

EXPLORING THE PSALMS

HOMEGROUP BIBLE STUDY NOTES: LAMENT AND PENITENCE

OUT OF THE DEPTHS I CRY TO YOU O LORD, LORD HEAR MY VOICE! (Ps 130:1)

As we have seen earlier, the Psalms have something to say about every aspect of life - times of joy, as well as times of sadness. We all know that life is unfair! There are times in life when - individually and collectively - we have to look darkness in the face, and acknowledge that part of life really is broken and falling apart.

TAKE A LOOK AT

Psalm 88:1-7

*If you feel able, reflect on a time when you have felt as if you were in
"the lowest pit, in the darkest depths"?*

*Sometimes events happen in our lives, and it feels as if God has abandoned us;
our prayers seem to go unanswered and we feel almost as if
God's anger is hanging heavily over us.*

What do we mean by "Lament"?

- **Laments are prayers:** They might take the form of a petition, or complaint, to God about illness, suffering, feeling abandoned by God or betrayed by friends. A lament brings all those feelings into the presence of God, laying it all before God. Psalm 88 is a really good example;
- **Laments are more than just grumbles:** They are cries to God for help. Yes, they may often have a tone of bitterness but they don't usually end with despair. On the contrary, laments are very much part of the praise of Israel, and often end up with a shout of praise - as in Psalm 13:1-6;
- **Laments often serve as a reminder of God's faithfulness:** They often trace God's steadfast love in the past, by recounting his acts in the Exodus or other redeeming acts.

DISCUSS

Psalm 31:2

"Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me" (Psalm 31:2)

Often the question is asked: "Why is God allowing this to happen now?"

Is that a fair question?

Have you thought about that in the context of the current pandemic?

or might a better question be:

"Where is God in all this?"

What do you think? We may not know the answer to the first question. But as Christians we surely ought to have something to say about the second!

- **Laments are sometimes individual:** “O God, why?” “O God, how long?” “Why does God seem so far away?” “What have I done to deserve this?” “Why do the wicked prosper...?” Such statements undoubtedly express a belief that God is there and can help. That’s a good starting point for lament - even though, at times, there may be little evidence to support such faith. But isn’t that what faith is all about: **Forsaking All I Trust Him.**

TAKE A LOOK

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1)

*Why O LORD do you stand off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1)*

*How long, O LORD?
Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13: 1-2)*

*I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;
I will remember your wonders of old...
with your strong arm you redeemed your people (Psalm 77:11,15)*

Are sin and suffering linked?

*There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones because of my sin (Psalm 38:3)*

**Scripture (eg Job, and Jesus’ teaching in the NT)
makes clear that a person’s suffering isn’t necessarily related to specific sins**

...but can sinful behaviour lead to ill health and suffering?

- **Laments are sometimes corporate:** They often express grief - even anger - about testate of the nation. We can turn to Psalm 137 to see an example - the words are well known: “By the rivers of Babylon....” (I hear you singing!).

BUT...TAKE A LOOK AT

Psalm 137:7-9

*Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell.
“Tear it down” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!”
O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is he who repays you for what you have done for us -
he who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.*

Horrible words, indeed, that seem to run counter to everything we are ever taught about God’s love and compassion. Yet these words have to be understood as a cry of anguish from people far from home, exiles in a foreign land their temple destroyed, its treasures looted, taunted and oppressed by their enemies yet still filled with zeal for their God and a longing for justice and God’s name vindicated.

**These words are hard to read, and we would never use these words in worship.
But we cannot ignore the depths of human pain they express,**

and the deep longing for God's righteousness to be seen

- **Lament is sometimes expressed as a prayer for “vengeance”.** These are often called “imprecatory” Psalms. We have just seen one example, but here is another:

TAKE A LOOK AT

Psalm 58

The Psalm opens with grand words of outrage against those in authority who abuse their power:

*Do you rulers indeed speak justly?
Do you judge people with equity?*

*No, in your heart you devise injustice,
and your hands mete out violence on the earth.*

Then the Psalmist describes them as liars:

*Even from birth the wicked go astray;
from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies.*

*Their venom is like the venom of a snake,
like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,*

*that will not heed the tune of the charmer,
however skilful the enchanter may be.*

**And finally, in his fury, he wants rid of the oppressors,
so he lets rip in violent words:**

*Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;
Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!*

*Let them vanish like water that flows away;
when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.*

*May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,
like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.*

**Yet, in the end, he concludes that retribution is for God alone
- he will one day bring about justice and judgement**

*Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns—
whether they be green or dry—the wicked will be swept away.*

*The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,
when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

*Then people will say,
“Surely the righteous still are rewarded;
surely there is a God who judges the earth.”*

Laments for Christians

In the Cross and Empty Tomb we see how God has engaged with human anguish and betrayal through self-giving love. As 1 John 1 tells us: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* So as we confess our sins, we can find forgiveness. And relief can come as pain and anguish is acknowledged and brought into the open. Thus, lament can be part of - and lead to - praise.

As Christians, we are looking for the ultimate destruction of all that is wrong and evil. We know that this is brought about through the self-giving love of Christ on the Cross, and we are looking forward to the coming Kingdom of Christ's glory and the establishment of God's rule of justice, righteousness and peace.

Therefore, we say:

"...Your will be done, your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven...deliver us from evil; for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever."