

Souls Thirsty For God: The Lament Psalms

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Introduction:

- I. On a surface level, some of the psalms may create discomfort in the average Christian.
 - A. In the psalms described as imprecatory, that discomfort stems from their message, a message which might seem at first glance to manifest vindictiveness on the part of the writer.
 1. Although we ourselves occasionally may have wanted to curse certain individuals in our lives, are we really allowed to do that??
 - B. Other lament psalms make the reader uncomfortable with the boldness of the language used by the writers to address God.
 1. “Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide in times of trouble?” (10:1)
 2. “How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?” (13:1)
 3. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear;” (22:1-2a)
 4. “O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure! For Your arrows pierce me deeply, and Your hand presses me down.” (38:1-2)
 5. “For You are the God of my strength; why do You cast me off?” (43:2)
 6. “Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. Why do You hide Your face, and forget our affliction and our oppression?” (44:23-24)
 7. “O God, why have You cast us off forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?” (74:1)
- II. How are we to understand the bold language of these psalms? Can we speak to God in this fashion?
- III. As Anderson [60] notes, the term “lament” may “suggest a pessimistic view of life, the whining complaint of self-pity.”
 - A. The people of God were certainly guilty occasionally of complaining about God’s perceived “lack of care” for them, particularly during the period of the wilderness wandering following the exodus from Egypt.
 1. On one such occasion, Israel complained about a lack of water and Moses named the location *Massah* (*tempted*) and *Meribah* (*contention*) “because they tempted the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:7).
 2. Both the Hebrews author and the apostle Paul clearly teach that such “complaining” is evidence of a lack of faith and unacceptable to God (Hebrews 3:7-19; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11).
 - B. Are lament psalms just another case of God’s people complaining because of their circumstances? Are the lament psalms to be viewed as examples of weak faith on the part of the authors?
- IV. The psalms are unique in that, unlike most of the other books of the Bible, they are primarily man speaking to God rather than God speaking directly to man.

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- A. A wide range of emotions are expressed in the psalms, from joy to righteous anger, from praise to imprecation.
 - B. It is not surprising that some of the psalms would manifest the anguish resulting from suffering of some sort.
 - 1. The laments “reflect fundamental dimensions of human experience: suffering, despair, pain, hopelessness, and anguish.” [Bellinger, 44]
 - 2. Some measure of suffering is the universal experience of man.
 - V. There are, however, several additional dimensions to the lament psalms beyond that of suffering.
 - VI. In our study we will:
 - A. Lay a foundation by noting the structure and characteristics of the lament psalm.
 - B. Suggest the practical value of the lament psalms for the Christian.

Body:**I. CATEGORIZATION OF THE PSALMS**

- A. The psalms are actually divided into five “books” of psalms, but the psalms are also divided by many students according to various genres, a division which is certainly more helpful in the interpretation of individual psalms.
 - 1. “It also gives us the first question to ask when interpreting a particular psalm: *What are the type and structure of the psalm?*” [Bellinger, 24]
 - 2. Anticipating a typical structure for a certain type of psalm may bring to our attention differences and similarities between psalms of the same genre and between psalms of different genres.
- B. The division of the psalms into various genres is a relatively recent development.
 - 1. The use of the form-critical method of study resulted in the classification of the psalms into various types or genres.
 - 2. Both Kittel and Gunkel (from the early 20th century) divided the psalms into five major categories. [Westermann, 16]
 - a. Gunkel also recognized several minor types of psalms.
 - b. Some of the more commonly recognized genres include praise (hymns), penitential, imprecatory, historical or didactic, messianic and lament.
 - 3. Westermann [33] refined Gunkel’s work by dividing the psalms into two basic genres: praise and lament (he originally used the term “petition” instead of “lament”).
 - a. “As we turn to the lament [from the hymn – asd], we go from the height of our relationship with God to its depths. The lament is the polar opposite of the hymn on the emotional spectrum.” [Longman, 26]
 - b. Roberts [15] echoed Westermann by suggesting that lament and praise “correspond to the two most basic ways in which the heart responds to God (Psalm 30:5; Romans 12:15; James 5:13).”
 - c. Westermann further divided each of the two basic genres into two categories:
 - 1) The praise psalms were differentiated on the basis of two “different modes” of praise, *i.e.*, declarative versus descriptive.

