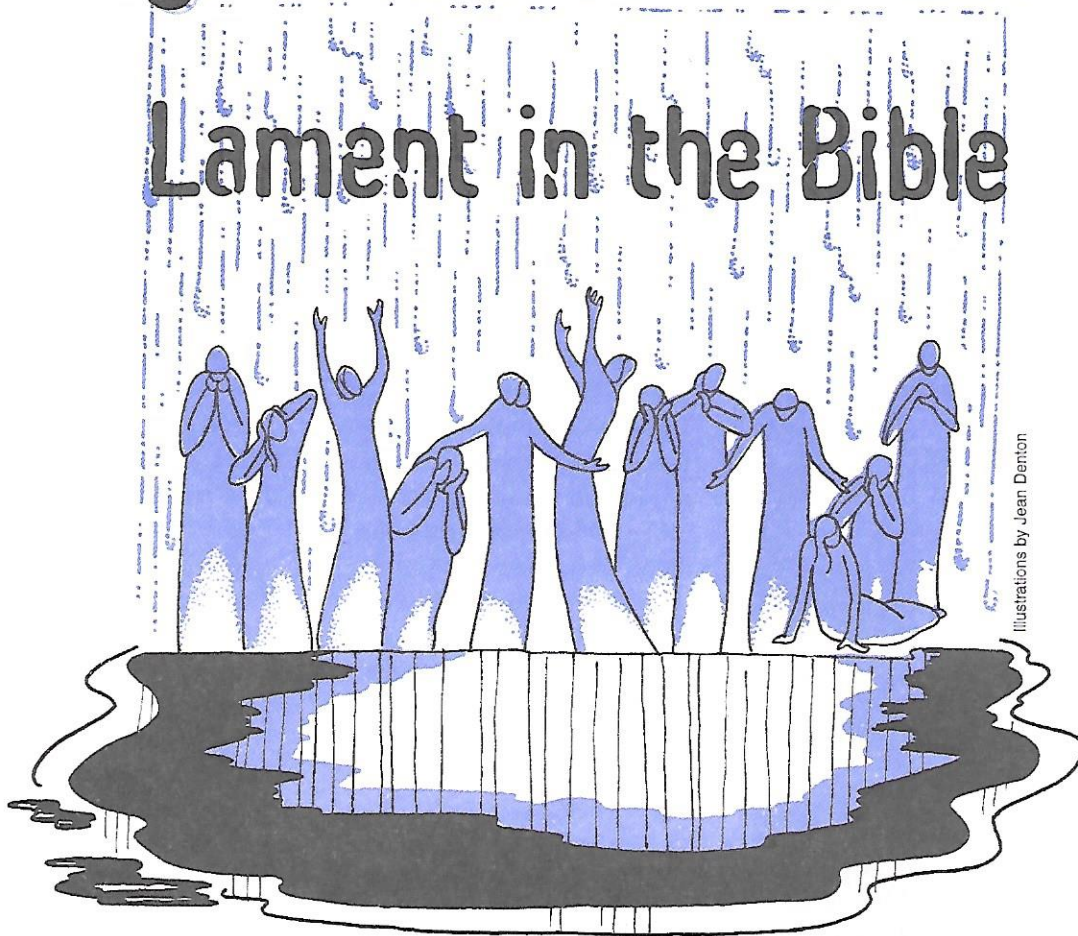


# Scripture **from** Scratch

*A popular guide to understanding the Bible*

## 'They Cried to the Lord!'

### Lament in the Bible



Illustrations by Jean Denton

Once again the Church begins its annual retreat with the Lord. The 40 days of Lent are clearly modeled on Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, which are in turn modeled on Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, as they journeyed from the oppression of Egypt to the Promised Land.

While in Egypt, "the Israelites groaned...and cried out...their cry for help rose up to God" (Ex 2:23), and God heard their cry. In the wilderness, facing death from hunger and thirst, again Israel complains to God in their need (e.g., Ex 15:22-25a; 17:1-7; Nm 20:1-13). This is the language of lamentation.

by Michael D. Guinan, O.F.M.

As we enter into Lent, this *Scripture from Scratch* reflects on the biblical meaning of lamentation.

## What Is Lamentation?

Lamentation, a prayer for help coming out of pain and need, is very common in the Bible. Over one-third (50 or so) of the psalms are laments. Job laments (e.g., Job 3:11) as do the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah 15:18 and Habakkuk 3:16).

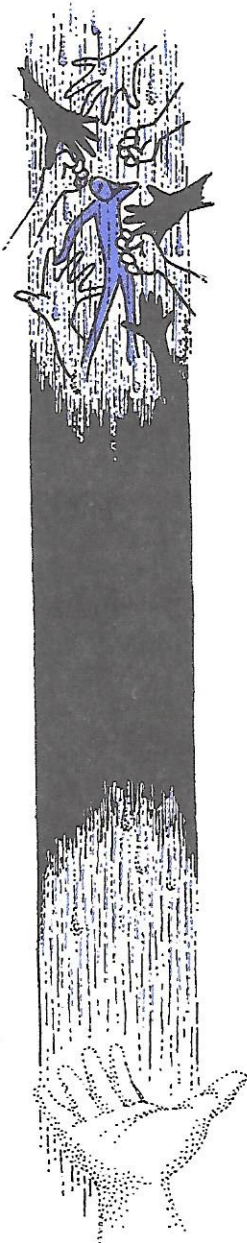
One whole book, Lamentations, expresses the confusion and suffering felt after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

And something similar occurs in the New Testament as well. People who are afflicted (e.g., Bar Timaeus, Mark 10:47) cry out to Jesus for help, while Jesus himself laments to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). In his agony on the cross, Jesus makes his own the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?"

When we feel blessed in life, when we experience goodness and wholeness, we turn to God in praise and thanksgiving. But what happens when we are overcome by the presence of chaos, brokenness, suffering and death?

When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt spiritually, we cry out in lament. Lamentation can be described as a loud, religious "Ouch!" we cry to God.

To begin with, laments are addressed directly to God: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!" (Psalm 130:1) and "My soul, too, is utterly terrified; but you, O Lord, how



long...?" (Psalm 6:4).

In more modern terms, we might say, "I call to you, O Lord, and all I get is your answering machine!" We take our cries directly to the top. God, however, seems far away, "O my God, I cry out by day, and you answer not; by night, and there is no relief for me" (Psalm 22:3).

We ask heartfelt questions. "How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me?" (Psalm 13:2), which implies: I am at the end of my rope, and I cannot hold on much longer. "Why, O Lord, do you stand aloof? Why hide in times of distress?" (Psalm 10:1), which implies: I do not understand what is going on; this makes no sense.

How long? Why? These are not requests for information, but cries of pain.

The afflictions of the speaker(s) are described in broad, stereotyped ways, with which all sufferers can identify: sickness (Psalm 6:3); loneliness and alienation (Psalm 38:12); dangers and mistreatment by others (Psalm 7:2) even aging (Psalm 71:9).

And, finally, the ultimate affliction is physical death (Psalm 88:4). All of these are manifestations of the realm of chaos and brokenness invading and pulling our lives apart.

Lamentation often speaks



## Praying With Scripture

- **Psalm 13 is the prayer of an individual for help against some unspecified kind of trouble, but one involving, in some ways, enemies. Pray it slowly. What role do feelings play in it? Have we given enough attention to feelings in prayer? Might it be healthier if we did?**

of enemies. At times these are enemies from outside the community, also known as "foreigners," or "the nations" (Psalm 79:1). At other times, it is an enemy from within who schemes and plots against the psalmist (Psalm 31:14).

On more than one occasion, the psalmist suggests to God things to do to these enemies, (the so-called "cursing psalms: Jer 18:21-22; Ps 6:11; Ps 137:8-9).

## The Costly Loss of Lament

As Christians, we are probably not all that comfortable in speaking our pains, our doubts and our anger before God. Lament leaves us more than a little uneasy.

Unlike the Jewish community (think of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, speaking his pain and confusion to God), we have lost a certain sense of lamentation, and this has been, in the words of one scholar, "a costly loss." What might we gain from a recovery of lamentation?

First, we feel, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and we might think, "I should not feel this way! I am losing my faith!"

Lament corrects a false, naive and overly rationalistic view of faith. In the Scriptures, faith is not simply an intellectual assent to some statement about God. It is the trusting of our entire selves to God. At times, we do experience God's absence; we do feel alone and confused, and we doubt.

