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Lament & Vengeance Psalms

Series: Summer in the Psalms

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Psalm 28, Psalm 139

Let me start by telling you a story. Some may remember the name John Newton, captain of a slave-trading English ship who had a dramatic conversion to Christianity and became a radical leader of the abolition movement. He is the author of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. That hymn was published in a book of hymns written by Newton and his close friend William Cowper. Cowper's life was marked by suffering and shame through going insane in his early adulthood. Newton stood by his friend in Cowper's mental turmoil and history records that Newton saved Cowper's life from attempted suicide on several occasions. A life marked by such harrowing suffering would perhaps seem unlikely to contribute to the Christian community. But amid a life that was riveted by agony Cowper would write breath-takingly beautiful hymns that revealed a deep trust in the God he loved, whom at times seemed so distant from Cowper. During his mental ill-health Cowper penned the hymn:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,

The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the LORD by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev'ry hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain

Oh, to sing hymns of such depth and honesty today! With frankness, Cowper is expressing the vulnerability of his heart amid adversity. Cowper is real with God as he admits to God's silence, distance, and the darkness that will not lift. Rather than denial of suffering or stuffing that suffering or dismissing that suffering, Cowper meets his own frailty with utter truthfulness as he confesses to God his struggle to trust him during his turmoil. What Cowper is doing as he is honest with himself and with God, what Cowper is doing is called lamenting.

The dictionary defines lament as a verb, which means to “feel, show, or express grief, sorrow, or regret.” And in scripture, the biblical basis for such sorrow is sin and suffering. It is biblical and good to grieve over our sin or to mourn over experienced suffering. And to have the boldness to speak of sin and suffering before God is to lament.

In Psalm 32 the Psalmist confesses, “*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found.*” Here the Psalmist recognizes that to ruminate on our grief and sin or to stay in denial with grief and sin causes a poisoning of the inner life and so the antidote for such poisoning is a ventilation of the soul in plain candor with God.

The key to lament is that it takes the Christian through mourning so that they may experience the comfort and healing of Christ, or it takes the Christian through confession and repentance over sin so they may experience the forgiveness and healing of Christ. Lament is the vehicle that transports us through despair toward hope. It recognizes that there once was goodness and there can be goodness again. Let’s dig down on this a little more deeply with the example of lamentation over suffering.

Perhaps you have met someone, or have experienced for yourself, the effect of getting caught in a never-ending cycle of suffering after trauma. The person is caught in a pattern of sorrow that is the torment of grief. Unable to find a safe place where they may publicly express their feelings without judgement, they grow accustomed to a soul in crisis and live in perpetual shame and pain. Their lives are hijacked by the inability to tell their story and to hear their own story being told and so loss becomes a vicious cycle of despair, loneliness, isolation, and wounding.

But God, in his mercy, has given us the invitation for honesty, hope, healing, and health through the agent of lamenting. To lament is to express trust in God to say exactly what is on your heart—even if it may be that God seems absent. What is the process and

result of lament? As we trust God with the bare honesty of our hearts, we find that beyond absence there is presence. Beyond the pain there can be healing. That beyond brokenness there can be wholeness. That beyond anger there can be peace. That beyond silence there can be The Word made flesh. That with the Word made flesh—Jesus himself—there may be understanding. And that through understanding there is love.

Rather than an endless cycle of woundedness, to lament is to enter a helix of healing. Do you remember what a helix is through your days of geometry? It's a circular pattern that is on a forward-moving trajectory. And as we enter this helix of lamenting, we experience the words of Christ, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." And Christian, you yourself are called to share with Christ in this work of comforting. In 2 Corinthians 1:4, Paul urges the church to, "Comfort others with the same comfort you have received in Christ."

So, as we look at the Psalms of lament, we will see this helix of healing. Much like Kubler-Ross' stages of grief: denial-anger-bargaining-depression-acceptance can't be contained in an easy ABC pattern, I want to suggest that lamenting is not a linear process, but a helix where we come back and experience different aspects of naming our loss and our wound as we experience the layers of God's healing grace.

Similar to Kubler-Ross' Stages of Grief, the Psalms of lament have a general themes of pleas to God for help, honest complaint to God, asking God for vengeance on enemies, acknowledgement of God's presence, and then ending with a hymn or blessing of praise.

Let's briefly look at one lament Psalm to see these themes, Psalm 28.

The Psalm begins with an invocation and plea to God for help:

To you, Lord, I call;

You are my Rock,

Do not turn a deaf ear to me. (v. 1a)

Afterward, he complains that he is treated like the wicked:

Do not drag me away with the wicked,

With those who do evil . . . (v. 3a)

He curses his enemies:

Repay them for their deeds

And for their evil work . . . (v. 4)

At the end, the psalmist asserts confidence in God and sings his praise:

Praise be to the LORD,

For he has heard my cry for mercy . . .

The LORD is the strength of his people,

A fortress of salvation for his anointed one. (vv. 6,8)

With these themes, there's a bit of an elephant in the room, which we really ought to address, the part where the psalmist curses his enemies. This theme of cursing is tied to the vengeance psalms.

On our summer reading list of the Psalms, you will see that we put Psalms of lament and Psalms of vengeance together mostly for the reason that vengeance Psalms are often part of Psalms of lament. Let's take Psalm 139 as an example. It's a beautiful

Psalm, often quoted at baby showers or dedications with the poetic lines of “You knit me together in my mothers’ womb, I will praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” It also has a strong sense of confidence in God’s presence with, “Where can I go from your Spirit...if I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” These are assuring and comforting words.

But then, in the last section of the Psalm, there is a dramatic turn, beginning with verse 19

19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

20 They speak of you with evil intent;

your adversaries misuse your name.

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,

and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

22 I have nothing but hatred for them;

I count them my enemies.

Those are fightin’ words! In fact, there are just as many psalms as vengeance as almost every other theme of the Psalms—with far more vengeance Psalms than Psalms of thanksgiving! Considering the quantity and intensity of vengeance Psalms, I think we would be wise to ask Can we or should we pray vengeance Psalms today? Let’s probe this question with three dimensions.

First, and most importantly, these Psalms are written before the Incarnation—before Redeeming Love came to earth, defeated death by death, won the victory over the enemy on the cross, and trampled sin through his rising from the dead. Unlike the Psalmist, we now look back on what Christ has already done rather than crying out to God for the Justifier to come and do what is right.

Second, the Psalmist expresses pure and unedited honesty before God. The psalmist teaches us that it is good and right to leave every burden, every emotion (even rage!) with Jesus. The Psalmist demonstrates the safety and trustworthiness of God as he lays bare his strongest emotions before God—even the emotion of hatred. Notice too, that the Psalmist is not saying that he is going to get revenge himself, he is asking the God of the Universe to do justice.

And third, it is good and right to pray for the ultimate day of reckoning when every wrong will be made right, every deed will be exposed, every heart will be made known, and every human will give an account for how they lived. As we live in the reality of a world that has been redeemed by Christ, is being redeemed by Christ, and will be redeemed by Christ, we pray earnestly for his return. Come Lord Jesus, come! Jesus, vengeance is yours, and so come back and make your justice known on earth.

Friends, the God of Christianity is a God of justice. As we live in a world marked by sin, the blood of the innocent cries out, “Where is the reckoning for Clifford Olson, Willy Pickton, Ted Bundy, “Chinggis” Khan, Josef Stalin, Hitler, and “Mouw” Mao. Where is the justice for these evil men—to say nothing of the murderers whose names we will never know until the great Judgement Day?” We do not serve a God who doesn’t hear our cries for justice for on that great and awful day of Christ’s return he will have his prize of the ransomed church for which he died. Then those who willfully refused his mercy but acted wickedly and did abominable evil will receive their punishment.

And so for the Christian today who lives in the past work of Christ on the cross and looks forward to his return, it is good and right to be completely open with God in confessing to him that we have enemies, praying for and loving those enemies as Christ commanded us to do, and earnestly praying for Christ’s return when every wrong will be made right.

So, what is our application for the psalms of lament today? We have seen that they are the gift of God to his people to move them from unresolved and unspoken grief that wastes away our very selves to the means of receiving the comfort of God by honest expression of mourning or open confession and repentance of sin.

