

The Structure of the Psalms of Lament

While the psalms of lament were written by a number of psalmists, in a variety of circumstances, and for different reasons, they nevertheless share a common structure and pattern. Nearly all the laments move from the negative to positive, from sorrow to joy, and from fear to trust (a notable exception being Psalm 88). The laments represent a ‘journey of the soul’. In studying the pattern followed by the psalmists, we can learn how we too can use lament so that we, too, can cry out to God in the midst of our pain. Sorrow, grief and loss.

The psalms of lament share a number of common elements, but the three main ones are:

- **Crying out to God.** In the laments, the psalmists begin by crying out to God. They come to God just as they are, with tears streaming down their faces. They don’t try to sort out their lives or put a brave face on it before seeking out their heavenly Father. God already knows what is going on in their minds and hearts, so they don’t try to pretend that their lives are better than they actually are. The psalmists give voice the depth of their pain, often using vivid descriptions and adjectives: *“I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping”* (Ps. 6:6).
- **Asking for help.** The psalmists then ask for help. They beg God to rescue them. They ask for relief from their pain. They ask for help and salvation. Whatever their needs are, they ask God to come to their rescue in and provide for them: *“O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me!”* (Ps. 71:12).
- **Responding in trust and praise.** Throughout the laments, the writers often talk about God’s character. They list His past acts of salvation. They speak of His power and wisdom and of His love and faithfulness. They cry out to God and remember who He is and what He has done. They then end their laments by expressing their trust in and in praise and worship of the God who can make all things new.

For those of us reading these laments, it might seem rather an abrupt ending. We might wonder, how can the psalmists go from feeling as though their lives are ending to praising God in one easy step? But we need to remember that the laments don’t take place in real time. Before writing a psalm, the psalmist has gone spent some time wrestling with their thoughts and emotions, crying out to God over and over again, and reminding themselves of the deeper truths of their relationship with God. The result of this process is that they are then able to respond in trust, and to praise God: *“I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever”* (Ps. 86:12).

When we reflect on this pattern, 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. Learning this pattern and adopting it for ourselves helps us to cry out

to God with 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).

Although it is quite possible to write our own psalms of lament, and many people have done so to suit their own particular circumstances, the 60 or so psalms of lament in the Book of Psalms, provides us with words of lament when words simply do not come and we are left speechless before God.

A Psalm of lament and praise in a time of coronavirus

How shall we praise you, Lord, our God?

When we are locked down, how shall we praise you?

When the doors to your house are barred, and your people cannot assemble?

When those urgently in need of money and work can't even wait in the market-place?

When we have to circle round people in the street,
and to queue for shops maintaining safe distance?

When we can only communicate by hearing on the phone,
or seeing on the screen; or by digital messaging,
or even just waving through a window?

When we cannot meet our parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren,
or other family members and friends?

When we cannot touch them in their flesh and blood, to know they are really alive?

How shall we praise you?

How, like Thomas, shall we not see yet believe that your son is raised among us?

How shall we praise you?

Lord, I will try to praise you.

Through gritted teeth, I will try to praise you.

I will try to remember that you created all things, and this virus is part of creation.

I will try not to hate it but seek to mitigate its harm.

I will try to do my bit to keep others safe, by the way that I behave.

I will pray for all those around me and seek to help in whatever way I can.

Lord, when I cannot pray or worship help me be aware of all your people
and your saints and angels hovering around me, lifting me up.

When I feel alone, let me feel you near me,
even if only for a moment that enables me to go on.

Let me hear you say “Peace be with you”.

Lord, I will praise you. Let all the peoples praise you.