

CRY OUT TO GOD IN OUR NEED

Psalms of Lament

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CAN I BE ANGRY AT GOD? Can I express anger in prayer? Such questions never stop surprising me, whether in pastoral ministry or spiritual direction, or conversing with friends or relatives about the important aspects of our lives. We live in an era when many people approve – even encourage – expression of negative feelings and emotions (as cathartic), but complaining in prayer or articulating anger against God still makes many of us very uncomfortable. Perhaps such expression of anger touches close to something deeply ingrained in us from an early age.

Can I be angry with God?

That is not to say that we Christians have no history of anger against God. My grandmother knew how to let God know she was angry. She was convinced she had reasons to complain: she suffered from a wide array of physical ailments in her later years, especially trouble sleeping at the times most other people slept. She used to write me long letters, and in one she mentioned that sometimes in the early morning when she could not fall asleep she would talk to God about how she felt. She remembered St Teresa who had told God at a particularly bleak moment: 'If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them!' When she had expressed her anger and frustration with God in this indirect fashion, she felt better. She had learned the first step of the prayer of lamentation. She would probably have many friends today, people who transform anger into humour. It has an attraction to it, because there is no lack of hurt and frustration in human lives.

Which of us has not at some time felt like a mess, sad, confused, immobilized, unable to make a move, angry at our situation, depressed, angry with others who should have done more for us, betrayed by friends, mad at enemies, tired of illness, wondering why God lets all this happen to us. Our problems may revolve around sickness, or death of a loved one, or losing a job, or facing retirement, or a gross inequity

in the ways various people are treated, or the injustice of our government, some experience of pain or embarrassment in the Church, a natural tragedy, a personal failure, abandonment. At such times it is often hard to express what I am feeling. Perhaps we say: 'I'm sad, I'm depressed, I'm angry, I am appalled, my life feels dark and dismal, my life is chaotic, I'm in the pits'.

When we complain we just yearn for an object, someone to scream at . . . but since we have been socialized to frown on articulating anger, we usually tone it down ('I'm a bit upset, this approach displeases me') or transform it into humour, like my grandmother. The indirect approach seems more true especially when the anger is directed at God. Such attitudes also help to explain a curious fact about Christian perceptions of the Book of Psalms: although more than a third of the psalms echo the voices of passionate complaining to God, most people express surprise at the suggestion that we can learn to pray our anger and hurt from the psalms. Whether our acquaintance with the psalms comes from personal prayer and meditation or from the daily offices or the eucharistic liturgy, Christians usually recall many more words of praise or gratitude or trust than psalms of complaint. So most people are surprised to learn that psalms of lament outnumber by far the hymns of praise and psalms of thanksgiving.¹

Lament as a type of psalm

I teach the Psalms fairly regularly and my students include Catholic and Protestant ministry students, and usually some older ministers in a renewal time. Many have regularly prayed the psalms for years and yearn for an opportunity to learn more about them, while others are newcomers to the psalms. I design the course around the different types of psalms, particularly the categories biblical scholars have used since the studies of Hermann Gunkel, who pioneered the study of psalms according to their function in Israel's life and worship, such as: hymns of praise, thanksgiving, songs of trust, royal songs, laments, didactic and wisdom psalms. Over the years I have used several different texts as background for students; some begin by introducing readers to psalms of praise or thanksgiving. For some reason, I usually place laments first on the syllabus, and spend more class time on these than any other type. By the end of this unit most students find themselves deeply engaged in issues that range from the experiential (personal prayer in times of anger) to the theological (what kind of God can we address in anger?). Once or twice I began with praise psalms, but the group never experienced as deep an involvement or a questioning

stance as in the times we began with laments. What I have learned from these experiences is that psalms of lament can affect people very powerfully, and in group study they prove formative for education in the entire Psalter.

Psalms that exhibit a mixture of sadness, anger and helplessness usually contain very concrete language directed to God, sometimes complaint, almost always a petition. The presence of these and similar qualities in more than fifty psalms has led many people to call them lament psalms, on the analogy of lamentation over the death of someone. Gunkel compared the various psalms which display this style and mood, and his study led to a profile of a lament psalm.² What distinguishes these psalms from a funeral dirge, however, is the clear sense that life has not ended, that the singer demands something from God in order to preserve life.

