

ST ARMANDS KEY LUTHERAN CHURCH
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

COME, JOIN THE CONVERSATION!
ON
THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Lesson Plan for Thursday – October 31, 2013

Conversation #6 – “*Psalms of Community Lament*”

Our objectives for this session:

- to share personal ideas, attitudes, and experiences relating to The Psalms; and, in doing so, strengthen our SAKLC fellowship;
- to be able to describe distinctive elements in Psalms of Lament, generally speaking; and, in Psalms of Community Lament in particular; (*next week’s session will focus specifically on Psalms of Individual Lament*);
- to analyze several select psalms in order to identify the elements of lament in each;
- to articulate the nature of lament in the context of Psalms, as well as in the context of contemporary Christian experience;
- to consider the appropriateness of including prayers of lament in corporate worship.

Some introductory words:

Lament is not a common element of Christian worship, either corporately or individually. For that reason, it may not be comfortable in this session and/or the next, for us to think about or pray with the ancient psalmists guided by psalms of lament. Yet, fully one-third of the Book of Psalms [*#60-70 in total*] consists of laments. They are of two general types: {1} individual laments and {2} community laments. There are approximately three times as many individual laments as there are community laments.

Our usual practice in prayer is to express positive emotions to God. Most of us seem to carry the impression that God will be offended if we vent any negative feelings. Some even fear that we might bring the Lord’s wrath and punishment upon ourselves!

At the outset of this Conversation, then, it is important to acknowledge that many of us have negative feelings about “*letting it all hang out*” before God. We may think of it as inappropriate to always and honestly tell God about all of our grievances with him and his world. Complaining openly to God in prayer (*expressing laments*) is not a common element in our worship style. Yet, who of us has not inwardly felt the emotions that are expressed in many of the Psalms of Lament? Is there a “*disconnect*” between our inner religious experience and the outward airing of our feelings in prayer? Are we guilty of practicing too much piety?

Do we too often jump to the conclusion that God will somehow make “*it*” all come out right in the end? How do we affirm faith when so much of the evidence in the world around us is negative? Dare we mention this to God in our prayers?

You are about to discover that the psalmists had no difficulty bringing their complaints before God. They had no shame or reluctance in sharing their deepest despair, fear and anger with the Lord. They knew that an idyllic existence in this world is not only unrealistic, but that it also fails to realize what makes God’s people human. Being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) means that we can and do make conscious choices; but, it never loses sight of the fact that we are mortals and God is eternal. “*Being a little lower than God*” (Psalm 8:5) means that our choices are not always good. Not unlike our Hebrew ancestors, many of us today still inwardly resent the prosperity of the wicked. But, at the same time, we also cringe at the kind of vengeance advocated and expressed in Psalm 137:8-9 –

*⁸ Babylon, you will be destroyed.
Happy are those who pay you back
for what you have done to us—
⁹ who take your babies
and smash them against a rock.*

It is important to get such raw feelings out in the open! Where better than in the hearing of our compassionate and loving God? When the psalmists vented, it often opened a way to reach the resolution of their problems. Our awareness of these psalms of lament, and our willingness to let them be a guide for our own prayers, will hopefully be a healthy learning experience for all!

AN OPENING PRAYER OF LAMENT – PSALM 79 (Good News Translation [GNT])

- ¹O God, the heathen have invaded your land.
They have desecrated your holy Temple
and left Jerusalem in ruins.**
- ²They left the bodies of your people for the vultures,
the bodies of your servants for wild animals to eat.**
- ³They shed your people's blood like water;
blood flowed like water all through Jerusalem,**

and no one was left to bury the dead.

⁴ **The surrounding nations insult us;
they laugh at us and mock us.**

⁵ **LORD, will you be angry with us forever?
Will your anger continue to burn like fire?**

⁶ **Turn your anger on the nations that do not worship you,
on the people who do not pray to you.**

⁷ **For they have killed your people;
they have ruined your country.**

⁸ **Do not punish us for the sins of our ancestors.
Have mercy on us now;
we have lost all hope.**

⁹ **Help us, O God, and save us;
rescue us and forgive our sins
for the sake of your own honor.**

¹⁰ **Why should the nations ask us,
“Where is your God?”
Let us see you punish the nations
for shedding the blood of your servants.**

¹¹ **Listen to the groans of the prisoners,
and by your great power free those who are condemned to
die.**

¹² **Lord, pay the other nations back seven times
for all the insults they have hurled at you.**

¹³ **Then we, your people, the sheep of your flock,
will thank you forever
and praise you for all time to come. Amen.**

DISCUSSION OPPORTUNITY –

- How do you personally feel after praying to God in this manner? Are there any words, thoughts or phrases that make you uneasy?
- From knowledge of Hebrew history, when do you think that this psalm evolved?
- What synonyms can you think of for the word “*lament?*”
- What events in modern history might cause our world/nation/community to lament?
- How appropriate would it be to occasionally include a prayer of lament in the liturgy of our worship services?

