

The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Chapter 1 – The Community Psalm of Lament (CL)

THE TEXTS

- Which Psalms are community psalms of lament?
 - 44, (60), 74, 79, 80, 83, 89
- Psalm 60 is in parentheses because Westermann notes that much of its content is unclear
- Other examples of CL in the Scriptures
 - Jeremiah 14
 - Isa 63:7-64:12
 - Habakkuk 1
- “...the first beginnings or forerunners of the CL genre must reach back into the time of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness” (30)

THE LITURGICAL ACTION

- What took place before and during CL is very well known because of the prevalence of CL texts throughout the Old Testament
 - The entire people were summoned (Ezek. 21:12; Joel 2:16; Jonah 3:5)
 - Purification of the worshipers (Joel 1:14)
 - Abstinance and garments of mourning
 - Girding on sackcloth (Isa. 22:12; Jer. 4:8; 6:26)
 - Sprinkling one’s head with dust and ashes (Josh. 7:6; Neh. 9:1)
 - Gestures of humiliation and entreaty
 - Weeping before the Lord (Judg. 20:23-26; Jer. 14:12)
- “No Israelite ever lived who had never heard the sound and words of these gloomy psalms of lament, and who could not associate with them special and unforgettable hours and days” (30).
- CL were not on the liturgical calendar
 - “...they were observed spontaneously whenever a crisis sent out the call: a drought perhaps, or a plague of grasshoppers, an enemy attack or a disastrous defeat, the destruction of a city or a sanctuary” (31).
- If CL were so important, why do we not find more in the book of Psalms?
 - The Psalter is a collection from the late period when Israel was a province inside an empire
 - “The place of the old liturgical observances of lament had been taken over by the service of penitence, such as the one described programmatically in Ezra 9. The prayer transmitted there exemplifies the transition from the psalm of lament to the prayer of repentance” (31).

AN EXAMPLE OF CL: PSALM 80

- **Verses 1-3**
 - Psalm 80 begins with the introductory petition attached to the address
 - “The living God can be appealed to for aid only by first of all being asked to turn, appear, hear, and cause his countenance to shine forth” (31-32).
 - “God is a person, and one can ask him for help only when that personhood is taken seriously” (32).
- **Verses 4-7**
 - After the introductory petition comes the complaint
 - The complaint begins at the point where the trouble had its origin: with God’s relationship to the suppliant.
 - Every lament somewhere strikes at the one who as Creator and Lord allows suffering to come upon his creatures.
- **Verses 8-11**
 - A review of God’s past saving acts, which stand in stark contrast to the present
 - The one who complains still clings to past personal experiences of God’s goodness and faithfulness
 - The vinedresser metaphor “implies that God’s dealings with his people are a *totality*—what we mean by the comprehensive term “a history.” They are a totality which existed prior to the individual events and in which these events have meaning only as members of the whole” (33).
- **Verses 12-13**
 - The speaker asks God “Why?”
 - “The metaphor permits at this point a frighteningly bold accusation of God, who is accused of participating in the destruction of the vineyard he personally planted. But this is not a mere assertion of fact; it is really the lamenter’s passionate clinging to the God who is incomprehensible” (34).
- **Verses 14-15**
 - Two parts of the petition can be seen here
 - There is a request to “turn again,” which presuppose that God has turned away
- **Verses 16-17**
 - Petition is connected with a wish, a double wish aimed in two directions. The speaker wants God’s intervention in a political situation with two opponents.
 - God’s intervention *for* the one can only be understood as an intervention *against* the other
- **Verses 18-19**
 - Conclusion of the psalm is a vow to remain faithful to God
 - The person calls out to the Deliverer and promises loyalty beyond the hour of deliverance

