



Sermon Transcript

July 9, 2017

Psalms: Prayer of Faith and Hope

Let us Cry!

Psalms 3-5

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 9, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Psalm 3

¹ O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; ² many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God. *Selah*

³ But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. ⁴ I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*

⁵ I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. ⁶ I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

⁷ Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. ⁸ Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people! *Selah*

Psalm 4

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 honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? 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 lay down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Psalm 5

¹ Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. ² Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. ³ O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

⁴ For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.

⁵ The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. ⁶ You destroy

those who speak lies; The LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

⁷ But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in fear of you. ⁸ Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of your enemies, make your way straight before me

⁹ For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue. ¹⁰ Make them bear their guilt, O God; Let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgression, cast them out for they have rebelled against you.

¹¹ But let all you take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. ¹² For you bless the righteous, O LORD; you cover him with favor as with a shield.

Introduction

It is more than OK to cry. At least, that is the conclusion I come to when I read through the book of Psalms. Over a third of the psalms are classified as psalms of lament. Close to 60 psalms out of 150 are psalms of lament. The vast majority of these laments are personal and individual laments born out of a deeply personal experience. But about 16 of these laments are corporate or communal laments, common cries that are shared by the congregation. The preponderance of these laments and cries of the soul suggest that we are not just given permission to cry. Rather, it is expected that we will cry. We are invited to cry. I would even go so far as to say, we are called to cry.

R. W. L. Moberly says that the preponderance of psalms of lament show us “that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.”¹ In other words, these laments and cries are not a sign of weakness or immature faith. How many times did we hear growing up, “Stop your crying!” “Stop acting like a baby!” Rather, through the psalms, we discover that there is nothing infantile about a biblical lament. In fact, these laments demonstrate that our hearts are deeply aligned with God and that our hope is in God and the purposes of God. Bruce Waltke and James Houston suggest that without these laments “we cannot express our solidarity with the sick, the disabled, the persecuted, the tortured, the dying—that is with those in the depths of despair and darkest desolation.”² And so, we must learn how to cry.

That is an important statement. We must learn “how” to cry. Our laments and cries are born out of times of trouble. And so we need to learn how to cry in our times of trouble. Beale and Carson observe that a “lament can express the deepest trust in God, or it can wholly reject God; lament then becomes the spiritual experience of trustful humility, or the defiance of God in pride. Biblical lament is prayer; secular complaint collapses into the meaningless.”³ When it comes down to it, we all cry. We all look at this world and issue our complaints. We all have those situations in our lives that elicits some kind of cry of dissatisfaction because of the way things are or because of the way things have not worked out as we had hoped they would. But how do we take that cry and turn it into a biblical lament that strengthens our faith in God?

I would like us to consider what it looks like to offer our cries to God by looking at Psalms 3-5. These three psalms are cries from the heart and mouth of King David. In fact, starting after the two introductory psalms, Psalm 1 and 2, all the psalms but two of them in BOOK ONE—that is Psalms 3 to 41—are written by David. The three psalms we are looking at this morning are not only attributed to David, but it is widely held that these three cries are born out of the same event and situation in David’s life. The incident that produced these cries of lament from David is found in the inscription at the beginning of Psalm 3. It reads, “*A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.*” So what can we learn from David’s cries to help us learn how to offer our cries?

A Continual Cry

To help us understand the cries of David from these three psalms, it would be good to rehearse the story that unfolded between David and his son, Absalom. You can read this story in its entirety in 2 Samuel 13-18. It is here where you discover that the tension within the household of David between the king and his son had been brewing for well over ten years. The reader begins to get a hint that not everything is good in David’s household when Tamar, the full sister of Absalom, is raped by their half-brother, Amnon. While David was angry over the events that transpired, he really didn’t do anything about it. For two years, Absalom’s anger against his brother simmered as he patiently plotted out his revenge. Eventually, he took matters into his own hands by having his servants rise up against his brother and they murdered Amnon. Consequently, Absalom fled for safety and he found refuge with his maternal grandfather, Talmai, where he stayed for three years. As these three years passed, David longed for his son, and so eventually Absalom returned to Jerusalem.

