

LEARNING TO PRAY AS A SHEPHERD

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The purpose of this article is to give pastors and Christian leaders a pattern of prayer to follow when they experience various stressful situations in leadership. This model of prayer will come from David's individual laments in the book of Psalms. In his individual lament psalms David, a leader of God's people, found himself in various deep distresses. In response to his anguish David cried from the depths of his soul to God in prayer. When David lamented his desperate situation to God, he found divine care and strength in every situation.

Today Christian leaders need to find the same divine care and solace David found as they experience similar stresses in their ministries. The individual lament psalms of David provide Christian leaders with a pattern to follow in their prayers so they can experience the same divine concern that David enjoyed.

INTRODUCTION

As Richard D. Floyd notes well, pastors are at risk: "Nearly one half of all those who enter the ministry will quit within five years. This is true of mission agencies, as well as local church and extension ministries."¹ In a 1991 survey of pastors the Fuller Institute of Church Growth presented statistics that give numerical evidence that pastors in the ministry are at risk:

- 90% work more than 46 hours a week
- 80% believed pastoral ministry affected their families negatively
- 33% believed ministry was a hazard to their family

¹ Richard D. Floyd, "Ministers in Crisis," *Voice Magazine* (January/February 1995), <<http://www.smallchurch.com>> (accessed 16 October 2000).

75% reported a significant stress related crisis at least once in their ministry
 50% felt themselves unable to meet the needs of the job
 90% felt inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands
 70% say they have a lower self esteem now compared to when they started in ministry
 40% reported serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month
 37% confessed to having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church
 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend²

After viewing these statistics and hearing of self-destruction in the ministry, Don Whitney asks “Is there a connection between the moral failures or moribund feelings of the American ministers just mentioned and a chronic spiritual marasmus? To put it another way, is moral weakness a sign of spiritual weakness? Is ministerial burnout ever a symptom of spiritual coolness?”³ According to Whitney the answer is an emphatic “Yes.”⁴

Those in leadership positions in the church and for the church would agree with Whitney. Pastors and Christian leaders **know** they **should pray** when they find themselves at risk but many leaders do not know **how to pray** when experiencing the factors that put leaders at risk. Pastors and Christian leaders are at a loss to know how to pray when they face loneliness, inadequacy, various stresses, conflict, temptation, and other factors that place Christian leaders at risk.

While training with Jesus, his future leaders (the disciples) made a request of him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples,” (Luke 11:1, NASB). This request is sorely needed by the Lord’s leaders today. In response to the disciples’ request Jesus Christ gave believers a pattern of prayer.

The individual lament psalms of David are the Lord’s answer today for Christian leaders who are suffering various distresses in

² H. B. London and Neil Wiseman, *Pastors at Risk* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), <<http://www.smallchurch.com/06%20Statistics.htm>> (accessed 9 June 2006).

³ Don Whiney, “The Importance of Spiritual Formation in the Training of Ministers,” *Founders Journal* 32 (Spring 1998): n.p.

⁴ *Ibid.* Whitney describes spiritual coolness as a lack of personal scripture reading and prayer.

ministry and who desire to know how to pray while under great burdens. The lament psalms provide Christian leaders with a pattern of prayer to follow when they face difficult, draining ministry struggles.

Using the psalms as a pattern of prayer should not come as a surprise to ministry leaders. Countless saints have prayed the psalms back to God down through the ages. The psalms have given voice to the soul and to the emotions. When saints could not find their own words to express their hurts and disappointments, they found voice in the psalms, especially the psalms of lament or complaint. Claus Westermann remarks, “The theological significance of the personal lament lies first of all in the fact that it gives voice to suffering. The lament is the language of suffering: in it, suffering is given the dignity of language.”⁵

Lament psalms give voice to the complaint saints feel when they experience various troubles in this life. Christian leaders can find voice for their feelings and a pattern of prayer as they pray their complaints about the stresses of ministry back to God. Derek Kidner recognizes this age-old practice: “The secret of the language of the psalms lies in the fact that many people and many succeeding generations can recognize and utter it as their own prayer.”⁶

David, a man who knew the struggles of leadership, wrote many lament psalms. As the “shepherd of Israel” (2 Sam 5:2; 1 Chr 11:2) David faced similar heartbreaks and stresses in his ministry to God’s people, as do pastors and Christian leaders today. As the modern leader reads David’s psalms carefully, he recognizes that David was a leader like him—at risk. David faced many of the same struggles as present-day shepherds. David transformed those struggles into prayer. These shepherd/leadership prayers are preserved for leaders in David’s individual lament psalms. These psalms teach Christian leaders how to pray when they find themselves at risk in the ministry.

The lament psalms of David answer for present leaders “how to pray” when they find themselves at risk. Since David was a

⁵ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 272.

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 199.

leader after God's own heart (Acts 13:22) and was called to shepherd (Ps 78:70–72) the people of God, pastors and other Christian leaders can learn how to pray from another leader.

By following the pattern of prayer in the individual lament psalms, the at-risk pastor or Christian leader has divine resources at hand to deal with the pressures of ministry life. Maybe, just maybe, the at-risk leader will be able to weather the sometimes frequent and severe storms of church (or para-church organization) without jumping ship or causing the ship to sink because of his negative response to the various struggles in the ministry.

This is the first of three sections that will observe and apply the pattern of prayer in three individual lament psalms of David. These prayers of David will show Christian leaders how to pray when they face betrayal (Psalm 55), loneliness (Psalm 69), and frustration (Psalm 13) in the ministry.⁷

To make this article practical I will (1) draw the parallel between a specific lament psalm of David and a present ministry situation, (2) if possible explain the historical situation that gave rise to the psalm, (3) show the structure of the lament psalm, and (4) apply the pattern of the lament to the present-day ministry situation in the form of a prayer.

