



## Psalms of Lament

### Introduction

The psalms of lament are extremely emotional. They are filled with sadness, sorrow, fear, and anger expressed by godly people who are suffering and honestly pouring out their hearts to God. Sometimes the writers of the laments actually seem to be shouting at God, but even so, it is clear that it is a shout of faith, as practically all of the psalms of lament close with humble expressions of faith and confidence in God. Ted Phillips (BibleStudy.org) writes, “The psalms of lament are a model of Godly response to suffering. God does not expect us to remain stoic through our suffering. We CAN pour out our hearts and souls. However, we must remember God’s loving care for us in the past; how He led us out of the captivity of sin, forgave our sins, brought us into His church, and gave us eternal life. Knowing all this, we can willingly trust Him with the future.”

There are both individual and national psalms of lament. The individual laments are personal prayers for help in times of trouble. National laments were written at times when the nation of Israel faced difficulties and the people, as a community, approached God for help.

Two subcategories of the lament psalms are the penitential psalms and the imprecatory psalms. The penitential psalms are cries of repentance, expressing the acknowledgment and confession of sin. The penitential psalms always include a request for God’s mercy.

The imprecatory psalms are laments which contain curses or prayers for the punishment of enemies. They are graphic and solemn descriptions of evil invoked upon incorrigible sinners and are often shocking to modern readers. They may offend our sensibilities and seem to go against what we have been taught about forgiving those who sin against us. The imprecatory psalms are not to be taken as examples for our own prayers, but it must be kept in mind that God’s kingdom will not come in its fulness until satan, all evil, and all men who are permanently identified with evil are destroyed. The revelation of God in the fulness of His glory demands the destruction of evil. Thus, the imprecatory psalms should be precious to the Christian.

- I. David’s Personal Lament - Psalm 3
- II. Heman’s Personal Lament - Psalm 88
- III. Moses’ Prayer of National Lament - Psalm 90
- IV. David’s Personal Penitence - Psalm 51
- V. Imprecatory Lament of Captivity in Babylon - Psalm 137

### I. David’s Personal Lament - Psalm 3

The title of this individual lament ascribes it to King David, written when he fled from his son, Absalom, who had stolen the affections of the people and raised a rebellion against him (2 Samuel 15-18). The sudden threat of Absalom’s forces had compelled David to flee from Jerusalem. He was surrounded by enemies on every side. According to the 2 Samuel passage, David was weeping, barefoot, head covered in sorrow (15:30), stoned, and openly cursed (16:5-14). No wonder the people of Israel considered David’s situation hopeless.

#### A. David’s Crisis - Psalm 3:1-2

As his lament begins, David is facing a new day, confronted by danger on every side. The saddest part is that the enemy was his own family, his beloved son, Absalom. The whole nation was saying of David, *There is no help for him in God* (3:2).

Notice the word *Selah* following verse 2. This is most likely a musical notation which was added some time after the psalm was written. It is found in many of the psalms, as we shall see in our studies. Perhaps it was derived from the Hebrew word “*salah*” which means “to be still.” Most commentators take it to mean a pause in the song or an opportunity to lift up one’s voice or hands in worship. For us, it is an opportunity to pause and think about the gravity of David’s situation which is not so different from yours and mine. This world is satan’s battleground, and every morning when you awaken, you face a spiritual battle. But praise be to God who has won the victory for us. *And this is the victory which has overcome the world — our faith* (1 John 5:4).

#### B. David’s Confidence in God - Psalm 3:3-8

In spite of his hopeless situation, David showed faith in God. When he turned his thoughts away from his problems and considered God, he was reminded of God’s strength and faithfulness.

1. *You, O Lord, are a shield for me* - 3:3-4

God was David's shield (3:3), the only one who could protect him from his enemies. God was his *glory* (3:3), empowering him to rule with honor over His people. God was the lifter of his head (3:3), meaning He was the one who would restore David to his position of dignity.

2. *The Lord sustained me* - 3:5-6

As David turned His thoughts to God, he was reminded of how God had sustained him through the night in the midst of his enemies. This encouraged his heart and he took it as an indication of God's complete deliverance. His fear subsided as he realized that God was much more powerful than the ten thousands of mere mortals who had come up against him.

3. *The Lord delivers* - 3:7-8

Verse 7 is David's confident cry for God's deliverance. *Arise, O Lord* is actually a war cry. When Israel was in the wilderness, the Ark of God went before them, leading the way. Each time the nation set out on a new day's journey, Moses would shout, *Rise up, O Lord! Let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You* (Numbers 10:35). *Arise, O Lord* is David's victorious call to battle. And God did save him that day, giving him decisive victory over his son, Absalom (2 Samuel 18).

