

THE WILD PLACES: WEEK 4

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2019

Monday, April 1

Last week, we read some of ancient Israel's stories of exile – one of the great wild places of their collective historical and spiritual consciousness. This week we'll read some of the poetry of exile – the expressions of sadness, anger, doubt, and faith hard and chaotic times can provoke. We'll look to this poetry as a model for our own range of reactions to life, and our own possibility of faith while in wild places.

Lamentations 1:1-11, 20-22 (CEB)

1 Oh, no!

She sits alone, the city that was once full of people.
Once great among nations, she has become like a widow.

Once a queen over provinces, she has become a slave.

² She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears on her cheek.
None of her lovers comfort her. All her friends lied to her; they have become her enemies.

³ Judah was exiled after suffering and hard service.
She lives among the nations; she finds no rest.
All who were chasing her caught her—right in the middle of her distress.

⁴ Zion's roads are in mourning; no one comes to the festivals.

All her gates are deserted. Her priests are groaning, her young women grieving. She is bitter.

⁵ Her adversaries have become rulers; her enemies relax.
Certainly the LORD caused her grief because of her many wrong acts.
Her children have gone away, captive before the enemy.

⁶ Daughter Zion lost all her glory.
Her officials are like deer that can't find pasture.
They have gone away, frail, before the hunter.

⁷ While suffering and homeless, Jerusalem remembers all her treasures from days long past.

When her people fell by the enemy's hand, there was no one to help her.

Enemies saw her, laughed at her defeat.

⁸ Jerusalem has sinned greatly; therefore, she's become a joke.

All who honored her now detest her, for they've seen her naked.

Even she groans and turns away.

⁹ Her uncleanness shows on her clothing; she didn't consider what would happen to her.

She's gone down shockingly; she has no comforter.
"LORD, look at my suffering—the enemy has definitely triumphed!"

¹⁰ The enemy grabbed all her treasures.

She watched nations enter her sanctuary—nations that you, God, commanded: They must not enter your assembly.

¹¹ All her people are groaning, seeking bread.
They give up their most precious things for food to survive.

"LORD, look and take notice: I am most certainly despised."

...

²⁰ Pay attention, LORD, for I am in trouble. My stomach is churning;
my heart is pounding inside me because I am so bitter.
In the streets the sword kills; in the house it is like death.

²¹ People heard that I was groaning, that I had no comforter.

All my enemies heard about my distress; they were thrilled that you had done this.

Bring the day you have announced so they become like me!

²² Let all their evil come before you.

Then injure them like you've injured me because of all my wrong acts;

my groans are many, my heart is sick

Points of Interest

- This is the first chapter of the short book of Lamentations, with a few verses cut for brevity. Tradition has it that the prophet Jeremiah wrote this poetry after the destruction of Jerusalem by the conquering armies of Babylon in the sixth century B.C. Many Jews still commemorate this historical destruction and other calamities Jews have faced, right through the Holocaust, on the annual fast day of Tisah B'Av.
- Scholars note that this chapter's poetry reads like an ancient funeral dirge. Not one but many people have died. Collective suffering and chaos is personified through the death of the city's husband. Once great Jerusalem is now empty, her people enslaved. She weeps, experiencing both suffering and shame, at the reversal of her fortunes.
- Lament is the expression of grief, sorrow, and anger. Bitter weeping and lost glory shape the tune here. Lament is an alternative to the cheer that can be out of reach in wild places. It is also an alternative to the denial of our suffering and shame, denial that can easily fuel inclinations toward despair, addiction, or domination of others. To lament is to be curious about our suffering or that of others.
- An awkward aspect of Lamentations is how the author sees God's agency in Jerusalem's suffering. The opening narrator says, "The Lord caused her grief because of her many wrong acts." When Jerusalem speaks in the second half of the chapter, she says similar things. Lamentations finds this helpful. To see Jerusalem's destruction as the consequence of its injustice and unfaithfulness is more comforting to the author than to imagine it as the result of chaos, or the death or failure of God. But for most of us, I expect this merely raises more questions. Somewhere between a Calvinist, micromanaging God and a deist, absentee landlord god, is the God the Bible speaks of that is good and just and honors our freedom while also active in history. Lamentations tries to grapple with God's possible role in their suffering, even if the results aren't satisfying to you and me.
- Beyond looking for explanations, the lament ends with a cry for help and a cry for vengeance. We want to make meaning out of the story of our wild places; even more, we want to know we're seen and known in it all. This week, we'll invite you to speak with God in the hope that God sees and knows all that troubles you, and sees and knows with compassion.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your city, your region, or your country. Tell God what grieves or angers you. Ask God that those who suffer shame will have the power to cry out and rage, rather than bury their shame, and ask God to hear and respond to their cries.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Words of Doubt or Lament – Too often we don't express to God our questions, our doubt, and our anger. This week, though, we still remember the wild places of exile – loss, grief, disappointment, out of control seasons, anxiety born of change. Whatever challenges you're facing, speak out loud to God, or write in your own mini-psalm, your questions, doubt, or anger. When you've said or written what you have for today, sit in silence for a moment, and see if you sense or feel anything from God.

Tuesday, April 2

Psalm 137 (CEB)

¹37 Alongside Babylon's streams,
there we sat down,
crying because we remembered Zion.

²We hung our lyres up
in the trees there

³ because that's where our captors asked us to sing;
our tormentors requested songs of joy:
"Sing us a song about Zion!" they said.

⁴But how could we possibly sing
the LORD's song on foreign soil?

⁵Jerusalem! If I forget you,
let my strong hand wither!

⁶Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth
if I don't remember you,
if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

⁷LORD, remember what the Edomites did
on Jerusalem's dark day:
"Rip it down, rip it down!
All the way to its foundations!" they yelled.

⁸Daughter Babylon, you destroyer,
a blessing on the one who pays you back
the very deed you did to us!

⁹ A blessing on the one who seizes your children
and smashes them against the rock!

Points of Interest

- The psalm takes us from the burning ashes of Jerusalem to captivity in Babylon. We're invited to picture the branches on which the stringed instruments hang, un-played, while the exiles weep by the riverside.
- The captors' request for Zion-songs reminds me of the USA's complicated, ugly history with minstrel shows and blackface, and white appropriation of African and Black-created music. Violence and oppression is bad enough; to pile exploitation and mockery atop it is utterly enraging.
- But the psalmist finds strength, even if it is strength that in its lust for vengeance makes us uncomfortable. I'm reminded of two different things, one about the Bible and the other about human nature.
- Bible scholar Pete Enns reminds us that God lets God's children tell the story. The Bible can reveal God to us, but it also serves to reveal ourselves to us. The psalms are a model of whole-hearted, gut-engaged prayer more than they are a series of moral lessons or teachings about the nature of God. There's no prayer they censor – even prayers of rage and vengeance.
- Secondly, as a therapist once told me, angry is often better than sad. Anger isn't the greatest landing place, but as a stage of reaction to wild places, it keeps our dignity and our agency intact, and leaves us with options of what to do with our anger – act or wait, engage or walk away, reconcile or cut ties. The point is that we still have choices.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for any friends and family who have suffered harm, that they would have the freedom to feel and express their anger, knowing God sees and hears.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Words of Doubt or Lament – Too often we don't express to God our questions, our doubt, and our anger. This week, though, we still remember the wild places of exile – loss, grief, disappointment, out of control seasons, anxiety born of change. Whatever challenges you're facing, speak out loud to God, or write in your own mini-psalm, your questions, doubt, or anger. When you've said or written what you have for today, sit in silence for a moment, and see if you sense or feel anything from God.

Wednesday, April 3

Psalm 73 (CEB)

73 Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are have a pure heart.
2 But me? My feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped
3 because I envied the arrogant;
I observed how the wicked are well off:
4 They suffer no pain;
their bodies are fit and strong.
5 They are never in trouble;
they aren't weighed down like other people.
6 That's why they wear arrogance like a necklace,
why violence covers them like clothes.
7 Their eyes bulge out from eating so well;
their hearts overflow with delusions.
8 They scoff and talk so cruel;
from their privileged positions
they plan oppression.
9 Their mouths dare to speak against heaven!
Their tongues roam the earth!
10 That's why people keep going back to them,
keep approving what they say.
20 As quickly as a dream departs from someone
waking up, my Lord,
when you are stirred up, you make them disappear.
21 When my heart was bitter,
when I was all cut up inside,
22 I was stupid and ignorant.
I acted like nothing but an animal toward you.
23 But I was still always with you!
You held my strong hand!
24 You have guided me with your advice;

11 And what they say is this: "How could God possibly
know!
Does the Most High know anything at all!"
12 Look at these wicked ones,
always relaxed, piling up the wealth!
13 Meanwhile, I've kept my heart pure for no good
reason;
I've washed my hands to stay innocent for nothing.
14 I'm weighed down all day long.
I'm punished every morning.
15 If I said, "I will talk about all this,"
I would have been unfaithful to your children.
16 But when I tried to understand these things,
it just seemed like hard work
17 until I entered God's sanctuary
and understood what would happen to the
wicked.
18 You will definitely put them on a slippery path;
you will make them fall into ruin!
19 How quickly they are devastated,
utterly destroyed by terrors!
later you will receive me with glory.
25 Do I have anyone else in heaven?
There's nothing on earth I desire except you.
26 My body and my heart fail,
but God is my heart's rock and my share forever.
27 Look! Those far from you die;
you annihilate all those who are unfaithful to you.
28 But me? It's good for me to be near God.
I have taken my refuge in you, my LORD God,
so I can talk all about your works!

Points of Interest

- For most psalms, this one included, we don't know when and where they were written, but they give voice to feelings we can have in wild places, in this case feelings of envy and resentment.
- After opening with the religious cliché that God is good to good people, the writer considers all the ways that seems not to be true. Good people suffer problems big and small, and sometimes really bad people appear to prosper. It's not clear which is more frustrating – the ease with which the wicked accumulate wealth and triumphs or the seeming futility of virtue and humility.

- Trying to make sense of this injustice doesn't help. Knowing that envy and resentment are wrong ("unfaithful" is the poet's word) doesn't change anything either. What brings a shift in the poet's experience is a thought that appears during worship. Sticking with the practice of worship even when life and God don't make sense ends up helping.
- The first turn point away from resentment is remembering that bad people will suffer. Maybe this has to do with God's judgment in the afterlife, maybe with some kind of karma, or maybe just that the principle of reaping what we sow catching up with people eventually. Here's one thing I have observed, though. Think of a prominent person who seems to get away with misdeed after misdeed. I have someone in mind. I know many people who resent this person and want to see him suffer. But I have never heard anyone wish they could be this person. I certainly wouldn't.
- There's maybe a second, more important turning point in the psalm. More than just a shift in perspective about bad people, there's a shift in perspective about where God is in our lives. Long-term resentment and bitterness has a connection to stupidity and ignorance – it emphasizes the animal in us. A hope that God is with us is connected to different conditions – satisfaction, whole-heartedness, and inner peace.
- At the end of the poem, the psalmist returns to the same simple, binary faith that life messed with earlier. (God is good to me, but "you annihilate all those who are unfaithful." Ouch.) For this particular person, that conviction seems comforting and kind of hard to shake, I guess. More interesting to me is that satisfaction and freedom that have replaced resentment without any change in circumstances. I'm attracted to whole-hearted gratitude that stands up in the face of my own wild places, and others' successes, even the ones they may not deserve.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your church, that it will cultivate a community of gratitude and inner peace, freeing people (yourself included) from comparison and resentment.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Words of Doubt or Lament – Too often we don't express to God our questions, our doubt, and our anger. This week, though, we still remember the wild places of exile – loss, grief, disappointment, out of control seasons, anxiety born of change. Whatever challenges you're facing, speak out loud to God, or write in your own mini-psalm, your questions, doubt, or anger. When you've said or written what you have for today, sit in silence for a moment, and see if you sense or feel anything from God.

Thursday, April 4

Psalm 77 (CEB)

77 I cry out loud to God—

out loud to God so that he can hear me!

² During the day when I'm in trouble I look for my Lord.

At night my hands are still outstretched and don't grow numb;

my whole being refuses to be comforted.

³ I remember God and I moan.

I complain, and my spirit grows tired. *Selah*

⁴ You've kept my eyelids from closing.

I'm so upset I can't even speak.

⁵ I think about days long past;

I remember years that seem an eternity in the past.

⁶ I meditate with my heart at night;

I complain, and my spirit keeps searching:

⁷ "Will my Lord reject me forever?

Will he never be pleased again?

⁸ Has his faithful love come to a complete end?

Is his promise over for future generations?

⁹ Has God forgotten how to be gracious?

Has he angrily stopped up his compassion?" *Selah*

¹⁰ It's my misfortune, I thought,

that the strong hand of the Most High is different now.

¹¹ But I will remember the LORD's deeds;

yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times

long past.

¹² I will meditate on all your works;

I will ponder your deeds.

¹³ God, your way is holiness!

Who is as great a god as you, God?

¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;

you have demonstrated your strength among all peoples.

¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people;

redeemed the children of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

¹⁶ The waters saw you, God—

the waters saw you and reeled!

Even the deep depths shook!

¹⁷ The clouds poured water,

the skies cracked thunder;

your arrows were flying all around!

¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the swirling storm;

lightning lit up the whole world;

the earth shook and quaked.

¹⁹ Your way went straight through the sea

your pathways went right through the mighty waters.

But your footprints left no trace!

²⁰ You led your people like sheep

under the care of Moses and Aaron.

Points of Interest

- I write our reflection on this psalm on the day we learned of a murderous, white supremacist attack on Muslims in New Zealand. I think of the white supremacist terror on other people of faith – Jewish worshippers in Pittsburgh last year, Christians in South Carolina a couple years before that. When I read this psalmist's sleepless moaning, inability to access comfort, and deep sense of abandonment, I think of the victims of these public acts of terrorism, and their loved ones, as well as the victims of the domestic terror of sexual and gender based violence.
- Our own wild places may or may not involve grief or loss, but this psalm's expressions of need, doubt, questioning, and loneliness are common in confusing, hard times.
- Scholars aren't 100% sure what the untranslated word "Selah" means, but it may be a pause for meditation or musical interlude. This psalm takes a turn, but I appreciate that twice during its expressions of heartache, there is a pause to just sit with it. I have a few sad songs that have helped me sit with my pain, rather than trying to avoid or deny it. I wonder what your favorite sad songs are.

- This psalm takes a turn in remembering and meditating on what's remembered. The great story of the exodus that the writer remembers would have been many hundreds of years removed from her circumstances. And yet its story of wonder, power, redemption, and possibility brings hope and comfort into the present. What stories can you remember that renew your hope and faith?
- It's a small comment, but I appreciate that God's holiness isn't tied here to abstract ethical perfection but to faithful love in action and gentle leadership.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your friends and family who are lonely, discouraged, or suffer heartache today – that they'll have the right mix of sad songs and hopeful stories to make it through.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Words of Doubt or Lament – Too often we don't express to God our questions, our doubt, and our anger. This week, though, we still remember the wild places of exile – loss, grief, disappointment, out of control seasons, anxiety born of change. Whatever challenges you're facing, speak out loud to God, or write in your own mini-psalm, your questions, doubt, or anger. When you've said or written what you have for today, sit in silence for a moment, and see if you sense or feel anything from God.

Friday, April 5

Psalm 27 (CEB)

27 The LORD is my light and my salvation.
Should I fear anyone?
The LORD is a fortress protecting my life.
Should I be frightened of anything?

2 When evildoers come at me trying to eat me up—
it's they, my foes and my enemies,
who stumble and fall!

3 If an army camps against me,
my heart won't be afraid.
If war comes up against me,
I will continue to trust in this:

4 I have asked one thing from the LORD—
it's all I seek:
to live in the LORD's house all the days of my life,
seeing the LORD's beauty
and constantly adoring his temple.

5 Because he will shelter me in his own dwelling
during troubling times;
he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent;
he will set me up high, safe on a rock.

6 Now my head is higher than the enemies
surrounding me,
and I will offer sacrifices in God's tent—
sacrifices with shouts of joy!
I will sing and praise the LORD.

7 LORD, listen to my voice when I cry out—
have mercy on me and answer me!

8 Come, my heart says, seek God's face.
LORD, I do seek your face!

9 Please don't hide it from me!
Don't push your servant aside angrily—
you have been my help!
God who saves me,
don't neglect me!
Don't leave me all alone!

10 Even if my father and mother left me all alone,
the LORD would take me in.

11 LORD, teach me your way;
because of my opponents, lead me on a good path.

12 Don't give me over to the desires of my enemies,
because false witnesses and violent accusers
have taken their stand against me.

13 But I have sure faith
that I will experience the LORD's goodness
in the land of the living!

14 Hope in the LORD!
Be strong! Let your heart take courage!
Hope in the LORD

Points of Interest

- This psalm has a brighter mood than the others this week. I call it a psalm of hope in my notes, in that it expresses one person's hope and exhorts us all to move toward strength, courage, and hope ourselves. Still, in the middle of the psalm, it's clear it is written from its own wild place. There is trouble and loneliness. False witnesses and violent accusers are in play. There are people best called enemies. The writer is very much out of control and in trouble.
- Before I unpack this psalm's anatomy of hope, a word about God's power and agency in hard times. Theologians and ordinary believers have been wrestling with the nature of evil, the possibility of God's power, and the hope in God's love. There's tension here. Why would a good and powerful God allow... well, you name it. Believers have usually reduced the torment of evil, arguing that bad things are part of God's plan, in some way. I can't stomach that; instead, I've been learning different ways to think about God's power. I've come to the conviction that a relational and loving God doesn't have or express the kind of controlling, micro-managing power many people associate with God. Regardless of how you come to terms with all this, the Bible demonstrates people dealing with these tensions, rather than spelling out a crystal clear answer for us.

- While this psalm may not make perfect meaning out of their troubles, it does get to hope. Here's how, best as I can tell:
 - Freedom from fear – the psalmist is under threat so knows God doesn't keep troubles away, but there's an inner fearlessness that the light and presence of God shapes.
 - Beauty – whatever taste of the divine and wonder comes in the temple lifts the spirit.
 - Love and protection – Mom and Dad may have dropped the ball, but there's an experience of God on the scene, in love, and out for good.
 - Freedom to ask – no shyness in crying, "Help!"
 - Willingness to find God's path through the trouble – openness to God's leading and guidance. And
 - Faith that God is good and that goodness can still be experienced in this life – sometimes we have evidence for God's goodness, sometimes not. But faith invites us to hope that God will again be good in all things.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your city, that residents in trouble would find greater and deeper hope.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Words of Doubt or Lament – Too often we don't express to God our questions, our doubt, and our anger. This week, though, we still remember the wild places of exile – loss, grief, disappointment, out of control seasons, anxiety born of change. Whatever challenges you're facing, speak out loud to God, or write in your own mini-psalm, your questions, doubt, or anger. When you've said or written what you have for today, sit in silence for a moment, and see if you sense or feel anything from God.