Songs of Brokenness
to the Healing God

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Abstract. If our theology about the human condition correctly underscores our brokenness, and our understanding of the world as being fallen indeed reflects reality, then our poetry of worship should express that brokenness as well as our longing for healing. However, the Church in North America neglects laments because (1) we have essentially lost the art and practice of grieving in the West, (2) the Church silently condones some bad theology about Christian living, and (3) we lack a robust philosophy of language in Christian practices and disciplines. As this article explores, Job's curse (Job 3) and the lament of Psalm 22 offer healthy correctives to these and other missteps. The article emphasizes the important place of lament in Christian community, particularly as it functions in worship.

Poetry evokes powerful emotions. It elevates our joy, and it wraps us up in our misery. As the prophets of Israel demonstrate, poetic speech evocatively exhorts, condemns, warns, and encourages. Today, poetry no longer functions as the primary language of exhortation from religious speakers. It is however ubiquitous in the songs that the Church sings. So what does it say that contemporary "praise and worship" songs in North America consist largely of expressions of joy, adoration, and gratitude that worshippers are encouraged to sing to God, usually as the very first act of worship?

Unless Christian thinking about the human condition has completely missed the mark, unreflectively mouthing words of adulation to God often makes liars out of those of us who enter into worship from our brokenness. To most of us in the real world, pretty platitudes about how much we supposedly adore and appreciate God too often sound hollow, but words like, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1) ring so true.[1] And the curse that Job utters out of his profound suffering in Job 3 resonates deeply, as it did also for God who angrily tells Eliphaz that Job spoke rightly—despite speaking bitterly out of pain—more so than his

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[1] Unless noted otherwise, citations of Scripture are from the NRSV.

theologically consistent friends. Perhaps God's words to Eliphaz should serve as a warning to us: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). Would the God of Job burn with wrath against our repetitively saccharine songs of worship?

In contrast to our own collection of songs addressed to God, the Psalter contains more laments than any other single genre of poetry. This makes sense. If our theology is right to emphasize human brokenness and the fallen state of creation, then our songs ought to reflect our true condition and our longing for healing.[2] Why then does the Church in North America neglect laments in worship? There may be at least three reasons for this: (1) grieving as a practice and an art has largely been lost in the West, (2) some bad theology about Christian living prevails in the Church, and (3) we lack a robust philosophy of language related to Christian practices and disciplines. The corrective to these and other missteps can be found in the laments of Job 3 and Psalm 22.

Why the Church Avoids Laments

In our competitive industrialized culture of North America, taking even just a week off from work to grieve a loss is often perceived negatively. Certainly, there are no laws in the United States to protect workers from loss of income due to bereavement leave.[3] Rugged individualism may have helped create one of the most powerful economies in the world, but it also may have contributed to our inability to grieve properly. In our North American context, "grievers have been taught to isolate themselves."[4] Laments—as grief embodied in words—then do not comfortably belong in communal activities like worship. Furthermore, even the most well-meaning people do not know how to help; we hardly know how to respond to people who have experienced profound loss.[5] It should not be surprising then, that the Church—in this cultural context—has inadvertently conformed, effectively losing our ability to process our grief and pain through laments.

Beyond cultural conformity, however, Christians seem to have gone a step further, insisting that we need not grieve because God makes everything

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[2] In words that echo the first Noble Truth of Buddhism, Eliphaz acknowledges that "human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Laments allow us to process our condition of being "born to trouble."

[3] According to the US Department of Labor, "The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) does not require payment for time not worked, including attending a funeral." See "Funeral Leave," United States Department of Labor, accessed February 23, 2016, http://www.dol.gov/general/topic/benefits-leave/funeral-leave.

[4] John W. James and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses*, 20th Anniversary exp. ed. (New York: Collins Living, 2009), 35.

[5] Ibid., 39.

good and right. In this context, Christians of strong faith could scarcely exhibit anything other than joy all the time. This pernicious theology seems particularly widespread today within Western Christianity. We are prone to forget that Jesus reacted to the death of his friend Lazarus and the weeping of Mary by also weeping himself![6] By some standards, this would make Jesus a bad Christian.

Closely related to the notion of an ever-happy Christian, the Church regards language in essential conformity to North American culture. That is, polite conversation is equated with good Christian speech. If a certain four-letter word is not acceptable in polite conversation, it could not possibly be uttered by godly people![7] Granted, Paul admonishes us, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29). But which words would be "useful for building up" someone in a deep state of grief? Which words might give grace to the suffering person?

This weak or nonexistent philosophy of language in the Church influences Sunday morning sermons, public prayers, conversations among believers, and especially songs of worship. Only nice, safe, and polite words can exist in Christian communal activities. However, Brueggemann observes, "[T]he speech of the Psalms is abrasive, revolutionary, and dangerous. It announces that our common experience is not one of well-being and equilibrium, that life is not like that. Life is instead a churning, disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation."[8]

There is something dishonest in our avoidance of lament. We pretend not to grieve because our culture says, "Get over it." We hide our negative thoughts and feelings because we want to be good Christians. So we use only pretty words even when we feel ugly inside. Perhaps we are all just being polite. After all, we could be honest with ourselves and still use polite, positive, and pretty words. Could we not follow Thumper's advice in *Bambi* and remain silent when we "can't say something nice"?[9] Why should we need to lament communally in worship, when life is hard enough already? Such questions miss something about what language, especially poetic language, accomplishes. Brueggemann writes, "The function of such lament speech is to create a situation that did not exist before the speech, to create an external event that matches the internal sensitivities. It is the

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[6] In John 11:3, Mary and Martha describe Jesus's love for Lazarus as φιλέω, indicating their friendship. When Jesus witnesses the weeping of Mary, he becomes "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33).

[7] A Bible translator may make a note in Philippians 3:8 that Paul is using "a vulgar term for fecal matter," but no English translation or Sunday morning sermon would actually include the perfect English equivalent for the Greek word σκύβαλον (the footnote appears in the NET Bible's translational note on Phil. 3:8).

[8] Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1993), 17.

[9] *Bambi*, directed by James Algar et al., Walt Disney Studios, 1942.

work of such speech to give shape, power, visibility, authenticity, to the experience."[10] This last point on the functions of language deserves more attention.

Functions of Language

One philosopher's work that has become commonplace in biblical studies is that of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory. According to Austin, the act of speaking can perform three kinds of acts. First, every act of speaking is to perform the *locutionary* act of making sounds (phonetic act), using conventions of language such as vocabulary and grammatical constructions (phatic act), and giving some sense and reference (rhetic act).[11] Second, performing a locutionary act is also to perform an *illocutionary* act of uttering a certain conventional force, such as "informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, &c."[12] Third, Austin identifies *perlocutionary* acts as bringing about or achieving something by saying something, "such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even … surprising or misleading."[13]

To illustrate, when Paul argues that compared to the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus" he considers everything else "rubbish" (Phil. 3:8), his *locutionary* act might make the sound "σκύβαλα," and the *illocutionary* force informs the reader of Paul's view on the importance of knowing Jesus Christ. However, it is against the *perlocutionary* act that polite Christians might object. Paul achieves something beyond informing his reader. By using a vulgar term, Paul shocks the reader with the rhetorical force of the word. The primary *function* of Paul's words here is much more than mere transfer of information.

Another very useful framework for linguistic functions comes from Roman Jakobson, a linguist who proposes six different functions of language based on a model of communication consisting of six "constitutive factors in any speech event."[14] Jakobson writes, "The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT … graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee … and, finally a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication." [15] Jakobson's six

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[10] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms,* 26.

[11] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 92–93.

[12] Ibid., 98, 108.

[13] Ibid., 108.

[14] Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 72.

