

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF PAIN INTO PRAISE<sup>1</sup>

(Daniel J. Estes)

This paper has sought to determine in the individual lament psalms the extent to which the process of meditation by the psalmists can explain the transformation of their mood from pain to praise. In some cases clearly this transformation can be attributed to the internal theological thinking of the particular psalmist, rather than to an external cause such as an oracle of salvation by a prophet or a priest, as was contended by Begrich and adopted by many others. This theologically prompted transformation is somewhat broader than the more narrow psychological explanations championed by Wevers, Cartledge, and Kim.

This survey of the textual data in the individual lament psalms offers strong evidence that as the psalmists turned to Yahweh during their experiences of pain, they were contemplating aspects of his character, control, care, works, word, and presence. This juxtaposition suggests that the transformation from pain to praise that characterizes most of the individual laments is not primarily attributable to an external oracle of salvation uttered by a priest or prophet. Rather, the praise of the psalmists may be better explained by their internal process of meditation, as they reflect upon the significance for their experience of what Yahweh is like, how Yahweh rules over his world, how Yahweh cares for his people, what Yahweh has done and said in the past, and the abiding presence of Yahweh with them. As the psalmists contemplate these theological truths, their view of their adversities is altered as the process of meditation causes them to perceive their experience through the lens of Yahweh's attributes and activity.

We have analyzed the individual lament psalms solely as literary texts. We have asked and answered a prominent question in the history of interpretation—but the Psalms compel us to go a step further. The psalms are more than just ancient literary texts, more even than ancient religious texts. They are part of the biblical Psalter, and a testimony to the life of faith of the people of Yahweh in ancient Israel, our spiritual forebears. In the Psalms, and especially in the individual lament psalms, theology comes crashing into human experience, and in that collision the life of faith is forged.

Just as the individual lament psalms were originally composed in the context of the personal adversities of the worshipers of Yahweh nearly three thousand years ago, so God's people today are beset by a vast range of comparable problems: illness, accusation, betrayal, guilt, discouragement, fear, disappointment, heartache. For Christians in the twenty-first century, the ancient lament psalms provide patterns for dealing with their own pain and for ministering to others who are in pain.

As individual laments demonstrate, the remedy for pain is not denying its reality or resisting it by human resourcefulness alone. Rather, by following the psalmists' example of meditation upon the Lord—by pondering what he is like, how he sovereignly directs his world, his commitment to his people, his past actions, what he has communicated in his Word, and his promise always to abide with his own—we Christians today can join the psalmists of old in being transformed from our pain into praise. Believers today indeed can move from pain into praise through the process of meditation. Through meditation our faith is nurtured, drying our tears in the night so we can rejoice in the morning. In this way we can turn our mourning into dancing.



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<sup>1</sup> This is the conclusion to the longer chapter entitled "The Transformation of Pain into Praise" in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013, edited by Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr.