**Session #2: The Lament Psalms: (Psalm 13 & 137)**

# **What is a lament?**

* **For all:** a **complaint** (that things are not as they should be)
* **For believers:** ‘Lament is the **honest cry** of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.’ – Mark Vroegop[[1]](#endnote-1)
* **For the psalmist**: a **prayer of pained protest** that, despite God’s covenant promises, His people experience all manner of calamities: slander, sickness, privation, loss, treachery, violence, kinglessness, and even exile (see Ps 89:38-46).
* **1st 3 of 5 books mainly lament.**

# **An Individual Lament: Psalm 13**

**1. Superscription(s):**  ‘*For the director of music. A psalm of David.’*

* 116 of 150 psalms (**77%**)
* Can include writer, circumstance, occasion, musical directions (choirmaster, instrumentation, tune, etc.)
* Ps 13 an individual lament performed in a large group (temple) setting
* “A psalm of David”: “Le David” = **of/by/about/associated with”**

## **2. General Form**

* **Introduction** (v1-2): 1st person cry to God with questions or requests for God to act.
* **Body** (v3-4): details the suffering the narrator is currently experiencing (e.g. sickness, slander, sin, legal accusations, political upheaval, famine).
* **Conclusion** (v5-6): details the pivot to trust and confidence in the faithfulness of Yahweh [to His covenant], and expressions of commitment (to praise etc.).

## **3. Occasion**

* Absalom’s rebellion (Ps 3)?
* 15-year **pursuit by Saul** (cf. Ps 54, 57, 59)

## **4. Outline:**

* **Pain** (v1-2)
* **Prayer** (v3-4)
* **Praise** (v5-6)

## **5. Takeaways:**

* **Life is hard**—for believers too!
* ‘To cry is human; **to lament is Christian’** – Mark Vroegop
* Pain pushes the psalmist **towards** God, not away from Him
* The laments provide a **model** of how we might talk to our heavenly Father

# **A Communal/Imprecatory Lament: Ps 137**

**1. Definition: *‘Imprecation****, or cursing, is found a good many times in the Psalter; not cursing in the vulgar sense of bad language, but the serious invoking of supernatural power against one’s enemies.’ – Michael Wilcox, The Message of Psalms 1-72, p.119.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

## **2. Approach:**

* **We won’t** pretend v9 doesn’t exist, is not inspired, or is an inspired record of a misinformed, savage era[[3]](#endnote-3)
* **We will:** read it as it is: inspired Scripture, the Word of God; read it in its context (historical, theological and literary); wrestle with understanding its original meaning, then ongoing significance

**3. Historical context:** **post-exilic**. Freed from their Babylonian captivity by Cyrus the [conquering] Mede, the exiles return to their ravaged land. Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed.

**4. Theological context:** **Babylon**, Bible-wide symbol of evil & representative of Israel’s foes, has **destroyed** God’s covenant people, nation, holy city, temple, and line of kings

**5. Literary context:** Placed after Psalms of Ascent (120-134) & 2 appendix praise psalms

## **6. Outline:**

* Recalling the **Exile** in Babylon (1-4)
* Affirming an **Oath** to Jerusalem (5-6)
* Cursing the Edomites & Babylonians (7-9)
	+ Edomites (7)
		- Descended from Esau, Jacob’s brother (fraternal/kinship obligations)
		- Rejoiced, gloated, plundered, murdered as Jerusalem sacked (Obad. 10-14)
		- ‘Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did’ (see Lam 4:21-22)
	+ Babylonians
		- Sovereignly **used by God** to discipline his rebellious people
		- But Babylon was **still responsible**

## **Making Sense of the Imprecation/Curse**

**1. Babylon *was* horribly guilty (Jer 25:12; 51:24)**

* + of murdering God’s chosen people
	+ of exiling them from the promised land
	+ of destroying the nation and Jerusalem
	+ of desecrating God’s holy dwelling, the holy temple
	+ of ending the Davidic line of anointed kings
	+ And so became *the* Bible-wide symbol of evil (Rev 18:2, 20)

**2. Ancient justice was ‘in kind’ retribution**

* + *lex talionis, ‘*an eye for an eye’ (Deut 19:16-21; Hab 2:6-17; Lam 3:64-66)
	+ the precise measure here: ‘according to what you have done to us’ (v8; Isa 13:16-18)

**3. The psalmist vents, but leaves vengeance to the LORD** (this is true for all the lament psalms)

* **Vengeance** (as in justice ‘in kind’, *not* vengefulness):
	+ **is God’s domain**, perfectly dispensed by Him alone (Deut 32:35)
	+ **is requested** by the psalmist (‘remember’/’repay… according to…)
	+ has already been enacted [in part?] on Babylon by Cyrus (Jer 51:11-12, 56b; Dan 5; Isa 13; Cf. Rev 18:20)
* **Venting:**
	+ is a **normal** human emotion (we are looking over his shoulder)
	+ is often expressed in **hyperbolic** language in Scripture (and today)
		- *‘Cursed be the man who brought my father the news… For he did not* ***kill me in the womb*** *with my mother as my grave’* (Jer 20:15,17)
		- ‘*I’m gonna* ***murder*** *him! I could just wring his neck.’*
		- *‘He should be shot… hung, drawn and quartered.’*
		- *‘When I see him, I’m gonna bash his brains in.’*
	+ ‘Happy’ (Hebrew *asre*)*,* often translated ‘blessed’ as in Ps 1:1, here has more the sense of ‘fortunate’ or ‘**content**’. Q: *“How do you feel about the verdict for your daughter’s killer?”* A: *“I’m happy… We got a measure of justice.”*
	+ is **descriptive** of how he felt; **not prescriptive** of how he/we should act

## **Takeaways**

* In this horribly broken world, our **longing** for true justice is good and appropriate
* While humans pursue justice the best we can, **only divine justice** will be truly equitable
* It’s normal for real people—ancient and modern—to vent at injustice
* As Christians, we can **vent honestly**—confident in divine justice

**Vent, but leave vengeance to the LORD (Ro 12:19)**

1. END NOTES

 Mark Vroegop. https://www.crossway.org/articles/to-cry-is-human-but-to-lament-is-christian/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a detailed discussion, see article on “Imprecation” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Wrtitings* (IVP Academic, 2008), 314-320. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘If we are really honest with ourselves—down at the core of our being where only we and God truly know ourselves—we will have to admit, I think, that sometimes we too feel the kind of anger (sometimes even hatred) against those who have unjustly abused and belittled us. This is not simply an example (as it has sometimes been explained) of Old Testament, pre-Christ ignorance. It is not that the Israelites (whom the psalmist represents) just did not understand what God truly wanted because they had not yet experienced the gracious love and mercy of God poured out on sinful humanity through the work of Jesus. It is not simply that the Israelites were fiercely loyal to their nation as the one embodiment of the people of God and therefore viewed their own enemies as the enemies of God—and deserving of judgment. While there may be a germ of truth in these claims, it is just too easy to distort them and as a result to miss the challenge these verses make to our own moments of anger and hatred.’ – Gerald Wilson commenting on Ps 3 in *Psalms* Vol 1, NIV Application Commentary, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)