Structure of lament psalms

Psalm 13 provides a straightforward example for us.

Psalm 13

To the leader. A Psalm of David.³

- 1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- 2 How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart
all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
- 3 Consider and answer me, O Lord, my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in the sleep of death,
- 4 and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
- 5 But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
- 6 I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Below I list the typical elements of a lament psalm and show how they appear in this psalm.

Addressing God: 'O Lord' (v 1).

Complaining or lamenting the distress I or we experience (notice the plaintive words: 'why?' 'how long?' – three times in v 1):

— against *human enemies*: 'How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?' (v 2c); worried that 'my enemy . . . say, "I have prevailed": my foes will rejoice' (v 4);

- against *God (as enemy)*: 'How long, Lord? Will you utterly forget me? How long will you hide your face from me?' (v 1);
- about *self as enemy* (personal experience of worthlessness, feelings of depression): 'How long must I carry sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day?' (v 2).

Professing innocence, or confession of sins that bring on suffering. Some psalms contain admissions of guilt and pleas for deliverance; the seven traditional *penitential psalms* (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), though not all laments, all contain admissions of guilt. Other psalms complain that evil comes in spite of innocence (in the pattern of Job's laments: cf Job 3:7). In Psalm 13 this issue does not arise.

Petition for what one desires from God (often consists of commands, issued in imperatives): 'Consider and answer me, O Lord, my God! Give light to my eyes or I will sleep the sleep of death' (v 3).

Confession of trust in God who has saved us before (begins with words like: 'still', 'nevertheless'): 'But I trusted in your steadfast love' (v 5a).

Vowing to praise God (occasionally promising thanksgiving sacrifice): 'I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me' (v 6). In some biblical narratives which draw upon the lament pattern, for example the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel, which we will discuss below, there is also a pronouncement of God's salvation. But few if any of the psalms contain such oracles (perhaps Pss 12:5; 85: 9–13).

Many lament psalms contain several of the elements described above, but not all of them. Since the deepest reasons for lamenting emerge from the language of complaint, careful reading of these psalms reveals the kind of problems brought to God: sickness (Ps 6:2, 4, 7; Pss 38, 41); false accusations (Ps 7:3–5); malicious gossip (Ps 31:18); need for asylum (Ps 61:3–4); oppression (Ps 94:6, 16, 20–21). Others do not indicate a clear reason for the psalmist's complaint, but the situation is clearly terrible; for example, Psalm 22 – 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' – reflects various complaints, but none stands out as central. This difficulty in identifying the root cause of suffering may reflect our life-experience: often it is hard to isolate the central issue from the others we experience. In this way laments reflect some of the tragic realities of our lives.

Questions to ask when reading a psalm

Laments require us to listen carefully to the language of hurt and anger, to the descriptions of pain and frustration in the psalm. To reflect

on our feelings and reactions to the language of lament, I suggest the following questions for a first reading: 'Who is the speaker?' 'Who is being addressed?' 'What is the mood?' 'What does the Psalmist desire?' Again, Psalm 13 is our model.

The *speaker* refers to himself or herself as one who bears pain and sorrow (v 2), feels forgotten (v 1), beset by an enemy (v 2), and feels that death is imminent. The *addressee* in this psalm is God, named *Lord* in three places (vv 1, 3, 6). The psalm's *mood* varies from impatience ('How long', v 1) to sadness and anger (v 2) to petulance (vv 3–4), to cajoling ('but I trusted', 'I will sing', vv 5–6). What the psalmist *desires* is divine attention ('consider and answer me', v 3) and some response, though the petition lacks concrete details. Notice how clearly the mood of the psalmist reflects that strained relationship between the addressee and the one addressed (God).

