

THE CHURCH IN EXILE: LAMENT AS A RESPONSE TO THE  
CHURCH IN DECLINE

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A few years ago, one of my students, a foreign student from South Korea who was studying at the seminary I teach at, invited me to go for lunch. Along with his full-time studies he was also serving as an assistant pastor at a Korean church in the city of Hamilton, Ontario, the same city where the seminary I teach at is located.

We agreed that we would meet at the church building where his congregation met and that he would give me a brief tour before we went out together for Korean lunch. As I drove into the church parking lot of the red brick church building, I noticed that it was an old mainline church that needed a bit of a face lift but was quite large and still impressive. My student met me at the door, and we began to walk around the building. He took me into the church sanctuary, which, while dated, was quite large. It had a balcony that could likely seat at least a thousand people. In the foyer, I noticed the walls were lined with black and white pictures of former pastors and groups of people posing for the camera. One photo in particular caught my attention. It was a picture of the sanctuary that had been taken from the back of the platform, perhaps on some special occasion many years ago. The picture showed a full church of white faces, the floor and balcony were packed with people, it told the story of a church that was vital and attracted a significant number of people to its public services. As we continued the tour, we came to the gymnasium. These days, having a gym in a church building is not that unique, but for a church from that era, a gym was rare. It too had a series of black and white photos on its outer walls. Again, one picture stood out to me. It was a basketball game that was being

played in the church gym. It featured a group of young men (all white) in short basketball shorts, long white socks, sleeveless uniforms, and running shoes ca. 1950 engaged in a game that was being watched by a full gymnasium of fans lining the wall. It told me that at one time the church was a hub of community life, a place where people gathered for a variety of activities.

The story was far from complete, my student told me that his church had purchased the building from the original congregation for *one dollar*! The original congregation had dwindled to about a dozen senior citizens. They could no longer afford to keep up the building, and so they sold it to the Korean church for a single dollar. The only stipulation was that they would still be allowed to meet in the church on Sundays at 11:00 AM until there were no longer any members left. The Korean church gladly agreed and took the building over for the purposes of their growing ministry.

I have often wondered what it would be like if I could go back in time and stand in front of that original congregation on a Sunday when the sanctuary was full and describe their future to them. What if I told them that one day, in the not-too-distant future, they would be reduced to a small gathering of about a dozen people and that they would ultimately sell their building for one dollar to a Korean church! I am sure that they would have laughed at me and told me that I was crazy! Yet that is the true story of that congregation. That is exactly how their future unfolded.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated story. This is the story of too many congregations across North America and Western culture in the last thirty years and, of course, there is no guarantee that it will not be the story of many more congregations in the years ahead.

Where is God in a story like this? When we witness the church in a time of decline and decay, it is right to ask these types of questions. In fact, we probably should ask that question. Why would God not bless his church in such a way to preserve it? Why would he not work, despite whatever human flaws and failures present—as there are in every local church—to help the church flourish? Further, if this story were an isolated incident,

that would be one thing, but the truth is that it is far from isolated; it happens regularly across the European and North American landscape.<sup>1</sup>

The journey of faith necessitates that we embrace mystery and realize not all our questions will be answered. However, it is puzzling and sometimes disconcerting when God acts in ways that do not seem to make sense or reflect what we understand to be in keeping with his character as we believe it to be. As Ellen Charry rightly points out, “[T]rust in God is based on the conviction that God is working good for us and is effective in bringing it about.”<sup>2</sup> Yet we know that there are times in life, both individually and corporately, that our experience of life in this world tests that assumption. Our experience does not add up to our trusting faith. It is at times like this when the practice of lament can be the appropriate response of faith.

*Making Connections between Ancient and Contemporary Contexts*<sup>3</sup>

Historically, those who follow the God of the Bible are a marginalized people. While Christendom may have defined Western culture for approximately 1,500 years, this is the exception, not the rule. The people of Israel were never a superpower; they were a small nation among a world of much larger and more powerful nations. The Babylonian exile in 587 BCE, followed by ongoing Persian captivity, only made this experience more intense. The early church was a fledgling group who lived insecurely on the fringes of the Roman empire. Moreover, the contemporary church in many countries lives as a small minority, sometimes even persecuted as a result of their Christian faith. As already noted, in the contemporary Western world where Christianity once dominated, the church finds itself increasingly rele-

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1. A cursory search on Google will provide numerous credible sources of support for this claim.

2. Charry, “May We Trust God and (Still) Lament?” 95.

3. Parts of the following are taken from my article “Spirituality of Exile.” See also Beach, “Language of Exile.”

gated to the margins of society where it is deemed irrelevant and a relic of a former time.

While exceptions to this narrative can be identified, they remain just that: exceptions. One of the questions the church must always answer, no matter what context it is in and especially in a marginalized one, is this: how do we sustain ourselves as Christian communities and continue to form congregations for ongoing participation in the mission of God in the world?

While there is more than one answer to this question, the story of ancient Israel in exile can offer some clear guidance. A unique resource from the exilic literature of the Bible offers direction to congregations who are struggling to remain faithful to their calling to be God's people in the midst of challenging circumstances. This resource is the prayer language of exile as it is found in the book of Lamentations and the Psalms that can be placed during the period of Babylonian exile with reasonable certainty (Pss 44, 74, 79, 89, 102, 106, and 137).

Emerging from this section of biblical literature comes a number of key themes that were significant in sustaining the ancient people of Israel throughout their exile in Babylonia and subsequent captivity by Persia. One of these themes is lament. Lament played an important role in helping Israel shape its identity in a new cultural circumstance, and it offers similar possibilities for ministry today that can both sustain and shape the life of congregations for life on the margins just as it did for ancient Israel so many years ago.

#### *What Is Lament?*

“Lament” is not a significant word in our vocabulary. Sometimes we may use it to describe a feeling of disappointment. We “lament” the loss of our favorite coffee shop, or we find it “lamentable” that one of our politicians chose to support a position that we disagree with. While this is not a completely inaccurate way to understand lament, it certainly fails to capture its deeper meaning. To lament means to express grief or regret, or to grieve audibly. But more than that, as Billman and Migliore write, lament is “that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that

includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God.<sup>4</sup> In this way, lament is a multi-faceted prayer language that is found throughout Scripture and has been employed in various ways throughout Christian history.<sup>5</sup> It is the language of those who are struggling to understand God's ways in a particular situation and yet are desperately seeking divine help.

Generally speaking, we do not practice lament in large parts of the Western church, not officially at least. Lament is an expression of pain that has largely been either misunderstood or dismissed as inappropriate in most parts of Western culture. Further, when it comes to considering the changing place of the church in contemporary culture, some would say that lament is the wrong way to go. Wallowing in our loss or taking an approach that accentuates the negative rather than embracing the possible opportunities that these changes offer is misguided at best and counter-productive at worst. This view of lament perpetuates the Western mindset and dismisses lament's possible benefits. Refusal to express grief and/or frustration openly sets aside the many benefits of lament to help people define their reality. This way of responding to the suggestion that lament is in fact a highly productive discipline for facing exile simply perpetuates the Western mindset of dismissing the possible benefits of expressing our grief and/or frustrations openly, and it sets aside the many potential benefits that the practice of lament offers as tool that helps a people define their reality and orient themselves to their circumstances so as to begin to move forward in them. I will argue that lament is not about giving in to the negative or choosing to become a complaining misanthrope who only wants things to go back to what they once were. It is a spiritual discipline that helps to form a congregation theologically, spiritually, and missionally.

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4. Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 6.

5. Pemberton offers that lament constitutes forty percent of the Psalter (*After Lament*, 30).

*Lament: The Forbidden Language*

Western culture tends to value strength, resolve, and triumphalism as virtues, and so it is no wonder that the concept of lament is remote to many of us. The term may seem quite archaic or removed from us as it speaks of a language that we do not regularly employ in our day-to-day lives. Further, it invites us into a sphere that is not always comfortable for us or is valued by many other traditions within Christianity. That is, the sphere of questioning God.<sup>6</sup>

Lament is honest language; it is a first response language. It is the language that gives an initial voice to the circumstances that we find ourselves in when it feels like God is being unfair or when he seems absent. Lament is the language of honesty, sadness, rage, anger, and loss.<sup>7</sup> These are emotions that we all experience, both individually and collectively, but that often remain muted in our spirituality as Christians.

Of particular note is the idea of experiencing God's absence. This is often at the heart of exile. As we will see later in this article, ancient Israel certainly struggled with a sense of God's absence as a result of being overrun by the Babylonians. We, too, as twenty-first-century Western Christians, may at times wonder where God is? Why does he not show up more clearly and more powerfully? Does he want his church to go extinct? From here, it is easy to feel sad, angry, and dislocated. Lament is the prayer language that gives voice to these emotions.

