

## Psalms of Lament

by G. Brooke Lester

"Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? ... Why do you forget our affliction?" (Ps 44:23-24). If many of us have been taught to put on a happy face, to let a smile be our umbrella, to keep our complaints to ourselves, then the Hebrew Bible offers a welcome corrective in the complaint psalms, or psalms of lament.

Lament, as a genre of psalm, is not the same as lamentation over the dead. In a lament psalm, a petitioner addresses God directly on the occasion of some calamity. Given God's history with God's people, the psalmist is comfortable charging God with "dereliction of duty" and unabashedly urges a favorable response. In fact, many readers prefer the term complaint psalm, since the passive connotations of lament do not match the vociferous and active tone common to psalms of this genre. Like the psalms of thanksgiving, lament psalms are sometimes individual ("I, me"), sometimes communal ("we, us"), and occasionally a blend of both.

Psalm 44 illustrates well the typical features of the lament psalm. A lament usually contains some direct address to God (Ps 44:1, "O God"), a complaint describing the occasion for the lament (Ps 44:9-22), a petition for redress (Ps 44:23-26), some statement of trust concerning God's proclivity to save and vindicate (Ps 44:1-8), and a vow to offer public thanksgiving after God has intervened favorably (Ps 44:8; this last element is often absent or only suggested in communal laments).

As with any literary genre, the formal features of the lament psalm are not set in stone. Each psalmist will play freely with the form, ordering the elements variously, expanding or suppressing them, breaking them up or repeating them. reflect the comfortable embrace of a status quo whose conditions favor the speaker. Thanksgiving psalms speak to the gathered community of their deliverance from a crisis by God. They reflect the resolution of the crisis and the speaker's progress toward moving on after trauma.

August 11, 2019

## Psalm 13

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

- <sup>1</sup> How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?
- <sup>2</sup> How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
- <sup>3</sup> Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
- <sup>4</sup> and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";  
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
- <sup>5</sup> But I trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
- <sup>6</sup> I will sing to the Lord,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

## Genesis 22:1-14

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

- <sup>1</sup> After these things God tested Abraham. [God] said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."
- <sup>2</sup> He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." <sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup> Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." <sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup> Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He

said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.<sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.<sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."<sup>12</sup> He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."<sup>13</sup> And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.<sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

#### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What word, phrase or image grabs your attention?
- How does the way you speak of God shape your experience of God?; and your experience of God shape your language?
- How do you struggle with the silence of God that may merely be between the period and the but?; or much longer?

Between these two forms sit the lament psalms, which respond to a crisis that disrupts the life of an individual or community. In laments, a critical event calls into question the conviction that God reliably protects the speaker from injustice, chaos, and death. The lament psalm, then, looks backward at praise (recalling God's saving acts), and it looks forward to thanksgiving and salvation (praising God's inclination to save). Lament gazes unflinchingly at the present reality of pain and at God's apparent slowness to save.

It's worth noting that the book of Psalms contains more lament psalms than any other genre, suggesting lament's prevalence in the institutional liturgies of Israel's temple, shrines, and family life. Differently from the more cosmopolitan and dispassionate Wisdom Literature, lament interrogates similar questions around divine justice and God's ways with God's creatures. If (lamentably) rare in today's regular worship, lament still finds voice in observances for the deceased, private and family devotion, and pastoral care.

*G. Brooke Lester, "Psalms of Lament", n.p. [cited 11 Aug 2019]. Online:*  
<https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/passages/related-articles/psalms-of-lament>