Doubt is not opposed to faith; despair is. We see this in the case of the father who brought his son to Jesus for healing. When Jesus encouraged him to have faith, the father replied, "I do believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

Even St. Paul tells us that he was "perplexed, but not driven to despair" (2 Cor 4:8). In despair, we give up on our relationship with God. Doubt, on the other hand, is a sign that our faith is alive and kicking; it is part of the rhythm of faith itself.

Lament is not a failure of faith, but an act of faith. We cry out directly to God because deep down we know that our relationship with God counts; it counts to us and it counts to God.

Even if we do not experience the closeness, we believe that God does care. Even if God seems not to hear, we believe that God is always within shouting distance.

In the Scriptures, God does not say, "Do not fear, I will take away all the pain and struggle." Rather, we hear, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (e.g., to Isaac, frightened of the Philistine king [Gen 26:24]; to the anxious Moses being sent to confront Pharaoh [Exod 3:11-12]; to the disciples when they see Jesus walking on the sea [Matt 14:27]) and together we will make it, we will survive—yes, even death itself. Perhaps it is not lamenting, but the failure to lament that expresses a lack of faith.

Second, in lamenting, we cry to God, "Why, O Lord?" Our suffering is so big; it does not make any sense; it lacks meaning. Our search for meaning is a

strong one.

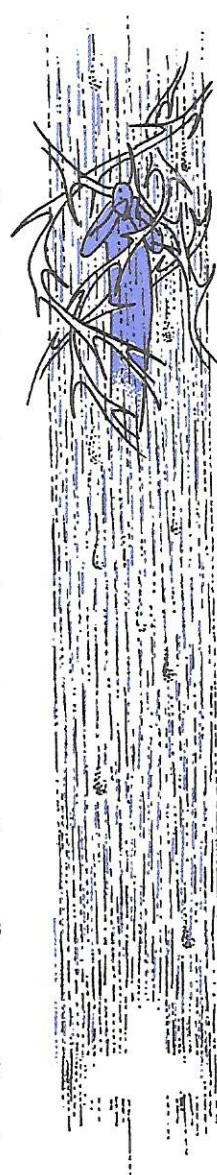
The terrorist attacks on 9/11 provide an instructive example. A photo making the rounds on the Internet, showed what seemed to be a face (a skull?) visible in the smoke pouring out of the towers. Could this be a sign that this was the work of the devil? Others referred to the predictions of Nostradamus! Some popular media preachers offered superficial religious explanations to make sense of what happened.

In our search for meaning, we can be tempted to look for cheap and easy answers. Lament teaches us that there are indeed things we do not understand; in fact, we cannot understand.

God does not say, "Do not fear; you will understand everything and have all the answers." Our human minds can take us only so far. At times we can do no more than speak our confusion to God, and lament tells us that we should do no less.

Third, toward people who hurt us, personally or as a nation, we might feel with the psalmist, "Happy the man who shall seize and smash your little ones against the rock" (Psalm 137:9). Then we think, "I should not feel this way; it is against charity!"

Lament counters a false, naive, and overly romantic view of charity. Char-



ty does not mean that everything is lovely, that we never get upset, that we sit around holding hands and saying how wonderful everything is. This is unreal.

Negativity, injustice, hatred, brokenness are part of our lives and part of our world. In the face of this, we can have an instinctive feeling for retaliation in kind, for returning hatred with hatred. I do feel pain, hurt and anger, but these are not a good basis on which to act.

The fact that I feel a certain way does not give me permission to go out and dump my negativity wherever and on whomever I want. Lament suggests that it is all right to express our uncensored feelings before God.

In this light, the "cursing psalms" make sense. They have often been a particular stumbling block. We need to recognize that they are clearly spoken out of great pain and distress. The feelings are really in the psalms, and at times they are really in us.

But the psalmist does not say, "I am going to go out and smash his little ones against the rock!" We do not, as it were, take things into our own hands. We say rather, "God, this is the way I feel; I leave it to you." And God has never been known to rush right out and do everything we ask when we are angry. We let God deal with it, and in the process, we get the feelings out of us; we can begin to respond more reflectively, more constructively.

