

“Consolation for the Despairing”:  
C. H. Spurgeon’s Endorsement of Lament Psalms  
in Public Worship<sup>1</sup>

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This article forms part of a work that has as one of its aims, to encourage the rediscovery of the lament psalms in the life of the church. At first glance, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), a preacher from the 19th century, may seem like an unlikely candidate to help us with this project. His life and ministry have become legendary and Spurgeon has often been called “the Prince of Preachers.”<sup>2</sup> The growth of New Park Street Baptist Church from approximately 230 members when Spurgeon, “the boy preacher,” became the Pastor at 19 years of age, to a size of approximately 6,000 at each service in the Metropolitan Tabernacle is widely known. This phenomenal growth, together with Spurgeon’s renowned personal oversight of numerous other ministries such as the Pastor’s College, an orphanage, a Colportage Society, and his prolific writing, has meant that his story has often been told with an accent on the extent and successes of his ministry and a sense of wonder at what God can do.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a longer version of the chapter, “Consolation for the Despairing”: C. H. Spurgeon’s Endorsement of Lament Psalms in Public Worship” in *Finding Lost Words: The Church’s Right to Lament* (eds. G. G. Harper and K. Barker; Australian College of Theology Monograph Series; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017, pp. 37–51. I am grateful to Zack Eswine, Christian George, David Music, and Tom Nettles for taking the time to read and provide feedback on a previous draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> See the excellent overviews of Spurgeon’s life and ministries in Drummond, *Spurgeon*, and Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*.

<sup>3</sup> Morden, P. J. “C. H. Spurgeon and Suffering,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 35 (2011): 307, makes this observation. For Spurgeon’s many benevolent

Spurgeon's life, however, was also characterized by much suffering and anguish.<sup>4</sup> Serious effects of kidney disease, the stress of needing funds for the many ministries he oversaw, concern for the well-being of his frequently ill and bed-ridden wife, Susannah, as well as his own insomnia and depression, were regular features of his life. Spurgeon spoke openly about his physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish, including his depression.<sup>5</sup> Spurgeon's depression related in part to the physical suffering he endured, but is also traceable to his distress over the Surrey Gardens Music Hall tragedy in October 1856, when seven people died and many others were injured, because of a prankster's shout of "fire." The sight of seeing the crowd fleeing in panic and people trampled to death at one of his services, haunted Spurgeon for the rest of his life.<sup>6</sup>

Given this life-long experience of suffering in various forms, it is perhaps not surprising to find that Spurgeon regularly preached on what we today call the lament psalms.<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon obviously loved the psalms, as his twenty-year, seven-volume "magnum opus" commentary on the psalms, *The Treasury of David*, makes clear. Spurgeon also loved applying the psalms to the needs of his flock. Far from avoiding lament, Spurgeon sought to help his congregation appreciate the value and benefits of

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ministries see Drummond, *Spurgeon*, 393–441; Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*, 339–92.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*, 595–665, see Morden, "Suffering," 306–25.

<sup>5</sup> See also Eswine, Z. *Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer from Depression*, (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2014), and Skoglund, E. R. *Bright Days, Dark Nights: With Charles Spurgeon in Triumph over Emotional Pain*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000 [reprint Wipf and Stock, 2014].

<sup>6</sup> Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*, 597–99; Morden, "Suffering," 309–10.