GENERAL BACKGROUND TO THE LAMENT PSALMS

Before moving to the pattern of the specific psalm it is important to note the general pattern of the lament psalms. Westermann notes generally that all the lament psalms follow this eight-part pattern or structure:

The following are the constituents parts of the lament psalm of the individual This is the basic scheme, but it never becomes stereotyped. The possibilities of variation are unusually numerous.

⁷ Two cautions: (1) I assume and will not build a case for a leader to pray when he finds himself at risk. Prayer and the desire to pray are a given. (2) Following the pattern of prayer exhibited in these lament psalms will not necessarily eliminate the at-risk factors in a leader's life. Following the pattern of prayer in the Psalms will help the leader respond biblically to ministry strife. Following the pattern of prayer in Psalm 55 will not eliminate the intense hurt of betrayal. But following this pattern will help the minister respond rightly to God when he finds himself desperately hurt by the betrayal of a close friend in ministry.

- I. Address
- II. Lament
- III. Confession of Trust
- IV. Petition
- V. Assurance of Being Heard
- VI. Double Wish
- VII. Vow of Praise
- VIII. Praise of God⁸

The address is usually the opening verse asking God to hear the one who is complaining and in need. The lament is the explanation of the problem that has cast the psalmist into the depths. The confession of trust is a statement that although the psalmist is presently in the lament (and God has failed to intervene to eliminate the cause of the complaint as of yet), he will still trust God to work for his good. The petition is the psalmist asking God to intervene favorably on his behalf. The assurance of being heard is another statement of trust. The double wish is another petition for God to work. The vow of praise is a promise to praise God once the psalmist has had his burden lifted. The praise of God is a statement of praise once the lament has been dealt with by God and the psalmist is at peace.

PSALM 55: DEALING WITH BETRAYAL IN THE MINISTRY

Psalm 55 expresses one of the deepest hurts a leader can experience in ministry, the torment of betrayal. For those in leadership positions experiencing betrayal is almost beyond description (as evidenced in this psalm). The personal pain and the public repercussions are deep and very hurtful. Although leaders realize that the Judases and the Benedict Arnolds are realities in history, when they are found in leaders' own ministries leaders can hardly stand it (Ps 55:12).

Christian leaders have experienced betrayal at the hands of those they serve in the pews. Betrayal in ministry has occurred between dear friends on the same staff in churches, colleges, and seminaries and among parachurch groups. Unfortunately, leaders have even been betrayed by their spouses through adultery.

⁸ Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 7.

Having been in ministry for over twenty years, I can think of no greater hurt I have experienced than when someone I loved and served with in the church betrayed me. My betrayer and I had labored side by side. We served together in leadership. He was someone I could count on to be both a close friend and a fellow servant. But one day he ruthlessly betrayed me and became an enemy of the church of Christ and me.

This situation caused great stress and emotional turmoil for my family, my church, and myself. It is a situation I still cannot understand, nor is it an experience I have forgotten. This betrayal by a close friend, one I trusted with my children and my heart, has caused me to lament greatly. I have found voice and a pattern of prayer for my hurt in Psalm 55. Kidner writes in his introduction to this psalm, “The person who is driven to distractions finds a fellow sufferer here; the rest find a guide to our intercession”⁹

Historical Context

Based on the information given in Psalm 55 the actual historical context in David’s life that gave rise to this psalm cannot be accurately determined. Based on 2 Samuel 14–19 David was betrayed by his son, Absalom, and his trusted counselor, Ahithophel. Although both of these men were close to David and either situation could have caused the emotion that was expressed in this psalm of betrayal, the details in the psalm do not suggest either of these two as the one in view in Psalm 55 who betrayed David. It is best to leave the historical person and context uncertain. This psalm could have arisen out of another betrayal of David of which students of Scripture are unaware and the Scriptures give no witness. For our study of this psalm it is enough to realize that someone very close to David betrayed him and that it could have happened more than once.

Pattern of the Lament Psalm 55

The structural pattern for Psalm 55 is definitely one of an individual lament. David’s complaint is heard loud and clear:

- I. Address (vv.1–2a)
- II. Lament (vv. 2b–8; 10–14; 18b–21)

⁹ Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 199.

III. Confession of Trust (vv. 16a–18a)

IV. Petition (vv. 9, 15)

V. Assurance of Being Heard (vv. 16b, 22)

VI. Double Wish (v. 23a, b)

VII. Vow of Praise (v. 23c)

VIII. Praise of God (not present)

Because most modern leaders are not Hebrews, the above pattern of the lament is burdensome to remember and would be difficult to use as a pattern of prayer. As a pattern of prayer, I will suggest Westermann's simpler outline of the lament psalms. Westermann sees the lament psalm by nature as threefold: "God, the one who laments, and the enemy."¹⁰ God receives the petition. The psalmist laments to God. The enemy is the cause of the lament or adds to the misery of the psalmist. To make this psalm profitable as a pattern of prayer this threefold division will be utilized. This condensation will make the pattern of prayer easier to remember and useful for leaders who need a model for their prayers because of the hurt of betrayal.

A Threefold Pattern for Prayer

David's First (vv. 1–2a) and Second Petitions to God (vv. 9)

Sometime after David felt the pain of the treacherous knife in his back, he turned to God. Within three compact lines of Hebrew poetry David implores God four times to help him. The deep pain of betrayal causes David to turn to God. "Give ear," "Do not hide Yourself," "Give heed," and "Answer me" show the intensity of what David had felt and experienced at the hand of his betrayer. David's redundant and desperate cries for God to hear were designed to bring God to his aid. David knew that God who made the ear (Ps 94:9) could literally hear his cries. What David was asking was for God to act on his behalf to eliminate the pain and deal with the enemy (vv. 9a, 15). Westermann captures this theme well: "The true function of the lament is supplication; it is the means by which suffering comes before the One who can take it away. Seen from

¹⁰ Westermann, *Praise and Lament Psalms*, 169.

this perspective, we can say that the lament as such is a movement toward God.”¹¹

Up to this point in David’s experience God had not worked to “fix” the situation of betrayal. The “knife” was still in David’s back and the traitor was still turning it! Thus far God had withheld his help.¹² The betrayer was also causing havoc in the city (vv. 9–11), and David could not get away from him (v. 12).