[15] Jakobson considers "[a]ll these factors" as "inalienably involved in verbal communication," ibid., 73.

functions of language are determined by identifying the emphases on one or more of these factors:

1. REFERENTIAL: oriented toward the **context**; also called "denotive" or "cognitive"; Jakobson considers it the "leading task of numerous messages"[16]
2. EMOTIVE: focused on the **addresser**; also called the "expressive" function, it "aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. It tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion"[17]
3. CONATIVE: oriented toward the **addressee**; it "finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative"[18]
4. PHATIC: emphasis on the **contact**; functions "to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works … to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention"[19]
5. METALINGUAL: focused on the **code**, as in verifying meanings of vocabulary and syntax[20]
6. POETIC: focused on the **message** for its own sake; "This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects"[21]

There are some points of convergence between Austin and Jakobson. In order to identify these points, we need to look more closely at Austin's speech-act theory. Austin identifies five illocutionary forces:[22]

1. Verdictives give "a verdict … by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire"
2. Exercitives exercise "powers, rights, or influence" as in "appointing, voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning, &c."
3. Commissives promise or commit to doing something

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[16] Ibid. When we think of the various functions of language, we tend to focus on this simplest and most fundamental linguistic act of sharing information. See also George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 8.

[17] Jakobson, *On Language*, 73. It seems unlikely to find purely expressive language in the Bible—a communal text that served the people of God in ordering their lives. Even the most aesthetically formulated expressive language may perhaps be best considered "as communication aimed to reinforce or change attitudes and behaviour." See F. Gerald Downing, "Aesthetic Behavior in the Jewish Scriptures: A Preliminary Sketch," *JSOT* 28, no. 2 (2003): 146.

[18] Jakobson, *On Language*, 74. Unlike verdictives or exercitives, which accomplish something by their utterance, conatives require the response of the hearer.

[19] Jakobson, *On Language*, 75.

[20] Ibid., 75–76.

[21] Ibid., 76.

[22] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 150–151.

4. Behabitives "have to do with attitudes and *social behaviour*" such as "apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging"

5. Expositives "make plain how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, how we are using words, or, in general, are expository"

At least four points converge between Austin and Jakobson.

1. *Referential-Constative:* Although Austin is primarily interested in understanding the performative sentences that "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all," his category of constative language fits well with Jakobson's referential function[23]

2. *Emotive-Behabitive:* Austin and Jakobson refer to the "attitude" of the speaker in this function of language, including Austin's examples of congratulating or apologizing

3. *Conative-Exercitive:* Acts such as ordering or urging focus on the addressee and are often couched in vocatives and imperatives (Jakobson's description)[24]

4. *Metalingual-Expositive:* Both describe the use of language to talk about language, e.g., words that describe how words are being used

Some categories proposed by these two thinkers do not correlate well. Jakobson's phatic and poetic functions lack counterparts in Austin's illocutionary forces. Also, Austin's verdictive and commissive functions do not have clear points of contact in Jakobson's categories. Therefore, we might include eight functions of language as identified by Austin and Jakobson: referential, emotive, conative, metalingual, phatic, poetic, verdictive, and commissive. As illustration, we can imagine a conversation between a stranded motorist and a helpful Good Samaritan.

GOOD SAMARITAN: Good morning. [*Phatic* function: establishes communication]

STRANDED MOTORIST: Good morning. [*Phatic*: continues communication]

GS: Is the starter turning over at all? [*Referential* function: seeking information]

SM: No, nothing at all. [*Referential*: constating the state of the vehicle]

GS: Let me try to help. [*Commissive*: committing to "a certain course of action" [25]]

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[23] Ibid., 5.

[24] One of the clearest examples of exercitive language in the Bible is, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). See Michael Hancher, "Performative Utterance, the Word of God, and the Death of the Author," *Semeia* 41 (1988): 1.

[25] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 156.

SM: Wow! Thank you so much! [*Emotive*: articulates the attitude, i.e., gratitude]

GS: Well, I said I'll "try." No guarantees. [*Metalingual*: explains the code]

SM: As the great sage Yoda once said, "Do or do not. There is no try." [*Poetic* function]

GS: Please pop the hood. [*Conative* function: imperative focused on the addressee]

SM: I call this "one dead starter!" [*Verdictive*: "appraisals or assessments"[26]]

Similarly, all eight functions of language enter into Christian religious speech. We undeniably make *referential* statements about God, humanity, and nature. Prayers of supplication use *conative* language to make requests from the addressee. Believers use language to make decisions about religious matters (*verdictive*) and often make promises and commitments (*commissive*) about our religious activities. Especially for those of us who value the Christian canon, our language often focuses on the "code" of Scripture (*metalingual*). In addition, the Christian emphasis on consistent prayer life emphasizes the *phatic* function.

