

A Comparison of Ancient Near Eastern Lament to Selected Passages of Biblical Lament

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People of all cultures throughout time have experienced suffering and have found methods for expressing their deep pain and overwhelming feelings of despair. The very existence and expression of lament throughout history demonstrates that embedded in the universal nature of suffering humans is the innate longing to seek hope in something greater than one's self. Ancient Near Eastern religious expressions were adopted and adapted into other cultural expressions, including the worship of Yahweh. Biblical writers, carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), used a recognizable literary form as a basis upon which to share the hope they found in God with the hurting people around them.

Biblical lament and the lament of ancient Near Eastern societies share some strikingly common features, but their functions are remarkably different. One of the roles of ancient lament was to attempt to gain attention from deities in order to ease human suffering while biblical lament was (and is) a function of worship that points toward the hope of rescue. Therefore, a proper understanding of the role of lament is important because the truth found in biblical lament is the same truth available for suffering humanity today. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of lament from examples found in ancient Near Eastern material, to compare some of the elements with examples of biblical lament, and to highlight the need for incorporating lament into modern corporate worship gatherings.

Coupled with the unique capability to decipher Egyptian and Akkadian hieroglyphics in 1823 and the 1850s respectively, the

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subsequent discovery of (and ability to decipher) Sumerian, Hittite, and Ugaritic provided a different framework for examining and interpreting Old Testament literature. Ancient Near Eastern culture plays a vital role in the study of the function of lament in biblical literature.²

When studying a particular aspect of ancient history and culture, one also must examine the surrounding geographical areas since cultural influence seeps across boundaries of location.³ Generally, the ancient Near East is considered to be the home of early civilizations that roughly correspond to the modern Middle East. The approach to this topic is intended as a survey, since the material is so vast. In order to be concise and maintain focus, only Hittite and Sumerian lament will be examined, though there is much more available to study. The term "lament" will be described intentionally in a broad context that includes both genre and cultural features. Because there are so many examples of lament (or portions thereof) in the Bible, only selected passages will be examined.

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel knew Yahweh as the one who could deliver them from affliction. Israel's relationship with him was based on his saving acts when they cried out to him in distress.⁴ According to Amos 5:16, mourning was dramatic and loud. Jeremiah 32:9-12 and 41:5-6 allude to some physical aspects, such as the beating of one's breast and the removal of certain types of clothing. The theological significance of the lament genre only can be found in the proper distinction of the lament of *affliction* from that of lament for the *dead*. Funerary laments look backward at the life of someone deceased, and the lament born from affliction gives a voice to suffering while looking forward to the hope of rescue.⁵ Although the outward act of weeping is similar for both types of lament, the Hebrew terms for each action should not be mistaken for one another.⁶

² J. J. M. Roberts, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 44-45.

³ Giovanni Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 57.

⁴ Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (January 1974): 21.

⁵ Westermann, "The Role of the Lament," 22.

⁶ Westermann, "The Role of the Lament," 23.

Ancient pagan lamentation was not just a method of mourning and appeasing the dead. Lamenters believed they could persuade the spirits of the dead to relieve the pain and suffering while encouraging fertility and prosperity in both the land and in humanity.⁷ Laments could be communal – spoken by one person on behalf of a suffering community, or they could be individual spoken on behalf of the person experiencing the pain and suffering.

Examples of Ancient Near Eastern Lament

Communication with a deity or deities was a fundamental element of ancient Near Eastern religious life. In typical ancient Near Eastern lament, the following elements are usually present:

Invocation
Praise to the deity
Complaint
Petition⁸

The invocation of the god included an abundance of flowery, lofty wording. The grandiose invocation often flowed into a section of praise for the deity for his or her wonderful qualities. Once the deity had been praised sufficiently, the lamenter explained the problem and sought help or relief from suffering. The complaint section often

⁷ Mary Bachvarova “Sumerian Gala Priests and Eastern Mediterranean Returning Gods: Tragic Lamentation in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Ann Suter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

⁸ For a more exhaustive discussion on the formal elements of ancient lament, see Tyler F. Williams, “A Form-Critical Classification of the Psalms according to Hermann Gunkel,” used with permission with the stipulation that proper credit be given in this way: Prepared by Tyler F. Williams (10/2006). Sources: Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967; translation of his article in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* [2nd ed; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1930]; and Hermann Gunkel (completed by Joachim Begrich), *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); translation of *Einleitung in die Psalmen: die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985)); available from <https://three-things.ca/?p=711>.

flowed into the petition portion, where the speaker would beg for the desired outcome.

Hymns and laments were the primary methods of communication between Hittites and their deities, especially during times of distress and suffering. In this example of a Hittite prayer, the use of lofty *praise* is evident:

Thou, Telepinus, art a noble god;
Thy name is noble among all gods;
Among the gods art thou noble, O Telepinus.
Great art thou, O Telepinus;
There is no deity more noble and mighty than thou.⁹

Also demonstrating the use of flowery invocation is this plea to Ea, who was thought to be the god of fresh waters.

O wise king, perceptive creator, lofty prince, ornament of the Eabsu . . . artful, venerated one . . . sage of the Igigi . . . bringer of the high waters (that cause) abundance, who makes the rivers joyful. . . .

In oceans and in reed thickets you make plenteous prosperity, in the meadows you create the livelihood of the peoples. Anu and Enlil rejoice because of you, the Anunna-gods bless you in their holy places, the peoples of the land extol your weighty command. . . .¹⁰

Just over four thousand years ago, in the area of modern-day Iraq, the Sumerian city of Ur fell. This excerpt from “Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur” describes the destruction of the kingdom by an enemy army that brought terrible suffering upon the people. In this excerpt demonstrating the element of *complaint*, the lamenter paints a vivid picture of civilians suffering in war.

⁹ Tremper Longman III, “Ancient Near Eastern Prayer Genres,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnson and David G. Firth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 55.

¹⁰ Allen Lenzi, “Invoking the God: Interpreting Invocations in Mesopotamian Prayers and Biblical Laments of the Individual,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 305.

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There were corpses (floating) in the Euphrates. . . .
The trees of Ur were sick, the reeds of Ur were sick,
Laments sounded all along its city wall.
Daily there was slaughter before it. . . .
Alas, what can we say about it, what more can we add to it?
How long until we are finished off by (this) catastrophe?¹¹

In the “Sumerian Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar” (also called Inanna), the general elements of pagan lament are clear. Ishtar was a Mesopotamian goddess closely associated with love, beauty, sex, and war, and she was thought to be the greatest of all the goddesses, often referred to as “queen of heaven.”¹² (There is a reference to Hebrew worship of her found in Ezekiel 8.) The elements of invocation, praise, complaint and petition are evident. (Categorization added.)

Invocation/Praise

I pray to thee, O Lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses.
O Ishtar, queen of all peoples, who guides mankind aright,
O Irnini, ever exalted, greatest of the Igigi,
O mighty of princesses, exalted is thy name.
Thou indeed art the light of heaven and earth. . . .
O Lady, glorious is thy greatness; over all the gods it is
exalted. . . .

Complaint

O mighty one, Lady of battle, who suppresses the
mountains,
Thou dost make complete judgment and decision. . . .
I am beaten down, and so I weep bitterly. . . .
Like one who does not fear my god and my goddess I am
treated;
While sickness, headache, loss, and destruction are provided
for me;
So are fixed upon me terror, disdain, and fullness of wrath,
Anger, choler, and indignation of gods and men. I have to

¹¹ Translation taken from Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda: CDL, 2005), 643.

¹² Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 55.

expect,
O my Lady, dark days, gloomy months, and years of
trouble.

Death and trouble are bringing me to an end.

Petition

Let the favor of thine eyes be upon me. With thy bright features look faithfully upon me. Drive away the evil spells of my body (and) let me see thy bright light.

How long, O my Lady, wilt thou be angered so that thy face is turned away? . . .

