

CHAPTER 5 PSALMS OF HUMAN NEED AND DISTRESS

Human need takes many forms. It can be the savage alienation brought by physical pain or psychological stress; the loss of an intellectual basis for one's faith; the pedestrian sense of an absence of value or meaning to life. Whatever form it takes it is, for thinking man, always a catalyst. It provokes a reaction: awareness of human need is the starting point of any journey of recovery.

In the psalter this is invariably a religious perception, for God is inescapably part of any equation that can be called '*life*'. Any diminution of human well-being, any loss of shalom, is indicative of something gone wrong with an individual's relationship to God. The first and most immediate cure is to be found in prayer, the restoration of personal intercourse with the source of existence. Indeed, even if it must be as judge that he comes, God's presence is immeasurably better than his absence, as Ps 17.1-3 attests:

*Hear a just cause, O Lord;
attend to my cry!
Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!
From thee let my vindication come!
Let thy eyes see the right!
If thou triest my heart, if thou visitest me by night,
if thou testest me, thou wilt find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.*

This is formally a '*Lament*', but it is also one man's studied judgement on human life and alienation, and is typical of the whole Old Testament. Pain diminishes the personality, but prayer of any sort will initiate a process of restoration. In the '*lament*' type of psalm in particular it can be seen how sickness, pain or any of the burdens of mortality can in fact become an arena within which one encounters God and rediscovers *shalom*.

Naturally, death is the great enemy of all the living, but it is particularly evident in the psalter that death is not a simple, clearly determinable moment: its domain encroaches upon life itself, casting its shadow of sickness, oppression, poverty. All of these are seen as death's outriders, manifestations of its ultimate dominion over the living. To lack anything of life's fulness was to be reduced to a state that was at best *relatively* human, and one became something of an outsider in a society that was dominated by the knowledge of life's transitoriness. This fact gives a definite emphasis to the theology of the psalms of lamentation, which serve a positive function for both individual and society. In the appeal to God, found in one way or another in all these poems, the suppliant is given a point of stability, something to hold on to; a key to meaning in what otherwise would be an alien world. He participates in a very actual way in something that never changes — the presence of an interested God. The almost invariable structure of the '*Lament*' makes this obvious. There is always a clearly marked passage from '*request*' to '*acknowledgement*' or recognition. Sometimes the change is indicated by the use of a priestly oracle, which seems to guarantee the effectiveness of the prayer for rehabilitation, as in Ps 12.5:

*'Because the poor are despoiled,
because the needy groan,
I will now arise,' says the Lord;
'I will place him in the safety for which he longs';*

more often by a simple copulative — 'then' or 'but' — as in Ps 55.16:

*But I call upon God;
and the Lord will save me.*

There is always a clearly defined moment of change, when an oppressive situation is reversed. The psalmist presents himself before God, opens his heart to pour out his troubles, and during the course of the prayer receives confirmation of grace; he will then end his prayer with an expression of gratitude for what is to him a *fait-accomplis*.

While used in the liturgy — and many of them represent a liturgical testimony of thanksgiving -- by their nature they pertain more to the realm of private life and personal difficulty, especially the kind known as '*Individual Lament*'. The psychological pattern is too deeply incised to be merely ritual, and one can frequently trace a genuine personal issue behind the formal prayer. A classic example of the genre can be found outside the psalter in the two-part '*Prayer of Hannah*' in 1 Sam 1.9-2.10.

Technically, only the last ten verses of this story form the '*Song of Hannah*', which seems to be a later addition to the story of the birth of Samuel. Yet the whole section admirably scores the dramatic movement in three acts that is found in all laments. The heroine is barren, and longs for a child. During one of her annual pilgrimages to the shrine of Shiloh she enters the '*temple of the Lord*':

After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, 'O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head'. (1 Sam 1.9—11)

Thus the scene is set with the first act of a typical lament, though most of those in the psalter lack any such clear description of the particular human need that calls them forth. The narrative force of 1 Sam 1-2 draws the reader into a participation with its protagonist in her '*need*', and into a subsequent identification with her in thanksgiving when, after her return home from Shiloh, '*she conceived and bore a son*' (1.20). The rest of the narrative adds the second and third acts — assurance of divine intervention and act of thanksgiving (1.23b-2.5):

So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine; and she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slew the bull, and they brought

the child to Eli. And she said, 'Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me my petition which I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord'. And they worshipped the Lord there.