It should be of comfort to know that, when we experience the feeling of God's absence or have doubts about his presence, there is language in the Scriptures that comes from our ancestors' experience of God's absence, which precedes us and gives permission to question God and his purposes. As Gary Anderson notes, "For Bible readers of the present era, for whom the feeling that God is absent can be so poignant, it may be of comfort to

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6. Of course, some Christian traditions have historically valued lament and practiced it in various forms in their liturgies. This is true in Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions, just to name a few.

7. Brueggemann, *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope*, 61.

know that these feelings have their place in the divine economy.”<sup>8</sup>

In our collective journey as the church in a post-Christian context, lament is a necessary language. Leaders in the church must learn how to employ it as a way for the doubts and disappointments to find expression in the life of contemporary congregations. Of course, the personal use of lament is also crucial, but just as it is too often sidelined in our personal spirituality, it is even more so in our congregational practices. However, the language of lament was crucial to Israel as it was moved to the margins as a people who experienced drastic cultural change and dislocation. In reaction to this new reality, the speech practice of lament said out loud, “How overwhelming is the loss, how great the anxiety, how deep the consequent fear.”<sup>9</sup> This is necessary language in the midst of massive change.

However, it should not be missed that lament is ultimately the language of prayer. It is language that is addressed to God. Lament is not necessarily a sign of a lack of faith. In fact, it may be a sincere expression *of* faith. Yet it is strangely absent from our corporate practices in many sectors of the church today. Even where it is practiced, it may be done in a rather rote way, absent of any kind of deep emotion. This betrays the essence of lament as raw language that often comes as a first response to our sense of God’s unfaithfulness. Why do we avoid this aspect of prayer in the Western church?

As we have already noted, there are at least two reasons for this. The first one is the cultural reality that we do not express our sorrow and disappointment in ways that legitimize lament as a viable vehicle of expression. Overall, we tend to be more reserved and private about our sorrows. Public expression of pain, unless it occurs among close family or friends, is often met with palpable discomfort. We generally do not like outward expressions of raw, honest emotion. Further, to say out loud that we are angry with God or that we are doubtful of God’s ways is often seen as a flaw in character. If that kind of thing needs to be ex-

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8. Anderson, *Time to Mourn*, 96.

9. Brueggemann, *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope*, 61.

pressed, then it should be done in a way that reflects restraint and is ultimately couched in a positivity that “all things will work together for the good!” Our faith should not “acknowledge and embrace negativity.”<sup>10</sup> This kind of honesty rarely wins favor in most Christian congregations, even though it fairly reflects the experience of anyone who has sought to live out their faith in a world that is not always just. Thus, we do not foray into the world of lament because it risks offering an expression of emotion that we do not outwardly value in our culture as a whole, and in the church even more specifically.

The second reason that we do not employ, or even understand, lament as a legitimate prayer language is that we have often been taught that to question God is equivalent to sin or even apostasy. Thus, we do not enter the territory of questioning or complaint as these are considered out of bounds by many.

In general, our church services reflect a positivistic tone that features praise song after praise song. Even if a song expresses the reality of life’s pain, it always includes an affirmation of God’s goodness and divine providence that affirms that we can trust God, and in one way or another, all will be well no matter what we are currently going through. Thinking otherwise places one firmly in the category of the unfaithful. As Ellen Charry says,

On the view that God’s goodness, knowledge and power are absolute, shock and anger in the face of tragedy are unseemly because they appear to doubt God. On a very strong belief in God’s powerful goodness what happens must be for our good and we should rejoice gratefully, even if we are being punished. For such person’s lament is also precluded because it conveys a questioning of divine goodness.<sup>11</sup>

As Walter Brueggemann observes, this is not just a church issue, it reflects the desire for optimism and positivity that pervades our culture as a whole. We like winners, and we like to celebrate victories. Lament leads us into the world of disappointment and loss. However, when we section it off as a practice of

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10. Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 52.

11. Charry, “May We Trust God and (Still) Lament?” 96.

unfaithfulness, we deny the church a way of speaking that acknowledges the disorientation that we sometimes experience in life, and as a church in these times of immense change.<sup>12</sup>

*Lament: The Legitimate Language of Spiritual Exile*

For a religious people, the language of prayer and worship becomes primary vehicles through which meaning is made out of life experience. For those from ancient Judah who were cast out of their land and into a vortex of change and uncertainty, this was certainly the case. Their initial reaction to exile can be found in the various Psalms and laments that depict the prayer language of the period. The prayer language of exile is rich and varied; however, in this study, we will focus on the prayers found in the book of Lamentations and the Psalms that can be placed during the period of Babylonian exile with reasonable certainty (Pss 44, 74, 79, 89, 102, 106, and 137).<sup>13</sup> In words of anger, frustration, and disbelief, the poets of Israel express their sense of God's absence. The theological crisis with which these texts wrestle and to which they give voice is the perception that God's care for them as a people has been called into question by the exile.

For Israel, exile was marked by a profound sense of the absence of God. Losing their land, temple, and political autonomy seemed to imply abandonment by God. This sense of dislocation and betrayal could only be expressed through lament. The laments of the Hebrew Bible during the exilic period are bold acts of discourse which reveal Israel's unwillingness to remain passive in the face of their plight. These prayers are the aggressive initiatives of a faith that is shaken but unwilling to give up. While prayers of lament are multi-faceted and include positive elements of both trust and hope, the theological reflection that is

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12. Brueggeman, *Message of the Psalms*, 51–52. Also, Boda (“Priceless Gain of Penitence,” 100) notes that few congregations offer their people the opportunity to express pain in their normal liturgies.

13. Middlemas, *Templeless Age*, 36. Middlemas notes that Ps 44 is debatable in terms of its exilic context, however, it is often listed along with the other exilic Psalms. Psalm 137 is not necessarily to be dated during the exilic period but is a clear reflection on life during that period.

at the heart of biblical lament usually begins by naming the situation as it truly is, as Brueggemann says,

The first task among exiles is to represent the catastrophe, to state what is happening by way of loss in vivid images so that the loss can be named by its right name and so that it can be publicly faced in the depths of its negativity. Such a naming and facing permits the loss to be addressed to God, who is implicated in the loss as less than faithful in a context seen to be one of fickleness and failure.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the prayer language of lament gives voice to the anguish of feeling exiled. Lament is the genre of God-speech that expresses the incongruity of life experience with what one previously understood to be the character of God. That is, that our experience does not match up with the way that we understood that God works in the world.

In discussing their sense of God's absence, the writers of Lamentations and the Psalms offer a range of perspectives on how God is involved in their exilic experience. Yet, while the language is multi-faceted, this language expresses Israel's sense of abandonment by God and reflects a determination to speak honestly to God about a lack of satisfaction with their lot in the world and God's seeming inaction or injustice. Here we can identify three characteristic responses.

The first such facet that emerges in the language of Psalms and Lamentations is the idea of *God's willful withdrawal from Israel*. This can be seen in the plaintive language of Lam 5:20:

Why have you forsaken us completely?  
Why have you forsaken us these many days?

The language used in other sections of Lamentations is even more graphic as the poet clearly expresses sorrow to God (2:22 and 3:4):

You invited my enemies from all around  
As if for a day of festival;  
And on the day of the anger of the Lord  
No one escaped or survived.

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14. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 16.

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
And broken my bones.

The language of the exilic Psalms reflects a similar perspective (79:5 and 89:49):

How long, O Lord will you be angry forever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?

Lord where is your steadfast love of old,  
Which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

Lament complains to God about one's plight. It questions God's activities or lack thereof. It refuses to politely accept that current circumstances are just and fair. Terrien writes:

Now the lamenter has been cut off from the source of his life. Not only has he been deprived of the protection he expected from the Lord of history, but he has also been dispossessed of his divine filiality.<sup>15</sup>

In the language of lament, Israel comes before God in honest prayer despite the fact that such bold speech may run the risk of offending him.

Psalm 44 accuses God of having rejected his people and left them deserted in their battle with the Babylonians (v. 9). Further, he has sold them for a small price (v. 12) and, using language common in ancient expressions of abandonment by a deity, the poet addresses Yahweh as a God who has hidden himself in such a way that it seems like he has fallen asleep (v. 23).<sup>16</sup> If victory was a sign of God's favor (v. 4), then surely defeat indicates his rejection.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the psalm reflects a community whose world was being drastically reshaped and who saw no other solid explanation but their collapse as the inaction of God on their behalf.

The writer of Ps 74 highlights God's absence by questioning his inactivity toward the enemies of Israel: the poet cries, "Why

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15. Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 322.

