

A Contemporary Journey with the Bible Toward Community

WORSHIPING THROUGH LAMENT AND PRAISE

15 March 2018

Today: The Problem and Challenge

The Situation: We've talked about communities and: (1) visions of the end; (2) hopes for acquiring wisdom and the good life, for ourselves for those with whom we live; (3) the values we seek to live by and the structures through which we organize and shape ourselves; and (4) the ways in which stories carry our past, shaping both our present and future. Finally, we need to look at what might be considered the most distinctive and important (biblically, at least) characteristic of community: our common shared relationship with our ultimate value, with God, or whatever we choose to call that which we value most highly. Biblically, responses to that "One" are very often expressed in terms of lament and praise. If we are disappointed and dissatisfied with the "results" of our relationship, lament is often a vehicle for expressing such. If we are happy and fulfilled, praise is the bottom line. Both lament and praise are responses to what we have experienced, to what God has done, or not done, in our lives. *Questions: How do contemporary communities express their relationships with their most important values, with that which provides purpose and meaning for life? Where and when and how do we lament and praise?*

The Rhetoric: Lament and praise utilize many different "forms" to express emotions associated with anger, grief, disappointment, frustration, betrayal, fear, joy, expectation, hope, satisfaction, communion. The language of lament and praise is often **bold**, sometimes "over the top." Complaining about God's action, cursing God or one another, bargaining with God, predicting particular outcomes if only God will keep promises, calling everyone and everything into God's presence and praise—all this is found in lament and praise. The ones who lament and praise have a strong relationship (or want to) with God, sometimes resulting in hard questions (Where are you? Why haven't you shown up yet? Why don't you kill all my enemies?), even judgments about God's behavior and priorities. On the other side, it's possible for the one who praises to get lost in the glory and magnificence of God's actions toward the community, toward the whole world and cosmos. Despite the challenges of living in this world, the bottom line for praise and lament would seem to be an affirmation of: (1) being out of control; (2) receiving grace in the living of life; (3) not understanding it all—to mystery; (4) to omnipresence. *The Question, again: Where and What is "Community" in such a time?*

Please come ready to talk about all of this. What special characteristics, positive and negative, of community are highlighted in contemporary lament and praise? If you can, please be ready to share an example or two.

The Bible: Parallels or Not?

After thinking on the issues and concerns raised by the situation and rhetoric of lament and praise, please read and think on the following biblical texts.

Lamentations 2:11-19

¹¹ My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground
because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint
in the streets of the city.

¹² They cry to their mothers,
'Where is bread and wine?'
as they faint like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers' bosom.

¹³ What can I say for you, to what compare you,
O daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin;
who can heal you?

¹⁴ Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen oracles for you
that are false and misleading.

¹⁵ All who pass along the way
clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads
at daughter Jerusalem;
'Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
the joy of all the earth?'

¹⁶ All your enemies
open their mouths against you;
they hiss, they gnash their teeth,
they cry: 'We have devoured her!
Ah, this is the day we longed for;

at last we have seen it!
17 The Lord has done what he purposed,
he has carried out his threat;
as he ordained long ago,
he has demolished without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you,
and exalted the might of your foes.
18 Cry aloud to the Lord!
O wall of daughter Zion!
Let tears stream down like a torrent
day and night!
Give yourself no rest,
your eyes no respite!
19 Arise, cry out in the night,
at the beginning of the watches!
Pour out your heart like water
before the presence of the Lord!
Lift your hands to him
for the lives of your children,
who faint for hunger
at the head of every street.

Psalm 22 Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
3 Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
4 In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
5 To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
6 But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
7 All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
8 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'
9 Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
10 On you I was cast from my birth,

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
12 Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
13 they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
15 my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shrivelled;
17 I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
19 But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live for ever!
27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;

and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Psalm 139 The Inescapable God

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
20 those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
24 See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 8 Divine Majesty and Human Dignity

To the leader: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

1 O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

you have put all things under their feet,
7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
9 O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Psalm 150 Praise for God's Surpassing Greatness

1 Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

Luke 1:46-55 Mary's Song of Praise (The Magnificat)

46 And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Luke 1:68-79 The Benedictus

⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Revelation 4:1-11 The Heavenly Worship

⁴After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice,
which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will
show you what must take place after this.' ²At once I was in the spirit, and there in
heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! ³And the one seated there
looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an
emerald. ⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are
twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.
⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of
thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven
spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like
crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

'Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.'

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

¹¹ 'You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.'

Questions:

- 1. Do you see anything shared by the biblical communities in these texts (either the ones described or the ones writing) with contemporary lament and praise today?*
- 2. What is not shared? What is different?*

Implications for Action and Next Steps

Together we will assess the implications of those things we share and don't share with biblical communities when thinking about lament, praise, and the relationship with the One who sustains us, disappoints us, and who provides us direction. What has changed for us in the 21st century? What lessons or values from the Bible are worthy of remembering and even, perhaps, capable of helping us live more faithfully and well today?