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King David as an Optimally Developed Person in the Sense of Helplessness and Hopelessness

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Abstract

This paper concerns a rhetoric theological or hermeneutic discussion about a person's sense of helplessness and hopelessness, especially when in a state of depression. In this case, the authors have chosen King David, the second king of the ancient Israel, who reigned from c. 1010 to 970 BCE, as the key biblical character (persona) in the Old Testament for this discussion. The main aim is to study and understand the implications underlying this biblical image, whose name means "beloved" (of God), in terms of being an optimally developed person (ODP), during the episode when the king was having a serious power struggle with Prince Absalom, his third son. King David suffered depression during that period heartbroken by his son's rebellion against his reign. It was during that period when the king was lost in the sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Keywords: Depression, Helplessness, Hopelessness, King David, Optimal Development

Introduction:

For someone undergoing (or has undergone) the experience of feeling a sense of helplessness and/or a sense of hopelessness, s/he often encounters some of the most frustrating emotions when s/he is in the worst state of depression. Generally speaking, a feeling of helplessness reflects a negative perspective of oneself, while a sense of hopelessness reflects one's negative perspective of the future with the pessimistic outlook that nothing will get better. As a result, one's self-esteem suffers, self-confidence declines, and the person may not believe s/he has any control towards helping him/herself feel better. The person may give up and think, "What's the point?" or "What's life all about?"

In examining these negative perspectives from the sense of helplessness and/or the sense of hopelessness, we refer to the chapter 6 taken from the Book of Psalms or the 6th Psalm (or Psalm 6) [1], whose author is probably King David (the second king of Israel whose reign from c. 1010 to 970 BCE). A psalm is a sacred song found in the biblical Book of Psalms and used in both Christian and Jewish worship.

During that time, in the context of Psalm 6, King David was having a big problem with his son, Prince Absalom, who was described as the most handsome man in the kingdom of Israel. The prince rebelled against his father's reign as the king of Israel. Prince Absalom was the third son of King David with Maacah, daughter of King Talmai of Geshur. However, the revolting prince was eventually killed during the Battle of Ephraim's Wood.

Moreover, it has also been assumed that King David's intention for writing this Psalm 6 can be meant for anyone suffering from sickness/distress or suffering through oppression. In this paper, the authors have chosen to focus only on Psalm chapter 6, verses 1-7 [1]. The seven verses will be examined in two parts: verses 1-4 [1] to review the sense of helplessness; verses 5-7 [1], the sense of hopelessness. The main aim of this paper is to understand the psalmist's view of helplessness and hopelessness.

Psalm chapter 6 verses 1-7 [1] is an intensive lament that had been causing King David sleepless nights. Apparently, his circumstances seemed hopeless and helpless. The early Christian church regarded this psalm as the first among the "penitential psalms" (compare Psalms chapters 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143) [1]. King David's cries, coming up from the depths of his personal pit of persecution, and this indicates a radical change in his frame of

mind as he addressed two different audiences [2]: Firstly, he poured out his soul before God, taking a defeatist frame of mind (see Psalm chapter 6, verses 1-7) [1]: (1) A tone of helplessness (Psalm chapter 6 verses 1-4) [1]; and (2) a tone of hopelessness (Psalm chapter 6 verses 5-7) [1]. Secondly, King David turned his attention to his enemies with a defiant frame of mind (Psalm chapter 6, verses 8-10) [1]: (1) His boldness about it (Psalm chapter 6 verse 8a); and (2) his basis for it (Psalm chapter 6, verses 8b-10) [1]. As mentioned in the earlier paragraph above, the focus of this paper will be on Psalm chapter 6, verses 1-7. All the biblical verses cited in this paper are taken from the King James Bible Online [1].