16. Mrozek and Votto, "Motif of the Sleeping Deity."

17. Broyles, *Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 140.

do you hold back your hand?” (v. 11). His question articulates a sense of God’s neglect. In essence, he asks, “Why do you act as if you are not there?” This is a clear violation of the traditions on which the nation has come to rely. For in the “Zion tradition, God should defend the dwelling place of his name and his congregation.”<sup>18</sup>

In Ps 79, the writer calls attention to the fact that God’s absence is obvious even to his enemies: “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” (v. 10). In a similar way, in Ps 137, the writer painfully recalls the taunt of his enemies who demanded, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion” (v. 3). This mockery is depicted as a way for the enemies to remind Israel that their God has been defeated. Further, he did not deliver, and thus, the reality of his presence should be questioned. The loss of the temple in particular (Ps 79:1) was a reminder in graphic physical form that God’s presence had been lost, a loss that was apparent to all.<sup>19</sup>

Brueggemann notes that several questions are consistently repeated in the Old Testament literature that address God’s absence and hiddenness.<sup>20</sup> Two of the questions that come up repeatedly in these psalms are “Why?” and “How long?” These interrogatives arise from the lived experience of Israel that expects Yahweh to be in control and yet finds him inattentive. The questions rise out of the initial experience and intolerable nature of their life in exile and the perception that God should be more active. As Brueggemann puts it,

Israel fully anticipates that the God of its core testimony must and will act decisively to intervene and transform unbearable circumstances. But the intervention and transformation are not on the horizon—hence the question.<sup>21</sup>

A second way that the literature of Lamentations employs daring speech to address God as absent is by accusing God of taking an active role in their defeat and *actually becoming the enemy*. A sampling of this imagery includes the following:

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18. Broyles, *Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 152.

19. Clifford, *Psalms 73–150*, 52.

20. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 319–21.

21. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 319.

He has cut down in fierce anger  
 All the might of Israel;  
 he has withdrawn his right hand  
 from them. (2:3)

He has bent his bow like an enemy  
 With his right hand set like a foe;  
 He has killed all in whom we took pride  
 In the tent of daughter Zion. (2:4)

The Lord has become like an enemy;  
 He has destroyed Israel. (2:5)

He has broken my teeth with gravel. (3:16)

God seems to not only have removed himself from the people but also have participated in their demise. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp observes,

The central thrust of the poem's opening section may simply be stated: to show in no uncertain terms that God is the chief cause of Jerusalem's destruction. Its portrayal of God, as it accentuates God as Judah's champion- turned- enemy, God's unquenchable rage, and God's merciless destructiveness, is one of the darkest in all of biblical literature.<sup>22</sup>

God is absent in that he is not who Israel has depended on him to be—their protector and defender. It is chilling to note that three times in this section of Lam 2, God is referred to as the “enemy” (vv. 4a, 4b, and 5a). Dobbs-Allsopp writes, “That a Judean prophet could call God ‘enemy’ is a telling sign of the deep distress and unparalleled suffering brought on by the catastrophe.”<sup>23</sup>

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22. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 79.

23. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 79. There is significant debate over the language used by the poet here. Some say the word “like” seems to make the claim of God as enemy into a simile, thus slightly softer. See Mandolfo, *God in the Dock*, 131–32. Others like Dobbs-Allsopp (*Lamentations*, 83) see the Hebrew כִּי (“like”) as a “later theological addition” to the text “designed to stress that God was only ‘acting’ as if he were an enemy.” Thus, the idea that

Third, there is in the language of lament a sense of *God's betrayal*. God is presented as neglecting his covenant loyalties. For example, God's absence is depicted in vv. 6 and 7 by drawing out language that clearly provokes sacred images of God's presence now withdrawn from his temple:

He has broken down his booth  
like a garden,  
he has destroyed his tabernacle.

The Lord has scorned his altar,  
disowned his sanctuary.

The image of God departing from the dwelling in which he once happily resided graphically reminds the people of Judah that when God is not present the possibility for catastrophe is at hand.

Mingled with the assertions that God is somehow behind the plight of his people comes a steadfast plea for help, albeit to no avail. In the midst of unceasing tears, the poet tries to "goad, flatter, shame, or otherwise compel God into acting in deliverance."<sup>24</sup> The agony of God's removal of himself from amongst his people is almost unbearable.

Finally, in the closing strains of the poem the disappointment, frustration and fear of life without Yahweh is expressed in haunting words of abandonment tinged with the slightest hew of residual hope (5:20–22):

Why have you forsaken us completely?  
Why have you forsaken us these many days?

Restore us to yourself, O Lord  
That we may be restored;  
Renew our days as of old  
Unless you have utterly rejected us,  
And are angry with us beyond measure.

the poet is offering regarding God's antagonistic posture toward Israel needs to be understood quite literally.

24. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 125.

Coming as it does at the end of the book, these words reinforce the overriding sense of distance from God that is the impetus for the prayers of the whole book. Brueggemann captures this essence when he writes,

The speaker does not question that God has abandoned. The abandonment by Yahweh is taken as a given. In asking “why,” the speaker does not seek an explanation from God but seeks to assert that the absence of God is inexplicable and inexcusable.<sup>25</sup>

Such language and its multiple perspectives on the exact nature of God’s role in Israel’s exile are disconcerting and difficult to read. Yet it appears in Hebrew Scripture as a description of exilic experience. It is no wonder that Linafelt sees the main theme of Lamentations as “survival.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the first response to exile for Israel was to offer a jarringly honest approach to Yahweh in the form of the speech of lament. This response reflects an unwillingness to politely drift along in quiet acceptance; it is both a somber and a hopeful act. Its sober tone is evident in the content of the speech, full as it is of pain, anguish and loss. But it is also hopeful because it is prayer. Despite the disappointment with their God and the subsequent confusion regarding his role in their downfall, these prayers of lament are reflections of sustained faith. Exile has not left the community without words to say to God, or the heart to say them. This initial reaction to exile demonstrates that while the people of Israel may feel abandoned, they are determined to survive.

#### *Lament for the Church Today?*

What does the church in the Western world have to lament? Surely, are our struggles not anything like the struggles that ancient Israel experienced in their exile? Is lament not a bit ex-

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25. Brueggemann, *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope*, 78.

26. Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 18. He writes that one of the hermeneutical keys to a large section of the book is “survival, rather than the theological categories of guilt or hope.”

treme? Is it fair to blame God for the decline of the church? Is it really productive to focus on a discipline like lament in leading a congregation today? Will excessive lament just not discourage the church further? Also, you may be thinking of ways that you and your congregation are experiencing God's blessings these days, none of which provides evidence that God is absent or is acting unfaithfully. Why lament when you are experiencing God's powerful working in your midst? Further, while the church may act hypocritically all too often and may blunder its way through numerous situations there are literally millions of faithful people who try their very best to live godly lives, who love others sincerely, serve sacrificially and pray passionately for their church and others. Why not focus on that?

These are all legitimate questions and, of course, we do need to celebrate the many ways we can identify God's work in our midst. If the core issue of biblical lament is the perceived absence or unfaithfulness of God, is this a fair complaint for the church today?

It is at this point that we may hesitate. As the reader, however, I assume that you can think of several reasons for the decline of the church right off the top of your head. There are ways that the church has failed, and these have surely contributed to its decline. Lament calls us to look at the failure of the church to be what God has designed it to be. Perhaps the reason for the church's loss of ground and spiritual anemia is to be found in its neglect of theology, its lack of passion for mission, its "buy-in" to a consumerist culture, individualism, an ignoring of the poor, and disinterest in caring for the environment.

Further, we are confronted with the reality that the church has not done itself any favors by behaving badly. Too often the church has been guilty of flagrant hypocrisy, from various sex scandals, mistreatment of minorities, discrimination against women, treatment of indigenous peoples, lack of unity amongst believers, etc. The list could go on. We are all aware that there is ample reason for people to have negative attitudes toward the church, and therefore, the church has, in many ways, contributed to its own demise. Some have even wondered if, like the exile of

ancient Israel, this is an act of divine judgment.<sup>27</sup> That is, the church may be suffering the reality of marginalization because God is exercising his divine right to punish his people for their sins (Rev 3:16; Acts 5:1–11). Certainly, leaders throughout church history have equated persecution of the church to God's divine judgment upon the church because of its failure to live up to its divine calling.<sup>28</sup> Whether we understand the church's current struggles as divinely initiated or simply part of the natural consequences for its short comings, either way, it produces a lamentable situation. The fact that the church has a track record of serious misbehavior needs to be named and owned. We must own the failures of our local church as well as the failures of the wider church. Also, while it is true that many people serve and lead with great passion and faithfulness, they struggle to see much fruit in ministry. Why does God not reward their sincere work? Does he not care about the people in those communities that these people and their churches are reaching out to? Why does his Spirit not work more powerfully in concert with the honest, faithful work of his servants? Why does God not show up in power when we ask him to? What does it take? Why does he not heal more often? Why does he not do miracles that convince people that he exists? Why does he just let his church struggle and decline? The church has always been imperfect. It always will be. That cannot be a requirement for God's presence. Why does God not build his church more forcefully in Western society today? I know there are places where that may be happening, but it is not the trend. Why not?