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- 2) He divided the lament psalms by whether the psalm reflected the petition of an individual or the people, *i.e.*, the nation or community.
- C. Some general observations about genres:
1. As Phil Roberts [14] observed, the determination of genre may emphasize either form or content or some combination of the two.
 2. Naturally, not everyone divides the psalms into exactly the same groups.
 - a. Besides the fact that there is no “canon” of groups utilized by all scholars, it is also true that some psalms can fit into more than one group. They contain literary elements associated with multiple groups.
 - b. Psalm 22, for example, is both a lament and a messianic psalm.
 - c. Most laments also contain the element of praise (Psalm 88 is an exception).
 3. It could be argued that several of the genres of psalms (*e.g.*, imprecatory, penitential) are merely specialized types of lament. Such psalms emphasize one of the elements of the lament over other elements. (See the next section on the structure of the lament) [Roberts, 16]
 4. Perhaps a good summary of these points is to concur with Longman that “we need to be flexible as we speak of a psalm’s genre.” [23]
 5. It should also be noted that the division of the psalms into categories or genres should facilitate their study, not hinder it. Such divisions must remain descriptive and not become prescriptive.
- D. Bellinger lists 67 lament psalms (individual [50], community [17]) and Anderson counts 60 lament psalms (individual [44], community [16]).
1. Bellinger [23]
 - a. **Individual:** 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9-10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 42-43, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 94, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143
 - b. **Community:** 12, 14, 44, 53, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137
 2. Anderson [213-214]
 - a. **Individual:** 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 35, 36, 39, 40:11-17, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 109, 120, 139, 140, 141, 142
 - b. **Community:** 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89:38-51, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129, 137

II. STRUCTURE OF THE LAMENT

- A. Although students of the psalms differ some in their description of the common form taken by a lament psalm, there is some consensus regarding several key elements.
1. Some (*e.g.*, Westermann) suggest different paradigms for the lament of the individual and of the community.
 2. Similar to the categorization into genres, the paradigm of a lament is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive.

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3. Longman [27] suggests that rarely do all seven of the elements in his paradigm appear in one psalm, but rather some combination of them and not always in the exact same order.
- B. Some sample paradigms include:
1. W. H. Bellinger [45-46]
 - a. **Invocation**
 - b. **Complaint**
 - c. **Petition**
 - d. **Conclusion**
 2. Tremper Longman [27]
 - a. **Invocation**
 - b. **Plea to God for help**
 - c. **Complaints**
 - d. **Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence**
 - e. **Curse of enemies** (imprecation)
 - f. **Confidence in God's response**
 - g. **Hymn or blessing**
 3. Westermann
 - a. Community lament [52]
 - 1) **Address and introductory petition**
 - 2) **Lament**
 - 3) **Confession of trust**
 - 4) **Petition** (double wish)
 - 5) **Vow of praise**
 - b. Individual lament [64]
 - 1) **Address**
 - 2) **Lament**
 - 3) **Confession of trust**
 - 4) **Petition**
 - 5) **Assurance of being heard**
 - 6) **Double wish**
 - 7) **Vow of praise**
 - 8) **Praise of God** (when the petition has been answered)
 4. Phil Roberts [16]
 - a. **Address to God**
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- b. **Remembrance of Past Salvation**
 - c. **Lamentation of the Present Distress**
 - d. **Description of the Wicked**
 - e. **Confession of Sin and Plea for Forgiveness or Protest of Innocence**
 - f. **Declaration of Trust**
 - g. **Petition:**
 - 1) Save me
 - 2) Punish my enemies
 - h. **Motivation for God to Act**
 - i. **Vow of praise**
 - j. **Assurance of Having Been Heard**
- C. Further observations:
- 1. The lament and petition are key elements in virtually any lament psalm.
 - 2. The “vow of praise” tends to be more common in the individual lament, probably because individuals typically make vows rather than communities, although the “vow” is often not a formal vow.

III. VALUE OF THE LAMENT PSALMS

- A. “As we probe the Psalms together, our ultimate purpose is not to increase our knowledge of ancient customs and poetic forms; we are studying to know God better through his Word.” [Longman, 15]
- 1. I would add that we study the psalms in order to strengthen our relationship with God, to develop a greater intimacy in that relationship.
 - 2. The laments, in particular, help us deal with crises in light of our relationship with our Creator and Sustainer.
 - a. Longman comments, “The lives of obedient Christians are always fulfilling, but never easy. As Christians, we have something which the world lacks – Christ who brings meaning to our lives. Nonetheless, as long as we are in the world we will confront hostility, frustration, fear and danger.” [133]
- B. Intentionally or unintentionally, the lament psalms are written in such a way as to make them **universally applicable**.
- 1. There is often in these psalms a vagueness regarding the “enemy” or crisis which is the catalyst for the lament.
 - 2. Such vagueness easily lends to the universal application of the lament psalms.
 - a. “The psalms do not speak of only one type of crisis; they describe material, mental, physical, and spiritual suffering. These various realities are often related and combined. In addition, the general language of the psalms often makes it difficult to be specific about the nature of the crisis... While the general language of the laments causes difficulty in identifying the specific crisis behind the laments, it has the advantage of making the texts relevant to different people in a variety of crises.” [Bellinger, 47]

