The Book of Psalms
Psalm 13: A Song of Lament

Week 52

Introduction

It surprises many to learn that the largest category of Psalms are the Laments (also called Songs of Protest) in which the writers are giving voice to their anxieties, fears, sorrows and uncertainties. There are more than 65 Lament Psalms (close to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the entire book of Psalms), some being personal laments and others being corporate laments.

The Laments show people wrestling with God in a world that doesn’t always make sense. If God is good, then why is my life so filled with pain? If God is all-powerful, then why doesn’t He move to remedy my situation? If God is in control, then why can’t He maneuver the job market in my favor? If God is all-knowing, then why does it feel like He’s forgotten about me? There is even an entire book of the Bible devoted to the expression of sorrow – Lamentations (written by Jeremiah the prophet).
“There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God’s people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God.” (D.A. Carson)

Even Jesus used the Lament Psalms when He was dying on the cross for our sins. His first and last words were quotations from the Psalms:

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but You do not answer” (Psalm 22:1,2).

Then, at the end:

“Free me from the trap that is set for me, for You are my refuge. Into Your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth” (Psalm 31:4,5).

It may seem as if the Lament Psalms express a lack of faith in God; but as Walter Brueggemann pointed out, the opposite is true. The Laments show people turning toward God in their pain, not running away from God:

“The use of these ‘psalms of darkness’ may be judged by the world to be acts of unfaith and failure, but for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith. It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God. Thus these psalms make the important connection: everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life.”


Community Laments: Psalms 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79-80, 83, 85, 89-90, 94, 123, 126, 129.
PSALM 13 – How Long?

Psalm 13 is a classic little Lament Psalm. It's only 6 verses, but it contains three key elements of the typical lament. First, read through the entire Psalm and feel David’s emotions.

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me.

1. EXPRESSION of DESPAIR (feelings)

The first step in true lament is to stop stuffing your true feelings and tell God exactly what’s on your mind and heart. Unplug it and let Him hear the sour notes. Bringing our issues to God is a step of faith, even if our tone is one of sorrow.

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me (13:1,2)?

It’s not hard to pick out the key words in this first part. “How long” (4x). You can feel his pain, his agony, his frustration with God. “Despair” is an old word that means, literally “loss of hope.” And that’s where David is at here at the beginning of this lament. He is on the verge of losing hope. He feels abandoned by God. He feels forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind.

He feels like God has turned His face away from him. He feels rejected. He’s tried to be a faithful servant of God, and now he feels like God has left him alone to wrestle with bad thoughts and deep sorrows.

Meanwhile his enemies are having a field day watching all of this, and it seems as if God could care less. That’s how he feels, how he really feels. We might say, “That’s not theologically correct.” Exactly! But it’s “emotionally correct” and sometimes our emotions
and our theology are at odds. The important point is that HE EXPRESSES THIS DESPAIR OPENLY TO GOD. He doesn't bury it; he doesn't candy-coat it; he doesn't ignore it. He tells God exactly what he’s thinking and feeling. That’s where healthy lament starts. This process is sometimes called “hurling at God.”

This reminds us of what Job felt and said to God. He didn't curse God. But he was frustrated with God. He was confused and bewildered about his suffering. So he hurled all of those emotions toward God. That's being honest ABOUT HOW YOU FEEL. Job did that. David did that. We also need to learn to do that.

One thing you learn from the Psalms of Lament is that it’s O.K. to be brutally honest with God about your feelings. You don’t have to worry about being theologically correct when you’re telling God how you feel inside. Say what you feel. Play Him your sour notes. Sing your blues to Him. He’s waiting to hear that from you.

The opposite of hurling is stuffing. And that’s what a lot of us do with our pain. Instead of wrestling with God, we stuff it and just get bitter. The Lament Psalms give us permission to say it, not stuff it.

Here’s an important thing about expressing our pain to God through lament: This is NOT “turning away from God.” In fact, it’s just the opposite. This is “turning toward God” in your pain. This is wrestling with God, not walking away from God. But hurling at God is not where lament ends.

2. PRAYER for RESCUE (facts)

Healthy lament moves from the expression of negative emotions to real, specific needs. The writers of these Psalms are direct in telling God what they hoped He would do for them. In Psalm 13, David’s statement of his need is brief, yet to the point.

> Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall (Psalm 13:3,4).
David asked to 1) be noticed, 2) uplifted and 3) vindicated. He reminds God that he is in a life or death situation. If God does not give him victory soon, he will be overcome by his foes. Of course, David knows that God is sovereign and will do as He purposes; but he still knows that he can pray, as a child of God, and let His Father know his needs.

Do you talk to God like this? Directly? Specifically? intentionally? These Psalms teach us to ask God for what we need. Tell Him directly. He can handle direct requests.

If He wants to say “No,” He’ll say “No.” If He wants to say “Yes,” He’ll say “Yes.” And if He wants to say “Yes, I’ll answer your prayer, but in a different way than you’re expecting,” then He’ll do that. Let Him handle filling the orders. You just make known your needs.

“Pray at all times, keeping alert in your prayers with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

“Cast all of your cares upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7).

3. STATEMENT of TRUST (faith)

You will find in all the Psalms of Lament a statement of trust, or confidence in God (the exception being Ps.88). It might not be fancy, or long, but it’s there . . . an expression of trust in the midst of trouble, based on what the person knows to be true of God.

But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me (Psalm 13:5,6).

But I trust . . . my heart rejoices . . . I will sing. Why these expressions of hope amidst such a dark situation? Nothing has changed. The enemies are still there.

Notice the object of his trust. I trust in Your unfailing love. My heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord. The Lord has been good to me.
The object of his trust is the character of God. And this is critical in learning how to process your way through the valleys of life. David has NOT come to a positive outlook on his troubles. He has turned his heart Godward in the midst of his agony. He has begun to gaze at the character of God and he utters a cry of faith. He is leaning into what he knows to be true about God.

When it comes to the lamentable situations in life, we must face the ultimate question: What do we believe to be true about God? If I am facing a fearful situation, can I cling to a Father Who is strong enough to overcome my enemies? If I am feeling lonely or abandoned, can I turn my heart toward a God Who will never leave me or forsake me? If I am feeling betrayed or falsely accused, can I rest my case with a all-seeing God Who knows the truth? If I am feeling worthless, can I turn to a Father Who calls me His “masterpiece.”

This is why it is so important to develop a deeper and deeper understanding of the character of God. We can do this by 1) reading the descriptions of His character in the Bible; 2) learning from His dealings with people in biblical times; 3) learning from the way He works with people in our own day; and 4) remembering His ways with us in the previous stages of our journey.

The more we truly KNOW (experientially, not just intellectually) our God, the more natural it will be for us to turn TO Him in times of lament.

Note: IF you notice in yourself a pattern of having difficulty trusting a specific aspect of God’s character, you would do well ask the deeper question: What lie has been planted deep in my heart that makes it so difficult for me to trust God in this particular area?