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The Psalms of Lament

PART 1: **Psalm 6**

Sticks and Stones Hurt Less Than Words

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Part 1, Lesson 1

Introduction

Shuffle the Deck

Choose 4 or more words from the following list and write them in a style appropriate to each word. For example, “anger” might be written in a bold hand, or using jagged lines.

ANGER

“Peace” might be written in an elegant script or with rosebuds nestled all around.

Peace

anger, peace, gentle, scream, tiptoe, kiss, chant, fresh, poke, wail, caress, stinky, marriage, bubble, street, screech, love, forsake, shower, sweet, tangy, ancient, scrub, confidence, welcome, message, bright, deadly, escape, yuk!, genius, nap time, stalwart, empty

Deal the Cards

As a new Christian, I read several Bible studies that instructed me to pray using the acrostic “ACTS”:

Adoration
Confession
Thanksgiving
Supplication (requests)

“Always start with adoration, no matter how you feel,” one writer said, “because we should thank God for who He is, not what He has done for us.” Later I went to a church that rearranged the ACTS acrostic to spell CATS:

Confession
Adoration
Thanksgiving
Supplication

There the members told me, “Confess first because God can’t hear you if you regard iniquity in your heart” (based on a rigid interpretation of Ps. 66:18). It didn’t occur to me at the time that the Lord’s prayer ends with confession.

Years later when my husband and I had experienced seven pregnancy losses, I found myself continually drawn to the psalms. New phrases such as “I was a brute beast before You” (73:22) and “How long, O Lord? (6:3) and “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1) began to fill my prayers. While echoing these spiritual gripes, I discovered to my surprise that the formulas I’d been taught had left out the most common form of psalm in The Bible—the lament. A lament is a prayer in which we moan and wail. Perhaps if we followed



inspired examples of legitimized whining—if we spent more time fussing to God than to therapists—we’d write fewer checks for couch time.

While psalms of lament don’t always fit into a handy formula any more than prayer itself does, we do see some frequently recurring elements in lament psalms:

- (1) an introductory appeal;
- (2) a description of the psalmist’s plight (the lament itself);
- (3) and a formal request.
- (4) Sometimes we also see evidence that the psalmist has received an oracle from God in response. Perhaps a prophet delivered a word or the psalmist had a dream through which the Lord spoke (see Heb. 1:1).
- (5) Following such an oracle, the lament often ends in an expression of confidence or praise, though we don’t always see a “happy ending.”

We see all of these elements in Psalm 12. It begins with a simple introductory appeal: “Help, Yahweh, for the devout one has ceased” (v. 1). Then the psalmist tells of his plight saying, “For the faithful have vanished from the face of the land./The unholy speak nothingness, each one with his neighbor/From a divided heart they speak flattery (vv. 1–2). In this case the psalmist complains that evil people have used their words to inflict pain, using smooth speech to injure.

As in many laments the writer of Psalm 12, under the inspiration of the Spirit, goes on to say what he wants the Lord to do. Sometimes at this point in a lament, we read that curses are called down on enemies. This pre-dates the New Testament ethic in which both Jesus and Paul exhort believers to bless their enemies rather than cursing them. Today we pray for God to bless our enemies within the long-term context of looking toward the day when God will right all wrongs (cf. 1 Thess. 1:6–10).

In Psalm 12 we see the author’s desire for the Lord to bring justice commensurate with the pain—in other words, cut off the very body parts used for inflicting harm: “May Yahweh cut off all flattering lips, And the tongue speaking exaggerations—Which say, ‘We’ll talk big; We can say whatever we want. Who is master over us?’” (vv. 3–4).

In the present age when God has spoken through His Son and we have the completed Word and the Spirit, we don’t generally expect to receive an oracle or audible words from God in response to our prayers. But in the psalmist’s day, he might have expected to hear from God through a prophet, a dream, or the Urim and Thummim (articles placed in the high priest’s breastplate used to discern God’s will in decision making). Often a lament psalm will leave out God’s actual words in response to the prayer, but it still includes the psalmist’s expression of confidence in the message that has come from God. Psalm 12, however, actually records God’s response: “‘Because of the violence done to the afflicted, Because of the groaning of the oppressed, Now I will arise,’” says Yahweh. ‘I will provide safety for the one who gasps for it.’”*



Words from God, whether or not they're quoted in the psalm, are generally followed by expressions of praise. Yet Psalm 88 ends with the writer seemingly as depressed as when he started. For this reason, this psalm became a favorite to me during my darkest days. I identified with someone who felt only grief for a time. Nevertheless, most of the psalms move from trauma to trust. Consider the final expression of confidence in Psalm 12: "Yahweh's words are words of purity—silver refined in a furnace of earth, purified completely. You, Yahweh, You will preserve the victims. You will protect him from this generation continuously, for all around criminals walk to and fro while people exalt worthlessness."

