

## **The Poetry of Life** **Psalms of Lament**

Something is wrong. The pain is unbearable. Where is God? Is He angry with me? Why doesn't he come to help me? God has been so faithful in the past, why not now? Help me God! Don't turn your back to me when I need you the most! Don't sit back and let me be destroyed by this evil!

We have all experienced trials and difficulties in this life. We have probably pleaded with God to help us and maybe even felt like our prayers were falling on deaf ears. Deep down we know God is good, but in the moment of suffering we question if He has our best interests in mind. Can we express these hurts, doubts, and even anger to God? Is He displeased with this kind of prayer?

If we see the Psalms of Lament as guides showing how to speak to God in our distress, we notice that we are given a remarkable amount of freedom to speak to the Lord. This freedom of expressing our emotion and hurt to God must be guided by a deep humility, however, for how quickly we can go from a rather innocent doubting to dangerous cursing, whether it is God or our enemies.

There are many Psalms of Lament, it is the largest category in the Psalms. They can be divided into several categories. One way to divide them is:

### *Individual Psalms of Lament*

- Prayer Song of the Sick: 38, 41, 88
- Prayer Song of the Sick with modifications: 6, 13, 22, 30-32, 35, 39, 51, 69, 71, 91, 102, 103
- Prayer Song of the Persecuted and Accused: 3-5, 7, 11, 17, 23, 26, 27, 57, 63
- Prayer Song of a Sinner: 51, 130

### *Community Psalms of Lament*

- These are: 44, 60, 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126, 137

## **Elements of the Psalms of Lament**

The Psalms of Lament contain many similar elements in them, though again it must be noted that not all "elements" of a Psalm of Lament will be used in all of them. These are prayers, not formulas. The basic components are:

- Address and introductory cry to God for help/action (22:1)
- Lament/Complaint
  - This can be against God, against one's own self, or against enemies (35:13-14; 13:1)
- Confession of Trust (6:4; 13:5; 22:3-5; 30:5; 51:1-2, 71:1, 130:5-8)
- Petition for help/relief/strength (22:11, 19-21; 35:1-8; 102:1-2, 24)
- Vow of Praise or Praise itself when the petition has been heard (13:6; 22:22, 25; 51:15)

The Psalms of Lament contain some of the richest and heart-wrenching imagery in the entire Bible. The pain is real and expressed straight from the heart. Yet notice that, in almost all of the Psalms of Lament, there is still trust in the Lord. There is still hope for reconciliation. There is still hope for healing. And praise is never far from the lips of the Psalmists, even when they are in deep distress.

## **For further study I recommend**

Bullock, C. *Encountering the Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Lewis, C.S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. (various publishers)