

A full moon is visible in the center-right of the image, partially obscured by wispy, light-colored clouds against a dark, starry night sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# PSALMS: THE PRAYER BOOK OF JESUS

Session 4: The Psalms of Lament



## PSALM 77:1-10, *Voce mea ad Dominum*

I will cry unto God with my voice; \*

even unto God will I cry with my voice,  
and he shall hearken unto me.

In the time of my trouble I sought the Lord; \*

my hands were stretched out in the night  
without rest; my soul refused comfort.

When I think upon God, I groan; \*

when I ponder, my spirit grows faint.

You hold my eyelids open; \*

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

I consider the days of old; \*

I call to remembrance the years that are past.

In the night I commune with my own heart; \*

I meditate and search my spirit.

Will the Lord cast me off for ever, \*

and will he no more show his favor?

Is his mercy gone for ever, \*

and has his promise come utterly to an end  
for evermore?

Has God forgotten to be gracious, \*

and will he withhold his loving-kindness  
in displeasure?

And I said, "Has his right hand become weak? \*

Has the hand of the Most High lost its strength?"



# THE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT

- How do you feel when you read these first ten verses of Psalm 77?
- For many of us, it is easy to bring our happiness and praise to God. It is easy for us to petition him on behalf of other people. It is much harder to bring our negative emotions before him—anger, loneliness, doubt, sadness, failure, and utter despair.
- However, we live in a broken world—a world not yet remade whole—which means we live in a world of grief. Often, it leaves us asking, “Where is God?”
- What is lament?
  - “Lament is not complaining, whining, or grumbling. It is prayer that faces the horror and injustice of the world head-on and refuses to let go of God. The Psalms train us in lament so that suffering does not silence faith but deepens it.” (Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*)



# THE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT

- “The lament psalms are the steady, unflinching voice of a people who refuse to settle for the world as it is. They dare to tell God the way things are, and in doing so they keep alive the hope that He will act to set them right.” (N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms*)
- “This is what the psalms would offer us... Here are prayers of lament that furnish us with language for the seemingly unspeakable. Here are songs to name the sorrow in the company of the faithful. Here are poems that give coherent shape to our incoherent feelings in the presence of our Maker, who has, it often feels, seemingly abandoned us to our inconsolable pain.” (W. David O. Taylor, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*)
- “[Here] we have permission given us to lay open before [God] our infirmities, which we would be ashamed to confess before men.” (John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms*)



# THE SHAPE OF LAMENT PSALMS

- There are two major types of lament psalms:
  - **Individual concerns** (examples: 5, 6, 27, 22, 41, 77, 88, and 109).
    - Topics include the experience of abandonment, loss, sickness, death, and repentance from sin (the latter including Psalm 51, which we recite on **Ash Wednesday**).
    - Personal yet incorporated through Israel's worship into public life and, thus, able to become any person's lament.
    - "I am weary with my groaning; / every night I flood my bed and drench my couch with my tears." (Psalm 6:6)
  - **Communal concerns** (examples 44, 74, 83, 85, and 89).
    - Topics include public events of loss such as drought, famine, epidemic, national devastation, war, etc.
    - "O God, why have you utterly cast us off? / Why is your wrath so hot against the sheep of your pasture?" (Psalm 74:1)



# THE SHAPE OF LAMENT PSALMS

- Lament psalms have a recognizable pattern:
  - A complaint
  - A petition
  - A resolution
- The **complaints** are made directly to God. They are about God, the psalmist's own life, or about a presumed enemy.
- The **petitions** range widely. They include requests for healing, deliverance, vindication, provision, protection, and even forgiveness of sin.
- The **final resolutions** may present a confession of trust, a resolve to praise or obey, or give a confident affirmation of God's own faithfulness.



## PSALM 13, *Usquequo, Domine?*

### A Complaint (vv. 1-2)

How long will you utterly forget me, O LORD? \*

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long shall I seek counsel in my soul and be so vexed  
in my heart? \*

How long shall my enemy triumph over me?

