

## **Food For Thought Article: 'Keeping Praise and Lament Together.'**



I would like to begin by asking you, as I ask myself, this question: 'What kind of a Christian are you? Do you tend towards being a praise Christian ~ forever praising? Or towards being a lament Christian ~ forever lamenting?'

Well, the pattern that God shows us throughout the Bible is that we are called to combine both praise and lament, to keep them both together. Any other pattern will ultimately prove to be unsatisfactory. So why is it that as individuals, and corporately in our Western churches, we have largely lost the balance between praise and lament and what kind of price are we paying for having done so?

The German scholar, Claus Westermann wrote this, "It is an illusion to suppose there can be a relationship with God in which there was only praise and never lamentation. Just as joy and sorrow in alternation are part of the finitude of human existence, so praise and lamentation are part of man's relationship to God. Hence something must be amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. ***Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation.***" (1)

It seems to me that we have often been developing a new form of Christianity here in the West, which focuses almost exclusively on celebration and victory, with worship sometimes verging on 'entertainment,' and the gospel presented as a kind of therapy to meet personal needs and desires, focused on I/me/my.

However, any relationship with God which sidesteps the questionings, the doubts, the pain, the tears, the reality of traumas and tragedies, the ambiguities of faith etc., is likely to be surface and superficial for the individual concerned and will also make it much more difficult for them to help others bridge the gap between faith and suffering, between promise and reality, between vision and limitation.

## ***What does Lamentation mean?***

‘Lamentation’ is a latinised English word, much better substituted with the earthy, Anglo-Saxon, word ‘Tears.’ Note: From this point on, whenever I mention the book of Lamentations, I will refer to it as the book of Tears.

If the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had used latinised English words and offered us ‘sacrifice, labour, lamentation and perspiration’ when he was calling us to resist the Nazis at the beginning of WW2, we may well have lost the war! His rallying cry wouldn’t have had nearly the same impact as the pictorial Anglo-Saxon words he actually used i.e., ‘blood, toil, tears and sweat’!

To lament is to weep, to bewail, to mourn, and, in the Bible, it is often accompanied by beating of breasts, tearing of clothes, cutting off hair, putting on sackcloth, sprinkling dust over the head and fasting i.e., there was a physical response to the emotional trauma.

Biblical lament includes asking God hard questions, expressing feelings of hurt towards God or over apparent rejection by Him, pouring out one’s heart to God and even voicing complaints to Him.

This may sound like a risky thing for us to do, so it is important to understand what Biblical lament **is not**.

It is **not** about bitter grumbling. It is **not** about allowing worldly regret and self-pity to destroy us, others, and our relationship with God. Rather, the goal of Godly lament is to grow and deepen our relationship with God; to allow distress to bring us to God, not drive us away from Him.

## ***Asking the Hard Questions***

The spiritual discipline of lament enables us then to ask God hard questions. Questions like: ‘Where is God’s justice?’ Why does God not appear to be present? Why is he not listening to our prayers? Where is he? What is he doing? Why, O why, is he not doing anything about the situation we find ourselves in? Why does God allow sickness, death, destruction, injustice, tsunamis, wars, typhoons, earthquakes etc.?

*And once we start to ask God these sorts of questions, we will find ourselves in the company of all the great men and women of faith in the Bible.*

Here are some examples: -

**Moses**, who asked, “Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me?” (Ex. 5:22)

**Joshua**, who said, “Ah, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?” (Josh. 7:7)

**Naomi**, who said, ‘Don’t call me Naomi (which means ‘pleasant’), call me Mara (which means ‘bitter’). Her husband and two sons died after she and her family went from Israel to the land of Moab as refugees. She said, ‘The Almighty has made my life very bitter. Eventually she came back to Israel with one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth. Naomi said, ‘I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me; the Lord has brought misfortune upon me.’ (Ruth 1:20&21)

**Job**, who believed implicitly in God’s power and wisdom, nevertheless lays this question at God’s door, “When a scourge brings sudden death, he [God] mocks the despair of the innocent. When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges. If it’s not he [God], then who is it?” (Job 9:22&23).

Some may say, “Well, Job was wrong to say this about God”. But that’s not the point. The point is surely that God gives Job permission to voice his concerns and criticisms and never rebukes Job for his words, unlike Job’s human ‘discomforters’ whose weasel words made things much more difficult for Job and were rejected by God!

**Hannah**, who was Elkanah’s wife. She was childless and came in for a lot of verbal abuse from Elkanah’s other wife Peninah, who had children. Hannah said, ‘I am a woman who is deeply troubled; I have been praying out of my great anguish and grief.’ (1 Sam. 1:15&16)

**Jeremiah** has this conundrum, “You [God] are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer. 12:1)

**Habakkuk** is weighed down with these questions, “How long O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?” (Hab. 1:2&3a)

**David** asks, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Ps. 13:1&2)

None of these men and women were shrinking violets or snowflake Christians; they were all people of strong and mature faith. And one of the reasons for this is that they had learned the secret of lament, i.e., bringing their emotions, questions, and complaints directly to God. Interrogatory prayer and lament are therefore key to spiritual maturity.

Of all the interrogatives addressed to God (Who? Why? When? Where? What? How long?), ‘Why?’ is the most common. So here is another ‘Why?’ question!!

### ***Why do we Find the Spiritual Discipline of Lament Difficult?***

Although lament is everywhere in the Bible, many Christians seem reluctant, or are even unable, to give expression to this key spiritual discipline even though a third of the psalms, and all the Prophets, except Haggai, contain the genre of lament. Why could this be?

1. Is it down to a lack of teaching? Does our emphasis on praise and celebration suppress the need to lament? Do we feel out of place if we raise these difficult questions when everyone else is apparently having a good time rejoicing? Have we become ‘Facebook Christians’ ~ only presenting our best side to others and telling them only of all the wonderful things that are happening in our lives?

Is it because of a purely Western approach to theology where our understanding of the nature of God and our relationship with Him is based more on a Greek philosophical approach rather than on Biblical Hebrew thinking?

**Aristotle** described God as the ‘unmoved Mover, completely separate from all he creates; perfect, eternal, unchangeable, and wholly unaffected by his interaction with humanity.’ (2)

This sounds to me like a very remote, unfeeling, distant God. It reminds me of what Churchill said about his mother. He said, “She was a wonderful woman my mother. She shone like a star..... but at a distance!”

In the third century A.D., the north African theologian **Tertullian** said that because God was without passions he could 'not suffer with the Son.' Later, **Thomas Aquinas** said, 'It does not belong to God to sorrow over the misery of others.'

These views, and others, have affected both what we think of God's nature and of how we relate to him.

They certainly affected the first of the 39 Articles of Religion adopted by the Church of England in 1562, part of which states, "God is without body, parts, and passions."

But the pathos of God, his ability to feel strong emotions, and to show mercy, are an integral part of who he is. And surely, we can say that Jesus, who demonstrated the whole range of human emotions, was the *pathos* made flesh as well as the *logos* made flesh. He was indeed, 'a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.' (Is. 53:3)



2. Are there cultural issues that make it difficult for us to lament? Two examples: -

- a. Here in the West, with our British 'stiff upper lip' culture, we spend vast amounts of time, effort and money trying to protect/insure ourselves against the tragedies and traumas which may befall us ~ floods, fires, accidents, thefts, death itself. And we are most definitely averse to any kind of pain. Pain ~ physical, mental, or emotional ~ is something which must, at all costs, be 'killed.'

Instead of listening to our pain and what God may be saying to us through it, we reach for our pills to kill the pain stone dead. Have we become a nation of pain killers? It seems like there is a pill for every ill; 'I lift up mine eyes to the pills, from whence cometh my help?!'

And if we take, for example, the mood disorder depression, there is no doubt that anti-depressants help some people. But what is also true is that the more anti-depressants are prescribed, the more depressed people there seem to be!

Here in England, between 2021 and 2022, according to NHS figures, the number of adults on anti-depressants increased from 7.9 million to 8.3 million. There were 83.4 million prescriptions for anti-depressant medication in that year. And the numbers have gone up every year for the last 6 years.

And what people don't generally realise is that anti-depressants are now also prescribed for physical pain, not just mental/emotional disorders. And they are also being prescribed more and more for teenagers.

Surely, however, if we turned more to God in repentance and lament, some at least of our pain, if not most, would be lessened.

- b. Another cultural reason why lament may not be widely practiced, and this applies more to countries who have experienced centuries of colonial rule, is that people from those countries have adopted a passive and submissive form of spirituality which demands unquestioning reverence and obedience. Although politically this can make them vulnerable to 'strong,' authoritarian, dictatorial leaders, spiritually they have not been given permission to ask God, the ultimate authority, hard questions; they have not been taught how to lament.

However, by God's grace, this situation is changing. For example, the Filipino scholar, Federico Villanueva, has written a commentary on the book of Tears which arose from the experience of his people after they were struck in 2013 by what was then the most devastating typhoon in the history of the Philippines, typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan). The typhoon devastated the city of Tacloban and surrounding areas. 4.4 million people were displaced, 5,982 were killed, 1,779 people were never found and 27,000 people were injured.

Rodrigo Duterte, later to become President of the Philippines, said at the time, "I think God was somewhere else when the typhoon hit. God must have been somewhere else, or he forgot that there's a planet called Earth." [Note: Since 2013 there have been even more powerful typhoons to hit the Philippines including Super Typhoon Goni which struck villages on the coast of Tiwi in Albay province in October 2020].

Villanueva explains how centuries of colonisation, first under Spain, then at the hands of the Americans and Japanese, had created a passivity accompanied by a sense of inferiority, and temperamentally the Filipinos

were not assertive by nature. Lament was certainly not on their agenda; neither had they learned the value of expressing their complaint directly to God.

*But the people discovered that it was through their anguished cries, through the expression of their anger and frustration, through their broken-hearted pleas and questioning of God, that they experienced God's resources for pastoral support, survival, and eventual recovery.*

Villanueva concluded that, "The God of the Bible allows his servants to tell him what is on our hearts." (3)

Godly lament, accompanied as it often is by confession and repentance, is an important gateway to healing, and a way in which we may be emboldened and empowered in approaching God. Villanueva believes that without honesty, there can be no intimacy with God.

When I listen to some intercessory prayers that lack interrogatory questionings, I often find them bland and too pristine to be able to connect with the messy reality of the world in which we live.

By way of a cultural contrast, Jewish people have always been good at lamenting, very good at shedding tears, whether it was occasioned by personal loss or national crisis and calamity.

When someone in our British culture dies, we often send flowers or a wreath; in Jewish culture people used to send a small bottle of their tears to the bereaved person as an expression of their heartfelt sorrow. They even believed God had a bottle to collect the tears of his people. In Psalm 56:8, David says to God: "Record my lament; put my tears into your bottle; are they not in your book?"

When Jerusalem was destroyed by the invading Babylonian army, we read this in the book of Lamentations, "The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord. O wall of the Daughter of Zion, let your tears flow like a river day and night; give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest." (Lamentations 2:18)

And today in every synagogue throughout the world, every year, Jewish people commemorate Tisha B'Av. Tisha is the number 9 and Av is the fifth month of the Jewish year. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Av they lost their first temple in 586BC and they lost their second temple, amazingly, on the same date in 70AD.

So, they are commemorating those events on that date through fasting, attending synagogue, singing, or reciting the whole of the book of Lamentations, and on that day, they are not allowed to laugh or even smile.

## **Sharing in God's Pain**

The Japanese theologian, Kazoh Kitamori, wrote this in 1946 as Hiroshima and Nagasaki lay in ruins after the nuclear attack:

"God's love can be understood only on the basis of his pain. His glory is the radiance of the cross; his love is the victory of his pain. Our task then is to comprehend the depth of Christ's love as God's pain." (4)

Kitamori says that it is the pain of God which gives meaning and value to human suffering and the surpassing grace of God's pain which makes human suffering valuable and precious.

Often it can be the experience of pain which turns people to God.

I remember talking with a man whose teenage daughter had been murdered. He told me he had cried out to God and said, "They murdered my daughter!" and God had said to him, "Yes, they murdered my Son!"

In Hosea 5:15 God says, "In their misery/distress they will seek my face, they will earnestly seek me." And in psalm 119:67 the writer gives his testimony, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word."

People like Moses, Sarah, David, Hosea, Hannah, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Deborah, Ruth, Daniel, Ezekiel all entered the heart and sadness of God, either over their own sin and/or over the ongoing rebellion and faithlessness of God's people. Their lived experience often embodied God's pain.

## ***Praise, Praise, Praise!***

### ***1. Here on earth .....***

It is time now to turn to praise, praise, praise, before finally coming to see how lament and praise overlap and complement one another.

Some psalms, like 96-100, are pure, extravagant, praise; full of singing, shouting, exalting, ascribing greatness, power, and majesty to the Lord. They remind me of that concentrated squash you can buy that is many times stronger than the normal stuff! These praise psalms are so strong you almost feel as though you must dilute them down a bit!



Many of the psalms are a 'Praise the Lord sandwich' beginning and ending with the words 'Praise the Lord' e.g., 103, 104, 106, 113, 117, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150.

Praise is often at the heart of Paul's letters. For example, his second letter to the Corinthians begins, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort...." (2 Cor. 1:3). Also, his letter to the Ephesians, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3). And he encourages the Christians in Ephesus to "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord...." (Eph. 5:19).

Likewise, Peter, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...." (1 Pet. 1:3)

So, praise **is** to be at the centre of our worship, our fellowship, and our daily walk with the Lord. "I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live." (Ps. 104:33)

The English word 'worship' comes from the Anglo-Saxon '*weorthscipe*' which means 'to attribute worth to something.' Worship means worth-ship, to give someone the honour or worth that is due to their name.

We can pick out one or more of God's attributes and give him honour and glory for that attribute. The writer of psalm 136 says, "His love endures for ever". So, he chooses to thank God for his steadfast love and repeats that phrase twenty-six times in his psalm!!

Words associated with worship in the Bible include bowing down, falling down, clapping, raising hands, playing musical instruments, coming towards to kiss, dancing, singing, praying, serving, giving, sacrificing, reading, and proclaiming God's word. Acceptable worship, according to Jesus, must be in 'spirit and truth' (Jn. 4:23&24).

Sometimes we may wonder why God wants us to keep on telling him how wonderful he is! I suppose the answer is that he does not **need** us to worship him but that he **wants** us to worship him because he knows that for us to do so will give us the greatest sense of enjoyment and fulfilment.

God has surely made us to be 'worshipping creatures' with the inbuilt desire to attach worth to something/someone. True worship is focused on the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but in idolatry people praise and worship the things and people they value ahead of, or instead of, Him. Everyone is a worshipper of something or someone.

I remember once visiting a man and when I got to his house, I noticed his front garden was full of dahlia flowers. As I went through the gate, I could see his back garden was full of dahlia flowers as well. When he invited me into his home there were pictures of dahlias on the walls, his bookshelves were full of books about dahlias, the conversation we had was about the diseases that attack dahlias, and then he told me something which didn't surprise me. He said, "I'm President of the local Dahlia Society!"

But, claiming to be wise, the man had become a fool, and was worshipping a tiny part of God's creation rather than the Creator Himself.

## **2. Praise, praise, praise .... *also, in Heaven***

Worship of God is an integral part of what is constantly taking place in God's throne room in heaven. The apostle John was invited to go, in the Spirit, into heaven for a conducted tour, and he records for us what he saw and heard there:

"In the centre, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and behind. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around. Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "**You are worthy, our Lord and God**, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being." (Rev. 4:6-11).

Jesus, the Lamb, is also included as being worthy of worship: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living

creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: “**Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain**, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!” (Rev. 5:11&12).

*Because, eventually, God comes to make his home with us on the new Earth, (where Heaven and Earth will combine), it is good and natural for us to practise worshipping and praising him now!*

However, in this life and in this present world, praise is mixed with lament. Only in the new heaven and earth will God wipe every tear from our eyes; only then will there be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21:4).

### ***Praise, Lament, Praise, Lament.***

Cassells concise English dictionary defines a ‘tear’ as: “A drop of the saline liquid secreted by the lachrymal glands, moistening the eyes or flowing down in strong emotion.”

Sometimes I wonder why there seem to be so many dry-eyed preachers and teachers of God’s word, so many dry-eyed worship leaders, so many dry-eyed prophets and evangelists, so many dry-eyed missionaries and so many dry-eyed Christians.

Perhaps as our hearts become hard and our minds become cynical, our eyes become dry.

When Paul was establishing the church in Ephesus over a period of 3 years, he says: “I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.” And when he finally left them, telling them they would never see him again in this life, “they all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.” (Acts 20:31-38)

We have already seen how God invites us to enter his pain and suffering as part of his love, and Jesus was also often angry over those who rejected him, over those who prevented others coming to him (especially children), over those who wanted to stop him healing others.

Last year I read about how children under 18 have been prohibited, by law, from attending any public religious activities in the Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan. When I read that I felt sad and angry.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem's rejection of him knowing that God's wrath would eventually destroy the city. Kitamori. says this is an example of Love + Wrath = Pain.

**Lament and praise are inextricably linked throughout Scripture; they inform each other and grow together. Here are some examples of either individual or corporate times of lament and praise.**

Before **Jacob** saw God 'face to face' and experienced revelation and blessing, he experienced a night of wrestling, wrenching, struggle, bafflement, mystery, wounding, and conflict. It is through the conflict that Jacob is strengthened. He still does not know the name of God but he receives a new name for himself, and through this increased self-knowledge, God is revealed. Praise, struggle, revelation, and crisis are intertwined. (Gen. 32:22-32)

In her poem 'No Scar,' Amy Carmichael asks this question, "No wound, no scar? Can he/she have travelled far, who has no wound, nor scar?"

Before we get to **the song of victory in Exodus 15:1-18** (Praise), we read, "The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers (Lament), and I am concerned about their suffering'." (Ex. 3:7)

Moreover, before we get to the well-known psalm 23, with all its aspects of comfort, reassurance, and hope, we have psalm 22, a psalm of lament where **David** begins "My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" The intimate God of psalm 23 is the apparently distant God of psalm 22.

Even within one psalm, the writer often moves from lament to praise (e.g., psalm 13) or starts with praise and finishes with lament (e.g., psalm 89). Praise and lament are not mutually exclusive.

Before we get to the only verses which most Christians know from the **Book of Tears**, i.e. "Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (3:22&23) ~ words immortalised by T.O. Chisholm's hymn, 'Great is Thy Faithfulness' ~ we bypass the lament verses which give the context. **Jeremiah** protests, "My eyes fail from weeping; I am in torment within." (2:11a). "The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord. O wall of the Daughter of Zion, let your hearts flow like a river day and night; give yourself no relief,

your eyes no rest.” (2:18). “He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So, I say, ‘My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord’.” (3:16-18)

It is then, out of this dark, unpromising soil of lament, that a new shoot of hope and praise springs, “Yet this I call to mind and therefore have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.....etc.” (3:21&22)



Last Spring, I took delivery of a cherry tree. I say ‘tree,’ it was a dry, dead-looking ‘stick’ grafted onto a rootstock. I must confess I had doubts about whether it was alive! But I planted it (by faith!) in the dark earth, watered it regularly and soon all the dead-looking buds started to sprout vivid green shoots and leaves! So it is, that from the dark, unpromising soil of lament, that new shoots of hope and praise can spring.

Before **Shecaniah** told Ezra and the people that “There is still hope for Israel” (Praise) we read, “While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping, and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites – men, women and children – gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.” (Lament) (Ezra 10:1&2).

Before **Jonah** could write this in his praise poem, “I with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you” he wrote, out of his personal experience, these words of lament, “In my distress I called to the Lord”, “All your waves and breakers swept over me”. “I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight’.” “My life was ebbing away.” (See Jonah 2:1-9)

*So, we have, embedded within the structure of Biblical faith, a dialectical pattern of lament and praise, praise and lament. Anything else is a distortion of Christianity.*

Walter Brueggemann draws attention to another downside of the loss of lament. He writes, “A community of faith that negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise.” (5)

### ***New Testament Perspectives on Praise & Lament***

Before looking at this more closely, it is worth pointing out, I think, that many Christians seem to drive a wedge between what we read in the Old Testament on this topic and what we read in the New. They might acknowledge that, ‘Yes, there were many difficult things which caused people to wail and lament in times past, but surely now under the New Covenant, we have an all singing, all-dancing, all-praising approach?’

Not so! I don’t believe the New Testament bears this out. Both the need for lament and the reality and appropriateness of lament, seem to continue. Take for example Matthew’s birth narrative of Jesus in chapter 2 of his gospel.

Set in the wonderful context of the joy and worship of the Magi, we have the foreboding, disturbing presence of the evil King Herod. What is worse, this paranoid man went into a furious rage when he discovered he had been outwitted by the Magi; so much so that he had all the boys in Bethlehem and surrounding vicinity, who were two years old and younger, killed.

Matthew then introduces this lament which he has taken from the book of Jeremiah:

“A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”

In its context in Jeremiah chapter 31, this verse is sad for two reasons. Firstly, Ramah (5 miles north of Jerusalem) is the place where Rachel is buried after she died giving birth to Benjamin. I have been to her tomb. Secondly, Ramah was a place through which the Israelites travelled when they were being carried off into exile to Babylon. Jeremiah is imagining Rachel weeping as she sees all the refugees, including children, marching past in chains.

But the chapter is one of positivity, hope and future blessing, as God promises to bring them back again from exile. So, in Jeremiah 31, we have another lament set in the context of overall joy. And Matthew is happy to see this awful event of the ‘murder of the innocents,’ six centuries after the deportation of God’s people, as both a time for lament, and, in the wider context of the coming of Messiah Jesus, a time for Good News to be shared and the genuine worship of the Magi to be celebrated.