- b. “One of the difficult issues in interpreting the laments is the identity of the ‘enemies.’ Some scholars have taken them as the national enemies of Israel, others as ‘sorcerers’ and still others as accusers in a legal case. In most cases the references are vague, and we have every reason to believe they are so intentionally. The psalms are **purposefully** [emphasis mine – asd] vague in reference to historical events so that they can be used in a variety of situations.” [Longman, 27]
- C. The lament psalms remind us of **the nature and role/position of our God**.
1. Affirmations regarding the character or role of God sometimes appear in the “address” part of the lament, but they are often present in other parts as well.
 2. Some examples include:
 - a. “For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You.” (5:4)
 - b. “God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day.” (7:11)
 - c. “For the kingdom is the Lord’s, and He rules over the nations.” (22:28)
 - d. “Your mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens; Your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the great mountains; Your judgments are a great deep; O Lord, You preserve man and beast. How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings.” (36:6-7)
- D. We are reminded of **our dependence upon God**, the nature of our relationship to Him, in the laments.
1. “One thing for sure, the Psalms will enrich our spiritual life and give us windows through which to look at the events of our lives. Through those windows we will see the hues of a new landscape where our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” [Bullock, 97]
 2. The lament psalms are replete with statements of trust (as the previously suggested paradigms indicate) that God will help. Some examples include:
 - a. “But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, My glory and the One who lifts up my head.” (3:3)
 - b. “Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies; In you I take shelter.” (143:9)
 - c. “But the Lord has been my defense, and my God the rock of my refuge.” (94:22)
 - d. “I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” (4:8)
 - e. “The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You.” (9:9-10)
 - f. “Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust.” (16:1)
 3. “The psalms call upon God to act as God should and deliver and bring justice as promised, and the speakers expect it to happen.” [Bellinger, 72-73]

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4. Although there are bold statements about God hiding His face from the supplicant, *etc.* (e.g., 13:1; 44:24; 88:14), it would be a mistake to conclude that the lament psalms are primarily charges of God's inattention.
 - a. As Longman ("confidence in God's response"), Westermann ("confession of trust") and Roberts ("declaration of trust") affirm, the typical lament contains the element of trust or confidence in God's willingness to save.
 - b. Even in those laments which boldly charge that God is not "paying attention," there is the obvious premise that God can and should intervene to save.
 5. "In Hebrew, as in all primitive languages, the lament of affliction and the lament of the dead are designated by different words and cannot be mistaken for each other." [Westermann, 262]
 - a. Some lamentations merely express anguish regarding things that cannot be changed, as in the funeral dirge.
 - b. The lament psalms, however, are concerned with situations which can be changed.
 - c. "The psalmists are not like Greek tragedians who portray a no-exit situation of fate or necessity; rather, they raise a cry out of the depths in the confidence that God has the power to lift a person out of the 'miry bog' and to set one's feet upon a rock (Ps. 40:1-3). Hence the laments are really expressions of praise, offered in a minor key in the confidence that YHWH is faithful and in anticipation of a new lease on life." [Anderson, 60]
 6. As the paradigms for lament psalms suggest, the lament psalms manifest faith in God's promise to protect His people. Consider these examples:
 - a. "The LORD *is* my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD *is* the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?² When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell.³ Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war should rise against me, In this I *will be* confident." (27:1-3)
 - b. "You are my King, O God; Command victories for Jacob.⁵ Through You we will push down our enemies; Through Your name we will trample those who rise up against us." (44:4-5)
 - c. "Behold, God *is* my helper; The Lord *is* with those who uphold my life." (54:4)
 - d. "Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. ⁴ In God (I will praise His word), In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?" (56:3-4)
 7. The lament psalms manifest an intense desire for the saving presence of God in one's life
 - a. The psalmists ask the questions, "Where is God? When will He help?"
 - b. "A lament arises from the midst of distress and pleads with God for help. The Psalter as the 'Book of Praises' offers praise to God in times of both divine presence and absence. The laments reflect that experience of God's absence. We begin with the laments because they reflect fundamental dimensions of human experience: suffering, despair, pain, hopelessness, and anguish." [Bellinger, 44]
- E. The psalms in general remind us of **the need to pray without ceasing**. The lament psalms, in particular, teach us **how to pray in adverse circumstances**.
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1. “Here, for the most part, we find people addressing God in various ways – complaint in situations of distress and perplexity, thanksgiving in moods of liberation and joy, and hymnic praise in times of rejoicing in the goodness and wonder of God’s creation and providential care. In this sense, the Psalms may speak ‘for’ us by expressing the whole gamut of human responses to God’s reality in our midst and thereby teaching us how to pray with others in the various times of our lives.” [Anderson, ix]
2. As noted in the introduction to this study, the striking feature about some of the lament psalms is the boldness and frankness of the language used. The psalmists seem to hold nothing back in the expression of their emotions.
 - a. It is commonly understood that emotional language, the language used in situations of distress, is frequently hyperbolic.
 - b. The psalmists were not simply writing about what they knew or understood, but also about how they felt.
 - 1) Sometimes there is dissonance between what we know and how we feel at the moment.
 - 2) One might argue that such dissonance is seen in particular lament psalms where the author affirms that God has abandoned him, but calls upon God to save him with the implicit confidence that it will happen.
 - c. Can we say what we feel in our prayers? Is it true that the prayers of Christians are often “sanitized” and devoid of feeling? Are reverence for God and honesty about our feelings mutually exclusive?
 - 1) “Out of fear that our needs and longings will crowd out praise to God, ministers and other Christian leaders emphasize praise in prayers. However, we must be cautious that the pendulum does not swing too far in the other direction so that petition is considered sub-Christian. As we read the laments, we are encouraged and instructed to turn to Jesus with our needs. We can learn from the laments how to be honest with God. The psalmist held nothing back; neither should we.” [Longman, 71]
 - 2) “These psalms are basically prayers, as the psalmists lay their problems out on the table before God. As they do, they lay their spiritual inhibitions aside as they deal with the crises that have interrupted their lives and created physical pain and spiritual consternation. While the boldness and naked honesty of the psalmists may shock us, this attitude is nevertheless instructive for our own spiritual lives. We sometimes hold back too much from God, conceal our true feelings in prayer, and create a false image of ourselves at the heavenly throne of grace. What would happen to us and to our relationship to God if we were truly honest with him and with ourselves? Thankfully there is a place in the biblical faith for this kind of boldness before God. The psalms of lament carve out a spiritual niche for us where we can use the colloquial language of life’s hurts and still stay within the vocabulary of faith. John Goldingay remarks that Psalm 22, with its range and depth of complaint (and psalms similar to it), invite us into ‘an extraordinary freedom in our speech with God.’ Goldingay is right – this freedom is indeed extraordinary, and we can use it to great benefit, as Job did. But it is also a dangerous freedom that can too easily move us, on the divine level, in the direction of spiritual defiance and mutiny. On the human level, it can direct us down the path of insolence and hatred of our enemies.

