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With this issue of *Christian Studies*, I begin the duty and privilege of serving the faculty as editor. Since its inaugural issue in 1980, this journal, known at that time simply as the “Faculty Bulletin,” has been in the capable hands of its founding editor, Michael Weed. It is with gratitude for Dr. Weed’s visionary labor and with humility for the work at hand that I assume the role of editor, with the indispensable aid of the managing editor, Todd Hall.

From its inception, this publication has sought to provide responsible and biblical theological reflection that is beneficial and accessible to the scholar as well as to the interested “layperson.” This aim is summed up well in the journal’s motto: Scholarship for the Church. I want to assure our readers, old and new alike, that we press on toward the future mindful of what has come before. As in the past, so in the future, the goal of this journal will be not merely to publish the “results of scholarly research,” but to address real issues in the faith and practice of the church and of individual believers. As in the past, it will continue to be a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology, but also with contributions from other scholars. Within these parameters, the intent is to provide readers with the best theological writing in Churches of Christ, but also with a reach that extends beyond our walls.

All issues of *Christian Studies*, including this one, are available online, via the Austin Grad website, at <http://austingrad.edu/resources/christian-studies-publication>. If you find the content beneficial, please share this journal, in its print and online forms, with others.

In that first issue of the “Faculty Bulletin” that appeared thirty-five years ago was a contribution by Paul Watson. Watson is an Old Testament scholar who taught at the Institute for Christian Studies (now Austin Grad) from 1979-1983. He had a lasting impact on his colleagues and students during his years as a professor here. He left the Institute to work in full-time congregational ministry, where he has continued to influence countless souls for God’s kingdom. This issue of *Christian Studies*, whose theme is “The Old Testament and the Life of the Church,” is dedicated to Paul Watson and to the legacy of scholarship and ministry that he has passed on—and continues

to pass on—to the church. The contributors bring this gift to him, and to us all, in the hope that it will bring honor to whom honor is due.

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a congruence born of form criticism,⁴ the optimism of American culture, and the enormous influence of Walter Brueggemann's 1980 essay, "The Psalms and the Life of Faith—A Suggested Typology of Function," followed shortly after by his monograph, *The Message of the Psalms* (in which he organizes the psalms into three categories: Psalms of Orientation, Psalms of Disorientation, and Psalms of New Orientation).⁵

Unfortunately, what Brueggemann and other early form-critical scholars took for granted about the movement after lament or after disorientation is not part of the equation in contemporary studies, and is altogether lacking in present-day proclamation that expects songs of joy to *always* replace our psalms of lament.⁶ Neither Brueggemann nor Gunkel would ever agree that lament *always* leads to thanksgiving; nonetheless, the present consensus leaves this impression. This study is an attempt to step into the consensus and conclusions drawn from it and ask the difficult questions that lead to unsettling answers. Lament does not always lead to thanksgiving. Instead, under closer examination we find that lament leads first to trust in God—a point assumed by Brueggemann and others, but lacking an explicit claim and presentation of evidence. This paper, then, will try to present the evidence that will lead us to a better understanding of what happens after lament and the direction in which lament tries to lead its reader.

Before we race to another extreme position or sound as if we are denying thanksgiving as a proper outcome of lament, we need to confirm that sometimes psalms of thanksgiving do follow psalms of lament. Two brief observations support this possible movement. First, a number of laments declare

⁴ In Hermann Gunkel's monumental work (*Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James Nogalski [Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998]), the chapter on "Individual Thanksgiving Songs" (7) comes immediately after the "Individual Complaint Songs" (6), a suggestive placement, even if unintended.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 3–32; and *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

⁶ Of course, not everyone adopts form-criticism or Brueggemann's three-part organization of form-critical categories. For a brief survey of other approaches see my essay "Hebrew Wisdom and Lyrical Literature: A Brief Field Report for the Early Twenty-First Century," *Restoration Quarterly* 55 (2013): 129–30.

that they will give thanks or give thank offerings to God. For example, consider the conclusions of Psalms 52 and 56:

I will thank you forever,
 because of what you have done.
 In the presence of the faithful
 I will proclaim your name, for it is good. (52:9)⁷

My vows to you I must perform, O God;
 I will render thank offerings to you.
 For you have delivered my soul from death,
 and my feet from falling,
 so that I may walk before God
 in the light of life. (56:12–13)

It is simple enough to see that each of these psalms takes a path from lament to thanksgiving.

