

It's Sunday, What Do You Do? Worshiping Through Lament

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On Saturday evening during the June 2016 IWS session, Dr. Cherry told what had happened in class that day, as students around the table described real-life, tragic events that had impacted their ministries. Each description ended with “It’s Sunday, what do you do?” Just a few hours later, forty-nine people were murdered at a nightclub in Orlando and church leaders were confronted with that same question on Sunday morning. Ignoring such realities in our liturgies dismisses the deep-seated, very human emotion of hurt and confusion, yet it seems that often we are ill equipped to respond.



The Psalms offer us insight through the life of David. David, the earth is full of God’s glory, what do you do? You praise him. David, you have just ignored your commitment to living a holy life worthy of this God and committed an egregious sin, what do you do? You confess. David, you are persistently pursued by your enemies, you are in great danger, you are confused and overwhelmed, what do you? You lament.

Lament is a specific prayer of complaint and protest. We tend to see it as a threat to our positive outlook and even our demeanour, concerned that others might infer that our faith is not intact. Who questions God? Who wears the 21st century equivalent of sackcloth and ashes? Who sings in a minor key?

Of course, the redemptive work of Jesus has given the church certain victory, but we still live in a world of brokenness and suffering. Because of this we look to the Psalms. When our own words are not enough and our own hurt is impossible to express, we can turn to lament—raw, honest, often painful expressions of loss and confusion, deeply grounded in recognition of God’s unbending faithfulness and never-ending mercy. Laments teach us that God is not only present in our messy reality, He is actively involved.

Causes for lament within the Psalms are varied—isolation, shame, despair, danger, physical pain, and even death. Psalm 56, for example, recounts a time in the life of David when he was in immediate danger. The Psalm’s heading relates it to 1 Samuel 21, when he had fled from Saul to hide among his enemies hoping to go unrecognized. When this ploy failed he pretended to be mad and escaped to a cave.

An expression of deep concern and fear over enemies is a consistent theme of laments (Ps 56:1-2; 5-6). While the context here suggests specific enemies, often the term stands for anything that opposes God or His followers. David’s enemies

provide a metaphor for any of God's people, at any time, to name the enemies surrounding us. Who, or what, is your enemy? What causes you to flee, to hide, or to despair? Who or what is the enemy of the Lord, standing in the way of His Kingdom work?

Because there has been no apparent solution nor any resolution to his suffering, the refrain, "In God I trust" (Ps 56:3-4; 8-11), seems like an abrupt shift in tone. Many laments, however, share a lengthy litany of hurt, agony or despair, only to change abruptly to praise, thanksgiving and trust.

In the Psalms, in fact throughout the history of Israel's worship, praise and thanksgiving did not stand alone. Since the primary focus of the gathered community was to recount the deeds of the LORD in relationship to His covenant love for His people, it would have been unnatural to leave out the many times in which they suffered loss, pain, hurt, or injustice.

Often in corporate worship we sing songs of affirmation with no apparent connection to our worshipers who are dealing with confusion, anger, or bitterness. Doing so can leave people singing words that they do not mean, or confused as to how it is that no one else in the congregation appears to have wrestled with these emotions.

These worshippers need to know that God is not shocked by their reactions, nor has He been absent in their time of need. David says that God has kept count of his tears "in your bottle" (Psalm 56:8). He has not abandoned David, turned His back, nor lost sight of His beloved child. God is well aware of our human condition. The good news is that because God is for us, we can say, "I am not afraid."

This apparent shift in outlook is not so abrupt after all, but is built upon the confidence of knowing that God is God, upon the calm assurance of faith. The most important lesson to draw here is that we do not lament because we lack faith in God; we lament because we trust him completely. While we may not understand why He would allow suffering, we remain firmly grounded in the assurance of His reign.

The acclamation (Ps 56:12-13) is the final piece of the puzzle. The promise of deliverance is as good as done. The result is worship: to perform vows, to render thank offerings and to walk with God in His ways. This is the worship of everyday life. Lament does not just end with praise in the assembly, it impacts the way in which we live as His light in the world.

Why should we ignore worshiping through lament? Rather than forcing negativity, lament reinforces grace. Rather than dragging us down, lament builds us up as a chosen generation covered by the never-ending mercy of Almighty God. Rather than point us out as people of doubt, lament illuminates us as children of faith.

Laments end with thanksgiving because we have seen His glory, full of grace and truth. Laments end with praise, because God is greater, more powerful and more gracious than we can hope or imagine. Laments end with trust, because our finite minds and fragile hearts are planted firmly in His sovereignty. Because the steadfast love of the LORD never fails, we trust in God and will not be afraid.

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