

Group Exercise: Preaching a Psalm of Lament

Many of the Psalms address very negative circumstances and profound challenges in the life of the Psalmist. These Psalms can be difficult to interpret and preach with relevance to our listeners today. In this session we will study a Psalm of Lament and consider together how it could be effectively preached in our contemporary context.

Huw Williams worked for 12 years as a conductor, working with orchestras, soloists, singers and ensembles across the world. He then made the transition to pastoral ministry and is currently the pastor of the International Church of Torino in Italy. He is a passionate advocate of clear and understandable Bible teaching, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. He maintains a keen interest in classical music and opera, and continues to support and encourage Christian musicians as they engage their Christian faith with their artistic environment. He is a husband to Alison and a father to Kitty and Clara.

I. Why preach laments?

“God has placed... laments in Scripture, it would appear, as a corrective against euphoric, celebratory notions of faith, which romantically portray life as consisting only of sweetness and light. Such a one-sided, happiness-only view fails to deal with the realities of life. It drives the hurtful and painful side of life into the corners of faith and practice, leaving few guides or comforts from mortals or the Word of God.

On the contrary, God has given us in the laments of Scripture a solace where the full spectrum of our earthly journey can be represented.”

(Walter C. Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*, p.125-6)

II. What is a lament?

A. Individual or communal

B. Not only in the Psalms

C. Elements of laments

1. Invocation / Initial cry to God
2. Complaint (usually stating specifics of the situation)
3. Petition / Supplication (request from God)
4. Statement of confidence in God
5. Statement of praise / vow to praise in future

Often, but not always...

6. Confession of sin / assertion of innocence
7. Imprecation on enemies

III. How to preach laments?

- A. Allow the passage to shape the message (not vice versa!)
- B. Be aware of the complaint(s) since this will usually give specifics of the context
- C. Preach the tone of the lament
- D. Application - not always straightforward

IV. When to preach laments

- A. Individual mourning / suffering
- B. Corporate mourning / suffering

C. Local / National mourning

V. Workshop - Psalm 4 (ESV)

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David.

- 1** Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have given me relief when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!
- 2** O men, how long shall my honour be turned into shame?
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? *Selah*
- 3** But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.
- 4** Be angry, and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. *Selah*
- 5** Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the Lord.
- 6** There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!”
- 7** You have put more joy in my heart
than they have when their grain and wine abound.
- 8** In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

A. Analysis

- v1 - Invocation
- v2 - Lament
- v3 - Statement of confidence in God
- v4 - Instruction to others
- v5 - Instruction to others
- v6 - Lament & Petition [nb. combined]
- v7 - Statement of confidence in God
- v8 - Statement of confidence in God

B. Questions for discussion:

1. How would you divide this Psalm into sections?
2. Who is David speaking to?
3. What is your sermon outline?
4. Application:
 - a. What instruction(s) does David give?
 - b. What motivation(s) does David give for change?

C. Feedback

Recommended Readings:

Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Kregel, 2007)
Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 1981)
Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Baker, 2003)
Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Zondervan, 1984)