

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Unexpected Psalms: Do We Ever Sing Like That?

Hymns:

211 – As The Deer Pants For Flowing Streams (Psalms 42 & 43)

228 – My Eyes Ran Down Fountains Of Tears

2. Psalms of Lament

There are a whole range of psalms that give expression to sorrow, outrage, loneliness, fear and desperation. Often they are called psalms of laments. This broad category can, I think, be broken down into three sub-categories – lament, protest, and imprecation. This week we will look at lament, and next week at protest and imprecation. To be clear it isn't always simple to classify a psalm neatly in any category – the psalms are more complex than that, as complex as our emotions and thoughts!

Martin Luther said this about the psalms of lament. “What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid the storm winds of every kind? . . . Where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. . . . When they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for your fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator has so portrayed them. And that they speak these words to God and with God, this I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life”¹

Luther says that these psalms speak ‘. . . to God and with God. . .’ I think we can see how it is that they speak *to* God, but what of his thought that they speak *with* God? Are we joining in with God's own speech in lamentation? Is God a God who laments? Is there some kind of sorrow, outrage, loneliness, fear or desperation in the heart of God?

My initial thought is ‘Yes, but. . .’ Let's deal with the ‘but’ first. If there be lament in the heart of God, it is not the same as lament at a human level. So much of our lament is linked to our powerlessness, vulnerability, failure and sin. We protest at injustice done in God's world, we weep with sorrow for wrongs we have done to others. So, to be clear, if we may speak of lament with God, we certainly will not find lament there of personal sin or failure.

Nor can we find any expression there of powerlessness or vulnerability. The classic doctrines² of the aseity (‘uncausedness’ – has and is all He has and is of Himself) impassibility (not acted upon as an object from without³) and the immutability (changelessness) of God teaches us that God is without change; that He is not acted on in such a way as to produce something that was not in Him before.

But our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus the Messiah, is not ‘locked up’ by these ‘attributes’ – in fact, they are the very thing that assure us of His freedom to be Who He is, and that give us confidence to

¹ *Word and Sacrament*, Luther's Works, vol. 1, ed. E. T. Bachmann. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960, pp. 255–56

² See *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*, Matthew Barrett, Baker Books, 2019.

³ ‘[You] love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you “repent” . . . without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil.’ Augustine, *The Confessions*, quoted in *None Greater*, *ibid.*, p. 111

approach Him even in situations of sin, injustice, and grief. Could we have confidence to speak with God if He were not so – as if He had to resort to something outside Himself to help us, or as if He may not be the same God who revealed Himself to His people in the covenant and in Jesus Christ, or as if He may need some prompting or prodding on our part to become merciful to us?

This utter freedom of God is the basis from which we can explore just what it means that we might speak *with* (not just *to*) God in lament. The God whom we address is the God who of Himself is changelessly merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Exod. 34:6.) That means that God Himself, in all His power and freedom laments the situation of the world and the troubles of His people. He was not taken aback by the first sin; before creation began, in the unity of the Triune Godhead, the Son had been destined to be the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 13:8; Eph. 1:4, 1Pet. 1:20.). Our laments come to the ears of God who has borne the world's crisis from the first sin – and who has since then, essentially, being saying, 'This cannot be, this must not stand', working steadfastly and graciously throughout history towards the renewal of all things and the defeat of all evil. What we may lament in the world, the church and our lives is only a small part of the 'lament' that God bears in all He does.

In the ministry of Jesus, God's incarnate Son, the closer he came to the great act that deals with the world's crisis, the more he lamented. This is notable in Matthew's Gospel especially, in the events after the transfiguration. Coming down from the mountain, he lamented over the faithlessness of the generation (17:17). He expressed a woe for the world where there are temptations to sin (18:7.) The cleansing of the Temple (21:12-17) was a protest against the turning of that place of grace into a place of prayerless trade, and the sign of the fig tree (21 :18-22) was a protest and lament about the fruitlessness of Israel. The seven woes against the Pharisees and Scribes (23:1-36) are quite literally a lament ('woe' is in Greek, 'ouai', a funeral wail.) This is followed by Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (23:37-39) – they won't be gathered, so they have only judgment ahead of them. The anointing of Jesus at Bethany (26:6-13) is received by Jesus as a preparation for his burial. He laments over his betrayer (26:20-25) and over Peter's denial (26:31-34.) And his soul is 'very sorrowful' as he prays in Gethsemane (26:38-39.) His cry of dereliction on the cross, quoting Psalm 22, a lament psalm (27:45-46) is the most sorrowful moment in all human history. It's only after the burial, on the day of resurrection that sorrow is turned to dancing (cf. Psalm 30.)

Let's take Psalm 88, perhaps the most sorrowful of all the laments, as a way into understanding godly lamentation. As with the psalms of lament generally, it begins (vv. 1-2) with an address to God, seeking that He hear and attend to the concerns of the one praying.. 'O LORD, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.' I find that address surprising given the despondancy of the psalm – 'God of my salvation.' We really only know the depths of sorrow the closer we are to the God who borrow our griefs and carried our sorrows. Rather than removing us from the realm of sorrow, belonging to the saving God makes the reality of sorrow clearer, sharper.

Lamentation involves spelling out just what it is that distresses us, and just what that distress feels like. So we hear the sorrow of the man in vv. 3-5. What the lamenter does next, and what we so often do *not* do, is then attribute what is happening to him to the LORD – see vv. 6-9a. Look at what he so boldly says to God in his grief: 'You

have put me in the depths of the pit; *your* wrath lies heavy upon me; *you* overwhelm me with all your waves; *you* have caused my companions to shun me; *you* have made me a horror to them.' One thing that we are tempted to do is to try to save God from any complicity in what's happening to us. He is not so squeamish. God is the sovereign Lord who actually is in all that happens to us.

In vv 9b-12 the lamenter asks God questions. They all focus around what happens after death. Is there still some act of God after death by which the steadfast love and faithfulness of God may be known (v. 11)? Is death the last word, or does God still have more to say and to do? For us as believers in the risen Lord, Jesus – who likewise asked these deep questions of God as he faced death – the confidence hope we have is that yes, there is a time when the departed will rise up to praise God for the steadfast love and faithfulness that has held us even in death. The day will come when those who have believed in Jesus Christ will know that God has delivered us even from death. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages them to not grieve as others do who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13) – because of the hope granted to us by Jesus' resurrection (v. 14.) The stress is not on *not grieving* but not grieving *without hope*. Death is an enemy, an intruder, an obscene development in God's good creation. It is lamentable. The death of a child or grandchild is simply tragic, not at all the way things should be. Lament is honest and true. But lament with hope in Christ is the gift of the Spirit to us.

The pain and mystery for us is the 'why?' of God's will. Vv. 13-18 asks that searching why of God – just as Jesus asked that searching 'why?' on the cross. In sorrow and grief with all of the confusion and loneliness that come with them, it may seem to us that God's face is hidden, that we are God-forsaken. Jesus knows it all – and in his praying he has given us the words for our own searching prayer in lament.

Psalm 88 differs from all the other lamentations in the psalms in that it does not have the turn of hope at the end. It ends with those most desolate of words – 'Darkness is my closest friend.' The gift of this desolate psalm for us is that it tells us that we may address words to God and with God in the most unresolved and bleakest of circumstances. We may speak with Him from that dark place – and we find in Him one who knows that place – and us with all our suffering and sorrow – very well.