

Singing Sad Songs to the Savior: An Examination of and Argument for Biblical Lament Songs

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Abstract

Christian lament songs play an important role in the context of the local church. There are several key differences between Christian lament and secular “sad songs” that are due to Christianity’s perspective of suffering that revolves around the hope of Jesus Christ. Christian songwriters have been writing lament songs through the lens of biblical hope in Christ throughout church history. Due to the nature of lament songs and how they give voice to negative emotions, which can help people to process their grief, and the communal nature of corporate worship, it is important that local churches ensure they use lament songs as often as needed to meet the needs of their congregations.

Lamentation Songs and Their Role in the Context of the Modern Corporate Worship Gathering

The Current Context

The modern mainstream Evangelical Christian church is a significant institution both in the United States and internationally. When people think about a Christian church in the 21st century, it seems likely that what comes to mind would be entities such as Hillsong, Bethel, Elevation. Large, industrial buildings equipped with concert-quality lighting, stage setup, and sound systems seem to be the norm in the modern church. While these things in themselves are not inherently wrong, one of the pressures that a church, especially one of that scale, might face in the 21st century is the pressure to constantly inspire and motivate congregants with uplifting music uttering a joyous shout of victory to the Lord who has already won the battle. Make no mistake, this certainly is a biblical way to worship and there will always be a place for raising a joyful noise to the Lord in praise, but it seems that one element of the corporate worship service that can go overlooked at times, especially in a modern context, is lament. Lament is an important part of worship services because without it, congregants who are in seasons of suffering and despair are given no way to biblically express their innermost feelings of grief and pain to God. As a localized expression of the body of Christ on earth, it is important that local churches of all sizes and traditions continue to value lament in worship and to incorporate it into their services when appropriate.

Prevalence of Negative Emotion in Secular Music

Negative emotions (e.g., grief, pain, loss, lament, etc.) are at the forefront of a vast plurality of popular music, and they have been for a number of decades at least. It does not take much more than a cursory sift through various local AM/FM radio stations to see that many

popular songs seem to have been written from places of deeply negative emotion, regardless of genre. Research has shown that a song's lyrical themes seem to be connected to its mainstream success in an "analysis by researchers at North Carolina State University reveals the top 12 most common themes based on the lyrics of No. 1 songs on *Billboard's Hot 100*."¹

An analysis of common lyrical themes in popular music as one of the driving factors behind a given song's success is important because "recent psychological research suggests that an individual's musical preferences are a representation of his or her attitudes, beliefs, and needs."² This research suggests that one's personal attitudes or emotions directly correlate with the music that they listened to at any given time. The North Carolina State University study deduced the most common lyrical themes in each decade's most popular songs from the 1960s through the 2000s, with the exact results being: "1960s: nostalgia, pain, rebellion. 1970s: nostalgia, rebellion, jaded. 1980s: loss, aspiration, confusion. 1990s: loss, inspiration, escapism. 2000s: inspiration, pain, desperation."³ What is fascinating about the results of this study is that in every decade researched, many of the most popular songs in a given decade contain lyrics which are predominantly emotionally negative. This does not appear to be affected by genre given that the study also examined the most popular artists of each decade, including The

¹ Bettina Chang, "Can a Song's Lyrics Predict Its Commercial Success?" *Pacific Standard*, June 14, 2017, <https://psmag.com/economics/can-songs-lyrics-predict-commercial-success-76936>.

² David H. Henard and Christian L. Rossetti, "All You Need is Love?" *Journal of Advertising Research* 54, no. 2 (2014): 55, <https://marketingmusicology.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Henard-JAR.pdf>.

³ Chang, "Can a Song's Lyrics."

Beatles, Elvis Presley, Rod Stewart, Bee Gees, Paul McCartney, Diana Ross, Mariah Carey, Boyz II Men, Black Eyed Peas, and Beyoncé.⁴

The way that popular music sounds has shifted over time as well. According to professor emeritus at University of Toronto⁵ E. Glenn Schellenberg and professor doctor at Freie Universität Berlin⁶ Christian von Scheve: “over the years, popular recordings became longer in duration and the proportion of female artists increased. In line with our principle hypotheses, there was also an increase in the use of the minor mode and a decrease in average tempo, confirming that popular music became more sad-sounding over time.”⁷

Music as a Method of Coping with Emotion

Negative emotion is one of the more prominent lyrical themes to be found within the spectrum of popular music. Even as far back as the 1960s, pain was a very common theme woven into the lyrical passages of the most popular songs of the time, and this is certainly still true today. Though the music itself has evolved and taken many different forms through the decades, the emotions that drive artists to write certain songs and lead consumers to listen to

⁴ Chang, “Can a Song’s Lyrics.”

⁵ “E. Glenn Schellenberg,” University of Toronto, Faculty Directory, <https://www.psych.utoronto.ca/people/directories/all-faculty/e-glenn-schellenberg>.

⁶ “Prof. Dr. Christian von Scheve,” Freie Universität Berlin, Institute of Sociology, <https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/soziologie/arbeitsbereiche/emotionen/team/Professur/scheve.html>.