A DICTIONARY DEFINITION OF LAMENT: *(American Heritage)*

(as verb) **to express sorrow or deep regret, to mourn, to wail or complain;**

(as noun) **an expression of sorrow or mourning, a dirge or elegy.**

A) GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LAMENTS and their application in the present -

1) Nothing is held back from God:

God is always addressed forthrightly; there is no bashfulness about accusing the Holy One of being asleep, forgetting his promises, sitting on his hands or abandoning his people.

This kind of honesty and willingness to say how we feel about ourselves and about God should be present in our own prayers!

2) Laments are accompanied by affirmations of belief :

God is identified as the one who creates, judges, loves, forgives, heals, helps and redeems the people. Such belief enables the psalmist to pray in confidence and hope, believing that God will respond to the present distress.

We can also pray with the same belief. Because we believe God to be the One who loves and redeems, we can pray with confidence that our prayers will be heard and that there will be a response!

3) For almost every lament there is a corresponding supplication:

Laments are followed by petitions or requests that God do something in particular. In some psalms there are more verses of lament than supplication; in others, the reverse is true. Claus Westermann (*THE PSALMS, AUGSBURG, 1980*) suggests that there are three dimensions to laments. All psalms of lament will contain at least one dimension; some will include two or three dimensions. The problems on which the psalmists focus may be:

- a) Internal (*directed toward the self*)
- b) External (*directed toward an adversary or enemy*)
- c) Divine (*directed toward God*)

B) VIEWING MANY CONTEXTS OF LAMENT:

The social milieu of the psalmists was very different from anything that we have experienced, and the particular circumstances of the persons who composed the laments varied widely. However, our modern experiences and emotions of despair, grief, rejection, anger, worry, embarrassment and defeat provide ties that link us to those who first composed these types of prayers:

➤ A sick person's lament: (6:2)

I am worn out, O LORD; have pity on me!

Give me strength; I am completely exhausted

- One who feels falsely accused: (109:25)
*When people see me, they laugh at me;
they shake their heads in scorn.*
- One who is grieving: (31:9-10)
*Be merciful to me, LORD,
for I am in trouble;
my eyes are tired from so much crying;
I am completely worn out.
¹⁰ I am exhausted by sorrow,
and weeping has shortened my life.
I am weak from all my troubles;
even my bones are wasting away.*
- One suffering military defeat: (60:1)
*You have rejected us, God, and defeated us;
you have been angry with us—but now turn back to us.*
- One under oppression: (94:3-5)

*How much longer will the wicked be glad?
How much longer, LORD?
⁴ How much longer will criminals be proud
and boast about their crimes?

⁵ They crush your people, LORD;
they oppress those who belong to you.*
- At a time of natural disaster (*famine may be this setting here*): (126:5-6)

*Let those who wept as they planted their crops,
gather the harvest with joy!

⁶ Those who wept as they went out carrying the seed
will come back singing for joy,
as they bring in the harvest.*
- Captivity in a foreign land (*prisoners of war*) (137:1, 4)
*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down;
there we wept when we remembered Zion ... How can we sing a song to the LORD
in a foreign land?*
- A corrupt society that brings despair (12:1)
*Help us, LORD!
There is not a good person left;
honest people can no longer be found.*

- A personal spiritual crisis; feeling abandoned (13:1)
*How much longer will you forget me, LORD? Forever?
How much longer will you hide yourself from me?*

C) THE PLACE OF VENGEANCE, ANGER, VINDICATION and VIOLENCE IN PSALMS:

- Newspapers and TV constantly provide us with reports of these personal and corporate emotions and actions in daily life. Why is it that so many of us are uncomfortable when such feelings are expressed in Scripture?
- From the perspective of a Christian it can be disturbing that anger and violence are so prominent We remember Jesus' teaching: {Matthew 5:44} ***"But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"*** and {Luke 6:27} ***"I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."***
- Biblical scholarship suggests that we first read The Psalms from the viewpoint of the original writer Consider how the psalmist viewed enemies in relation to what he understood to be God's justice and truth. W. H. Bellinger, Jr. ("READING AND STUDYING THE BOOK OF PRAISES" HENDRICKSON PRESS, 1990) suggests:
"The laments' amazing candor is sometimes shocking to the reader, but it is crucial to the honest dialogue of faith. The psalms do not bear a witness to prayer "as it ought to be" but to be brutally honest prayer from the depths of life. An honest faith acknowledges life's realities. In the Psalms, no part of life is ever beyond dialogue with God. Modern Westerners often find themselves seeking to avoid or deny pain, but the laments accept that pain is a significant and intrinsic part of life and seek to put that reality in the context of faith in God. The psalms that seek vengeance call God to the divine task of justice and take the desire for the vengeance to the Lord who can act upon it."
- Suggestion: When we encounter troublesome psalms, it is not necessary to read them as words to nurture our own spirituality, but to recognize their place in the life and faith of the ancient Hebrew people. We accept these words in their literary as well as their historical context, seeking always to understand their meaning for the time in which they were written. It is not necessary that we read these as our own prayers. However, if honest with ourselves and with God, there are times when we, too, have had similar anger in our hearts, and have sought vengeance upon our own enemies!

D) THE MATTER OF QUESTIONING GOD - "HOW LONG?" – "WHY?":

- Questions about God's motives are present in many psalms of lament. The question: "How long?" shows that the psalmist, though a person of great trust and confidence, nevertheless experienced seasons of doubt and dismay regarding God's willingness or ability to act in times of crisis. Example – Psalm 13:1-2

*How much longer will you forget me, LORD? Forever?
How much longer will you hide yourself from me?
² How long must I endure trouble?
How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?
How long will my enemies triumph over me?*

- Frequently the question begins “Why?” The psalmist wonders why God allows some things to happen, why God does not act more quickly or decisively, or why God seems totally absent. Example – Psalm 22:1

*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
I have cried desperately for help,
but still it does not come.*

- It is significant that even in the psalms where such doubt and dismay are present there are also expressions of trust and confidence in God.

E) CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY PSALMS OF LAMENT:

1. Address to God -
 - Most community laments do not begin with a formal invocation;
 - Sometimes the simple words “O God!” are used;
2. Lament -
 - Use of “we, us, our, or your people” {^{1st} person plural}
 - Sometimes the lament is implied rather than stated directly (*example: 12 & 85*)
3. Remembrance of God’s past actions -
 - Recall of God’s mighty actions in a brief sacred history
 - This element found in some but not all community psalms of lament
4. Words of Affirmation -
 - Express belief that God is one who creates, protects, leads, and forgives in the present
5. Petition -
 - Request for God to respond to the distress of the people
 - God’s authority and power are never questioned; God’s intervention assumed
6. Expression of Praise -
 - Only 3 of the community psalms of lament include this feature (*14, 53 & 79*)

PRACTICUM & CLOSING PRAYER – PSALM 80

*Listen to us, O Shepherd of Israel;
hear us, leader of your flock.
Seated on your throne above the winged creatures,
² reveal yourself to the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.
Show us your strength;
come and save us!*

- ³ ***Bring us back, O God!
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved!***
- ⁴ ***How much longer, LORD God Almighty,
will you be angry with your people's prayers?***
- ⁵ ***You have given us sorrow to eat,
a large cup of tears to drink.***
- ⁶ ***You let the surrounding nations fight over our land;
our enemies insult us.***
- ⁷ ***Bring us back, Almighty God!
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved!***
- ⁸ ***You brought a grapevine out of Egypt;
you drove out other nations and planted it in their land.***
- ⁹ ***You cleared a place for it to grow;
its roots went deep, and it spread out over the whole land.***
- ¹⁰ ***It covered the hills with its shade;
its branches overshadowed the giant cedars.***
- ¹¹ ***It extended its branches to the Mediterranean Sea
and as far as the Euphrates River.***
- ¹² ***Why did you break down the fences around it?
Now anyone passing by can steal its grapes;***
- ¹³ ***wild hogs trample it down,
and wild animals feed on it.***
- ¹⁴ ***Turn to us, Almighty God!
Look down from heaven at us;
come and save your people!***
- ¹⁵ ***Come and save this grapevine that you planted,
this young vine you made grow so strong!***
- ¹⁶ ***Our enemies have set it on fire and cut it down;
look at them in anger and destroy them!***
- ¹⁷ ***Preserve and protect the people you have chosen,
the nation you made so strong.***
- ¹⁸ ***We will never turn away from you again;
keep us alive, and we will praise you.***
- ¹⁹ ***Bring us back, LORD God Almighty.
Show us your mercy, and we will be saved.***

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