So we must use this freedom – and use it we should! – with great precaution and humility.” [Bullock, 137-138]

- 3) “The laments’ amazing candor is sometimes shocking to the reader, but it is crucial to the honest dialogue of faith. The psalms do not bear witness to prayer ‘as it ought to be’ but to brutally honest prayer from the depths of life. The laments demand that God relate to all of life, even to crises. The spirituality seen in the honest dialogue of faith in the laments is not weak or weary but bold and tough, even in the face of trial. An honest faith acknowledges life’s realities. In the Psalms, no part of life is ever beyond dialogue with God.” [Bellinger, 71-72]

Conclusion:

- I. The laments spring from a desire to see justice done, to know the exaltation of righteousness and the need for deliverance from evil and/or suffering.
- II. Far from being the result of a lack of faith, the lament psalms are the evidence of faith!
 - A. God promises in His Word that He will protect and care for His people. Do we believe that?
 - B. The psalmists wrote their laments because they believed in God’s promises.
- III. The lament psalms also represent a boldness in speaking with God, a boldness that results from having an intimate relationship with Him.
 - A. In general, the more intimate our relationship is with another, the more freely we are willing to speak.
 - B. A measure of such intimacy is seen in the language and the nature of our prayers, both public and private.
- IV. “In a very broad sense, Psalms exhibits a movement from Lament to Praise.” [Roberts, 15]
 - A. Most of the laments are found in the first three books of the psalms. As one moves toward the end of the collection of psalms, the hymns of praise become more numerous.
 - B. “In Hebrew, the book of Psalms is entitled *tehillim*, which (when translated) means ‘songs of praise.’ As we look at the psalms, though, the laments substantially outnumber the songs of praise. In what sense then is this book characterized as *tehillim*? A close examination of the Psalter suggests an answer. A decided shift takes place as we move from the beginning of the book to its end. As we move toward the end, praise overtakes lament until at the very end of the book we have a virtual fireworks of praise.” [Longman, 45]
 - C. Roberts [15] makes these observations:
 1. This movement corresponds to the story of the Bible as a whole.
 2. This movement may correspond to the whole of the life of a Christian.

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All scripture references are taken from the New King James Version.

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