⁷ E. Glenn Schellenberg and Christian von Scheve, “Emotional Cues in American Popular Music: Five Decades of the Top 40,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 6, no. 3 (2012): 196, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-12935-001>.

those songs (allowing them to maintain their place in the mainstream charts) have been consistent almost as long as modern music charts have existed.⁸

Why Do People Choose to Listen to Emotionally Negative Music in Times of Negative Emotional Experience?

Research has suggested that people in a sad mood or actively experiencing some level of sadness may be more psychologically drawn to the more focused, introspective nature of sad music itself. Regarding this point, professor emerita of philosophy at Hampshire College⁹ Lauren Sizer says, “sad moods, therefore, encourage and promote the sort of focused music listening that enhances the listener’s engagement with and experience of the music. Sad mood and sad music listening, therefore, are mutually reinforcing. Sad music enhances the very processes and behaviors that keep one wrapped up in and engaged with the music itself.”¹⁰ Additionally, Sizer argues that some people who listen to sad music do so out of a need for consolation and comfort, as she states later in the same article, sad music “engages the mood repair mechanisms that help listeners feel comforted and consoled, encouraging them to stay with and within the music. The engagement of mood repair mechanisms that bring on feelings of comfort and consolation seem to be unique to the sad mood/sad music relationship.”¹¹ Oftentimes, people choose to listen to emotionally negative music when they themselves are experiencing a time of negative emotion,

⁸ Bill Dahl, “The Birth of Top 40 Radio: The Storz Stations’ Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s/Payola in the Music Industry: A History 1880-1991,” *ARSC Journal* 46, no. 2 (2015): 312-313, 339, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1733899144?accountid=12085&forcedol=true&forcedol=true&forcedol=true&pq-origsite=summon&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

⁹ “Laura Sizer,” faculty, Hampshire College, <https://www.hampshire.edu/academics/faculty/laura-sizer>.

¹⁰ Laura Sizer, “Sad Songs Say So Much: The Paradoxical Pleasures of Sad Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77, no. 3 (2019): 263, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jaac.12659>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

whether that be grief, anger, sadness, etc. People actively feeling such emotions gravitate towards music that gives voice to their experience as a way to cope.

What Makes Christianity Different in Terms of Coping with Emotions?

The logical question to be discussed, then, is whether or not the biblical way of coping differs from the way that people in secular circles tend to cope with emotions and whether biblical coping is inherently healthier. It seems, based on examples found in Scripture, that emotion and faith are in some way connected. When a person has put their faith in Christ, their emotions are no longer dependent on external circumstances or whatever events in life might befall them. Rather, the Christian emotional experience is defined by a radical trust in the Lord and the hope of future glory with Him. Professor at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary¹² Matthew Schlimm writes:

...even in our broken bodies, there will be times when the reality of our faith profoundly touches us. Many of us can think of moments in worship when we are moved to tears or found ourselves smiling because of God's presence. Clearly, there will be times when we join Jesus in weeping over the death of those we love (John 11:35). However, as St. Paul reminds us, the resurrection has blunted the edge of such grief (1 Thess. 4:13).¹³

Given this scriptural truth, it is also of crucial importance to note that being a Christian does not mean that one will live a life completely free from negative emotions. God does not promise His followers an earthly life brimming with happiness and bliss. Instead, the biblical promise to believers is that God will walk with them in the midst of their circumstances and will hear their cries in times of turmoil and distress. He offers comfort in such times because He is ultimately

¹² "A Little About Me," Matthew Schlimm, About, <https://www.matthewschlimm.com/about.html>.

¹³ Matthew Richard Schlimm, "Emotions and Faith: The Perplexing Relationship Between What We Feel and What We Believe," Columbia Theological Seminary, November 2, 2022, <https://www.ctsnet.edu/at-this-point/emotions-and-faith-the-perplexing-relationship-between-what-we-feel-and-what-we-believe-2/>.

working every circumstance in a sanctifying way for the good of the believer. Schlimm continues to write: “the Psalter suggests that, sometimes, anger and sorrow will be enduring (Pss 44, 88). Yet, many of the Psalms begin with raw expressions of anger and grief, but then they end with praises of God. Somehow, in the midst of these gut-wrenching prayers, a way is made for rejoicing in God, even amid our tumult.”¹⁴ Faith is intertwined with human emotion in that while one may feel sorrow upon sorrow due to some catastrophic event or situation, faith allows for continued rejoicing in God all the more because He is and always will be good. He “has heard their plea and will work on their behalf in powerful ways.”¹⁵

Biblical Suffering

Suffering is defined by Noah Porter Professor Emeritus Philosophical Divinity School and Religious Studies at Yale University¹⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff as “when something prized or loved is ripped away or never granted – work, someone loved, recognition of one’s dignity, life without physical pain – that is suffering.”¹⁷ People suffer when they lose something or someone they love or are affected by some manner of injury, whether it be physical, emotional, or something else entirely. The natural human response to suffering is the feeling of some negative emotion (fear, grief, loss, sorrow, lament, etc.) Professor at Western Washington University¹⁸

¹⁴ Schlimm, “Emotions and Faith.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Nicholas Wolterstorff,” Yale University, Religious Studies, <https://religiousstudies.yale.edu/people/nicholas-wolterstorff>.

