

*The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message*  
Sunday Morning Bible Study  
Chapter 3 – The Individual Psalm of Lament (IL)

INTRODUCTION

- Individual Psalm of Lament (IL)
- IL Psalms: 3-7, 10-14, 16-17, 23-23, 25-28, 31, 35-36, 38-43, 51-59, 61-64, 69, 71, 73, 77\*, 86, 88, 94\*, 102, 109, 120\*, 130
- Individual lament outside of the Psalms: Lamentations 3; Jeremiah 11, 15, 17, 18, 20

THE LITURGICAL ACTION

- Consider Samuel’s mother (1 Samuel)
  - She came to the sanctuary and poured out her heart to God
  - The priest assured her that God had heard the prayer
  - The assurance effected a change in her
- Consider King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38)
  - King prayed to God from sickbed for healing
  - Isaiah went to the king to tell him God had heard his prayer
- These two examples show us most clearly the purpose of the IL
  - A person would pray to God from a position of great duress and ask God for help
  - We do not have responses recorded in the Psalms, but most of them indicate a turning point or break in the complaint—which is understandable only when one realizes that the suppliants received a word of comfort from outside themselves.
- Samuel’s mother and King Hezekiah also show us that IL was used outside of Israel’s worship services

THE STRUCTURE

- Very similar to the CL
- Consist of complaint and petition from trouble
- Directed to God
- Major components
  - Address (often with an introductory call for help)
  - Complaint in its threefold form
  - Petition with motifs and words which express the fact that a reversal of the complaint has occurred

“The gap between trouble and rescue—between suffering and the reversal of suffering—ordinarily shows up smaller on the horizon of an individual’s life than on the horizon of the life of a people” (60).

- Differences between the CL and IL
  - In the IL we can recognize the reversal from complaint to trust, or to the confidence of having been heard.

- Entire emphasis in the IL’s looking to God is on the confession of trust
- The vow to praise is a regular feature of IL

“Various types of IL psalms can be distinguished according to whether one of their parts is especially emphasized or whether it determines the entire psalm” (60).

### AN EXAMPLE OF IL: PSALM 13

“One may take for granted that the very words themselves were in various ways actually lived and suffered, and were suffused by the sounds of the suffering people who used them to bring their pain to God” (55).

- The accusation (vv. 1-2)
  - The “how long” questions are about God, self, and enemy
    - About God (v. 1)

“But it is precisely these human questions which indicate the genuineness of a relationship to God—a relationship in which joy, happiness, freedom, and health can only be understood as dependent upon God’s attention to and participation in human life. But if these qualities are absent, then God is absent” (56).

- About self (v. 2a)
- About others (v. 2b)

“At this point we meet a characteristic feature of this group of psalms. Trouble is what the suppliant brings to God in the lament, but this was not what *we* understand as trouble. It is not *symptoms* of the psalmist’s troubles which are mention. Rather it is more the disturbance of healthiness or wholeness, something which shows itself not primarily in symptoms but in the interrelationships which characterize being alive: in the relations of the lamenter to God, to self, and to others” (56).

- The petition (vv. 3-4)
  - Petitioner prays to God in v. 3 for him to turn and help
  - Petitioner asks God to “light up his eyes,” an indirect petition for God’s intervention

“In the clause ‘...lest I sleep the sleep of death,’ pain and sorrow (v. 2) are understood as steps toward death. Death is not only the end of physical life; it is a power which projects itself into life” (57).

- The declaration of confidence (vv. 5-6)
  - “but” in verse 5 indicates a reversal, a turning point
  - There is one power in which the psalmist can trust: the steadfast love of God
  - “In the newly-won confidence based on God’s goodness, the petitioner—with daring faith—now has stepped forth into the hour of deliverance, in which he will rejoice in God’s help” (58).

- The reversal

“What becomes apparent is the fact that a reversal occurred while the lament was being prayed. This reversal appears throughout the entire genre” (58).

“The lamenters, in the brief space of a prayer, stepped out of complaint into trust, into the certainty that their prayers had been heard, into an anticipation of the jubilation experienced by those who have been delivered” (59).

“In this well-attested reversal from complaint to trust or to praise of God, we are dealing with the direct witness—the direct reflection—of an intervention from outside, from beyond; we are dealing with an activity of God which actually had been experienced and which was concretized, as a result of such experience, in the structure of these psalms” (59).