

*The Practice of Personal Lament*

Grieving in a healthy way, in a way that affirms God’s love for us even in the midst of pain, in a way that enables us to successfully return to loving God and loving neighbor, is modeled in the lament psalms of Scripture. These lament psalms reveal a structure that can guide us through the turmoil of trauma.

Glen Pemberton writes that lament “is not an outburst of unrestrained speech that gives free reign to an emotional torrent of words.”<sup>55</sup> Instead it is “a structured controlled language that by its methodological cadence helps restore a modicum of structure in times of disorientation.” Lament psalms accomplish this by providing a way of praying that incorporates five common elements:

1. an address to God,
2. complaints,
3. requests,
4. motivation (why God should act), and
5. confidence in God.

Through this structure, Pemberton writes, “lament itself begins to restore some sense of order in the midst of chaos.” Not all five of these components are in every lament psalm, and some lament psalms include additional components. But these five represent the core of biblical lament. They are handrails that allow us to grieve well. Psalm 13 reveals this structure:

1. Address to God: “How long, O Lord?” (Ps. 13:1a ESV)
2. Complaint: “Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps. 13:1b-2 ESV)
3. Request: “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes” (Ps. 13:3a ESV)
4. Motivation: “lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him, lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.” (Ps. 13:3b-4 ESV)
5. Confidence in God: “But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Ps. 13:5-6 ESV)

Using this structure, poet Ann Weems writes fifty psalms of lament with language from the psalms. Here is one:<sup>56</sup>

O Holy One, I can no longer see.  
 blinded by tears  
 that will not cease,  
 I can only cry out to you  
 and listen

<sup>55</sup> Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting With God* (ACU Press, 2012), 65.

<sup>56</sup> Ann Weems *Psalms of Lament* (Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1999) 10-11.

for your footsteps.

Are you, too, O God,  
blinded by tears?  
have you watched this world  
pile its hate  
onto the faces  
of your little ones  
until your eyes are so filled with tears  
that you cannot see me  
waiting for you?

Are you, O God,  
deafened by the expletives  
of destruction and death?  
have you heard  
so many obscenities  
that you cannot hear  
my moaning?  
O God, if you are blind,  
can't you hold out  
your hand to me?  
if you're deaf,  
can't you call my name?

How long, O God,  
am I to sit  
on the plain of blindness?  
How long am I to listen  
to the profanity  
of my enemies  
who mock:  
"Where is your God now?"

Show them, O my God,  
that you remember.  
reach out your hand  
and dry my eyes  
that I might see  
a new beginning.

