

## ***Psalms of Lament – Surviving Exile***



We step into this world with a cry. Although none of us remembers the moment, the first sound we uttered after leaving the warm and protected confines of our mother's womb was a loud protest. We enter, wailing. To cry is human.

However, we aren't the only part of the created order expressing sorrow. The apostle Paul says that the entire creation groans (Romans 8:22). Along with the fall of Adam, the created world was infected with the broken effects of sin. Death is the ultimate reminder that something is not right with the world. But there are other examples: cancer, addictions, failed marriages, relational conflict, loneliness, and abuse.

*Sculpture outside Notting Hill Methodist Church.*

We don't stop crying after birth. It continues because the world is broken. While tears and sorrow are part of our humanity, there is an often-neglected prayer language in the Bible for our travels through a broken world: lament.

To begin with, the laments we find in Scripture are addressed directly to God: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!" (Psalm 130:1) and "My soul, too, is utterly terrified; but you, O Lord, how long...?" (Psalm 6:4).

In more modern terms we might say, "I call to you, O Lord, and all I get is your answering machine!" We take our cries directly to the top. God, however, seems very far away, "O my God, I cry out by day, and you answer not; by night, and there is no relief for me" (Psalm 22:3).

We ask heartfelt questions: "How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me?" (Psalm 13:2), which implies: I am at the end of my rope, and I cannot hold on much longer; and, "Why, O Lord, do you stand aloof? Why hide in times of distress?" (Psalm 10:1), which implies: "I do not understand what is going on; this makes no sense. How long? Why?" These are not requests for information, but cries of pain.

The afflictions of the speaker(s) are described in ways with which all sufferers can identify: sickness—"...heal me, O Lord, for my body is in terror" (Psalm 6:3); loneliness and alienation—"My friends and my companions stand back because of my affliction..." (Psalm 38:12); danger and mistreatment by others—"O Lord,... save me from all my pursuers" (Psalm 7:2) and even aging—"Cast me not off in my old age..." (Psalm 71:9).

Finally, the ultimate affliction is physical death. "For my soul is surfeited with troubles and my life draws near to the nether world" (Psalm 88:4).

Lamentations often speak of enemies. At times these are enemies from outside the community, also known as "foreigners" or "the nations": "O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple" (Psalm 79:1).

At other times, it is an enemy from within who schemes and plots against the psalmist: "I hear the whispers of the crowd...as they consult together against me" (Psalm 31:14).

On more than one occasion, the psalmist suggests to God things to do to these enemies, which are known as the so-called “cursing psalms”: “So now, deliver their children to famine, do away with them by the sword....May cries be heard from their homes” (Jeremiah 18:21-22); “All my enemies shall be put to shame in utter terror” (Psalm 6:11); “Happy the man who shall repay you the evil you have done us! Happy the man who shall seize and smash your little ones against the rock!” (Psalm 137:8-9).

***Try saying “This is the Word of the Lord” “Thanks be to God” after reading these psalms! In reality, these are the words of slaves in exile, filled with brutal honesty and frustration. It is fairly obvious that as Christians we are not all that comfortable in speaking our pains, our doubts and our anger before God. Lament leaves us more than a little uneasy.***

***But these Israelite slaves hold nothing back. God hears them despite this. He will lead them out of exile. This time it will be different. There will be a new Moses. He will be the Son of David who gets it right as opposed to Solomon who got it wrong. This exodus will be for the whole of humankind. No wonder the prophets get excited!***

### **Psalms of Lament – the list!**

<b><u>Lament Psalms</u></b>	
<b>Community</b>	12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89*, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129
<b>Individual</b>	3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27*, 28, 31, 36*, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52*, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89*, 120, 139, 141, 142
<b><u>Specialized Lament Psalms</u></b>	
<b><u>Penitential</u></b>	6, 32*, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143
<b><u>Imprecatory</u></b>	35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140