Appropriating psalms for life

David and the psalms. The laments are found in a collection of psalms, not in stories which could illuminate their use in everyday life. But Jewish compilers of the Psalter realized that many people benefit from imagining a context for the psalms they were praying, so they added titles to some of the psalms in an attempt to situate psalms in Israel's life. For example, Psalm 7 bears the title: 'A lamentation of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning Cush, the Benjaminite' (ICEL). No such story is known from the Bible, yet David surely was opposed by the tribe of Benjamin, both during and after the time of Saul, and one could imagine someone named Cush slandering David. Psalm 18 provides a second example: 'A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul' (NRSV). Here again the specifics are difficult to pinpoint, but it is not difficult for the reader of 1 and 2 Samuel to imagine such a scene. The most memorable of the titles is adjoined to Psalm 51: 'A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba' (NRSV). Most readers recall the story of David and Bathsheba and also Nathan's rebuke of David (2 Samuel 11–12); imagining these events gives the psalm a life of its own. The reverse is also true: if one prays this psalm after hearing the story of David, Bathsheba and Nathan, then one gets a sense how to pray in similar situations. The Roman lectionary pairs these stories of David with Psalm 51, allowing the congregation to ponder the relationship between psalm and story.⁴

In the Hebrew Psalter eleven psalms contain titles which relate them to historical memories or events in the life of David: Psalms 3, 7, 30, 34, 51, 52, 54, 57, 59, 60, 102.⁵ These linkages show the yearning of Jewish worshippers to connect the life story of David, the reputed originator of the Psalter, with various psalms. But not all people would comfortably relate to the Davidic memory: some might not imagine themselves as leaders, women might yearn for experiences more directly related to their life-settings. Other biblical characters and stories broaden our horizon.

Hannah and lamentation. Lament psalms, in the view of the form critics, undoubtedly had a real life setting. Some speculate that in earlier Israel one would have gone to a local shrine to beg God's intervention for any serious need. The story of Hannah at the shrine of Shiloh in 1 Samuel 1—2 provides a fitting entree. Elkanah went with his wives Hannah and Peninah at appointed times of the year. We learn from the story that Hannah suffered tremendous distress because she had no children, while Peninah provoked her to disgrace her. Hannah's experience of humiliation at the hand of her rival provide the basic *reasons for lamentation*. She felt psychological suffering, which today we might describe as despair or depression: she 'wept and would not eat' (1 Sam 1:8). Her husband could say or do nothing to relieve her anguish, so Hannah went before God: 'she was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly' (1 Sam 1:10). As part of her prayer she *vowed* to dedicate her son as a nazirite, if God would give her a son. Eli misunderstood her actions and accused her of coming drunk to the shrine – not unlikely at a time of festival; so she felt further mocked by another temporary enemy. But Hannah protested her innocence: 'I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord', and begged him 'Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my anxiety and vexation all this time' (1 Sam 1:15–16). She has made a petition to God – though not heard in the story – and also to Eli: 'Do not disregard me'. This part of the story concludes with a remarkable change in the old priest, who responds: 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the *petition* you have made to him' (1 Sam 1:17). This *word of salvation* leaves no cause to wonder why her mood changed when she returned to dine with her husband.

I have long found this story helpful for imagining life settings of laments; one could vary the reasons considerably, but prayer to God, with weeping and bitterness, still fits the situation. On one occasion I was studying this story with a parish group at an Air Force base. I

suggested we read Psalm 6 as the kind of psalm Hannah might have prayed. Let me cite the psalm in a newer, more poetic translation (ICEL).⁶

Psalm 6

- 1 For the choirmaster. For stringed instruments: upon the 'eight'. A psalm of David.
- 2 Stop rebuking me, Lord, hold back your rage.
- 3 Have pity, for I am spent; heal me, hurt to the bone,
- 4 wracked to the limit. Lord, how long? How long?
- 5 Repent, Lord, save me. You promised; keep faith!
- 6 In death, who remembers you? In Sheol, who gives you thanks?
- 7 Night after night I lie exhausted, hollow-eyed with grief,
- 8 my pillow soaked with tears; all because of my foes.
- 9 Get away, from me, scoundrels! The Lord has heard my tears.
- 10 God hears my pleading and will answer my prayer.
- 11 My foes will be shamed, shocked, turned back in sudden panic.

After hearing this psalm a vigorous discussion began, and after one woman talked about Hannah praying this psalm I was struck when others continued in the same vein, speaking of it as 'her psalm'. Whereas I had intended us to hear it as a type of psalm appropriate to Hannah's story, they identified it as hers. This psalm, most likely written by a man, took on life as a woman's psalm because contemporary hearers empathized with Hannah's experience of suffering; they heard the psalm as voicing the kind of prayer they imagined appropriate to the situation. As with the stories of David, it is a small move from Hannah's story to our personal stories, which would also provide a setting for lamentation. We could imagine a myriad of oppressions and hostilities that could fit the mood of this psalm, some more appropriate to women, others to men.