For the first two years Absalom was back in Jerusalem, he was barred from entering

David's presence. But once he gained access to David and to the palace, he began to manipulate the situation and for the next four years he built a coalition that would one day seek to overthrow the king and take the throne for himself. It says in 2 Samuel 15:6 that he "*stole the hearts of the men of Israel.*" Even some of David's highest officials joined Absalom in the plot to overthrow the king. At the point when Absalom was ready to put his plan into motion, it says in 2 Samuel 15:12, "*And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing.*" Once David got word that Absalom was about to descend upon the city and take it by force, David and his men fled the city. David's escape from the city is described in 2 Samuel 15:30 and here you can capture the raw emotion of this event. It read, "*But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with head covered. And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up weeping as they went.*" As David fled, there were those who were walking along side him hurling insults at him and throwing stones at him. Finally, in 2 Samuel 16:14 it says, "*And the king and all who were with him, arrived weary at the Jordan. And there he refreshed himself.*"

I wonder if it was here, at the banks of the Jordan, where David penned the words of Psalms 3-5. Was it here where the lament of Psalm 3:1-2 was first expressed? "*O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God.*" Was it here where this great king of Israel, now finding himself running for his life, appealed for his subjects to come to their senses by issuing the cry of Psalm 4:2? "*O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?*" Was it here where he cried out to God the words we find in Psalm 5:1-2? "*Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.*"

One of the things that ties these three laments together is the rhythm of morning and evening and morning. For example, in Psalm 3:5 he says, "*I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.*" Even though, in the next verse we are reminded that he went to bed with the knowledge that there are "*thousands of people who had set themselves against me all around*" he awakens the next morning knowing that God has sustained him through the night. But like with many problems in our lives, the new day does not mean that the problem goes away. Most of the problems that we deal with that cause us to cry out to God are problems that are present for a period of time, if not years. And so in Psalm 4, we find a prayer for the night in Psalm 4:8, "*In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*" And then again, in Psalm 5, we find a morning prayer in Psalm 5:3, "*O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.*"

If nothing else, the rhythm of morning and evening and morning, tells me that my cries of lament are continual expressions of prayer as we learn how to trust God in whatever it is that concerns us. The remedy to our cries of lament is not found in having “one good cry” and then we are good to go. It is an ongoing cry that teaches us to trust in God. When David woke up in the morning, the problem of Absalom wasn’t gone. It was very much pressing upon him. In Psalm 3 his cry is that “many are against him.” In Psalm 4 he cries because many in high places have betrayed him. In Psalm 5 he cries out to God because of the lies people are saying against him and the opinions people are forming based on these lies. A good night’s sleep doesn’t make these problems go away. And so, he needs to learn to trust God as a new day approaches and when he lays his head down at the end of a day, each and every night.

The *ESV Psalter* describes it this way, when talking about Psalm 4. “David is expressing the battle that rages within our heart at night. On one side is stacked up all the clamoring accusations and misunderstandings and painful words of the day—of actual people in our lives or of demonic attack or of our own fallen minds. On the other side is the Lord. Both beckon to us; both invite us to listen. In the darkness of that moment, David makes up his mind; he will trust in the Lord.”⁴ But then he wakes up the next morning, and the problem is still there. So what does he do? Again, he turns to God in prayer. I like how that morning prayer ends in Psalm 5:3, “*In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.*” In other words, he waits to see what God will do.

Of the three prescribed times for daily prayer and worship, the most important one to the Jewish worshiper was the morning prayer. It is because, in the morning we have the physical illustration of how light dispels darkness. “The rays of the rising sun chase away the darkness of the night.”⁵ And so, with confidence David says in Psalm 5:3, “*O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice.*” Then with eager anticipation, he waits for God to act. As the day begins, he prays in verse 8, “*Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of your enemies, make your way straight before me.*” God will do right. God will do good. In the meantime, we wait and we trust and we continually—day and night—cry out to God and affirm our trust in God. So how do we offer our cries to God? We do so, day and night. It is an ongoing cry of dependence and trust in God.

A Christ-filled Cry

Did you ever take time to consider the upside of lament? I don’t mean to trivialize or make light of whatever it is that causes you to cry like David in these three psalms by suggesting that there is an upside to our suffering. Admittedly, it is our natural

inclination to see laments and the situations in life that cause us to lament to be something to avoid, or at the very least to pray they come in small doses. But sometimes they come in rather large doses. And there is a very real upside to our laments. They make us realize that our hope comes from outside of us. They actually point us to Jesus.

Consider this thought by Francis Bacon. When I first read it, I had to stop and really ponder what he was saying. He said, “Prosperity is the [promised] blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the [promised] blessing of the New, which carries the greater benediction [praise], and the clearer revelation of God’s favor.”⁶ It makes you want to ask, “How is adversity the blessing of the New Testament?” Well first of all, it is what is promised to us. “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” So at the very least it is expected. These laments should not catch us by surprise. But even more so, in Jesus, we know from the cross comes the resurrection and so we know that suffering does not have the last word. Soren Kierkegaard said it this way, “We believe that God is great enough to harbor our little grievances, and that he can lead us through darkness to the other side.”⁷ While joy is the last word, lament is what fills most of our earthly days.