Subdue my haters and cause them to crouch down under me. . . . Let thy great mercy be upon me.¹³

The final example of pagan lament was written to some deity that the lamenter did not even know, as evidenced in the title, "Prayer to an Unknown God." Altars to unknown gods were common in antiquity.¹⁴ (Paul referenced one in Acts 17:23.) This person, however, does not know *who* he is praying to or *what* sin he has committed, but his sense of despair is dishearteningly evident. In this Sumerian prayer, the elements of invocation, praise to the deity, complaint, and petition/need for rescue are striking as they are interwoven into this lament. The text is written in *emesal*, a dialect of the Sumerian language that is restricted to direct speech of goddesses and women in certain types of literary texts, in particular lamentations, since even the gender of the deity is uncertain.¹⁵

May the wrath of the heart of my god be pacified!
May the god who is unknown to me be pacified!
May the goddess who is unknown to me be pacified!
May the known and unknown god be pacified!
May the known and unknown goddess be pacified!

¹³ Library of Biblical and Historical Documents,
<http://jewishchristianlit.com/Texts/ANEhymns/lamIshttr.html>.

¹⁴ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 321.

¹⁵ Ann Suter, ed., *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.

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The sin which I have committed I know not.
The misdeed which I have committed I know not.
A gracious name may my god announce!
A gracious name may my goddess announce!
A gracious name may my known and unknown god
announce!
A gracious name may my known and unknown goddess
announce!
Unto my merciful god I turn, I make supplication.
I kiss the feet of my goddess and [crawl before her]. . . .
How long, my god. . . .
How long, my goddess, until thy face be turned toward me?
How long, known and unknown god, until the anger of thy
heart be pacified?
How long, known and unknown goddess, until thy
unfriendly heart be pacified?
My god, my sins are seven times seven; forgive my sins!
My goddess, my sins are seven times seven; forgive my sins!
Known and unknown god, my sins are seven times seven;
forgive my sins.¹⁶

From a reading of the above lament, one may notice the use of phrases such as “how long” and “seven times seven” that are included also in biblical literature. While the study of the influence of one culture upon another brings inherent questions regarding authenticity and primacy, many similarities between ancient types of literature are undeniable.¹⁷

¹⁶ From “Penitential Psalms,” Robert F. Harper, trans., in *Assyrian and Babylonian Literature*, ed. Robert F. Harper (New York: Appleton, 1901); reprinted in Eugen Weber, ed., *The Western Tradition, Vol. I: From the Ancient World to Louis XIV*, 5th ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1995), 38–39.

¹⁷ Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 15.

Biblical Examples of Lament

Ancient lament served a role within society. Cultic lament was performed in hopes of appeasement from suffering. In classical Greek literature (*Iliad, Odyssey*) the inclusion of lament indicates the act of mourning or the process of grief. Biblical lament, however, can be described as “crisis language” as it is a method for crying out to the deity for respite more than simply grieving an irreparable loss.¹⁸ While there are some stark differences between Mesopotamian and Israelite poetry, hymns and prayers preserved in the ancient Near Eastern cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia demonstrate important parallels to the biblical psalms.¹⁹

Poetic devices, allusions to destruction, relation to sacrifice, and gender all share commonalities in both Mesopotamian and biblical lament. The previous examples of ancient Near Eastern lament conformed to a specific literary form with a specific structure. Biblical writers took similar elements of lament and used them in communicating their deepest cries of pain to the one true God. Biblical lament also has some formal elements. Like ancient pagan lament, biblical lament also can be communal or individual.²⁰ Just as there are many similarities between the laments of the ancient Near East and those found in biblical literature, there are also many stylistic differences. Four of them are related to invocation, praise, content, and petition.²¹

In Israel, lamenters did not attempt to flatter their deity as the Mesopotamians did. Most biblical laments begin with a brief invocation such as “Oh Yahweh” or “My God.”²² This insinuates that Yahweh can be approached with confidence and without pretense. While Mesopotamian laments typically *begin* with praise, biblical laments typically *end* with praise.²³

¹⁸ Carleen Mandolfo, “Language of Lament in the Psalms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 114.

¹⁹ Roberts, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 47.

²⁰ For a more thorough discussion of community vs. individual lament, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 162.

²¹ Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 209.

²² Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 304. Also, see Psalms 3:2; 6:2; 42:1; 51:3; and 59:2 as examples.

²³ Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 160.