Second, some thanksgiving psalms look back to a preceding lament, or state that they are written as a response to a promise made in lament. So for example, Psalm 30, a thanksgiving psalm, retells the unexpected movement out of orientation and into disorientation (30:6–7). The poet then recites part of an earlier lament to the Lord.

To you, O Lord, I cried,
 and to the Lord I made supplication:
 “What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the Pit?
 Will the dust praise you?

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!

O Lord, be my helper!” (30:8-10)

Psalm 30 is the poet’s response of gratitude to the Lord for answering the earlier lament. Another thanksgiving psalm, Psalm 113, also looks back as the writer recounts a deathly crisis (v. 3), crying out to God (v. 4), and the Lord’s intervention (vv. 5–11). Then the psalm poses a question, “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” and answers:

I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call on the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord

in the presence of all his people...

I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice

and call on the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord

in the presence of all his people,

in the courts of the house of the Lord,

in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the Lord! (116:12–14,17–19)

Once again there is a strong connection between the prior crisis, lament, and the new psalm to accompany thanksgiving sacrifices (see also Pss 66:13–15 and 107:21–22).

So then, sometimes lament may lead to thanksgiving: lament psalms may urge readers to give thanks to the Lord, and thanksgiving psalms may refer back to a lament. What the Psalter does not support, however, is the notion that lament *always* moves toward thanksgiving. We need a more nuanced exploration of where laments first lead their readers.

A Fresh Analysis of the Laments: Which Way Do They Go?

The Achilles' heel in the thesis that lament always leads to thanksgiving is the presupposition that in every case of lament God hears the prayer and God intervenes to help (cf. Exod 2:23–25). My objection is, what if...? What if the cry does not rise up to God? What if God doesn't hear? What if God doesn't "take notice?" In other words, what if—for whatever reason—the Lord chooses not to intervene? At a minimum Psalms 88 and 89 suggest that there are times when the Lord's people cry out, but God refuses to help.⁸

So I introduce a different hypothesis: *the psalms of lament do not regularly move the poet or reader toward a gift of new life and so to thanksgiving. Instead, these psalms consistently move their readers first into a position of trust in a God who may or may not surprise them with joy.* Consequently, New Orientation begins with trust as readers await the Lord's answer. The Lord may then offer a "surprising gift of new life" that leads to thanksgiving; or the Lord may say "no" and challenge the readers to even greater trust as they begin to readjust life to a new normal that they did not want.⁹ In support of my hypothesis I offer six observations.

I. First, the sixty or so laments in the Psalms, encourage the reader to move in diverse and overlapping directions: 39 laments mention thanksgiving, 28 mention praise, and 17 mention joy or rejoicing. At first glance this data appears to support the thesis that lament invariably leads to thanksgiving or praise. It is not until we see a barrage of related words and concepts such as wait, hope, take refuge, rely on, and more—that another theme emerges in these and other laments. The first position these psalms take and advocate in the midst of crisis is to trust the Lord.

Once admitted into the dialogue, the concept of trust changes the landscape. Of the directions mentioned above, thanksgiving is most frequent (65% of the laments), praise comes next (47% of the laments), and then joy

⁸ This point is established by Moses' appeals for God to let him enter the promised land. Eventually, according to the Deuteronomist, the Lord said, "Enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again!" (Deut 3:26). The New Testament also affirms this point by Paul's prayers that God would remove his "thorn in the flesh," and God's implied answer 'no': "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:7-10).

⁹ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 123.

(28%; for gifted mathematicians, remember these are overlapping categories). But if we consider the motif of trust or reliance: 51 of the 60 laments speak of trust in one way or another (85% of the laments). Thus, a simple argument of frequency suggests that the laments may be less concerned about thanksgiving or praise and more concerned with trusting the Lord.