<sup>7</sup> As well as preaching a sermon, Spurgeon often read a passage of Scripture along with verse-by-verse comments. These "expositions" were often published at the end of his weekly sermons in *The Sword and the Trowel*. Spurgeon often preached numerous times on the same lament psalm. For example in Spurgeon, C. H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1861–1917), hereafter abbreviated as *MTP*) there are at least four "expositions" and another four sermons on Psalm 77 (a psalm that Spurgeon believed reflected his own experience; see Morden, "Suffering," 311), and four expositions and three sermons on Psalm 39.

lament psalms in their own personal lives and in their congregational worship. This article will show, therefore, that Spurgeon brought before his congregation the value and benefits of these psalms of sorrow by (1) explaining that it is good and necessary to hear lament psalms in church; (2) encouraging the congregation to follow the pattern of the lament psalms in taking their cries and sorrows to the Lord; (3) reassuring the congregation that such laments are the experience of all true believers; and (4) helping the congregation to apply the pattern of the lament psalms in congregational singing. Thus, as we sample Spurgeon's sermons and "expositions" on lament psalms our focus will not be on his exegesis of the psalms, the content of his sermons, or even his teaching on a theology of suffering. Rather, we will observe how this 19th century psalm-loving and suffering shepherd used lament psalms in church life and showed his congregation the value and benefits of these psalms of sorrow.<sup>8</sup>

### **Spurgeon Oriented His Congregation to the Benefits of Sorrowful Psalms**

Spurgeon recognized that many in the congregation would prefer to have more joyful topics of sermons and therefore needed to be oriented to the benefits of reflecting on grief and sorrow in the lament psalms. Thus, often in the introductions and conclusions to his sermons or expositions of these psalms Spurgeon explains to his congregation that it is good to reflect on such psalms. For instance in his sermon on Psalm 39:6–8 Spurgeon opens with the following:

These are solemn words. Sometimes we have a more joyful theme than this; but I believe that, spiritually, as well as naturally, it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. A meditation of a quiet kind, on things not as they are in fiction, but as they prove to be in fact, is always salutary. There is a great mass of sorrow in the world; and all of us meet with something every now and then to calm our spirit, and cool our blood. So, tonight ... by the blessing of God's Spirit, we may go away even more lastingly

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<sup>8</sup> The following survey primarily refers to Psalms 25, 31, 39, 42, 69, 70, 83, 88, and 120.

refreshed than if our hearts were made to leap for joy by meditation upon some transporting theme.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Spurgeon introduces his broader exposition of the psalm with this encouragement: "David was in a great heat of spirit, and much tried, when he wrote this Psalm. There is little that is cheerful in it, yet there is much that may cheer us. Sometimes, when we are unusually thoughtful, we are more likely to be blessed than at other times. Specific gravity is better than specific levity; there are some who have a great deal of the latter quality." In his concluding summary Spurgeon again affirms: "There is much sweet comfort here, though the Psalm reads like a dirge, rather than a hymn. God give us, if we are obliged to sing such words as these, to sing them with a full belief that the Lord will hear us, and will bless our trials to us, and make them work our lasting good!"<sup>10</sup>

In another introduction to this psalm he refers to the variety of life's experiences and how David's psalms reflect those experiences. Sometimes David was very joyful and he wrote joyful psalms. Sometimes, however, "he was very sad, and then he touched the mournful string." "This is a very sorrowful Psalm," Spurgeon noted, "but" he quickly adds, "it is full of teaching." Spurgeon concludes this exposition by affirming, "So, you see, this is a sweet Psalm after all; it is a bitter sweet, a sweet bitter, a Psalm that tends towards our spiritual health."<sup>11</sup> In these introductions and conclusions we get the sense that Spurgeon acknowledges the reluctance of some to hear an exposition on sorrow and mourning and reassures them that there is much to gain from such expositions.

On other occasions Spurgeon orients his congregation to the lament by providing possible justifications for the psalmist's lament before expounding the text. For example, in introducing his sermon on Psalm 120:5, Spurgeon notes that his outline is: "on this occasion, first, to say *a word or two in justification of the psalmist's complaint*; secondly, to justify *God's dealings with us in having subjected us to this dwelling in the tents of Mesech*; and thirdly, *a few words, by way of comfort, to those who are sad at*

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<sup>9</sup> *MTP*, vol. 40 (1894), 49 ("Earth's Vanities and Heaven's Verities;" preached Nov 7, 1889).

