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Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life

Writing your own psalm of lament

(Note: Read chapter 5 of *Open and Unafraid* before doing this exercise.)

“A poem requires re-reading. Unlike prose which fills the page with print, poems leave a lot of white space.... We sit before the poem like we sit before a flower and attend to form, relationship, color. We let it begin to work on us. This attending, this waiting, this reverential posture is at the core of the life of faith, the life of prayer, the life of worship, the life of witness.” — **Eugene Peterson**

TASK

1. Write your own psalm of lament by taking the basic shape of a lament psalm as your pattern.
2. Choose whether you wish to write an individual lament or a communal lament.
3. Keep your phrases/lines succinct; no long sentences, no wordy phrasings.
4. Be specific and concrete in your statements, rather than abstract and idiosyncratic.
5. Choose evocative imagery or metaphors that will help you see what you're praying.
6. Take advantage of the unique devices of Hebrew poetry and of the language of the Psalter.
7. Title your psalm.
8. Share your psalms with others.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW POETRY

1. Shorter sentences than in prose. This means that you will often find that one line = 6 Hebrew words divided in two halves; or 9 words divided into a tri-cola. EX: Ps. 2:1 + 2:2.

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2. Default rhythmic arrangement is 3 Hebrew words or 3 stresses per half line. EX: Ps. 2:2, 7 and 8.
The second most common is the 3-2: Psalms 14 and 27.
3. Things are said in the most economical way possible; it is not a flowery style of poetry.
4. It relies on the following poetic devices:
 - Strophe and Stanza: Ps. 13 and 19.
 - Rhyme: 5:1-2; 18:46; 26:11; 35:23; 44:5
 - Paronomasia (play on words): 6:10; 28:5; 37:2.
 - Alliteration and Assonance: Ps. 127:1 and Ps. 102:6.
 - Alphabetical psalms: Pss. 9-10; 25; 35; 37; 111; 112; 145; 119.
 - Chiasms (abba): Ps. 29.
 - Refrains: 42; 43; 67; 80.
 - Parallelism. Three of the most common types of parallelism include:
 - a) Synonymous (Ps. 77:11)
 - b) Antithetic (Ps. 30:5)
 - c) Synthetic (a heightening or specifying of first line: Ps. 33:8; 6:5).
5. Its language is suggestive rather than propositional.
6. Its powers reside in its rich use of metaphor and imagery.

THE BASIC SHAPE OF LAMENT PSALMS

With individual and communal psalms of lament, there is a recognizable pattern. Psalm 13 is typical.

A Complaint (vv. 1-2)

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

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and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

A Petition (vv. 3-4)

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed;”
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

A Resolution (vv. 5-6)

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

It is important to remember that while there are plenty of variations on this pattern, the complaints are directed chiefly to God. The complaints may be about God, one’s life, or a presumed enemy. The kinds of petitions that the psalmists make of God include requests for healing, deliverance, vindication, provision and protection, and, in the cases of sin, forgiveness. The final resolution of a psalm of lament may involve a confession of trust; it may involve a promise to obey; it may involve deep sadness; or it may involve an affirmation of God’s faithfulness, even if there is no empirical data to prove it.

The goal of a psalm of lament is not to force God to act or to presume to know the outcome of one’s prayer. The goal of a psalm of lament is to present to God all of the heart’s longings and sorrows and painful experiences. It is to trust that God welcomes it all and is not bothered or embarrassed by our laments. It is to trust that God hears and will act. And it is to trust that God wants us to share these things with others so that we do not have to carry our burdens alone.