

“How Long, O Lord? -- The King who Sang the Blues”

(Psalm 13 and the lament psalms of David)

I have never really told you the full story of my life as a blues/rock musician. As a college student I played lead guitar for a somewhat popular band. After I became a Christian decided to do something of an acoustic coffeehouse genre with a good friend. We found ourselves with a wonderful invitation to play our first breakout Christian performance at none other than the large group meeting of Campus Crusade in the large ballroom in Squires. Being a young Christian I did not have a lot of discernment so I chose two songs, both from the blues genre, one by Neil Young about a crime of passion, which was coolly received. But the second song we did was one I wrote that was very warmly received, being a blues song about Virginia Tech cafeteria food. It was called “Dietrich Blues”, and if there had been a contemporary Christian music billboard in that day I’m sure we would have been right up there in the top 20 countdown!

And that pretty much sums up my brief career as a blues writer and performer. I have always felt that blues music has a certain legitimacy, and wondered why there hasn’t been a category for that in contemporary Christian music. I asked friends the other day to post song titles they’d suggest in the genre of Christian blues. Here are some of them:

- “The World Done Me Wrong, Jesus.” (Actually, this may be more of a Country title!)
- “Lord, I’ve Done You Wrong.”
- “I Know You’re out there somewhere.”
- “Why me, God?”
- “You married a sinner, and so did I.”
- “I Got a Hunger in my Soul that this World Can’t Take Away.”
- “I Know Where the Truth is, but No One Will Listen.”
- “The Flesh & Spirit Blues.” (an actual blues song written by Cliff Ragsdale)
- “Don’t sell your soul for a mess of porridge.”
- “If I’m living right, why’s everything going wrong?”
- “My Sadness Gets in the Way of my Happiness.”
- “Jesus, hug my loved ones for me.” (from a friend who lost his wife to cancer last year)

David’s song (Psalm 13) opens with, “How long, O Lord?” It could easily be a blues title today. Over 70 of the 150 Psalms are attributed to David. He was not only a shepherd, a warrior, a king... but also a poet and musician.

The book of psalms is a collection of Hebrew poetic literature which were gathered together into God’s inspired hymnbook for the nation of Israel. They are as relevant today as 3,000 years ago. In *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis emphasized the importance of studying the Psalms as poetry, with its unique forms and characteristics. He wrote:

What must be said ... is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons. ... Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood.

These poems include many different forms: praise, thanksgiving, wisdom, and laments, both individual laments and community laments. And most of the psalms attributed to David are composed in the form that bible scholars call Lament Psalms.

Many of these songs were written in the decade that David was an outlaw. He sought to serve King Saul faithfully, but was the object of Saul's murderous envy. David would wait many long years, living on the run, hiding in the wilderness, being misunderstood, before he would become king of Israel.

His psalms of lament tend to have a typical order and composition: first a calling upon the Lord to hear the psalmist's complaint which is described, then a petition (a call for God to intervene), then usually a statement of trust, and then a concluding praise or vow to praise. This order is more than just a convention or form, it tells us something about dealing with pain in a fallen world. Since we are studying the "Shaping of a Heart for God", we want to look at his psalms to learn how to deal with sorrow, loss, opposition, disappointment, and pain in a godly way. What can we learn from David's blues?

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13:1-2 ESV)

"How long?... How long?... How long?" We've all said that, haven't we? Like David, we should acknowledge the pain, the sorrow, the battle. Someone has observed, "*Every major portion of Scripture was written by someone having a hard time to men and women experiencing a hard time or about to experience a hard time.*" This may be something of an over-generalization, but there is some truth to it. Life happens and it's often painful.

David does not deny the pain. As I read the psalms I'm frankly surprised of the honesty with which David approached God! We are not to be Stoics! It would be several hundred years after this in Greece, and contemporary with Jesus day and the early church, that a philosophy would arise, called Stoicism. One Stoic philosopher (Epictetus) would say: "Freedom is secured not by the fulfilling of desires, but by the removal of desire." Another (Marcus Aurelius): "Get rid of the judgment, get rid of the 'I am hurt,' you are rid of the hurt itself." This is not the approach we find in the bible, of David, of the patriarchs, prophets or apostles, or Jesus himself.

Jesus would be a man of deep emotion. Older movies, statues, paintings he comes across rather unemotional, detached, or as someone once said, "walking around like he just had his nails done." Mystical, above. Not so...

