

Out of the Depths Psalms of Disorientation

Please remember that the participant guide includes more information and topics than can be covered in a normal 45-minute Sunday School class. This is purposeful and is designed to give participants additional materials to study throughout the week if they wish.

Please review the lesson and pick which sections you would like your class to focus on. In this lesson, it is recommended that you do the introduction, sections I - II, and then either sections III or IV. In either case, be sure to include time for section V.

Welcome & Prayer

- Allow class to gather and have fellowship.
- By 10:00am at the latest, convene everyone for general announcements and attendance.
- Be sure to introduce yourself to the class. If guests are present, it would be appropriate to go around and have everyone introduce themselves (just names for brevity).
- Remind everyone about the First in Focus series and how it works. For instance:
 - “First in Focus is a special six-week Sunday School series designed to generate church-wide conversations around important topics in Christian faith and theology. In weeks 1 and 6, all participants gather for a lecture in Fifield Hall. In weeks 2-5, participants meet in their individual Sunday School classes to explore the topic further with the help of a curriculum.”
 - “This is week 3 and in it we’ll be exploring what are known as psalms of disorientation and how they can help us speak more honestly to God about pain, loss, and injustice.”
- Lead class in a brief prayer.

Introduction

- Handout this week’s curriculum (printed copies are available in the classroom).
 - Please note that e-book versions of the participant’s guide are also available on the web at: <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- Read, or have someone else in the class read, the **Introduction** and the **Lesson at a Glance** sections printed in the curriculum.
 - Remember that some SS participants may NOT have been present for the previous week of this study. As a result, you may wish to offer additional comments of your own to help give a sense of what was covered during the week 2.
 - An e-book version of the participant’s guide for week 2 is available online. See <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- Pose the **Conversation Starter** question to the class.
 - The goal of this question is to get individuals to begin to reflect on whether they have felt the freedom to share about seasons of disorientation in their own church experiences.

I. Anatomy of a Lament

- Background: There are two types of laments in the Psalter: individual laments and communal laments. This section examines the former while the latter are considered in section IV. Psalms of individual lament are spoken in the midst of some personal crisis. In some cases, the specific crisis is described in detail, but in most other cases, little information is provided. The vague language about the nature of the crisis is likely intention: this allows the reader to more readily apply the words of the psalm to their own situations.
- Read the opening text and then read Psalm 13.
 - Give participants a moment to look at Psalm 13 on their own and to consider which verses reflect the 4 characteristic parts of a lament psalm.
 - vv. 1-2 = complaint
 - vv. 3-4 = petition
 - v. 5 = trust
 - v. 6 = praise
 - This is the typical order of elements in a lament psalm. However, in some cases the parts come in a different order or there are multiple rounds of complaint/petition before trust and praise are uttered.
- Read (or have someone else read) the next block of text.
 - Lament psalms are not just open forums to complain about God or others. The point of the complaint is to get God's attention. The most important part of the prayer is an urgent request for help (petition).
- Give out the following psalms (13:3-4; 25:6; 80:4-6; and 86:15-16) to participant's in the class.
 - Have participants read each passage aloud, inviting the class as a whole to identify how the psalmist is trying to motivate God to respond to his petition.
 - Ps 13:3-4 = the psalmist is near death (v. 3); unless God responds the enemies will triumph (v. 4)
 - Ps 25:6 = responding to petition is consistent with God's past acts of mercy and love
 - Ps 80:4-6 = the depth of the psalmist's sorrow; public scorn and shame
 - Ps 86:15-16 = responding to petition is consistent with God's character (in v. 15 the psalmist quotes Exod 34:6, an important testimony about the character of God)
- Read the next block of text and pose the accompanying discussion question.
 - Note that psalms of lament condense into a few poetic verses an experience of disorientation that might well have been long lasting. For this reason, the "gap" between v. 4 and v. 5 in Psalm 13 may reflect months or even years. It is important for the reader not to rush past the complaint and petition in order to arrive prematurely at praise.
 - The question invites participants to engage at a more personal level with the "gap" between lament and its resolution.
 - For this and other questions that invite personal reflection, be sure to leave space for participants to jump in even if there is some "awkward silence" at first.
 - In some cases, it would be appropriate for you to break the ice by offering your own answer to the question; but be sure not to do this too often so as to cultivate fuller class participation.

