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Crying To the Lord

The Psalms of Lament

by Lori Glenn

In the Old Testament, all aspects of Israel's life were based on a covenantal relationship with God. The book of Psalms portrays the open, honest, vulnerable relationship between God and his people that the covenant was supposed to create. Nowhere is this relationship more evident, nor more challenged, than in the psalms of lament. The lament psalms let God see the people of Israel in their depths. They had an idea of how life was supposed to be and how God was supposed to work in it. When life did not meet their expectations, and God was not responding as they thought he should, the people cried out to him. In this article, I will reflect on these cries to God—the lament psalms, particularly Psalm 73—and on the place that lament psalms have in our lives today.

A lament psalm usually consists of an address to God, a description of the problem, the lament, a petition/plea, and a vow of praise and/or a statement of confidence in God. The three subjects of the lament psalms are I/we, God and the enemy. Declarations of innocence of the I/we often appear in the laments as well as calls to destroy the enemy. The lament psalms are both communal, responding to such events as natural disasters or a national upheaval; and individual, responding to such events as sickness, death, persecution and slander.

In the laments of community, God is dominant, and the focal complaint is that he has turned his face away. Personal suffering is not a significant feature. However, the enemy (usually the enemy during a time of war or an oppressor during times

when Israel was subject to foreign rule) has a significant role. In the individual laments, which make up the largest part of the Psalter, God is less dominant and the main focus is on the person's own suffering and the nature and the acts of the enemy. Some aspect of one's life is troublesome. Tears have become one's bread, and self-reliance is of no help. Only God can help, even though his reliability is doubtful.

A lament is a cry that questions God—"How long? Why? How dare you?" *Lamenting is not an act of unfaith, but an act of deep faith.* The psalmists who wrote the lament psalms were unhappy with God, but they did not walk away from him. Instead, they risked their relationship with God, and even risked their lives, in order to engage him. The psalmists were upset with their situation, with God or with other people; and they took their problems to the only one they knew could do anything about their circumstances. They felt that their relationship with God was important enough for them to be vulnerable. They had invested in this relationship and felt that God had betrayed them. Because of their faith in God, the only possible way to express their problems was to question God.

Israel dealt with life as it was, and life was not always great. Life is disoriented and messy. Laments enter into life and into the pain. Facing the circumstances, events and situations that hurt us most is how we move to new life and joy. The one who laments may feel that God seems far off—"there," but far off. Lamenting, therefore, allows God to come into our lives and to struggle with us. The lament psalms

raise questions about God, his power and his relationship to his people. Israel's psalmists refused to settle for simple answers that would have gotten God off the hook. Instead, they struggled with the questions. They found that power, leading to true relationship, was often in the questions and not the answers.

The majority of lament psalms end with a vow of praise. Some scholars believe that a period of time has passed before the completion of the lament psalm. Between the lament and the praise, one has waited for or perhaps received an oracle from a priest in the temple. Another possibility is that the lament, the speaking to God, ushers the person lamenting into God's presence in an open, vulnerable way; and once in God's presence, one cannot help but praise him.

God had called Israel to be in a covenantal relationship. While this relationship is not a relationship of equals, it is a relationship of partners. If Israel had been content simply to praise God and to gloss over the hardships of life, this partnership would have been a sham. God would have become a distant, controlling Being; and Israel would simply have been a docile, subservient nation with no sense of her own power or identity. By calling God into question, Israel established genuine interaction and was able to develop a true self, capable of the strength for responsible faith instead of blind obedience. Walter Brueggemann believes that Israel's questioning arose from a struggle with God's *hesed*, his covenantal loyal love. Israel could not understand their present suffering in light of God's *hesed*, and they would not allow God to simply stand by and watch while they experienced pain. God was not living up to his promises, and Israel demanded justice. Brueggemann states:

... lament makes an assertion about God: that this dangerous, available God matters in every dimension of life. Where God's dangerous availability is lost because we fail to carry on our part of the difficult conversation, where God's vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair and the world as we now have it becomes absolutized.¹

The editors of the Psalter chose to shift from using mainly laments at the beginning of the Psalter to using mainly praises toward the end. This shift has theological significance for our lives since we are also to move toward praise. Placed in the middle of this shift is Psalm 73. This psalm is a good example of the movements of the heart. The psalmist portrays

an obedient heart, a questioning heart, a disgruntled and jaded heart that is finally transformed into a heart that seeks God and him alone once the psalmist has moved into the community of God's people and realized the folly of the wicked. The psalmist has questioned God, fought God. Because of that openness with God, a relationship develops and a willing (but not blind) trust in God is established.