### A Petition (vv. 3-4)

Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; \*

give light to my eyes, that I sleep not in death,

Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him"; \*

for if I am cast down, those who trouble me will  
rejoice.

### A Resolution (vv. 5-6)

But my trust is in your mercy, \*

and my heart is joyful in your salvation.

I will sing of the LORD, because he has dealt so lovingly  
with me; \*

indeed, I will praise the Name of the Lord Most High.



# THE SHAPE OF LAMENT PSALMS

“[The primary language of prayer is people] calling out their trouble—pain, guilt, doubt, despair—to God... The language of prayer is forged in the crucible of trouble. When we can’t help ourselves and call for help, when we don’t like where we are and want out, when we don’t like who we are and want a change, we use primal language, and this language becomes the root language of prayer.”

– Eugene Peterson, *Answer God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*



# PSALMS OF DESPAIR

- "Rise up, O Lord! Why are you sleeping? / Awake, and cast us not away for ever. / Why do you hide your face / and forget our misery and trouble?" (Psalm 44:23)
- "Do not be silent!" (Pss. 35:22; 109:1 NRSV)
- Give ear to my words, O Lord / Consider my groaning. / Heed the sound of my cry for help." (Psalm 5:1-2 NASB)
- "Turn to me, and have mercy on me, / for I am desolate and in misery." (Psalm 25:15 [16])
- Some psalms even lead to silence or the dust (4:4; 22:15; 28:1; 39:9)
  - The silence may be oppressive. Their very idea of God may be called into question.



# PSALMS OF DESPAIR

"[This is] the kind of visceral honesty that belongs in the place of faithful worship. This is no faithless cry against the almighty. This is not the attack of an atheist. This is the wrestling out of faith in the presence of the Lord. For the psalmist, there is no 'civilized' speech; there is no stiff upper lip or quiet resignation. There is only more intense address *before the face of God.*"

– W. David O. Taylor, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*



# PSALMS OF DESPAIR

- Christ himself experienced and expressed such agonizing grief in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross, where he cried out the opening line of Psalm 22, one of the Psalter's most brutal laments to God.
- It is here we remember that Jesus prayed these psalms, too.
  - "The Psalms of lament are not the pious musings of individuals; they are the prayers of the suffering Christ, in whom all human suffering is borne and redeemed. In them, the church learns to cry out to God with Christ's own voice." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*)



# PSALMS OF DESPAIR

- In “the dust,” hope is born to the faithful. The “resolution” of these Psalms is a glimmer of hope we find ultimately fulfilled in Christ and the work he did, is doing, and will do.
- We “may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)
- In our lowest place, God delivers us from the dangerous idea that our happiness rests in our self-sufficiency. It rests in utter dependence on our Father in heaven.
- “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 2:9)
- Our circumstances now may not be quick to change, but the Psalms offer us both language for our pain and a promise for the future.



# THE PSALMS OF LAMENT

“The design of the Holy Spirit was to deliver to the Church a common form of prayer, in which all the godly might join together. By placing before us the complaints, fears, hopes, doubts, desires, and joys of the saints, these Psalms of lament teach us that in the darkest hour we may still pour out our hearts to God.”

– John Calvin, *Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms*



## PSALM 77:11-20, *Voce mea ad Dominum*

I will remember the works of the Lord, \*

**and call to mind your wonders of old time.**

I will think also of all your works, \*

**and my talk shall be of your deeds.**

Your way, O God, is holy; \*

**who is so great a God as our God?**

You are the God who does wonders, \*

**and have declared your power among the peoples.**

You have mightily delivered your people, \*

**even the sons of Jacob and Joseph.**

The waters saw you, O God; the waters saw you

and were afraid; \*

**the depths also were troubled.**

The clouds poured out water, the skies thundered, \*

**and your arrows flashed on every side.**

The voice of your thunder was heard in the whirlwind;

the lightning lit up the world; \*

**the earth was moved and shook.**

Your way was in the sea, and your paths in the great

waters, \*

**yet your footsteps were not seen.**

You led your people like sheep \*

**by the hand of Moses and Aaron.**