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**Wounded Prayers: Relearning the Language of Lament**

I grew up in a teetotaling, Bible-reading, washed-in-the-blood Southern Baptist small town deep in the heart of Texas. And though I’ve been in Lutheran circles for over half my life now—as a catechumen, seminary student, pastor, professor, and prodigal son—if you get close enough to this Lutheran, you’ll still pick up a little Baptist aroma about me. And for that I’m rather thankful. Because the part of my spiritual upbringing bequeathed to me that I still treasure—and applaud—is just how overarchingly central the Bible was in my family and church life. I memorized all of Genesis 1 and recited it from the pulpit when I was six years old. I cut my teeth on the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Whatever shortcoming our theological heritage had, at least no one could accuse us of neglecting the Word of God.

My early immersion into the Scriptures has remained with me. When I went to university, and later seminary, I fell in love with that crazy and kind of backwards girlfriend named Hebrew, fell in love again with the OT, and my love affair with the TaNaK continues unabated. In my work with 1517, the organization for which I now work full-time, I write about the OT, teach the OT, and cohost the podcast “40 Minutes in the OT,” in which we go chapter by chapter through the Scriptures every week. I say all this, as preface of sorts, to explain part of the background as to the how and why of my presentation today.

I am a man of stories—biblical stories and personal stories. I take seriously the fact that, when God was deliberating how best to unveil the profoundest mysteries of the world, he jettisoned philosophical treatises, systematic theologies, and (with apologies to Martin) even Q & A catechisms. He chose instead to sit us children down on the front porch, light his pipe, and say, “Kids, let me tell you a story.” A story full of naked people and talking snakes, polygamous kings and street-smart prostitutes, giants and blind men and prophets smelling like they crawled out of a fish. When God wants us to know something, to really know something, to stake our very lives on the truth of it: he tells us a story.[[1]](#endnote-1) And today I’d like to tell you the story of wounded prayers, of the brokenhearted who prayed them, and how from them we the church today can relearn the forgotten language of lament.

Rediscovering the Psalms in a Mack Truck

First, let me take you back to a story from my own life. About a dozen years ago, in the middle of the night, in the godforsaken backcountry of the Texas panhandle, I sat cursing behind the wheel of Mack truck that was stuck deep in the snow and mud on a steep hill, with a full trailer of waste-water in my tanker behind me. A couple of years before, I’d been a Hebrew professor; now I was a truck driver. I’d been married; now I was divorced. I’d been at the top of my game; now I was a disgraced, depressed, shame-filled lost cause who was in a complicated relationship with the God whom I both hated and wanted to get back together with. My prayers, when I did pray, didn’t begin with “O Almighty God” or “Heavenly Father” or “Sweet Jesus,” but something along the lines of “Where the hell are you and what the hell are you doing with me?”

That night, as I wiled away the hours, waiting for a bulldozer to show up and pull my truck out of the mud, I reached for a book that I sometimes carried in the cab with me. It was an old copy of the Psalms. And there, with the darkness pressing in all around me and within me, something unexpected happened: the Psalter began to teach me a rather dark language as well. You see, there was so much I wanted to say to God, but I didn’t even know where to begin. How could I tell him that I felt nothing but death inside me? How could I translate into intelligible speech, much less prayer, the ooze of shame that slathered my insides; the roar of anger that echoed within me; that flesh-tearing feeling of being devoured from the inside by hopelessness and abandonment? How to tell God that it seemed to me he was wearing the mask of a devil? Or even worse, that he had simply packed his bags, left me a divorce decree on the kitchen table, and hightailed it for some Deistic all-inclusive resort on the other side of eternity, never to be seen or heard from again. How in God’s name do you pray things like that?

To my shock, I discovered that night—and many subsequent nights thereafter—that you pray things like that in God’s name by speaking back to God the words he himself gave us in the psalms of lament. A basic definition for a lament psalm might be this: any psalm that embarrasses churchgoers today. That asks God questions those in polite company simply do not presume to ask. That accuses God of forsaking his people, drinking too much liquor and collapsing dead drunk on the battlefield of our lives, forgetting what love and fidelity are, kicking us down into a deep stinking grave full of bones and leaving us there to rot, or any of the other uncomfortable petitions that bite and snarl when you try and put a leash on them. Those are lament psalms. And when I found them lurking inside that Psalter, I realized that this broken-down, broken-hearted man had finally discovered the kinds of prayers that matched my condition. And so I began hurling them toward heaven. Wounded prayers for a wounded man. Yet wounded prayers that, by the relentless mercy of the God who both gave and received them, were healing prayers for those crawling toward the flickering light at the portal of the Easter tomb.

I was living the theme of this conference. The “Broken Life” was not a theoretical topic for discussion in a faculty lounge; it was not a killer book idea; it was my 24/7 existence. If Luther was right in insisting that Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio, make a theologian, then that third category was at work on me. I didn’t know it, of course. And I damn sure didn’t desire it. I just thought God had transmogrified himself into my enemy. “What a foe I have in Jesus,” was my favorite hymn. What I found in the thick of this Tentatio, however, was also a way to engage in Oratio, in prayer. And, lo and behold, since much of this Oratio while in Tentatio took place while praying the psalms of the Bible, I suppose I was also engaged in Meditatio. But I didn’t care about any of this Latin, or Luther, or anything quite so theoretical. I just wanted to stay alive. I just wanted to find some way to wake up and not put a pistol in my mouth. I just wanted some way, even if by a millimeter, to crawl back a little closer to God.

Forgive me, if you will, for this little foray into the midnight of my soul from a few years ago, but I tell you the story because, frankly, I wouldn’t be here with you if it hadn’t happened. I’d be dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, or dead from alcohol poisoning, or dead while still living because I was stuck in a hopeless life. It sounds strange even now to say this, but lament saved my life. It gave me words when all my speech toward God was lost. Lament not only gave me the permission, but the blessing, and even the language, by which to scream, yell, weep, fight, and bang on heaven’s closed door until it swung open and I was able to face the God whom I loved and feared and was royally pissed off at. Lament was the only heart language that made sense when living the broken life.

Over the years since then, piece by piece, the Lord of patience and mercy glued the shards of my life back together again. Like our resurrected Lord, I still bear the scars of former wounds. And for those scars I am now very thankful. And I endeavor to be a good steward of those scars. One of the ways I do so is by encouraging people, over and over, not to be a tourist in the world of the Psalms but to choose that zip code as their permanent address. As you probably all know, one of the Ecumenical Councils decreed that a person could not be ordained as a bishop unless he had learned the entire Psalter by heart. This was not a mere legalism, but an open-eyed realization that, if you’re going to shepherd God’s people, you’d better be well at home in David’s poetic and prayerful and lament-laden world. Along these same lines, I’ve encouraged countless people not to be brownnosers in prayer, telling God what we think he wants to hear, but to be honest, even if that means being angry, raw, hurt, confused, confrontational, or simply asking God to go away and leave them alone (Ps. 39:13).

The Voice of Blood

I find it fascinating that, when we scan the biblical story with an eye for lament, we don’t have to journey very far before we come across the first occurrence. What’s even more remarkable is that it’s not only the first occurrence of lament, but the first prayer ever recorded in Scripture. “The voice of the blood of your brother is crying out to me from the ground,” (Gen. 4:10). The Hebrew verb *tsa’aq*, “crying out,” is the verb used over 50x in the OT, frequently for people crying out to God in times of fear, panic, or distress. Genesis 4 is its first occurrence. And, in many ways, this first time sums up all we need to know. Let me explain.

Adam and Eve were, and were not, the first two human beings. Truth be told, there’s much about this first couple that’s pretty hard for us to identify with. Neither one of them were conceived and born. There are no baby pictures of Adam and Eve. They were never children, never teenagers, never had to figure out how to get along with mom and dad, and brothers and sisters. It’s pretty hard to identify with someone who doesn’t even have a birthday—not to mention are perfect specimens of humanity. So, yes, on the one hand, Adam and Eve are the first human beings, but on the other hand, they’re not.

But their sons, Cain and Abel, now that’s a different story. From our perspective, judged on the basis of our own experiences, these two are the first two people. They’re not crafted from dirt, or built from a rib, but are conceived when a man and woman have a pleasurable little roll in the hay. We know all about that. They’re not born into a pristine paradise where everything is 100% A.O.K., but into a royally screwed up world where snakes bite, oncologists are never out of work, and coffins are sometimes only three feet long. We know all about that, too. Cain and Abel, unlike their parents, are the first two human beings whose story we can read and say, “Oh, yeah, those two—we know where they’re coming from.”

As important, therefore, as the first three chapters of the Bible are, it’s really not until chapter 4 when human history begins. For there, in Genesis 4, in a mere 15 verses, we encounter all the down and dirty stuff of real life in our real world: men and woman having sex and making babies; people getting up in the morning and going to work; a man with a chip on his shoulder and a slab of ice in his heart; families in turmoil; brothers at war; and blackened blood pooling on the ground next to the cold and lifeless body of the first victim of violence the world has ever seen. Sex, envy, malice, murder, lies, and—in the midst of it all—worship: that’s what we find in Genesis 4. As I say, here is when human history*, our broken history*, begins.

And, quite fittingly, it’s also where prayer and lament begin. I often wonder if the whole history of the world would have been different if Cain had done something more than skulked off all crestfallen to go and lick his wounded pride. Have you ever noticed that it’s not until after the murder that Cain speaks to God? God speaks to him. He asks why Cain is angry. He tells Cain that sin is crouching at his door. He tells Cain *timshel* (Thou mayest or Thou must), the word over which John Steinbeck made so much hay in *East of Eden*. And how does Cain respond? He doesn’t. In the Hebrew, God speaks 21 words to Cain and Cain responds with zero. Utter silence. No, “Why are you not pleased with me?” No, “Why did you not accept my sacrifice?” Not even a “Help me, God, for I am full of anger and resentment and bloodthirsty thoughts.” Nothing.

What if those who are experiencing hatred toward others knew how to lament, to take the raw material of their animosity and build a prayer out of it? What if young men like Cain, who are angry at the world, angry at themselves, and angry with Being itself, could somehow direct their violence toward heaven instead of classmates or teachers or random strangers? Perhaps they’d pray something like this, something I wrote when my own countenance had fallen, and when I would gladly have done violence to some of those with whom I was angry:

Twinkle, twinkle little scars
Wounds upon heaven’s hide
Where molten words from
Souls enraged and enflamed
Are hurled toward the deity
Who answers with deafening silence.
Words flaring through the inky veil
Behind which the Light resides—
Or hides or snores or cackles—
Whatever that one does while those
Who suffocate in darkness writhe
Beneath the canopy of muteness,
Wishing upon smoldering scars.

That was my lament. It was my way to avoid the way of Cain. If nothing else, throwing violent words heavenward helped to keep me from throwing violent actions toward those on earth.

Cain does speak, but he speaks not to God, but to his brother. But by then, it’s too late. Not having lamented to the God with whom he was angry, he laid into the brother who was iconic of the one with whom he was angry. For Cain, Abel was God in effigy. Every blow upon Abel was a blow directed toward heaven.

And, in the aftermath, a bewildering thing began to happen. We couldn’t have seen it had we been there. It was meta-visual, if you will. We couldn’t have heard it, either, for it was meta-auditory. But as the body of the first victim of violence blackened the soil with his blood, a strange and wondrous prayer arose as a liquid lamentation that cried out to God. Wonder of wonders, but we discover in Genesis 4:10 that blood has a voice; the voice cries out to God; and the bloody voice is heard.

As Patrick Miller notes, “The first time that God appears on the human scene in response to human address is at the very beginning, in response to the inarticulate but voiced cries of the blood of ‘the brother’ Abel…So at the beginning of the human story and of the biblical story…the voice of the suffering one, the brother, who cries out for help, is what brings God on the scene, what initiates a divine response. It is instructive,” Miller goes on to say, “that the first time the voice of lament is heard in Scripture, it is the voice of one who is already murdered, already dead. That warns us against assuming that the only laments that matter are those where there is still possibility of help, that once the suffering has destroyed the human creature it is too late, nothing can be done, God cannot and will not help…Cries for God’s justice and mercy are not silenced forever, even in death.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

I do not like, or agree with, the stanza from “Glory Be to Jesus,” that Lenten hymn, where we sing “Abel’s blood for vengeance, Pleaded to the skies.” Nothing is said about vengeance in Genesis 4. And, in Hebrews 12:24, we read that the blood of Jesus “speaks better than the blood of Abel.” Better, not radically different. What do we know: maybe the blood of Abel was crying out for mercy for his own murdering brother? Maybe this first lament, right on the cusp of human history, was as eschatological cry for God to step in and made everything sad and bad and evil come untrue. Maybe the blood of this first martyr was already participatory in the blood of the great Martyr, whose own blood does indeed speak better and bolder than the blood of Abel.

What we do know is this: in Genesis 4, in a broken world, already full of broken people, the faithful of God respond to violence and loss and death with lament. I don’t think Abel was asking for his parents to throw him a Celebration of Life service. I don’t think Abel was wanting everyone to move on, remember the good times, fake it till you make it, wear a smile and get on with their lives in the pursuit of happiness. Even while dead, Abel spoke. His lament, in some ways, was a summons to God to do something. His lament pronounced that this world is broken, and, by God, something needs to be done about it. His liquid lament, which the ground opened its mouth to drink, polluted that soil. It pronounced that God’s good world is in dire need of recreation. And that is the ongoing message of lament. It seems to me that in our cultures of violence, we would do well to teach the Cains in our congregations how to lament (before it may be too late), and to put laments into the mouths of Abels and their loved ones when violence strikes. Because, as we see, blood has a voice; blood cries out to God; and blood is always heard.

**From Naomi to Bitter**

But, of course, in our dealings with broken people in a broken world, we’re not just striving to minister to those who struggle with or against violence. Very often we’re attempting to comfort those who, from day to day, aren’t sure what kind of God they’re up against. Is he for me or against me? Does he love me, or does he despise me? On the one hand, he’s promised to be faithful, to never leave my side, but on the other hand, everything I witness and feel testifies that he has turned against me, that he’s abandoned me. In other words, we’re surrounded by—and often we ourselves are—that blunt and honest widow named Naomi.

Naomi is one of the best embodiments in the OT of the pendulum swings that believers go through when we’re trying to be faithful to God, but every time we turn around, the rug gets ripped out from underneath our feet. We have terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days (or months or years!), and almost every time what happens is outside our control. A few years ago, my sister’s daughter had a premature baby, a little girl named Remi, who was in NICU for months; that same year her husband, my brother-in-law, who is a farmer and rancher, fell seriously ill and couldn’t take care of the cattle or farming; and, finally, my sister fell off a stool and broke her leg. All within a matter of months. Of course you have such stories, too, some much worse. People go to church, raise their children well, seem to do all the right things, and still their lives, their health, their sanity, their finances, fall apart. People like Naomi.

You know her story. During a famine, she, her husband, and their two sons leave Bethlehem to live in Moab. In her own words, she leaves “full” (1:21). Sure, times were tough, but Naomi has those whom she loves and who love her. And, for a while, life remains that way. Then, episode by episode, things rise and fall, rise and fall. First her husband dies. Later, the two boys find wives and settle down. From what we can tell from the story, both daughters-in-law love Naomi, and she them, so perhaps this was a balm to her sorrow. But then, either one after the other, or both at once, the two sons die as well. And, as the story so starkly puts it, “The woman was bereft of her two children and her husband” (1:5).

When Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, after a decade-long absence, is when the narrative takes some rather bizarre turns with regard to Naomi’s relationship with God. On the one hand, she hears that the Lord has visited his people in Bethlehem and given them food (1:6). So far, that’s positive. Next, when she attempts to send both Ruth and Orpah back to their mother’s homes, she offers a benediction free of all malice, “May the Lord deal kindly [Hebrew: *chesed*] with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband,” (1:8). The word “deal kindly” in Hebrew is “do chesed” to you. Again, so far, all’s positive. One would think, based on what we know so far, that Naomi is the female version of the Job of chapter 1, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” She’s one of those stalwart soldiers of the faith, undaunted by hardship, probably of German heritage (!), with a little Stoicism mixed with her Israeliteism.

But we’ve seem only one side of Naomi so far. We’ve seen, if I may, the “church side.” The sitting in the pew, singing, “Joy to the World,” saying “Amen,” shaking the pastor’s hand as she leaves church, Naomi. The follows the rules of all the ecclesiastical etiquette Naomi. But that’s not the whole picture, as we’re about to see. When both Ruth and even Orpah, at first, insist on accompanying her back to her hometown, a little more of the full Naomi opens up. She tells them No, go home, I’m not having any more sons. I am useless to you. And here’s the ultimate reason why: “Because the hand of Yahweh has gone forth against me” (1:13). Or, as I would translate it, “Indeed, Yahweh’s own hand has struck me!” God has brought his fist down hard on her. Usually, in the Hebrew, it would say the hand of the Lord “was” against someone, with the simple form of the very *hayah*. The hand of the Lord was against so-and-so. But not here; that’s far too mild for Naomi. She uses the verb *yatza*, an action verb, “to go forth.” It’s not as if God has placed his open hand in her path to block her; he’s aggressively attacked her as if she is his enemy.

But she’s not done yet. Naomi has more to say. After her well-known acquiescence to let Ruth return with her, both women arrive in Bethlehem and the whole town is stirred up. The women of the community ask, “Is this Naomi?” (1:19). Now it seems as if all her pretense drops. “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (1:20-21). There’s so much subtlety going on here that’s it difficult to catch all the nuances, but here are a few:

1. Naomi’s story fits the pattern of the early patriarchs in that she has to leave the promised land because of a famine, as did Abram and Sarai. But in a cruel reversal, she doesn’t come home rich like Abram and Sarai, but poor and bereft of everything.
2. After their exile and return, Abram and Sarai have their names changed positively to Abraham and Sarah because they will have a promised son. Naomi, on the other hand, after her exile and return, changes her own name to reflect the negative turn of her life. Indeed, she’s the only person in Scripture to do this.
3. And then there’s the name itself: She is no longer Naomi, which means pleasant or lovely, but Mara, which means “bitter.” What’s more, the Hebrew verb for “dealt very bitterly” is in the [Hiphil] causative form. She indicts the Lord. He personally has made this happen.
4. There’s bitter irony in Naomi’s choice of words for return: “the LORD has brought me back empty.” Again, the form of verb here is [Hiphil] causative. I didn’t just return. I was brought back. Most of the time, when God causes his people to return from exile, it’s a good thing. He brings Abram and Sarai back full; he brings Jacob back full; later, he brings Israel back from Babylon, full of hope. But Naomi? No, he causes her to return empty, depleted, and hopeless.
5. And one more thing: Naomi uses legal language. The Lord has witnessed against me. She, a widow, the paradigmatic person in Israel whom God is supposed to watch over, part of the “widows and orphans” that are never to be overlooked, that judges are supposed to make sure they deal justly toward—she, a widow, has God himself witnessing against her in this trial. She’s been prosecuted, found guilty (of something), and sentenced to a life of bitterness.

Now, please notice, one very important fact—one very unpopular bit of theology that Naomi embraces here—she places all the blame for her troubles on God. Not “life,” not bad luck, not fate, not Karma, not even the devil. She doesn’t theologize about the antecedent and consequent will of God. No, in typical OT fashion, she bluntly wags her finger at heaven and says, “You and you alone are to blame for all of this.”

What I find particularly fascinating about Naomi is you’re not sure which Naomi you’re going to encounter when she uses God-talk. Will it be the “may the Lord deal kindly with you” Naomi as she talks to her daughters-in-law or the “God has attacked me, dealt bitterly with me, and persecuted me” Naomi when she talks to the women of Bethlehem? At the risk of reading too much into this narrative, she sounds to me like most women and men who come from faithful, churchgoing families, when they’re dealt a serious blow. We’re caught between two tendencies: one, to pray in the same pious fashion we’ve all been taught; and, two, to pray violent words.

Robert Barron, the Roman Catholic auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, tells the story of a woman some years ago, in Chicago, who was going through just such an ordeal. Her husband had been hospitalized for a long period of time as he battled cancer. Every day this woman was by her husband’s side. She would hold his hand. Read him Scripture. Pray the Our Father. Comfort him in any way she could. One day, she just had to get out of the hospital. A group of nuns happened to be on the sidewalk as well as she walked out the doors. They watched the woman as she stormed up to a statue of the Virgin Mary and just lost it. Just went berserk. She stooped down and began grabbing handfuls of dirt and rocks and hurling them at the statue. Again and again in this explosion of anger. One of the sisters started to run over and stop her. But an older sister put her hand on the nun’s shoulder. “No, no,” she said. “Leave her alone. She’s praying.”

That woman might have been named Naomi. Or Beth. Or Veronica. Or any of the other names of those who refuse to “to pole vault over complaint and petition in order to arrive more quickly at confidence and praise.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Instead, Naomi faces it head on, grabbing handfuls of dirt and rocks and throwing them about.

Now you are Naomi’s pastor. One temptation, it seems to me, is to help Naomi find a better, more acceptable, more positive and constructive way to speak to God. To tell her, *at this point*, that God causes all things to work together for good, and to pray that the Lord would give her patience and hope as she awaits that future epiphany of divine benevolence. Worse yet, to urge her to follow the path of early Job and stoically smile as we swallow this bitter pill. And, still worse yet, to give even the impression that it is not right to question God. If we can’t question God, who can we question? If we can’t talk openly and frankly and woundedly to our Father, then let’s just down this whole church thing as a big fat sham—or, at the very least, rip the book of Psalms out of our Bibles because we no longer believe what most of them say.

* Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1)
* I say to God, my Rock: “Why have you forgotten me?” (Ps. 42:9).
* Why have you rejected me? (Ps. 43:2).
* Why are you sleeping, O Lord? (Ps. 44:23).
* Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? (Ps. 74:1)
* O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? (Ps. 88:14).

On and on the Psalms go, interrogating God. Why are you not acting? Where have you gone? How long will you reject me? It is not an act of faithlessness to question God. Quite the opposite—it is the prayer of faith. The lament of divine interrogation rests upon a faithful relationship with the One who is addressed. Faith—at least the OT kind—is not a passive acceptance of life’s tragedies but a fiery and faithful Hebraic cry of How Long, Why, and Where the hell are you?

Naomi’s pastor, rather than discouraging such lament, embraces it and prays it alongside this bitter, suffering, bereft woman—as does her community. We are privy, of course, to the rest of Naomi and Ruth’s story. But at this point in her life, she was not. And the people to whom we minister, they are not. So, for now, while they suffer the wounds of loss, grief, confusion, and uncertainty, we join our voices with theirs to the only one who can ultimately give hope and healing again. And we give heaven no rest until he acts in accordance with his status as our Father. Weeping may last a night, but joy comes in the morning, as the Psalmist says. But as long as that night remains, let tears fall and lamentations arise.

**What a Madman Teaches Us About Prayer**

Before I shift our focus to the New Testament, I’d like to take a brief look at one more OT story—a with it, add a few thoughts about its connection to the book of Lamentations itself. You might call this section, “What a Madman Teaches Us About Prayer.”

Relatively early in David’s life, when he was still an “outlaw,” on the run from King Saul, he fled—of all places—to a city of the Philistines called Gath. This was beyond counterintuitive (one might call it foolishly brazen), not just because the Philistines were the top enemies of Israel, but because you might recall that what made David famous was a certain man-to-man combat he had with Goliath *of Gath*! In 1 Samuel 21:10-15, where this incident is recorded, we’re told that it wasn’t long before the servants of the king came to him and said, “Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?’ And David took these words to heart, and greatly feared Achish king of Gath.” As well he might! Here he was, on the run from one crazed king, right into the city of an enemy king.

But isn’t David simply instantiating the fundamental human propensity to try to solve one problem and end up creating a myriad of other problems? Like the woman who is having marital issues, feels unloved by her husband, so she decides to deal with that emotional problem by having an affair? And soon her life, which she only thought was bad before, is now a total wreck, full of chaos and confusion. Or like the man who, during a financial crisis at home, decides to steal from his employer to help make ends meet, but winds up getting caught, losing his job, probably going to jail, and likely losing his family in the process. We’re these little Walter White’s, breaking bad and expecting good to issue from it. Or Daenerys Targaryen, thinking we’ll make everything OK by riding our dragons and torching everything in sight. That’s not the way life works.

So here’s David, giant-slayer, in a giant heap of trouble caused by his own imprudence. But, giving credit where credit is due, David at least comes up with a plan. He feigns madness. He scribbles on the doors of the gate. He lets saliva run down his beard. A regular Thespian, this young man. In fact, he’s so convincing that, when David is hauled before the king, he says, “Look, you see the man is behaving as a madman. Why did you bring him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence?” (21:14-15). So out

David goes.

Now all that makes for a somewhat comical story—as well as a not-so-funny parable of the human condition—but here’s where it really gets interesting: the superscription of Psalm 34 says this prayer was written in relation to this episode from David’s life. What makes this interesting, and instructive, is that Psalm 34 is one of the eight acrostic psalms (Pss. 9/10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). Acrostics, or alphabetical psalms, of course, are those in which the opening line begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each successive line follows the order of the alphabet. Such psalms are, by definition, organized, predictable, stable, with a clear beginning and a clear end. They are the literary antithesis of chaos.

The fact that an acrostic psalm is prayed in response to a chaotic situation—that is what this supposedly Hebrew madman teaches us about prayer. In the most chaotic times of life, we maintain a white-knuckled grip on anything that remains predictable. It might be a close friendship or a gym routine. It might be something simple like how you fold and stack the towels. We’re clinging to a vestige of stability. Unchangeableness. Something or someone to anchor us while we're whirling in a vortex of uncertainty. If your health, career, or marriage feels like one of those vomit-inducing carnival rides, the last thing you need is more of your life unhinged.