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CL

- Listed below are the essential elements but, as Westermann notes, “each individual psalm is an entirely unique, unrepeatable composition” (35).
- **The address**
 - Also known as the “call to God”
 - “By means of the address, contact is established which makes speaking to God possible” (36).
 - “The address is an event which unites the one who calls with the one who is called” (36).
 - The complaint can follow the address immediately (Ps. 79:1) or might be combined with an introductory petition (Ps. 74:2-3)
- **The complaint**
 - A complaint is no longer part of prayer. We think of the complaint in a negative light, but it was not that way for Israel. “Hence we can no longer understand what the complaint once meant in speech directed toward God” (37).
 - The complaint is different from our understanding in three ways
 - #1: a complaint directed against God (a “you” complaint)
 - May take form of a question (Ps. 80:4-12) or statement (Ps. 89:40)
 - “...those who prayed these psalms did not doubt that God existed somewhere beyond the limit of human possibilities” (38).
 - Accusations against God tell us that those who spoken them took their God seriously
 - #2: a complaint about one’s own suffering (an “I” complaint)
 - consists of two parts: a complaint about the trouble and the shame caused by the trouble
 - “...suffering—whether that of an individual, city, or nation—is perceived as an event that always happens in the context of community” (38)
 - #3: a complaint about the acts of enemies (a “they” complaint)
 - Especially elaborate in Psalms 74, 79, 80, 83
 - “It is a striking fact that only such community laments were taken up into the Psalms which presuppose hostile action by enemies, while laments raised because of catastrophes in nature have been transmitted to us only in historical and prophetic texts (e.g. Jeremiah 14:15; Joel 1-2)” (39).
 - “The complaining and lamenting in them is not done by an individual as such, nor yet by the people as a sovereign political entity, but by the human person, in the three basic relationships which comprise all human existence: self-existence, existence together with others, and existence over against God” (37).
- **Review of God’s past acts**
 - The review of God’s past acts holds up before God what God once did for the people in times past and stands in contrast to the present troubles
 - “When God is thus reminded of this earlier activity, and when the contrast between the past and present is placed before him, what becomes noticeable is the awakening of a sense of history” (40).

- When we look back at God’s actions, we become aware of the fact that the totality of our history rests in the acts of God alone, who heals the ruptures.
- **The petition**
 - The petition in the psalms is more like our word “entreaty”
 - “Almost always the petitions of the Psalms are concerned with deliverance from acute trouble. We never meet what is so common and entirely natural in our modern prayers: a heaping up of individual requests” (41).
 - Petitions consist of two parts
 - Request for God’s attention
 - Request for God’s intervention
 - “The Israelite knew that help could come only through an encounter with the living God. Without God’s personal turning toward the person in trouble, there could be no help” (41).
- **The divine response**
 - People lamented something to God so that he would reverse the situation
 - After the petition, the people expected God to respond in some way
 - “The people who had assembled for lament actually expected God to respond to their pleading; and this response could be heard through a servant of God, a priest, or a prophet, and then proclaimed to those who waited for it” (42).
- **The vow to praise**
 - Only found rarely in the CL psalms because it belongs more with IL psalms
 - Must have special significance when found with a few CL psalms
 - Finishes the psalm and serves as a commitment from the speaker directed to God

REMARKS ABOUT SPECIFIC CL

- **Psalm 44**
 - Marked by bitter contrast between God’s past and present activity
 - God helped so wonderfully in the past but appears to have abandoned his people
 - The people declare that they will hold fast to God but the psalm ends with a desperate cry for help
- **Psalm 60**
 - Many things in this psalm are no longer clear
 - An oracle of salvation (vv. 6-8) is at the center
 - Well-known verse ends the psalm: “With God we shall do valiantly...” (v. 12)
- **Psalm 74**
 - Laments the destruction of the sanctuary (vv. 3-9)
 - Psalm brings an appeal to the Creator and Lord of history
 - Creation is presented in mythical images
- **Psalm 79**
 - Lamenting the city and temple being destroyed
 - Survivors rise to face the source of the woe: God’s burning anger
 - Pleading that God turn away the enemy
 - Sharp accusation of God but ends with a vow to give thanks to God forever

- **Psalm 83**
 - Contains almost nothing but complaints about enemies and petitions against them
 - Many names are heaped into the complaint, so it could be that they are bywords for the evildoers who threaten the righteous
- **Psalm 89**
 - The complaint is verses 38-51 and is preceded by review of God's past deeds
 - Focuses on God's covenant with David
- **Psalm 106**
 - Encompasses the entire history of the people of Israel
 - Concludes with a petition to God for the redemption of Israel and the gathering of those who have been scattered among the nations