

The group of psalms known as laments is rooted in an individual or nation's crisis or great distress. And these laments usually entail a plea for God to help. Human experiences such as suffering, pain, despair, and hopelessness often are dramatically expressed in this genre.

Two Main Lament Types

Personal Laments: 3, 5, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42, 51, 55, 57, 59, 77, 88, 123, 140, 141, 142, 143

Community Laments: 44, 74, 79, 80, 83, 90, 137

The laments are, numerically, the most common form in the psalms, nearly a third of the psalms being of this type. And, even in psalms where the main theme is not lament, there may be elements of such present.

The majority of the laments are individual in nature, focused upon one person's experience and crisis, rather than that of the larger community. There are, however, about seventeen laments that speak on behalf of the community or congregation or nation.

The setting of each lament will have to be discerned. In some cases, such as Psalm 102, the superscription helps. It reads, "A Prayer of the afflicted when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint before the LORD." The crises can be varied, sometimes spiritual, but at other times material, physical, or mental or a combination.

Sometimes the exact nature of the crisis is difficult to ascertain, because the language is so general. At other times there is a more specific reference. For example, in Psalm 137, Judah's military defeat at the hands of Babylon is in view. The psalmist cries out for vindication. Crop destruction and social corruption are other themes.

Psalms of Lament

Typical Structure of a Lament Psalm

The lament psalms have a fairly standard structure that involves four elements. Psalm 13 is used here as an example of each element. This form doesn't appear in every lament psalm, but it is fairly common.

1. Invocation (introductory address to God)

Verse 1: How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

2. Complaint or Lament (the crisis or situation prompting the lament)

Verse 2: How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

3. Petition or Supplication (the plea for help)

Verses 3-4: Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him"; Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

4. Conclusion involving motivation or vow (usually positive, expressing confidence in God)

Verses 5-6: But I have trusted in Your mercy; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

It is worth noting that many of these psalms show a change in mood near the conclusion, where sorrowful expressions and pleadings are followed by confident assurance that God has heard and will answer the prayer. This pattern may be seen also in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, where He pleads for escape from the cross, but then changes tone dramatically and accedes to whatever may be the Father's will (Matt. 26:39).

The Nature of the Complaints in These Psalms

Usually the nature of the complaint in the laments takes one or more of three variations.

1. Complaints against God, perceiving Him to be the problem.
2. Complaints against an enemy, thus an external problem.
3. Complaints against the psalmist himself, thus an internal problem.

It is not often that all three forms of complaint are found in a single psalm, but that is the case in **Psalm 22**.

1. The complaint against God—vv. 1-2

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; And in the night season, and am not silent.

2. The complaint against his enemies—vv. 7-8 and 12-13

All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, “He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!”

Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion.

3. The complaint against himself—v. 6

But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people.

Comparing Crises to Being in Sheol

Some crises appear so great that the psalmist compares his distress to what he imagines existence in Sheol to be like. Sheol is the world of the dead, the underworld, the realm of death.

Before the New Testament concept of “hell” was developed, the ancient Israelites nevertheless had a concept of an existence in a region sometimes called “shades” or “the pit” where there was no hope of escape. It was a place of terror, where one was gripped by the power of death. Yet, often the psalmist is not claiming to actually be in Sheol, but he is expressing the depth of his misery as being likened to being there.

Psalm 88 is a good illustration of this use of death or Sheol in a lament. Some of the language will remind readers of some of the language Job spoke in his anguish and of Jonah’s description of his condition when swallowed by the great fish.

Other Categories of Laments

Besides dividing the lament psalms into individual and community psalms, other categories also can be observed.

1. Prayers of Sick Persons. Psalms 38 and 41 are examples. There often is an intertwining of physical illness and spiritual anguish, an early evidence of what psychologists have only recently discovered.



2. Petitions by Those Falsely Accused (Prayers of Innocence).

Psalm 7, particularly verses 3-5, serves as an example.