There is an unspoken but vital truth embedded in the very structure of David’s prayer. The more out-of-control our lives become, the more stable and even predictable we need our prayers to be. Not only in the acrostic psalms, but in all of them, we have methodical, predictable prayers that lead us from A to B to C all the way to Z and back. Even the most wild and untamed prayers in the psalms are fenced in by order, symmetry, predictability. They organize our chaos. They bring order and hope and stability to our broken and fragmented lives.

Along with many others, I would argue that this is why Lamentations—a book about chaos, confusion, disorder, pain, heartache, anger, forsakenness, and all the formlessness and void of an uncreated city—is one of the most spectacularly organized, unchaotic books of the Scriptures. It reads, if you can imagine this, like a moan set to music, like a flood of tears marching in step down Israel’s cheeks. With four chapters of the five written as acrostics, the laments of the city rise to God, from A to Z. This both limits and expands the prayers—limiting by the number of letters in the alphabet but also expansive in the sense that they contain everything (as we say, “from A to Z”). As Kathleen O’Connor writes, “I think the alphabetic devices embody struggles of survivors to contain and control the chaos of unstructured pain.”[[4]](#endnote-4) She goes on, “The alphabet gives both order and shape to suffering that is otherwise inherently chaotic, formless, and out of control. It signifies the enormity of suffering as a vast universe of pain…It tries to force unspeakable pain into a container that is familiar and recognizable even as suffering eludes containment. It implies that suffering is infinite, for it spans the basic components of written language from beginning to end.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Although the acrostic organization of a Hebrew psalm of lament may have no bearing on English-speaker, the chosen literary organization of the prayer bespeaks the need for those broken by sin, broken by sickness, broken by violence or loneliness not to be told simply, “Just pray,” but to be given what to pray. That was my situation, years ago, as I drove my truck in the oil fields. I didn’t know the language of the languishing. I had to learn it. It had to be given to me. The inclusion of more psalms in the liturgy, the inculcation of the practice of praying them, their role in catechesis and pastoral care—I think—cannot be overstated. There’s a reason the Psalms are the most quoted OT book in the NT: here is the poetic mosaic of the entire Scriptures. As Luther says, “The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book. If for no other reason than this: it promises Christ’s death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully everything that is in the entire Bible.”[[6]](#endnote-6) It should come as no surprise to find that the Psalms are the most quoted OT book in the NT.

**The Lament of Christ Crucified**

Speaking of the NT, let’s shift gears to look at lament from the perspective of the Gospels. Or, to put it differently, let’s gather together the strands of everything that we’ve covered so far—from Cain and Abel, to Naomi, to David, to Lamentations—and see how all these diverse stories weave together around the person of Christ. And, in him, to see how the language of lament, rather than sounding foreign, like a Texan speaking French, this language of lamentation flows perfectly from his lips as the very heart language of the Messiah. As we shall see, Christ demonstrates that lament is the foundation stone of all prayer, *the* messianic prayer, and the means by which he both incorporates into himself the fragments of the world and thereby makes the world whole in himself.

We saw in Genesis 4 that the first prayer was a cry, that Hebrew verb tsa’aq, issuing from the one who bore in his own body and blood the results of the Fall. This foundational response to suffering, to tsa’aq, to cry out, is the “the primary mode of conversation between God and the human creature.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The sheer fact that we are human is the basis for this conversation. It’s not rooted in distinctly Israelite history or ritual. It is the basic response of life in a fractured world. There is hardly anything more essential to being human than to tsa’aq.

One might even define lament as just that—the cry for God to hear. The prayer of a creation slipping back into ex nihilo that calls for the Logos to act. Yes, of course, there are particular genres of lament: individual, communal, even a particular kind of city lament (such as we read in Lamentations). We see all of these represented in the Psalms, of which about 40% (!) are laments. And, yes, lament occurs often in ritual situations. One thinks of David’s funeral lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:17-27). But laments, defined more broadly as “crying out” to God in times of suffering, populate the Scriptures from beginning to end. After Abel, even Cain pleads with God for mercy after killing his brother. And after these brothers, on and on the prayers pile up, all the way into the ministry of Jesus when blind Bartimaeus will not shut up, will not take No for answer, as he laments to the Son of David to have mercy upon him.

Lament, therefore, far from being an exceptional mode of prayer, reserved for the most trying times of loss or grief, is the rule. It is the rule because pain and suffering are the inescapable rule in this life. Pain and suffering sometimes literally break our language, send us backwards in time to before we even spoke. When all we can do was cry or scream or moan, before we learned words that vocalize the unvocablizable. And we, the priests of God, those who bear his image, who have been ordained into the body of the high priest himself, we stand as the mouthpiece of a pain-soaked world that doesn’t how to pray, and we pray for them as we pray for ourselves. We offer up the pain of the world to the Creator in speech he himself has given us to say. When we do so, we are being fundamentally human.

This fundamentally human activity of crying out to God in any and every need was taken over by the Son of the Father in his Incarnation. The book of Hebrew describes how “in the days of his flesh, [Christ] offered up both loud cries and tears to the One able to save him from death,” (5:7). The Greek verb behind the form “cries” (κραυγῆς) is often used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew tsa’aq. We might paraphrase it, “Christ offered up loud laments, mixed with tears, to his Father.” And note he did this: “in the days of his flesh.” Not just at a certain point but lifelong. Characteristic of his “days of flesh,” one might say, befitting his humanity, he offered up loud laments mixed with tears.