But brothers and sisters, I want to encourage us to not shy away from lament—especially communal lament. Remember, these psalms were written by individuals but their primary purpose was for public and corporate worship in which the congregation was taught to pray and how to pray. Let's sit with that for a moment, and perhaps open ourselves to hear a call that is needed in the church today.

For example, if you simply look at the reading list of the Psalms, what is the very first thing you noticed? That's right: how many lament Psalms there are! In fact, Psalms of lament take up 1/3 of the book of Psalms, more than any other category! And yet in the church today, where are our songs of lament? Let's tease this out.

If you look under the themes of songs sung in the church today, using the Christian Copyright Licensing International database, the findings are shocking.

To begin with, they don't even have a category of "Lament" songs, so we need to get creative. Look at what I found:

Suffering: 207

Praise: 18,027

Regret: 27, Testing: 42, Repentance: 951

Declaration: 7,469

Now, the question begs if older songs also follow this same trend, and the research shows that this has been the trend. For example, the Scottish Presbyterian hymnal has an

abundance of hymns of praise, but only a few songs having to do with suffering, doubt, lament, or struggle.

At this point, it's really necessary to remember first the quantity of lament psalms in scripture and the key fact that they move us through turmoil toward comfort and praise. But in our corporate worship if we deny ourselves the good and right practice of communal lament and insist only on praise, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the wrong belief that the Christian life is easy or free from pain while at the same time allowing our silence or even denial of suffering to be a source of inhospitality and separation towards brothers and sisters who are suffering and are desperate for a safe place to share their grief.

We sing, "I will raise a hallelujah, I will watch the darkness flee." While certain aspects of this catchy jingle may be true, if we isolate songs of declaration and praise as the sum essence of our worship, we run the risk of becoming escapist in our belief systems and deny a place of safety and healing for suffering and in desperate need of the comfort of Christ.

A friend I graduated high school with named Derek experienced incredible loss in his life. His younger brother Mark died at 16 of a rare heart disease, his parents moved three provinces away, then his sister married and moved to Pittsburgh leaving him alone in Alberta. He became engaged, but shortly before their wedding his fiancé broke off the engagement. Derek stopped coming to church and when asked why his response was riveting. Derek said, "Everyone at church is fake happy and there is no place for me to be sad." We would be wise to learn from my friend, Derek, and make room in our corporate worship for grief to be turned to mourning and mourning be turned to joy.

And let us not forget Christ, but fix our eyes on him. Remember Christ, dear Christian, in your suffering. Remember that in Gethsemane, Christ did not dismiss the

suffering he was about to experience, but was so bold as to ask his father that the suffering might pass and he then humbly aligned his will with that of his father by praying, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” Christ was honest with his father.

Then, remember that on the Cross Jesus did not cry out, “I will raise a hallelujah and watch the darkness flee.” On the cross, Jesus cried out a psalm of lament, Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Where was Christ in my suffering? As we learned last week, Christ was on the cross, dying for us. We have the incarnate Christ who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we know the risen Christ who is victorious and who will make right every wrong on the great and dreadful day of his return.

So Christian, pattern your life after the honesty and humility of Christ. Allow Christ to enfold you in his arms that yet bear the scars of his suffering. Allow Christ to heal your brokenness by bringing your brokenness to him. And Christian, if you are currently in a place of great healing and joy and fullness, be bold in comforting others with the same comfort you have received in Christ by giving space for and dignity to the scriptural practice of lament.

To close, let’s come back to William Cowper, who amid insanity and deep brokenness penned the words, “There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel’s veins. And sinners plunge beneath the flood, lose all their guilty stains.” Someone so wracked by grief and sorrow clung to the Crucified, the Suffering Christ. At the end of that great hymn of the faith, Cowper proclaims, “Redeeming love has been my song and shall be ‘till I die.”

So as Cowper ends with praise of his Redeeming Saviour and as the lament psalms end with hymns of praise, let us hold fast to the testament that faith teaches us not that

life will be easy but that the difficulties of life yield beauty for they make us like Christ, the Suffering and Victorious King. In the end all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. So as we pray for the day of Christ's return, let us fix our eyes on Christ, who blesses and keeps us and makes his face to shine upon us and is gracious to us. Let's pray.