O LORD my God, if I have done this: If there is iniquity in my hands,

If I have repaid evil to him who was at peace with me, Or have plundered my enemy without cause,

Let the enemy pursue me and overtake me; Yes, let him trample my life to the earth, And lay my honor in the dust. Selah

3. Pleas for Asylum in God’s Temple as a Sanctuary.

Psalm 61:2-4 illustrates.

From the end of the earth I will cry to You, When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For You have been a shelter for me, A strong tower from the enemy.

I will abide in Your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of Your wings. Selah

4. Prayers of the Oppressed or Persecuted. Psalms 3, 4, 5 and 7 are exemplars of this type, but there are many more.

5. General Laments. Some psalms, like Psalm 22, seem either general or very inclusive of several manners of distress.

Laments Help Us See Part of the Purpose of Prayer

Sometimes prayer can be a perplexing concept. God knows our needs before and better than we do. He knows what is best for us, even when we don’t. So, in one sense, we don’t need to instruct God, via prayer, about our needs or list for Him how He should come to our aid. What then, is the purpose and value of prayer?

The prayer psalms help us see that the aim of prayer is to convince God to act on our behalf now, rather than waiting until a later time. The vehement expressions of pain, the protests that justice demands actions, the implication that unrighteousness is about to get the upper hand, all imply that God can be convinced or provoked to act on our behalf.

And, there is biblical support for the idea that God’s mind, as it were, can be changed. Abraham negotiated with God for the preservation of Lot and his family (Gen. 18:20-32). Moses became an intercessor for Israel on more than one occasion when God expressed His intent to destroy people. God listened to Moses and preserved Israel.

The psalms of pain and protest can sometimes shock Christians, who are not used to the idea of talking

to God in such a way. We may feel as the psalmists, but we also deem it inappropriate to speak so to God. Yet, it was Jesus Himself who appropriated language from Psalms 22 on the cross as He laments His feelings of separation from God, identifying Himself with humankind's often similar feelings (Mark 15:34).

Perhaps we hold back too much from God as we pray. We may be, unintentionally, creating a false image of our true feelings as we come before the throne of grace. There is a great need for total honesty in prayer. Just as in a human father-son relationship, there needs to be respect shown. But, the father also needs to know what his son truly believes and feels. These psalms show us we need not fear boldly speaking to God.

Resolution of human problems often requires our solicitation of God's forgiveness. But, forgiveness by God requires acknowledgement or confession of our sins. The very process of constructing a song of lament may help identify the true cause of our suffering and impel us toward confession. Psalm 32 reflects this need.

Psalm 74: A Community or National Lament

Read this psalm carefully. It would appear that the Babylonian destruction of the temple in 586 BC is in view. This was a national disaster.

- The lament opens with a question. Why?
- That is followed by a call for God to “remember” His people, as before.

- There is then a description of what the heathen are doing to God's temple.
- God's absence is observed; no prophets, no way of knowing how long this situation would continue.
- That God's name is being blasphemed is noted, just before the plea for aid.
- God is called upon to quit holding back and use His hand to destroy the enemy.
- God's historic power is recounted back to the creation.
- Finally, the people identify themselves with God and plead that He not forget His covenant, ignore their plight, or fail to uphold His cause, and they tell God the tumult of opposition to Him grows daily.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. From a Christian perspective, what do you make of expressions of great lament to God as seen in the psalms? Should a Christian lament in such a way? _____

2. Think about the most recent or greatest crisis you have faced. Jot down some notes about how you felt. Now, using the four elements of a conventional lament, write a short psalm of your own to express your feelings and needs to God. (If you feel this is too personal, you don't have to share it with the class.) _____

3. What do you see as the most fundamental feeling in the psalmists' heart when he says, as in Psalm 88, that he feels as though he is in the realm of the dead or the pit? And how is his feeling similar to what the reality of hell will be? _____

4. Think over the various challenges or distresses that you or others have experienced and list at least one where your complaint is against:
God: _____
An enemy: _____
Yourself: _____