How we address God in laments

One reason people can identify with such psalms derives from the frank and concrete language they contain – especially the ways in which they address God – and how they help people to articulate the feelings they have. In Psalm 6 the speaker issues blunt orders to God: 'Stop rebuking me, Lord, hold back your rage' (v 2); 'Repent, Lord, save me. You promised; keep faith' (v 5). He also complains to God: 'Lord, how long, how long?' (v 4) and we already have heard the psalmist complain that God rebukes him, lets rage blaze away and pulls back on divine promises. When the psalmist pleads with God to save

her (or his) life, the motivating clause sounds like an attempt to bribe God: 'In death, who remembers you? In Sheol, who gives you thanks?' (v 6). As if God will miss our praise! But that is precisely the point: the lamenter believes intensely that God will miss his or her songs of praise, that this one person makes a difference to God. This language of lament bespeaks a bond, a personal relationship between the one who prays and the God of the covenant. Such language rests on faith, relies on memories – both personal and communal – of a God hearing the cry of the oppressed, of the lamenter, of the lowly . . . and God answering that cry. In Hannah's story Eli announced God's hearing and intention to respond (oracle of salvation), but her feeling of assurance rests not only on the old priest's word but also on the solid rock of Israel's experience of God's long-lasting love. Israel had regularly cried out to God (ever since their suffering in Egypt) and continually experienced God's saving intervention (beginning with their deliverance from Egypt at the Red Sea). Concrete stories feed the memory and allow worshippers in their time and ours to speak frankly, realistically, emotionally, and without fear of recrimination from God. A psalm that lacks such concrete charges against God, anger expressed towards God, probably has ceased to function as a lament.⁷

Lamenting with and for others who suffer

Psalms of lament also invite us to focus beyond the individual, on sufferings, pain and oppression of myriads of people throughout the world. Communal laments reveal to us a world of natural pestilence (Joel 1–2) or military danger and defeat, especially the wrenching experiences of lost battles, desecration of Jerusalem and the temple (Pss 44, 74, 79). One psalm even addresses the pain of life in the Babylonian exile (Ps 137). In our day the awareness of human suffering, especially through unjust and oppressive social structures and governments, has spawned a frightening awareness of the hostility and enmity many people feel, and also the sense of despair and hopelessness that tempt all of us to despair. Resort to lament psalms can prove fruitful for us for help in attending to our world's ills.

Even when one does not personally feel a need to lament – and consequently might feel alienated by a lament psalm in the office or liturgy – these psalms always invite us to join in the experience, feelings and prayers of others who suffer terribly.⁸ I often marvel how persons can write their own 'laments' about the world; some are poetic, others in forms of letters and essays about social ills, ranging from racism to street violence to the death penalty.

In retreats focused on the psalms a colleague of mine has developed another way of joining in the laments of the world: a style of guided lament titled: 'Articulating the laments of the world and its people'.⁹ Such prayer follows the form of lament psalms: address to God, complaint, confession, petition, words of assurance. On one occasion we prayed Psalm 94 with a group, suggesting they imagine some group of people whose suffering seems articulated by the language of the psalm. Later it might be possible to focus on the situation and let the words of lament arise imaginatively. Some of the questions that guided the contemplation are the following:

- Come into an *awareness of God's presence* . . . remain here until you feel ready to enter imaginatively into the passion of the world and its peoples.
- *Recall* a painful situation, one of injustice or in which others suffer severe duress, some structural or intractable evil . . .
- Let God speak deeply within you to surface a situation which needs to be rectified and for which you will intercede.
- Identify as concretely as you are able with those caught in this situation.
- Now *address God* in whatever way seems fitting, calling on God to hear you. Articulate your *complaint* forcefully, repeatedly, as strongly as you can.
- But our God is a God of compassion. *Confess your trust* in God with whatever words come to you.
- Hear God speak *words of assurance* to you. Address words of assurance to yourself, to the community in need.
- Offer God your *promise of praise* in the face of this stubborn situation.

Once a person has allowed an imaginative presence of some person or group that is suffering to surface, then the psalm can be prayed with and for them. Just like the woman who identified with the feelings of Hannah and could recognize Psalm 6 as 'her' psalm, so Psalm 94 (and many others) can assist our empathy with and compassion for many groups of people today. We might lament with indigenous peoples, with victims of violence, with civilians caught in civil wars, with victims of AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, with the poor, with victims of abuse.¹⁰ Praying this way in a group does not require that each individual focus on the same group of sufferers; indeed, the variety of groups with whom and for whom we pray enriches the experience of the fullness of Christ's body praying in anguish, even as he did on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

In conclusion

The rhetoric of lament in these psalms ('Why?' 'How long?' 'Who (else) will praise you?' 'How much?') permits us to engage a similar rhetoric in our own prayer, without fearing recrimination, condemnation or even humiliation by others because we lament. These psalms not only permit us to express our anger against God, they also teach us words and ways in which to do that.¹¹ The verbs and adjectives with which they describe and address God model for us open, honest biblical prayer of lamentation. They help us to learn *how* to articulate the pain and the grief that we experience; we do not have to internalize it all, let it fester, grow sour. Laments lower the risk of venting anger in dangerous and inappropriate ways. When we can pray laments we acknowledge God's covenantal bond with us. Could we ever address a mere acquaintance or associate so directly, without fear of reprisal, of total abandonment? At times I wonder if we can afford not to pray psalms of lament in our day.

NOTES

¹ An older Catholic introduction to the psalms, which brought modern scholarship into the Catholic arena, lists 58 psalms of lamentation or petition (42 individual, 16 communal), 25 psalms of thanksgiving (17 individual, 8 communal), and only 17 hymns of praise. See Pius Drijvers, *The Psalms: their structure and meaning*, 5th revised edition (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965). The numbers in other introductions may vary slightly, but not significantly.

² A handy guide to Gunkel's views is available in Herman Gunkel, *The Psalms: a form-critical introduction*, Facet Books – Biblical Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

³ This is the translation of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Its clear, consistent translation process makes it easier to identify rhetorical features typical of laments, such as 'how long' and 'why'. Other translations often vary the translation of fixed terms for poetic reasons.

⁴ Saturday, week 3 of the year, year II.

⁵ The process continued with the Greek translators of the Psalms in the Septuagint: they added Davidic titles to an additional fourteen psalms (beyond the seventy-four Davidic titles in the Hebrew Masoretic text); cf William Holladay, *The Psalms through three thousand years: prayerbook of a cloud of witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p 71. Of these fourteen additional Davidic titles, three relate to events or circumstances in his life: Psalms 71, 96 and 97.

⁶ ICEL Psalter represents the *Liturgical psalter*, copyright 1994, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc.

⁷ Psalms of praise (hymns) generally contain images of God that are more cosmic and creation-oriented, less personally connected to the psalmist.

⁸ In the 'General instruction of the liturgy of the hours' Paul VI discusses the issue of praying psalms which do not match one's mood: since one who prays the liturgy of the hours prays 'not so much in his own person as in the name of the Church, and, in fact, in the person of Christ . . . difficulties disappear when one notices in prayer that the feelings of the heart in prayer are different from the emotions expressed in the psalm . . . when . . . a psalm of sorrow confronts a person full of joy . . . The person who prays the psalms in the name of the Church can always find

a reason for joy or sadness', *The liturgy of the hours: I* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1975), p 58f.

⁹ Elizabeth Liebert SNJM has developed this guided meditation for groups learning prayer with psalms.

¹⁰ A very helpful guide for communal liturgies of lament is by J. Frank Henderson, *Liturgies of lament* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994). He suggests many situations which call for lament and provides numerous texts for use.

¹¹ For helpful discussions of anger against God, of the following: Sheila Carney, 'God damn God: a reflection on expressing anger in prayer', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* vol 13, no 4 (October 1983), pp 116-120; Toni Craven, *The Book of Psalms*, Message of Biblical Spirituality #6 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, Glazier Books, 1992), esp. pp 49-54; Pierre Wolff, *May I hate God?* (New York: Paulist, 1979). The book by Toni Craven provides an excellent introduction to the study and the spirituality of the psalms, offering a feminist perspective on issues of language and metaphor as well as articulation of anger.