

**The Big Picture**

While some Psalms remind us of the ways life is ordered by God, we too often recognize that our world is anything but ordered. Too often, we lament how disordered our world really is. We lament how bad things really are. What do we do when bad things happen to us? Where do we turn? How should we react?

**Biblical Text**

Psalms 5 or 51, among others. (All scripture quotations taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted.)

**Preparing for the Lesson**

The wisdom psalms and psalms of praise are easy for us to study. They reinforce everything good about life and remind us of a God who loves us and, in many ways, orders our world. However, we do not have to live much life before we discover that it is not always sunshine and roses.

What do we do when things go bad? And how do we turn to God with our fears and our anger, especially in light of spending a week learning about the way wisdom psalms reinforce the “order” of God’s world?

The good thing about the lament psalms is they give voice to our fears, our concerns, our sadness, and our anger. One thing you discover about the psalms of lament are the sheer number of psalms which fall into this category. (W. H. Bellinger Jr. lists the following psalms as psalms of lament: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 106, 108, 109, 120, 123, 126, 130, 137, 140, 141, 142, 143. Using his numbers, almost 45% of our psalms are laments.) Something addressed that often must not be inconsequential to God.

We are not going to attempt to address all of these psalms, nor are we going to be able to determine all of the different emotions and situations the psalmists touch in their writings, but what I do want to do is spend a few minutes being reassured by the simple fact that Scripture gives us an example of crying out to God in lament.

One of the things that those who study the Psalms tell us is that many of the laments follow a distinct pattern—that even as Israel cries out to God concerning their disordered life, there is some order in their pleas. Almost all of the psalms have two parts: a plea and a praise. (Psalm 88 is the notable exception to this, where the psalmist cried out to God, but never “resolves” his cry in praise to God.)

Within the plea, some or all of the following elements appear (I am using Walter Bruggemann’s outline of these elements, as found in his book *The Message of the Psalms*):

## An address to God

This is typically the initial cry. You can often tell a lament just by the anguish we see in the first words of the psalm.

## Complaint

Here is where the writer tells God what is going wrong in his life. God knows this, obviously, but the psalmist is careful to spell out the problem at hand.

## Preparing for the Lesson (cont.)

### Petition

Here, the writer says, is what I want you to do about this problem, God. The writer places the impetus to act directly on the shoulders of God. Even though I have the problem, it is God's responsibility to right it. (This has all kinds of implications about what we lament to God about, by the way.)

### Motivation

Here is where the writer lists why God should act, why he is the one responsible to *fix it*. The motivation can include the fact that the writer is innocent, the writer recognizes his guilt and has repented, God has already acted in this manner so should again, or that God's reputation will somehow be tarnished if he does not act.

### Imprecation

Sometimes, the author not only asks God to act, but also spells out how he should act against those who come against the author. (See Psalm 137.8-9 for the most drastic example of this I am aware of in Scripture. Preview it before you just read it to all the children in your group, by the way.)

The laments, with one noted exception, end with a return to a statement of praise, which serves to re-orient the disorder that has gone on in the world around the writer. The praise is often written in terms of "You *will* do this, God." This is not because the writer is demanding God to act as much as it is recognition that a world ordered by God includes a God who is all powerful and comes to the aid of his people. Therefore, his nature or character demands we praise him and that praise often comes across as a statement of understood fact.

Now, having given a brief overview of the outline of a lament psalm, what are you supposed to do with this?

Here is my suggestion. Share with your group the outline I have described above, then take one of the psalms of lament (I have suggested Psalm 5 or perhaps Psalm 51.) and read it together. Ask your group to identify the different parts of these psalms. When does the author move from one of the sections to another?

Then, once you have done this, ask your group if either of these two psalms (or whichever one you use) resonate with some of their own experiences? How did they react and how does having this information about the psalms of lament alter how they may react the next time their world is disordered.

The questions in the Discussion Questions section follow the outline I have described above and will help you work through one or more of these psalms.

## Possible Lesson Outline

A good ice-breaker question might be: Think about a time in your life when you felt on Cloud 9 spiritually. Also think about a time when you felt about as low as you could go in your faith? How did you handle these two extremes? What was similar in the ways you handled each? What was different?

Explain the two parts of most lament psalms—the plea and the praise, including the various elements of the plea. Then, ask your group to listen for these various elements in the reading of the psalm.

Read Psalm 5 (or 51 or another lament you choose).

Spend a few minutes asking Discussion Questions 1-6.

If you are going to look at more than one psalm, read the next psalm and ask Discussion Questions 1-6 again.

Ask Discussion Question 7.

End with a time of prayer.

### For the Kids

Depending on the age of your children, they may find it difficult to follow along with the outline of the lament psalms as I have described above. For this reason, this may be a lesson better suited for adult discussion, with the children included for the prayer time.

I do think, however, our children need to see us handle bad situations. If our children do not see us appropriately addressing anger or deep pain (I know, too often they see us botch handling anger!), I think we do a disservice to them by avoiding teaching them a valuable life skill. More importantly, I think they need to understand the ways God understands anger, even if He might be disappointed in the way we mishandle some things. If that is the case, repent and allow your children to hear you say: I messed that one up, and I am sorry.

### For Next Week

Encourage your group to continue to spend time this week reading through some of the Psalms.

### Discussion Questions

1. In this psalm of lament, how does the author begin the psalm? What tone do you sense or what emotions would you say the author is feeling?
2. What is the problem that causes the author of this psalm to write this lament?
3. What does he want God to do about it?
4. Why does the author claim God should work in the life of the psalmist? Do you think the psalmist has a right to claim this?
5. Does the psalmist ask God to take revenge in any way on the people who wrong him? How comfortable are you with what he asks God to do to them?
6. What truths does the author claim about God when he ends his psalm in a moment of praise?
7. Given the pattern you have seen here in some of the psalms of lament, how does this shape how you might respond to God the next time things do not go as you think they should or when you think God is not taking care of the problems you feel he should address?

### For Further Reading/Study

The two works I have been using for these lessons are:

Bellinger Jr., W. H. *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990.

Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984.

### What's Next

Next week will continue to look at the Psalms with a study of one of the psalms of thanksgiving.