David did not pretend there was no problem or personal pain.¹³ He acknowledged his deep hurt and complained to God about it. It has been my experience that Christian leaders are reluctant to complain to God. There seems to be a badge of honor for leaders who endure deep hurts without bringing those complaints to God. But that is not the outlook of the lament psalms. Leaders gain no points with God for suffering in silence. Even Jesus Christ, when he hung on the cross, quoted David’s lament of abandonment and betrayal from Psalm 22. Lament psalms are designed to give voice to the suffering of God’s people. Spurgeon commenting on this psalm states, “We may not complain *of* Him but we may complain *to* Him.”¹⁴ David complained to God of his intense pain.

Sometime during this terrible experience David realized God was the only resource he had to deal with this painful situation of betrayal. David wished to run away and hide from the pain (vv. 6–8), but he realized running would not solve the problem or eliminate the pain. Instead of running to the wilderness, David ran to God in prayer.

This violent pain of betrayal causes David to lament again in verse 9. In this address to God, David outlines a solution he desired to see happen. It seems David was not the only one who was suffering in this betrayal. David’s enemies were causing complete havoc in the city as represented by seven nouns. The betrayer was

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹² Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC, vol. 20 (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 5, note 2a.

¹³ Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 392.

¹⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), 249 (emphasis mine).

causing “violence, strife, iniquity, mischief, destruction, oppression and deceit” in the city among David’s people (vv. 9–11).

My experience in ministry has taught me that personal betrayal is not limited to the victim (i.e., the leader). At times the betrayal hurts those in the immediate area (i.e., the church family). Others are hurt as well by those in sympathy with the traitor. Again, David was driven to God as his only resource to deal with the chaos that dwelt in his environs day and night (v. 10). David asked God to divide their tongues (v. 9) (an allusion to the Tower of Babel)¹⁵ so that they could not continue their destructive work. Without being able to communicate, David’s enemies would lose their power of destruction. As a pastor I have prayed this on occasion, knowing if God would not allow contentious people in the pew to find a hearing of their destructive criticism with others, peace would be possible within the body of Christ. Contentious people lose their power if they cannot communicate their “unhappiness” within the church.

David’s heartfelt petitions grow out of the deep, private suffering he had experienced at the hands of his betrayer and out of the spreading of wickedness through David’s environment.

This first section of this lament psalm of David demonstrates to modern leaders that the first step in using the lament psalms as a pattern of prayer is to turn toward God in prayer. This turning to God in prayer is a personal realization that God is the only one who can aid the leader concerning the deep hurt he is experiencing. God is the only resource leaders can turn to deal effectively with betrayal. This act of prayer is an act of the humble. Only the humble knows he has no resources with which to deal with the deeply hurtful situation. To survive betrayal the wounded leader must turn to God in prayer. While in prayer, the “bleeding” leader can complain to God about his deep wounds.

*David’s First (vv. 2b–8) and Second Laments
to God Because of the Enemy (vv. 10–15)*

These sections of laments or complaints give voice to the depths of David’s pain. Although the traitor was unknown to the reader in the early verses of this psalm (v. 3), it is best to see him as the enemy identified in the later part of the psalm (vv. 12–14). This

¹⁵ VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 394.

one-time friend-turned-traitor had gathered together others who like himself wanted to hurt David.

These lament sections describe in vivid, emotional details David's injury. Emotionally David is "restless" (v. 2), "distracted" (v. 2), "in anguish" (v. 4), and "terrified" (v. 4). Physically he experiences "trembling and horror" (v. 5).

David finds himself in a seemingly constant storm (v. 8). Tate comments, "The vivid language conveys the impression of almost intolerable strain."¹⁶

Added to David's personal suffering is the pain he felt as he watched his enemies cause "violence, strife, iniquity, mischief, destruction, oppression and deceit" in his beloved city (vv. 9–11). It was bad enough his enemies made life miserable for David but they even made life difficult for those for whom David was responsible. The personal pain of verses 2–5 coupled with the pain of watching his people (i.e., city) suffer cause David to lament to God his deep anguish.

As leaders it is sometimes easier to endure the attacks as long as they stay personal. But when those attacks affect those for whom you are responsible and the ones you love, the weight of the attacks is felt all the more. Under this immense burden modern leaders can understand David's level of pain and comprehend his lament to the Lord.

In verses 12–14 the intensity of David's pain is made clear. The enemy who has caused so much pain in David's life was not a real enemy at all (i.e., outside of Israel [v. 12]) but a very close friend. Because he had been betrayed by a close, personal friend, David felt the pain deeply. If the enemy were simply an outsider, someone not of the community of Israel, David could have handled the trouble he brought. Since it was someone near to him who was in the habit of being in his presence, who enjoyed his company (v. 13), and who worshiped with David (v. 14), David's agony was multiplied greatly.

The weight of these personal and public attacks cause David to want to flee (vv. 6–8). It is easy for any leader to identify with David's desire to escape the hurt and the physical environment. David desires to be like a bird that could spread its wings and fly to a nest high above the fray that was causing his pain (v. 6–9). David wants to flee to the wilderness, a place of isolation. Every ministry

¹⁶ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 56.

leader has desired at some point to have wings to flee to some lonely spot to be free of the turmoil and pain of betrayal. Unfortunately, leaders cannot lead from isolation.

In this lament section of David's psalm he moans vehemently of the treacherous betrayal. He protests violently about how this betrayal affected him physically and emotionally. He wails bitterly that the trouble was unwarranted. Through all the emotion and physical hurt, David communicates his broken heart to his God.

