

Lament and the Psalms – a Lent Study



Session 3. Lament and the Suffering of Others

Listen/Watch – the clip of the theologian NT Wright

***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.*

Psalm Study

Read Psalm 69

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

To set the scene, it is probably safe to assume that the Psalm was written during the period of exile in Babylon (the period that the first part of the Book of Isaiah is concerned with).

Structure

Today's Psalm is rather longer than the ones that we have looked at so far, but we can still look for structure in 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. You will be delighted to know that we're not going to explore each verse you may be delighted to know but to pick up the flavour of the story contained in these verses and to see what they can teach us today.

Verses 1-4 This is the plea of the man or woman or as I have said maybe even a group of people whose lives have turned upside down who think that they are like a man drowning- the cry is save me or rescue me.

Verses 5-12 The second section starts with a confession of sorts “*my sins are not hidden from you*” but then he goes on to suggest two more reasons why he should be saved.

Look don't let others with faith be discouraged because you don't here and respond to my prayers. Does the author have a prominent position- he thinks so. It's because of my faithfulness to you that I am scorned and ignore and laughed at. And part of it seems to be because of nature almost as a zealot, verse 9 says as much For zeal of your house consumes me.

Verses 13-18 He repeats his appeal as that of a zealous follower who has found frustration in the way of faith and maybe even in his relationship with others. This is not uncommon for people of faith, sometimes faith hope and prayer seem not to be answered and this leads to frustration. The psalmist was fed up and was seeking help. Verses 17 and 18 say:

*Do not hide your face from your servant,
. for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.
Draw near to me, redeem me,
set me free because of my enemies.”*

It is clear that the psalmist is feeling overwhelmed and possibly part of that is a feeling of rejection by God.

Verses 19-21 He is really piling on his woes here and in this section he goes as deep as possible- he's in the pit of despair.

Verses 22-29 The psalmist winds the lament up with these verses, he asks God to retaliate against those who have been against the psalmist. He actually wants God to punish them severely and to protect him,

*Pour out your indignation upon them,
and let your burning anger overtake them.* he pleads in verse 24.

Verses 30-36 This is actually probably a hymn of thanksgiving in light of all that has gone before the psalm finishes with praise to God. No matter how far down the psalmist has gone he returns to praise God

*I will praise the name of God with a song;
Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything in them.*

This is a strong and uplifting finish and is typical of a lament in which all complaints and moans are given to God and then afterwards is a time of praise.

Questions

***With someone else, consider the questions below:*

- *What words and phrases does the Psalmist use to describe God?*
- *What does the Psalmist wish on his enemies, and what do you think about this?*
- *What has been your experience of suffering caused by others?*
- *What in your context, would you want God to “hear” from your life?*

Discussion

Since, in Hebrew culture the heart is the seat of the intelligence and will, to have a broken heart is to be in a situation where one's understanding has collapsed, where one's sense of direction in life has gone haywire. For an Israelite commanded to love God with all her or his heart, to have a broken heart was to undergo a severe crisis of faith. According to one insightful psalmist, though, this chaotic moment is not the rift with God that it may seem to be.

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit. (Ps 34:18)*

In this psalmist's understanding, no doubt gained from bitter experience, the moment when one's ability to understand had broken down, when everything one lived by was pulverised into dust, was the very time when God was close.

The process of lament often involves letting go of cherished notions that have, perhaps, been foundational to one's beliefs and values. Psalm 73 could be read as the story of someone whose disorienting honesty forces her to risk the possible loss of relationship with God and of belonging to God's people, and who experiences re-orientation by coming to a new and

more profound understanding. The trouble is, though, that it takes faith to recognise that this is what is happening. And faith is the very thing that you have to risk losing if you are to be an absolutely honest lamenter.

It is for this reason that having a culture of community lament, where the community of faith can lament together and in doing so support those who are struggling. Community lament is also really important where we share in grief or pain or regret or disorientation about how things are.

In his writing, Walter Brueggemann uses a model from the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who sees human life as a continual movement from orientation to disorientation and re-orientation. People can be described as oriented when their lives are running smoothly; they become disoriented when a crisis occurs, upsetting the orderliness and serenity of their lives; re-orientation is the ‘*new creation*’ that is given when the old world destroyed by the crisis has come to an end and a ‘*new normal*’ has taken its place. The laments in the Psalter capture that moment of disorientation and the dawning of a re-orientation.

However there’s almost always a clearly defined moment of change, when an oppressive situation is reversed as a re-orientation begins. 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 then ends his prayer with gratitude and praise.

When those around you are disorientated (as many are at the present time), what they need is patient support as they navigate their disorientation. They don’t need people earnestly trying to re-orientate them, that is work for God and the individual concern to work through, what they need is others to lament with them in both that first phase of lament, but also in the second as re-orientation gradually occurs and the lament turn from complaint, through pleading and trust, to praise and thanksgiving.

“Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness. Today we are challenged as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and spirit.” Pope Francis