

ST ARMANDS KEY LUTHERAN CHURCH
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

COME, JOIN THE CONVERSATION!
ON
THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Lesson Plan for Thursday – November 7, 2013

Conversation #7 – “*Psalms of Individual 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 within Psalms of Lament, generally speaking; and, in Psalms of Individual Lament in particular;
- to analyze several psalms in order to identify the elements of individual lament in each;
- to consider the appropriateness of including individual laments in our personal prayers.

Facilitator’s brief introductory remarks:

Authorship of Psalm 51, a portion of which is used in today’s ‘Opening Prayer,’ is attributed to David, written when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had illicit relations with Bathsheba. Yet, the words of this psalm are so characteristically “*open-ended*” in terms of the sin committed that it is not necessary for us to have committed the same sin as David in order for them to be relevant for our use in the following prayer!

AN OPENING PRAYER OF INDIVIDUAL LAMENT – PSALM 51:1-4, 10-12 (Good News Translation)

**Be merciful to me, O God,
because of your constant love.
Because of your great mercy
wipe away my sins!**
² **Wash away all my evil
and make me clean from my
sin!**

³ **I recognize my faults;
I am always conscious of my
sins. ⁴ I have sinned against you—
only against you—
and done what you consider
evil. So you are right in judging**

**me; you are justified in
condemning me.**

**10 Create a pure heart in me, O
God,
and put a new and loyal spirit
in me.**

**11 Do not banish me from your
presence;**

**do not take your holy spirit
away from me.**

**12 Give me again the joy that
comes from your salvation,
and make me willing to obey
you.**

Amen.

INDIVIDUAL PSALMS OF LAMENT – approx. 45 in total number; represent largest number of psalms of any one type. Not surprising when remembering the cultural climate, the sociopolitical circumstances, the theological heritage, and the geographical setting of the time. No one lived or died, succeeded or failed without God's intervention; God was the one to whom all despairs, grief and concerns were to be expressed!

A) QUICK REVIEW: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL LAMENTS -

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) SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS - INDIVIDUAL PSALMS OF LAMENT *(not all elements are present in every psalm of lament; nor do these elements necessarily appear in the same sequence in which they are presented here:)*

1. Invocation or Address to God

- *the psalmist calls upon God to hear his prayer;*
- *sometimes as brief as: “O Lord”*
- *other times more to it: “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim (Ps. 80:1)*

2. Lament

- *make use of first person singular pronouns: I, me, my and mine;*
- *a complaint or grievance occasioned by something that another person, the self, or God has done to cause the personal distress;*
- *specific circumstance causing the lament is seldom clear;*
- *nature of the lament, however, is often quite clear, whether it be because of sin, abandonment by friends or by God, the actions of enemies or personal sickness or grief;*
- *see further “facilitator’s comment” below, in notes following the study of Psalm 13!*

3. Expression of Confidence or Trust

- *psalmist expresses deepest despair because he is confident of God’s dependable presence and action on his behalf;*
- *in many of these laments psalmist affirms his confidence and trust with phrases that begin:*
 - **“The Lord is ...”**
 - **“Because of ...”**
 - **“But, I have trusted in ...”**
 - **“I put my hope in ...”**
 - **“I have complete confidence, O God ...”**

4. Petition or Supplication

- *accompanying each lament is a corresponding petition that asks God to do something;*
- *knowing God’s past actions and having trust in God’s presence, the psalmist is confident in the divine power and authority to act in response to his distress;*
- *supplication is usually a very direct statement beginning with words such as:*
hear, turn, restore, protect, come.

5. Expression of Praise or a Vow to Praise

- often found in last verse(s)
- a statement that expresses or promises praise by the psalmist in response to who God is and what God has done; however, sometimes missing altogether.

C) DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUAL LAMENTS OUTSIDE THE BOOK OF PSALMS

1. Seen as prayer-form used in ancient Israel's worship (! Samuel 1:1-19)
 - **Hannah**, a person in great trouble, came to the sanctuary; poured out her heart to God;
 - In answer to her prayer she received – in this case from a priest – assurance that God had heard her;
 - This assurance effected a change in the person who had lamented;
 - Hannah was convinced God had heard her!
2. Story of the sickness of **King Hezekiah** (King of Judah 715-686 BC) told in Isaiah 38:1-7
 - King (from his sickbed) prays to God for healing;
 - Prophet Isaiah sent to announce that God has heard him;
 - Shows that effectual prayers of lament can be offered from places outside the temple.
3. Books of Job, Lamentations and Jeremiah (11, 15, 17, 18 & 20) contain multiple psalms/prayers of lament.

D) INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OF LAMENT WITHIN THE BOOK OF PSALMS – prime example # 13

- How much longer will you forget me, LORD? Forever?** [*psalmist's*
How much longer will you hide yourself from me? *personal*
² **How long must I endure trouble?** *condition*
How long will sorrow fill my heart day and night?
How long will my enemies triumph over me?
- ³ **Look at me, O LORD my God, and answer me.** [*address; invocation*]
Restore my strength; don't let me die. [*petition; supplication*]
- ⁴ **Don't let my enemies say, "We have defeated him."**
Don't let them gloat over my downfall.
- ⁵ **I rely on your constant love;**
I will be glad, because you will rescue me. [*expression of trust*]
- ⁶ **I will sing to you, O LORD,** [*expression of praise*]
because you have been good to me.

FACILITATOR'S ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: (based on my personal study and some important observations obtained through the scholarship of Claus Westermann, in his book: "THE PSALMS – STRUCTURE, CONTENT & MESSAGE," Augsburg Press, 1980.)

- One assumes that long before it was committed to the Scriptures, Psalm 13 carried the sorrow and anxiety of many generations; one also assumes that the words used were in various ways actually lived and suffered by a veritable host of people intent on bringing their pain to God. Although experienced here in a succinct form, each word truly represents many words; many chains of thought!
- Psalm 13 represents a very human expression when one can no longer endure continuing pain, pressure and the absence of any prospect for improvement. Not unique to Judaism, examples of this type are also found in Babylonian psalms of lament dating from the same period.
- In this psalm we never learn about the "surface" symptoms that were disturbing the suppliant. This is a characteristic of Individual Psalms of Lament. It is the disturbance of one's "wholeness" which is lamented; the interruption of interrelationships that characterize "being alive;" in the relations of the lamenter to God, to self, to others.
- An intense reversal appears. (vs. 5-6) This kind of dramatic change is found in various degrees, and in different ways, in all Psalms of Individual Lament. We are dealing here with an action of God which had been actually experienced and was "concretized" as a result of that experience!

E) JUST WHO IS THE "ENEMY?"- A LOOK @ THREE METAPHORS OFTEN REPEATED IN PSALMS OF INDIVIDUAL LAMENT:

1. **"THEY SET A NET OR A TRAP"** for the petitioner. Example Ps. 140:4-5 *'Protect me, O Lord from the power of the wicked; keep me safe from violent people who plot my downfall. The proud have set a trap for me; they have laid their snares, and along the path they have set traps to catch me.'*
2. **"THEY THREATEN LIKE WILD BEASTS."** Example Ps. 17:11-12 *'They are around me now, wherever I turn, watching for a chance to pull me down. They are like lions, waiting for me, wanting to tear me to pieces.'*
3. **"THEY ATTACK LIKE WARRIORS."** Example Ps. 7:13 *'... he takes up his deadly weapons and aims his burning arrows*

RESPECTED COMMENTS FROM NOTED BILICAL SCHOLAR, CLAUS WESTERMANN (“The Psalms”
– previously cited)

“THE ENMITY OF THESE PERSONAL ENEMIES IS DIRECTED ALWAYS AND ONLY AT THE ONE WHO SPEAKS IN THE PSALM. WE ARE NEVER TOLD, NOT EVEN BY SLIGHT INTIMATION, THAT THIS PERSON BELONGS TO A GROUP AND THAT THE ATTACK IS AIMED AT THE GROUP.

THE INDIVIDUAL WHO IS THREATENED BY ENEMIES IS DELIVERED UP IN SEEMING IMPOTENCE. THE IDEA OF PUTTING UP A DEFENSE DOES NOT OCCUR – NOT IN THE SLIGHTEST. ... THE ONLY FIGHTER IS THE OPPONENT, NEVER THE ONE WHO DOES THE LAMENTING. IT IS CLEAR THAT BOTH THE INDIVIDUAL WHO LAMENTS AND THE ENEMIES BELONG TO THE SAME COMMUNITY! THEY VISIT ONE ANOTHER (41:5-6) ... SPEAK IN A FRIENDLY MANNER (55:21) ... THEY HAVE ‘SMOOTH TONGUES’ BUT ENMITY LURKS IN THE BACKGROUND.

IN ALL THESE STATEMENTS ABOUT ENEMIES ONE THING SEEMS CLEAR: HERE IS A COMMUNITY WHICH IS BREAKING APART. IT IS MARKED BY CONFLICT IN WHICH A VERY POWERFUL GROUP CONFRONTS ONE WHICH IS HELPLESS. THE HELPLESS ... ARE PEOPLE WHO STAND ALONE ... WHO CONTINUALLY ARE BEING PRESSURED BY THE OTHERS. IN THE OPINION OF THE SUPPLIANTS THE OTHERS ARE THOSE WHO DO NOT TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY. (the “godless,”)

ALL OF THESE FEATURES ARE UNDERSTANDABLE IN THE POSTEXILIC AGE IN WHICH ISRAEL WAS MERELY A PROVINCE OF AN EMPIRE, WHEN MEMBERSHIP IN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WAS CONSEQUENTLY NO LONGER IDENTICAL WITH MEMBERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY FAITHFUL TO ISRAEL’S GOD. ONE MAY SURMISE THAT THOSE WHO ARE MEANT BY THE TERM ‘EVILDOERS’ ARE THE GROUP IN THE POPULATION WHICH ADAPTED ITSELF IN ITS ENTIRE LIFE-STYLE TO ITS PAGAN ENVIRONMENT. THE ENEMIES WERE THE PEOPLE WHO NO LONGER HELD STRICTLY TO THE TORAH.”

F) **GROUP PRACTICUM – PSALM 22** (an excellent example of a psalm of Individual Lament; Christians are familiar with Jesus’ words spoken from the cross; yet many are unable to specifically identify with this psalm.) **INSTRUCTION:** in small groups, work through the text of this psalm; in the right-hand margins identify specific characteristics that were suggested in *ITEM #B-PAGE 3*, above:

**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
I have cried desperately for help,
but still it does not come.
² During the day I call to you, my God,
but you do not answer;
I call at night,
but get no rest.
³ But you are enthroned as the Holy One,
the one whom Israel praises.
⁴ Our ancestors put their trust in you;
they trusted you, and you saved them.
⁵ They called to you and escaped from danger;
they trusted you and were not disappointed.**

**6 But I am no longer a human being; I am a worm,
despised and scorned by everyone!**
**7 All who see me make fun of me;
they stick out their tongues and shake their heads.**
**8 "You relied on the LORD," they say.
"Why doesn't he save you?
If the LORD likes you,
why doesn't he help you?"**

**9 It was you who brought me safely through birth,
and when I was a baby, you kept me safe.**
**10 I have relied on you since the day I was born,
and you have always been my God.**
**11 Do not stay away from me!
Trouble is near,
and there is no one to help.**

**12 Many enemies surround me like bulls;
they are all around me,
like fierce bulls from the land of Bashan.**
**13 They open their mouths like lions,
roaring and tearing at me.**

**14 My strength is gone,
gone like water spilled on the ground.**
**All my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like melted wax.**
**15 My throat is as dry as dust,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.**
You have left me for dead in the dust.

**16 An evil gang is around me;
like a pack of dogs they close in on me;
they tear at my hands and feet.**
**17 All my bones can be seen.
My enemies look at me and stare.**
**18 They gamble for my clothes
and divide them among themselves.**

**19 O LORD, don't stay away from me!
Come quickly to my rescue!**
**20 Save me from the sword;
save my life from these dogs.**
**21 Rescue me from these lions;
I am helpless before these wild bulls.**

- 22 I will tell my people what you have done;
I will praise you in their assembly:**
- 23 “Praise him, you servants of the LORD!
Honor him, you descendants of Jacob!
Worship him, you people of Israel!**
- 24 He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering;
he does not turn away from them,
but answers when they call for help.”**
- 25 In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done;
in the presence of those who worship you
I will offer the sacrifices I promised.**
- 26 The poor will eat as much as they want;
those who come to the LORD will praise him.
May they prosper forever!**
- 27 All nations will remember the LORD.
From every part of the world they will turn to him;
all races will worship him.**
- 28 The LORD is king,
and he rules the nations.**
- 29 All proud people will bow down to him;
all mortals will bow down before him.**
- 30 Future generations will serve him;
they will speak of the Lord to the coming generation.**
- 31 People not yet born will be told:
“The Lord saved his people.”**

FACILITATOR’S COMMENT: As a good Jew, we can be sure that Jesus was familiar with this psalm in its totality. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to infer (*as some people have*) that while on the cross our Lord felt completely abandoned by God because he quoted only the beginning of the psalm. As the ancient psalmist could lament and trust – so did Jesus!

G) INDIVIDUAL PRACTICUM: PSALMS OF LAMENT FOR YOUR PERSONAL MEDITATION

INSTRUCTION – *Select one or more of the following psalm passages to read; then, do so slowly and prayerfully! Ponder the words ... focus on those words that express your own thoughts and feelings. Select one line or verse that is especially meaningful to you; SOME ARE LISTED BELOW AS EXAMPLES. Then, on a separate sheet, attempt to write your own prayer prompted by the words of the line or verse you select! Be surprised by how easy it is to do!*

1. Psalm 6:1-10 *My eyes waste away because of grief . . . (v. 7a)*

2. Psalm 13:1-6 *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? (v. 1a)*
3. Psalm 41:1-12 *Even my bosom friend ... has lifted the heel against me. (v.9)*
4. Psalm 51:1-17 *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; . . . (v. 1a)*
5. Psalm 71:1-21 *I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God, . . . (v. 16a)*
6. Psalm 90:1-17 *For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past (v. 4a)*
7. Psalm 119:81-88 *My Soul languishes for your salvation; I hope in your word (v. 81)*

CLOSING PRAYER: PSALM 71:5-6, 14-17, 23

- ⁵ Sovereign LORD, I put my hope in you;
I have trusted in you since I was young.**
- ⁶ I have relied on you all my life;
you have protected me since the day I was born.
I will always praise you.**
- ¹⁴ I will always put my hope in you;
I will praise you more and more.**
- ¹⁵ I will tell of your goodness;
all day long I will speak of your salvation,
though it is more than I can understand.**
- ¹⁶ I will go in the strength of the LORD God;
I will proclaim your goodness, yours alone.**
- ¹⁷ You have taught me ever since I was young,
and I still tell of your wonderful acts.**
- ²³ I will shout for joy as I play for you;
with my whole being I will sing
because you have saved me.**

(SAKLC_PSAKMS_2013.11 per hjm)