<sup>10</sup> *MTP*, vol. 40 (1894), 58, 60.

<sup>11</sup> *MTP*, vol. 40 (1894), 572-76.

*heart, by reason of those ill times, and those ill places, in which they abide.*" Then, as he begins his first point justifying the psalmist's complaint, he declares: "I will say, and must say, that it is not only excusable, but scarcely needs an apology, for that Christian man sometimes to cry out, "My soul is weary, I am almost weary of my life ...."<sup>12</sup>

Many times Spurgeon explains that his own calling as a shepherd of the flock and his responsibility to comfort those in the congregation who are in grief or despair is the reason why he must speak on a lament psalm. In these comments Spurgeon anticipates a potential objection from some in the congregation to a sermon that focuses on sorrow. For example, he begins his sermon on Psalm 31:22 with the following rationale:

I desire at this time to speak to those who are much depressed in spirit, the sons of despondency and daughters of mourning, who dwell upon the dreary confines of despair. It may seem objectionable among so large an audience to address my discourse to a class so comparatively small, but I must leave it to your compassion to excuse me; nay, I think I need hardly do that, but may urge as my apology the nature of my calling.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in his introduction to his exposition of Psalm 88 Spurgeon explains:

I think that this is the darkest of all the Psalms; it has hardly a spot of light in it. The only bright words that I know of are in the first verse; the rest of the Psalm, is very dark, and very dreary. Why, then, am I going to read it? Because, it may be, there is some poor heart here that is very heavy; you cannot tell out of this great crowd how many sorrowing and burdened spirits there may be amongst us; but

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<sup>12</sup> *MTP*, vol. 48 (1902), 242. See also *MTP*, vol. 48 (1902), 457 (on Psalm 42:6). Spurgeon also followed the pattern of the psalmists in noting the many and varied potential causes of sorrow and depression, including physical and constitutional elements, and thus the many potential helps for sorrowful saints. See Eswine, *Spurgeon's Sorrows*; Skoglund, *Bright Days, Dark Nights*.

<sup>13</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 685 ("Consolation for the Despairing;" preached Dec 7, 1873).

there may be a dozen or two of persons who are driven almost to despair.<sup>14</sup>

Spurgeon recognizes that his calling is not only to minister to those in the congregation who may be presently going through these sorrows, but also to prepare others for the time when they will experience such grief. This is the way he introduces his sermon on Psalm 88:7, with an eye toward those who think it may be inappropriate to have a “discourse upon sorrow.” It is worth quoting this introduction in full:

It is the business of a shepherd not only to look after the happy ones among the sheep, but to seek after the sick of the flock, and to lay himself out right earnestly for their comfort and succour. I feel, therefore, that I do rightly when I this morning make it my special business to speak to such as are in trouble. Those of you who are happy and rejoicing in God, full of faith and assurance, can very well spare a discourse for your weaker brethren; you can be even glad and thankful to go without your portion, that those who are depressed in spirit may receive a double measure of the wine of consolation. Moreover, I am not sure that even the most joyous Christian is any the worse for remembering the days of darkness which are stealing on apace, “for they are many.” Just as the memories of our dying friends come o’er us like a cloud, and “damp our brainless ardours,” so will the recollection that there are tribulations and afflictions in the world sober our rejoicing, and prevent its degenerating into an idolatry of the things of time and sense. It is better for many reasons to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting ...; it will work thee no ill. It may be, O thou who art today brimming with happiness, that a little store of sacred cautions and consolations may prove no sore to thee, but may by-and-by stand thee in good stead. This morning’s discourse upon sorrow may suggest a few

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<sup>14</sup> *MTP*, vol. 41 (1895), 478–80. Later in this exposition, Spurgeon again notes: “This subject may not interest some of you, just now; but it is here, so we must mention it; and it may be wanted even by you one of these days .... The day may come when you will turn to this Psalm with the two eights to it, and find comfort in it because it describes your case also.” A similar explanation is found in the conclusion to this exposition.

thoughts to thee which, being treasured up, shall ripen like summer fruit, and mellow by the time thy winter shall come round.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Spurgeon often orients his congregation to the benefits of these lament psalms, explaining that it is good to examine these psalms of sorrow. It is an opportunity and indeed obligation of Spurgeon's as their shepherd to comfort the afflicted and strengthen others for the day of affliction. These psalms are, however, not only beneficial to reflect on, they direct us in expressing grief.

### **Spurgeon Encouraged his Congregation to Follow the Pattern of the Psalmists by Taking Their Cries to the Lord**

Many times Spurgeon explained the benefit of lament psalms by encouraging his congregation to follow the example of the psalmists in expressing their grief. "We all know," Spurgeon reasoned in his exposition of Psalm 39, "that, unless our grief can find expression, it swells and grows till our heart is ready to break. We have heard of a wise physician who bade a man in great trouble weep as much as ever he could. 'Do not restrain your grief,' he said, 'but let it all out.' He felt that only in that way would the poor sufferer's heart be kept from breaking."<sup>16</sup>

Spurgeon also spoke specifically of the tears of those expressing their sorrow. In "Consolation for the Despairing" (on Psalm 31:22) Spurgeon notes that "when David feared that he was cut off from God, he was wise enough to take to crying. He [David] calls prayer crying." Spurgeon then extols the benefits of such an expression of grief from this lament psalm: "Crying is the language of pain; pain cannot cumber itself with letters and syllables and words, and so it takes its own way, and adopts a piercing mode of utterance, very telling and expressive. Crying yields great relief to suffering. Everyone knows the benefit of having a hearty good cry: you cannot help calling it 'a good cry,' for, though one would think crying could never be especially good, yet it affords a desirable relief. Red eyes often relieve breaking hearts."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 13 ("For the Troubled;" preached Jan 12, 1873).

<sup>16</sup> *MTP*, vol. 57 (1911), 46.

<sup>17</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 693 ("Consolation for the Despairing;" preached Dec 7, 1873).

The example of the psalmists' laments that Spurgeon particularly emphasizes, however, was that they expressed their grief to the Lord. Spurgeon encourages his congregation, therefore, to see from these lament psalms that their expression of sorrow is more than a hopeless exercise of merely expressing grief. In "Consolation for the Despairing" Spurgeon adds that "according to our text this cry was addressed to the Lord .... It is important to observe that he cried to the Lord, even though he thought himself cut off from hope .... Ah, soul, if thou be in despair, yet resolve to pour out thy heart before thy God." For those who say "Oh, I cannot pray," Spurgeon replies, "My dear friend, can you cry? .... If you cannot say it in words, tell it with your tears, your groans, your sighs, your sobs .... Never is a child in such a bad plight that it cannot cry. It never says, 'Mother, it is so dark I cannot see to cry;' no, no, the child cries in the dark. And are you in the dark, and in terrible doubt and trouble? Then cry away, my dear friend, cry away, cry away; your Father will hear and deliver you."<sup>18</sup>

Spurgeon regularly applies the example of the psalmist's expression of sorrow before the Lord to the sorrowful believer in his congregation. In his sermon on Psalm 25:19 Spurgeon observes that David asked the Lord "to look, not only upon the trouble, but also upon the misery which the trouble caused him." "So here," Spurgeon continues, "we may bring before God's notice, not only our trial, but the inward anguish which the trial occasions us."<sup>19</sup> This parallel between the psalmist and the grieving believer in Spurgeon's congregation is made regularly throughout the sermon. "It was to God that David took his sorrow .... Observe then, *we must take our sorrows to God.*" Spurgeon contrasts this with taking our