*Hannah also prayed and said,
'My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in the Lord.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in thy salvation.
There is none holy like the Lord,
there is none besides thee;
there is no rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn'.*

So strong is the reader's identification with this episode that the 'Song of thanksgiving' has become a formal recital of divine intervention on behalf of the nation, as well as a personal prayer of gratitude. A private grief has become a communal triumph. The three constitutive elements of the lament are present, and illustrated: human need; conviction of grace received; expression of gratitude.

Lament as an Act of Confidence

In fact, the unity of salvation-history is nowhere nearer the surface of biblical prayer than in the lament: the cry of a people in travail rising up to the ear of the Lord, and the Lord 'remembering' them and answering their need. Every lament is a spiritual replay of Ex 2.23-25 :

In the course of those many days the King of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition.

In the 'Individual Lament', which is the most personalized kind, most emphasis is placed on the act of faith and confidence that is the fruit of theological speculation on that very history, and this results in a declaration of certainty that one has been heard. The grace of divine help is accepted as real, though its aspect may change from psalm to psalm.

Psalm 86 is an individual lament, the cry of one lost and alienated, and more accustomed to God's indifferent silence than his salvation — as one might guess from the repetitive style of vv.1-6. Yet the fact is that through the act of praying that silence meaning has come to an absurd world:

*Thou art my God; be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to thee do I cry all the day.
Gladden the soul of thy servant,
for to thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.
For thou, O Lord, art good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on thee.
Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer;
hearken to my cry of supplication.
In the day of my trouble I call on thee,
for thou dost answer me.
(vv. 2b-7)*

However obscurely, God has come into that situation and no other answer is deemed necessary by the poet:

*I give thanks to thee, O Lord my God,
with my whole heart,
and I will glorify thy name forever.
(v. 12) .*

Psalm 6 is a poem of the same type. On a first reading, what immediately comes to mind is the question, 'a lament for what?'; what is at stake in the mind of the psalmist? The act of special pleading in v. 5 - 'in Sheol who can give you praise?' - may perhaps be passed over as a rather pathetic human expedient at gaining God's attention, but v. 4 is important for it reflects, quite simply, the poet's need of God and his need of the institution of prayer - 'Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of thy steadfast love'.

The first issue therefore is clearly his relationship with God, and this throws light on the opening verses of the prayer:

*O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger,
nor chasten me in thy wrath.
Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is sorely troubled.
- But thou, O Lord — how long?
(vv. 1-3)*

It is a simple cry for help. The psalmist takes refuge, not in a protest of innocence (common enough in the lament), but in the grace of God. His personal feeling of insecurity is evident: stretching out his hands to God he is none too sure how much he can expect — indeed, the broken nature of v. 3 underlines the emotional condition of the suppliant. The very fact that the immediate cause of lament is not indicated may in fact point to the inner nature of the prayer. An awareness that God seems to hold

himself aloof makes it the poet's first concern not to lose this relationship, which for him represents the very essence of human existence. And, seemingly, this prayer in itself is sufficient to guarantee the restoration of intimacy, for vv. 8-10 show how the psalmist has reached an assurance that his request has been heard, and union with God restored:

*Depart from me, all you workers of evil;
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.
The Lord has heard my supplication;
the Lord accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be ashamed and sorely troubled;
they shall turn back, and be put to shame in a moment.*

The quality of life depicted here is the reverse of what was shown in vv. 6-7, for the psalmist knows that his prayer *has already been answered*.

Psalm 13 is a more complex example of lament. It is an amalgam of the experiences of many people who have known suffering – a paradigm of human distress: a rift in the relationship with God; estrangement from the community; psychological disorder. Certainly, the emotional content of the psalm is deeper and more evident than usual – a fact that suggests the poem is a very personal expression of distress. This is immediately evident in the fourfold repetition of the cry for help that the opening verses represent:

*How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me forever?
How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
(vv. 1-2)*

This is not simply the expression of a passing sense of loss or a temporary affliction. The feeling of alienation has eaten into the very soul of the psalmist. But strangely enough, this is not the predominant mood of the psalm. The whole is dominated, structurally and theologically, by a single conjunctive particle — ‘*but*’ (v. 5a) — that links this prayer of request with an act of thanksgiving, and so marks the psalm as a theophany of grace :

*But I have trusted in thy steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.*

Human need and divine presence balance each other, and the polarity in fact serves to accentuate the reality of God's response to human need.

