

Faith Seeking Understanding

Lent 2010

Psalm 22:1-18
Mark 14:32-42

Prayers of Lament

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.
Amen

Prayers of lament may seem a contradiction in terms. Are we not in prayer meant to praise God and thank him and confess our sins and remember people in need and ask for spiritual growth?

Lament means complaining, grumbling, questioning, protesting. How can these things be part of Christian prayer? Are they not the sign of a weak faith? Should Christians lament?

Lamenting and protesting are part of legitimate Christian prayer because they are, for most believers, part of Christian experience.

How so?

Because we live in a fallen world and we share its pain and we are human, and it is not given to us to understand everything.

Over the Christian centuries many believers have agonised over the problem of evil and suffering. If God is good and loving, why does he permit disease and tsunami and earthquake and murder and war and accidents on the roads and all the ills of life? If God is almighty, can he not put a stop to suffering?

For people who have no Christian faith, there is no problem explaining suffering: that's how life is.

But Christians believe in a God who is both loving and almighty, and the painful troubles of human existence have caused many of these believers to cry out in bewilderment and anguish to God. These cries are what we call prayers of lament.

I propose to illustrate prayers of lament with a series of pictures. The pictures fall under four headings.

The first heading is **biblical**, prayers of lament in scripture.

Do you remember the story of Job?

Job was a prosperous farmer with a large family. He worshipped God and was good, honest and kind. Then disaster fell. Raiders attacked and killed his servants and stole his cattle. Lightning struck his sheep and killed his shepherds. A desert storm caused the death of all his children. Then painful ulcers inflamed Job's body from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.

False friends came to Job, the so-called Job's comforters. "You suffer," they said, "therefore you must have sinned. Your suffering is terrible: therefore your sin must have been terrible." They invented sins that Job had not committed, and accused him of wrongs he had not done (22:5-10). "Job," they said, "God is punishing you, and we advise you to repent and accept your punishment."

This caused Job spiritual torture. If he had wickedly disobeyed God, he could have understood his affliction. He would have deserved it. But he does not deserve this! (chapter 31)

Why, Lord, why? That was Job's question. Pain, despair and outrage burst from him. He complained to God, protested to God, even raged against God. Why had God allowed this torture to come upon him?

Listen to Job: "I cry to you and you do not answer me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute

me. When I looked for good, evil came; and when I waited for light, darkness came“ (30:20-21, 26-27). Job pours out the torment inside him. Why? Why should this happen to him? God is meant to be fair and just. What has Job done to deserve this?

We sometimes speak of the patience of Job and he was patient in the sense that throughout his sufferings he never lost his faith in God, but Job did complain and he protested and he raged.

We have not time now to see how God answered Job. But anyone asking the question *why?* will find a soul-mate in Job.

Let's turn now to the psalms.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the most common type of psalm is the psalm of lament, the psalm where the psalmist complains and cries out to the Lord. He asks, even demands, that the Lord help him, and sometimes he questions why the Lord has not come to his aid, and how long it will be before he does. These psalms of lament describe the psalmist's distress. Sometimes it's sickness, sometimes false accusation, sometimes persecution. In most cases the trouble is described, not in specific detail, but in general terms with vivid imagery. This means that often we don't know the precise circumstances, but it has the advantage that we can use the psalm and apply it to our situation.

These psalms of lament have a change of mood at the end. The psalmist comes to a certainty that the Lord has heard his prayer and will act to save him. For example, Psalm 13: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul?" But the psalm ends, "I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord."

There's one exception. Psalm 88 is a psalm of lament, but there is no movement towards hope and no glimmer of light. The psalmist is in despair. We may feel that despair should have no place in scripture. And yet it's right that this psalm is in scripture, for there are times when people feel despair and see no way forward. Anyone in that situation can use this psalm. The one saving factor is that

the psalmist brings his despair to the Lord and describes the Lord as "the God who saves me, the God of my salvation."

One biblical book has the word *lament* in its title – the book of Lamentations.

This book was carefully constructed. It contains five laments. All but one of the laments have 22 verses, reflecting the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The exception is the third lament, which has 66 verses – 3 times 22. Moreover, the verses of the first four laments begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The fact that the book is carefully constructed does not mean that it is not passionate. It throbs with anguish, torment and pain.

It's a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon marched with his army against Jerusalem. The Babylonians broke through the city wall, plundered and burned Jerusalem and its Temple, broke down the city walls, and carried off the leading citizens into exile in Babylon. And so the royal line of David was deposed and humiliated, the city laid waste, and the Temple desecrated.

The Jews in exile despaired. Their feelings find expression in the psalm, "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. Our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

It was not only that their city was destroyed and their Temple violated. It was also that they felt the Lord's promise to establish them in the promised land had come to nothing.

And so they cried out with lamentation.

Orthodox Jews customarily read the Book of Lamentations aloud in its entirety on the traditional anniversary of the destruction of the Temple (the 9th day of Ab). Many Jews read it each week at the Western Wall, known also as the Wailing Wall, in the Old City of Jerusalem. In some Christian traditions the Book of Lamentations is read during the last three days of Holy Week.