¹⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 89.

¹⁸ “Jason Kanov,” Western Washington University, The College of Business and Economics, <https://cbe.wvu.edu/people/kanovj>.

Jason Kanov describes fear and anger as “symptoms of suffering.”¹⁹ This is important to note because the Bible makes it clear that Christians are called to suffer during their earthly lives in passages such as Matthew 16:24-26, which says: “the Jesus told His disciples, ‘if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?’” (Matthew 16:24-26). Jesus directly commands His own followers to lay down their lives and suffer for His name’s sake. Suffering is even interwoven within the fabric of the second greatest commandment that Jesus gives in the gospel of Mark to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). If suffering is a result of losing something or someone loved, then, as Wolterstorff puts it: “in commanding us to love, God invites us to suffer.”²⁰

Scripture takes this approach to suffering one step further by stating that not only should believers be ready and willing to suffer, but they should “rejoice in [our] sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...” (Romans 5:3-4). The true believer is able to maintain joy despite earthly suffering of any kind with the knowledge that God is using that suffering to actively mold and sanctify them. The Apostle Peter shares this notion in his first epistle by stating: “therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Peter 4:19). The Christian is equipped to combat being overwhelmed or overtaken by suffering or the

¹⁹ Jason Kanov, “Why Suffering Matters!” *Journal of Management Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (2020): 90, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1056492620929766?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider.

²⁰ Wolterstorff, *Lament*, 89.

symptomatic emotions associated with it because he is empowered by the hope of the Gospel and the goodness of God to sanctify him through suffering circumstances. Suffering, as Wolterstorff continues to write: “may be among the sufferer’s blessings... in the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making.”²¹ The biblical Christian lives from the perspective that suffering of every kind (physical, emotional, etc.) will ultimately be used by God in a sanctifying way and that joy can continue to be maintained and cultivated despite suffering because of the comfort found in the security of eternity in Christ.

Other Religions and Their Emotional Approach

Research has indicated that religious people tend to cope with emotions better than nonreligious people, even those who hold to a theological belief system outside of Christianity (Muslims, Jews, Etc.). Several researchers including cultural psychologist and assistant professor at the Faculty of Data and Decision Sciences at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology²² Allon Vishkin have concluded:

...people higher (vs. lower) in religiosity were more likely to use emotion regulation strategies that are typically linked to adaptive emotional outcomes (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, acceptance) and less likely to use emotion regulation strategies that are typically linked to less adaptive outcomes (e.g., rumination). These findings suggest that people higher (vs. lower) in religiosity may deal with their emotions in more adaptive ways.²³

²¹ Wolterstorff, *Lament*, 97.

²² “Allon Vishkin,” Allon Vishkin, <https://www.allonvishkin.com/>.

²³ Allon Vishkin, Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom, Shalom H. Schwartz, Nevin Solak, and Maya Tamir, “Religiosity and Emotion Regulation,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 50, no. 9 (2019): 1050, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022022119880341?utm_medium=discovery-provider&utm_source=summon&journalCode=jcca.

Given the conclusions reached in this particular study, it can be inferred that religious people in general tend to cope with traditionally negative emotions in healthier and more adaptive ways than people who consider themselves to be non-religious. The Christian emotional response is different still when compared to the responses of those who hold to other religious belief systems and this is because Christians live with the knowledge that God is good and that “all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, ESV). As Schlimm puts it, “in many respects, the Christian emotional life is shaped in response to God’s character. We feel peace, joy, love, and hope from knowing of God’s mercy, grace, love, and faithfulness.²⁴ Professing Christians are able to see joy in the midst of sorrow and hope in the midst of pain because God is good and He makes all things work together for good. The believer can also take comfort in the fact that his eternity is secure in Christ and His redeeming work on the cross. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4: “for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

The Christian Emotional Experience in Music

Because of the far-reaching effects of belief in God on the life of the believer, it stands to reason that this particular approach to coping with negative emotions would permeate all aspects of life, including in the music that an artist who happens to be a Christian writes. In fact, Christian musicians have injected their own deeply-felt grief, pain, sorrow, and anger into their song lyrics for thousands of years, going as far back as the time of David in the Old Testament.

²⁴ Schlimm, “Emotions and Faith.”

This tradition has continued throughout Christian history, making its way into hymns that remain immensely popular today and modern Christian contemporary music as well. There is a substantial scriptural foundation to support the notion of one expelling negative emotion in the form of song (Psalms 3, 13, 58, 77, 88, 94, etc.). The primary difference between an emotional secular song and an emotional Christian song, however, remains that the Christian has the knowledge that God is always good and faithful and will walk with His followers through all things.

Psalms of Lament

The Christian songwriting tradition of expressing innermost feelings of pain and grief began with the Psalms of Lament. The Psalms of Lament are a special type of Psalm, distinct from the rest of the Psalms because of their deeply emotional nature. The Psalms of Lament make up one-third of the Psalms, meaning that “they form a large portion of the Bible’s ‘prayer book.’”²⁵ Given that the Psalms of Lament make up such a considerable portion of the Psalter, it is important for one to have a proper understanding of lament and its role in the context of the Christian worship gathering.

What is Lament? Biblical lament, in its simplest form, is essentially a complaint directed towards God in response to some tragedy that has taken place to affect the life of the psalmist penning the words. Lament can be defined as “...a stylized form of speech. It is a cry of distress. It is a protest or a complaint that seeks – and certainly expects – a positive outcome from God, that God deliver, that God save, that God show compassion upon the one who cries

²⁵ Jeanette Matthews, “Lament Psalms,” *St. Mark’s Review*, no. 219 (2012): 8, <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.006306186490282>.

out.”²⁶ Lament is a way for someone to complain directly to God regarding difficult life circumstances and demand answers to difficult questions that he or she may have regarding those circumstances. Biblically, lament may also involve no small amount of confusion as the lamenter brings a number of questions before God pertaining to why a certain event may have happened or why God has not yet brought relief from pain or sorrow. Four characteristics of lament are crucial to a proper understanding of it. Lament is “. . .a form of prayer,”²⁷ that “these prayers are not polite,”²⁸ that lament is “profoundly hopeful,”²⁹ and that lament “allows us to live in the moment.”³⁰ Together, these characteristics reveal that lament is a powerful tool for expressing grief, sorrow, pain, anger, and loss.

Lament is a way for people to cry out to God in their pain and frustration and get brutally honest with Him in their hurt and confusion about certain circumstances. Lament is a way for people to ask God “why?” Through the process of lament, God has made a way for those who follow Him to voice their sorrow. This ability to be direct and upfront with God makes the emotional process for the Christian rather distinct from anyone else in any other belief system in the world. The authors of the Lament Psalms wrote them as a “catalyst for expressed feelings of

²⁶ Logan C. Jones, “The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 1-2 (2007): 48, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/154230500706100106?journalCode=pcca>.

²⁷ Matthews, “Lament Psalms,” 8.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

abandonment and desertion which warrant prayer intended to rouse God into action.”³¹ The conclusion, then, given what these sources have said, is that lament in a biblical sense is a responsive complaint directed against God based on some terrible or painful situation. This complaint can also be driven by the issuer’s feeling of God’s absence in the midst of whatever unpleasant circumstance may have befallen them. In essence, biblical lament is when a believer vents his or her frustrations directly to God, oftentimes in the hope that it may nudge Him into action to intervene in the midst of a situation or circumstance. Even more so, what separates biblical lament from secular “sad songs” is that biblical lament always contains a declaration of trust in God. Every Christian lament song includes a moment where the singer turns back once again to trust in the Lord.

Examples. One prime example of a lament psalm within the canon of Scripture is Psalm 3. This Psalm perfectly encapsulates the idea of Christian lament having a turning point from mourning to rejoicing once again in the Lord. “The first and the last stanza seem to be two parts of a prayer in the present tense, spoken by a suppliant who is under attack from a large number of enemies.”³² This psalm starts with a very striking complaint regarding the psalmist’s present situation, stating: “oh Lord, how many are my foes!” (Psalm 3:1). It then features a key turning point in the middle stanza, which “seems to contain a description of a prayer by the same person in the past, as well as the nocturnal answer of YHWH to this prayer, something that gave the

³¹ Joshua C. Waltman, “Psalms of Lament and God’s Silence: Features of Petition Not Yet Answered,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2018): 209, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=2c2c67b4-88f4-428b-abc5-95cab7ac65a9%40redis>.

³² Phil J. Botha and Beat Weber, “‘Killing Them Softly with This Song...’ the Literary Structure of Psalm 3 and Its Psalmic and Davidic Contexts. Part I: An Intratextual Interpretation of Psalm 3,” *Old Testament Essays* 21, no. 1 (2008): 18, <https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.10520/EJC85934>.

suppliant the courage in his present situation of distress to react with confidence to the fear instilled by the enemies and their words.”³³ The author is lamenting in his distress, but then turns once again to the courage and confidence found in the Lord.

Another example of lament Psalm is Psalm 13, which begins “a wrestling with God that is arguably the most concise articulation of a crisis experience in the Old Testament.”³⁴ This psalm consists of three distinct parts (each broken up into its own paragraph in the English Bible). The first part is a bitter cry out to God in which the psalmist accuses God of forgetting him. The second part is the psalmist demanding answers from God as to why He has apparently been silent and ignorant of his cries and his distress. This is not the end of the passage, however, and it reveals to the readers that things are not as bleak as the writer’s initial outcry may have initially indicated, because the third and final part of the psalm recalls God and His attributes as a counter to the initial distress of the first several verses. Again, this exemplifies a “turning point” because the “prayer of conflict illustrates the psalmist’s trust in God despite his complaints. This conflict encounter transforms his experience of desolation, abandonment, and anxiety into the joy of renewed communion with his God.”³⁵

Psalm 88 is another example of a Lament Psalm that shows how believers can cope with negative emotions and respond by turning back to God. This psalm is an oddity compared to other lament psalms because there is no written resolution to the situation that the author is in at the time of writing. “There is some affinity between Kubler-Ross and lament psalms. Although

³³ Botha and Weber, “Killing Them Softly,” 18.

³⁴ Dirk Human, “Human Suffering in Need of God’s ‘Face’ and ‘Eyes’: Perspectives on Psalm 13,” *Old Testament Essays* 34, no. 1 (2021): 270, <https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.17159/2312-3621/2021/v34n1a15>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

not a precise parallel, some of the states can be recognized and the majority of psalms display a movement from lament to praise in sufficient similarity the movement in Kubler-Ross.”³⁶ There is an emotional depth in the words of Psalm 88 that directly point to the confusion that is often felt in the midst of pain and sorrow because “Psalm 88 is unafraid to say God himself has caused the problem.”³⁷ The psalmists, in the depths of their emotional torment, hurl accusations toward the God of love and goodness because they are looking for someone to lay the blame for their emotional state on.

Psalm 77 is an excellent example of how lament for the Christian is different than negative emotions felt by an unbeliever and it can serve as a foundation for an approach to writing songs of lament in the modern day. As previously stated, one of the biggest differences between songs of lament and secular “sad songs” is that Christian lament songs offer hope in the darkness for something greater beyond it. For the Christian, lament is always followed by a shift in emotional state back to rejoicing in the Lord and His goodness in spite of present earthly circumstances, and this is certainly the case in Psalm 77, which “names what moved the writer from weeping to rejoicing.”³⁸ The psalmist recalls to mind who God is and what He has done in the past and uses that truth to fuel his hope for the future in spite of the terrible circumstances surrounding him at present.

³⁶ Beverly Jameson, “Difficult Texts: Psalm 88,” *Theology* 117, no. 5 (2014): 357, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0040571X14537435?utm_medium=discovery-provider&utm_source=summon&journalCode=tjxa.

³⁷ Beverly Jameson, “Permission to Rant,” *Theology* 119, no. 5 (2016): 342, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0040571X16647864?journalCode=tjxa>.

³⁸ Tremper Longman III, “Getting Brutally Honest with God: The Psalms of Lament Invite Us to Voice Our Frustrations – and Provide a Reason for Hope.” *Christianity Today* (2015), https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=BIC&u=vic_liberty&id=GALE%7CA409831897&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon&aty=ss0%3A+shibboleth.

Psalm 58 is an example of a lament Psalm that reminds its readers who to turn to for justice: God. In the Psalm, the author laments a cruel ruler who abuses his authority and miscarries justice. It is in this moment of grief and sorrow that “the only recourse they then have is to turn to God. The reason in this instance is that God is the only one who can see to it that justice is done.”³⁹ When a Christian is faced with injustice and abuse of power from leadership, the appropriate response, as demonstrated in Psalm 58, is to turn to God as the sole provider and orator of justice.

Psalm 94 talks about God’s allowing of oppression and suffering and how believers are to cope with the reality of suffering that still coincides with God’s love, goodness, mercy, and justice. For the Christian, oppression is simply something that God allows in one’s life in order to draw people closer to Himself. As assistant professor of New Testament at Wartburg Seminary⁴⁰ Troy M. Troftgruben puts it: “contrary to reason, faith perceives divine consolation hiding in suffering, changing the basis of complaint into a reason for God’s praise.”⁴¹ Within this particular Psalm is the emotional turning point that serves as the key distinction between Christian song and secular song. Here, the psalmist includes a shift from lamenting into rejoicing. This Psalm contains the light at the end of the tunnel which is present in all forms of Christian music even today. This light is the hope of Jesus Christ and His already finished work on the cross at Calvary. It is in the pits of lament, sorrow, and despair that the believer is most

³⁹ Leonard P. Mare, “A Pentecostal Perspective on the Use of Psalms of Lament in Worship,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103, <https://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/vee/v29n1/07.pdf>.

⁴⁰ “About,” Troy M. Troftgruben, <https://troymtroftgruben.com/about/>.

⁴¹ Troy M. Troftgruben, “Fruit for the Soul: Luther on the Lament Psalms By Dennis Ngien,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2016): 473, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2315127467?pq-origsite=summon&parentSessionId=V4LcsOKT54OEFrS5pia5cBZGuL2AACCLa4ccEtgEkzs%3D&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

pointed back to Christ and the cross and it is when they are at their lowest point that they are encouraged to trust God all the more, as Troftgruben continues on to say: “the believer’s experiences of temptation and loss reflect the way of the cross and lead all the more to trust in the God revealed in Christ.”⁴²

Christian Lament Songs Throughout History

The practice of musical or lyrical lament in a Christian context did not stop in the Old Testament. In fact, Christian poets, musicians, and artists have continued this tradition of writing lament songs for centuries. Christians throughout history have all had songs that they could turn to in their grief and sorrow which point them back towards the hope and the love and the comfort found only in Christ.

Examples. The hymns of Paul Gerhardt are excellent examples of historical lament songs. His lyrics often spoke about trusting God in the midst of difficult or painful circumstances. One author states that “Gerhardt’s hymns are hymns of trust in God’s care and providence in the midst of suffering. The cross of Christ features prominently as an image of suffering and hope beyond death.”⁴³ Overall, Gerhardt’s hymns excellently exemplify the broader nature of Christian song (especially in their use of lament) and their emphasis on hope in the midst of suffering. Rather than ignoring negative emotion and focusing purely on the positive things in life, “Gerhardt does not deny the horror of war and violence, but finds God’s

⁴² Troftgruben, “Fruit for the Soul,” 473.

⁴³ J. Gertrud Tonsing, “Responses to Violence and Human Suffering in Christian Hymnody: A Study of Responses to Situations of Violence in the Work of Four Hymn Writers,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 2, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2241899233?pq-origsite=summon&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

redemptive hand in human history and human pain.”⁴⁴ For hundred of years, Christian hymnody has told about God’s redemption, goodness, and mercy in the midst of great suffering and sorrow.

Another one of the most prominent examples of a (relatively) more modern lament song can be found in the hymn “It Is Well with My Soul.” This song has stood for 150 years as a gleaming testament to the Lord’s goodness even in the midst of incredibly painful and terrible earthly circumstances. The hymn was written by Horatio Spafford in the late 19th century after a tragic shipwreck claimed the lives of his two daughters in 1873. His wife, Anna, was the only member of his family to survive the experience. Journalist⁴⁵ Kevin Perrotta recounts it like this: “on a calm night in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the Ville du Havre was accidentally rammed by another ship and sank in twelve minutes, taking down most of the passengers and crew. An hour later, rescuers found Anna floating unconscious in the water. The girls were gone.”⁴⁶ Surely most would not consider it all that unreasonable for Spafford to have fallen into complete and utter despair completely devoid of all hope and joy due to this devastating loss, but instead his faith was somehow bolstered. Perrotta continues: “On arriving in Europe, Anna sent Horatio a terse telegram: ‘saved alone.’ It cast Horatio into anguish. But he too affirmed his faith. The grief-stricken father told a friend, ‘I am glad to trust the Lord when it will cost me something.’”⁴⁷ It was as Horatio was himself sailing to Europe to meet his wife after the accident

⁴⁴ Tonsing, “Responses to Violence,” 3.

⁴⁵ “Kevin Perrotta,” Loyola Press, <https://www.loyolapress.com/authors/kevin-perrotta/>.

⁴⁶ Kevin Perrotta, “It Is Well with My Soul,” *Word Among Us* 24, no. 2 (2005): 64, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/199558338?pq-origsite=summon&sourcetype=Magazines>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

and his ship passed over the place where his daughters tragically drowned that he wrote the words to one of the most famous hymns in the world. For 150 years, Spafford's words have brought comfort and truth to lamenting Christians around the world. The song stands as a staunch reminder to put one's hope and trust in God in the midst of dark circumstances. It reminds the listener that no matter what may happen, God is good and He is sovereign over all.

Another example of a (relatively) modern Christian songwriter whose lyrical style is deeply evocative of Old Testament Lament Psalms is Jochen Klepper, who lived during 1930s and 40s Nazi Germany.⁴⁸ and was married to a Jewish widow with two daughters.⁴⁹ Part of what makes Klepper's hymns so reminiscent of the Lament Psalms is his lyrical style and the dichotomy that exists within most of his songs. Faculty member at the University of South Africa in biblical and ancient studies⁵⁰ J. Gertrud Tonsing notes that "although there is a great undercurrent of trust in the hymns, there is a dark edge of fear and bitterness which is absent in Gerhardt."⁵¹ Songs such as Klepper's, when used in a congregational context for the purpose of corporate worship, can give those present who happen to be in some dire emotional circumstance a needed vent for their fear and pain as well as the hope of Christ that forever exists as a shining light in that emotional darkness.

⁴⁸ J. Gertrud Tonsing, "Responses to Violence and Human Suffering in Christian Hymnody: A Study of Responses to Situations of Violence in the Work of Four Hymn Writers," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 3, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2241899233?pq-origsite=summon&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "J. Gertrud Tonsing," Academia, <https://unisouthafr.academia.edu/GertrudTonsing>.

⁵¹ Tonsing, "Responses to Violence," 3.

There are numerous examples of lament songs that have been written by Christian contemporary artists in the last 20 years. One example is “O Come to the Altar” by Elevation Worship. This song “is a call to surrender and find healing and restoration in the presence of God.”⁵² This song calls to mind the burden of sin in the life of the believer’s life and provides room for lament before putting the hope of the gospel back into the mind of the listener.

Another modern example is the song “I Will Wait for You (Psalm 130)” by Keith & Kristyn Getty, which “is a profound expression of longing for God’s mercy and forgiveness, emphasizing the depths of human sinfulness and the need for divine redemption.”⁵³ This song is a deep and desperate cry by the author for the mercy of God. The author groans in languish and waits for the Lord.

“Christ the Sure and Steady Anchor” by Matt Boswell & Matt Papa is another example of a modern Christian song that includes elements of lament. The lyrics of this song “depict Christ as our anchor, using vivid imagery of a ship enduring a fierce storm.”⁵⁴ The singer is being buffeted by the winds and waves of life, yet remains steadfast in the hope of Christ as an unchanging anchor.

Historical Legacy. Historically, it is clear that the art of the lament song is one that Christian songwriters have been expressing in their lyrics for millennia. As far back as the Old

⁵² Gwen Hicks, “The Meaning Behind the Song: O Come to the Altar by Elevation Worship,” OldTimeMusic, September 5, 2023, <https://oldtimemusic.com/the-meaning-behind-the-song-o-come-to-the-altar-by-elevation-worship/>.

⁵³ Ken Stewart, “The Meaning Behind the Song: I Wait for You (Psalm 130) [Live] by Keith and Kristyn Getty,” OldTimeMusic, last modified February 25, 2024, <https://oldtimemusic.com/w3/the-meaning-behind-the-song-i-will-wait-for-you-psalm-130-live-by-keith-kristyn-getty/>.

⁵⁴ Myrtle McKee, “The Meaning Behind the Song: Christ the Sure and Steady Anchor by Matt Boswell and Matt Papa,” OldTimeMusic, last modified February 26, 2024, <https://oldtimemusic.com/w3/the-meaning-behind-the-song-christ-the-sure-and-steady-anchor-by-matt-boswell-matt-papa/>.

Testament, Christian hymnody has been composed with all manner of emotions in mind as felt in real time by the author of any given song. The Psalms of Lament comprise a section within the psalter that are shining examples of what it means for the Christian to grieve, to hurt, or to be downcast. In many ways, the Psalms of Lament give voice to negative emotions in a manner that remains Christlike and entirely biblical. Throughout the canon of the psalter (and Scripture as a whole), writers use song to vent their emotions, at times expressing their anger and confusion towards God Himself. Similarly, Christians have practiced hymnody since the time the Scriptures were written to continue the tradition of bringing such emotions before the Father. Even in the 21st century, Christian songwriters continue to write lament songs to voice the experience of their grief and sorrow. Throughout these many eras of church history, laments songs have also been used corporately in congregational worship gatherings to help Christians participating in the localized gathering of the body of Christ to grow in community with each other (as well as God) by singing lament songs together.

Continued Use of Lament Songs in Modern Contexts

The practice of singing lament songs is often overlooked in the modern church/ Music itself has a near-supernatural ability to connect with people and their emotions in a way that few other things have the capacity to. Music seems to have a special way of speaking to people and tuning in to their emotional state, whether it is happy and joyful or solemn and sorrowful. The use of lament songs in the context of the Christian corporate worship gathering is altogether helpful and beneficial to the localized body of Christ when appropriate and applicable. Singing a lament song during a normal worship gathering in church can help congregants who are currently in a state of sorrow or grief to give voice to their negative emotions in a healthy, biblical way while also allowing them to come together in community with other believers who can help them

to bear the burden of their pain as well as God Himself who is always and forever the source of hope, strength, and security. Given that, it is of crucial importance that local churches take initiative and responsibility in knowing their congregations along with members' individual circumstances and present hurts in order to incorporate lament songs in their normal worship services when appropriate.

Tonsing conducted a study which involved researching the lives and song catalogues of four different hymn writers over the course of history and found that this study “shows how rare hymns and songs are which directly respond to violence, and which prove sustainable in a congregational setting.”⁵⁵ While lament is not always necessarily tied to some form of violence, the same idea applies. Tonsing continues: “such songs are definitely needed so that worshipping Christians can express themselves more concretely in difficult times. It should really not be necessary for a hymnal commission to have to specifically request texts to fill the great gaps in this area. However, it seems that Christian writers do not do this so well.”⁵⁶ Today, there certainly exist gaps in Christian song regarding music that incorporates elements of lament, and this is a category of Christian worship that can oftentimes go overlooked in the modern western Evangelical church. Because of that and the incredible benefit that utilizing lament songs in a corporate context can have on those members of the local church who are in the midst of a process of grieving or lamenting over something that has been lost, it is imperative that the global church take conscious initiative to begin to incorporate more lament songs when appropriate.

⁵⁵ Tonsing, “Responses to Violence,” 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Christian lyricists and hymn writers have kept a tradition of penning lament songs for centuries. Since the time of the Old Testament, believers have used the catalyst of song to express their emotions and feelings to God. It is crucial for worship leaders/pastors and music directors pay attention to the songs that they use in their services and the emotions that are present within those songs because “in many Christian congregations today, the question of music is an emotive issue as the service and its music touch the heart of people’s faith life and shapes people’s theology.”⁵⁷ As Tonsing, associate professor of homiletics and liturgy at Stellenbosch University⁵⁸ Cas J. Wepener, and author Cas Vos so eloquently stated it, the musical aspect of the Christian congregational worship gathering plays a vital role in shaping churchgoer’s faith as well as their theology. Congregations are done a disservice if the musical worship portion of a Sunday gathering omits songs that discuss harder topics such as lament and grief. Such songs allow body of gathered believers to empathize with them and give voice to their frustrations regarding their current negative circumstances, although it is also important to bear in mind when choosing songs for corporate worship that emotions should not be the central focus of any given musical worship set. Incorporating a balance of both more emotional and more theological songs is altogether the most helpful option, though “leading worship and choosing songs both for their emotive and proclamation value will remain a challenge.”⁵⁹ Given the vast amount of Christian lament songs that have been penned over the course of church

⁵⁷ J. Gertrud Tonsing, Cas J. Wepener, and Cas Vos, “The ‘Cognitive’ and ‘Emotive’ Component in Christian Songs: Tracing the Shifts in Traditional and Contemporary Songs,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 1, https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/49696/Tonsing_Cognitive_2015.pdf?sequence=1.