We need to see Yahweh's "words" here as a specific revelation given for the psalmist's situation, rather than as a more general reference to the Word of God as a unity of Bible books.

I wrote this psalm of lament after miscarrying repeatedly.

O Lord, not again.

How could you allow this again?

Once more the doctor has said our baby's gone, and I feel pain deeper than my own soul.

Our friends say, "Maybe you can have another," but why would you let me conceive this one if it wasn't going to live?

I want this child, Lord! How long must we keep going through this endless cycle of hope and despair? It feels so cruel.

I hate it and I don't understand it, but I have nowhere to go but to You.

Please help me to trust You.

Writing and praying my own laments as I experienced multiple losses helped me honestly express my grief to God. Before a friend directed me to the psalms of lament, I had thought it wrong to ask "Why?" or to suggest I might feel any displeasure about God's ways. Afterward, with new courage to express the pain I felt, I found greater respect for the Lord's greatness, amazed that He not only allows us to talk this way to Him, but He has even provided examples of how.



Part 1, Lesson 2

Psalms of Lamentation: Psalm 6

Pray for the Lord to give you insight; then read Psalm 6 (below):

6:1 Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger! Do not punish me in your raging fury! 2 Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am frail! Heal me, Lord, for my bones are shaking! 3 I am absolutely terrified, and you, Lord--how long will this go on? 4 Come back, Lord, rescue me! Deliver me because of your faithfulness! 5 For no one mentions your name in the realm of death, In Sheol who gives you thanks? 6 I am exhausted as I groan; all night long I drench my bed in tears; my tears saturate the cushion beneath me. 7 My eyes grow dim from suffering; they grow weak because of all my enemies. 8 Turn back from me, all you who behave wickedly, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping! 9 The Lord has heard my appeal for mercy; the Lord has accepted my prayer. 10 May all my enemies be humiliated and absolutely terrified! May they turn back and be suddenly humiliated!

What Are You Holding?

Now look for elements commonly found in laments:

1. With what two-word phrase (one word in Hebrew) does the psalmist begin? (v. 1)?
2. What is the psalmist's plight or complaint (v. 1-3)?
3. What does the psalmist ask God (v. 3)? What does this suggest to us about the rightness or wrongness of asking God questions?
4. What does the psalmist want God to do and why (v. 4-6)?
5. What does the writer list as evidence of his suffering (v. 6-7)?
6. Is there any evidence that God has answered? If so, what (v. 8-9)?
7. What expression(s) do you see of the psalmist's confidence in God (v. 9-10)?
8. Did you identify with anything the psalmist said? If so, what?

Lamenting wasn't just for people worshiping God years ago. It's for us, too. Here are some group laments:



By a sixth grade Sunday school class:

O Lord, help me because I can't seem to get just one minute of total peace and quiet. My brother interrupts me constantly. My big sister thinks she's the boss of me. My little sister won't let me talk without butting in, and when I have a friend over, she won't stop pestering us. She whines. She nags. She pulls my ponytail. Help the bruise on my shin to heal (the one my brother put there). Help my brother and sister to grow up fast so they'll leave me alone. Thank you that I can hope in You.

By high school counselors at a Texas' camp in July:

Save me, O Lord, for my days are filled with rays. For scorpions pursue me, and my mornings begin before the sun. There is no hope, for I am shower deprived. Oh God, I praise you, anyway. Thank you for cleaning me on the inside when I am dirty on the outside.

Your turn: Write your own private psalm of lament, pouring out your heart to God. Feel free to use or discard any of these elements. They are here only to give you a guide.

Group Option: As a group, agree on a common lament and write it out using these elements as a guide.

1. An introductory appeal:
2. The problem and how you feel about it:
3. Your request: what you want God to do:
4. Your answer from God (to be filled in when you receive it):
5. Your expression of trust/confidence (to be done both now and after he answers):

Play Your Hand

Decorate a playing card or a playing-card-sized piece of paper or cardboard with something associated with the following:

1. ... the lament you expressed above.
2. ... how it feels to have your lament heard by God.
3. ... how it feels when you know God is present in affliction.
4.how it feels when you feel God is absent.