Another difference between Mesopotamian and Israelite lament is that, while formally similar, the content varies greatly. The Israelites pled for vindication and claimed their innocence while the Mesopotamians desired to appease the gods and claim their ignorance.²⁴ Possibly, this is due to the polytheistic nature of Mesopotamian beliefs or a reflection that the lamenter is uncertain of the offenses committed.²⁵

Petition is an important feature in lament. Many biblical lament psalms are imprecatory in nature. Through them, the psalmist graphically requests God's punishment on the enemy in vivid terms. While Mesopotamian literature does include certain types of curses, imprecations are infrequent.²⁶

Lament in the Old Testament

The Hebrew Bible contains many examples of lament. It is a widely used feature in Old Testament literature and can be found in books such as Lamentations, Psalms, Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel, among others. Lament offers a method to express strong, heartfelt emotions and even accusations in the midst of deep pain, allowing the sufferer to petition God for divine intervention.

Psalms of Lament

Nearly one third of the book of Psalms fits the genre of lament. Psalms 44, 74, 79, 80, and 83 are considered to be examples of congregational or communal laments.²⁷ This type of lament typically follows the following pattern:

- 1) address and introductory cry to God for help
- 2) lament, usually political in nature
- 3) confession of trust
- 4) petition

²⁴ Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 160.

²⁵ Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 147.

²⁶ Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 137.

²⁷ Williams, "A Form-Critical Classification."

- 5) assurance of being heard
- 6) wish for God's intervention
- 7) vow of praise
- 8) praise of God when petition has been heard²⁸

Individual laments, or complaints, found in the book of Psalms are 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42-43, 54-57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, and 143.²⁹ Characteristics of the individual lament are (not always in the same order):

- 1) Summons to Yahweh.
- 2) Complaint (often preceded by a description of the prayer)
- 3) Considerations inducing Yahweh to intervene
- 4) Petition
- 5) Assurance of being heard/vow of praise³⁰

The form has other nuances when applied to Hebrew lament and does not have to include all the aforementioned elements to be considered lament.³¹ The following general elements, however, are usually present:

- Invocation
- Complaint
- Request
- Expression of confidence
- Vow of praise³²

In biblical lament, the address to God is usually a short, non-verbose expression of abandonment, such as "O Lord" (Ps 38:1), or "My God" (Ps 22:1). Following a brief invocation is a description of the need for rescue, and then the petition from the lamenter to Yahweh. Biblical

²⁸ C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 136.

²⁹ Williams, "A Form-Critical Classification," 2.

³⁰ Williams, "A Form-Critical Classification," 2.

³¹ Nancy C. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 112.

³² Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 209.

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lament deviates from the ancient pagan form by including an exclamation of certainty or confidence that God will, in fact, act on behalf of suffering humanity. Finally, most biblical laments close with a vow of praise, more as a statement of hope in coming victory.

Psalm 13 is a clear example of the aforementioned elements of biblical lament. The writer uses a short invocation and follows with statements of complaint, request, confidence, and praise. (Categorization added.)

Invocation

1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

Complaint

2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Request

3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
4 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

Exclamation of Certainty

5 But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

Vow of Praise

6 I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

Lamentations

The entire book of Lamentations expresses the suffering that occurred at the hands of the Babylonians after the destruction of

Jerusalem.³³ Various types of Sumerian lament are found in the book. It should be noted that such similarities are more than a mere borrowing of literary form between cultures as divine inspiration cannot be ignored. One example includes the use of the female voice, which begins in the first chapter, and is assumed to be taken from the non-literary performance of laments.³⁴ Although a male character enters in chapter three, one of the accomplishments of the book is to present an inclusive voice that only can be “accessed through human individuality” that humanity reads through the lens of gender.³⁵

Another example of Sumerian lament in Lamentations is the sub-genre of city lament, albeit sometimes fragmentary in nature. Scholars agree that chapter three differs in form than the remainder of the book, but glimpses of city lament are evident even throughout this non-traditional chapter.³⁶ Most likely composed in commemoration of historical events, city laments comprised part of the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum. The writer of the book incorporates many elements of Near Eastern lament into the biblical text. Some of them include subject and mood, structure and poetic technique, the idea of divine abandonment, assignment of responsibility, the divine agent of destruction, the destruction itself, a weeping goddess,³⁷ lament, and restoration/return of the deities.³⁸

Job 3, 10:1-22

Included in the middle of Job’s discourse is his lengthy lament. In the beginning of chapter three, as in a typical lament, Job focuses his lament toward God and toward himself simultaneously as

³³ Walter Brueggemann, “The Formfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (1977): 274.