The double question that constitutes v. 1 sets the tone: the origin of the psalmist's suffering, however it be manifested, is really the absence of God. Thus *shalom*, the fulness of human wellbeing, comes from his presence to the suppliant, and is the primary requisite - indeed often the only requisite. Certainly, the fact that the more actual human need is mentioned only in v. 2 — almost as a consequence of the situation described in v. 1 — is indicative. Though God is called on to deal with a real

personal need this is not specified; the emphasis remains on the appeal for divine help. And indeed, the poem's very lack of definition on this score may point to its being a liturgical response that could be adapted to the needs of individual worshippers. What remains is the poet's need to experience God's presence. Whatever else may oppress him, the first and most urgent affliction is his alienation from God. Once God enters the arena of human suffering healing has already begun, for the divine presence is known to be the source of all human wellbeing. Verses 3-4 in fact make it clear that what is in question is man in his totality — man the spiritual-physical entity he is for the Old Testament — and thus if God considers and answers me' (v. 3) the whole person is healed.

Psalm 13 is the expression of a keen psychological insight. In the opening prayer the psalmist turned to God to articulate his need; in w. 3-4 he prayed for divine intervention. *With this the process of healing has already begun*, for God has entered the situation. Thus 'death' in v. 3 is more than the term of human existence — it is symbolic of a life separated from God; a 'sleep', not a viable human existence. Thus in the act of lament the suppliant comes closer to God, and by the urgency of his prayer tries to importune God — for he has already become aware that if he has God he has 'life'. And so with the conjunctive 'but' of v. 5 the psalmist acknowledges the fact that his prayer has changed its thrust and is on another tack.

Faith has reversed the situation and the cause of lament (vv. 1-2) has gone.

*But I have trusted in thy steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.
(vv. 5-6)*

This is an extraordinarily confident statement. God is presumed to have already acted. Verse 6b uses a verbal form that implies the situation has been fully, and successfully, confronted: '... *he has dealt bountifully with . . .*' signifies the case is closed. From a request in v. 3 the psalmist has passed to a clear affirmation that divine intervention has met human need. This double-verse act of thanksgiving reflects, soberly and grammatically, a definitive gift of healing grace that the poet has personally experienced.

A Prayer of Disenchantment

The apparent silence of God, man's inability to make contact with him, and the resultant weakening of faith is a recurrent theme in biblical prayer. It is reflected in classic terms in Ps 28, which is technically a lament but might well serve as a model of prayer for vulnerable human beings. Is God interested? Will he even hear if one calls upon him? The alternative is too deadly to contemplate:

*To thee, O Lord, I call;
my rock, be not deaf to me,
lest, if thou be silent to me,
I become like those who go down to the Pit.*

(v. 1)

Even the subconscious fear that he *might* very well be ‘*deaf to me*’ for some reason of his own lends urgency to the psalmist’s prayer as he lifts his hands in supplication:

*Hear the voice of my supplication,
as I cry to thee for help,
as I lift up my hands
towards thy most holy sanctuary.*

(v. 2)

These first two verses mark the psalm as a prayer addressed to God in the temple — v. 2b representing a liturgical gesture towards the Holy of Holies where God dwells among his people. Once again the reader is struck by the fact that the real concern of the psalmist is for the presence of God that is so essential to a life of faith. In fact, vv. 3-5 is a prayer for the strengthening of faith. He fears that if his mood of disillusion (caused by the seeming unwillingness of God to respond to his needs) continues he will inevitably become one of ‘the wicked’ (v. 3). This is a comprehensive term that has psychological rather than moral implications. They are neither atheists nor irreligious persons in the context of Ps 28. Rather, the term represents that spiritual attitude of disenchantment with religion that so easily follows on any ‘dark night of the soul’. One tends to question the worth of prayer or of faith in the face of enduring silence on God’s part, and thus one easily falls into an attitude of indifference.

