy* temple. And so as he enters the Lord’s house and bows down toward His holy temple, what does the Psalmist pray? What are the groanings that he utters? Having brought before his mind the absolute holiness of God, and his abhorrence of all that is evil, *and* having considered that he himself is undeserving, and can only enter God’s house by the abundance of God’s “hesed,” the Psalmist cries out for help.

**V. Psalm 5:8-9**— Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me. For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.

If the Psalmist had not felt his own sinfulness and proneness to wandering, he wouldn’t have needed to pray: “Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness... make Your way straight before me.” On the other hand, if it weren’t for his enemies, maybe he wouldn’t have felt in quite *so much* danger of failing to walk in God’s way of righteousness. So what is it about the Psalmist’s enemies that even further provokes the Psalmist to groan and to cry out for help as one in distress: “Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me”!

One commentator translates literally: “Their throat is an open grave; their tongues they *make smooth*.” (Broyles; quoted by Jacobson) There’s nothing attractive about an “open grave,” but sometimes the open grave may be camouflaged and disguised as something else. In fact, it most often *is*! In this case, the open grave is made to look *appealing* by the smoothness of the tongue. So the point here isn’t necessarily just “flattery,” but how good and reasonable and right the wicked can make all of their words sound. One commentator says:

“Here is painted the graphic picture of someone being enticed by [the enemy’s] flattering speech and slipping on their smooth tongue into their grave-like throat... their words are *enticing* and *tempting*...” (Broyles; quoted in Jacobson)

Another commentator says: “The psalmist is surrounded by... smooth, persuasive speech and destructive *advice*.” (Jacobson; cf. Craigie) Do we not feel this – that we are surrounded on all sides not just by evil and wickedness, but by the deceitfulness, by the smoothness, by the persuasiveness, by the attractiveness of the ways of wickedness? If we don’t feel this, then maybe we’ve already been unknowingly enticed and deceived – or else we are very ripe for the picking. But when we combine the *smooth tongues* of the wicked with *our own sinfulness and weakness*, and then when we call to mind the absolute *holiness of God*—that “God is so incompatible with evil that even the most temporary coexistence is utterly impossible” (Wilson)—then we can see how every single day that we live is a call for *lament*. Every single day that we live, there is reason for distress. Every single day that we live ought to be the occasion for groaning and crying out for help.

“Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I lay out my prayer to you and watch... Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness... make Your way straight before me.” The Psalmist cries out to God not only to lead him along the path, but also to make the path itself clear and easy to find. In *every way*, the psalmist confesses his neediness, and his dependence upon God to keep him in the way of righteousness, and to enable him to walk in God’s paths. Our own hearts are so prone to wander. We are surrounded in the world by smooth tongues hiding open graves. And the God with whom we have to do is utterly and absolutely holy, and opposed to all that is evil. If all this put together does not provide us with a singular reason for lament, and groaning, and crying out for help each and every morning of each and every day, then what ever will? It’s only now, with all of this in mind, that we can truly understand the next part of the psalmist’s prayer:

**VI. Psalm 5:10** —Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you.

The psalmist prays this way not because he’s been personally offended or hurt, and now he just wants payback. The psalmist prays this way because his enemies have rebelled against God, and because their rebellion against a holy God is a constant threat and danger to his own commitment to walk in the paths of righteousness. I wonder – how much do we see this? How much do we see that the rebellion of the world against God is a constant threat to us, not simply in terms of

persecution, but in terms of our own hearts being enticed and deceived and led away on the paths of destruction? This is truly an ever-present danger to all – not just to some. And so we long for a world that is free of the wicked. And we can be absolutely confident and full of hope that one day this world will come, *because why?* – Because God is *holy* – because He is utterly and wholly opposed to anything and everything that is in any way, shape, or form, evil. So the same holiness that caused the Psalmist to groan as he saw his own unworthiness and proneness to wander is now also the ground of the psalmist’s hope and confidence that one day he will no longer be endangered by the smooth tongues of the wicked. We watch expectantly for a world that is free of the wicked. We long to be surrounded only by the examples and the influences of righteousness.

And yet even as we long for these things, we remember what Jesus prayed in His High Priestly prayer:

- ✓ John 17:14–15 — I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

And so the psalmist also concludes in a similar vein:

**VII. Psalm 5:11a** — But let all who take refuge in you...

Who are the ones who take refuge in the Lord? They are the ones who love Yahweh’s name. They are the ones who own and confess this Yahweh as “*my King and my God.*” In other words, they’re the ones who lament, and groan, and cry out for help: “Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make Your way straight before me.” This is what it means here to take refuge in the Lord. It means daily crying out for help and enablement, in light of the enemy within and the enemy without, to know what God’s ways are, and then to walk faithfully in them. Craigie writes: “There is a sense in which this psalm may be seen as a prayer for protection from one’s own tongue, from the evil that is within [oneself].” And another commentator says: “[This] prayer is a humble request for shelter from the *ways* of the wicked, and a request for direction, lest our human feet mislead us into walking those very ways on our own.” (Jacobson) But then we come, as always, to the hope and the promise.

**VIII. Psalm 5:11–12** — But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O LORD; you cover him with favor as with a shield.

Remember that lament in the Psalms is not ultimately an expression of despondency. It’s not ultimately an expression of hopeless desperation, but rather of a wonderful, unshakable confidence and hope. If the psalmist can be confident that because of God’s holiness He will one day cleanse the world of all the influences and deceptions of evil, then the psalmist can also be *confident* that *because of God’s holiness* all those whom He leads in His righteousness, and before whom He makes His ways straight, *will* daily experience His protection, and His favor, and His blessing. And in the experience of these things, they won’t be able to help but rejoice, and exult *in the LORD*, and ever sing for joy!

So we see the pattern in Psalm 5 of a daily groaning and lament that gives way each and every time to singing. But now we come back to the question that we asked at the beginning: How much of our prayer is characterized by lament? Because it's the groaning and the crying out of lament that reflects a heart patterned after God's heart. And it's the groaning and the crying out of lament that ultimately, every time, gives birth to true, exultant joy, and gladness. The absence of lament in our own prayers really only shows us that this is something we very much need to learn. And we can begin the process today by simply taking Psalm 5 and making it our own. May God *teach us* to lament, and to groan, and to cry out with the words of the psalmist, so that we might in turn rejoice, and exult, and ever sing for joy *in Him*.