

How Long, O Lord? The Lament Psalms

Scripture and Song Lesson 2

Lesson Overview

- In this lesson on lament psalms, students will read and analyze Psalm 13, a helpful introduction to lament psalms because it is brief, concise, and paradigmatic of the lament form. They will then listen to two musical settings of Psalm 13 by Nate Hale and Brian Doerksen and discuss how each song interprets the psalm, as well as discussing the role of lament in worship.

Materials Needed

- Bibles for each student, OR copies of Psalm 13, OR project the psalm for them to read.
- If you have a Smartboard, you can use it for the Explore section.
- The Shiyr Poets' "How Long (Psalm 13)": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-oxN19dBOY>
- Nate Hale's "Psalm 13": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmaZAJ7HaqI>

Teacher Preparation

- Read Psalm 13 and listen to each song a few times to become familiar with them; reflect on how the music interprets and communicates the psalm.
 - Read through the discussion questions and come prepared with some answers of your own.
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Open (5-10 minutes)

- **Ask:** Have you ever come to church sad? (If students are willing, ask them to share about it.) What did it feel like to sing happy songs when you felt sad?
- **Ask:** Have you ever sung a lament or sad hymn in church? What was that like?
 - Come prepared to share your own answers to the first two questions, but wait for other students to share first.
- **Ask:** What are some reasons people might need to sing sad songs in church?
- **Transition:** Today we'll be learning about lament psalms in worship by listening to two different versions of a lament.

Explore (10-15 minutes)

- **Explain:**
 - The lament psalms are prayers that are really honest about fear, grief, doubt, and even anger. But even in the midst of these emotions, the psalmist still worships.
 - Last week we started with praise psalms, but most of the Psalms are actually laments!
 - When Jesus was on the cross and asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", he was actually quoting a lament psalm – Psalm 22. (If you have

extra time, take a look at Psalm 22 with your students and see other resonances to Jesus' experience.)

- **Project** Psalm 13. **Ask** the group to summarize what is happening and/or what the psalmist is feeling in each stanza (preferably one or two words). If you have a smartboard, write answers to the side beside each stanza.
 - You might want to give an example for the first couple of lines – forgotten, invisible, etc.
 - Ask one student to share, and then let that student call on another student.
- **Ask:** Looking at each stanza and its summary, how do you see the psalm changing from beginning to end?
- Many of the lament psalms follow this basic pattern: lamenting their situation, asking God to listen or help, then remembering what God has done and transitioning to praise.
- **Ask:** How would you read the last stanza of praise? Happy, or sad? Why? What difference does it make in how you understand the psalm? Do you think the psalmist's circumstances have changed, that they have been rescued? If not, what has changed for the psalmist that allows them to praise anyway?
 - Feel free to try reading the movement to praise in both a happy and a sad voice to illustrate the difference.
- **Explain:** We're going to listen to two songs today, and they make different choices about whether it should sound happy or sad.

Listen: The Shiyr Poets (15-20 minutes)

- **Listen** to the song.
- **Ask:** How did this song make you feel? Was there a part that really stood out to you?
- **Project** the lyrics alongside Psalm 13. If you're using a Smartboard, highlight/circle lyrics that students point out.
- **Ask:** How are the lyrics similar to or different from the psalm? (The text is very close to the psalm, but it omits any reference to enemies and also talk of death. It also adds the future tense, "you *will be* good.")
 - If you're using a smartboard, circle or underline the differences they point out.
- **Ask:** How did the music interpret the psalm – through the opening, the ending, the rhythm, the instruments? Give some examples that you noticed.
 - (Have a few answers in mind for yourself that you can ask about if conversation lags – how it sits with the lament for a while before moving to praise, how it moves from minor chords in the lament, to major chords for the praise, and goes back to minor on "good to me").
- **Ask:** Does it sound like things have turned around for the psalmist, or is she still sad?
 - Two lyrical indications in the song are that they sing "still I trust," and "you will be good" in addition to "you have been good," indicating that perhaps the circumstances haven't changed but the psalmist chooses to praise anyway. A musical indication is the return to minor chords in the end.
 - You can use this as a helpful jumping-off point for a discussion of whether and how it is possible to praise God even when we are sad.

Listen: Nate Hale (15-20 minutes)

- **Listen** to the song.
- **Ask:** How did this song make you feel?
- **Project** the lyrics alongside the words to Psalm 13.
- **Ask:** How are the words similar to, and different from, the Psalm?
 - If you're using a smartboard, circle or underline the differences they point out.
- **Ask:** Was there a part of the song that really stood out to you? (Have a few answers in mind for yourself that you can ask about if conversation lags, such as how the music conveys "top of my lungs," how the repetition of "long enough, long enough" emphasizes waiting, etc.)
- **Ask:** How does the music interpret the psalm? How does it compare to the Shiyr Poets' version?
- **Ask:** What do you think of the use of the word "celebrate"? Does it take away from the lament, or give it a new interpretation? Does it sound like things have turned around for the psalmist, or are they still sad?

Discuss (5-10 minutes)

- Which of these two songs do you think you might find more helpful when you're feeling down? Or maybe different ones at different times? Or would you rather write your own? If you did, how would it be different?
- Why do you think we often don't sing lament psalms in worship?
- How could it be helpful/meaningful if we did?
- Sometimes people feel uncomfortable bringing unhappy emotions to God. But the fact that there are so many laments in the Psalms shows us that our worship can include our grief, our doubt, and our anger.

Close (2-5 minutes)

- Music often helps us process our emotions, and when we're sad or doubting or struggling is no exception. Being able to listen to and sing lament psalms can give us an outlet to express our feelings to God.
- Prayer: "God, some of us in this room are sad or frustrated today because we're going through a hard time or struggling with something, so we want to name those feelings and those circumstances and ask you to fix it, to step in and make things right. We're thankful that we have the lament psalms to teach us that it's okay to tell you how lonely and forgotten we feel sometimes. But we also choose to trust you, because we believe – even when we don't sometimes – that you love us and will take care of us. Amen."