So when it comes to learning how to cry and how to offer “Christian lament,” it is important to remember that we offer our cries while standing on this side of the cross. In other words, Jesus has to be in focus when we offer our cries of lament. We need our laments to be “Christ-filled cries.” To be honest, Jesus has always been the focus of the Psalms. The writers of the New Testament often indicate how the Psalms point us to Jesus. And so, how much more so for us, standing on this side of Jesus, does Jesus need to be our focus when bringing our cries to him.

It is helpful to know that when you read Psalms 3-5 that the incident that brought about these cries from David was what took place between David and Absalom. When David cries out in Psalm 3 about the “many who are rising against him,” you can almost picture the army under Absalom’s command coming out of Jerusalem in pursuit of David. Knowing the story that brought about this lament is helpful. But there is another way that you need to read these psalms. You need to read the Psalms with Jesus in mind. Jason Hood said it this way, “Almost every type of Psalm is applied directly to Jesus. It is as if the Psalm book is his own personal book, expounding his mission (Ps. 78 in Matthew), describing his unjust suffering (Ps. 22), and obedience unto death (Ps. 40:6-8 in Heb. 10:5-7), and proclaiming his resurrection and messianic rule (Acts 2, 4, Ps. 2, 110).⁸ Jesus is all over the Psalms. In fact, it is also good to ask, “why are Psalms 3-5 after Psalm 2? Psalm 2 is that Psalm that rehearses the promise that God’s Son, the

Davidic King will rule over God's kingdom with peace and justice. But through David's experience with Absalom, we find that God's King, the Son of David, will face opposition. Men in high places will come against this divine king. False statements will be made against this Jesus. In fact, in early church history, Jerome saw the lies that came against David in Psalm 5 to be a reference to the false teachers of his day who questioned the deity of Christ that was part of the Arian controversy that raged within the church for 100 years. In other words, like David, Jesus and the church faced opposition and attack from within her walls. And so when we offer our prayers of lament from the Psalms, they must quickly turn to Christ-filled prayers.

Can't you see hints of Jesus in these three psalms? At the end of Psalm 3 we are reminded of the character and the work of Jesus as we turn to God in our time of lament. The Psalm ends by confidently affirming, "*Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people.*" This is the same affirmation made in heaven in Revelation 19:1 in anticipation of the soon return of Jesus, the King of Kings. "*After this I heard what seemed to the loud voice of a great multitude of heaven, crying out, Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.*"

In Psalm 4 we hear David crying out to those who oppose him, calling on them to repent and to "put their trust in the Lord." It was David's testimony that he put his trust in God and that God hears the prayer of the godly. And then he professes his confident hope in Psalm 4:8, "*for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*"

This distinction between the godly and the ungodly becomes all the more pronounced in Psalm 5. He minces no words here and he readily acknowledges that God is a God who judges. By the way, he doesn't judge sin. He judges the sinner. It kind of goes against some of our sensibilities where we like to say, "God hates the sin, but he loves the sinner." But in this passage, it is against the sinner God takes his stand. In verse 4-6 he says, "*For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; The LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.*" Then he picks it up again in verses 9-10, "*For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue. Make them bear their guilt, O God; Let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgression, cast them out for they have rebelled against you.*" Part of verse 9 is quoted in Romans 3 where it tells us that the depravity of man is of such that *there is no one who is good, no not one.* Where then is our hope? Look what he says in Psalm 5:7, "*But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in fear of*

you.” Our only hope is found in the mercy of God that is given to us through Jesus. And so he says in verse 11, *“But let all you take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you.”* The difference between the godly and the ungodly is not found in that one is a sinner and other isn’t. We are all sinners. Yes, *“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* But it is these difficult to read “imprecatory psalms” that remind us that our sin is not a light matter. The difference is that the godly humble themselves and turn in faith to Jesus who atoned for their sin on the cross. It is the same thing Jesus says in John 3:36, *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”*

These laments are meant to lead us outside of ourselves and cause us to continually put our trust in Jesus. In fact the psalms of lament are closely tied to the penitential psalms. Because you don’t spend much time rehearsing the sin of the ungodly without being quickly reminded that it is only through the steadfast mercy and love of God that God does not hold our sins against us. And so part of our lament is that simple confession, *“God have mercy on me a sinner.”* May our laments lead us to Jesus and may our prayers be Christ-filled cries.