In the petition and lament section of this psalm (vv. 1–15) modern leaders are privy to the private thoughts of a leader of God as he pours his soul out to the only One who can deliver him. The psalmist can do nothing to deal with the betrayer (v. 12). Although he wants to flee, he has found no freedom to leave (vv. 6–8). The leader has simply endured the reproaches (vv. 3, 12) and attacks of a close friend. To unburden himself the leader tells God exactly how he feels. He does not mince words or hide his deep feelings. He implores God to act decisively and to stop to destruction (v. 9).

*David's Confession of Trust
in God (vv.16–23)*

This lament psalm gives leaders a pattern of prayer that grants permission to lament their deep hurt because of betrayal back to God. Nowhere in this psalm does God reveal himself as being angry or offended at receiving their complaints. On the contrary, could it be that God used the hurt of betrayal to draw the leader to a deeper knowledge of himself than the leader had before? This may be the case since David committed himself to a practice of daily, habitual prayer (vv. 16–17).

In the midst of the leader's petitions and laments (vv. 1–15) something happened. The reader is not told what transpired but there is a marked difference in David's attitude as evidenced between verse 15 and 16.

In the first section of the lament there is a noticeable sense of confusion and emotional instability. But in verse 16 the emotional tone changes to one of solid confidence. But the painful situation had not changed because David continues to complain and murmur (v. 17). It is unlikely David would continue the lament if the situation had changed. But something changed because David's emotional tone brightens.

The reader is uncertain what caused David to change emotionally. One would guess that in the midst of the battle (v. 18) God

granted peace to the leader, David. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6–7, NASB). Reading back from Philippians, one would guess David experienced the peace of God as he cast his burden (v. 22) of betrayal to God. Granted, this is conjecture, but somehow God ministered to David in such a way that David moved from distraction and desperation to trust and confidence.

It is important to remember that David was still in the midst of the hurt of betrayal as he was writing this psalm as evidenced by his continual prayer (v. 17) and expression of trust in God (v. 23). God did not deliver David from the betrayer, but he did sustain David in the midst of the betrayal (v. 22). Tate captures this important distinction:

The suppliant is urged to cast upon Yahweh his or her own lot-in-life—that which is given. Yahweh will provide for such a person though not necessarily deliver, and not necessarily provide a way out or remove all enemies and change all bad situations but He will provide the strength and resources to deal with life as it comes.¹⁷

Some may question how a leader can pray against another believer the words of verse 23. First, if one has been hurt by betrayal and/or one has watched what betrayal does to others, it is easy to call down God’s discipline. Secondly, it is theologically correct to pray this way because David (or the leader who follows this pattern of prayer) is simply asking God to work against those who oppose God. When an enemy raises himself against a leader that God has put in place, that enemy is no longer just against the leader, but now he is against the leader and God (1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam 1:14; 19:21). Thus the leader is asking God to deal with his own enemies. A godly leader never takes vengeance on his enemies. But he is free to ask God to deal with those that oppose God’s anointed leaders.

Not only is this psalm a pattern of prayer but it also is a pattern of life. Once the modern pastor has prayed his petition to God, once the leader has poured out his hurt and grief to the only one who can heal broken hearts, once he has committed the situation to

¹⁷ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 59–60.

God in prayer, then the leader must wait for him to grant peace (v. 18) and the sustaining grace (v. 22) to endure.

David knew this situation of betrayal was not unique to him because he calls others to follow his example of casting their burdens on God (v. 22). David knew this psalm could be a pattern for other leaders to follow.

Modern pastors need to follow David's example when they experience betrayal. During the time of waiting and trusting, the minister of God can turn to this psalm as a solace. The God who worked in the past for the shepherd David in the midst of his betrayal is the same God who will work for the Christian leader in the midst of his betrayal today.

Application

As an application I would like to offer an example of how this psalm can be used as a pattern for prayer.

My Petition

God, I am hurt. I am hurt deeply. God, please hear my prayer and answer me. You are the only one I can turn to. My wound is so deep. No other person understands or can heal me. I need you to help my family and me deal with this situation.

My Lament

I can't believe that Bob and Joan¹⁸ treated me this way. Lord, we used to go out together and laugh together. We babysat for each other. We even promised to care for each other's kids if either couple were to die. We served you together in leadership. We made great plans to impact this world for you, Lord. Now this. How could they have left without an explanation? Lord, if they hurt my wife and me, whom can we trust? Maybe it would be better if we left the church and ministry. I don't want to be hurt this deeply again. I don't think I can handle it. I don't think I will ever let anyone get that close to hurt me so much ever again.

¹⁸ Names changed to protect the guilty!

My Confidence

Lord, I realize that betrayal is not limited to me. You experienced it with Judas, and David experienced it in his life. God, help me to endure. You have called me to shepherd your people here. I don't have the freedom to leave (as much as I would like to), so I need you to help my family and me cope with the hurt, grief, and loss. God, I am trusting you to see me through this because in myself there is no emotional strength left. I hope you don't mind, but I will keep crying to you until the pain is gone. Please take it away and don't let this betrayal harm our church's impact for you. Deal with those in your own way who would destroy your work and your leaders. Strengthen those believers who desire to stay and labor for you. In Christ's name, Amen.

**PSALM 69: DEALING WITH
LONELINESS IN MINISTRY**

Ronald A. Allchin captures the emotional burden of carrying the mantle of leadership well: "Being a pastor can be the loneliest position in all of Christian service. Who can be the pastor's intimate friend? In whom can the pastor confide? Everyone in the congregation can 'dump' on the pastor, but how can he download?"¹⁹

According to a report by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth, Floyd mentions that "70% of pastors do not have someone they would consider a close friend."²⁰ The great twentieth century British South Pole explorer, Earnest Shackleton, stated, "Loneliness is the penalty of leadership . . ."²¹

Since loneliness is interwoven into the fabric of leadership, how can a Christian leader deal biblically with loneliness? As a leader of God's people, David experienced loneliness as well. To deal with his loneliness (and the situation that created the loneliness), David turned to God in a prayer of lament. Psalm 69 pro-

¹⁹ Ronald A. Allchin, magazine article from personal file. Source unknown.

