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Don Utley

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The Gift of Lament

by Don Utley

*Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Thru thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*Be still, my soul; thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.*

*Be still, my soul; the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord;
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone;
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul; when change and tears are past,
All safe and blessed, we shall meet at last.¹*

This wonderful hymn recently provided an uncommon consolation to my family as my father lay in a Houston hospital, very sick and soon to die. Over the course of my father's illness, at times when the hospital clock seemed to stop altogether, my mother would find herself humming a vaguely familiar melody. Although I had listened only unconsciously at first, I finally noticed what seemed to have become part of the room. I commented to my mother about its appropriateness, only to have her ask me the name of the song. While the melody had occupied her mind, she had no recollection of the words. It was hardly

familiar to her; still it had been providing my mother unique comfort. When we later looked at the lyrics together, we both knew that this splendid song, only distantly remembered, had led my mother to these wonderful words of solace—a marvelous gift from God.

Following my father's death, I prepared to lead the singing at my home congregation on my first Sunday home in nearly two months. I could lead no other song to begin our worship but this one. I desired somehow to bring the peace that this timeless song had given to my family and share it with my church family, even if they were unaware of the profound meaning that it held for me. My heart also seemed to require that the pain and darkness of the ordeal be brought back home to be validated among those who shared my faith—those who profess the same hope and assurance that my mother's song represented. Never before had I experienced such wondrous joy in a worship service. And to think that it came in the wake of the most overwhelming despair I had ever faced!

The path from lament to joy has been traveled throughout the ages. It is a strikingly significant facet of the entire biblical witness—especially of the Psalms.² Fully one-third of the psalms in the biblical collection are either personal or communal laments.³ This becomes especially important when one considers that these psalms provided much of the substance of the worship of the people of God throughout their history. Even the most singular and intimate expressions of doubt, fear, and disillusionment became expressions of the entire community:

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O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint;
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in anguish.
How long, O LORD, how long?

I am worn out from groaning;
all night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.⁴

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
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?⁵

One of the laments was thus embraced not only by
the community, but by its Redeemer:

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?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.⁶

I confess that prior to my father's illness, these individual laments had not become part of my personal canon. They were verses that I possessed, but they were not mine. Often I had come to these heartfelt verses only to quickly turn the page—mentally if not literally—as I would study or prepare for a sermon. I suppose that I had never experienced nights dark enough nor enemies malevolent enough to elicit the emotion expressed in these passages. This was at least subtly on my mind on that joyous Sunday morning when I invited my brothers and sisters to share the song that had sustained my family. I sensed that if they were told about the value of the song for me, several of the congregation would

not be able to truly empathize with the thoughts of my heart. Why did I think not? Because I would have been unable to do so only two months earlier! I am able to empathize to a degree with most situations—but only to a degree. Those of us who have not faced dark times of despair or hopelessness may find it very difficult to identify completely with those who have.

The apostle Paul told the church in Rome, “. . . we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us. . . .”⁷ There is a unique depth to the hope that comes from suffering and perseverance. All of us are given more of a vision of God's grace and goodness through challenging experiences. This process is undoubtedly painful, but it is also precious. I may never before have related fully to the psalmist's fear of his enemies, but I now know what it is to hear a doctor deliver news that might as well have come from a terrible foe. Like the psalmist, I now know personally that God's power can overcome the enemy.

So what does this say about the value of biblical laments? Should we shelve them until such time as we face a situation desperate enough for us to understand them? Not at all! I would suggest that the laments are marvelous gifts which are held in trust for each of us.

My mother had no idea that a song whose haunting melody and words that had not fully registered in her mind would eventually become so priceless. Poetic lyrics that express the course of another's voyage from despondency to delight in the Lord may not address each of us equally—and perhaps not yet fully. They may well, however, equip us tomorrow in ways that we can only imagine. The biblical laments which give voice to the faithful journey of generations stand ready to provide hope and assurance in our own dark days. May we cherish their entrusted promise.

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Notes

¹ Katharina von Schlegel, "Be Still, My Soul."

² Walter Brueggemann has cited a common paradigm within the collection of the psalms: a journey which flows from orientation to disorientation, then to re-orientation. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg Publishing, 1984) 19-22.

³ Anthony L. Ash and Clyde M. Miller, *Psalms*

(Sweet Publishing Company, 1980) 22-23.

⁴ Psalm 6:1-3, 6-7 (All biblical references are taken from the New International Version.)

⁵ Psalm 13:1-2.

⁶ Psalm 22:1-2; Mark 15:34.

⁷ Romans 5:3-5.