⁵⁸ “Prof. Casparus Johannes Wepener,” Global Network for Theology and Religion, <http://globalnetresearch.org/team/prof-casparus-johannes-wepener/>.

⁵⁹ Tonsing, Wepener, and Vos, “The ‘Cognitive and ‘Emotive,’” 13.

history, it also would not be incredibly difficult to find and select songs that best cater to an individual church's stylistic approach. Tonsing, Wepener, and Vos state that "one can add a richness of valuable old and new songs which have the potential to become favorites..."⁶⁰ With songs such as these at their disposal, worship leaders will be able to meet the needs of their own congregations.

Continued appropriate use of lament songs in Christian corporate worship can also help congregations grow in relationship with each other. Music itself is an inherently relational entity, with interplay between instruments and different notes within chords working together in harmony to make the sounds work. The fundamental nature of music is a collection of sounds that works together to create something beautiful and pleasing to the ear. This internal community that exists within music itself extends outwardly towards listeners. Theological ethicist and ethnomusicologist⁶¹ Nathan Myrick puts it this way: "music facilitates that emotional bond that is so necessary for healthy communities."⁶² The localized body of Christ is drawn together in community and relationship when they sing congregational songs. In the context of lament songs, they allow people who are currently lamenting to express these feelings in community with other believers who can encourage them and continuously point them back to the Father. Myrick goes on to say this: "because of music's relational/emotive importance, leaders need to program and perform in a way that facilitates honest emotional encounters for

⁶⁰ Tonsing, Wepener, and Vos, "The 'Cognitive' and 'Emotive,'" 13.

⁶¹ "About Nathan," Nathan Myrick, <https://nathanmyrick.com/about/>.

⁶² Nathan Myrick, "Music, Emotion, and Relationship in Christian Worship," *Liturgy* 36, no. (2021): 28, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/0458063X.2020.1865030?needAccess=true>.

our congregants and ourselves.”⁶³ Given all of this, it is important for leaders to utilize songs that encompass a broad variety of topics all over the human emotional spectrum in order to grow their congregations in their theological knowledge, their reliance on Christ as their sole source of hope, strength, and joy, and in their personal relationships with other members of the congregation.

Conclusion

The tradition of Christian lament songs goes far beyond the time of the Old Testament. For centuries, believers have composed hymns and written songs that express their deepest emotions and bare their hearts before the Lord. Hymns such as “It Is Well” and those composed by Paul Gerhardt as well as more modern songs such as those written by Jochen Klepper have both comforted Christians in their sorrow and given voice to their frustrations due to their unfortunate earthly circumstances. Even in the 21st century, there continues to be a selection of Christian musical artists who consciously and intentionally compose songs of lament intended for congregational use, such as “O Come to the Altar” by Elevation Worship, “I Will Wait for You (Psalm 130)” by Keith & Krystin Getty, and “Christ the Sure and Steady Anchor” by Matt Boswell and Matt Papa. However, there appears to have been a steep decline in lament songs from the time of the Old Testament up to the year 2024, and this reality could be a disservice to local congregations.

In light of the broader role that lament plays in the life of the believer and the seeming lack of lament songs being written and sung in corporate contexts in modern churches, it behooves the local church to take more care in their song selections for congregational worship

⁶³ Ibid.

services in order to fully meet whatever the needs of their individual congregations, including the use of lament songs when appropriate and necessary. The church's goal in musical worship should be to facilitate an environment in which congregants can both express their emotions (both positive and negative) towards God and simultaneously be pointed back to God through song. If churches were to hold closely to this methodological practice, congregations would grow closer together in community, deepen their relationship with God, and broaden their knowledge of Him and of His character.

Lament is a topic that often goes undiscussed and underused in the context of the modern Christian corporate worship gathering, despite it being a very biblical concept to express grief and sorrow in song that has been a tradition in the church for millennia. The world is certainly no stranger to expressing negative emotions through the catalyst of music, whether Christian or secular. Especially in the modern western world, the idea of a secular "sad song" is one that has been incredibly popular for many years across all genres of music. On the Christian side of sad songs, the idea of a biblical lament song has existed since the time of the Old Testament, with a substantial percentage of the psalter consisting of what are popularly known as the Lament Psalms. These Psalms were written by seven different known authors / groups of authors (and some anonymous ones) and are all united by one common theme: they all include at least some element of an expression of sorrow or grief or pain towards God (with some of them even directly accusing God of causing the author's affliction). There is a primary difference, however, that sets Christian lament songs apart from secular sad songs, and that difference is that, for the believer, the end is not found in lament. For Christians, times of sorrow and grief are always followed by joy at the goodness of the Lord in His sovereignty and they are interwoven with a hope that, to nonbelievers, is completely incomprehensible. It is because of this hope in the

Lord's goodness and His provision that Christians are able to maintain their joy even in the midst of the darkest of suffering because there is always a light at the end of the tunnel named Jesus Christ.

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