A Sense of Helplessness: Psalm Chapter 6, Verses 1-4 [1]

According to the dictionary meaning of the phrase "sense of helplessness," it is defined as an inability to defend oneself or to act effectively or "an inability to address immediate and pressing difficulties" (para.1) [3]. A person suffering from severe depression may perceive his/her condition as though there is no end to suffering within sight, and hence, may resort to committing suicide to end his/her misery. According to Wong [4], "it is only human to feel helpless, hopeless and terrified, because the adversity they experience and the terror they face tends to be pervasive, chronic, and beyond their control" (para. 45). Returning to Psalm chapter 6, verses 1 to 4, King David was lamenting in his tone of helplessness, with supporting commentary provided by Cayce [2]:

Psalm 6:1 [1]: "O LORD, rebuke me not in Thine anger, neither chasten me in Thy hot displeasure."

According to this verse as commented by Cayce [2], "[I]n Thine anger ... in thy hot displeasure", King David did not request for any immunity from judgment. In fact, he asked for the tempering of God's discipline with mercy. From this verse, King David was pleading with God not to turn away from him. Like anyone of us, David was very aware that he had sinned against God and he felt the rebuke of God. He was asking God to show him mercy. As Cayce [2] argued, "Except for the mercy of Almighty God, we would feel the displeasure of God" (para. 9) and went on to explain that ... "[T]he grace of God is what King David is asking for. I do not believe that the king wants to avoid the chastening that makes him grow in the Lord, He just asks that the chastening be done in love and not anger" (para. 9) [2].

In verses 2 and 7 [1] where "[B]ones ... eye" are mentioned, most people would assume that "because the psalmist (i.e., King David) mentions bodily 'parts' his affliction was a grave physical illness" (para. 10) [2]. King David's circumstances at that time would surely have had a strong impact on his physical health. However, according to Cayce [2], in the Old Testament anthropology, references such as picturesque metaphors are applied as in the case of David's affliction of his total being (compare all the parallel, personal references, e.g., 'me', 'my soul', i.e., by being or person, 'I', etc.) (See [2] for more detail).

Psalm 6:2 [1]: "Have mercy upon me, O LORD; for I [am] weak: O LORD, heal me; for my bones are vexed."

In this second verse of Psalm chapter 6 [1], King David pled not his merit, but the free mercy of God. He himself

admitted that "I am weak", which can be understood as what Cayce [2] explained, "I languish; my body pines away and my spirit fails through my excessive pains or troubles" (para. 13). The king also requested God to "[H]eal me", i.e. "the distempers of my soul and body, of both which this word is used" (para. 14) [2] (also see Psalms chapter 41, verse 4; Psalms chapter 107, verses 18 and 20) [5].

When the king complained that "[M]y bones are vexed", what he meant was that his torment was so deep and so general, that it had reached and was very grievous even to his bones [2].

Like all of us, King David was weak and heavy laden, burdened with a load of care. Christians have always been told or reminded that they are told to cast their cares upon the Son of God, i.e., Jesus Christ, for He cares for the human race. Like us, King David cried for mercy and not justice. It was in his weakness that King David realized God was and is always strong. "God heals not only the body, but the soul as well. The bones being vexed means that he is sick to the bone" (para. 15) [2].

Psalm 6:3 [1]: "My soul is also sore vexed: but Thou, O LORD, how long?"

"How long" in this verse is King David's exclamation of an intense lament (compare Psalms chapter 90 verse 13; Habakkuk chapter 2, verse 6; and Revelation chapter 6, verse 10) [5]. It is an indication that sin had brought the king a terrible guilt. "Physical hurt cannot compare to the sorrow that comes with knowing you have sinned against God. This sorrow is so great, that you could not endure it very long" (para. 18) [5]. The only thing for the guilt-stricken king to do was repentance and acceptance of forgiveness, before the sin could destroy him. According to Viktor Frankl (b.1905-d.1997), a professor of neurology and psychiatry in Vienna, every human possesses the freedom to be responsible. With this freedom to make choices, one cannot ascribe his/her behaviour to conditioning or drives, but must take responsibility for making those choices and taking this responsibility, i.e., noögenic dimension, which makes one human [6].

Psalm 6:4 [1]: "Return, O LORD, deliver my soul: Oh, save me for Thy mercies' sake."

