

*Listen, LORD, as I pray!
Pay attention when I groan.*

*You are my King and my God.
Answer my cry for help because I pray to you.*

*Each morning you listen to my prayer,
as I bring my requests to you and wait for your reply.*

*You are not the kind of God who is pleased with evil.
Sinners can't stay with you.
No one who boasts can stand in your presence, Lord,
and you hate evil people.*

*You destroy every liar,
and you despise violence and deceit.*

*Because of your great mercy,
I come to your house, Lord,
and I am filled with wonder as I bow down to worship at your holy temple.*

*You do what is right, and I ask you to guide me.
Make your teaching clear because of my enemies.*

Psalm 5:1-8

Utterings and Mutterings

Happy Father's Day! I thought it would be appropriate to begin the morning with a story about my dad. It's not so much a story as it is a collection of memories. My dad taught middle school and high school students for nearly 35 years. I think he tired of it after the second or third year, but he had two kids and a mortgage, and frankly, any job was better than no job. So, he endured. He persevered.

What sustained my father from August through June all those years was a daily nap. Practically every day he would come home from school, eat a snack (that usually included a handful of chocolate) and then retreat to the bedroom floor. He would lay there on the floor (he said it was better for his back), and rest his forearm over his eyes. In this position he would commence to breathing like he was trying to blow something off the ceiling, big inhales followed by forceful sighs. I wondered if he was trying to expel something from his chest. Sometimes I'd catch him pressing on his rib cage like he was trying figure out why everything was so tight.

When my tenth-grade English class read *The Crucible*, I recalled this image of my dad lying on his back forcing air in and out of his body, and it struck me that Giles Corey must have felt something like that. Do you remember the fate of old Giles Corey? Accused of sorcery during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, Giles refused to plead guilty or innocent. He wouldn't dignify the preposterous accusation with a plea. Our Puritan ancestors tried to press him for an answer, literally.

The court placed Giles on the ground, stuck a board on his chest and stacked rocks on the board until Giles made plea. Giles never did confess. The weight sat there on his chest until he just couldn't force one more breath. A citizen recorded in his journal that evening, "Giles Corey died for standing mute."

I always thought my dad's plaintive sighs said more than words. Like many men, my father's a private guy. He won't tell you what's pressing him. He'd rather let the stones sit than put words to his feelings. I've learned over the years, however, to roughly interpret his sighs. (That is to say, I'm starting to understand what my own sighs mean.) A powerful exhale might say:

(sigh) "I'm feeling the weight of obligation today"

(sigh) "The rocks of dissatisfaction and frustration are sitting heavy right now"

(sigh) "Anxiety's got my heart so twisted, it's all I can do to take this breath"

I remember a colleague of mine from Durham telling stories about growing up in the Carolina Mountains. When they were little, she and her older sister would find ways to stir up trouble during the long summer days. While they were out playing, their mother would be at home cooking meals in the hot kitchen, hanging up laundry in the sweltering sun, or running around town in a frenzy making sure the errands got done. My friend recalled a particularly busy afternoon for her mom. She and her sister had found a toad and wanted to keep it. The two girls, damp up to their knees and mud speckled up to their elbows carried the toad into the living room.

Big sister, being a little wiser for her days, told little sister to hold the toad and wait in the living room while she went to find momma. Momma, in between laundry and bill paying, was standing at the kitchen sink scrubbing lunch plates. When older sister came around the corner, feet squishing in her shoes, hands dirtied and hair frazzled, momma took one quick glance, turned back to the dishes and let out a hard sighhhhhh... Big sister looked back at little sister, still smiling and holding that toad, and big sister shook her head and said, "Huh uhh. Get it outta here. Momma's blowin'."

You can say so much with a sigh. A single breathy groan can carry a whole host of mundane worries and monumental feelings. I believe groans and sighs are one of our most honest forms of prayer. Paul teaches us that sighing is like asking the Holy Spirit for help. Romans 8:26-27 says,

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

In our weakness, God is strong; in our sighing, the Spirit speaks.

Yet there comes a point for all of us when we need to put words to our sighing. Groaning and blowin' may sustain us for a moment, but a good word will save us. That is why we're reading Psalm 5 today. At our Wednesday night meal we read the psalm and Virginia Lambeth asked, "Who is it that is praying these words?" I answered too matter-of-factly at first, wanting to the pastor with all the answers, "The psalmist, of course." But the weight and importance of her question quickly sank in.

St. Athanasius a 4th century Egyptian Christian gave Virginia a far more profound answer, “Scripture speaks to us,” he said, “the psalms speak for us.” Who is praying these words? The words are *our* prayer. For centuries, faithful men and women who have struggled to find words for their feelings have turned to Psalms. People of deep faith, overwhelmed, exhausted, and unable to pray on their own behalf have turned to the psalms and found a voice. Listen to Psalm 5 again and focus on taking deep, gentle breathes. Let the Psalm give voice to your inmost prayers this morning.

(VIDEO) Chuck Girard, *Psalm 5* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk0R7X1rigg>

That was Chuck Girard singing the first 3 verses of Psalm 5. Anice Griffin discovered that video for us. It is a peaceful and pastoral representation of the fifth Psalm that artfully invited us into a time of personal prayer. Perhaps, though, you’re not in a peaceful, pastoral place right now. Perhaps your prayer is more like verses 5-7. Those words would be more appropriately set against a battle scene from the movie *Braveheart*. Here you are a refuge facing the onslaught of all your enemies and you cry out: *No one who boasts can stand in your presence, Lord, and you hate evil people. You destroy every liar, and you despise violence and deceit! Lord, hear my prayer!!* Maybe you’re in an angry, frustrated, kicking-against-the-world kind of place right now. That’s okay. There’s a Psalm for that.

With raw emotions, the psalmist recognizes that we live in a world full of deception and lies, violence and evil, blood-thirsty rulers and boastful tyrants; *yet* we worship a God who is abounding in steadfast love and great mercy, a truly awe-some and righteous God who is just and attentive to our prayers. The Psalmist stands with us in the gap between our greatest hopes and our harshest realities and gives us words to pray. Wherever we are, the Psalmist stands with us.

Children of God, when you’re feeling pressed by life
and heavy sighs fill your days
and deep groans fill your nights.

Do not suffer for standing mute,
but turn to the Psalms and pray in truth. Amen