These realities must be acknowledged, and lament is one of the key languages that helps us to do that honestly. To appropriate the resources of exilic spirituality properly the congregation should find ways to lament these things and describe the reality of their situation.

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27. Mowchenko, "Embracing the Possibilities," 49.

28. Parry, *Lamentations*, 219, who cites Eusebius who applied the book of Lamentations to the persecution of the church in the early fourth century. Eusebius saw the persecution as divine judgment upon the church inner strife and lack of piety.

My colleague Dr. Gordon L. Heath at McMaster Divinity College has done research on places where the church once held a place at or near the center of culture. In some of these places, Christendom was the cultural reality. Places like Nubia, North Africa, Turkey, Moravia, and others were once thriving hosts to the Christian church. Today, the church is almost absent, or a very minimal presence in these countries. Heath concludes, "A loss of Christendom may lead to the end of a Christian presence."<sup>29</sup> Where is God in that? We may think, "This will never happen in Canada, the US, England, and other Western countries," but that is exactly what the people at the church that my Korean student toured me through thought forty years ago and look what happened. Unless God responds to our situation why is that not the future of the Western church too? This is cause for lament.

In fact, lament is necessary because it addresses and counteracts the temptation toward passivity. As we noted earlier, lament is the language of non-passivity. It engages reality in a way that refuses to accept it. The church needs this kind of language in its exilic vocabulary. It invites the congregation to say that it is not content with business as usual or with a future of inevitable decline. It is the language of resistance and for that reason must be released with all its formative power within congregations today.<sup>30</sup>

If we fail to give voice to our fears and frustrations, our struggles to remain hopeful or our feelings of doubt we will not be able to move past them and into a space where we can imagine a positive future for the church in the West. Brueggemann posits that you cannot move from critique to imagination without an honest embrace of the pain that led to the need for critique in the first place.<sup>31</sup> The need to name the pain produced by radical change that brings about loss and new challenges is essential to any significant forward movement. Any reasonable therapist would tell their patient the same thing. In terms of forming the

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29. Heath, "When the Blood of the Martyrs Was Not Enough," 128.

30. Campbell, "Lament in James."

31. Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic," 99.

church for life in the post-Christendom world, Brueggemann's words are apt: "What the *public embrace of pain* does is to *release social imagination*, i.e., give the community freedom, energy and courage to envision the world alternatively arranged."<sup>32</sup> Lament is the key spiritual discipline in a congregations life to move it forward to a place of genuine hope for its future life and ministry in these challenging times.

### *Practicing Lament in the Church*

There are a variety of ways that we can employ the practice of lament in the formation of congregations today. As we have already noted earlier, some traditions regularly use lament as part of their liturgy, and consulting with those traditions by perusing their prayer books, attending their services, and studying their traditions may spur ideas as to how to lead your congregation in this discipline. That said, here are some suggestions as to how lament can be practiced in ways that will fit into the life of most congregations.

### *Teaching*

As with any practice that one hopes will be adopted and integrated into the life of the local church, lament must be taught both as a theological concept and as a necessary part of the church's prayer language. This will require sermons that teach the lament tradition in Scripture and history as a significant aspect of biblical and Christian spirituality. In fact, giving both the congregation and individual congregants permission to lament and helping them learn how to lament are key homiletical duties. It is the preacher's and teacher's responsibility to help their people engage God in conversation. This conversation must reflect all the various components of theological reflection on our life experience, which is not always either pleasant or encouraging. Michael Knowles observes the following regarding the preacher's role:

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32. Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic," 99 (italics original).

As partners in and witness 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>33</sup>

However, reclaiming biblical lament is about more than acknowledging our hurt and anger from the pulpit; it is helping a congregation to understand the various rhetorical elements that comprise biblical lament and therefore demarcate it as a specific form of prayer and congregational formation.<sup>34</sup> Lament can shape a sermon and that can act as a catalyst and model for lament that informs the language of a congregation. This can help allow a congregation to define their reality and, as necessary, their discouragement with it.

Beyond the pulpit, teaching lament can also take place in other educational contexts whether in small groups, Sunday School classes, or seminars. In these settings, biblical forms of lament can be studied and affirmed as legitimate parts of Christian spirituality and congregational formation. Without robust teaching, the development of a practical theology, and encouragement of its actual practice in the life of the church, lament will never be embraced or seen as a genuine priority for twenty-first-century Christian congregations.

