

## *A Theology of the Blues*

Psalm 77

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Harbor Church

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*This sermon was given in conjunction with a performance by blues artist Robert Hill. The worship included readings of laments, Psalms 10 and 77, Walter Brueggemann's prayer "[Against a Closed Sky](#)" and my "[Psalm](#)" (2001).*

Is there a place for sad songs in church? Most of the time, you would not think so. Church is for happy songs, for praising God. I myself have preached on the importance of learning to praise, centering yourself on God and enjoying God. But is that all that is allowed? Can you sing something like this Muddy Waters song, "I Be's Troubled"?

*Well [if] I feel tomorrow*

*Like I feel today*

*[I'm] gonna pack my suitcase*

*And make my getaway.*

*Lord, I'm troubled, I'm all worried in my mind.*

*And I've never been satisfied, And I just can't keep from cryin'.*

Back in the '70's the blind songwriter Ken Medema used to sing about the church, "If this is not a place where tears are understood, where do I go to cry?" Is this a place for tears—or a place where you have to put on your smiley face, where everybody is just fine and all our children are above average?

Singing the blues has never really found a home in the church. Thomas Dorsey is often called "the father of gospel music," and you probably know his song "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." But Dorsey was also a blues singer. And he accepted the dichotomy of his day between gospel music and the blues. Gospel music was for church, and it was hopeful, while the blues was for the bar or the street corner, and it was hopeless and low down and sometimes dirty. Dorsey thought of gospel music as his good side and the blues as his bad side, and he felt torn between the two, resolving to do all gospel and then backsliding into the blues. But at one point he observed that "there are 'moanin' blues' in the spirituals, and there are spirituals in the 'moanin blues.'"

Can a Christian sing the blues? Is it ever an act of faith to cry out like the Allman Brothers, "Sometimes I feel like I've been tied to a whipping post, tied to a whipping post, tied to a whipping post. Oh Lord, I feel like I'm dying"?

In the contemporary church everything is supposed to be upbeat. Everything negative is supposed to be left outside while we accentuate the positive. But there is a Jewish tradition we have lost touch with that may be deeper and more deeply human than the way we worship now. It is a tradition of lament, of complaining to God, of challenging God to act and expressing frustration with God's slowness.

If you look through the book of Psalms you see that praise music and the blues appear side by side. For example, across the page from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, that favorite expression of confident trust in God, there is the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, the ultimate blues song, a cry Jesus echoed from the cross:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from helping me,*

from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day and you do not answer,  
and by night, but find no rest.

Do we ever sing *that* in church? The Israelites did. The book of Psalms is not a collection of private confessional poems written for the poet and a few friends. The book of Psalms in the hymnal of the temple. It is a book of congregational worship. So the people would sing not only “The Lord is my shepherd” but also “Why have you forsaken me.” They brought not only their praises into God’s presence, but also their anger and disappointment.

Today we do not allow that. Walter Brueggemann, the leading American Old Testament scholar, has said, “I think that serious religious use of the lament psalms has been minimized because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and enter into negativity. We have thought that acknowledgement of negativity was somehow an act of unfaith.” He says that the psalms of lament are included in the Bible as a kind of “script for learning how to speak what we were never permitted to say.” We would never let ourselves say “Why have you forsaken me?”—which is a question the blues asks over and over—but God himself has given us those words in the Psalms so that we might find the courage to use them in honest conversation with God.

Do you ever pray a bluesy prayer? Is there any room for that in how you were taught to pray? Some of us learned a model for prayer with the outline ACTS—one that’s been useful for me over the years. “A” is for adoration; you begin with praising God and expressing love. “C” is for confession of your own sin and asking for forgiveness. “T” is for thanksgiving for all God’s blessings. Then and only then are you ready for “S,” which is for supplication, asking for what you need. In general it’s a good idea not to jump right into the asking mode at the beginning but to focus on who God is first, but often it is desperate need that drives us to prayer, so we just cry out “Help!” But there is something missing in ACTS. There is no room for complaint. If the Psalms are the schoolhouse of prayer, we seem to have missed a lesson. The Psalms teach us over and over that it is OK to tell God how bad you feel. The Psalms teach us that the blues are a normal part of the life of faith.

The Christian rock star Bono said that he began to idolize David when he was 12 years old. He said David was among the first blues singers. It was the dark psalms of discontent and disorientation that spoke to Bono the most deeply, and continue to speak to him. Bono wrote a preface to a new edition of the Psalms and said, “That’s what a whole lot of the psalms feel like to me—the blues.”