David prayed for God to save him because he knew that *salvation belongs to the Lord*. (3:8). David was so confident that God would save him, that he wrote about it in very graphic language as if it had already happened. *You have struck all my enemies on the cheekbone; You have broken the teeth of the ungodly* (3:7).

The closing words are an encouragement to all God's people, a reminder that His blessing is upon us. *Selah*—pause and think about that. Read Ephesians 1:3-14.

Knowing that God is our deliverer, that He alone is our salvation, and that His blessing is upon us, why do we fear the things which come upon us in this world? "If God has saved you in the great matter of salvation — why should you tremble before the lesser, physical dangers of this life, however imposing and frightful they may seem. You should triumph by faith in God, as David did" (James Montgomery Boice, [Psalms](#)).

**II. Heman's Personal Lament - Psalm 88**

This song of personal lament was written by Heman the Ezrahite, a wise man (1 Kings 4:31) from the priestly tribe of Levi, who had been chosen and set apart by King David as a musician for the service of God. Heman

has written the very saddest of all the psalms. It has been called the darkest corner of the psalter because it is seemingly without hope. It describes Heman's suffering over a long period of time, his despair, and near hopelessness. Yet it also attests to his continuing trust in God.

## A. Heman's Troubles - Psalm 88:1-8

Heman's lament opens with the one glimmer of hope he possesses: God is his salvation. Heman addresses his prayer to *O Lord, God of my salvation* (88:1). He has prayed unceasingly to God and pleads with God to hear his prayer.

Heman lays his troubles before God. He felt that he was near death (88:3-4a), he had no strength (88:4b), in fact, he was as good as dead (88:5). The worst of Heman's troubles, however, was that he felt God had abandoned him (88:5b). He was in darkness, experiencing only God's wrath and waves of affliction (88:7). Even Heman's friends had abandoned him and he was utterly alone (88:8). The despairing man viewed all of these troubles as coming from God. Notice *You have....v. 6, Your wrath....v. 7, You have afflicted me....v. 7, Your waves.....v.7, and You have.....* two times in v. 8.

## B. Heman's Tenacity - Psalm 88:9-18

Heman says that his *eye wastes away because of affliction* (88:9), meaning that his tears had been flowing freely. But still he persevered in prayer every day (88:9). In his prayers he argued with God and questioned God, but he never gave up.

## 1. Heman's argument - 88:10-12

Heman obviously loved serving God and praising Him. Actually, that was even part of his job as a Levite and a musician. His plea is that he may continue to praise God (88:10), declare His lovingkindness and faithfulness (88:11), and make His wonders and lovingkindness known (88:12). Heman is sure he will not be able to do these things when he is in the grave (88:11). All of this is true from a human perspective. But it is not the whole truth, as we know in light of the New Testament and the resurrection of Christ.

## 2. Heman's question - 88:13-14

Heman says that he had prayed to God every morning, but God had answered with silence. Heman feels that God is rejecting him, hiding His face from him. He asks, *why do You cast off my soul? Why do you hide your face from me?*"(88:14). Have you ever asked these questions of God?

## 3. Heman's despair - 88:15-18

Heman had experienced a lifetime of sorrows. He could remember no joy in the past to cheer him. From his point of view, God was terrorizing him (88:15, 17). God had taken away his loved ones and friends, and, without God, he was totally alone in *darkness* (88:18).

Although Heman's lament ends with *darkness*, it gives several glimpses into the light of the Christian life. First, it shows us that believers certainly can and do experience unrelieved suffering. Happy endings are not guaranteed and are not our right. See 1 Peter 1:6-7, 1 Peter 2:21, and 1 Peter 4:12-13. Secondly, it is a reminder that the whole creation groans and suffers as we wait for our adoption as sons and the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:22-23). Thirdly, it is an encouragement to never give up, but to continue to serve God as Heman, the wise musician did!

**III. Moses' Prayer of National Lament - Psalm 90**

This lament was written by *Moses the man of God* (superscription), which designates it as the oldest of all the psalms. Although the historical setting is not certain, James Montgomery Boice, ([Psalms](#)), believes that the psalm reflects the incidents recorded in Numbers 20, near the end of Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings. Almost the entire generation which had come out of Egypt had died, including Moses' sister, Miriam, and brother, Aaron. Moses had been rebuked by God for striking the rock at Kadesh and told by God that he would not be allowed to enter the promised land. Although Moses had accomplished much, to the glory of God, and had spoken with God face to face (Numbers 12:8), it was a bittersweet time because of the sadness of loss. In this psalm, Moses reflects upon the brevity of life and the mercy of God, his everlasting refuge.