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows..." (Isa. 53:3-4)

And consider his ministry on earth as recorded in the gospels: He wept at Lazarus's tomb (John 11:35) and over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). At the garden of Gethsemane he said to his disciples, "*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.*" (Matthew 26:38) Upon the cross he cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46)

The writer of Hebrews observes: "*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.*" (Hebrews 5:7-8) Not the avoidance of pain, not the denial of pain. Jesus knew thirst, trials, pain, sorrow, rejection, loss and travail. Our Savior knew and knows deep emotion.

"How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" Who is David's enemy? Is this just a cry for protection from someone David doesn't like? Some personal vendetta? One thing you realize as you read the Psalms, David is not a private person, he's a representative person.

He has been anointed by God to lead the nation of Israel in righteousness, in justice, and in the beautiful worship of One true God. He is not just concerned about people who oppose him - frankly, we are often wrong and it's good that people oppose us - no, his opponents in the psalms are also the opponents of God's plan for truth, justice and worship in his nation. They are not just his enemies, but the enemies of the kingdom of God.

And this leads to an important point. Many of our sorrows are characteristic of life in this fallen world, and we should grieve, for example, over the loss of loved ones, over broken relationships, illness, poverty, over any abandonment or loneliness, etc. But there's an additional characteristic of the sorrows of believers, which arises from the struggle we face in seeking to put first God's kingdom and righteousness.

Unlike David, our opponents are spiritual forces (Ephesians 6:12) and destructive drives within us. We mourn our own failures and unbelief in our relation with our covenant God. We may experience persecution for righteousness sake, and we may suffer for doing God's will in faithfulness. So "how long" is not an utterance of impatience, but a cry for how long it is taking for God's purposes to come to fulfillment. It's a cry for the kingdom to come!

David is teaching us that we should seek God in the midst of the pain... and not the bottle, the pills, the bar, the needle, the movies, the shopping mall, the chat rooms, etc. And that's one of the main differences between David's lament and traditional blues - where we go to soothe our sorrows.

Lament therefore becomes worship. David sang his blues in God's presence. Worship is bowing down in the presence of God. And so his blues are actually worship songs. He's confused, tired, worn out, but he is bowing down. He is meeting with God. These individual lament psalms are placed in the book of Psalms side-by-side with praise and thanksgiving psalms, and with doxologies.

We must remember that we have people around us who are going through deep waters. We must weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15), before we begin giving advice. We have folks here with serious losses and sorrows. Before offering analysis we need to sit with them, and empathize with their pain. When we sense people are not taking their pain to God, we should gently move them in that direction. Sometimes people pour out their heart to me, and rather than giving an answer, I'll ask, "have you said it in just that way to God?" We do people a disservice to rush them through their pain. David spends as much, if not more, time poetically describing his pain as he does his confidence. He ends with confidence but he does not pass over the pain.

Parents, and here I must emphasize fathers, we need to model this to our children. We need to show them how to grieve and process sorrow and pain before we jump to the bottom line. We may say to our kids, "stop whining, suck it up, get over it." And by so doing we actually do not help them. Often cut to that too quickly. We need to model Hebrews 4 that we have a high priest in Jesus who is able "*to sympathize with our weaknesses*" so that they may learn "*with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (4:14-16)

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. (Psalm 13:3-4)

Like David, we should ask for God's intervention. When you're lonely, when you're afraid, when you're opposed, misunderstood, etc, what is it you need? Have you asked for what you need? Sometimes Jesus asked the obvious in order to get people to state the obvious. He asked Bartimaeus and his fellow blind friend: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Matt 20:32) It seems pretty obvious what they would want -- and Jesus is no fool - but they

needed to articulate what it is they wanted. They needed to *say* it. Sometimes we complain to God but never really get around to asking for what we need.

Now this does not mean we always have to *know what* it is we need. The prayer here and in many psalms is “Lord, answer me.” That is, intervene, step in. “Lord, do something here that only you can do.”

It is not only Jesus who knows sorrow and lamentation, but also the Spirit who lives with us. In Romans 8 we learn that creation “groans” in its fallen-ness and death [*laments*, 8:22... συστενάζω *lament or groan together (with)*]. We too “groan inwardly” [στενάζω, 8:23], longing for full liberation. Then Romans 8:26 says, Likewise *the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings* [στεναγμός *sigh, groan, groaning*] *too deep for words*. Three cognates are here used to show us that not only does creation groan, and we ourselves, but the Holy Spirit himself comes beside us in singing the lament, in sighing for God’s kingdom to come in its fullness.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.
(Psalm 13:5-6)

At the end, then we may, like David, express our commitment to trust God, and to praise him. Believers who live in this world may sing the blues, but they sing the blues with hope. This song may begin in a minor key, but ends in the major. The last verse is the last word. Look at the emphasis: “your steadfast love... your salvation... the Lord... he has dealt bountifully..”

