

Lament and the Psalms – a Lent Study



Session 2. The Power of Lament

Listen/Watch – the second 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.*

Read 1 Samuel 23:15-26

***With someone else, spend a short while reflecting on David's predicament (this forms the context to Psalm 57).*

Psalm Study

Read Psalm 57

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

The heading for this Psalm in my NRSV Bible it says “*To the leader: Do Not Destroy*”. Some scholars think that ‘Do not Destroy’ is the name of the tune to which this Psalm was sung.

In the NRSV it also says “*Of David. A Miktam, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.*” This sets the context and explains why we read from the first book of Samuel at the beginning. There’s not much scholarly agreement regarding what *miktam* means. However in this context it could mean a prayer or plea to God.

Structure

Look at the structure of the psalm in the light of what we’ve discovered about Lament already in our journey of discovery in the Psalms of Lament.

Let's start by looking at the layout of the psalm.

In my versions you can see a repeating pattern:

1-4 followed in 5 by a chorus

6-10 followed in 11 by the same chorus as verse 5

This psalm appears to be in two parts and some suggest they weren't written as a single entity, but that some long-forgotten editor thought they worked well together. If that's true, maybe God inspired the author or authors but equally so the editor, because this is a lovely lament to God.

Incidentally, you may have noticed the word **Selah** twice in this psalm, once in the middle of verse 3 and again at the end of verse 6. Selah is a word that appears 71 times in the Psalms and three times in the Book of Habakkuk. The meaning of this word isn't known, though there are various interpretations of it. It is probably either a liturgico-musical mark or an instruction on the reading of the text, with the meaning of "*stop and listen.*" Selah may also indicate a break in the song whose purpose is similar to that of "amen" (*Hebrew: "so be it"*) in that it stresses the truth and importance of the preceding passage.

Another proposal is that selah may be used to indicate that there is to be a musical interlude at that point in the psalm. At least some of the psalms were sung accompanied by musical instruments and there are references to this places. Thirty-one of the thirty-nine psalms with the caption "*To the choir-master*" include the word selah.

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):*

- *What jumps off the page at you?*
- *List the words the Psalmist uses to describe his enemies and their activities.*
- *List the words the Psalmist uses to describe God and his activities.*

- *What does the Psalmist ask God for? Why do you think the Psalmist asks God for this?*
- *What, in your life, might lead you to call out to God, "Have mercy on me"*

Discussion

Although the word "trust" doesn't actually occur in the first six verses, it does seem to be the main idea. God is glorified as we trust Him in our trials. Trusting in the Lord has perhaps come to be viewed as a bit of worthy, but totally useless, advice for someone who's facing trials in their life. But that isn't so; it's some of the most practical and sound counsel we could be given or follow when we're in a difficult situation. So we need to understand what it means to trust the Lord. Psalm 57 leads us through the process:

v 1- reliance upon God alone

v 2- going to God in prayer

vv 3-4 - seeing God as greater than my problem

In the second section, glorifying and praising God in my trials (vv 6-10).

Let's assume that when he wrote this, David was still in the cave hiding from Saul who's still the king and has sworn to kill him. Although David's circumstances haven't changed much, if at all, and he is still in danger, yet instead of self-pity and complaining, David breaks out in praise to God.

In this Psalm he teaches us two things about praise:

Vs 6-8 Praise is a matter of deliberate focus

Vs 9-10 Praise is a matter of testifying to others of God's goodness.

The power of Lament relies on the fact that it calls God into a situation and by engaging with God and trusting in God, the situation and our response to it are changed in a positive way. The scriptures are full of people telling their stories of loss, disappointment and grief.

When we reflect on the pattern that we see in Psalm 57 – the transition from complaint to praise – we can see that lament isn't a matter of going through the motions. Lament is a process through which we gradually gain the confidence to not only lay our pain, sorrow, grief and loss down before God, but to trust in God to act for and with us to move beyond it.

In Psalm 57, it is quite explicit that the two parts (complaint and praise) were written at different times and possibly by different people. Whilst this may be less explicit in other Psalms of Lament, it is likely that most such psalms were written in stages, as the process of mourning took its course. In other words, we shouldn't come away with the idea that Psalms of Lament can instantly transform our suffering into joy, but that constant repetition over a period of time, will help us to lay down our pain and gradually gain that confidence to let go of it and acknowledge God's role in the process. That of course naturally leads to praise and thanksgiving.

In some psalms, the psalmist has clearly emerged from their pain and the praise is fulsome but in others the element of praise is rather more muted, and in some cases non-existent. Learning this pattern and adopting it for ourselves helps us to cry out to God in our own pain, sorrow, grief, and fear. Following the way of the psalmists turns our gaze from ourselves toward the One who alone can save us. The more we do this, the more we find ourselves in the presence of our gracious Father in heaven, that place where we are encouraged to go: *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb. 4:16).

The lament psalms teach us how to mourn by complaining in the midst of the dark nights of our great sadnesses: *“You have put me into the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep”* (Ps 88:7). These psalms are rituals of mourning through which griefs are recognized and then yielded in order to allow the bereaved, the anxious and the suffering to look to the future with hope. If those suffering grief and pain truly lay their complaints down before God from the very depths of their souls and trust in God's willingness to listen, hope comes alive once more: *“He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God”* (Ps 40:3).