³⁴ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Lamentations,” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 107.

³⁵ Dobbs-Allsopp, “Lamentations,” 107.

³⁶ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 31.

³⁷ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 31–85.

³⁸ Since biblical monotheism would not include a goddess, the personified Jerusalem is the Hebrew counterpart to this particular element of Mesopotamian lament (Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 77.)

he questions why he must endure such hardship.³⁹ After Job's friends speak to comfort him, he responds with lament (against both God and the friends). In chapter 10:20–23, he is not consumed by his difficulty as much as he is overwrought with meaninglessness.⁴⁰ He goes so far as to wish he had never been born. His lament is similar in structure and form to the individual laments of the Psalms.⁴¹

Lament in the New Testament

In the New Testament, suffering individuals cry out to Jesus for help. The influence of the Psalter on the New Testament is pervasive as lament psalms are interwoven throughout this portion of Scripture.⁴² Some elements of lament are only allusions, as in Bartimaeus's story in Mark 10:47, while others are outright quotations, as when Jesus quotes the lament in Psalm 22 from the cross.

John 11:17–32, 12:1–7

Comforting the bereaved was a social and a religious duty during the first century A.D.⁴³ In the John 11 passage, most likely a large number of people had visited the grieving family as even those who passed a funeral procession were accustomed to joining it and participating in the lamentation.⁴⁴ Slipping out to be in private with Jesus, both Mary and Martha ask “why” even though they think they trust Christ. Their fragmented lament demonstrates that mourning practices that were similar to ancient ones were still common during

³⁹ Samuel Eugene Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 169.

⁴⁰ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 112.

⁴¹ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 202.

⁴² Lee, *Lyrics of Lament*, 112.

⁴³ D. A. Carson, “The Gospel according to John,” in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 411.

⁴⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 843.

the early church era in the sisters' ritual response to their brother's death.⁴⁵

Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:45–46

Mark 15 and Matthew 27 both include an account of Jesus quoting Psalm 22. In one last beautiful act of worship from the cross, Jesus struggles to quote the words of a well-known lament that, for years, had been associated with suffering. As he comforted his family, friends, followers, and maybe even himself, those in attendance would have known the words well and instinctively recognized that this lament was Scripture.⁴⁶ Psalm 22 is true to biblical structural form of lament. (Categorization added.)

Invocation

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

Complaint

2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

Request

11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Exclamation of Certainty

24 For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

⁴⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 247.

⁴⁶ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 196.

Vow of Praise

25 From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you, I will fulfill my vows.

Incorporating Lament in Worship Practice

Suffering is an unavoidable part of being human. God desires transparency and honesty, and he is worthy of worship even in the midst of difficulty. But how can someone lead others to worship in the midst of personal pain? How does one worship God while feeling angry at him or abandoned by him? While the initial interpretation of the term “lament” has been focused primarily on literary form used in ancient texts, a more modern general understanding includes the acknowledgment and expression of pain and uncomfortable emotions. Many church leaders feel that an emphasis on lament in worship is lacking in modern evangelical churches.⁴⁷ Believers have the unique opportunity to access several tools through which to express individual and collective pain during worship gatherings, such as Scripture readings, written prayers, and music.

There is a plethora of Scripture in the book of Psalms alone that a worship leader might select for reading in a public gathering of hurting people. For example, believers crying out for redemption and restoration might find solace in Psalms 44, 60, and 80, among many other communal laments. Those who are angry might turn to an imprecatory psalm, such as 35, 54, 79, or 137. Believers grieving over the death of someone they love or other significant losses could find comfort in the words of Psalms 9, 16, and 23, among various others. There are comforting and uplifting psalms for occasions such as the experience of unpleasant consequences for one’s own sin (Psalms 30, 88), exhaustion and depression (Psalms 6, 69, 130), tragedy or trauma (Psalm 91), feelings of abandonment (Psalms 13, 22, 27), or even when the object of anger is God himself (Psalm 44). Scripture

⁴⁷ Mark Vroegop, “The Danger of Neglecting Lament in the Local Church,” *Crossway*, July 14, 2019, accessed January 19, 2021, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-danger-of-neglecting-lament-in-the-local-church/>; and “Strong Churches Speak the Language of Lament,” *The Gospel Coalition*, April 9, 2019, accessed January 19, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/strong-churches-lanuage-lament/>.

provides worshipers with words to express their pain while pointing to the hope and assurance of the faithfulness of God even amid suffering.