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 693–94. It is also true that Spurgeon noted David's own faults, particularly when David himself identified them, such as, "I said in my haste" (Psalm 31:22). On this occasion Spurgeon notes, "it is well to follow David, but it is better to follow David's son; ... Do not let us imitate David in his speaking in haste, or in his saying, 'I am cut off from before thine eyes;' but at the same time let us take care that we closely copy him in confessing conscious fault, as he here does; in crying to God in the hour of trouble, as he tells us he did; and also in bearing witness to the exceeding goodness of God, notwithstanding our faultiness, as he here bears witness when he says, 'Nevertheless thou heardest the voice of my supplications when I cried unto thee.'" *MTP*, vol. 27 (1881), 158 ("A Hasty Expression Penitently Retracted").

<sup>19</sup> *MTP*, vol. 13 (1867), 157 ("A Troubled Prayer").

sorrows to our neighbors and instead urges that we must make it a rule to bring them before God first: “Your little sorrows you may take to God, for he counteth the hairs of your head: your great sorrows you may take to God, for he holdeth the world in the hollow of his hand. Go to him, whatever your present trouble may be, and you shall find him able and willing to relieve you.” Again, later in the same sermon, Spurgeon tenderly urges the sorrowful (and even suicidal) believer to take their grief to God:

[W]e may further say that *the most sorrowful and the most sinful are welcome to the Lord Jesus*. The most sorrowful may come; I mean those in despair, those who are at their wits’ ends, those poor souls who, through superabundant difficulty are ready to do the most unreasonable things—ready, it may even be, to give way to that wicked, Satanic temptation of rushing from this present life into a world unknown by their own hand. Go, sorrowful one, go now to Jesus, whose tender heart will feel for you. Has your friend forsaken you? Have your lover and your acquaintance become your enemies? Seek no human sympathy just now, but first and foremost, in a flood of tears, reveal your case to the great invisible helper. Kneel down and tell him all that racks your spirit and fills your tortured mind, and plead the promise that he will be with you, and you shall find him true though all else be false.<sup>20</sup>

In his many expositions and sermons on Psalm 39:4 Spurgeon observes that David’s expression of grief begins with “Lord.” He encourages his congregation to follow this same pattern. “That was a good beginning of David’s speech,” argues Spurgeon. “When we turn our burning words towards God, and not towards men, good will come of them. David’s hot heart finds a vent Godward. This was the wisest thing that he could do, cry unto his God, “Lord.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly in preaching on Psalm 39:4 Spurgeon exhorted, “if we are the subjects of the same infirmity as these godly men of old, we must flee where they fled for strength to grapple with these infirmities and overcome them. We must look to the strong for strength

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>21</sup> *MTP*, vol. 55 (1909), 21. See also *MTP*, vol. 40 (1894), 573 (both are expositions).

....”<sup>22</sup> In this sense Spurgeon often spoke of prayer as the resort of the Christian “in every plight.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Spurgeon recommends the lament of the psalmist in Psalm 69:14 because “You cannot be in any condition of poverty, or sickness, or obscurity, or slander, or doubt, or even sin, but still it is true that your God will welcome your prayer at any time and in every place.” Even in extreme weakness, Spurgeon urges his hearers, “although you can scarcely bend your knee, and are almost afraid to utter words once dear to you, yet your soul desires, pants, hungers, thirsts, and that is the ... very marrow and essence of prayer. Sobs and looks are prayers.”<sup>24</sup>

In his sermon, “Heman’s Sorrowful Psalm” (on Psalm 88), Spurgeon notes that Heman “seems to have been brought about as low as a man can be brought.” Nevertheless, even in this, “the darkest of all the Psalms,” Spurgeon observes, “there was this fact in his favour, he continued praying.” Thus, far from being a negative example, Spurgeon urged his audience, “if you would pray aright, you will do wisely to copy the writer of this Psalm; and first, *tell the Lord your case*.”<sup>25</sup> In pouring out their sorrows before the Lord, Spurgeon encourages his congregation that “Your eyes shall aid you with their liquid pleas, your breath shall assist you as you sigh and sob, every part of your being shall help you as you stretch out your hands unto God. The best prayer is, like a cry, the most natural expression of the sorrow and the need of the heart. Come like that to God ....” Again, Spurgeon notes, “[t]he psalmist says that he

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<sup>22</sup> *MTP*, vol. 60 (1914), 325–26 (“Brief Life is Here our Portion;” on Psalm 39:4). Spurgeon later again speaks of the lament psalm as instruction (“let us go to God with the prayer of the Psalmist”).