There is an order to lament psalms and this should be clue to us that there is an order to lamenting, to complaining. There’s a method to be followed in sadness. Except that when we’re sad we don’t want to follow a method or order. The bible does not promote endless whining! There is a process to mourning and lamentation. We don’t stay forever in the complaint mode. We move to trust and a commitment to praise God.

Sometimes David even speaks to himself, “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.*”
(Psalm 42:5) There is a point where we must address the faith issue and speak to ourselves and say, “why are you downcast?” We must confront ourselves in unbelief. We must remember that even though we do not understand the situation we do understand the character of God...

“Thus, Christians do not say to God, ‘I do not understand you at all, but I trust you anyway.’ That would be suicidal. Rather, they say, ‘I do not understand you in this situation, but I understand why I trust you anyway.’ It is therefore reasonable to trust even when we do not understand. **We may be in the dark about what God is doing, but we are not in the dark about God.**” (Os Guinness, *Unspeakable*)

The church has a rich legacy of hymns that give comfort in grief and sorrows. There are not as many of these songs in new hymnbooks and contemporary Christian music. Martin Luther, for example, while he was being hunted down by religious authorities he wrote “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, affirming “And though this world with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.” William Cowper was a man who struggled with mental illness, but wrote many beautiful hymns, including these words, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust him for his grace; Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.” (“God Moves In a Mysterious

Way") Fanny Crosby experienced a lifetime of blindness and yet wrote thousands of hymns, and could sing, "He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock that shadows a dry, thirsty land."

You may remember the story of Horatio Spafford, a 43-year-old businessman who suffered financial loss in the great Chicago fire of 1871. Afterwards, a son dies. They decided to participate in D L Moody's England campaign and his wife and four daughters went ahead by ship across the north Atlantic, but had an accident and quickly sunk. Only the mother of the family survived. As Spafford himself crossed the Atlantic he looked down at the waves where his daughters died and wrote the words "when sorrows like sea billows roll... it is well, it is well with my soul."

Ultimately, our sorrows are to point us to the Lord. God is the author of all righteousness, life, truth, peace, friendship, joy and community. When we lose one of these blessings we grieve that which only God can give and preserve. We therefore sing with confidence not because of some private wish fulfillment, but because we have come to believe that our deepest sorrows are actually deep yearnings for God himself and his Kingdom. And these good things will be restored to us through Jesus Christ.

Jill Carattini, an insightful writer for Ravi Zacharias Ministries, tells the story of professor and theologian James Loder, who had a serious, life-altering accident on the road. While on vacation with his family they noticed a motorist off to the side of the road waving for help. In his book *The Transforming Moment*, he describes kneeling at the front fender of this broken-down car, his head bent to examine the flat tire, when he was startled by the abrupt sound of screeching brakes. A motorist who had fallen asleep at the wheel was jarred awake seconds before his vehicle crashed into the disabled car alongside the road—and the man who knelt beside it. Loder was immediately pinned between two vehicles. The car he kneeled to repair was now on his chest; his own vehicle was under him.

Years after both the incident and the rehabilitation it required, Loder was compelled to describe the impact of that moment marked by pain and tragedy, which was yet unarguably, though unexpectedly, something much more. Writes Loder, "At the hospital, it was not the medical staff, grateful as I was for them, but the crucifixes—in the lobby and in the patients' rooms—that provided a total account of my condition. In that cruciform image of Christ, the combination of physical pain and the assurance of a life greater than death gave objective expression and meaning to the sense of promise and transcendence that lived within the midst of my suffering."

Jill adds, "At the center of the Christian faith is a Cross that is not alien to tragedy, and a savior not complacent in the face of suffering. Christ is not blind to the pains of the world nor passive aggressive in the face of despair. On the contrary, the Cross is a portrayal of passion, not passivity... Christ does not refuse our sense of tragedy or awareness of pain. He bears it in love, affirming our condition, carrying our sorrows to the end, all the way to the heart of God." (Jill Carattini)

Our hearts are being shaped after God's heart when we let our sorrows drive us to God himself, and to lead us to yearn for his kingdom. Sorrow begins to mature us when we see that what we really want is Him!

So in conclusion, would you like to write a Christian blues song? To summarize what we've learned from David, here's how to sing the blues in four stanzas:

- First stanza... Call upon the Lord and tell him how you really feel.
- Second stanza... Ask him for what you need; call on him to intervene.
- Third stanza... Proclaim your commitment to trust him.
- Fourth stanza... Praise him for what he's done and will do.