In addition to the book of Psalms, lamentation can be found in other biblical texts, such as Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Acknowledgment of hope through pain also appears in many New Testament texts. In the accounts of the crucifixion in Mark and Matthew, Jesus, being both fully human and fully divine, quotes Psalm 22 from the cross as he expresses the pain of the feeling of abandonment. Romans 8:18 reminds the reader that present suffering cannot be compared to the glory that awaits.

Many struggling believers throughout the centuries have left written evidence of their heartfelt faith through pain in the form of written prayers. All people have the capacity to become overwhelmed with anxiety and sorrow over distressing stimuli such as broken relationships, struggles in marriage, parenting, singleness, loneliness, caring for aging parents, social unrest, financial insecurity, or fear of the future. Written prayers can be a great source of comfort to those who hear them spoken aloud for the first time or others who read them later but find connection and community in the knowledge that they are not alone in their quest for healing and peace.

“My harp is used for mourning and my flute for the sound of weeping” (Job 30:31). Job expressed his excruciating pain through music as evidenced in this verse. Hymn writers throughout the generations have penned heartfelt lyrics expressing joys and struggles born from deep painful experiences. Natural occasions for incorporating lament into worship would be the Lenten season, Passion Week, and Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. Other occasions when lament music might be helpful would be surrounding the times of local, state, or national tragedy, such as 9-11, a school shooting in the community, or effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. At such times, pastor/worship leader teams might consider a worship gathering centered around lament in order to help worshipers deal with negative emotions that are sometimes stifled or ignored. Of course, there are many selections of appropriate texts and tunes to aid in a time of lament. Even a quick perusal through random playlists on digital music forums such as Spotify can lead to hundreds of songs, already organized by genre. An intentional worship planner might choose from

the following sampling of hymns and worship songs that express faith in the midst of sorrow.

Hymns

“Abide with Me” (Henry Francis Lyte, 1847)

“It Is Well with My Soul” (Horatio Spafford, 1873)

“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” (Elisha Hoffman, 1887)

“My Shepherd Will Supply My Need” (Isaac Watts, 1719)

“Tell it to Jesus” (Jeremiah Rankin, 1855)

Worship Songs

“He Will Hold Me Fast” (© 2013 Getty Music Publishing,
(BMI)/Matt Merker Music)

“I Will Trust My Savior Jesus” (© 2018 CityAlight Music,
Capitol CMG Publishing)

“Jesus” (© 2017, Chris Tomlin, Capitol CMG Publishing)

“Way Maker” (© 2017, Osinach Okoro, Capitol CMG
Publishing)

“When My Heart Is Torn Asunder” (© 2013, Phil Wickam,
Essential Music Publishing)

Grief can be a gift when it is used to move a hurting believer toward deeper connection and relationship with God, and the process of grieving should be honored. Many who suffer, as well as well-meaning friends who want to help alleviate the pain of others, tend to move quickly past the pain toward the good that comes from suffering. While few people would choose to suffer, there is biblical precedent that God is honored when his children embrace their pain while he works providentially behind the scenes. Pastors and worship planners should work together intentionally to create a specific atmosphere where worshipers can be together and hurt together. God does not always remove the source of pain, but he remains a constant source of consolation throughout it. Evangelical believers who hold a high view of Scripture understand that the ultimate answer to suffering is found in the God of the Bible.

The early followers of Yahweh used a secular literary form that connected to the community around them, and God redeemed it. Then the cross—a symbol of death and despair—became a symbol of life and hope. If musical worship is always exuberant, then

worshippers may miss the growth that comes through pain. When lament contains only elements of suffering, that is no more than a pagan exercise. When suffering, however, is balanced with victory, *that* is the message of Christianity.