It is true that Jesus' example teaches us to pray, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)—an attitude found also in some parts of the Old Testament, (Ex 23:4-5; Job 31:29-30). This is indeed the direction in which we hope to move, the direction we want our actions to reflect. But our feelings may not



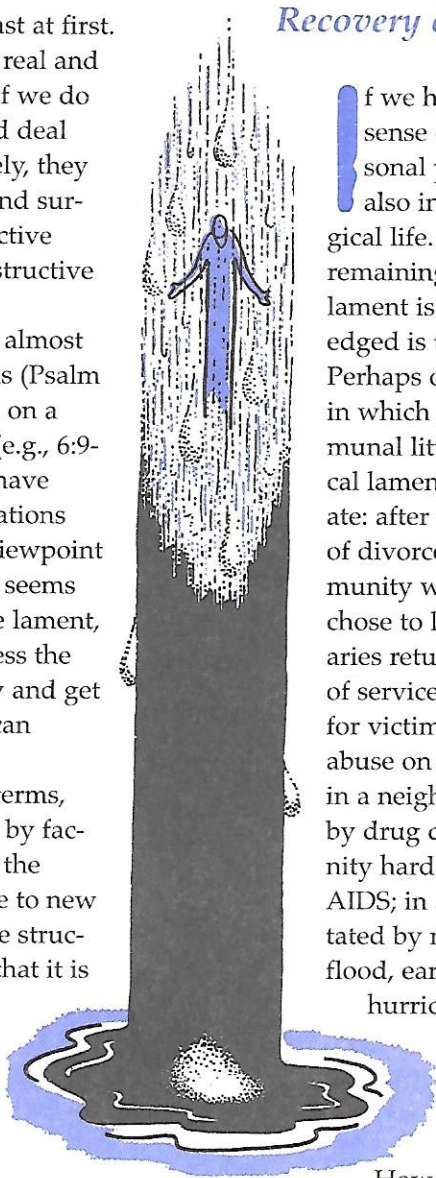
## Living the Scriptures

- **Imagine that a family member or a good friend is in the hospital, just diagnosed with terminal cancer. You come to visit and pray together Psalm 88. Have you faced other situations where praying lament psalms together might be a spiritually and pastorally good thing to do?**

always be there—at least at first. Again, the feelings are real and will not go away, and if we do not recognize them and deal with them constructively, they will go underground and surprise us later in destructive ways. Lament is a constructive way to express them.

It is often noted that almost all of the lament psalms (Psalm 88 is an exception) end on a sudden note of praise (e.g., 6:9-11; 22:23-32). Scholars have offered various explanations for this, but from the viewpoint of prayer, the meaning seems clear. It is only after we lament, after we face and express the pain and the negativity and get it all out, that healing can begin.

In more theological terms, we can say that is only by facing and going through the death that we can come to new life, to resurrection. The structure of lament tells us that it is possible to praise too soon. The psalmist takes the time to let all the pain and anger out before the praise can set in.



## Recovery of Lament

If we have lost a healthy sense of lament in our personal prayer life, this is true also in our communal, liturgical life. Almost the only remaining context in which lament is formally acknowledged is the funeral liturgy. Perhaps other situations exist in which some form of communal liturgical or paraliturgical lament would be appropriate: after a painful experience of divorce; in a religious community when dear members chose to leave; when missionaries return home after years of service in a foreign country; for victims of clergy sexual abuse on the path of healing; in a neighborhood taken over by drug dealers; in a community hard hit by HIV and AIDS; in a community devastated by natural disaster (fire, flood, earthquake, tornado, hurricane); for people after the experience of rape; or when terrorists attack and many lives are lost.

How helpful it would be if

we had some structures and models to allow us to express and acknowledge our pain and our anger; to offer each other strength and support in difficult times; to help us, individually and communally, move forward with the task and challenge of life and help us discern what is a good and proper response to our situation.

We have such structures and models available to us in the prayer of our Scriptures. During this Lent, we might reflect on the spiritual value of lament.

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### Talking About Scripture

- In 587 B.C., the Babylonians attacked and destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and led many of its people off to Babylon in exile. Psalm 137 is prayed by these exiles against their enemy. As we continue our national recovery in the wake of 9/11, do you think that we, as a nation, might have more lamenting to do? How could lamenting help us here?



### Reading About Scripture

- Endres, John C., S.J. & Elizabeth Liebert, S.N.J.M. *A Retreat with the Psalms: Resources for Personal and Communal Prayer*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.
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