<sup>23</sup> *MTP*, vol. 11 (1865), 299 (“The Believer Sinking in the Mire;” on Psalm 69:14).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Spurgeon often speaks of our various weaknesses and inability to manage the griefs of life on our own as an encouragement to take our sorrows to the Lord. E.g., page 289 in this sermon, and *MTP*, vol. 48 (1902), 464 (“Sweet Stimulants for the Fainting Soul;” on Psalm 42:6; preached “in the winter of 1860”).

<sup>25</sup> Spurgeon continues by noting the example of Heman. “In this Psalm, Heman makes a map of his life’s history, he puts down all the dark places through which he has travelled. He mentions his sins, his sorrows, his hopes (if he had any), his fears, his woes, and so on.” Then Spurgeon urges, lay “your case before the Lord. Go to your chamber, and shut to your door, and tell the Lord all about yourself. Do you lack words? Well then, use no words.”

cried day and night *before God* .... Praying is not whistling to the winds, it is crying before God,—speaking to God.”<sup>26</sup>

For Spurgeon, not only does God hear the grieving cries of his people, God is the only one we can cry to because in his sovereignty these trials ultimately come from God.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in his sermon “For the Troubled” (on Psalm 88:7) Spurgeon notes that Heman not only cries out to the Lord, “[h]e traces all his adversity to the Lord his God. It is God’s wrath, they are God’s waves that afflict him, and God makes them afflict him.” Spurgeon speaks of secondary causes and “the more immediate agent of our grief.” Yet, he urges the believer to remember that “all that thou art suffering of any sort, or kind, comes to thee from the divine hand.” Thus, the call to “cast your burden on the Lord” is something that is easier to do “when you see that the burden came originally from God.”<sup>28</sup>

Confidence in God’s sovereignty and power, however, was no deterrent to earnest prayer. In fact, in addition to the cries and pleas of the psalmists, Spurgeon often noted their earnest engagement with God in prayer. In the introduction to his sermon on Psalm 39:12 Spurgeon observes, “If you read the whole verse, you will see that David used these words as an argument in prayer.” This pattern is also to be emulated by the grieving believer. “It is a grand thing to be able to argue with God in prayer .... it is by well-grounded arguments that we must wrestle with him until we prevail. Expectancy puts in the wedge, but it is solid argument that drives it home. When we want to obtain any mercy from the Lord, we must support our plea by reasons drawn from his nature, his promises, and the experiences of his children as recorded in his Word.” After noting the examples of Luther and the apostle Paul, Spurgeon then adds, “Let it be so with you also, beloved; besiege the throne of grace with the most powerful arguments you can find in the heavenly armoury ....”<sup>29</sup>

In his exposition of Psalm 88, Spurgeon notes how the psalmist pleads with God. Such pleading is not a lack of faith or unbecoming of a

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<sup>26</sup> *MTP*, vol. 41 (1895), 469–71 (“Heman’s Sorrowful Psalm;” preached Sept 25, 1887).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Morden, “Suffering,” 311, 313.

<sup>28</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 13–24 (“For the Troubled;” preached Jan 12, 1873). Though Spurgeon explains that God’s “judicial anger” and punishment for sin have been laid upon Christ in the believer’s place (p. 18).

