

# An Exercise with Psalms of Lament

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## On Psalms of Lament (also called Disorientation)

First Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann has identified six common elements found in Psalms of Lament. While not every such Psalm may have all six elements, some do and most have three to five.

- 1 **Intimate Address to God.** This establishes the existence and natures of the relationship between the psalmist and God. It indicates that, however hard or severe the lament to come, it is held in the context of this sacred relationship.
- 2 **Complaint.** The psalmist launches quickly to the heart of the situation in life from which the lament arises. This is conveyed with no holds barred, with vigor, even exaggeration.
- 3 **Petition.** Out of the complaint comes the petition to God for redress. This may be in a demanding tone, spelled out in details, and with expectation that God would and should respond.
- 4 **Argument in favor of the petition.** Lest God miss the urgency of the complaint of God's duty to respond, the psalmist gathers and lists aloud reasons why God, being God, should respond as desired. It is an argument addressed to God meant to persuade and bring about action.
- 5 **Vengeance.** Sometimes the psalmist goes on to call on God to bring hurtful vengeance against those enemies who are responsible or the petitioner's own hurt. It might be justified as justice.
- 6 **Rejoicing and Praise.** Having moved through all these elements, there is a transformation of a sort at the end. Without necessarily experiencing or voicing any resolution to the complaint, the psalmist rests in the end in trust in the intimacy of the relationship with God. There is a sense of confidence in being heard and responded to that moves into gratitude, rejoicing, and praise.

## Exercise

During a period of time (2 or 4) pray a Psalm of Lament each week, praying the same one daily, reflecting on it, and eventually putting it in your own words. You can read them in the Bible of your choice and in several translations including *The Message*. You may choose any Psalm of Lament from the many in the book of Psalms, but to save you some time, here are some suggestions: Psalms 6, 13, 22, 55, 56, 88, 142

Each week pray with one of the Psalms of Lament through these steps:

- 1 **Briefly scan the first verse or two of the offered Psalms and notice which one, more than any of the others, connects with you just now** (as you might notice a word or phrase in Lectio Divina).
- 2 **Read the Psalm to yourself – slowly, contemplatively, prayerfully.** Do not try to analyze, contextualize, or study the structure of the Psalm. Just notice how and where it addresses you. Repeat 3 or 4 times, until it begins to settle in and become your own prayer.
- 3 **Notice where in your body this lament may be located.** Does it generate a physical sensation, an emotion, an inner sense of something, or an image or symbol? Then speak the Psalm out loud, adding voice and breath and, perhaps, gestures to your speaking. Repeat this until the Psalm becomes more fully your whole-body expression of your payer.
- 4 **Take an extended period of time to reflect on how the Psalm is now speaking to you and how you are speaking to God through your expression of the Psalm.** What is it that you are hearing from god, and that you are saying in and through this Psalm?

Some pieces of the Psalm may not resonate with your experience exactly, yet may evoke a response in you that is significant. IF so, write this Psalm or a portion of it in your own words, to reflect your experience. Notice what is now emerging, what is changing or developing.

Recognize that not all Psalms of Lament result in a resolution as outlined by Brueggmann in element 6. See Psalm 88 for example. Perhaps the Psalm you are praying with does not, or the one that is emerging in your own spirit is unresolved. This too is an aspect of lament that can be brought to expression.

If it will be helpful, you may want to journal about this reflection time.

- 5 **As your response to this prayer, feel free to choose any one or more of the following ways to give expression to where you have been taken:**
  - a. Write a short summary of the Psalm in your own words, perhaps choosing to include 3 (or more) of the 6 laments Brueggmann identifies in a Psalm of Lament. Perhaps write a single line or sentence for each element you include.
  - b. Identify a key line in the Psalm that particularly connect to you. Memorize this line. If you are musically inclined, you may, in listening, find a simple tune to which these words could be sung.
  - c. Create a soul card or other artistic expression as your response to how the Psalm has engaged you.