In this fourth verse of Psalm chapter 6, King David cried to God to "[D]eliver my soul ... thy mercies' sake" [1]. According to Cayce [2], this verse 4 introduces "a new synonym for salvation, connoting an action of drawing off or out. He desires the Lord to graciously extricate him (compare Job 36:15; Psalms 18:19; 116:8) [5]" (para. 22). The phrase "Thy mercies" describes the king's deeply significant, loyal love of God [2; para. 23]; (also see Genesis chapter 39, verse 21 [5]; Exodus chapter 20, verse 6, and chapter 34, verses 6-7 [5]). Cayce [2] argued that "[W]ithout God, humanity is in a terrible place, miserable and without hope. Yet God cares intensely and reaches out to rescue every single person who asks" (para. 22). Many psalms use this same phrase to explain why God is worthy of praise (e.g., Psalms chapter 40, verses 10-11; chapter 57, verses 3 and 10) [5].

In this fourth verse, King David was admitting that he did not deserve God's forgiveness. In his humility, the king pled for God's mercy for he realized that it is "only by the mercy of God that any of us are forgiven" (para. 23) [2]. From the theological hermeneutic perspective, this is not

only King David's plead for a savior, but all of mankind's plead for a Savior, whom the Christians recognize Jesus Christ as that divine Person, as mentioned in the book of Titus chapter 2, verse 13 [5]: "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ." As mortal beings, humankind is unable to save themselves. God sent His Son to save the humankind from their sinful way of life.

The only hope for King David (or anyone of us) was for God to send a savior. From the perspective of theological hermeneutics, God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, not because the humankind deserved it, but because God as the Creator to humankind loved His creatures. He had mercy upon the sinful humankind. As found in the book of First John chapter 4, verses 9-10 [5], it is mentioned that "[I]n this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son [to be] the propitiation for our sins."

A Sense of Hopelessness: Psalm Chapter 6, Verses 5-7 [1]

The dictionary definition for "a sense of hopelessness" is a feeling or state of despair. According to Knaus [7], hopelessness is an individual's prediction where s/he asserts that his/her future is fixed. The thoughts of being hopeless can shape one's perception and amplify one's low mood. Such negative thoughts often pivot on expectations, e.g., "I can't change and my life will continue to be a failure no matter what I do." The person may believe that his/her depression is never ending. The person continues to fear that s/he has no way to free him/herself from his/her dark mood and depressive pessimism. Knaus [7] argued that "If you believe you'll never stop feeling miserable, hopelessness thinking can have unwanted consequences. One big consequence is that you can suggest yourself into a negative cycle where you feel and act the way you think" (para. 4). He further added that "[A]nother is that you will tend to validate your hopelessness beliefs by finding examples to support them" (para. 4) [7]. As a result, the hopelessness expectations of any individual can lead to pessimistic conclusions impacting his/her mood for the worse.

In the chapter 19 of the book – Hope in the Age of Anxiety – written by Scioli and Biller [8] on "Overcoming Hopelessness: Escape from Darkness," the authors argue that there are nine different senses of hopelessness. Below is a summary with a brief description of each sense of hopelessness [8]:

- **Alienation (Attachment):** People who feel alienated believe that they are somehow different from others. They feel that they are not worthy of love, care or support from others. As a result, they alienate themselves from others, shut themselves off because of their unfounded fear of suffering further pain and/or rejection.
- **Forsakenness (Attachment and Survival):** The term "forsaken" depicts a strong experiential feeling of total abandonment. This negative feeling causes an individual to feel very lost and isolated in the time of his/her greatest need. This is also exactly how King David felt when he needed God's grace, mercy and assurance but felt that he was being abandoned in the time of his greatest need.

