

Lament and the Psalms – a Lent Study



Session 1. The Need for Lament

When we feel blessed in life, when we experience goodness and wholeness, we turn to God in praise and thanksgiving. But what happens when we experience just the opposite? What happens when we are overcome by the presence of chaos, brokenness, suffering and death, or by a sudden sense of our human vulnerability? When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt spiritually, we cry out in lament.

In these sessions we explore this often neglected practice, with particular reference to Covid-19 and Climate Change, though we have the opportunity to explore lament in relation to the grief that we feel in relation to any loss.

Lament was an important part of Israel's history, and the Hebrew Bible includes individual and communal laments as an integral part of the relationship with God. It's a way for an individual or group experiencing some deep pain or sorrow to move towards God, even if God may seem to be the cause of the suffering.

Listen/Watch – the first clip of the theologian Walter Brueggemann

***With someone else, discuss what you have heard and how it relates to how you view the Psalms and how they are used in church.*

Definition

We probably need to start with a definition or at least an understanding of what lament is.

Aubrey Sampson, author of the powerful book, *“The Louder Song, Listening for Hope in the Midst of Lament”* Says this:

“Lament, meaning a crying out of the soul, creates a pathway between the Already and the Not Yet. Lament minds the gap between current hopelessness and coming hope. Lament anticipates new creation but also acknowledges the painful reality of now. Lament helps us hold onto God’s goodness while battling evil’s evil at the same time.”

So to lament is not to lack faith, but a way of expressing faith in the light of difficult circumstances. And to that end over the next few weeks we will look at just a few of the 50 or so laments in the book of Psalms,

Read 1 Samuel 1:9 - 2:10

Many Psalms of Lament pertain to private life and personal difficulty. A classic example of this genre can be found outside the psalter in the two-part ‘*Prayer of Hannah*’ in 1 Sam 1.9-2.10. This section provides us with a dramatic movement in three acts that can be found in all laments; namely:

- human need (vv 9-16);
- conviction of grace (vv 17-23);
- expression of gratitude (from 1:24 – 2:10).

The ‘*Song of thanksgiving*’ sung by Hannah becomes a formal recital of divine intervention and act of worship and praise on behalf of the whole nation, as well as being her personal prayer of gratitude. In this way, a private grief becomes a communal triumph and cause for thanksgiving.

In the Psalms of Lament that we will look at in this study, we’ll see that these three elements of lament are present in some form: human need; conviction of grace; expression of gratitude through praise and thanksgiving. So let us start with Psalm 42.

*** You can read more about the story of Lament and the story of Hannah in Chapter 5 “Psalms of Human Need and Distress” of Dermot Cox’s book of the Psalms available via the web site, email, etc.*

Psalm Study

Read Psalm 42

***Reflect on what you hear in this psalm and perhaps discuss your initial impression with someone else.*

The Psalms are not all written by the same person nor are they written at the same time but they are collated and grouped into five separate books. Today's Psalm comes at the start of Book Two.

The heading for the psalm depends upon the bible translation in my NRSV Bible it says simply “*Longing for God and His Help in Distress*”.

In the NRSV it also says “*To the leader. A Maskil of the Korahites.*” It addresses the sons of Korah who are a tribe dedicated to helping in the temple. The psalmist is in despair and wants to share his message with like minded folk, and in doing so opens it up to us all to feel and understand his message.

Structure

Look at the structure of the psalm in the light of what we've discovered about Lament already in the story of Hannah.

Questions

***With someone else, consider the following questions (In these questions there are no right or wrong answers, they are simply here to help you in your discussion and reflection):*

- *In this Psalm, what jumps off the page at you?*
- *What words does the Psalmist use to describe how he is feeling.*
- *What words does the Psalmist use to describe the physical impact of his suffering.*
- *How does the Psalmist describe his current experience of God?*
- *What has been your experience of having a downcast soul?*

Discussion

The first verse in poem actually covers the first four verses. They start off with that wonderful image of a thirst for God: *“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.”*

In the time that this Psalm was written, God was thought to reside in the Holy of Holies in the centre of the Temple and this is where the author wants to be. He writes in verse 2 *“When shall I come and behold the face of God?”* He wants to return to the Temple and is really feeling bad about as he remembers how good it was to be there.

At verse 6 we get a glimpse of the psalmist’s complaint and the reason he’s so downcast. He’s longing to be in the Temple and is downcast because he can’t be. The reason is he’s in exile, and is remembering past glories and his encounters with God in His Temple. In remembering, he begins to feel better and his spirit is lifted, but he’s not finished yet. He still asks *“Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?”*

By the end, however, he recovers enough to offer praise: *“For I shall yet praise him my Saviour and my God.”*

Additional Material

If you haven’t already read the ‘pre-reading’ then now is the time to give it a go and understand more about *“The Practice of Lament”* and *“The Structure of the Psalms of Lament”*.

If you are able to access on-line videos or have the CD of audio versions of them, you could also listen to talks *“Overview of the Psalms”* which described the structure and purpose of the Book of Psalms and *“Introduction to Psalms of Lament”* which goes into more detail about the structure of Psalms of Lament.

Chapter 5 *“Psalms of Human Need and Distress”* of Dermot Cox’s book of the Psalms not only explores the story of Hannah in the First Book of Samuel, but also about both the *Need for Lament* (the subject of this week’s study), but also the *Power of Lament* (which is next week’s topic).