Listen to the cry of Lamentations. “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, my children are desolate, the enemy has prevailed.” (1:12, 16)

And yet the cry of lament is not total despair.

The book offers hope. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” (3:22-26)

Let’s leave the Old Testament and turn to the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We find that he himself cried out to his heavenly Father in agony.

What was it that took place in the Garden of Gethsemane with the cross only hours away? Jesus on his knees prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.”

Some manuscripts add, “In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” (Luke 22:44)

Then on the cross came the cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)

We may ask ourselves how God’s Son could possibly imagine that God had forsaken him. Had Jesus not taught, “Look at the birds of the air. Do not be anxious. Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God.”?

What caused this cry of dereliction?

Did the sins of the world that Christ came to take away separate him for a moment from God? Or was he deliberately quoting Psalm 22, which begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Or in sharing our human nature did he also share the bewilderment that we sometimes experience?

We sometimes get fixated over questions such as: how do I get what I want? how does God answer prayer?

Scripture is not concerned with these questions. God’s people in scripture pour out their problems and even their rage and despair to the Lord, and are content to leave them there.

Scripture is honest. In life there is pain. Scripture allows us to admit our pain, and scripture gives us words to use, and teaches us that the best person to whom we should bring our pain is our heavenly Father. Tell him how we feel. Tell him even our rage and despair. Leave it with him. Let God answer as God wishes to answer. He will listen and understand, and ultimately that is all that matters. Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.

So far we have had illustrations of prayers of lament under the heading of scripture.

Our second heading is **historical**.

Victims of the Holocaust during the Second World War cried out in agony to God. Psalm 83 gave them words: “O God, do not keep silence; do not be still. Your enemies are in tumult; those who hate you have raised their heads. They lay plans against your people. They say, Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more.”

In 1945 after the Allies liberated the Nazi concentration camp of Belson, the prayer of a condemned Jew was found. It read, “Lord, remember not only the people of goodwill, but also the people of ill will, and all the suffering they have inflicted on us. But do not only remember the evil they wrought against us, but also the fruits we have produced thanks to this suffering – our generosity, our humility, the greatness of heart which has come out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.”

Our third heading is **personal**, prayers of lament in personal experience.

In the 16th century there was a Spanish Carmelite called Saint John of the Cross, who devoted himself to studying the scriptures, to prayer and meditation. He wrote a book

entitled *The Dark Night of the Soul*. He was referring to those times in life when we struggle with faith, when we struggle with questions, even doubts, when we struggle with God.

The very fact that John of the Cross wrote a book entitled *The Dark Night of the Soul* shows that there is a place within the Christian life for struggling with faith. Sometimes, when people enter the dark night of the soul and go through a period of confusion, they feel that that they can no longer be called Christian. They feel they're failing, they're no longer welcome in the church, and their spiritual perplexity and torment are not acceptable.

Nevertheless, the dark night of the soul is, for some believers, part of their Christian pilgrimage.

William Cowper, an 18th century Anglican, suffered depression and chronic mental torment. He expressed this in his hymn *O for a closer walk with God* where he laments, *Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and his word?*

William Cowper felt that he was far from God. But the wonderful thing is, and this is where he helps us, he did not hide his despair or allow it to fester, but instead he put it into a prayer and took it to the Lord.

Our fourth heading is **liturgical**, prayers of lament expressed in liturgy, in services of worship.

Is there a place in worship for lament? Should lament be part of worship? And if so, where should it come?

Probably lament should not be a regular and normal part of worship. After all, we don't spend all our life lamenting. Perhaps lament should have a place in worship only when it is appropriate. And when is that? Perhaps after a tragedy like the disaster in Haiti or the earthquake in Chile or some terrible murder. That is, at a time when people are bewildered and confused and are asking, "Why, Lord? How could you permit this? What awful suffering!"

In these contexts prayers of lament are appropriate, allowing people to bring their confusion and pain to almighty God.

The question now arises: if lament is fitting in a service of worship, where is the right place for it?

Perhaps the best place is where normally we confess our sins. On occasions when lament is appropriate we could replace confession with lament. This is not to avoid our own sin, but to cry out to God at the brokenness of the world.

The lament could take the form of using phrases from a psalm, such as the "How longs?" of Psalm 13. "How long, O Lord, will Afghanistan suffer? How long will violence in the Middle East continue?"

Another question arises. What is the appropriate response to lament?

After a confession of sin, we long to hear a declaration of God's forgiveness: "As far as the east is from the west, so far do I remove your transgressions from you. Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Those words address the penitent heart.

But what is an appropriate response to lament?

Perhaps, when cruelty or cancer or tragedy force us to cry and lament to God, the response that we need to hear is a declaration of God's sovereignty and his never-ending mercy and his love in Christ.

A declaration such as Psalm 46, "God is our refuge and strength. Therefore we will not fear. Be still and know that I am God."

Or, "Neither death nor life, neither the present nor the future, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Let us pray.

Almighty God, when tragedy strikes and confusion bewilders, hear our cry, and teach us that in all things you work for good with those who love you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen