The Psalms

Today our focus is on those psalms that are called laments. Typically, these are the opposite of hymns which pour forth the language of praise and joy. Laments and hymns encompass the entirety of human existence; they cover the whole of life. That there are more psalms of lament than there are hymns of praise in the psalms is an indication that life is full of trouble and sorrow. “Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.” Job 14:1. However, it is fitting to note that the psalter ends with an energetic outburst of praise in 146-150. Typically, lament psalms are comprised of the following elements:

**beginning** – an invocation addressed to God which is at many times followed by a plea for divine assistance.

**major part** – the complaint which is provoked by some distressful situation including frustrations with God and his thoughts and actions and annoyance at enemies.

**move towards confidence** – that God has heard the complaint and will respond accordingly.

**praise of God** – for his faithfulness to answer our pleas. Many psalms of lament end with such praise.

### Individual Laments

By far the most numerous types of lament psalms, these are characterized by the “I” that is speaking. Some of these include 3-5; 9-10; 13-14; 22; 25; 39; 41; 42-43; 54-57; 69-71; 77; 86; 88, and 140-142. Psalm 13 reveals the above pattern:

- **opening invocation** – “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” vv. 1-2

- **cry for God’s help** – “Consider and answer me, … light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,” v. 3.

- **complaint and distress** -- “lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,” lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.” v. 4

- **trust in God** – “But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”” v. 5

- **praise to God** – “I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” v. 6

### Community Laments

These are very similar in structure to the individual laments and are identified by “we” rather than “I”. Usually, they are responses to a communal disaster such as war, drought or famine and include a recollection of God’s past works on behalf in contrast with what the community was currently experiencing. They may or may not end in an appeal confirming God’s faithfulness. Community laments are usually found in a
worship setting and are sometimes connected to a fast. Among such psalms are 12; 44; 58; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83, and 85. Psalm 85 is divided as follows:

reCollection of God’s past deeds – “LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin. ...” vv. 1-3.

plea to God for restoration of his favor -- “Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us! Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? ...” vv. 4-11.

confirmation of God’s faithfulness – “Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.” vv. 12-13.