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RECOVERING THE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT FOR THE WESTERN  
EVANGELICAL CHURCH: A SURVEY OF THE PSALMS OF LAMENT  
AND THEIR APPROPRIATION WITHIN PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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*Introduction*

On September 1, 2013, I was invited to a special service at my former church.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the service, I found myself in conversation with an older gentleman<sup>2</sup> who inquired about my studies at McMaster Divinity College. When I mentioned to him that my research was based primarily on the lament psalms, his response was quite striking. To paraphrase his statement, he said, “I really do not like to go back to things of the Old Testament that are no longer valid for the church today,”<sup>3</sup> to which I responded, “But do you know that Jesus used the lament psalms on the cross?” My rejoinder so stumped him that he was unable to make any further comments. Instead, he simply looked at me and smiled. And with that, our conversation came to an abrupt end.

Taking this gentleman’s remark into consideration leads me to ask the question that this article will address: is lament, or more precisely, the language of lament, still appropriate for the contemporary Western evangelical church? The argument of this article is in the affirmative, and to reinforce such a claim, information on lament will be gleaned, primarily, from the Old

1. For privacy reasons, the name of the church will not be disclosed.
2. To protect the identity of this gentleman, his name will be omitted.
3. By this he meant that, since laments were apparently only found in the Old Testament and not in the New Testament, they were no longer valid within the contemporary Western evangelical church.

Testament psalms,<sup>4</sup> as well as from the New Testaments laments within a biblical theology framework, which will then be applied to a pastoral theology of lament.<sup>5</sup> I seek to maintain that, because laments, whether they are in the form of a prayer, song or poem, were an appropriate response to God amidst suffering within the Israelite community of faith in the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament (Jesus and the early church), they also should be adopted within today's Western evangelical church. I present two reasons for such an appropriation of laments within the contemporary evangelical church, namely, (1) lament is the beginning of giving voice and/or language to those who weep in silence, even those whose voices have been muted;<sup>6</sup> and (2) lament also begins the process of hoping for the return of God's voice and with it his favor towards those in distress in both this lifetime and the next.<sup>7</sup> In consideration of this, we now turn to understanding the meaning of the word lament.

### *The Meaning of Lament*

Although not a frequently employed word in the vocabulary of our culture, or even in our contemporary Western evangelical churches, lament was a genre that pervaded the psalms, the hymnal and prayer book of the Jews and early Christians down through the centuries.<sup>8</sup> Central to what is called lament is a pleading with God for his help amidst distress, and all the more

4. The reason is that it was the songbook and prayer manual for the ancient Jewish community of faith in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

5. This is an inter-disciplinary article that deals with biblical theology in the first half and pastoral theology in the second half.

6. When words escape the sufferer, how does s/he respond to God? What theological language does s/he draw upon? The lament prayers or songs or poems of the Bible are an excellent starting point.

7. The reason people lament is for the purpose of God hearing them and turning things around in their favor. Or, as Brown and Miller propose, "the laments about one's condition and the complaints against God, are to be understood as acts of persuasion, motivations laid out to persuade God to act on behalf of the innocent, the victim, and the sufferer, that is, to persuade God to be God" (Brown and Miller, *Lament*, xv.).

8. For further information, see Holladay, *Psalms*.

so, amidst his silence. Noteworthy at this point is Scott Ellington's observation that, "Lament is lament only when it is addressed to someone ... Prayers of lament, though, are occasioned not by conversation with God, but by his *silence*."<sup>9</sup> In addition to this observation, Ellington notes that, "Biblical lament at its core is about the threat of the breakdown of relationship between the one praying and his or her covenant partner."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, according to William Soll, "lament is not merely an articulation of unhappiness; rather, it seeks in the midst of unhappiness, to recover communion with God."<sup>11</sup> As such, the language of lament provides words for those who seek to recover, in the midst of anguish and pain, intimacy with their God. This is one of the main reasons that lies behind the appropriation of the psalms of lament within the Jewish context. With this, I now turn attention to a general survey of the lament psalms that convey the message of hope amidst distress and trouble.

*Lament Psalms within the Faith Community of Israel*  
(Old Testament)

Preferring to look at the forest of the psalms rather than its trees, Walter Brueggemann divided the psalms into three categories or movements. According to him, the psalms move from orientation (e.g., Pss 1, 8, 33) to disorientation ... to new orientation (e.g., Pss 30, 40, 138).<sup>12</sup> Yet it was Hermann Gunkel who, operating within his form-critical approach, noted in his work done on the psalms that the bulk of the psalter is comprised of the genre known as lament—both individual and communal. Within this

9. Ellington, *Risking Truth*, 8 (emphasis mine).

10. Ellington, *Risking Truth*, 10.

11. Soll, "Israelite Lament," 79. J. E. Hartley ("Lament; Lamentation," 65) adds that "People lamented an anticipated calamity, no doubt because they dreaded its coming, but also because they hoped to move God to divert it." Hartley's statement, however, does not take into consideration the fact that the majority of laments are voiced not in anticipation of the imminent calamity, but rather after the calamity has occurred, that is, in the crux of the calamity.

12. Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 31.

genre of lament were two sub-genres, “depending on whether the people confess their sins and ask forgiveness or whether they protest their innocence and try to persuade God to recognize it as well. The first class we call Penitential Prayers ... and the second, Confessions of Innocence.”<sup>13</sup>

Gunkel also noted that, within the prophetic literature, “a Communal Lament is customarily divided into two parts: (a) a passionate appeal, and (b) the divine response.”<sup>14</sup> Within the book of psalms, however, “the counterpart to the second element is the poet’s ‘certainty of a hearing,’ which is an expression of his confidence that his prayer will be heard. Its appearance in the psalm is often quite sudden and unmotivated.”<sup>15</sup> Even though it does appear that within the lament psalm God’s answer had come swiftly, it is likely to have taken a longer period of persistent praying and patience and hope until the LORD finally broke through for the suppliant.<sup>16</sup> Another possibility that exists is that by simply petitioning the LORD for help, and because of his trust in the LORD, the petitioner was confident that his lament was heard and answered. What is important to note, nonetheless, is that the petitioner’s hope in the LORD’s favorable answer did not subside and God’s answer to the one in distress finally came through to him.<sup>17</sup> Gunkel notes, in his description of the individual laments, that

13. Gunkel, *Psalms*, 14, 20.

14. Gunkel, *Psalms*, 14.

15. Gunkel, *Psalms*, 14–5. I disagree with Gunkel that there is always a “certainty of a hearing,” and agree with Villanueva that “laments are capable of moving, and do move, from praise to lament. There is in the psalms, not only the ‘certainty of a hearing’; we also have what I call the ‘uncertainty of a hearing’” (Villanueva, “*Uncertainty of a Hearing*,” 28). Examples of this movement from praise to lament or the ‘uncertainty of a hearing’ can be found in Pss 12, 28, 86.

16. Even though not within the psalter, Hannah’s prayer to God for a child and Jonah’s prayer for God’s response and favor are examples of a long waiting, yet hoping, nonetheless.

17. Here I utilize the masculine pronoun, since there is no evidence that the petitioner was a female.

This literary type has a very pronounced style: almost invariably the same thoughts and images recur. The peculiar and recurring situation in this psalm type is that of the suppliant who, in the midst of some illness, which is a matter of life and death, must at the same time complain about his enemies who are persecuting and slandering him. Most of these psalmists, moreover, assert their innocence as happens in the Psalms of Innocence and the curse of their enemies, in the Imprecatory Psalms. Others acknowledge their guilt and ask forgiveness, as in the Penitential Psalms. The order in many of these psalms is a characteristic one: first, the wailing, almost desperate and the passionate prayer; then, suddenly, the certainty of deliverance in jubilant tone (Ps. 22 is a classic example).<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the individual laments dominate the scene of the psalter with some 40 percent of the psalms.<sup>19</sup> Such a high percentage confirms the statement that, “among the most distinctive marks of the prayer of Israel is the bold inclusion of prayers of lament, protest, and argumentation with God.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, one will find that in the psalms of lament, “No holds are barred, no questions or feelings taboo,”<sup>21</sup> as P. D. Miller has observed. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here that lament is not primarily the last word on the lips of the lamenter, which can be observed from Craig C. Broyles’s note that, “A lament psalm ... is a set poetic prayer aimed to present a need to God so that he may resolve it and further his praise ... *Praise* should have the last word.”<sup>22</sup> Put this way, the goal of lament is an intimate fellowship with God that leads to his exultation, which can be seen in most of the lament psalms (here the example examined is from Psalm 22) that contain the following elements (all biblical references in this article are taken from the NRSV).

18. Gunkel, *Psalms*, 19–20; cf., fn. 10.

19. Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 32.

20. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 25.

21. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 133.

22. Broyles, “Psalms of Lament,” 384 (emphasis mine). Broyles had earlier argued for the label of this genre of the psalm as “complaint” rather than “lament,” and that the two should be distinguished. He writes, “A lament focuses on a situation; a complaint focuses on the one responsible. A lament simply bemoans the state of things; a complaint contains a note of blame and rebuke” (Broyles, *Conflict of Faith*, 40).

(1) *Address*—with an introductory cry for help and/or of turning to God—“My God, my God ... ” (v. 1a); (2) *Lament*, which includes two (or sometimes three) subjects, namely, God and the petitioner(s), but which can include the foes—“why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning” (v. 1b); (3) *Confession of trust*, which is a contrast to the lament by the *waw* adversative (often as a result of a favorable answer from God which brought a sudden change of mood to the prayer)—“Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them” (vv. 3–4); (4) *Petition*—(a) for God to be favorable (look ... incline thyself ... hear ... ); and (b) for God to intervene (help ... save ... )—here the motifs are designed to move God to intervene; (5) *Assurance of being heard*; (6) *Double wish*—a wish or petition that God will intervene against ... and for ... something<sup>23</sup>—“Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help” (v. 11); (7) *Vow of praise*—“From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (vv. 21a–22); and (8) *Praise of God*—takes place only when the petition has been answered.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to this outline of the individual lament psalms, Westermann claims,

In Israel, all speaking to God moved between two poles. There is no petition, no pleading from the depths, that did not move at least one step (in looking back to God’s earlier saving activity or in confession of confidence) on the road to praise. But there is also no praise that was fully separated from the experience of God’s wonderful intervention in time of need, none that had become a mere stereotyped liturgy.<sup>25</sup>

23. The reason the petition is also called a “double wish” is because it is “simultaneously expressed in two directions. May God do thus to our enemies; may God do thus to us. An example is found in Ps 80:17–18” (Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 52).

24. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64. It is worth mentioning here that not all of the laments contain each of these elements.

25. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 154.

However, as one considers this movement from lament to praise, one is likely to assume that speech directed towards God moves in a linear fashion. As such, John Goldingay has proposed an understanding of the movement as that of an “upward spiral.” In response to Brueggemann’s approach, Goldingay suggests that as the community of faith moves from orientation to disorientation and then to new orientation, they do not return to the place from which they started. Rather, their faith grows ever stronger through their experiences of God’s manifestation, hiddenness, and new appearing.<sup>26</sup> As such, lament not only leads to re-communion with God, but along with it, a stronger trust in him.

So what can Christians glean from the laments of the ancient Israelite community of faith? Billman and Migliore provide nine points of learning from the laments within the Old Testament: (1) Old Testament prayer of lament is a bold and disturbing form of prayer; (2) the biblical prayers of lament have particular life contexts; (3) many of the lament psalms implicitly or explicitly reject the idea that all suffering is caused by sin; (4) Old Testament prayers of lament often include expression of raw anger and cries for vengeance against enemies; (5) the tradition of biblical lament juxtaposes trust and doubt, lament and praise in sometimes extreme tension; (6) the prayer of lament sometimes includes the element of protest in which the one who prays enters into intense, even angry, argument with God; (7) the prayer of lament presupposes an awareness of the freedom and hiddenness of God; (8) in the same biblical tradition that contains prayers of lament, there is testimony that God also laments and that God mourns along with the people of Israel because of their sin and suffering; and (9) in the prayer of lament, Israel remembers in order to hope.<sup>27</sup> Point 9 is especially significant to this article, since it is within the prayer of lament that Israel recalls its covenant relationship with God, which then gives rise to Israel’s hope. And with this, I now move into the laments

26. Goldingay, “Dynamic Cycle,” 85–90.

27. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 27–33.

appropriated within the early church, that is, in the New Testament.

*Laments in the Early Church (New Testament)*

Westermann asked the question pointedly, “Does the loss of lament in the prayer and worship of the Christian church have its basis in the New Testament itself?”<sup>28</sup> It does appear to be the case, especially when one looks at John’s Gospel, that without reticence Jesus readily accepted the cup of wrath from his father (John 18:1–11) as opposed to his struggle with the idea portrayed in the other Gospels (Matt 26:36–50; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 29:32–46). Even Mark’s portrayal of Jesus’s crucifixion and his cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34), which appears to emphasize Jesus’ death and agony rather than the hope that is found in Psalm 22, seem to point in that direction.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the apostle Paul admonishes the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (4:4), even while he is in chains for Christ (1:13)! Then in his letter to the church(es) in Rome, he tells the believers that, “we also exult in our tribulations” (5:3). Other passages that seem to take this trajectory are Matt 5:11–2, Col 1:24, 1 Thess 5:16, Jas 1:2–4, and 1 Pet 1:9. Thus, it would appear that, in the New Testament, praise and rejoicing are to take precedence over lament. However, it must be noted that even Paul himself *lamented* the thorn in his flesh, but was given more grace to endure the pain (2 Cor 12:7–10). Also, in Rom 12:15, the apostle Paul urges the believers to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, *weep* with those who *weep*.”<sup>30</sup> And even as Paul considered the ramifications of “sin’s deceptive, overpowering, and ever-present power in Romans 7, all he could do was to cry for help [within the framework of Old Testament lament

28. Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 52. More will be said on this question in the “Pastoral Theology” section below.

29. Robbins, “Reversed Contextualization.”

30. Emphasis added.

language],” which Crisler calls a “lament conscience” in his comment on this passage.<sup>31</sup>

An even closer look at the New Testament produces the findings of what Ellington calls a three-tiered classification for the description of the laments found in the New Testament: (1) *Lament references*—these are references made to lament being offered without the reader being told their content, as in the case of Paul’s thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:8–9); (2) *Lament fragments*—these are isolated petitions that are self-contained and stand-alone, which are usually found in the healing and deliverance stories, as in the cry, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (Luke 18:35–43). Other passages that contain lament fragments are Matt 8:1–4; 17:14–16; 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43; and (3) *Lament allusions*—these are quotes or echoes of specific Old Testament laments, as in the case of the passers-by “deriding him, shaking their heads” during Christ’s crucifixion (Mark 15:29), an allusion to Ps 22:7.<sup>32</sup>

Taking these three into consideration, Rebekah Eklund proposed a fourth tier, which she called “texts that evoke the function and ethos of lament,”<sup>33</sup> which she notes “includes texts that are not explicitly prayers of lament but that narratively embody the pattern of lament (e.g., petitions in the Gospels

31. Crisler, “Lament in Romans,” 175.

32. Ellington, *Risking Truth*, 164–67. In lieu of Ellington’s “lament allusion,” Eklund prefers “quotations of lament psalms.” See Eklund, “Jesus Wept,” 17. My own preference is that of “lament psalms citations.”

33. Eklund, “Jesus Wept,” 18. In his critique of Eklund’s fourth tier, Campbell asks, “Does the ethos of the lament actually lie behind Jesus’ weeping at Lazarus’ tomb, or is Jesus just sad because his friend has died?” (“NT Lament,” 768). Here I note that I am unaware of any documented response from Eklund. However, my own response would have to be in favor of the former, since the latter seems less plausible. My reason for saying this is because of the very fact that Jesus knew why he had delayed his coming in the first place, that is, so that the glory of God might be manifested before the eyes of the people, in order that they might believe that God the Father had sent Jesus the Son (John 11:40–41). Therefore, it is likely that Jesus did not weep because of the death of his friend whom he loved, since he knew he was going to raise him from the dead. As such, one finds that Jesus’ weeping provides an ethos of lament.

asking Jesus for help) or that function to express the longing of lament for God's salvation in the context of the eschatological in-breaking of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry (e.g., Rachel's weeping).<sup>34</sup> Her example of the "petitions in the Gospels asking Jesus for help," however, seems to be the very "lament fragments" that Ellington spoke of, as aforementioned, so I am not sure that Eklund offers anything new here other than renaming Ellington's "lament fragments" to "texts that evoke the function and ethos of the lament." However, she does speak of Rachel's weeping and of Jesus' weeping at Lazarus's tomb,<sup>35</sup> both of which seem to fit well with her fourth tier, and in fact, I would add here that it fits well with Paul's call to "weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

In addition to these four tiers, a fifth tier called "lament prayer proper," has been offered by Keith Campbell, which is similar to Ellington's "lament fragments," yet different because they contain petitions directed towards God, as in the case of the souls under the altar praying for vengeance on their enemies (Rev 6:9–10).<sup>36</sup> What is significant is that, in each case, the lament results in praise because of a trust and hope in God and/or Jesus to bring about a positive change on behalf of the lamenter. As such, it can be said that hope exists in the midst suffering when the one in distress begins to lament.