A. The Everlasting Grandeur of God -  
Psalm 90:1-2

God is the only sure foundation. He has always existed and He always will. He is the creator and sustainer of all things and the *dwelling place* (90:1) of those who put their trust in Him. From generation to generation, people have found refuge in Him.

B. The Frailty and Sinfulness of Man -  
Psalm 90:3-11

In contrast to God, the everlasting refuge, Moses describes the fleeting frailty of sinful man.

## 1. Man's frailty - 90:3-6

God creates man and then sees him turn back into *dust* (NASB, 90:3). One thousand years to Him are like one day to us, or the quickly passing four hours of a night watch (90:4). Time does not limit Him as it does us. Our lives are brief: our days are like rushing floodwaters (90:5). We are like the grass which flourishes in the morning after rain, but is soon scorched by the burning sun and withers and dies (90:6).

## 2. Man's sinfulness - 90:7-11

Human beings are not only frail, but also sinful. It is our sin which causes God's wrath (90:9). Because of sin, our lives are fleeting and filled with trouble and sorrow (90:10). No one can understand the power of God's anger (90:11).

## C. The Need for God's Mercy - 90:12-17

On the basis of our frailty and sin, Moses makes three requests of God:

1. *Teach us to number our days* - 90:12-13

Since our lives are short, we need to live them wisely and make each day count. A life not lived to the glory of God is a wasted life. Please, don't waste your life!

2. *Satisfy us early with your mercy* - 90:14-16

Moses prays that we may be glad in God and that even in afflictions we may see His work and His glory.

3. *Establish the work of Your hands* - 90:17

Moses asks that God will make the work done for Him, according to His will and power, count for eternity. Moses had come to the end of his life, a life of labor and sorrow (90:10). He had toiled diligently to do what God had called him to do. He had shared in the work of the everlasting God. Now he asks God to show His favor by making all his efforts worthwhile.

"Only one life! 'Twill soon be past.  
Only what's done for Christ will last." (anonymous)

What are you doing that will last for eternity?

**IV. David's Personal Penitence - Psalm 51**

Psalm 51 is considered the chief penitential psalm. It was written by King David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and plotted the murder of her husband,

Uriah. See 2 Samuel 11-12. The psalm is a model of confession and should be a great encouragement and comfort to all of us who sin so often!

#### A. David's Cry for Mercy - Psalm 51:1-2

Two sins David had committed (adultery and murder) were both punishable by death. There was no prescribed sacrifice he could offer which would grant him forgiveness. So David appealed to God's *mercy, lovingkindness, and tender mercies (compassion - NASB)*. His request was that God remove his *transgressions, iniquity, and sin*. *Transgressions* refer to crossing a forbidden boundary, signifying rebellion against God. *Iniquity* refers to original sin and the depravity of human nature. See Romans 1:18-32 and Romans 3:10-18. *Sin* means falling short of God's commands. Since none of us can keep God's commands perfectly, we are all sinners! We all are born dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

#### B. David's Confession - Psalm 51:3-6

David acknowledged his rebellion against God. His sin was always on his mind (51:3). It had been nearly a year since his sin of adultery with Bathsheba (she had already given birth to the child she had conceived by him in adultery). The sin had been on David's mind all that time.

David confessed that his sin was against God (51:4). Obviously, he had done terrible wrong to Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah, but it is important to remember that sin is first and foremost ALWAYS against God. It is God's law which establishes sin as sin. Furthermore, God made mankind in His image, making every sin against a man or woman whom God created a sin against Him.

David confessed that he had been a sinner from the time he was conceived in his mother's womb. David took full responsibility for his sin. He did not blame his parents, his circumstances, the environment, or God.

#### C. David's Request for Cleansing - Psalm 51:7-12

David asked God to *purge* him and *wash* him (51:7), *blot out* his iniquities (51:9), create a clean heart within him (51:10), and *restore* the joy of his salvation (51:8, 12).

David prayed, *Purge me with hyssop* (51:7). Hyssop was a small plant that was often used like a small paintbrush. In Jewish religious ceremonies it was used to sprinkle blood (Exodus 12:22, Leviticus 14:4-6, and Numbers 19:18). David knew that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to*

*make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul* (Leviticus 17:11). His request to be purged with hyssop was a request to be cleansed by the blood.

David prayed to be washed, *whiter than snow* (51:7), a request to be purified for consecration to God (Exodus 19:10,14 and 40:12-13). Praise be to Jesus Christ who *loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood* (Revelation 1:5).

