

Psalms “Laments”

The most common type of Psalm is known as a “lament.” However, these hymns to God are about more than complaint and the venting of grief or anger. They are deeply personal, typically composed in the first person, and exhibit an immense faith that God listens to prayer and possesses the power to right the wrong and heal the hurting.

We frequently find a hint of what sounds like self-justification in such Psalms, as the petitioner makes a case for why God ought to respond in the requested way, but the justification rests mainly upon the nature of the relationship between the person praying and God; it is about living together in a covenant. Such justification of prayer can often be accompanied by passages of exuberant and genuine praise, not meant to flatter God, but to express the person’s confidence in God’s goodness. This facet of the Psalm can become the dominant theme, almost masking the core identity of the prayer. Psalms 4, 16, 23, 27, 56, and 62, are good examples of this phenomenon.

“Lament” Psalms sometimes conclude with a promise of sacrifice, not to be misinterpreted as a “bribe” for God. We must remember that the ancient Israelites who first offered these Psalms lived in a relationship with God that included regular sacrifice of animals, grain, oil, and wine. The various elements of a “lament” Psalm can come in a variety of orders.

The subject of laments can be broadly broken down into three categories: sickness, such as in Psalm 38; persecution, such as in Psalm 26; or conflict, such as a Psalm 3.

A related category of Psalm deals with corporate, or communal, needs. Psalm 44, 47, 79, 80, and 83, are all good examples. They contain many of the same elements as “lament” Psalms, but are not addressed as personal prayers, but as the type of prayers that might be used during public worship. A key distinguishing factor of corporate “laments” is the inclusion of lengthy reflection on how God has blessed the Chosen People during the course of salvation history.

Small Group Questions

1. Can you think of a specific time in your life when you could identify with the author of Psalm 38, when you could have made it your prayer to God? What do you find uplifting in Psalm 38? What parts are disturbing to you?
2. How does Psalm 44 “fit” as a prayer for our nation or our parish? How might the Psalm be re-written in a way that brings meaning to the specific challenges we face as a country or a congregation?