- **Uninspired (Attachment and Mastery):** For people coming from underprivileged minorities, they often feel uninspired because such opportunities for growth and positive role models within a minority group is either lacking or undervalued.
- **Powerlessness (Mastery):** Any person of any age possesses a belief that s/he can author his/her life story. However, when the person feels s/he is incapable of navigating his/her way to attain the desired goal(s) in life or that his/her need has been thwarted, a feeling of powerlessness can set in.
- **Oppression (Mastery and Attachment):** A person who feels oppressed or "down trodden" often experiences a prolonged cruel, receives unjust treatment or suffers under the abuse of authority.
- **Limitedness (Mastery and Survival):** People often feel limited when they see their struggle for survival to be an eventual failure. They perceive themselves as deficient, wanting in the right substance to succeed in the competitive world. This form of hopelessness is all too common among the poor as well as those struggling with severe physical handicaps or crippling learning disabilities.
- **Doom (Survival):** The form of despair can cause an individual to be emotionally burdened that s/he feels life is over and death is unavoidable. Such a perspective on life is termed as *tragic pessimism*, which is the opposite of *tragic optimism*, a term coined by Frankl [6] to describe a person who stays optimistic despite going through the unpleasant experience of pain, guilt, and possibly, death (also known as "tragic triad"). People diagnosed with a serious, life-threatening illness (e.g., fourth-stage cancer) or those worn down by age or infirmity are the most vulnerable ones to end up sinking deeper into this sense of hopelessness. They feel hopelessly doomed and/or completely trapped in an irreversible decline.
- **Captivity (Survival and Attachment):** There are two types of hopelessness that can result from physical and/or emotional captivity [8]. The first type can be enforced by an individual or a group. For instance, prisoners-of-war during the World War 2 can come under this category as well as those are held captive in a controlling, abusive relationship (also known as "other-imprisonment"). The second type occurs when a person cannot leave a bad relationship because his/her sense of self does not permit it. This is an equally insidious form of emotional entrapment (also known as "self-imprisonment"). Often a victim of the second type ends up suffering from Stockholm syndrome, i.e., a condition in which a victim develops some kind of a psychological alliance with his/her captor(s) during the captivity.
- **Helplessness (Survival and Mastery):** When an individual feels helpless because s/he no longer believes that s/he can live safely in the world, the sense of vulnerability sets in. With trauma or repeated exposure to uncontrolled stressors, an ingrained sense of helplessness can result in the eventual experience of hopelessness.

Returning to Psalm 6, verses 5-7 [1], King David was found lamenting in his tone of hopelessness, with supporting commentary taken from Cayce [2]. Such a

painful mood can be described as an unbearable physical experience of wading through mud as if one is stuck, immovable, and isolated.

Psalm 6:5 [1]: "For in death [there is] no remembrance of Thee: in the grave who shall give Thee thanks?"

In verse 5 of this psalm, King David lamented that "[F]or in death, no remembrance of Thee" [1]. According to Cayce [2], there is much mentioned about 'death' and 'the grave', where these terms are closely associated with Sheol. This does not "imply annihilation, but inability to participate temporally in public praise offerings" (para. 28); (compare with Prophet Hezekiah's reasoning found in the book of Isaiah chapter 38, verse 18) [5]. From the theological hermeneutic perspective, in the gospel according to Saint Luke chapter 20, verse 38 [5], in the New Testament: "For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him."

Cayce [2] argued that it is in this life that the humankind should be grateful to God for His blessings because it would be too late to give Him thanks after death. "There is nothing as silent as the grave" (para. 30).

In the following verses 6-7 [1], the psalmist painted weary pictures of his anguish over immediate danger and the prospect of an untimely death. It may also imply a long period of suffering. The clause "is consumed" in verse 7 [1] describes that King David was at the end of his resources. He had spent beyond recovery with no earthly means of help left. Sleep had also eluded him because of his severe sorrow. This can be compared with Psalm chapter 31, verse 9 [5]: "Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea, my soul and my belly."

Psalm 6:6 [1]: "I am weary with my groaning; all the night makes I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears."

In verse 6 of Psalm chapter 6 [1], the phrase "all the night" refers to the psalmist's lament by way of aggravation of his misery. According to Cayce [2], "[B]ecause that season, which is to others by God's appointment a time of rest, was to him very sad and doleful" (para. 34).

The two phrases "makes I my bed to swim" and "I water my couch with my tears" express the intensity of King David's groaning and praying. When prayer became so intense that the psalmist himself ran out of words to say, he could only groan things that could not be uttered in words. This is a prayer of great agony of spirit that gets God's attention [2].