*Take me not off with the wicked,
with those who are workers of evil,
who speak peace with their neighbours,
while mischief is in their hearts.
Requite them according to their work,
and according to the evil of their deeds;
requite them according to the work of their hands;
render them their due reward.
Because they do not regard the works of the Lord,
or the work of his hands,
he will break them down and build them up no more.*

(vv. 3-5)

Verse 3b shows that the ‘*wicked*’, the ‘*workers of evil*’ are simply those who, in their hearts, no longer really care about religion, but go on living behind a social facade of conformity. Thus while quite willing to accept the reality of God as an academic exercise, they refuse to allow it to have any real effect on their lives. He has become a speculative proposition rather than a person.

One certainly gets the impression that the author realized he had come close to this state of mind, and in this condition may have been capable of no more than the ritual prayer-gesture of the ‘*lifting of hands*’ mentioned in v. 2b. Yet even if he could rise no higher, the fact remains that he *has* approached God, no matter how subjectively inadequate the prayer, and this has clearly been sufficient as a first step in rehabilitation:

*The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts;
so I am helped, and my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.
(v. 7)*

It is possible that at some point of the liturgical act of ‘*prayer*’, perhaps after v. 5, a temple spokesman — priest or levite — delivered a ritual confirmation of grace. Whether this be so or not, vv. 6-7 quite obviously presume that the prayer, such as it was, has been heard.

*Blessed be the Lord!
for he has heard
the voice of my supplications.
(v. 6)*

It is like a sudden dart of sunlight, this spontaneous cry of gratitude, and it confirms the suspicion that the psalmist had not been at all sure how much he could expect from God, knowing well the state of disenchantment with religion he had reached — close as he was to joining ‘*those who go down to the Pit*’ (v. 16) as a result of God’s seeming indifference to his need. What mattered, however, was less the virtue of human prayer than the divine willingness to accept will for deed and the consequent gift of encounter. On even the most fragile basis of human goodwill God can build.

The note of change in vv. 8-9, from first person to third, signals a new insight that is the result of faith recovered in adversity. The psalmist’s personal experience has become a lesson for the community, to which he now can give a witness that is all the stronger for the trial through which he has passed. The introduction of the two themes ‘*shepherd*’ and ‘*anointed*’ in this last section may point to a relatively late date of composition. This would strengthen the central thrust of the psalm, since later generations in Israel, after the Exile, had singularly experienced the silence of God, and to such a community the voice of one who had come close to despair in his own life would sound with a special resonance. Whatever be the historical context, it is clear that through his meeting with God in the midst of a personal crisis of identity the poet became a sacrament of that divine ‘*presence-in-adversity*’ for the whole community.

The Abiding Nature of God’s Presence

The prayer of the psalter is most clearly marked by this confidence of the divine presence in the act of supplication itself. Particularly in the formal lament this belief in the efficacy of prayer is tied, structurally and thematically, to a ‘formal declaration of certainty of being heard by God. Assurance of his presence, and so of the efficacy of prayer, is central. For the Israelite, the prayer of human need is an arena of encounter, a quasi-infallible means of making contact with the divinity. The consciousness of human frailty, of physical or psychological isolation, is *itself* the catalyst that provokes both supplication and theophany. The actual situation of human need itself thus becomes a moment of sacramental encounter. The fact is that ‘lament’ is provoked by a specifically biblical concept of God: he is ‘*Yahweh*’ — the one who

is present to his people at every moment of their journey through life (Ex 3.14-15), and this is surety of both the proximity *and* the individuality of divine intervention. The psychology of the Israelite is nowhere more clearly manifested than in his attitude to personal distress, to any diminution of *shalom* in his own life. Such deprivation drives him to pray in a very personal and emotional way, for he believes God *must* hear him. If he does not, he is being unfaithful to his own nature as God of the Covenant. Also, being the only *human* initiative possible, prayer establishes contact, and once this is effected God has entered the arena of human need. The help the suppliant requests is therefore no more than his 'right' according to the covenant promises.

In fact, Ps 14, which is a variant of a typical lament, suggests that all peoples of the earth are objects of God's care, and if they 'seek after him' (v. 2) may be sure of his intervention on their behalf.

*The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men,
to see if there are any that act wisely,
that seek after God.*

The use of the universal term '*children of men*' suggests a wider sphere of influence than simply Israel. In prayer, the individual inserts himself into the covenant relationship with God and thus experiences *shalom*. The aim of the lament is thus encounter with a divinity who is known personally by his name '*Yahweh*', and who is conceived of as present to the one who prays.