But this is more than simply a man being a man, engaged in human activities. This is the Word made flesh, the Image-maker-made-Image, who comes (in the language of Irenaeus) to recapitulate humanity so as to recreate a new race who are in communion with God through the divine flesh of the Son. What this means is that, just as the blood of this first martyr, Abel, was already participatory in the blood of the great Martyr, Jesus, so the lament of Abel was participatory in the lament of Jesus. Or, to say it better, the laments of Jesus gathered together the past, present, and future tears and cries of all humanity into one and became the univocal cry of God to God, the Son to his Father, in the very breath of the Spirit himself. A pneumatic, incarnational cry to the Father which cannot *not* be heard for it is the choir from Genesis to Revelation all funneled down to exit the mouth of the soloist Savior himself. The mouth of Jesus becomes all human history: Abel’s blood, Rachel’s weeping, Zion’s cry, all the way to the choked sobs of Gulag prisoners and the frantic wails of mothers who cannot find their children after the tornado, the hurricane, the shooting. His voice is theirs and theirs his because all humanity is perched atop his tongue.

His identification with our suffering…no, better, his assumption and transformation of our suffering—making it his own more than our own, so that it not he who is crucified with us but we with him—that assumption and transformation of our suffering reaches its acme in the crucifixion. If the Bethlehem manger was the first visual epiphany of the divine condescension—God willingly becoming one of us—then the Jerusalem cross was the climactic epiphany of that condescension. But was it a condescension? Was it a “going down” only? Was it not an ascension, a “lifting up.” Yes, in the topsy-turvy ways of God, he goes down into the depths of suffering and death but in that very act simultaneously is lifted up from the earth to draw all people to himself, as he says in John (12:32). Thus, one might say, Christ clarifies his own incarnation by crucifixion. He is the Word made suffering flesh. The Word made lamenting flesh. On the cross, more clearly than in the manger, we see Emmanuel.

And we hear him, too, do we not? What does he say? “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” (Matt. 27:46). Note this well. If you remember one thing, let it be this: On that Good Friday in which we behold the clearest manifestation of who God is in his relation to humanity, and who we are in our relation through Christ to the Father, what do we hear but a psalm of lament? Lama—why? We hear a questioning of God. A challenge. An audacious pounding on heaven’s door, demanding, Why? And not just a generic Why but an accusatory Why. Lama sabachtani (as the Aramaic has it) or Lama Azavtani (as the Hebrew has it). Why have you exiled me to this faraway, dark, country of death? “Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry out by day, but Thou dost not answer; and by night, by I have no rest.” This is not a singular voice of singular broken man but the compressed lament of all of us who live east of Eden. To say we preach Christ crucified is also to embrace the crucified prayer, the lament.

And this lamenting God, sunk into our suffering, drawing all humanity to himself so that in him we might be healed, this is the only God we know. As odd as it seems at first, I find myself in agreement with much of what the atheists, old and new, say. I reject the existence of the same gods they reject. When it comes to belief in a higher power, a great being, a sadistic power, or a milk toast generic god: I agree, they don’t exist. The only God that exists is the God lamenting atop the cross, the God who is also a man.

We learn on the cross, therefore, who God is, who we are, and how we pray as those who are co-crucified with this one who unites both heaven and earth in himself. We pray in faith. Jesus, and we in him, say, “Eli, Eli,” my God, my God. The pronoun is pregnant with faith. Not just El but Eli, not just God but my God. In fact, read verses 4-5 of the same psalm:

In Thee our fathers *trusted*;

They *trusted*, and Thou didst deliver them.

To Thee they *cried out*, and were delivered.

In Thee they *trusted*, and were not disappointed.

Did you hear it? Three times we’re told they trusted, and once we’re told they “cried out” (za’aq, a verb synonymous with tsa’aq). The four verbs, joined like a trains cars, one after the other, are parallel. “The crying out for help in complaint, anger, questioning, and supplication is all an act of trust. How does one spell “trust”? You spell it out in the words of lament.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

That we pray in faith is the very reason we are bold to pray in naked honesty. Not pretending all is well. Not faking a confidence that we don’t have. But, just as theologians of the cross call a thing what it is, we pray as things are and not as we wish they were. We can do this only because we are in Christ. Don’t you see how crucial the preaching of the Gospel is to honesty in prayer? Only because I believe that in Christ I am free, chosen, forgiven, beloved, adopted, and everlastingly OK with God—only because all of that is true can pray truthfully. Only because I believe that God loves me can I also tell him he’s acting like he doesn’t love me. Only because I believe that on the cross of Jesus, God is giving us an epiphany of his heart can I now say that he seems hard-hearted or cold-hearted. There is not contradiction here. The Scriptures hold these tightly together. Remember that the perfect man with perfect faith is the very one who says, “My God, my God, where the hell are you? You don’t answer me. You give me no rest.” Remember, too, that at the end of the book of Job, after he’s bombarded heaven with words, demanding an answer, fighting with God tooth and nail, verb and noun—after all that, God says only of Job, that “he has spoken rightly of me,” (42:7). As one author puts it: “Job stays married to God and throws dishes at him; the three friends have a polite non-marriage, with separate bedrooms and separate vacations.”[[9]](#endnote-9) It might have been a heated marriage, but at least it was founded on honesty and a love that refused to let a winter chill freeze out all hope of healing.

