An Introduction to *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament*

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Abstract

The subject of lament and the use of lament in the lives of believers is a subject which has been neglected in the Church because it is often seen as an expression of unbelief. The fact is that all of us, including believers, experience loss, pain, suffering, and heartache. In the face of the realities of life, we cannot but lament to God. In *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* Scott Ellington provides a comprehensive and thorough treatment of this subject. Ellington argues that in the Bible, experiences of loss elicited prayers of lament. When calamity strikes and security is threatened, those who live in a relationship with God experience their sense of an ordered world and their relationship with God shaken. Ellington also addresses God’s participation in suffering, the use of lament in the Psalms, the suffering of Job, the unique complaints of Jeremiah, and the issue of lament in the New Testament.

Keywords

lament, prayer, suffering, complaint, Psalms, Job, Jeremiah

Let me say right at the beginning that I am highly impressed by Scott Ellington’s book, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament*. This is the kind of book of which I would say, ‘I wish I had written it!’

The subject of lament and the use of lament in the lives of believers, especially Pentecostal believers, is something to which I have devoted some research. It is a subject close to my own heart, a subject which, unfortunately, has been neglected in the Church, because it is often seen as an expression of unbelief and in addition to this, it is something that mostly belongs to the world of the Old Testament. New Testament believers do not lament.

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New Testament believers are men and women of faith, who stand strong in the face of adversity and rejoice regardless the circumstances. Of course, according to some of the more extreme ‘prophets of faith’ if one only follows their seven or sometimes ten steps of faith, one would never experience adversity, but one is kind of ‘doomed to prosperity’!

The fact is that all of us experience loss, pain, suffering, and heartache. Even as believers, we are not exempted from these dark nights of the soul. In the face of the realities of life, we cannot but lament to God. The problem of course, as Ellington points out, is that God sometimes can be the problem. In the midst of our sorrow and suffering, our sighs and screams are often met by silence. ‘This is at the root of Biblical Lament: the twin experiences of profound loss and the silence of God’ (p. xi).

Ellington argues that the journey of lament involves a double risk (pp. xi-xii); first, because lamenting in times of suffering is an admission that things are horribly wrong. It involves doubting, challenging, and also rejecting the easy answers that are sometimes given. The second risk we take by lamenting might seem odd—newness. Why would newness be a risk factor in lament? Because to embrace the new necessarily means a letting go of that which is familiar, the old world, and the vestiges of order and refuge it provided. It requires a leap into the uncertainty of new possibilities. This double risk, the loss of the old and the uncertainty of the new, Ellington writes, requires the act of lament.

So, why should we lament? In chapter 1 Ellington provides answers to this question. Although all of us hope that we would never experience loss, the reality of life is that all of us do. For the authors of the Bible, experiences of loss elicited prayers of lament. When calamity strikes and security is threatened, those who live in a relationship with God experience their sense of an ordered world and their relationship with God shaken.

It is very important to know that lament is not born from theological curiosity but from pain and anguish—‘How long, O Lord? Why, O Lord?’ are not questions that seek information but are questions that verbalize pain and suffering. The biggest crisis in this experience of suffering and distress is that God, the God who is supposed to be trustworthy and reliable, and the God who is supposed to be always the same, the loving, almighty God, stays silent. When the silence of God thunders in your heart and soul, the question arises: Where is God when it hurts? Can he still be trusted? Lament shouts loudly that the world is not as it should be, even God is acting in ways that one would not expect of him, but lament is never a sign of weakness and unbelief. Lament refuses to answer God’s silence with silence, but it keeps crying out; it will not let go. Therefore, lament is an act of bold faith (pp. 2–4).