The remaining two functions of language—emotive and poetic—play an especially important role in Christian worship.[27] While beautifully manuscripted sermons have gone out of style recently (having been replaced by less formal conversational style of speech), preachers still care a great deal about the kinds of words they use. This concern for words correlates well to the intent behind most sermons. Whereas theologians and biblical scholars commonly prefer *referential* language to serve our scholarly purposes, preachers generally want to accomplish more than constating ideas. Rather, the principal purpose of sermons remains exhortation of the listeners toward righteous living. It naturally follows then that preaching employs *emotive* language to accomplish the task of exhortation.

More importantly, *poetic* and *emotive* language still makes up the majority of our words offered as praise to God. Because poetic language brings attention to itself, it allows the focus to be the message for its own sake. In addition, unlike *referential* language that can only describe what *is*, poetry has the power to *evoke* "what has not yet been spoken ... into being."[28] This power to evoke—especially in the emotional life of the worshipper—explains the ubiquity of poetry in contemporary Christian songs of worship. However, if *emotive* language "tends to produce an impression of

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[26] Ibid., 152.

[27] The distinction between poetic and emotive functions is somewhat tenuous. While one can express an emotion or attitude without being poetic, poetry does not commonly exist purely apart from emotive purposes. Therefore, it may be better to think of poetic language as a subcategory of the emotive function.

[28] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 24.

a certain emotion," one wonders which emotions contemporary worship songs endeavor to produce.[29]

Christian worship music in North America undoubtedly does not evoke the wide range of human experiences. Some very positive emotions are well represented: joy, awe, gratitude, affection, tenderness, peace, delight, hope, and love. However, Christian poetic evocation woefully lacks the more common human emotions in our brokenness: anger, sadness, frustration, betrayal, anxiety, bitterness, confusion, resentment, desperation, grief, loneliness, suspicion, and fear. Again, it is possible that human experiences are so much more joyful and delightful than they are sorrowful and lamentable. If so, orthodox theologians and biblical scholars have a lot of work to do to catch up to this reality. It seems more likely, however, that traditional thinking on the human condition is correct, and contemporary communal experiences of Christians represent something of a polite pretense cloaked as spiritual maturity.

Brueggemann calls this kind of politeness a "cover-up" required by typical interactions of people: "The Psalms thus propose to speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. This is in contrast to much of human speech and conduct, which is in fact a cover-up. In most of life's arenas, we are expected and required to speak the language of safe orientation and equilibrium, either to find life so or to pretend we find it so."[30] Such pretense might belong in the market, but surely not in the community called out to be God's kingdom on earth. We have much to learn about authentic and vulnerable lament.

Lessons from Job 3

If our words are to reflect our reality honestly, curses and laments—as both emotive and poetic language—ought to be more common than hymns and praises—as is the case in the Scriptures. In fact, there is an entire book in the Christian canon essentially dedicated to genuine words of brokenness: Job. It should come as no surprise that a book devoted to reflecting the darker experiences of human suffering comprises mostly of poetry. Now, while the book as a whole offers much to teach us in regards to the place and purpose of lament, the beautifully crafted poem in Job chapter 3 imparts helpful lessons for the Church today.

The "patience of Job," despite its fame, really is not that evident in the book itself. Rather, from the beginning—in the very first speech found in the book that begins the speech cycles between Job and his friends—Job pronounces a curse over his birth and over God's creation that allowed his birth to happen. In this poem, Job undeniably shows impatience. His

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[29] Jakobson, *On Language*, 73.
[30] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 17.

suffering leads him to desire the undoing of God's creation.[31] This dark desire is clear in the reversal of the *fiat lux* that Job pronounces: "Let there be darkness" (3:4). As the rest of the poem establishes, Job's desire for undoing God's creation involves his own life, especially his birth. Nevertheless, Fishbane notes that Job's language mirrors Genesis 1, indicating that the main point of Job 3:1–3 is to reverse creation systematically, paralleling the "sequence and rhythm" of the "archetypal cosmic pattern of Genesis."[32] Of course, the curse could not actually undo God's creation (as the character Job would properly know), but these words convey "the acuteness of Job's misery."[33] In other words, Job's speech is neither *referential* nor *conative*. Rather, the *poetic* literature beautifully evokes darkness even of suicidal desires of a person in agony.

The first lesson from Job points to our misguided understanding of a healthy spiritual life, namely, that good Christians must exhibit nothing but happy thoughts and feelings. As noted above, even Jesus would fail this standard. Furthermore, Job teaches us something about the depth to which a person of great faith may go in voicing pain. For instance, Job says that everything is backwards: life is bad, death is desirable, light is no good, and darkness is a comfort. All throughout Job chapter 3, the poet plays with the theme of day/night and light/dark.[34] Job's lament contains many occurrences of the words *day* (יום), *night* (לילה), *light* (אור), and *darkness* (חֹשֶׁךְ).[35] Job desires darkness (3:4), because he sees light as something terrible for a man in pain (3:20).[36] Job curses the day of his birth to be covered in darkness (3:4, 5), and he asks why light is given to one in misery (3:20); Job calls the deep darkness to claim the day of his birth (3:5).[37] Despite all of this,

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[31] Many scholars comment on Job's desire to reverse creation. See Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 205; J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 61–62; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 112 (Sheffield: Almond, 1991), 95.

[32] Michael A. Fishbane, "Jeremiah 4:23–6 and Job 3:3–13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern," *VT* 21 (1971): 154.

[33] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 102.

[34] Perdue identifies the governing image of chapter 3 as "the contrasting pair of light and darkness (day/night), a creation image descriptive of the fundamental duality of reality" (*Wisdom in Revolt*, 94–95).

[35] The word יום occurs six times in just eight verses of 3:1–8. Since יום occurs fifty nine times in Job, these eight verses comprise 10.2 percent of all occurrences of יום in Job.

[36] Good writes, "Light itself, the first product of the divine creation, has become the equivalent of 'toil,' the drudging meaninglessness of a life under a burden, real or metaphorical" (*Turns of Tempest*, 205).

[37] The word צלמות is a fairly rare word in the Hebrew Bible. It occurs ten times in the book of Job and only eight other times outside Job.

there is no hint in the entire book that Job's honest and often strong words of lament somehow disqualifies Job as the one about whom God boasts to Satan. Job's dark language might lead us to forget that God believed, "There is no one like [Job] on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8; cf. 1:1, 2:3). As noted previously, God says that Job's words were the right ones, as opposed to his friends' speeches (42:7).[38]

The second lesson is found in God's response to Job. When God begins to speak to Job, the poetry of the divine speech in chapter 38 carefully demonstrates God's awareness of Job's suffering as articulated in the lament of chapter 3. Through intricate intertextual connections between the first speech of Job and that of God, the author/redactor has God answering Job's lament, and not his protestations of innocence in later chapters (29–31). There are thematic and lexical connections surrounding the subject of creation, the play with light/darkness and day/night, the language of birth and the womb, and the lexical link of "warrior" (גבר). When Job is satisfied and comforted by the divine presence (as well as the restoration of his family and wealth), it was his honest lament that began the process. This then is our second lesson: our honest responses—regardless of the bitterness and harshness that might best characterize the *emotive* and *poetic* functions of language—allow God to address the real needs of our lives.[39] The Church ought to remember that God does not answer Job's plea of innocence or his desire to know why he is suffering, but because Job was honest in his cry (Job 3), God addresses Job's lament/curse (Job 38), ultimately providing the comfort and healing that he desires.[40]

A third lesson from Job's speech concerns the poetry of the lament. Similar to so much of the darker poetry found in the Bible, Job chapter 3 represents one of the most beautiful expressions of agony and suffering. Why compose such beautiful poetry about a topic so hideously ugly? Alter believes that the heights of poetic beauty aid in a process of expanding one's theology.[41] The height of poetic splendor in Job 3 expands our understanding of the human condition and perhaps even our view of God's relationship with humanity.

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[38] What is more, even the harsh sounding words of God in Job 38 could be understood not as a rebuke against Job, but as words of "genuine compassion and comfort" in which "God speaks with Job as a powerful being who intimately comforts Job in his suffering." See T. C. Ham, "The Gentle Voice of God in Job 38," *JBL* 132, no. 3 (2013): 527.

[39] Of course, in joyful occasions, songs of adoration and gratitude best exemplify the poetic and emotive language needed to evoke what has not yet been spoken. It is the premise of this article that enough of those communal experiences exist already in the Church today. What the Church lacks is honest reflections of our lamentable reality.

[40] For more on this argument, see Ham, "Gentle Voice of God in Job 38."

[41] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 87.

In Job's lament, our horizon of suffering expands. The reader cannot callously witness the pain of others (as we so often do in our consumption of news media); the poetry draws us in to feel the pain of Job's loss. In Job's lament, our theology of God expands. The reader cannot comfortably accept the God of retribution theology (as Job's friends do); the poetry compels us to question God's justice. In Job's lament, our understanding of God's relationship to humanity expands. The reader cannot merely assent to simplistic views of God's sovereignty (as naïve students of the Bible do); the poetry begs us to imagine a relational God. Sadly, Christian poetry that exists today in the Church seems intent on never expanding our theology, especially concerning suffering and brokenness.

Finally, we learn from Job that laments—as honest reactions to reality—can engender genuine fellowship in the Church. The bulk of the book of Job is a dialogue between Job and his three friends (chapters 3–31). The entire conversation happens because Job begins with an authentic response to his situation. If Job had said nothing or sugarcoated his true thoughts and feelings, there really would not be much of a book left. The Church, if it is to be a genuine community of any kind, cannot neglect a large swath of human experiences because of cultural discomfort with communal lament and grief. Let theologians limit their language to *referential* uses. Let the worshippers of God find consolation in language that *poetically* manifest our truer condition. Let the Christian poets invite us to experience genuinely *emotive* words that expand our theology and draw us closer to each other.

Lessons from Psalm 22

Made famous by Jesus' citation of it on the cross, Psalm 22 begins with the well-known question from the poet: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Like so many rhetorical questions that ask *why*, the psalmist takes on a tone of accusation against God. The accusation continues: "Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Ps. 22:1–2). In essence, the poet hauntingly blames God for abandoning him and not letting him find rest. In this psalm, as well as in Job 3, the poet does not shy away from talking impolitely to God. Brueggemann correctly observes that such language is not "courteous or polite or deferential," but the poet is "willing to speak this chaos to the very face of the Holy One."[42] What is clear from this poem, as it is from Job 3, is that people of faith can and should communicate our deepest pains in honest—and sometimes harsh—words directed to God.

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[42] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms,* 19.

These honest articulations can include hyperbolic and self-pitying language. For example, we find the poet of Psalm 22 comparing himself to a worm, and not a man (v. 6). Such language hyperbolically but honestly connotes an "impulse of self-revilement."[43] Similarly, images of weakness (water poured out, heart melting like wax, and strength like dried potsherds) "describe the psychological impact of sheer terror and impotence."[44] The poet does not deny or suppress the darker feelings in favor of saccharine words of comfort. Rather, the poetry lays bare the rawness of his emotional life.

Another important lesson from Psalm 22 can be found in the larger structure of the poem. While there are many ways to divide the poem into stanzas and verses, it is interesting to note the constant back and forth between the poet's focus on God and himself. There is a clear alternating pattern of verbs and pronouns throughout the poem. This pattern is readily visible from the beginning (emphasis added):

1   **My** God, **my** God, why have you forsaken **me**? Why are you so far
     from helping **me**, from the words of **my** groaning? 2 O **my** God, **I** cry
     by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

3   **Yet** you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. 4 In **you** our
     ancestors trusted; they trusted, and **you** delivered them. 5 To **you**
     they cried, and were saved; in **you** they trusted, and were not put to
     shame.

6   But **I** am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised
     by the people. 7 All who see **me** mock at **me**; they make mouths at
     me, they shake their heads;

The poem's structure may be outlined this way:

a.	Me:	1–2	I cry out and you do not answer
b.	You:	3–5	You rescued our fathers (Exodus?)
c.	Me:	6–8	I am mocked
d.	You:	9–10	You, I have trusted from birth
e.	Me:	11–18	I am helpless
f.	You:	19	Be not far
g.	Me:	20–21	Deliver me
h.	You:	22	I will praise you
i.	Him:	23–31	A Hymn

Furthermore, the alternating pattern of focus matches the poet's attitude. Whenever the Psalmist focuses on God, he sees deliverance, faithfulness,

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[43] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 72.

[44] Ibid., 73.

and righteousness. In contrast, when the focus shifts back to the poet, he sees his troubles, and God is far away. This oscillation seems appropriate for a person of faith in great turmoil and crisis. Now, what is most interesting is the final stanza of the poem (vv. 23–31) in which the psalmist's direct address of God in the second-person pronouns and verbs disappear.[45] So do the self-pitying first-person pronouns and verbs. Rather, the concluding stanza is a hymn of praise, with God described in the third person, as is often the case in hymns of the Psalter.

This macrostructure of the poem may suggest the proper place of lament in the life of the Church. Authentic laments, even ones filled with accusations and strong images of self-pity, can lead to praise of God. Brueggemann writes, "Thus the lament psalms, for all its preoccupation with the hard issues at hand, invariably calls God by name and expects a response. At this crucial point, the psalm parts company with our newspaper evidence and most of our experience, for it is disorientation *addressed to God.* And in that address, something happens to the disorientation."[46] Namely, the lamenter can now experience reorientation toward God. This reorientation is possible for the psalmists because despite their "experience of God as absent ... and hidden ... they still direct their prayers toward" God in whom they have faith and hope.[47] This is the truth that everyone who has ever suffered knows: one cannot forego grieving in the healing process. As was true of Job, "anger at God is a typical response" to great loss, and "[w]e have to be allowed to tell someone that we're angry with God and not be judged for it."[48] In the case of Job, it was God who heard the angry lament without judgment. Fittingly, anger against God would dissipate if we were "allowed to express the feeling."[49] In other words, without lament, there is no facing God with joy, peace, and love. Regrettably, the North American Church has much to learn from Job and the Psalms.

Conclusion

Where do we go from here? There is perhaps little that the Church can do to help the larger Western culture relearn how to grieve. Even less likely is our ability to help everyone become more vulnerable and honest. However, we ought to be able to do something within the Church. We can learn the laments of the Hebrew Bible. Christian poets can help us worship God

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[45] To return to the various functions of language discussed above, the conative language has faded. The language becomes less emotive, and more imperturbably referential-constative about God's goodness and faithfulness.

[46] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms,* 19.

[47] Ingvar Fløysvik, *When God Becomes My Enemy: The Theology of the Complaint Psalms* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Academic, 1997), 157–8.

[48] James and Friedman, *Grief Recovery Handbook*, 49.

[49] Ibid.

more genuinely by giving us the language that *evokes* something more than just cheerful gratitude on Sunday mornings. Furthermore, we must counter the bad theology of Christian spirituality that says good Christians never feel bad. By embracing the lament in our liturgies, we can also combat weak philosophy of language that pervades the Church.

Like Job, through our honest responses to darkness and brokenness, we make room for God to address the real needs of our lives. We can allow the beautiful poetry of lament to expand our theology. We can even engender truer fellowship among worshippers by engaging in lament communally. Furthermore, knowing that the loving Creator accepts our sometimes harsh but honest speech directed at God, we can even wallow in some self-pity. Ultimately, such genuine lament can lead to praise and reorientation to God.

Aronson (a psychologist) writes, "In short, the general lesson of our society is never to reveal your vulnerabilities."[50] Perhaps unwittingly we have allowed this protective attitude to shape how we approach God and each other in the Church. Mouthing words of intimate adoration in song may be disingenuous—when we feel nothing of the sort—but it does not make us vulnerable. It does not make us look weak. It does not make us feel like we are bad Christians. But it also does not deepen our understanding of God. It does not give opportunity for us to authentically evoke so much of what we experience in our fallen condition. Entering into worship through lament requires us to admit our brokenness. This attitude of humility goes against the grain of the American sense of self-sufficiency and spirit of independence. What is more, such expressions of our true condition reveal our weakness. And we want to appear strong, especially in our faith. Yet, God's grace is sufficient for us, and power is perfected in weakness; so let us boast all the more gladly of our weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in us (2 Cor. 12:9).

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[50] Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2011), 399.