**Relearning the Language of Lament**

I mentioned earlier that around 40% of the Psalms are classified as some kind of lament. So, almost half of the official liturgical songbook of Israel was comprised of some form of lament. Many of these, like Ps. 22, moved from address to complaint and finally to resolution and praise. On the other end of the spectrum is Ps. 88, which ends, quite literally, in darkness. Still others, like Ps. 39, stumble from darkness to light and light to darkness, ending with the rather shocking address to God, “Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more!” Whatever form they take, they’re real. They’re transparent. And they are the ongoing, loud voice of singing among the people of God.

That we have lost. Lost almost completely. Even our hymns and songs that might be classified as lament are quite lame and timid when compared to the brash and bold words of the Psalms. And that, it seems to me, might be a good place to start. The words we sing are revelatory of our theology. That’s why the hymnologist Erik Routley once quipped that hymns are both delightful as well as dangerous. In a little book I wrote years ago, entitled *Why Lutherans Sing What They Sing*, I noted that “if you wish to know the good, the bad, or the ugly confession of an individual or congregation, you might as well begin by asking them to sing a dozen of their favorite hymns…Put your ear to a church’s mouth—not your nose in her books—and there she will tell you what she truly believes.” As numerous studies have demonstrated, across denominational lines, one thing your ear will perceive is that, compared to the Psalms, we don’t really know the language of lament. So if you’re a poet, a hymn-writer, or have those in your churches who are, encourage them to wade into the dark waters of lament. And to bring back to the church hymns and songs that will give expression, in current language and idiom, to the deepest woes and longings of the faithful who cry out to God.

But, lest we overlook the obvious, we do have plenty of laments already written, ready to use, free to the church! We have 40% of the Psalter. And we have ample liturgical time to use them. I wonder, though, if the reason we don’t is because we almost unconsciously have adopted that “sacred” vocation as Press Secretary for God, explaining away things he said, carefully editing out material that might cause a stir, polishing his image before the world so as to make sure no one is offended. And, granted, many lament psalms are offensive to our sensitivities. Well, our sensitivities be damned—literally. To hell with them. Let them die and let God’s word live. The problem is not with the Psalms but with us. Rather than warping its language to meet our needs, let’s allow that Psalms to mold us to its language. Rather than praying these psalms, let’s let them pray us.

It seems to me, as well, that we are confronted with opportunity after opportunity to show the world how believers lament, in true crucifixion fashion, but are we doing it? When there is a school shooting, when there is a natural disaster, when there is any sort of community tragedy or horror, what a time to emulate OT Israel, our spiritual mother, and gather as a community of believers for a service of lamentation, honesty, tears, petitions, and—suffused through it all—the theology of the cross. How exactly such a service might look is a good question, and one that I’ll leave to the experts in worship to work out. But let’s not make it more difficult that it is. A bare bones Vespers or Evening Prayer service, interlaced with psalms of lament, readings from Lamentations, some words of our Lord from the Gospels, and a sermon that roots us in the crucified Christ would be a very good place to begin.

Let me wrap this up with reference to a rather lighthearted song with an underlying serious message. I grew up primarily in Texas, in the 1970’s and 80’s, with parents who listened to classical country music. We bounced along in our pickup truck, listening to George Jones, Hank Williams, Loretta Lyn, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, Dollie Parton. Over the years, as music will, country has undergone a bit of metamorphosis. Some might say a transmogrification. Not just in style but in the kinds of stories—or the lack thereof—they tell. Maybe I’m just getting old, or maybe it’s something else, but it seems to me that one of the attractions of classical country music was that it honestly reflected the tragedies of life, translated those into a rustic kind of poetry, and powered them by the fuel of a steel guitar. Aaron Lewis, formerly of Staind, who in recent years has gone the country route, gives voice to my frustration in his 2016 song, “That Ain’t Country.” He laments that much of country today, if you call it that, ain’t country because “it’s full of tales of good times and happy ending, my life ain’t like that.” The old songs were “full of pain and heartache and desperation and the ones that got away.” They were full of “truth and consequences, all the things gone wrong.” Those songs, Lewis says, are the “ones that speak to me, the way I feel today.”

Sure, there’s always a place for “tales of good times and happy endings,” but much of life “ain’t like that.” It’s “full of pain and heartache and desperation, and the ones that got away.” In the less country, more Christian vernacular, it’s full of nails and thorns and sweat and blood and sometimes martyrdom. Angry brothers. Unfaithful spouses. Drunk fathers. Violent enemies. And, as if all that were not enough, a person staring back at us in the mirror every day who is the greatest sinner we know. So the Spirit does what he always does: leads us to Jesus. Into his body and blood. Into his death and resurrection. And into his life of prayer, which includes laments, those kinds of prayers, as Lewis might say, that “speak to me, the way I feel today.”

1. The preceding lines are taken from my preface to Robert F. Capon’s book, *Exit 36: A Fictional Chronicle* (Mockingbird Ministries: 2018), ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Denise Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms*, 116, quoted by Glenn Pemberton in *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with Psalms* (Abilene Christian University Press: 2012), 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Preface to the Psalter,” in Luther’s Works, AE 35:254. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Patrick Miller, “Heaven’s Prisoners: The Lament as Christian Prayer,” from *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)