#### *Pastoral Prayer*

Along with teaching, modeling is a potent pedagogical device. Here the church's practice of pastoral prayer can be a context in which lament can be practiced. Those leading corporate prayers can include in their prayer portions which honestly name some of the sense of the church's failures, cultural loss, discouragement, doubt, and disappointment that a congregation may feel in its ministry these days. It may also provide a voice where the church's concerns about and opposition to ungodly cultural practices can be articulated and where the church's complicity in them is lamented. It may not be necessary to include all three on

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33. Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 65 (italics original).

34. Brown, "When Lament Shapes the Sermon," 28.

every occasion, or even to use lament every time we pray publicly, but regularly employing this practice will further teach the value of lament and introduce a proper practice of it to the life of the congregation. Including lament in the pastoral prayer is significant because it performs an important pastoral act by helping the church to honestly express its convictions about its place in the broader culture, its discomfort with some of the prevailing ideologies, and its own sense of failure. Furthermore, employing lament in pastoral prayer demonstrates how to lament, inviting the congregation into the experience of lament themselves. 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.

#### *Forms and Formats for Lamentation*

A further step of congregational inclusion in the experience of lament is to invite practical participation in it through various forms of participatory prayer, such as litany. In many non-liturgical churches this is not a traditional form of congregational prayer. However, its use can provide a creative way to engage the congregation in lament. This form of prayer is led by a prayer leader, but it invites the congregation to respond to the leader's prayers with a prayer of their own, usually in a prepared sentence or two.

One way to do this is to directly employ the Scriptures themselves. Various biblical passages can be used for congregational prayer, for example, Lam 3:40–45. A brief excerpt from the text (vv. 43–44) can serve as an example:

Leader: Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say:

People: We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven

Leader: You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us;

People: You have slain without pity.

Praying the words of Scripture as a congregational lament is one way to invite the people into this form of prayer and it will impact the overall spiritual, theological and missional identity of

them as a people. Another way to do this is to develop original prayers of lament. A brief example of this would be as follows:

Leader: Lord, why have you allowed your church to grow so weak in such spiritually needy times?

People: Why will you not move in power Lord?

Leader: Lord, why do you allow your people and your name to be mocked and ridiculed so that unbelief grows?

People: How long will you stay silent Lord?

This abbreviated example demonstrates how the use of litany not only allows congregational participation in lament but also allows the leader to help the church define the contextual reality that it finds itself in and also further educates people about how lament functions as a legitimate expression of Christian spirituality. In some congregations, this kind of prayer may be uncomfortable at first and will take some explanation before engaging in it. However, it is a way of praying that can have great benefit in the formation of a congregation in a time of challenge and loss.

#### *Lament in Small Groups*

Brueggemann, building on the work of Erhard Gerstenberger, notes, "Social venues not unlike house churches were places where Israel may have practiced 'liturgies of rehabilitation' that functioned as 'transformative scripts' in their journey of exile."<sup>35</sup> In these intimate settings, people may be more able to enter the kind of honest prayer that lament calls for. Thus, even in ancient days, these kinds of small group gatherings offered God's people a place to express themselves through the vehicle of lament and thus be formed by the practice. This is potentially no less true in contemporary church settings as well.

Prayers of lament can be incorporated into a variety of small group settings such as church board meetings, pastoral team meetings, home groups, and Sunday School classes. In these settings, as lament is introduced and taught, more open expressions of lament can be initiated. Time can be spent praying together

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35. Brueggemann, "Lament as Wake-Up Call," 221.

and can include lament as part of the prayer dialogue. Prayer may not even be the form of dialogue needed; lament can take place in these kinds of groups simply by inviting discussion around questions pertaining to our loss, frustration, and failure within the church and society today. In small settings, an open dialogue can occur that allows a place for people to express their honest feelings about the challenges faced by the church in Western society today.

### *Conclusion*

As we considered earlier, lament is a first response language. It asks the question that has been raised several times in this article, “Where is God?” It does not assume that we have to accept God’s absence; rather, it asks us to engage God honestly with our questions, our doubts, and our fears. It is a way for us to define our reality and name our concerns. It provides the people of God with the language it needs to authentically come before God and tell him that everything is not okay. We are not content with the way things are or the direction they are heading. It is language of faith. Faith may be discouraged but is refusing to give up. It is necessary language in a time of displacement and uncertainty. It is language that our churches need and leaders must employ.

As a first response language, it is catalytic to the move forward in the journey of responding to our circumstances. It not only helps us to understand those circumstances but also has the power to form us as the people of God so that we can engage those circumstances and begin to find our way through them.

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