

Laments

Within the broad genre of psalms there are many different sub-genres or types. We will begin by looking at the type of psalm which is known as the “lament” psalm. The word lament means a passionate expression of sorrow or grief. Not all laments in the Bible are psalms. In fact, there is an entire book of the Bible (Lamentations) that is characterized by lament and poetic expressions of sorrow and grief appear frequently elsewhere. The lament in the form of a psalm, however, is the most common type of psalm in the Psalter. The lament form accounts for roughly 1/3rd of the overall content of the Book of Psalms.

By understanding how each of the psalm types is organized and functions you will be better able to understand them and to apply them to your own prayer life. Before we proceed it is important to remember that when reading the psalms that you are working with poetic literature. Not every single psalm of the same type works exactly the same way. The elements may be in a different order, one or more may be missing, or they may be combined. Often, it is the variations on the form as much as the form itself that provide clues as to the author’s emphasis. Just like in modern music and poetry the author will play around with form as part of the creative process. Despite this poetic flexibility, several common elements can be observed.

1. **Address:** Usually to God
2. **Distress or Complaint:** This is the “core” of the lament where the psalmist articulates the source of the grief. Sometimes this will include a confession of sin as well.
3. **Petition:** An appeal for God to intervene and often includes reasons why God should answer.
4. **Statement of Trust or Confidence:** This will sometimes include a recounting of God's faithfulness in the past, or His promise, etc.
5. **Praise or Vow:** The psalmist will often either praise God or will vow to bring praise or sacrifices.

Let’s look at a few examples of what this looks like. I will walk you through 3 examples and then we will do one together. You will then do one on your own as homework. In the notes, I have highlighted the various elements according to the following key:

1. **Address** = Bold
2. **Complaint** = Boxed
3. **Petition** = Underlined
4. *Statement of Trust* = Italics
5. Praise = Double Underline

Example 1: Psalm 3 (ESV)

O LORD, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me;
many are saying of my soul,
“There is no salvation for him in God.” Selah

*But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,
my glory, and the lifter of my head.
I cried aloud to the LORD,
and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah*

Laments

*I lay down and slept;
I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.
I will not be afraid of many thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around.*

Arise, O LORD!
Save me, O my God!
*For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked.*

Salvation belongs to the LORD;
your blessing be on your people! Selah

Example 2: Psalm 6 (ESV)

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath.
Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is greatly troubled.
But you, O LORD—how long?

Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.
For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who will give you praise?

<p>I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes.</p>

*Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
The LORD has heard my plea;
the LORD accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.*

Laments

Example 3: Psalm 54 (ESV)

**O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.**
O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves. Selah

Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.
He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.

With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.
For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

HOMEWORK #1

Choose another psalm of lament and see if you can identify the various elements. Keep in mind that an element can be as brief as a single word. Also, not every lament will have every single element. Don't over-think it, just pay careful attention to the language and see if you can identify how the psalm you selected is organized.

You can choose from any of the following:

3, 4, 5, 7, 12, 13, 14, 17, 22, 26, 27, 28, 35, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 44, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 106, 108, 109, 120, 123, 126, 130, 137, 140, 141, 142, 143

Additional Information on Laments

The structures that we have been looking at are elements found in lament psalms in general. If, however, we look at the content of the various lament psalms we can further classify them. Scholars often get very granular when discussing the various sub-classifications within the general types of psalms. Much of that is unlikely to be of much practical use to the average believer but there are a few of the lament types that it might be helpful for you to be aware of. These include:

1. **Individual Laments:** These are psalms written from an individual perspective. They often mention enemies, illness, false accusation, etc. In some cases, it can be difficult to discern whether the individual is speaking for himself or on behalf of a group (such as a king). Most of the lament psalms are individual laments.
2. **Communal Laments:** These are written from a communal perspective. They often deal with distress that impacts the entire community such as famine, war, etc. As mentioned above, there

Laments

are times where a psalm is written in the first person “I” but is better understood to be a communal lament because the psalmist is understood to be a representative figure. There are also examples, such as psalm 130, that contain elements of both individual and communal focus.

3. **Penitential Psalms:** These psalms are unique because the grief and sorrow are the result of sin and the petitions are related to God’s mercy on the sinner. There are traditionally 7 penitential psalms, 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143. Psalms 32; 38; 51; 130 all contain explicit confession of sin and the other 3 have been included in the classification based upon the psalmist appealing to the mercy of God in avoiding judgment.
4. **Imprecatory Psalms:** These are the most controversial of the psalm types. The word imprecation basically means curse. These are psalms where the psalmist is calling down the wrath of God on enemies. There are roughly 20 psalms that include some form of imprecation. In some cases, these psalms can be quite violent and harsh (c.f. 69, 109) and as a result present difficulty for Christians struggling to reconcile them with the love ethic of Jesus. Lord willing, we will spend next week looking at imprecatory psalms.

APPLICATION & DISCUSSION

1. What might be the practical significance of the fact that lament is the most common type of psalm?
2. How might the common elements of the lament be helpful in structuring our own prayers?
3. How might the content of these psalms help us to express our own fear, struggles, and disappointments in an appropriately reverent way?
4. Is there any practical significance to the variation we see in these psalms?
5. Can you legitimately pray one of these lament psalms if things are going well and you are happy? (How do we connect with the experience of the psalmist when we are doing well?)

HOMEWORK #2

Considering our lesson and discussion select one of the three example psalms from above or the one you chose for the first homework assignment and pray that psalm throughout the week using the following approaches. Try to use each approach at least once during the week.

Each time read the entire psalm and then proceed with one of the following.

1. Offer the actual words of the psalm as a prayer.
2. Use the organization of your psalm to structure a prayer in your own words.
3. Use the organization of your psalm to structure a prayer for someone else you know who may be struggling.
4. Use the organization of your psalm to structure a prayer for the Church.

*Please be sure to reach out to me via email if you have any questions while working through the homework. I am here to help you. Don’t worry about getting everything right, just do your best to get a feel for the flow of the psalm you are working with and how it “works”.