<sup>29</sup> *MTP*, vol. 57 (1911), 37 (“Strangers and Sojourners;” preached Nov 5, 1863).

believer, rather, “[p]rayer is always best when it rises to pleading. The man who understands the sacred art of prayer becomes a special pleader with God.” Regarding verse 14, Spurgeon states, “Note again the earnestness of the psalmist’s pleadings. We have had many of them already; each verse has, I think, had at least two pleadings in it. If thou wouldst be heard with God, take care that thou dost reason with him, and press thine arguments with the Most High. He delights in this exercise of persevering supplication which will take no denial.” Spurgeon’s concluding comments on his exposition of Psalm 88 commend the psalm as an example of persevering prayer and thus the psalmist is “a pattern to us” in continuing to pray “even when he did not seem to be heard.”<sup>30</sup>

Spurgeon therefore often encouraged his congregation to see the benefit of lament psalms in providing a pattern to follow in the expression of their grief. He encouraged them to follow this pattern and take their sorrows to their sovereign Lord and Savior.

### **Spurgeon Reassured his Congregation That Such Laments are the Experience of True Believers**

In addition to regularly encouraging believers to follow the pattern of the psalmists in pouring out their griefs to the Lord, Spurgeon regularly reassures his congregation that such psalms show that these sorrows and trials are no sign of their inferior status. Along with numerous references to David as a type of Jesus as “the man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,”<sup>31</sup> Spurgeon regularly refers to the examples of Luther, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and his own personal weakness to reassure his congregation that the cries of these lament psalms are common in the lives of Christians. While recognizing that there are more than laments in the psalter, and that there are more emotions than sorrow in the Christian life, Spurgeon encouraged his congregation to see

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>31</sup> *MTP*, vol. 48 (1902), 249 (on Psalm 120:5). See e.g., “Tears have ever had great prevalence with God. Christ used these sacred weapons when, ‘with strong crying and tears,’ he prayed to his Father in Gethsemane.” *MTP*, vol. 57 (1911), 48 (exposition of Psalm 39:10–12). Likewise in his introduction to the exposition of Psalm 39 as a “sorrowful Psalm,” Spurgeon calls David “the type of Christ, in whose great heart the joys and sorrows of humanity met to the full.” *MTP*, vol. 40 (1894), 572. Cf. also Morden, “Suffering,” 313–14.

that one significant benefit of the lament psalms is that they help to assure the sorrowing and burdened believer that “somebody else has been just where you are.”<sup>32</sup>

In his sermon on Psalm 69:14 Spurgeon draws a deliberate link between the psalmist and the experiences of believers to reassure his congregation. “True believers, beloved, are sometimes in deep mire, and in fear of being swallowed up.” Spurgeon then notes, “This was the state and condition of the Psalmist when he wrote this psalm.” This then becomes the basis for his outline of this sermon.<sup>33</sup> Later in this same sermon Spurgeon regularly notes his own struggles with doubts and temptations, and that these are in fact the regular experience of ministers as well.

If I were only to reveal my own struggles and conflicts with Satan, I might stagger some of you; but this I know, that no Christian minister will ever be able to enter into the trials and experiences of God’s people, unless he has stood foot to foot with the arch fiend, and wrestled with the prince of hell. Martin Luther was right when he said that temptation and adversity were the two best books in his library.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, in his sermon, “Consolation for the Despairing” (on Psalm 31:22), Spurgeon reassures his congregation that despair is not the lot of just some disobedient or unbelieving Christians:

Yet this bitter sorrow has been endured by not a few of the best of men. If it could be said that only those Christians who walk at a distance from Christ, or those who are inconsistent in life, or those who are but little in prayer, have felt in this way, then, indeed, there would be cause for the gravest disquietude; but it is a matter of fact that some of the choicest spirits among the Lord’s elect have passed

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<sup>32</sup> *MTP*, vol. 41 (1895), 478 (introduction to the exposition of Psalm 88).