*Imprecatory means cursing!*

### **A few examples**

#### **The Story of Exile**

*O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;*

*they have defiled your holy temple,*

*they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.*

*They have left the dead bodies of your servants*

*as food for the birds of the sky,*

*the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.*

*They have poured out blood like water*

*all around Jerusalem,*

*and there is no one to bury the dead.  
We are objects of contempt to our neighbours,  
of scorn and derision to those around us.*

*How long, Lord? Will you be angry for ever?  
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?  
Pour out your wrath on the nations  
that do not acknowledge you,  
on the kingdoms  
that do not call on your name;  
for they have devoured Jacob  
and devastated his homeland.*

*Do not hold against us the sins of past generations;  
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,  
for we are in desperate need.  
Help us, God our Saviour,  
for the glory of your name;  
deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake.  
Why should the nations say,  
'Where is their God?'*

*Before our eyes, make known among the nations  
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.  
May the groans of the prisoners come before you;  
with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die.  
Pay back into the laps of our neighbours seven times  
the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.  
Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,  
will praise you for ever;  
from generation to generation  
we will proclaim your praise. (Psalm 79)*

### **Cry to God**

*Awake! Why are you asleep, O Lord?  
Arise! Cast us not off forever!  
Why do you hide your face,  
forgetting our woe and our oppression?  
For our souls are bowed down to the dust,  
our bodies are pressed to the earth. (Psalm 44:24-26)*

*How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long shall I harbour sorrow in my soul,  
grief in my heart day after day?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalm 13:2-3)*

## **Prayer in Anger**

*Pour out your wrath upon the nations  
that acknowledge you not,  
upon the kingdoms that call not upon your name.  
Why should the nations say,  
“Where is their God?”*

*Let it be known among the nations in our sight  
that you avenge the shedding of your servants’ blood.  
And repay our neighbours sevenfold into their bosoms  
the disgrace they have inflicted on you, O Lord.  
(Psalm 79:6,10,12*

*Rise up, judge of the earth; render their deserts to the proud. How long, O Lord, shall the  
wicked,  
how long shall the wicked glory,  
Mouthing insolent speeches, boasting, all the evildoers? (Psalm 94:2-4)*

## **Personal Affliction**

*Look toward me, and have pity on me,  
for I am alone and afflicted.  
Relieve the troubles of my heart,  
and bring me out of my distress.  
Put an end to my affliction and my suffering,  
and take away all my sins.  
Behold, my enemies are many,  
and they hate me violently.  
Preserve my life and rescue me;  
let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. (Psalm 25:16-20)*

## **Trust and Hope in God**

*Show us, O Lord, your kindness,  
and grant us your salvation.  
I will hear what God proclaims;  
the Lord—for he proclaims peace.  
To his people, and to his faithful ones,  
and to those who put in him their hope.  
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him,  
glory dwelling in our land. (Psalm 85:8-10)*

*Many say, “Oh, that we might see better times!”  
O Lord, let the light of your countenance shine upon us!  
You put gladness into my heart,  
more than when grain and wine abound.  
As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep,  
for you alone, O Lord,  
bring security to my dwelling. (Psalm 4:7-9)*

## ***The story. . .***

The Exodus *Exodus 1-15*

The Journey *Exodus 16-40*

Solomon's reign *1Kings 1-11*

Forced Labour - *1 Ki 5:13. 1 Ki 5:13–16. 1 Ki 9:19–20*

Solomon's wives and idol worship – *1Kings 11: 1-13*

The fall of Jerusalem - *2Kings 25*

UK arms trading.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/30/uk-reclaims-place-as-worlds-second-largest-arms-exporter>

Comparative wealth in the UK <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/news/uk%E2%80%99s-five-richest-families-now-own-more-wealth-bottom-13-million-people>

Modern slavery in UK

<https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/slavery-uk/>

BBC Rethink project

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/rethink>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08gt1ry/episodes/downloads?page=2>

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Rob Bell. *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*. 2012 Harper Collins Publishers

Thomas Cahill *The Gifts of the Jews* 1998 Doubleday Publishers

*Podcasts*

The Bible for Normal People

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