Psalm 6:7 [1]: "Mine eye is consumed because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies."

In verse 7 of Psalm chapter 6 [1], the word 'is consumed' means 'to fall away' and when applied the "eye", it concerns "pining or wasting away from care, anxiety, and sorrow ... Tears were poured forth from the eye, and it seemed to be exhausting itself in this manner" (para. 39) [2]. The psalmist's eyes had grown dim or that his sight began to fail on the account of his troubles.

It is not uncommon effect of grief and sadness when King David lamented that "it waxeth old." As Cayce [2] described that "[I]t seems to grow old. It experiences the effects commonly produced by age in blunting the power of vision" (para. 40). When someone experiences such a

tremendous grief as the psalmist, physical signs around the eyes and in the eyes include the following: swollen eyelids caused by much crying, dark circles formed around the eyes, heavy eyebags caused by lack of sleep, and the eyeballs become red with little lines in them. Wendy Mass, a New York bestselling author of young adult novels and children's books, once said, "The eyes are the window to man's soul." By looking deep into the eyes, one can tell and understand what is going on inside of a person for great sorrow of spirit shows up first in the eyes.

What had made it worst for King David was "all mine enemies" were none other than the formerly exiled Prince Absalom (the third son of King David) and his rebel forces raising up against him, in the attempt to seize the throne, such conduct had brought upon the psalmist the overwhelming tide of sorrows. In most, if not all, cultures, especially in the Asian socio-cultural context, nothing pains more to a parent than having a rebellious child who causes problems to the family and troubles to the society. It is exactly the painful experience that King David was going through as a father, who still loved his son so much, rather than as a king of Israel.

Conclusion

Within the sense of helplessness and/or hopelessness, Psalm chapter 6, verses 1 to 7 [1], has shown how King David's humility led him to the spiritual attainment of optimal development in his personality. This occurred only when the king began functioning on a spiritual level, i.e., the spiritual side of his human stature became fully evident. Optimally developed people (i.e., people who attain full human stature) constitute a small minority because it requires courage and boldness to be optimally human [9]. There are nine attributes to describe such an optimally developed person and these are observed in King David's personality.

An optimally developed person (ODP for short) displays the following nine attributes as proposed by Viktor Frankl (cited in Wong, 2007):

- **Self-determining action:** That means one should not attribute his/her fate to implicit factors (e.g., drives and needs) or explicit factors (i.e., environment). An ODP is clear about him/herself and the surrounding circumstances that affect him/her and freely decides what s/he chooses to do or how to act. In King David's case, he chose to continue his love for his rebellious son, Prince Absalom, despite the prince's murder of his half-brother, Prince Amnon (King David's eldest son) for raping his sister Tamar, and also committing treason against the king by declaring himself the rightful king of Israel. King David was more than ready to pardon his wayward son and to accept him back into the royal family.
- **Realistic perception:** This refers to a person's ability to perceived issues of concern objectively and critically in the context of him/herself and the circumstances or situations s/he is in. An ODP is able to distance him/herself from what is happening to him/her. King David was able to view objectively and critically in the context of his son's revolting against him, and perceived it as his fault and more likely, his failure as a father in bringing up his son, Absalom.
- **Humor:** This concerns a person's ability to laugh at him/herself for the silly mistakes s/he has made and

hence, an ODP is able to distance him/herself from his/her weaknesses and/or problems encountered daily. King David wept bitterly in depression instead of laughing at himself for his mistakes or sin. Should the king have chosen to laugh, that would be nervous laughter (certainly not a hearty laughter!), and in psychological term, it is known as inappropriate affect.