II. Second, the motif of trust precedes and supports thanksgiving, praise, and rejoicing. So, for example,

But I *trusted* in your steadfast love;
my heart shall *rejoice* in your salvation. (13:5, emphasis mine)

The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts;
so I am helped, and my heart exults,
and with my song *I give thanks* to him. (28:7, emphasis mine)

But I am like a green olive tree
in the house of God.
I trust in the steadfast love of God
forever and ever.
I will thank you forever,
because of what you have done... (52:8–9, emphasis mine)

In these and other psalms trust is the first posture the psalmist takes or models, from which later springs thanksgiving, joy, or praise. For these poets, joy, praise, and thanksgiving come most naturally from a heart that first and foremost trusts the Lord, regardless of what may happen.

III. Now that I have introduced the key idea of trust, I need to clarify where trust lives and thrives—and conversely, how trust dies. According to the Psalms, trust thrives as people see God’s response to human need and as

they recognize God's characteristic faithfulness. The more people see or learn of God's help for those in seasons of disorientation, the more trust grows. But trust withers and dies from a lack of awareness of God's presence and/or a failure to experience or see God's help. Thus, on one hand, a believer grows in trust as the Lord establishes a track record of fidelity. On the other hand, when faced with adversity, uncertainty about the Lord's faithfulness leads a believer to despair. The key factor in whether a believer reacts in despair or trusts the Lord is the presence of an active, strong memory of the Lord's help in the past.

Psalm 77 provides a good example of the crucial role of memory in the dichotomy of trust or despair. Here the poet cries out to God from intense adversity.

I cry aloud to God,
 aloud to God, that he may hear me.
 In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
 in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
 my soul refuses to be comforted. (77:1–2)

The trouble is severe and God does not appear to be responsive (77:3–6), so much so that the writer begins to wonder about God's faithfulness and at the same time begins movement toward despair:

Will the Lord spurn forever,
 and never again be favorable?
 Has his steadfast love ceased forever?
 Are his promises at an end for all time?
 Has God forgotten to be gracious?
 Has he in anger shut up his compassion? (77:7–9)

With the psalmist near collapse, the poet recalls the key source of trust—*memory* of the Lord’s prior help. So the psalmist writes:

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
 I will remember your wonders of old.
 I will meditate on all your work,
 and muse on your mighty deeds...
 You are the God who works wonders;
 you have displayed your might among the peoples. (77:11–12,
 14)

From this point until the end of the psalm, the writer recalls the exodus (77:15–20): a theophany of the Lord coming to save his people (77:15–19), and the Lord leading his people “like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (77:20). Memory of the Lord’s prior help saves the day and enables the poet to trust the Lord.

A variation of this pattern is testimony by others of what the Lord has done, even centuries or generations before the present moment. Psalm 78 opens with stress upon the importance of telling what has happened in the past, “the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,” to coming generations (78:1–6, as in Deut 6:4–9). The reason this exercise is important is not because the Lord enacted a law that older generations must teach the children (78:5), but because this is the only way that new generations will be able to “set their hope in God,” that is, trust the Lord (78:7). The remainder of the psalm rehearses Israel’s many failures when they forgot what God had done for them in the past (78:10–11, 19–20, 22, 32, 42–43), in order to establish the point that only in memory is there hope for their relationship with God (78:35f). Here and elsewhere in the Psalms, it is remembering God’s faithful help that enables a believer to live by trust (or faith) even when present indicators may recommend giving up. So Psalm 103 begins,

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
 and *do not forget* all his benefits—

who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the Pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
 who satisfies you with good as long as you live
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (103:2–5, emphasis mine)

Memory of all the Lord's benefits enables this poet to affirm the Lord's self-revelation to Moses:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
 He will not always accuse,
 nor will he keep his anger forever. (103:8–9; cf. Exod 34:6)

Now this poet can confirm and remind others of the Lord's compassion and forgiveness (103:10–14) and the Lord's steadfast love (103:17–18).

Trust, then, lives in the space between our memory of God's past actions and the present moment. Trust is easy when the present moment does not challenge or threaten our well-being. Trust remains probable as long as our memory of the Lord's past interventions or our recollection of the Lord's character outweighs the present crisis. But when memory begins to falter or the Lord's prior help is overshadowed by the new threat, trust does not come easily; without support, trust may erode and fall into despair.

IV. Eleven laments exhibit trust or encourage the reader to rely upon the Lord without any mention of thanksgiving, praise, or rejoicing.¹⁰ Two of these psalms include only a verse or two of spoken confidence in the Lord, but despite their brevity, they exhibit strong trust in the Lord (6:9–10, 17:6, 15).

¹⁰ Psalms 2, 3, 6, 12, 17, 55, 62, 74, 77, 85, 130.

The other nine laments include substantial statements of faith in God's fidelity. This assurance comes from:

An oracle of salvation. In Psalm 12, after a hyperbolic complaint that "there is no longer anyone who is godly" (12:1), the Lord responds:

"Because the poor are despoiled,
because the needy groan,
I will now rise up," says the Lord;
"I will place them in the safety for which they long." (12:5)
In response the poet affirms new confidence in the Lord:
You, O Lord, will protect us;
you will guard us from this generation forever. (12:7)

Remembering God's past fidelity. See the discussion above (III) about the relationship of memory to trust, especially in Psalm 77. As a reminder, recall how the poet cried out to the Lord and almost gave up until he or she *remembered to remember*. Memory of the Lord's ways saved the day.

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.
I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds. (77:11–12)

Recognition that the Lord reigns. The Psalter opens with the claim that the Lord has set his king "on Zion, my holy hill" (2:4–6); thus, a human king may rule from Zion, but the human king is nothing more than the son and representative of the true King (2:7–12; see also 55:19). Much later, amid the total destruction of the sanctuary in Jerusalem, remarkably, the poet of Psalm 74 is able to affirm trust because of memory that the Lord reigns:

Yet God my King is from of old,
 working salvation in the earth.
 You divided the sea by your might;
 you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. (74:12-13)¹¹

Finally, assurance comes from what appears to be a long life with the Lord. In other words, it is the faith and life that the writer brings to the text that provides substance for the assertions of confidence. In this category, Psalm 62 stands as remarkable testimony to trust. The psalm begins,

For God alone my soul waits in silence;
 from him comes my salvation.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my fortress; I shall never be shaken. (62:1–2)

To open public prayer with such confidence might be easy if the threat were mild or innocuous. But that is not the case in Psalm 62. Instead, the opponents are at work to bring down the poet (or the one he represents)—hitting, attacking over and over again as if trying to knock down a wall (62:3–4). But again, the writer has total confidence in God. With variation the opening confession of trust comes again:

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
 for my hope is from him.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my fortress; I shall not be shaken. (62:5–6)

¹¹ Psalm 74 does ask in passing, “let the poor and needy praise your name” (74:21b).

The poet's "salvation" (62:1) from those who only want to bring him down is "my hope" (62:5). And his hope is completely and totally in God as the psalm turns into testimony to others:

On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. (62:7–8)

The poet asserts that humans are of no help. Those of low estate are a mere "breath" (*hebel*: Ecclesiastes' favorite word for "vanity" [NRSV], "meaningless" [NIV], "useless" [NCV], "futile" [NJPS]) and those of high estate are nothing more than a "delusion" (62:9), a false image of strength and security. And when added together "breath" + "delusion" = "lighter than a breath" (*hebel*). More human help equals even less genuine help. Money is also a false hope (62:10). In fact, there is only one set of truths that stands the test of time:

...power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.
For you repay to all according to their work (62:11b–12).

The poet can see beyond the smoke and mirrors, as well as past the fear of the moment. Speaking from what can only be described as a long life with the Lord, the poet knows to wait patiently for God to intervene. And I suppose even if God were not to intervene, this poet would still wait for the one who has proven to be the only true rock and fortress in life. (see also 3:3–8, 55:22, 130:3–4, 7–8)

Of course these psalmists want God to help them. And yet, these eleven laments emphasize trusting God even if there is no change in their situation.

V. Now I introduce the difficult psalms into evidence: Psalms 38, 39, 44, 60, 80, 88, 89, and 90. These eight laments (13% of the laments) do not conclude with the genre-typical assertion of praise or confidence in the Lord, and they assert little or no intention to give thanks, praise, or rejoice in the body of the lament.¹² The presence of these psalms in the Psalter crushes any normative claim about laments leading to thanksgiving. For these writers God has already failed Israel and her king, or the community and its leaders. These psalms do work to reunite the reader with God, to forge a path back to God by providing words to speak, recalling God's past faithfulness, and more;¹³ but this path leads to a God who has said "no" and massively disappointed the community, permitting the unimaginable, even violating covenant promises—it is not a path to a place where God has or will (ever) make everything all right. Consequently, the challenge for the future, including any psalm that follows, is to help the reader maintain or regain trust in God.