II. Questioning God

- Background: The complaint section is the part of the psalm that Christians are typically most uncomfortable with. In many cases, the psalm offers a complaint to God *about God*. It is important to note that these questions are rhetorical in nature – that is, they are not so much looking for information but rather are bringing accusations before God.
- Read the opening text and give out the various psalms listed.
 - Have participants read the passages aloud, inviting the class as a whole to identify what God is being accused of in each case.
- Read the next block of text and pose the accompanying discussion question.
 - Though the language of a lament is bold and at times feels impious, it is important to note that the psalmist assumes a relationship with God. That is, the psalmist presupposes the reality of a God who has the ability and inclination to intervene.
 - Be aware that while some participants will readily see the need for the language of lament in the church, others will find these expressions to be uncomfortable or even inappropriate. Be sure to allow space for participants to express their own opinions.
 - Invite participants to be specific about why they think such expressions are or are not appropriate in the church.
- Read the final block of text and pose the accompanying discussion question.
 - Pathos is a quality that evokes pity or sadness on behalf of an other. In Greek rhetoric, pathos is a mode of persuasion that appeals to the emotions of the audience.
 - Metaphors are “word pictures” that draw on vivid imagery to describe more abstract ideas or feelings.
 - v. 6 = psalmist as a worm; reduced to crawling in the dirt; an object of scorn
 - vv. 12-18 = the enemies are described in terms of vicious animals (bulls, lions, dogs); the psalmist as poured out water, melted wax.

III. A Lament Without Limits

- Background: In most cases, we do not know what exactly brings about the move from complaint/petition to trust/praise. God intervenes in some decisive way. Some scholars have suggested that the original setting of lament psalms was a temple or domestic ritual of healing or rehabilitation.
- Read the next block of text, which explains some of the imagery found in Psalm 88.
 - Note that the presumed answer to the questions posed in vv. 11-12 is “no” – God’s steadfast love is not proclaimed from the grave and God’s wonders are not known.
 - The discussion question in this section asks participants to reflect on what an “endless lament” is meant to teach us about how we are to relate to God in seasons of disorientation. One possible answer is that Christians shouldn’t feel that they need to “fast forward” to trust / petition. There sometimes is a need to sit with our grief and deal honestly with our pain in its own right.
 - In the language used in week 1 of this study, we need to make space for the agony of Friday and the uncertainty of Saturday before arriving at the good news of Sunday.
- Read the next block of text, which explains another type of lament without limits found outside of the Psalter.
 - It is recommended that you turn to Lamentations 5 and read vv. 15-22 to get a broader sense of the context.

- The Jewish custom described is also used with other biblical books that end on a negative note, such as Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, and Malachi.
- Other translations are equally troubled by the ending, but instead of repeating v. 21 they insert a negative into v. 22, yielding the following affirmation of trust: “renew our days as of old. Thou canst *not* have utterly rejected us, and be exceedingly wroth against us!”
- Other translations render the verbs in v. 22 as pluperfects, thus picturing God’s anger as a past reality: “renew our days as of old, even though you *had* despised us greatly and *were* (previously) very angry with us.”

IV. Lamenting Injustice

- Background: This section focuses on communal laments. While less common than individual laments, these types of psalms of disorientation are important because they attempt to address tragedy and injustice at a more national or community level.
- Read the first block of text and Psalm 82. Pose the accompanying question.
 - What is of note in this psalm is that it is the God of Israel who raises the complaint! God takes the place of the psalmist as the speaker of lament.
- Read the next block of text, which describes some of the context and language of Psalm 82.
 - The discussion question invites participants to think about for whom God would raise a complaint in our modern world. That is, if God were speaking up for those who experience oppression and injustice, who would God have in mind?
- Read the final block of text, which describes the Jewish fast day known as “the ninth of Av.”
 - Av is the name of a certain month in the Jewish calendar.
 - The Jewish calendar system is based on lunar months, meaning that the ninth of Av (like other Jewish holy days) does not fall on the same day of our solar calendar each year. The ninth of Av typically occurs in late July or early August.
 - Christianity does not have an equivalent of the ninth of Av. The closest counterpart might be Ash Wednesday; however, in most Christian traditions Ash Wednesday is more about penitence for individual sin rather than a lament for national or communal tragedy and injustice.

V. The Costly Loss of Lament

- Read the first block of text.
 - The point of this section is to begin to reflect on what is lost when the language of lament is excluded from the church and Christian life.
 - Brueggemann names 3 “costly losses” that result from thinking that Christians only should utter words of praise to God.
- Pose the two discussion questions that follow.
 - The first question asks participants to reflect on Brueggemann’s list in terms of: a) which loss they have experienced most vividly; and b) what other losses they can think of.
 - Answers to the latter question might include:
 - the loss of genuine covenant interaction with God
 - the loss of authenticity in our faith
 - the loss of hospitality to believers and non-believers who are experiencing grief and pain
 - the loss of relevance in a world in which many face injustice and hardship

- The lesson ends with a list of additional psalms of disorientation that participants might choose to pray throughout the coming week.