- **Self-transcendence:** This refers to being outward-looking, giving one's life meaning in whatever s/he does in order to dedicate him/herself to values and ideals that s/he holds dear to heart. An ODP's primary goals in life are not so much about attaining own satisfaction and/or happiness but moving forward to find or give meaning to his/her life. King David is known to be the beloved of God – a man who sought after God. He was not a person to lust for power and wealth, but one who always wanted to please God in whatever he did. The king never blamed Prince Absalom for rebelling against his reign. Instead, the guilt-stricken king blamed everything on himself since the time when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdering of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, who was an elite soldier in the king's army. King David was truly repentant and early sought forgiveness from God, before the sin could destroy him.
- **Future directedness:** This is a person's ability to make each day a special opportunity in life and his/her past a trove of fulfilled possibilities. To an ODP, death is never seen as a threat as it carries a special meaningful conclusion to his/her life, i.e., a future-directed goal or vision for betterment of life. When Prince Absalom declared himself as a king to replace his father in Jerusalem, King David had to fled for his life with his loyal men to take refuge from Absalom's forces beyond the Jordan River. However, he did not give up the hope of reuniting with Prince Absalom one day. In fact, King David himself passed an explicit command to his men if they captured the prince, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom" (Second book of Samuel, chapter 18, verse 5), which means killing the rebellious prince was against the king's order.
- **Work as a vocation:** Words such as job, vocation and career, are often taken to be similar in meaning. They conjure up images of a profession (e.g., doctor, engineer, lawyer, teacher) that people tend to use them interchangeably. However, these three words do not mean the same thing. The term 'vocation' refers to the profession that one desires to be in. The word comes from Latin *vocare*, i.e., "to call." The call or calling comes from within the person in the choice of profession. Generally speaking, the choice of vocation depends on one's education that is supposed to enable one to earn and stand on own feet and start a family and make important decision in life. Today, many people find themselves in all sorts of professions which are not to their liking. Career refers to all the jobs a person engages in throughout his lifetime taken together. Unlike vocation, career comes from Latin *cart* that means "a race track." It does not have anything to do with a race track; a career is not a job, but a series of jobs that a person may have done or intends to do in life. An ODP regards work or profession as a vocation (i.e., a calling) – an

opportunity to make a worthwhile or responsible contribution to life. King David took his kingship as an anointed position by God through His prophet Samuel. That was David's special vocation as a king-servant of God ruling over God's people, the Israelites. His legacy includes worship music (psalms) that still endures to this day, but the greatest legacy of King David is Jesus Christ, whose lineage of both Mary (based on the gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapter 1, verses 1-17) and Joseph (based on the gospel according to Saint Luke, chapter 3, verses 23-28) are recorded in the Holy Bible.

- **Appreciation of goodness, beauty and truth:** This concerns one's experiences of what is good, beautiful and genuine that life offers. An ODP is receptive to these attributes of life and s/he is open to new experiences encountered daily. This attribute can be found in many of the psalms that King David had written, such as those that sing praises to the Almighty God, speak of God's greatness, goodness and mercy, and also include those that are prayers and supplications to God, which the king prayed in times of trouble. Some of his psalms also contain good advice, pointing the direction to true happiness through virtue and the fulfilment of God's commandments [10].
- **Respect and appreciation for the uniqueness of others:** This concerns attitude characterized by respect and appreciation, and also being free from prejudice and discrimination in one's attitude toward others. An ODP will not make others as objects for his/her own gains in life or to achieve own selfish ends. The ODP wants to have meaningful relationships with others. According to Mindel [10], King David won the everlasting love of his people, not as a great warrior or mighty king, but as the respected author of the Book of Psalms (Tehillim), the sweetest poetry of Israel, appreciated by many people throughout the world today.
- **Meaning in suffering:** This is the toughest attribute among all to be attained. Meaning can be found in suffering, guilt and death [6] [9]. An ODP is someone who has discovered meaning in suffering and has reached the highest or ultimate point of development. S/He has accepted tragic factuality (or actualities) of life and his/her meaning of life is actually deepened as a result. For instance, King David had endured hardships and trials within and outside his family, both physical and mental, throughout his lifetime. We can better understand David better through the songs (psalms) he had written and the emotions that so evidently displayed in them [10].

For anyone to have attained the level of optimal development, the person has completely exercised his/her freedom of will and fulfil his/her basic human intent/motive: to seek and eventually find meaning in life in the midst of helplessness and hopelessness as what King David finally realized almost 3,000 years ago.

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