VI. Finally, since the advent of Gerald Wilson's hypothesis for reading the Psalms as a book, and the subsequent development of his thesis by other scholars, any analysis of the Psalms needs to consider the possible relevance of the shape of the Psalter and the message of the book.¹⁴ Not every study will find Wilson's work germane; for this paper, however, the shape and message of the Book of Psalms (as a whole) is another supporting pillar for

¹² Psalm 44:4–8 appears to be the words sung by the ancestors for whom God acted boldly (44:1–3); Psalm 60 concludes with slight confidence (vv. 11–12); Psalm 80 concludes with a promise that if God will help they will never turn back (80:18); at most, Psalm 88 addresses the Lord in the first line as "God of my salvation"; Psalm 89 also begins with two verses that promise song and proclamation of God's steadfast love, but then set up God (89:4–37) for harsh accusation of breaking his covenant with Israel (89:38–51); Psalm 90 addresses the Lord as "our dwelling place" (v. 1) and asks for the Lord to turn away so that "we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us..." (vv. 14–15).

¹³ See my essay, "When God is the Problem: From Allegation to Apologia in the Psalms," *Stone Campbell Journal* 17 (2014): 63–76.

¹⁴ Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); in less technical forms see Gerald H. Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, JSOTSup 159, ed. J. Clinton McCann, Jr. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 72–82; or the explanation by Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

my contention about the place of trust in the movement from lament to thanksgiving.

Briefly summarized, Wilson and followers observe that the Book of Psalms begins with a double introduction that sets key themes: 1) blessing for the righteous and the downfall of the wicked (Psalm 1), and 2) the Lord's commitment to the Davidic kingdom (Psalm 2). Books I-III catalog the struggles of the nation and its king against a horde of enemies. Finally, the monarchy collapses at the end of Book III, documented by Psalms 88 and 89. Book IV opens with a dirge for the death of the kingdom (Psalm 90) and then turns the conversation in a surprising direction. Instead of a renewal of the kingdom like those in the new province of Persia want, the poets proclaim the reign of the Lord (Pss 93–99). Life with God is still possible, not in the resumption of an independent nation with a king from the Davidic dynasty, but under the reign of the Lord.

Before proclaiming the reign of God, however, Psalm 91 calls the reader to trust, beginning:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
 will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
 my God, in whom I trust." (91:1–2)

The psalmist continues with an evocative description of a fowler stalking the believer (91:3a), an image that quickly morphs into a deadly plague set loose in the community to punish the wicked. While thousands may fall, those who have taken refuge in the Lord find protection under the Lord's wings. Consequently, "You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked" (v. 8). Nothing can touch those in the safe refuge beneath the Lord's wings (vv. 3b, 9–10); even more, those in this refuge have no fears. They will not fear "the terror of the night" (v. 5a), "the pestilence that stalks in darkness" (v. 6a), or the "destruction that wastes at noontday" (v. 6b). A second reinforcing image emerges in verses 11–13: God commands the angels to lift and carry the believer to safety (vv. 11–12). Conse-

quently, it doesn't matter where they step, the angels will not let them stub a toe (v. 12) or be injured by stepping on adders or lions (v. 13). God's refuge means no harm and no fear.

Those who love me, I will deliver;
 I will protect those who know my name.
 When they call to me, I will answer them;
 I will be with them in trouble,
 I will rescue them and honor them.
 With long life I will satisfy them,
 and show them my salvation. (91:14–16)

From beginning to end, Psalm 91 leads the reader beleaguered by the tragedy and lament of Psalms 88–91 to trust and find refuge in the shadow of the Most High.

Then, from a position of complete trust Psalm 92 marches to the new cadence of thanksgiving:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
 to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
 to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
 and your faithfulness by night,
 to the music of the lute and the harp,
 to the melody of the lyre.
 For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
 at the works of your hands I sing for joy. (92:1–3)

Now the Psalter is surprised by the joy of new orientation—a movement that the dullard cannot understand (92:5–6). Even if the evildoers sprout and flourish for a time and the world seems upside down (as in Pss 88–90), the

Lord will bring judgment to the wicked (92:7–9) and the Lord will exalt the righteous (92:10–11). In fact, the righteous will be planted and will flourish in the house of God, living and producing fruit to an old age (92:12–14). And in all of this, the Lord will demonstrate that he is upright “and there is no unrighteousness in him” (92:15), as was claimed in the charges of Psalm 89:38–51.