### **Blessed Are You Who Weep Now....**

Here is another example of lament and blessing coming together in the New Testament: - What are we to make of these words of Jesus? “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh..... Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.” (Lk. 6:21b & 25b) Presumably those who weep now are those who weep over their own sin, the sin of others, the injustices of the world, those caught up in tragedies etc. The blessed are those who lament over these things.

But those who are really in a bad place are those who, in this life, are taken up with their own entertainment and superficial merriment. Shallow laughter will give way to tears of loss, remorse, and recrimination.

I am reminded of these wise words from Solomon. “Sorrow is better than laughter; it may sadden your face, but it sharpens your understanding.” (Eccles. 7:3). “When a fool laughs, it is like thorns crackling in a fire. It doesn’t mean a thing.” (Eccles. 7:6)

### **Paul’s Praise, Paul’s Anguish ....**

At the end of chapter 11 of Romans, Paul breaks out into unfettered, exuberant, praise; he can hardly contain himself: -

‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory for ever! Amen.’

However, if we only read these verses, we fall into the trap (again) of failing to see **that it is praise in the context of lament.**

What a struggle Paul had in trying to understand God's plan and purpose for his fellow Jews, which is the context of Romans chapters 9-11. He says, 'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart' (9:2 NIV); 'I carry with me at all times a huge sorrow. It's an enormous pain deep within me, and I'm never free of it' (9:2 The Message).

What pain, what sorrow, what anguish are you carrying in your heart? If you can acknowledge what it is and then bring it to God in prayer and praise, you are developing the Biblical pattern of praise, lament, praise, lament.

### **Praise and Lament in Revelation Chapters 5 and 6**

Again, even in heaven, Revelation 5 and 6 are a mixture of praise and lament. There is much worship and singing around the throne in heaven **and** there is heartache both for John who was writing down what he saw and heard (5:4&5), and for those Christians who had been martyred on earth and whose souls were now with God in heaven (6:9-11).

John's testimony, at one point, was that he 'wept and wept', whilst the martyrs had a searching question for God, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Or to put the question another way, "Lord, lots of us were murdered on earth, when are you going to do something about it?"

**Conclusion.** We have seen how the dialectic of praise and lament is intertwined throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. What God has joined together we are not at liberty to separate. To focus on one without the other is unbalanced and unbiblical; both are needed in a broken, fallen world and will be needed until Jesus returns. We are called to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and to weep with those who are weeping (Rms. 12:15).

If our gospel is unremittingly and exclusively affirmative, positive, celebratory, and triumphalist, and is only about confidence and untroubled assurance, then it is not the true gospel and cannot reflect the relationship that we have with a living, loving, heartbroken God in a sinful and rebellious world controlled by false gods and moving towards apocalypse.



Such a distorted view not only increases people's distress by making them feel guilty that they cannot join the party, but also tends to suppress knowledge of the crises which threaten the survival of our planet. Thus, it undermines the credibility of the Christian faith for the masses of suffering people around the globe who are affected by wars, famines, persecution, earthquakes, injustice, etc.

However, things are changing; for it is into these kinds of troubled situations that God is increasingly at work as people are given permission and the freedom to combine praise and lament.

Michael Nai-Chiu Poon says, "Makeshift tents replace cathedrals as the carriers of Christianity at the start of the third millennium. Peoples are on the move; and so too faith is on the move. For many, life is apocalyptic. They live under the constant threat of an impending end." (6)

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the influence of one book, from the list below, in writing this particular 'Food for Thought' article. The book is called, 'Stumbling Toward Zion – Recovering the Biblical Tradition of Lament in the Era of World Christianity' by David Smith (7). The author goes wide and deep into this topic and I would highly recommend his thoughts, research, and conclusions. I believe his synthesis of praise and lament will bring challenge, comfort, and hope to many. It did so for me.

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George Irving – March 2023

- (1) Westermann, *Praise and Lament*.
- (2) Scott Ellington, *Risking Truth*.
- (3) Federico Villanueva, *Lamentations: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016).
- (4) Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Wipf & Stock Publishers).
- (5) Walter Brueggemann, *The Costly Loss of Lament*, in *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*.
- (6) Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, *The Rise of Asian Pacific Christianity & Challenges for the Church Universal*.
- (7) David W. Smith, *Stumbling Toward Zion ~ Recovering the Biblical Tradition of Lament in the Era of World Christianity* (Langham Global Library, 2020).