²⁰ Floyd, "Ministers in Crisis."

²¹ Earnest Shackleton, *South* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1998), 121.

vides the Christian leader who feels isolated and lonely a pattern of prayer through which he can unburden himself to God when no human comfort can be found.

Historical Context

Based on the superscription the exact historical context of Psalm 69 cannot be ascertained. Even within the psalm itself the exact historical context for the reason for David's lament in this psalm is at best vague. Keil and Delitzsch see "many points with this Psalm belonging to the time of Saul" when David was in conflict with the king.²²

Certainly David experienced loneliness during that time of his life. While running for his life from King Saul and hiding in the caves of the wilderness separated from familiar surroundings, friends, and family, David would have felt loneliness intensely.

Although the historical context is vague, the heart cry of David is clear. Because of his zeal for the house of God (v. 9), the psalmist has experienced separation from family (v. 8). The psalmist is the butt of jokes and songs from those in the community (v. 12), which deepens his loneliness. If being the object of ridicule were not enough, this psalmist experiences the loneliness of standing against an enemy alone (v. 4). To deepen his loneliness to Job-like proportions, David writes of some deep trouble which further intensified the feelings of being alone (vv. 2, 17, 20). With no one else to turn to, this psalmist continually cries to God to save him from his troubles.

Leaders today feel what David felt in this individual lament psalm. Because of my belief in a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, I am isolated from my brothers and parents. It is a lonely feeling. Solo pastors have experienced loneliness by bearing the burden of the church on their shoulders alone. Other Christian leaders cry silently at night over their organizations' financial burdens or family troubles.

But for Christian leaders who experience loneliness in the work of Christ, this psalm gives a pattern of prayer so a minister is

²² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 5, trans. Francis Bolton (reprint Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 463.

able to know God's presence and sustaining grace when he feels all alone.

Pattern of this Lament

Tate notes the elements of the lament psalm: "This psalm is easily recognizable as having the elements characteristics of individual lament, in which a speaker sets forth to God complaints about adverse situations and sufferings, along with strong petitions for divine actions to relive the distress."²³

The psalm can be divided as follows:

- I. Address (vv. 1a)
- II. Lament (vv. 1b–4)
- III. Confession of Trust (vv. 5–12)
- IV. Petition (vv. 13–21)
- V. Assurance of Being Heard (vv. 3b)
- VI. Double Wish (vv. 22–29)
- VII. Vow of Praise (vv. 30–33)
- VIII. Praise of God (vv. 34–36)

To set the pattern of prayer for this psalm I would again like to follow Westermann's simplified structure for the laments. Because present-day leaders are not Hebrews, the above eight-part pattern of the lament is burdensome for modern minds to remember. Westermann saw the lament psalm by nature as threefold: "God, the one who laments, and the enemy."²⁴ God receives the petition. The psalmist laments to God. The enemy is the cause of the lament or adds to the misery of the psalmist.

A Threefold Pattern of Prayer

David's Petition to God (vv. 1–3)

In the midst of loneliness David cries a simple prayer to God in verse one, "Save me, O, God." The petition is short and to the point because the writer of this psalm has been in this dreadful spot for sometime. He does not have the energy to pray anything more. His body feels the effects of constant sorrow. His eyes, throat, and

²³ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 192.

²⁴ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 169.

body are weary with the expression of hurt and sorrow. It seems that David is in an attitude of prayer because he is waiting for God to come to his rescue. But as of yet God has not moved to lessen the sorrow David feels.

David petitions God because he finds himself in such a place that the distressing situation in his life is overwhelming him. David is in the vulnerable position of terrible troubles washing over him, threatening his life. While the flood threatens to drown him, he finds himself sinking down. Without finding a firm place on which to stand, David is unable to get his neck above the water of trouble to get a breath to sustain life! Like a drowning man David is weary with calling out for help!

Imagine the feeling of being stranded alone in the ocean. (If you read the book or saw the movie *The Perfect Storm*, you have a good visual picture.) Imagine huge, crashing waves washing over your head while at the same time your feet cannot find anything to stand on to propel yourself above the waves! You cry out but the waves crush both you and your cries for help. You are alone in the midst of a sea of troubles. Those in leadership can relate to David in this psalm. There are times in the ministry when problems (either people or things) like angry sea waves threaten to overwhelm leaders. Interpersonal relationships among members, conflict over resource allocation, strong disagreements on boards, and financial troubles either in the church or pastor's home are some of the breakers that hit leaders like tidal waves. The leader cries to God, but he throws no life ring and sends no lifeguard. Persistent troubles begin to take a physical toll and personal pain intensifies the feeling of loneliness.

*David's Lament or Complaint
Because of the Enemy (vv. 4–29)*

David found himself in this life-threatening position because he had aligned himself with God by having a zeal for the things of God, namely the temple (v. 9a). Since God's enemies could not find a target in God, they set their crosshairs on his servant leader (v. 9b). Because of this godly leader's loyalty (even in the midst of deep troubles vv. 14–15), he suffered hatred from enemies, separation from family, public scorn from his own community (which furthers alienates and isolates), and emotional and physical sickness (v. 20). To add insult to injury, when he looks for human

comfort and companionship, he finds only those who desire to add to his pain (v. 21).

To compound his feelings of loneliness David lacks even the comfort of God's presence (v. 17). Even though David is waiting for God to answer his prayer (v. 3), God has not yet turned his face (i.e., made his presence known by a favorable answer) towards David. Separated from family, friends, community, beset by wicked enemies, and seemingly separated from God, David's loneliness is intense.

David knows he is not perfect before God (v. 5), but he also knows that what he is experiencing is not due to personal sin (v. 9). He also knows his enemies had no legitimate reason to persecute him. He is not guilty before them either (v. 4).

Modern leaders can readily identify with David. Because of the nature of Christian ministry, leaders are required to take stands with God that are culturally unpopular. To take a stand against abortion, homosexuality, divorce, or women's roles can put the leader in the forefront of a firestorm in his church or community. Taking these positions will isolate the leader because God's position on these topics is culturally unpopular.

Since people do not like God's position on some matters and they cannot fight him (because he is in heaven), they will attack those who stand and say what he has already spoken. Sometimes even Christians in the pews can assault leaders with a vengeance.

Because David's enemies are actually God's enemies, David is free to pray God's discipline upon them (vv. 22–28). Some find it difficult to pray this type of psalm back to God today because of its imprecatory nature. It may help to realize that David is not seeking vengeance himself or even asking God to enable him to take revenge on his enemies. David is asking God to take care of his own enemies, which became David's enemies because of his loyalty to him. David asks God to deal with his enemies in a dramatic way (and in his own time) so believers would be encouraged and not lose heart in the midst of their own loyalty to God (v. 32). Also, realize that even in the severity of this imprecation, God is the one who chooses what prayer to answer and for whom to answer it. But those who set themselves up against God and his leaders are in a precarious position even in this dispensation of grace (Acts 5; 1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 4:14; Heb 12:29).

Although leaders in ministry understand the concept of needing to stand alone, it is still difficult to handle. No one likes to be unpopular or alone. But there are times when it is impossible to

avoid the consequences of taking a stand with God (unless a leader wants to experience God's displeasure). What does a leader do when there is no human comfort and problems crash over him like a tsunami? David gave leaders the pattern: cry out to God in the lament. Tell him your pain and sorrow over the situation. Remind God of your loyalty. In your emotional distress, through your tears, continually cry out to God to save you. In your crying remember God hears those who are needy and who cry to him (v. 33) because God must be faithful to his name (v. 30).

David's Confession of Trust to God (vv. 30–36)

David's lament changes to a confession of trust to God when David remembers the character of God as represented by his name (v. 30).

David knows there was nothing good in himself to move God to act on his behalf (vv. 5–6), but he knows God would be true to his own name. David has already alluded to two characteristics that guarantee God would render help to his needy one in his own time. In verse 14 David asks God to answer based on his great loving-kindness or his covenantal love as promised in Deuteronomy 28–32. In verse 16 David asks God to answer based on his great compassion, which causes God to move on the behalf of the needy. These two characteristics are part of who God is and thus are in view when David remembers the name of God. This realization allows the leader, David, to move from lament to praise, from a cry of pain to a confession of trust.

Because of God's great lovingkindness and compassion, David is guaranteed a favorable answer to his prayer because he plans to praise God in the city. He is going to be delivered from the muddy depths that threaten his life and placed on the firm foundation of the city of God, Zion (v. 35). Although David may not have experienced human companionship as an answer to his cry for help (i.e., finding comfort from human sources), he did experience divine companionship as he knew that God would accept his sacrifice of praise (vv. 31, 33).²⁵

²⁵ Verses 32–33 give the impression that David was among others who were seeking God and who were needy. David was not really alone after all. He found company with others who also suffered and sought God.

Such was David's confidence in God hearing and answering his prayer that David summons all of creation to join him in praising God. Tate mentions the uniqueness of David's request: "Here it is remarkable to see how this evidence of Yahweh's concern for but one among His devoted followers is held to be of cosmic significance and to warrant His being praised by the whole of creation."²⁶

David's confidence may also have been derived from the fact that as he looked at the created order (i.e., the heaven and the earth and all that moves in them) and noted that they were cared for constantly by God; as one of God's creatures, so would he.

Application

David, a servant leader of God, who was in physical pain and emotional distress, who found no human comfort but instead felt the sharp pain of rejection, shame, and reproach, cried alone continually to the One who cared for him. David finds that in God's time he would enjoy the presence of God in his city with his people.

As an application I would like to offer an example of how this psalm can be used as a pattern for prayer.

My Petition

Dear God, I am not sure how much more I can take. You have to do something before I decide to simply chuck this whole thing called ministry. I can't carry another burden, someone else's in the church or mine. I am weary of being the "strong one." I need someone to carry me for a while. But who in the church understands my schedule or my needs? Whom can I share with honestly without their thinking I am not capable of handling this "job"? I feel lonely and hurt. I met a "friend" in the hall and looked for some sympathy. He simply added weight to my already overburdened heart. I especially feel hurt when my motives are misunderstood or even called into question by so-called friends as if I have some hidden agenda or I am out to end someone's "precious" ministry. I feel like I am the only one concerned about your church!

²⁶ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 202.

My Lament

God, I need your help. I am being overwhelmed with problems in my church and in my home. Finances are a problem in both. Resources are stretched to the max. What am I going to do? When will you ease the pressure? When will you allow me to get above the waves and sail on calm seas for a while? God, I ask that you deal with those who are truly your enemies (and mine) in a way that would encourage your people to stay loyal to you in the face of difficulties.

My Confidence

Father, as I read this psalm I know Jesus felt the same things I am feeling. In his hour of need while he hung on the cross, the mob mocked him and they gave nothing to help him. He did not react in kind but kept entrusting himself to you. I know you are compassionate and faithful to keep your promises to keep me safe and near you. I trust you will live up to your name! May I follow Christ's example. I am still praying for a lifting of this burden, but I will endure, knowing you cared for your first Son, You will care for this son as well. May I have the opportunity to share with others how you have strengthened me. For your namesake, Amen.

PSALM 13: DEALING WITH THE FRUSTRATION OF LIFE NOT CHANGING

How long must I put up with this deacon? How long must I put up with this board? How long must I put up with this church? How long must I struggle to make financial ends meet? How long must I fight to fit one more meeting or one more needy person into an already too tight schedule? How long must I deal with the stress at church? How long must I deal with the stress in the family? How long must I put up with yet another disappointment in ministry?

No matter the ministry, every leader has at least silently mouthed (if not shouted to God in an isolated place) this same question, "Lord, how long ... ?"

The ninety percent of pastors who work more than 46 hours per week ask how long must they endure this schedule (so do their families).

The eighty percent of pastors who believe that pastoral ministry is affecting their families negatively ask how long must their family be sacrificed on the altar of ministry.

The seventy-five percent of pastors who have reported a significant crisis due to stress at least once in their ministry ask how long must they endure the physical and emotional strain of ministry.

The seventy percent of pastors who do not have someone they would consider a close friend ask how long must they must brave the loneliness of leadership.

The at-risk factors are in place in ministry life to make the question, “How long O, Lord?” not simply a possibility but an ever-present reality.

How do leaders pray when conflicts, problems, frustrations or disappointments continue indefinitely? How do pastors pray when church life looks like it will never improve? How do leaders’ spouses pray when they seem stuck in a ministry that abuses their loved one for so long? David’s lament in Psalm 13 is a model of prayer every leader needs in his arsenal of prayer to be able to deal biblically with the seemingly unchangeable, unending, negative situation in ministry life.

Historical Context

The superscription of Psalm 13 and the body of the psalm give no clear indication of the historical context for why David wrote this psalm. The readers are unsure what this shepherd of God was dealing with in his life to make him cry such a heart-wrenching prayer.

David may have mouthed this prayer as he was running from cave to cave, month after month, from Saul, who sought to kill him. Again, the present readers are unsure. All that is known is that David felt abandoned by all, even God. David was left to deal with his desperate, unending situation alone.

If this psalm is vague, it is vague for the reason that it might reach across the centuries to speak afresh to leaders today. This psalm voices to a leader’s unspoken thoughts as he waits for God to deal with his nagging frustration and unending sorrow. David’s frustration and suffering were so drawn out that he felt he was moving nearer to death either figuratively or literally.

This individual lament, written by David for the choir director, must have been a popular song because it captures succinctly the

emotion of believers (especially leaders) as they wait for God to put an end to their sorrow and disappointment that had gone on too long.

Pattern of the Lament

Although the pattern of the individual lament psalm is usually address, lament, confession of trust, petition, assurance of being heard, double wish, vow of praise, and praise of God, Psalm 13 does not follow this pattern rigidly. Although it does not follow the classic pattern of the individual lament, it is still considered an individual lament psalm.²⁷

Westermann divides this individual lament psalm as follows:²⁸ Lament (vv. 1–2); Petition and Motifs Accompanying the Petition (vv. 3–4); Expression of Confidence and Promise of Praise (vv. 5–6).

With the previous psalms Westermann's simplified structure for the laments has been followed. Because we are not Hebrews, the classic pattern of the lament may be burdensome for western minds to remember. The pattern in Psalm 13 shows clearly Westermann's simpler outline of the lament psalms. Westermann saw the lament psalm by nature as threefold: "God, the one who laments, and the enemy."²⁹ God receives the petition. The psalmist laments to God. The enemy is the cause of the lament or adds to the misery of the psalmist. There is a slight change from the other psalms we have patterned our prayers after. In Psalm 13 the lament is before the petition. In this psalm the complaint comes before the prayer.

Many times this is where I live. As a leader I complain before I pray. I can relate to the pattern of this psalm!

²⁷ Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹ Westermann, *Praise and Lament Psalms*, 169.

A Threefold Pattern for Prayer

David's Lament or Complaint to God (vv. 1–2)

In his three-stanza psalm David voices a threefold complaint. He complains about the length of how long he had to endure God's not remembering him (i.e., answering his prayer to end the uncertain distress). He moans about how long he must endure his sorrow. He laments the continuing exalted position of his enemy.

In the midst of what was for David unceasing suffering, he cries out four times within only two verses "how long?" The repetition of the phrase "how long" drives home the emotion of divine abandonment and the leader's struggle against unending suffering. As Westermann comments, "The question is specifically the utterance of one who is experiencing a suffering that seems determined to continue. Here, time itself becomes the destructive force, wearing down a man's ability to hold out and intensifying the suffering to an inhuman level."³⁰

David is not only battling against a seemingly unending trial but he is also battling against the feeling of being in the fight alone, without God. David's concern about being "forgotten" by God and God "hiding" his face means the withholding of divine, practical help. Because David has been suffering for so long, he feels God has forgotten him by not providing practical relief from his continual sorrow. The presence of continued suffering and the lack of divine help cause David to look inside his own soul for much needed relief. When David looks into his soul, he finds he has no resources to deal adequately with his pain. Instead of relief when David looks inside, he finds sorrow in his heart all day long. David is at his wit's end emotionally and maybe even physically (v. 3). David can find no relief anywhere, nor is any divine help on the horizon.

This continuing suffering, this continuing absence of God's help to relieve the suffering, and the continuing exaltation of David's enemy over him, causes this leader of God's people to cry and lament his suffering to God. Willem A. VanGemerén communicates the deep pain of loneliness: "The sufferer is alone, and suffering in loneliness aggravates the anguish."³¹

³⁰ Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 71.

³¹ VanGemerén, *Psalms*, 140.

For leaders in ministry today David's lament in this song is ours. Leaders feel forgotten by God when the conflict with the board goes on week after week and month after month. Their prayers for peace and unity in the church go unanswered day after day. There are times when they cannot see God's face or experience his blessing because the work of the local church grinds to a near halt. James Montgomery Boice, himself a pastor, notes, "Times of harvest give way to times of reorientation or testing, to seasons of hard plowing and sowing."³²

Leaders look inside for answers to the question "How long?" and they find nothing but more sorrow because they do not know how long they must put up with such a difficult ministry situation. Leaders may even believe that the situation will never cease, that God will never look on them with favor again. Pastors are destined to live life in a constant struggle without any resources. If a leader is honest before God, David's cry centuries ago is the leader's cry today.

It is interesting that although David felt forsaken **by** God, he was moved to cry out **to** God by asking him the question "How long?" Although David **feels** he has been left on his own to endure this seemingly ceaseless suffering, he **knows** God can hear his deep soulful cry. This knowledge moves David to the second section of his psalm.

David's Petition for God to Save Him (vv. 3–4)

Keeping with the threefold complaint (vv. 1–2), David asks for God to "consider," to "answer," and to "enlighten my eyes." David's distress (whether it was physical or emotional) could only be lifted if God were to intervene on David's behalf. No other resource was at David's disposal to ease the burden that was weighing on him for so long and was so draining.

There is a sequence of events in this threefold plea to God from his leader. Once God considered David's burdensome state, God would then answer. With God's answer David's eyes will be lightened with gladness³³ because God had intervened on David's

³² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1-41*, Psalms, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 108.

³³ Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 73.

behalf. This reversal of God's look (from hiddenness in verse 1 to looking [NIV] at David in verse 3) was all that David needed to experience the gladness that had eluded him for so long. VanGemeren gives evidence of such a reversal: "A man relieved of troubles and blessed with God's protection, peace, and favor shows his inner spiritual condition in his outward appearance. His eyes sparkle with God's grace."³⁴ For David, God must consider, answer, and enlighten soon because he felt death was very near. This death could have been literal, separation from this life, or figurative, with David at the end of his proverbial rope!

Although the enemy is mentioned in verse four, he may or may not have been the reason for David's prolonged trouble. In the psalm the enemy is one who would rejoice as long as this leader of God's people was under such a weighty burden. The enemy of God's people rejoiced whenever any turmoil (physical sickness, financial difficulties or emotional anguish) struck a leader and thus made him feel that God had left him alone to deal with life and ministry.

David pleads with God not to let death (the believer's last enemy [1 Cor 15:54–55]) or the present enemy rejoice over him because then his trust in God would be shown to be unfounded. David sees not only his own life at stake but he also views God's reputation and ability to deliver his own leader at stake as well. If David were to suffer much more, death and the enemy would win; God and David would have lost. But that scenario is unlikely to David.

David's Confession of Trust to God (vv. 5–6)

It is important to realize there was a distinct change of mood of the leader between verses four and five. Although the change of mood was quite evident, it is important to realize that David did not have his burden lifted. He was still in the midst of a significant trouble in his own life. Nothing had actually changed in his situation from verse four to verse five. David was still suffering greatly. Nothing changed but his perspective.

Westermann observes the contrast: "The 'but' marks a step forward ... it indicates a step forward into trust which the suppliant takes in face of his suffering and in spite of the persistent force of

³⁴ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 141.

that suffering.”³⁵ At this point David is willing to trust in God’s covenantal love although his present circumstances seem to indicate otherwise. David is clinging to God’s promise to love his people (Deuteronomy 28–32). David purposes to cling to God even when it seems God is not there to cling to.

This clinging to God and his promise is the only resource that gave this leader a hope and a future. Clinging to this truth keeps David from being overwhelmed with his unending situation.

The present individual lament turns to a promise of future individual praise as David holds tightly to God’s promise of salvation. David, who could only speak within his own heart at the beginning of the psalm (v. 2), now looks forward to singing publicly because he has trusted in God (v. 6).

Even though David was in the throes of suffering, his mindset was such that he knew God was going to save him and deliver him from his present troubles. There was an end coming to this “endless” suffering. The question “How long?” was answered. The answer was not so long from now. The present raging anguish of the soul of the leader was becalmed by the knowledge of God’s love for his own. The answer to how long would be answered in future praise (v. 6).

Application

How long, O Lord? How long must I suffer being misunderstood? How long must I be unappreciated? Although the situations differ in each leader’s ministry and life, this question has haunted the sleepless nights of every leader’s soul. David, a leader of God’s people, in the midst of his pain of abandonment and distress lamented his helpless condition to God. In the midst of the complaint David recognized God’s unconditional love for his own. With this promise David took his eyes off the present and looked to a not too distant future time when he would praise God for delivering him from his present distress.

As an application I would like to offer an example of how this psalm can be used as a pattern for prayer.

³⁵ Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 74.

My Complaint

*O, God, how long, how long, how long, must I put up with constant disappointments? If it is not one thing, it is another. How long must we as a church take two steps forward in growth and excitement and take two steps back by having supposedly solid people leave for no good reason? I don't know how much more I can take or want to take. It is tough enough to struggle with people. Now finances are a problem **again**. How long must we live this hand-to-mouth existence? When will we be able to stop thinking about money? How long must we just struggle to keep the ministry afloat or at least drifting forward? I don't want our ministry to die, and your reputation and mine become a laughing stock.*

My Petition

O, Lord, I need you to answer me. I feel like I am all alone. No one understands, no one comes along side, and no one even cares what I feel. Lord, you are the only one who can turn these situations around for me. But lately my prayers have bounced off the ceiling. They go nowhere. I need you to hear and be merciful and bless me.

My Confidence

Lord, I know you are there in heaven and here beside me. Your word encourages me that I am not alone. You have delivered me in the past. Although this situation looks bleak and unending, I know you will work again on my behalf. I will praise you now for the work you will do in the future on my behalf. Please do it quickly! Amen.

CONCLUSION

It is both an intellectual fact and a ministry reality that tough times will pounce on those in leadership. Difficulties and negative situations will come in the form of people and problems. It is also a spiritual fact that when those times come, leaders should pray.

As was demonstrated in these psalms, the individual lament psalms of David give various Christian leaders the pattern of prayer to entreat God when difficulties in leadership make them mute.

The reasons for the individual lament psalms of David and the other psalm writers are intentionally vague and are rarely specified.³⁶ God inspired the individual lament psalms in this way so leaders across time and negative situations could find a common language to express their broken hearts to the great Physician. In the individual lament psalms the modern leader can recognize his own suffering and help his deep hurt find voice for his prayer.

Finding a voice for a personal sorrow or professional hurt is important to today's ministry leader because as David proved in his lament psalms and Westermann communicates so well, "The one who laments his suffering to God does not remain in his lament."³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.