

## Psalm 13 – *A Psalm of Lament*

I suppose I could begin by telling you that a ‘Psalm of Lament’ (at least according to those who dissect these kinds of things) normally has five parts:



- (1.) **Introductory Cry** – *“How long, O LORD?”* asks the psalmist in the opening words of the psalm we just prayed, Psalm 13.
- (2.) **The Lament (the real problem)** – *“How long shall I have perplexity in my mind [or: “How long must I wrestle with my thoughts” as a better translation reads], [having] grief in my heart, day after day...my enemy triumphs over me...*
- (3.) **Prayer: What the psalmist wants God to do about it** – *“Look upon me and answer me, O LORD my God; give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death...”*
- (4.) **Confession of Trust** – *“But I trust in your unfailing love...”* the psalmist says in verse 5, *“my heart is joyful because of your saving help.”*
- (5.) **Vow or Shout of Praise** – *“I will sing to the LORD, who has dealt with me richly.”*<sup>1</sup>

I could begin by telling you about and explaining each of these five parts of a ‘Lament Psalm,’ but it would probably be like explaining to someone who just lost a loved one the five stages of grief. (1.) Denial, (2.) Anger, (3.) Bargaining, (4.) Depression, (5.) Acceptance. It’s one thing to have them explained. It’s another to live it.

We could probably begin with a dissecting approach, but as E.B. White put it (speaking about what’s sometimes mistakenly thought of as the opposite of lament): “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Taken from: <http://loveintruth.com/psalms/5-lament>

<sup>2</sup> From “Don’t Explain the Joke” at: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DontExplainTheJoke>

So as we transition from the wisdom psalms of last week to the psalms of lament tonight, we begin with a story instead.



A son asked his father who lived in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands during World War II, what songs they sang at church. The father explained: “Worshippers couldn’t sing anything that smacked of nationalism... They stuck to the psalms... The Nazis saw the [Psalms] as innocuous. Little did they know...

“After musing a bit [the] father added, ‘At night we sometimes sang a different sort of psalm.’” Psalm 79 is a psalm that “drips with fear, doubt, anger and even wishes for revenge.” After the father recited a few lines from Psalm 79 in his native Dutch (“O God, the nations have come into your inheritance... they have murdered your people... How long, O Lord? ...save those doomed to die... repay the people who are doing this to us...”), “...[the] father smiled sadly and sighed. ‘We probably should not have sung these psalms. We were angry. It wasn’t very Christian.’”<sup>3</sup>



Praying your way through the psalms, you don’t have to pray very far or long before you come across a few surprising words that might not sound very “Christian”; perhaps even a few surprising ways of talking to God.

After all, “The moment we say no to the world and yes to God,” the pastor and translator of the psalms Eugene Peterson muses (perhaps a bit sarcastically):

...all our problems are solved, all our questions are answered, all our troubles over. Nothing can disturb the tranquility of the soul at peace with God. Nothing can interfere with the blessed assurance that all is well between me and my Savior. Nothing and no one can upset the enjoyable relationship that has been established by faith in Jesus Christ. We Christians are among that privileged company of persons who don’t have accidents, who don’t have arguments with our spouses, who aren’t misunderstood by our peers, whose children do not disobey us.

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<sup>3</sup> “Necessary Songs: The Case for Singing the Entire Psalter,” by Martin Tel in *The Christian Century* (January 8, 2014).

“Is that what you believe?” asks Peterson. “If it is, I have some incredibly good news for you. You are wrong.”<sup>4</sup>



A friend and colleague of mine found himself one night as a young chaplain in the ER’s waiting room. His task? To somehow explain to a family that – God help them – this would most certainly be the worst night of their life.

When he went to pray with them, he found a psalm that he thought (being a young pastor willing to “experiment”) might give voice to their pain, their loss, their suffering. It could well have been Psalm 22, the words we hear Jesus intone from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

The pastor could tell something wasn’t going quite right, but at this point he had no choice but to go on.

“But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads...”

The pastor suddenly felt as if he was digging a hole with each additional verse prayed, another shovel-full of dirt. But he pressed on...

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.”

The father of the family there in the ER waiting room finally got up, put his hand firmly on the pastor’s shoulder and said with almost a growl: “Try Psalm 23.”

There are times when you and I simply need to hear words of comfort.

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition in 2000), page 37.

But is it possible that we do a disservice, do injustice, violate our integrity when we avoid prayers that need to be spoken – thoughts and words that need to be exposed to the light – simply because we think that’s not what a faithful Christian would say?

Perhaps we are afraid that God can’t take it? If so, maybe the good news is that God most definitely is big enough to “take it” and then some. That’s the God of lent and the God of the cross.

Or do we avoid prayers like these because of an even greater fear – the fear that at the end of the day we really aren’t in control? If so, I have some incredibly good news for you. You really aren’t in control.



Speaking about these kinds of prayers and words that scratch off the false façades of life, again Eugene Peterson writes: “Good poetry survives not when it is pretty or beautiful or nice but when it is true: accurate and honest. The psalms are great poetry and have lasted not because they appeal to our fantasies and our wishes but because they are confirmed in the intensities of honest and hazardous living.”<sup>5</sup>

Thanks be to God that it is not every day or every night that our lives are turned upside down. But thanks be to God that there is a church (bigger than you or me or Custer Lutheran Fellowship even), which prays these prayers across time and space, alongside of those who are going through the worst night of their life – with cries like, “How long, O LORD?”

Thanks be to God there is a church, which remembers those who live in occupied places and times, with prayers that give voice to grief, to pain, to suffering. And thanks be to God there is a church (as upside down as it might seem), which also confesses trust in the midst of despair and praise in the midst of hopelessness.

May your prayers of lament have all five parts: (1.) an introductory cry; (2.) a lament; (3.) prayer that is not afraid to ask God to do something about what's wrong; and then (4.) confession of trust and (5.) shouts of praise.

Let us pray. *O God, How long? How long must your people wait? We pray your rescue. Even as we trust in your unfailing love. Upon nothing else can we stand. Amen.*

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition in 2000), page 75.