Confident Cries

Finally, one of the great characteristics of a biblical lament is that it ends with an expression of confidence in God. If you want to learn how to cry, it starts with that honest cry that freely admits that life is overwhelming. Like David, many are against me . . . some in high places have taken their stand against me . . . they speak lies against me. That was David’s cry as he ran for his life from his son. It is understandable how overwhelming that can be and why he was found crying out to God. But as we make that honest cry and as we are led outside of ourselves and brought to Jesus, our lament turns to a cry of confidence and trust.

In both the morning prayer of Psalm 3 and the evening prayer of Psalm 4, David gave testimony that in spite of the immensity of his lament—he was running for his life— and yet he was able to sleep. In Psalm 3 he talked about not being afraid and in Psalm 4 he testified that in peace he was able lie down and find sleep. That is an amazing testimony.

He adds in Psalm 4:7, *“You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.”* He basically says the same thing in Psalm 5:11, *“But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; and let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over*

them, that those who love your name exult over you.”

Where did this peace and joy come from? How could he sleep when the army led by his son is about to overtake them? His joy and his delight was in God. His security and his identity was in God. God was bigger to him than anything. And by that, I don't mean that God always removes the problem. But by that I mean that the source of my joy and my peace is God. When we have God in Christ, nothing can separate us from him. We have all that we need.

It is one thing to read these verses and it is another thing to live in them. I have had sleepless nights due to anxious thoughts and I have never faced anything remotely as unsettling as David was facing here in this passage. So I am not suggesting we don't wrestle to get there. I think it often requires us to wrestle with our prayer to get there.

Consider how Martin Luther handled his laments. In the summer of 1527, plague struck Wittenberg. Luther was one of its first victims. Sickness spread with such speed that Elector John of Saxony closed the university in Wittenberg and ordered Luther and his family to leave the city. Luther refused, insisting on the church's responsibility to care for the sick and dying. Even more threatening was the melancholy that assaulted the Reformer. Spiritual depression and anxiety were familiar nemeses: Luther's earliest battles with doubt and temptation in the monastery had nearly driven him mad. His discovery of justification by faith alone saved his life.

What was his advice for times like this? “At such a time as this”, he said, “it is well to pray, read, or sing.”

What, then, should we do in times of opposition, pestilence, and personal depression? Turn to Scripture. Luther took the psalmist's words seriously and applied them to his present trouble. . . We too ought to plead with God on the basis of his promises. The “man of God's own choosing” – that is Jesus - is on our side, pleading for us before the throne of grace . . . Finally, we too should sing. Singing does more than raise our hearts' affection for the triune God; it steels us with confidence to stand defiant against our enemy. It's not the prince of darkness grim for whom we tremble. No, we tremble in the presence of our Lord Jesus, whose gospel is the declaration of our enemy's demise. It is the kingdom of Jesus that is forever⁹. . . . And with this we sleep in peace and we sing with joy!

Conclusion

What about you? If you were to fill in the blank, what current lament do you find occupying your mind and your heart? What lament is robbing you of sleep and of peace and of joy? Bring it to God in prayer! Listen, it is OK to cry. But it is a different kind of cry from what our world cries.

Offer your lament both morning and night. Make it a continual cry. Bring it to God in prayer. But make sure it is a Christ-filled cry. That means that you spend time in the Scriptures and you recount the goodness and the promises of God for those who love him. And then make it a confident cry. Cling to God and his promises. Sing the songs of the church that affirm that God is faithful and good. In time, with daily trust, God will give your heart peace and rest and joy. No money can buy that. That is a gift of God's grace.

May we cry well. May our cries make us sensitive to the cries around us as we bear one another's burdens. May our cries land us at the feet of Jesus and may he give us peace. In fact in Psalm 4:6, David alludes to that great benediction in Numbers 6 when he says, "*Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD.*" It is that benediction Aaron is told to pronounce over God's people, "*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*" May it be so!

¹R. W. L. Moberly "Lament" *NIDOTTE*, IV, 879

²Bruce K Waltke, James M Houston and Erika Moore *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014)

³G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary of the New Testament on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 638

⁴*ESV Devotional Psalter* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) Psalm 4

⁵Waltke and Houston

⁶Francis Bacon "Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral," Essay V, in *Harvard Classics*, vol. 3, ed. Charles W Elliot (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1937) 16

⁷Quoted in Waltke and Houston

⁸Collin Hansen "The Psalms: Good News That Never Goes Out of Fashion" www.thegospelcoalition.org, February 20, 2011

⁹Ryan Griffith "Martin Luther's Shelter Amid the Flood of Depression" www.thegospelcoalition.org July 6, 2017