David asked God to *blot out all my iniquities* (51:9). Blotting out refers to removing writing from a book. David desired for God to remove his sins, so He would see them no more.

Only God can *create a clean heart* (51:10). David desired victory over his sin and fellowship with God. Both of these were impossible with an unclean heart. He asked God to start over from scratch with his heart and make it clean.

Sin had resulted in loss of joy for David, as it always does. Some people seem to think that sin brings joy, but in reality the opposite is true. The pleasures of sin are *passing pleasures* (Hebrews 11:25), and the *deceitfulness of sin* (Hebrews 3:13) hardens our hearts. David wisely knew that only God's forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with Him could restore his joy.

#### D. David's Desire - Psalm 51:13-19

David longed for God's forgiveness. The requests he makes in these verses express that desire along with his desire to serve God. It would be impossible for David to serve God without forgiveness which would restore his joy and remove his guilt. Then he would teach transgressors God's ways (51:13) and sing aloud of God's righteousness (51:14). He would do this out of a *broken and contrite heart* (51:17), the sacrifice he had presented to God (51:3-11), the sacrifice God desires (51:17).

David also realized that his sin had adversely affected his beloved city of Jerusalem (Zion). The tentacles of sin always reach out and hurt others. So David prayed for God to *Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion* (51:18) and to establish righteous worship which would please Him (51:19).

James Montgomery Boice ([Psalms](#)) closes his commentary on Psalm 51 with these words, "Let us remember that everything we do affects other people, whether for good or evil. It is not true that we can sin 'as long as it does not hurt anyone,' because sin always hurts someone. But it is also true that those who confess their sin find forgiveness and renewal, teach others the ways of God, and become a blessing." Will you

follow David's example of humbly acknowledging and confessing your sin to God? *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

## V. Imprecatory Lament of Captivity in Babylon - Psalm 137

Psalm 137 is an imprecatory psalm which laments the plight of God's people, Israel, when they were exiled in Babylon. The psalm expresses the psalmist's deep love for Zion (Jerusalem) and a profound hatred of Israel's enemies. The writer is unknown except for the fact that he had been an exile in Babylon and was probably one of those who returned to Jerusalem in 536 B.C. (See Ezra 1:1-4). It is impossible to comment on this psalm without taking away from the depth of the writer's emotion. Please read the psalm again thoughtfully after reading these notes.

### A. Remembering Zion - Psalm 137:1-6

The writer vividly remembers the exile in Babylon.

#### 1. Weeping by the rivers - 137:1-3

The Jewish exiles sat down beside the Euphrates River and wept as they remembered the destruction of Zion. In their sorrow, they hung their harps in the willow trees and the singers were silent. Their Babylonian neighbors urged them to sing a song of their homeland, but the psalmist writes, *How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?* (137:4)

#### 2. Love for Jerusalem - 137:4-6

Jerusalem was dearly loved by the Jewish people. The temple, the place where God's glory dwelt (1 Kings 8:11), was there. It was the holy city where the tribes of the Lord joyfully assembled for the annual feasts (Psalm 122:4). Memories of Jerusalem brought back thoughts of fellowship and holy worship. The psalmist vowed to remember Jerusalem and to always *exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy* (137:6). He invoked imprecations upon himself if he should ever forget. *Let my right hand forget her skill!* (137:5) and *Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth* (137:6) express complete inability to play the harp or sing songs of Zion.

### B. Remembering the Destruction of Jerusalem - 137:7-9

The psalmist calls on God to remember those who had destroyed the holy city. He asks God to remember so that He will be moved to judge the destroyers, Babylon and Edom (Babylon's ally). These verses are an imprecation filled with anger, bitterness, and fierce vengeance toward Israel's enemies. If the words seem overly vindictive and violent, keep in mind the cruel barbarity of the destroyers who burned the temple, plundered the city, ravished the women, and pitilessly murdered the little children.

The psalmist requests justice from God. In fact, it is justice which God had already decreed. Read Obadiah 11-14 concerning Edom and Isaiah 47:1-3 concerning Babylon. God had prophesied the destruction of these evil nations and Dr. Tom Constable, ("Notes on the Psalms"), states, "It is always appropriate to ask God to remain faithful to his promises."

### Applications

1. People often shed tears of lament when they are suffering, but how often do they shed tears of lament over their sin? Over what personal sin has the study of these psalms caused you to weep?

2. Have the psalms of lament stirred your heart to confess your sins to God? What sin will you confess to Him right now? What seemingly hopeless situation will you take before Him in faith, trusting in His power and mercy?

3. In Psalm 137, the psalmist expressed great hatred for the enemy. How would you express your hatred for your enemy, sin?

