



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Attending to the Lament Psalms

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My first lesson in a short class series I was invited to teach on “Preparing for Times of Trouble” was entitled, “Trouble *Will* Come—Be Prepared.” Foundational to the lesson, and series as a whole, are several examples from the text to illustrate that the Bible never ignores the question that countless people, many possessing great faith, have consistently asked when facing trials: “Why!!?” For my last example, referenced to support the point that it was not just secular-minded people who asked, I noted the lament psalms. Their purpose and tone are exemplified in David’s cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22.1).

Afterward, some class members said they were intrigued to learn of the laments; they had not heard of them before. They also expressed surprise at learning that, though there is no consensus regarding the precise number, Old Testament scholars generally agree that about one-third of the psalms are laments, more than any other psalm type.¹ John Collins notes that their “primary function is to lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help.” Like others, he recognizes two kinds, *individual laments* that express “troubles [that] face a particular member of the people,” and *community laments* that “deal with trouble faced by the people of God as a whole” (Collins 2008, 940). As with the group generally, there is no consensus regarding the exact number in each group.

For various reasons, many quite practical, the fact that many are unaware of the laments is unfortunate. We need to know their value for Israel’s faith and worship and how studying them can help our faith and praise. Walter Brueggemann has addressed both issues:

The faith of Israel, like all human experience, moved back and forth between the polar moods of, on the one hand, deep anguish and misery and, on the other hand, profound joy and celebration. In this back and forth movement the people of Israel worked out the power and limits of their faith. In the process they also worked out a pattern of rhetoric that shaped their anguish and brought it to expression so that it could be dealt with.

It is the lament that preserves for us Israel’s most powerful and eloquent statements of the effort both to survive and to be transformed as a people of faith. The study of the lament can provide important resources for our contemporary work of theology and ministry (Brueggemann 1995, 67).

For many today who see triumphalism and celebration as the quintessential definitions of genuine faith and meaningful worship, Brueggemann’s words sound a discordant note. As John Mark Hicks observes, we see this more clearly in light of the 9/11 terrorist attack. In the immediate aftermath of that horrible day, “communal lament almost became the solution. Churches held special services.... Lament brought the nation together. But in American culture communal lament quickly passes into private arenas as the materialistic, consumer-driven, and

success-oriented spirit reemerges. American culture is unrelentingly optimistic, individualistic, and self-focused” (Hicks 2005, 67). Consequently, “in our post-9/11 era, [churches] are dominated by a liturgical style that is upbeat, perky, positive, and celebrative. We leave little room for songs [or prayers and sermons, DA] that express the misery of life because, for the most part, we are *communally* disconnected from misery” (Hicks 2005, 69; my emphasis).

This does not mean that no one among us is ever miserable; tragic and horrible things happen to us and our fellow worshipers. Since that is so, we should ask what subliminal message a constant triumphalism devoid of lament conveys to those who, while immersed in miserable circumstances, find themselves incapable of feeling triumphant or celebrative. What do those who are hurting ever find in our current environment that gives them permission to see their hurting faith as authentic and viable and sustain them as they endure?

In asking this, I do not mean to suggest that faith should never be expressed triumphantly or that worship should never be exuberant. After all, two-thirds of the Psalms are not laments, and the themes of triumph, joy, and celebration comprise the content and emotional mood of many of them. Feelings of triumph and exuberance are integral to our lives as beings created in God’s image and thus should be part of our lives of faith, including worship. But the church pays a price if its people come to think that triumph and celebration are the *only* or most noble ways to express our worship. As Brueggemann argues, when we omit lament from our *communal* experience—and, practically speaking, treat it as appropriate only for troubled or grieving *individuals*—we risk creating an environment where people believe their only recourse for dealing with serious trouble and handling raw emotions is to turn to outside resources (e.g., “psychotherapy and growth groups”) in the belief that the church has nothing to offer except sympathetic expressions of comfort to individual sufferers (Brueggemann 1995, 68).

In other words, a faith community that never expresses lament as a *community* may inadvertently contribute to denial and emotional repression, leaving some to assume that genuine feelings of distress and anger should be taken elsewhere.

Works Cited

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¹ In his introductory article on Psalms, James Limburg identifies six additional psalm types: (1) Hymns or Songs of Praise, (2) Songs of Thanksgiving, (3) Royal Psalms, (4) Songs of Zion, (5) Liturgies, and (6) Wisdom and Torah Psalms (Limburg 1992, 531–534). Illustrating the disagreement among scholars regarding the specific number of lament psalms, Limburg identifies 54 (43 individual, 11 communal) while Walton identifies 50 (1994, 48–50).

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