On Thursday nights we’ve been learning about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and teacher who opposed the Nazis. Bonhoeffer wrote a book on the Psalms called *The Prayerbook of the Bible* in which he pointed out that

The Psalms know it all: serious illness, deep isolation from God and humanity, threats, persecution, imprisonment, and whatever conceivable peril there is on earth. They do not deny it, they do not deceive themselves with pious words about it, they allow it to stand as a severe ordeal of faith, indeed at times they no longer see beyond the suffering, but they complain about it all to God (p. 169).

I have had very few models in my life of people of prayer who complained about their suffering to God. Most of the people I took as models did not complain, and I admired that. Sometimes my mother did complain in her prayers, but she did it in a private way, in poems that I didn’t see until years later. One pastor I admired as a teenager [John Claypool] lost a daughter to leukemia and dared to complain to God, writing a book called *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*—

but he was a rarity. Most Christians I knew either accepted what happened as God's will or tried to find a silver lining in every tornado. And I don't think anyone I knew—except C. S. Lewis, at the time—was honest about how God felt far away and they felt their prayers never got beyond the ceiling.

Psalm 77 says about as directly as possible what I sometimes felt in secret:

I think of God, and I moan;

I meditate, and my spirit faints.

“You,” he says to God person-to-person, “you keep me awake at night. I am so troubled that I cannot speak.” The psalmist asks, “Will the Lord spurn me forever? Are his promises at an end for all time?” And he concludes, “It is my grief that God has changed.” This blues song does not stop there, however. It has a second half in which the singer decides to think back on what God did in the old days. It is an expression of faith, but I think there is a wistfulness there and an unspoken question: “Why don't you do things like that today?” But the singer notes in the last stanza that even when God led the people through the mighty waters, God's footprints were unseen. Maybe God is leading us now, but we can't see it.

I want to list for you four things that the psalms and the blues model about the spiritual life.

1. **Facing reality.** We are never going to get anywhere in our spiritual lives if we are not dealing with reality. Once Johnnie Billington was asked “What is the blues?” and he answered, “The blues is truth.” In the church, Walter Brueggemann says, we are constantly schooled in denial. We are taught to deny the pain in our own hearts because—what?—we might look like we don't have faith? we might hurt God's feelings?
2. **Being honest with God.** The only path to a deeper relationship with God takes us through a process of removing our masks and getting down to what we really feel and really believe. If the blues teach us anything, it's honesty about our feelings. Blind Willie Johnson was blinded accidentally as a boy when his mother was trying to throw lye on his father. He was an early blues singer who was clearly a Christian. Listen to these words as a prayer:  
*When my heart's full of sorrow and my eyes are filled with tears  
Lord, I just can't keep from crying sometimes  
My mother often told me, angels bonded your life away  
She said I would accomplish, but trust in God and pray  
I'm on the King's Highway, I'm travelin' everyday,  
But I just can't keep from crying sometimes.*
3. **Talking to God when he seems to be absent.** You notice in all the complaints to God, the psalmists are still talking to God even while complaining that God is not there. It is not crazy to talk to someone who is not there. It is, in a paradoxical way, faithful, hoping that somehow the absentee God will get your message, and assuming that somehow underneath all his inaction God really does care. In Psalm 56:6 (NLT) the singer says to God, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” God is not solving all our problems. God is not always making his present felt. But God is keeping track of our sorrows.
4. **Finding healing in expressing sadness and anger in a community.** You know, when you sing the blues it makes you feel better. People listening to Robert sing these sad songs on Friday night felt happy. It's a strange thing, but when we find the courage to express our sadness in the setting of a community of listeners, we find healing in that. You don't have to sing it, either. When we find the courage to express in the presence of people we trust that we

are finding it hard to trust God, some bridges are built. When we tell our friends in Christ that we are angry at God and they are not blown away, we begin to learn that God can take our anger, too.

As an old James Taylor song put it, “Everybody has the blues. Everybody gets to sit and cry. Everybody gets to wonder why. Everybody gets to watch the sky turn gray.” The church is not a community of people who have been able to avoid the blues. We are a community of people who face the blues together. We are a community that sings the blues along with songs of praise, knowing that they are two sides of a relationship with a living God. We sing in the hope that Jesus knows all about our troubles, that Jesus knows what it is to feel even the absence of God, that he knows what it is to be tired, and tired of people. So we cast our burdens on him—in all honesty, holding nothing back—because he cares for us.