

Recovering the Fullness of Prayer: The Psalms of Lament as a Bridge to Healing

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?

Psalm 13:1

“Psalms offer speech when life has gone beyond our frail efforts to control.”

- Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, pg. 19

“The Psalms are an assurance to us that when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage.”

- Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, pg. 23

DISORIENTATION AND LAMENT

Brueggemann proposes that life is a constant process of orientation (or equilibrium), disorientation, and reorientation – all experiences represented by different categories of Psalms. Psalms of lament emerge from the experience of disorientation. “They express the pain, grief, dismay, and anger that life is not good. (They also refuse to settle for things as they are, and so they assert hope.)”

PSALMS OF LAMENT BY TYPE*

Communal/Corporate	12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129
Personal/Individual	3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42, 43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142
Penitential	6, 32, 38, 51, 101, 130, 143
Imprecatory	35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140

*This is not a definitive list. You will observe limited variation in how some Psalms are categorized depending on the source.

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF A LAMENT PSALM**

Address, Complaint, Petition, Praise

- I. Address to God
 - sometimes includes an initial plea
- II. Complaint
 - the real lament – cry for help and description of the problem or crisis
 - sometimes ends with an affirmation of trust
- III. Petition
 - what the psalmist wants God to do about it
 - might include reasons God should answer the prayer
- IV. Praise or Blessing
 - acknowledges prayer has been heard
 - vow of praise or worship in anticipation of deliverance

**This structure is a broad generalization. There is much freedom and variety in the composition of lament psalms but a basic pattern can be discerned.

References and further reading

Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Fortress Press, 1984

Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed., Cascade Books, 2007

List of lament Psalms and categories adapted from <http://www.crivoice.org/psalmtypes.html>