Psalm 73 has been classified in numerous ways—everything from wisdom to reflective. The psalm does contain elements of several forms, but at the heart of the psalm is a person in distress, a person who is confused, a person who turns to God (for there is no one else to turn to) in his hopelessness even while questioning God's goodness. The psalmist begins with a simple wisdom motif—"God is good to Israel." But then the writer opens his eyes to the larger world around him and realizes that the wicked are the ones who are prospering, not the righteous. The wicked have no troubles that keep them up at night. They have healthy, well-kept bodies. They are proud and arrogant, full of malice; and their hearts have unhealthy, but very active, imaginations. The tongues of the wicked "strut across the earth." Because their prosperity is so incongruous with the author's belief that the righteous should prosper and the wicked should perish, the author comes close to stumbling.

The psalmist feels that his pure heart and his innocence have been for nothing. Wealth and popularity—the good life—have been the reward of the wicked. The psalmist struggles and contemplates retreating from religion. What is the reward of being good if there is no reward for being good? The author is troubled, wants to cry out to those around him, but realizes that would be a betrayal to his fellow Israelites. Even though he tries to make sense of the wicked's prosperity and ponders extensively over this breach of faith, he still finds this situation confusing.

Only when the psalmist enters the sanctuary of the Lord does he begin to understand. The writer is not on slippery ground—the wicked are. As he gathers with others to worship, his perception is restored. Entering the sanctuary allows him to see circumstances as they really are. He regains his vision and resets his priorities; for it is in corporate worship that prayer, coming into the presence of God, takes place. Psalm 73 shows a reason for gathering to worship: the world gives a skewed view of reality, but the presence of others who are also worshipping God helps to correct one's vision, because corporate worship reminds us of our story and brings us back into God's presence. The psalmist comprehends that God will destroy the wicked, that the wicked have no

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substance in God's presence. The psalmist recognizes his ignorance and bitterness. In God's presence we realize the fate of the wicked, and we are made to inspect our own lives; for the kind of life we offer to God matters to him and to us.

The psalmist realizes that the goodness of God does not consist of the prizes of fame and fortune. The goodness of God consists of the very presence of God. And knowing that he already has this good prize, he finds contentment in simply being with God, being guided by God and experiencing God's glory. And now with God as his refuge, the psalmist can finally speak. But instead of betraying Israel, the psalmist proclaims God's good deeds. Psalm 73 speaks to the heart—a pure heart that questions the foolishness of keeping itself clean when it sees other hearts that are prosperous, yet are full of conceit. But upon entering the sanctuary, the pure heart is pricked, recognizing that it may fail, but God is its strength.

The Psalter reflects life as moving from a childish faith to a childlike faith and a life of praise. In between, there is honest, forthright struggle and questioning. Life is not the soft bed of roses the Israelites expected as the covenanted people of God; more often than not they felt the thorns.² Roses do not try to hide their thorns, nor do they fail to blossom because they have them. Israel experienced the scars of life, but they blossomed (praised) anyway. Joy and sorrow are part of the same life. Through experiencing both, one can move from the open expression of suffering to gratitude for the assurance of God's loyal love. Through the psalms, Israel moved from simplicity to anguish to acceptance to communion with God. God himself is finally who matters and who is treasured.

The Psalms show us that we are part of a dialogue between Creator and created. To a church that often practices a simple religion where all the pieces of life's puzzle must fit together, the Psalms declare a reality that is messy, confusing and unpredictable. This reality is a world where God does not live up to our expectations and standards, and we find, to our surprise and dismay, that we must live up to his.

As individuals, we need to struggle with our hurts and disappointments. We must go to God, cry out to him, question him, hurl our anger at him, and yes, even ask him to curse our enemies. This may

seem extreme in our days of tolerance. Yet God's psalmists felt free to bare their souls before God, no matter how disgruntled the state of their souls was, and we should follow their example. God has given us the freedom to be open with him, to develop a relationship with him—a relationship where an honest, whole self beckons and responds to the Self that created it.

As a church, we need to compassionately come alongside those in despair and weep and wail with them. We need to enter their brokenness with them, cry with them and question God with them. The church has a responsibility to cry out to God and to question his loyal love in order to develop a vulnerable relationship where open communication, no matter how painful, can take place.

Neither the complacent church nor the church that wants to move directly to praise (and stay there) without experiencing or grappling with sorrow or questioning God's loyal love can fully realize the presence of God and accept his presence as enough. The ground must shake, our world views must shatter and God must be unboxed from his neat and tidy package. When the church has grappled with reality and God has come into question, and when open and honest dialogue takes place between God and his people, then faith in this unpredictable, awesome God can give us the strength and courage to submit to his will and say with the psalmist in Psalm 73, "as for me, it is good to be near God."

Lori Glenn graduated from Pepperdine University with a Master of Divinity in 1994 and is currently training to be a spiritual director.

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986) 57-71.

² As Brueggemann has said ["Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991) 63-92], much of Israel's life was spent in the middle of the Psalter grappling with the realities of life.