

Grief That Goes Somewhere The Psalms of Lament

Psalm 79: Corporate Lament

I. Introduction

- Psalm 79 has many parallels with other psalms (e.g., Ps 71, 74, 100, 137).
- The historical context is clearly 587 BC, when the Babylonians defiled and plundered the Holy of Holies and destroyed Jerusalem.
- Yet the lack of specific references to these events allows us to apply to psalm more broadly to many circumstances.
- Psalm 79 is an example of an imprecatory psalm (“imprecate” means “to pray evil against” or “to invoke curse upon”). It is unique in that it includes a confession of corporate sin.

II. Psalm 79

Stanza 1 (vv. 1-4) – Protest over the Fate of Judah

- ¹O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
- ²They have left the dead bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.
- ³They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
- ⁴We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,
of scorn and derision to those around us.

Some key verses: Exod 15:17; 19:6; Deut 4:20; Ps 78:62, 71; 137:7

Stanza 2 (vv. 5-12) – A Petition in Three Cycles

Cycle 1: Judge the Nations

- ⁵How long, LORD? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?
- ⁶Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,
on the kingdoms
that do not call on your name;

⁷ for they have devoured Jacob
and devastated his homeland.

How long? – A Key Lament (Ps 4:2; 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:10; 80:4; 89:46;
90:13; 94:3; 119:84; cf. Zech 1:12-17; Rev 6:9-11)

Cycle 2: Deliver Us

⁸ Do not hold against us the sins of past generations;
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.

⁹ Help us, God our Savior,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us and forgive our sins
for your name's sake.

¹⁰ Why should the nations say,
“Where is their God?”

Cycle 3: Avenge Your Honor

Before our eyes, make known among the nations
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.

¹¹ May the groans of the prisoners come before you;
with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die.

¹² Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times
the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.

Stanza 3 (v. 13) – Declaration of Praise

¹³ Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will praise you forever;
from generation to generation
we will proclaim your praise.

III. Some Comments about the Ethics of Imprecatory Psalms

“Ultimately, then, it was right for the Psalmists to pray for the destruction of the wicked because they were praying for God to do something which it was in harmony with God's nature for him to do” (Vos, 134).

IV. Going Forward with Psalm 79

A. Faith in the midst of judgment

- B. Repentance and forgiveness in the midst of judgment
- C. Restoration from judgment

V. **Going Forward into Corporate Lament**

- A. The Danger of Ignoring Corporate Lament

“A community of faith which 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. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions to God, they soon appear to be improper questions in public places... Justice questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied” (Brueggemann, 64).

- B. Corporate Lament as Spiritual Formation

- C. Corporate Lament as Prophetic Engagement

“Public lament, bringing injustice closer to view, is needed to energise, nurture and nourish individuals and communities into an alternative consciousness that lets people see their own history in the light of God’s heart for justice.” (Andrew Williams)

“Lament is an act of truthfulness, a profound expression of a people groaning for justice and appealing to their God to come and bring liberation.” (Andrew Williams)

“[T]hrough worship, prophetic word, and protest, we are called to expose oppressive social realities and insist: It could be otherwise.” (Walter Brueggemann)

Sources:

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