So with these two psalms the Psalter invites the reader back to trust the Lord and break out in thanksgiving (in that order)—as they reimagine life and begin the hard work of adapting to a new normal, which now includes a God who reigns (Pss 93–99) and a God who said “no” and who continues to say “no” to the hopes for an independent nation under the leadership of a new Davidic king.

Conclusion

The Psalms, her poets, and redactors do not live on Fantasy Island where every wish comes true, but in the real world of disappointment and loss. This study has reconsidered this real world of the Psalms and we have reached several conclusions. First, if we understand Brueggemann’s category of New Orientation to be occupied only or solely by those surprised by joy—those who got what they wanted from God—then we need to revise our understanding of the category or find new terminology to express the most frequent encouragement in lament: the move to hope, rely, take refuge, wait, or however it might be expressed—to trust the Lord.

Second, the laments most often take believers to a place of waiting and trusting the Lord. From here, the Lord may suddenly respond to and surprise those who have taken refuge beneath his wings. Or from here, believers may be faced with a Job-like challenge: will I continue to live in trust of this God to whom I have prayed, but who says no? Will I continue to serve a God who disappoints? This is no academic or theoretical question for the people of God.

Third, this study has recognized the function of Psalms 91 and 92 in the message of the Book of Psalms. These two psalms have been something of a gap or mystery in reading the Psalter as a book. Here, however, their function matches the paradigm established by this paper, namely, the first move

after lament (Pss 88–90) is to trust (Psalm 91), followed by thanksgiving (Psalm 92)—all in view of the reign of the Lord (Pss 93–99).

Fourth and finally, we must not allow the pressure of Western optimism to push us into a misreading of the psalms and their role in the life of faith. On this point Brueggemann warned us over thirty years ago:

It is my judgment that this action of the church [singing songs of orientation in a world experienced as disoriented] is less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life. The reason for such relentless affirmation of orientation seems to come, not from faith, but from the wishful optimism of our culture.¹⁵

Brueggemann's words are equally true today in our relentless rush to answer lament with thanksgiving. The Psalms clash with our Western optimism and our gospel of health and wealth. The first movement of lament is to re-establish or reinforce trust in the Lord, without short-circuiting the life of faith by expecting a gift that may never come—an expectation that is theologically and practically dangerous. Above all else the laments create a paradigm that leads us to trust the Lord, regardless of what may or may not follow. This is the reality behind Psalm 11.

The background to Psalm 11 is not unlike the dire predictions we hear today, that every generation has heard: What are we going to do now? What if a super virus resistant to antibiotics strikes? What if another powerful terrorist group emerges? With the same anxiety, one voice in Psalm 11 has assessed the situation in Jerusalem or Samaria (or Washington, D.C.) and concluded that the foundations of society are crumbling and the righteous are in mortal danger (11:3). The wicked are marking, aiming, and about to let loose their arrows at the righteous (v. 2). Run for your life while you still can! Or, stated with more poetic beauty, "Flee like a bird to the mountains" (v. 1b). After all, if the foundations of society are crumbling, "what else can the righteous do?" (v. 3b).

Another voice speaks in Psalm 11, a voice of faith—a person who has taken refuge in the Lord (11:1a) and refuses the frenzy: "How can you say to me, 'Flee like a bird to the mountains?'" (v. 1b). This believer is not naïve or

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 51.

unable to see the troubles confronting society. In fact, this believer is the only one with vision clear enough to put matters into perspective. Only this poet sees:

The Lord is in his holy temple;
the Lord's throne is in heaven. (11:4a)

The Lord reigns. The Lord is not off on vacation while the world goes to hell in a backpack loaded with a bomb. God is watching, testing, and discerning who is righteous and wicked (vv. 4b-5). And God has his own plans for the wicked (v. 6) and the righteous (v. 7). Psalm 11 follows a path to New Orientation. But this path is not revealed in a moment of joy out of thanksgiving for prayer answered. Rather, it is found in simple trust that sees God on a throne. And that is enough to see the poet—and us—through.

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