Further, as I mentioned to the gentleman in church, Jesus employed the language of lament as he cried out on the cross to God the father. Borrowing the words of a lament psalm, Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46)? Later he cried out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46), which was taken from the lament psalm in Ps 31:5.

Nevertheless, Jesus' lament cries did not go unanswered, for three days later this very Jesus rose triumphantly from the dead to new life. And with his resurrection came the disciples' preaching of the message of hope, that is, the hope of being raised to

34. Eklund, "Jesus Wept," 18–20.

35. Eklund, "Jesus Wept," 38–40.

36. Campbell, "NT Lament," 768.

new life even after death (1 Corinthians 15; 1 Pet 3:15). Thankfully, lament and death were not the final words, *but* resurrection and the hope of eternal life for everyone who trusts in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. As Jesus himself said prior to raising Lazarus from the dead, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though when they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25–26). And what better hope to give to his followers than to not only promise a resurrection from the dead, but to demonstrate it in raising his friend Lazarus from the dead (vv. 43–44),<sup>37</sup> and subsequently, even being raised himself by God the Father to new life after three days of being buried dead (Mark 16:9; 1 Cor 15:4).<sup>38</sup>

In addition to Jesus’ lament (and subsequent answer), the apostle Paul spoke of the entire creation groaning and the Spirit groaning on behalf of the sons and daughters of God when words escape us, as we await the blessed hope of a redeemed body (Rom 8:18–25). Indeed, “For Paul, the groaning of the Spirit in our prayers is a groaning of anticipation as well as a groaning of pain.”<sup>39</sup> The two must be held together without the negation of either, that is, they ought to be held in tension with each other. Nevertheless, it is the groaning in pain that amplifies the hope all the more. Indeed, what a blessed hope believers in Christ have—the hope of glory (Rom 5:2). But before we turn our attention to pastoral theology, let us consider one final New Testament lament recorded in Rev 6:9–10, which reads,

And they [the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained] cried out in a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth”?

37. I here acknowledge that, to be precise, Lazarus was resuscitated and not resurrected.

38. Jesus was resurrected, which means, rising from the dead and never to die again. Furthermore, Jesus was buried dead, not alive in some unconscious state.

39. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 39.

An interesting fact that is worth mentioning here is that God does not rebuke the souls under the altar for such a lament prayer. What is also noticeable is that they are told to “rest a little while longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed” (v. 11). And with such a response from God, we are reminded once again that there is hope for the believers in the midst of their lament.<sup>40</sup>

To conclude this section, let us consider some principles that can be gleaned from the New Testament. Billman and Migliore say (1) that New Testament prayers, including the Lord’s Prayer, are full of passion and a sense of urgency; (2) that like the prayers of lament in the Old Testament, New Testament prayers also have their particular life contexts; (3) that in the New Testament, prayer includes but is not reduced to the petition for forgiveness of sins; (4) that while the cry for vengeance against enemies is far rarer in the prayer of the New Testament than in the Old, its presence reminds us of the seriousness of evil and the reality of divine judgment; (5) that as is evident in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane and in the apostle Paul’s prayer for the removal of his “thorn in the flesh,” prayer in the New Testament can involve profound struggle; (6) that while the prayer of lament and protest is evident in relatively few Gospel narratives, some passages, which are often overlooked, breathe its spirit; (7) that acceptance of the lament prayer in Christian prayer is irrevocably ratified by Jesus’ cry of abandonment on the cross; (8) that because the New Testament community sees Jesus in the most intimate relationship to God, the lament of Jesus becomes the basis of Christian affirmation that God also laments; (9) and that in the New Testament prayer, memory and hope are closely bound together.<sup>41</sup> Once more, attention is given especially to point 9, where one notices that there is hope within the prayer of

40. Perhaps this is a good place to start our theological reflection concerning Christians suffering persecution, especially in the face of the ISIS crisis.

41. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 34–39.

lament, and with this, let us now move into a consideration as to how lament can inform contemporary pastoral theology.

*A Pastoral Theology of Lament within the Contemporary  
Evangelical Church*

In their volume, *Rachel's Cry*, Billman and Migliore remarked that, although Christians have appropriated the Bible for comfort and praise, their appropriation of the biblical laments is often lacking. They state:

While readily using the Bible for comfort, instruction, and praise, Christians may seldom ever look to it as a resource to voice their pain, grief, and anger. This suggests an attitude toward prayer and piety that seriously underestimates the role of *lament* and *protest* in biblical faith ... that diminishes Christian life and ministry by silencing honest *lament*.<sup>42</sup>

In consideration of this reality, it is my contention that there is a necessity for recovering lament within our contemporary Western evangelical churches. As stated in the introduction, the prayer/song/poem of lament acts as a voice or language for those who weep in silence, even for those whose voices have been muted. Likewise, this language of lament offers a message of hope for the contemporary Western evangelical church based on its prior usage within the nation of Israel and also the early church, and especially so from the mouth of Jesus.

That said, it is probably fair to say that all Christians will encounter at least once in their lives adversity and suffering, that is, the “dark night of the soul,”<sup>43</sup> or the “wall.”<sup>44</sup> Scripture reminds us that these experiences have an important purpose—they enable Christians to develop perseverance (Rom 5:3), and we thus become mature in Christ. It is also true that suffering enables us to prove the genuineness of our faith in God (1 Pet 1:7). At the same time, it aids in reminding us of our own frailty

42. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 23 (emphasis mine).

43. Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, 36.

44. Hagberg and Guelich, *Critical Journey*, 9.

and feebleness, which helps in keeping us humble and dependent on God for all things (Rom 5:5). As J. I. Packer said,

This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort and another: *it is to ensure that we shall learn to hold him fast* ... And God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore, he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in himself—in the classic scriptural phrase for the secret of the godly life, “to wait on the Lord.”<sup>45</sup>

In light of that, we do not despair, for we are not a people without hope, because God our Maker and Sustainer is the one on whom we have set our hope. And “our/my hope,” the hymn writer Edward Mote writes, “is built on nothing less, than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Thus, “When darkness seems to hide his face,” we are called to “rest in His unchanging grace.”<sup>46</sup> And this is exactly what lament assists the lamenter in doing, that is, in lieu of despairing, the language of lament reinforces the believer’s trust and hope in God that things will turn out alright, even if not on this side of heaven, it will on the other side (Rev 21:1–4). If this is true, then there is a need to recover the lost language of lament within our contemporary Western evangelical churches. One advocate for this need is Eugene H. Peterson, who commented that there are

Christians (and there are many of us) who have lost touch with our native language of lament, this language that accepts suffering and our freely expressed suffering as the stuff that God uses for our salvation. At-homeness in the language of lament is necessary for expressing our companionship with our Lord as He accompanies us through the “valley of the shadow of death” and who leads us to be with Him in “dark Gethsamane ... ”

For at least one reason why people are uncomfortable with tears and the sight of suffering is that it is a blasphemous assault on their precariously maintained American spirituality of the pursuit of happiness. They want to avoid evidence that things are not right with the world as it is without Jesus ... without love, without faith, without

45. Packer, *Knowing God*, 250.

46. Mote, “My Hope,” lines 1–2, 8–9.

sacrifice. It is a lot easier to keep the American faith if they don't have to look into the face of suffering, if they don't have to listen to our laments, if they don't have to deal with our tears.

So learning the language of lament is not only necessary to restore Christian dignity to suffering and repentance and death, it is necessary to provide a Christian witness to a world that has no language for and is therefore oblivious to the glories of wilderness and cross.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, Brueggemann has identified at least two consequences that relate to the church's loss of lament. First, the loss of genuine covenant interaction, since the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise or doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and wellbeing.<sup>48</sup> And second, the stifling of the question of theodicy, the capacity to raise and legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power.<sup>49</sup>

With this in mind, one can ask the question of whether or not the language of lament, particularly within the psalter, can be used as part of the church's prayer and songs today? Or, as David Cohen puts it, "How would it affect a person if they prayed lament psalms when faced with distress?" Cohen answers his question by stating that,

It seems today that the typical response to distressing life events is for faith communities, often, to avoid, ignore or even try to suppress the voices of those who are suffering. If there is a response it is often in the form of platitudes such as 'trust in God' or 'pray more,' when

47. In Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 12. It is interesting to note that Peterson uses the term "native language" for our laments, while Jesus speaks of the Jews (Pharisees) who questioned his authority as speaking the language of their father the devil whose "native language" is lying (John 8:44). Speaking of the "pursuit of happiness," John Piper seeks to lay out a biblical concept of the Christians' pursuit of happiness not by running after the things of this world but by delighting in God, that is, enjoying God as one's greatest treasure, which he calls "Christian Hedonism." In fact, he writes, "The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever" (Piper, *Desiring God*, 28).

48. Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 102.

49. Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 104.

acknowledgement and validation of the person's experience is of far greater importance. It is critical that people in distress are encouraged to tell their stories and express their thoughts and feelings in a safe and secure environment. Lament psalms are one resource, which offers a pathway towards this healthy engagement.<sup>50</sup>

With this in mind, we will now turn our attention to the use of lament (especially the psalms) within the contemporary church from the discipline of pastoral theology. As indicated above, the appropriation of lament songs or prayers are a means of voicing the language of sufferers in the midst of their silence, that is, when they find that they do not know what to say to God. At the same time, it also offers a message of hope to those who may find themselves in despair. William Arnold notes that the lament psalms are "One of the most helpful places to turn in the Bible for understanding grief."<sup>51</sup> When it comes to grief, the psalms of lament offer aid to the lamenter in a couple of ways, namely, (1) the excruciating misery of the suffering person or group is not denied but voiced, which gives contemporary mourners a sense of the normality and acceptability of their feelings, and (2) the words are spoken to another, which deprivatizes the suffering and ensures that the suffering is heard.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, Arnold observes that the use of memory in recollecting or remembering God's past mercies in difficult times, acts as a healing resource for the grieving one(s) in his or her time of mourning.<sup>53</sup> Here I would add that this is the message of hope for the one who grieves.

Writing along the lines of grief as well are Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, who both affirm that "The psalms of lament are filled with anger at God for God's absence and seeming disregard for the plight of God's people. Anger, especially as a part of grief, is not contrary to faith or faithfulness, but an inescapable response to loss."<sup>54</sup> Also of interest is

50. Cohen, *Why O Lord?* 3.

51. Arnold, *Introduction*, 162.

52. See Arnold, *Introduction*, 163–66.

53. See Arnold, *Introduction*, 163–67.

54. Mitchell and Anderson, *All Our Losses*, 79.

Anderson's article titled "Men and Grief: The Hidden Sea of Tears without Outlet." Anderson laments the fact that people are taught to keep silent for the very reason that weeping is taboo not only within our culture, but also within the Christian tradition, since it demonstrates man's weakness. Thus, he makes an urgent plea for its recovery by retrieving the legacy of David's story and his laments as a gift for the grieving. As such, he writes that, "David's legacy of a man of power who wept becomes a testimony to the possibility of linking strength and vulnerability."<sup>55</sup>

In speaking of strength and vulnerability, John Feinberg renders a practical example of what not to say to people when experiencing suffering as it related to the diagnosis of his wife's disease—Huntington's chorea. Although Feinberg acknowledges that "Healing can't come if we deny what we are feeling and act as though it is good that evil has occurred,"<sup>56</sup> he admits that "We don't immediately need a lengthy lecture to appeal to our mind, because this isn't primarily an intellectual matter. What we need is something to take away our pain."<sup>57</sup> At his point of vulnerability, one such antidote that provided strength for the journey was the very words of his father, Charles Feinberg, who said to his son that, "John, God never promised to give you tomorrow's grace for today. He only promised today's grace for today, and that's all you need!"<sup>58</sup> John said that "In that one comment I was reminded both of God's grace and of my need to take each day one at a time."<sup>59</sup>

Reading Feinberg's personal account of suffering immediately takes me back to the story of Job and his friends who wrongfully accused him of sin instead of remaining silent as they did when they first visited him (Job 2:13). This said, it might be helpful for Christians to listen to D. A. Carson's words, as he points out the flaw of Job's friends, and by extension, the flaws

55. Anderson, "Men and Grief," 225.

56. Feinberg, "Journey in Suffering," 224.

57. Feinberg, "Journey in Suffering," 220.

58. Feinberg, "Journey in Suffering," 225.

59. Feinberg, "Journey in Suffering," 225.

of many well-intentioned Christians that sometimes affect those who are suffering. Carson writes,

There is a way of using theology and theological arguments that wounds rather than heals. This is not the fault of theology and theological arguments; it is the fault of the “miserable comforter” who fastens on an inappropriate fragment of truth, or whose timing is off, or whose attitude is condescending, or whose application is insensitive, or whose true theology is couched in such culture-laden clichés that they grate rather than comfort.<sup>60</sup>

This is to say that rather than using theology or theological arguments as a means of comfort to those who might be suffering in pain, mourning, or distress, Christians should simply show up, that is, be present. It is the presence, silent presence for that matter, and not so much the words of fellow Christians, that means most to people who are suffering. In other words, it is the presence of fellow believers during times of distress that speaks volumes to those who suffer, as it communicates to the suffering ones that there are believers who *care* about them and their wellbeing. For when we honestly examine those persons in our lives who mean the most to us, we will find that the answer lies in those who extended communal solidarity in their care for us. That is, we will respond by saying that it is those who shared in our anguish, touched our wounds with a gentle and tender hand, remained *silent* with us in a moment of despair and confusion, and even stayed with us in an hour of grief and bereavement.<sup>61</sup> This is what is at the heart of caring for the other.

In view of this, if we truly care for those who suffer, then we will seek to express communal solidarity by weeping with those who weep (Rom 12:15) in the ministry of care (Matt 25:36). And in this act of caring for the other, we will seek to bring comfort to those who are in distress with the comfort that we ourselves have received from our God of all-comfort (2 Cor 1:1–12). In other words, the act of lamenting with those who lament, all the while trusting in the LORD, offers a message of hope that God

60. Carson, *Love of God*, 75.

61. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 38 (emphasis mine).

will come through favorably on behalf of those who suffer. This then leads to the question of how pastors can function properly in administering care and offering comfort and hope to their congregants who are experiencing pain and suffering, and even discouragement and despair.

Carson offers some helpful advice when he writes, “It is important to offer hope—not only the hope of the consummation, but of hope even on the shorter term. Hope is the antidote for despair.”<sup>62</sup> He thus calls on the Christian community to “pray for those who suffer ... In the deepest suffering, many find it almost impossible to pray. Should not the rest of us intercede for them?”<sup>63</sup> And might not one of those prayers take the form of lament, even the laments found within the psalter? At the least, when words fail or are hard to come by, the lament psalms will provide ample words that can be expressed to God amidst distress. And in the process of lamenting, the petitioner hopes in God, who hears and cares and who can do the impossible (Matt 19:26), for a reversal of the agony and event, which will then result in praise to God.

Moreover, that the lament psalms structure (elements) offers a helpful tool to those who suffer is further evinced by Donald Capps’s adaptation of it in pastoral counselling, especially when dealing with grief. Below is his description of these elements.

*Address to God*—Counselling the grieving begins with the understanding, usually implicit rather than explicit, that the words of the sufferer and the conversation between the sufferer and the counsellor are addressed to God.

*Complaint*—When private laments and complaints are disclosed, the role of the counsellor is to be really accepting the sufferer’s negative feelings. The counsellor’s capacity to hear and accept the depth of these negative feelings enables sufferers to know that there is someone who can possibly understand and accept them, and that help and comfort are possible for him or her.

62. Carson, *How Long*, 224.

63. Carson, *How Long*, 225.

*Confession of trust*—The pastoral conversation can itself provide a context in which trust is actually experienced as a simple confidence that one will be able to cope. This is a moment of turning the corner.

*Petition*—Petitioning helps mourners do something about their complaints. The pastor's role here is to help the counselee clarify the petitions, in order to gain a clearer sense of what the petitions are.

*Words of assurance*—Two pastoral initiatives characterize this stage of the grief counselling process. One is the assurance through words or attitude that the petitions of the sufferer are shared and that the pastor and others will offer active and committed support. The second is the assurance that God hears the petitions of the sufferer.

*Vow to praise*—The counsellor fosters a spirit of praise by assisting in clarifying what in the grief experience invites or warrants praise to God. The spirit of praise is vitally important to the resolution of grief, because it reinforces the hope that was rekindled in clarifying one's petitions and checks the drift toward apathy that typically follows the release of those petitions.<sup>64</sup>

It also seems appropriate to make use of this tool of the elements and movements within the lament psalm in counselling anyone who is suffering, and not just those who are grieving in bereavement. Such a tool aids the one who suffers to cry out to God for help in the midst of distress, while hoping in faith (not wishing) that God will respond favorably, with the goal being that of praise to God.

In keeping with lamenting in the midst of darkness and gloom, while simultaneously trusting and hoping in God for a joyful tomorrow (Ps 30:5), Phil Zylla proposes a paradigmatic (movement) approach to the theology of pain and suffering. His paradigmatic approach is really a three-stage movement or progression, the first of which is the movement "From Silence to Lament," and this involves the "sensitive articulation of the

64. Capps, *Biblical Approaches*, 73–92. Cf. Migliore and Billman, *Rachel's Cry*, 84–85.

situation, but only after an appropriate period of silent grief.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, as pastors and caregivers, it is our first response to “share in the hushed silence of the most afflicted,”<sup>66</sup> before moving the voicing of our pain and anguish. Put differently,

Enacting the paradigm begins with the willingness to live with the questions and to demonstrate our solidarity through tears more than words. In due course, *lament* emerges, but in the beginning we must be ever vigilant about the respect due to those who suffer in *extremis*.<sup>67</sup>

By way of explanation, it is only after we have dwelt with those who suffer *in extremis* for an appropriate period of time, which can be either long or short, that we can begin to move from a place of silence to lament. Yet as was noted above, lament is not the final word and, as such, this brings us to the second movement, which is, “from indifference to compassion.” In providing a description of this second movement, Zylla notes that

The practice of entering into the suffering of others with active help (compassion) requires deeper understanding of the dynamics of why we withdraw from the suffering of others in the first place. Compassion is not a practice that we can easily take up as though it were our natural response to suffering. It is a countercultural and spiritual skill of entering into the anguishing situation of others. When we acknowledge our indifference, we break its power in our lives and are free to pursue compassion as our deepest vocation.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, compassion ought to be the heartbeat of all pastoral caregivers and every Christian for that matter (Luke 6:36), since it is compassion that will lead to what Zylla called his third paradigmatic movement, that is, “from loneliness to community,” in which he identifies loneliness as “*the suffering in suffering*.”<sup>69</sup> He adds to this by saying that,

65. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 172.

66. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 172.

67. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 172 (emphasis mine).

68. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 172.

69. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 173 (emphasis original).

At its core, ministry to the suffering means coming near in their time of grave concern and anguish. The activity that we must generate as the compassionate community of God is the capacity to discern where the greatest needs are and to simply show up. In this way we dispel the dark cloud of abandonment and rejection, enabling suffering persons to experience themselves as loved and cared for by others ... In our ministry, our movements must enter into the experience of the other in such a way as to relieve the person's sense of isolation, forsakenness, and abandonment. Our presence in the life situation of the suffering is a concrete measure of authentic compassion.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, without compassion there is no genuine Christianity, and by extension, pastoral theology. And since it is the goal of this article to argue for the recovery of lament within the contemporary Western evangelical church, it is important to know where to start, that is, the acknowledgment of the loss of lament within today's church. According to Zylla, "We have not only lost the capacity to lament because of theological triumphalism, we have lost the language of lament and the mood of lamentation as core spiritual aspects of this spiritual practice."<sup>71</sup> Thus, there is a need for a "renewal of lament as a theological category," which must then "effect the transformation of our liturgical practices in the church."<sup>72</sup> Keeping Zylla's suggestion in mind, we now turn our attention to appropriating laments within the liturgical practices of the contemporary Western evangelical church.

70. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 173

71. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 173.

72. Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 173. I have sought to develop this idea in another paper titled "A Practical Theology of Lament: Reclaiming Lament as a Path to Hope in Suffering." There I argue, by means of a critical correlation methodology, that because of the presence of triumphalism in our evangelical churches, praise needs to be tempered and lament needs to be restrained.

*Recovering Lament: Aiding the Western Evangelical Church  
in Lament (Psalms)*

At the beginning of this article, I noted that my conversation with a gentleman at the church I visited ended abruptly because of his misunderstanding of the appropriateness of the lament psalms for contemporary Christian adoption. I further noted that the psalms of lament were part and parcel of the liturgy of the Jewish believers and through the centuries have been sung, prayed, and preached by Christians. Sadly, we have not only lost the hymnal and prayer book of our ancestors, but we have also misplaced this precious language of lament in our Western evangelical churches. So in light of these aforementioned facts, it is my aspiration to recover this precious language of lament, that is, to lead the contemporary Western evangelical churches into a holistic ministry of lament. In this ministry of lament, both pastor and congregation assert that the “entire communal life of the congregation contains caring potential.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, in this assertion concerning the communal life of the church, which includes the weekly worship, prayer, small/cell groups, Bible study, fellowship, etc., it is both the pastor and congregation that are working together to care for each other, which includes lamenting with and for one another. As such, I offer below some practical ways to implement lamenting within the contemporary Western evangelical church, especially the appropriation of the psalms of lament.<sup>74</sup>

*Preaching and Teaching the Lament Psalms*

Writing to the church in Colossae, the apostle Paul gave the following advice, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom *teaching* and *admonishing* one another with *psalms* ... ” (Col 3:16; emphasis mine). This is why I think that it is appropriate to begin by teaching and preaching these lament psalms before the congregation, so that they are able to

73. Fowler, *Ministry of Lament*, 18.

74. I wish to develop this idea further using theopoetics.

learn what the lament psalms are prior to taking this precious language upon their lips. In other words, it is more likely that the congregation will begin to appropriate the lament psalms amidst their distress after they are made aware of the fact that the pastor (or elder, or bishop) has sanctioned it. Put differently, the pastor has a lot of power to influence his or her congregants for good or bad, and in this case, it would be a good idea to have the psalms of lament become the very vernacular of the worshippers, which usually comes first from the pulpit. As Michael Knowles notes, “As partners in and witnesses to a larger theological dialogue, preachers urge their hearers to engage *God* in conversation, even (or especially) if that conversation is likely to be angry, outraged, or uncomprehending—if, in short, that conversation is likely to take the thoroughly biblical form of lament.”<sup>75</sup>

As such, practically speaking, it would be beneficial to the congregants for the pastor to appropriate the psalms of lament during times of grief, that is, during funerals and memorials. At the same time, the pastor could assign as her or his sermon a lament psalm for the annual Good Friday service, or even through the Lenten season. Perhaps even once every quarter of the year, if not once monthly, a lament psalm could be preached and taught.

#### *Singing the Lament Psalms*

The psalmist instructs the congregation to “O sing to the LORD a new song” (Ps 96:1; cf. Isa 42:10), and the apostle Paul instructs the church in Ephesus to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing* and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:18–19; emphasis mine). As such, should one think of these psalms to which Paul was referring, as inclusive of only the psalms of praise or hymns, it would be helpful to note that the majority of the psalms of lament begin with lament and end with praise and/or thanksgiving. So then, what better psalms to sing than those that can praise God for his deliverance from suffering,

75. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 65.

that is, the lament psalms? Thus, Paul perhaps did have in mind here in his admonition of singing psalms the lament psalms as well. Michael Jenkins notes that “We cannot expect a people’s understanding of God to reach much higher than their hymn books.”<sup>76</sup> Interestingly enough, this has led R. Mark Shipp and his team of professionals to prepare fresh renditions and numerous new musical settings for each of the psalms, within which the psalms of lament are included. So far they have produced *Timeless: Ancient Psalms for the Church Today: Volume One: In the Day of Distress, Psalms 1–41*. Their second and third volumes will include Psalms 42–89 and Psalms 90–150 respectively. Another recent hymnal is *Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship*, which was co-published by Brazos Press, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, and Faith Alive Christian Resources in 2012.

#### *Reading and Praying the Lament Psalms*

Some churches follow a lectionary reading/praying of one of the psalms each week, which includes on many occasions a psalm of lament. Perhaps the employment of the lament psalm in a pastoral prayer will aid the congregants in familiarizing themselves in the actual practice of what the pastor preaches. And if it is read and preached in a communal setting, then it can be read and prayed during a prayer meeting in a cell/small group setting. That is, if they become aware of the fact that the lament psalms are appropriate for their reading and praying in a communal setting, such as preaching from the pulpit, then it would be easier for them to read and pray it within a small group that usually takes place in someone’s place or home. Here I must add that people need to be vulnerable to each other, and at the same time, they also need to have confidence in those who hear their laments—that their prayers, be it their requests or confessions, are safely secured by those listening. In other words, only if the lamenters agree to their information being disclosed publicly, that is, known within the larger communal setting, that it should

76. Jenkins, *House of the Lord*, 34.

be shared. Otherwise, the rule of thumb is that what is said in the prayer meeting, stays in the prayer meeting. Furthermore, praying the lament psalms in the prayer meeting can even overflow into the appropriation of these lament psalms for one's own personal devotions. As Lee Beach remarked, "In doing this, pastoral leaders also give their people license to lament not only the corporate dimensions of exile, but its personal realities as well."<sup>77</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Billman and Migliore contend that

The prayer of lament, or what might also be called the prayer of pain and protest, is vital to theology and pastoral ministry today, that it is a profound resource for personal and corporate healing, and that it is inseparably related to the capacity of hope and praise. Without the resistance and protest that are expressed in the prayer of lament, Christian life, worship, and ministry can quickly become shallow and evasive.<sup>78</sup>

This is precisely what I have sought to demonstrate throughout this article, that is, to argue for the recovery of the language of lament, particularly the psalms, within our contemporary Western evangelical church from a biblical and pastoral theology perspective. Indeed, lament never gives up hope in the God who sees and hears and is able to act favorably on behalf of his beloved children. As John Piper notes, "The evil and suffering in this world are greater than any of us can comprehend. But evil and suffering are not ultimate. *God is*. Satan, the great lover of evil and suffering, is not sovereign. *God is*."<sup>79</sup> For this reason, it is my fervent prayer that all believers who suffer in one way or

77. Beach, "Hopeful Demise," 247. Here Beach speaks of the Canadian (and North American) church living in a post-Christian society, and as such, in exile, calling on the church to live in faithfulness to God's mission in the world. Part of this life of faithfulness includes the inculcating and appropriation of lament within the church.

78. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, vii.

79. Piper and Taylor, *Suffering*, 29 (emphasis mine).

another will appropriate the language of the lament psalms even as we hope for a better tomorrow (Ps 30:5) not only when Christ returns, but also in this lifetime. And as we lament and hope together, it is also my prayer that we can truly say with Horatio Spafford, “It is well with my soul.”<sup>80</sup>

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82. Spafford, “It is Well with my Soul.”

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