<sup>33</sup> E.g., “*first, that the true believer may be in the mire, and very near sinking; secondly, that the true believer may be in such a condition that God alone can deliver him; and thirdly, that in whatever condition the believer may be, prayer is evermore his safe refuge.*” *MTP*, vol. 11 (1865), 289, 290 (“The Believer Sinking in the Mire”).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 293. See also the reference to this saying of Luther in the sermon “For the Troubled” (on Psalm 88:7), *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 22.

through the Valley of Humiliation, and even sojourned there by the month together. Saints who are now among the brightest in heaven, have yet in their day sat weeping at the gates of despair, and asked for the crumbs which the dogs eat under the master's table. Read the life of Martin Luther .... Do not condemn yourself, my dear sister, do not cast yourself away, my dear brother, because your faith endures many conflicts, and your spirits sink very low.<sup>35</sup>

In speaking of the frailty of life at the conclusion to his sermon on Psalm 83:16, Spurgeon identifies with the congregation as he speaks movingly of how many of his close friends have died suddenly, some during that very week. In his closing words Spurgeon tenderly adds, "I seem to feel more than ever I did that I am living in a dying world. It might have been any one of you, it might have been myself. Come, then, and let us all seek the Lord at once; let us each one seek him now."<sup>36</sup>

Spurgeon shows his congregation that these sorrowful psalms are beneficial in large part because they reassure the grieving believer that they are not alone, nor are their sorrows a sign of inferior status. Rather, they provide reassurance that even "the best child of God may be the greatest sufferer."<sup>37</sup>

### **Spurgeon Encouraged the Use of Lament Psalms in Congregational Worship**

Spurgeon recognized of course that there are many joyful psalms and reasons to sing for joy. In keeping with Spurgeon's repeated

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<sup>35</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 688 ("Consolation for the despairing;" preached Dec 7, 1873).

<sup>36</sup> *MTP*, vol. 42 (1896), 548 ("Shame Leading to Salvation;" preached Oct 31, 1886). Similarly in his exposition of Psalm 120 Spurgeon identifies with the distress and helplessness of being slandered, and therefore that cries to God is the only source of Strength. See *MTP*, vol. 58 (1912), 480.

<sup>37</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 14 ("For the Troubled;" preached Jan 12, 1873). Similarly, this sorrowful psalm teaches that "the best of God's servants may be brought into the very lowest estate" (p. 13). It is also true that at times Spurgeon's application comes across as harsh. In his sermon "A Call to the Depressed" it appears that he changes tone from sharp critique to tender understanding in the last quarter of the sermon. See Eswine, *Spurgeon's Sorrows*, 52–53.

explanations of the benefits of lament psalms and reasons for preaching on the lament psalms, however, it is not surprising that Spurgeon also recognized the value of lament psalms in congregational singing as part of the congregation's worship. Thus, when he introduces his sermon, "For the Troubled," Spurgeon directs his congregation to notice that from this passage "we learn that sons of God may be brought so low as to write and sing psalms which are sorrowful throughout, and have no fitting accompaniment but sighs and groans .... their songs are generally like those of David, which if they begin in the dust mount into the clear heavens before long; but sometimes, I say, saints are forced to sing such dolorous ditties that from beginning to end there is not one note of joy."<sup>38</sup>

Similarly when introducing his sermon "Consolation for the Despairing" (on Psalm 31:22) he argues that he has scriptural warrant for speaking to a congregation that is mostly filled with "joyous hearts" on a psalm that is largely sorrowful because it was intended for public worship. The reason for this is because this psalm, "as do several others which are even more full of grief," bears the inscription, "To the chief Musician." Spurgeon concludes: "If, therefore, griefs which to the full could only be known by a few, were nevertheless to be made the subject of public psalmody, I am quite sure they ought not to be passed over in public ministry."<sup>39</sup>

Although Spurgeon's preaching ministry is widely known, it is less commonly known that he took a special interest in music and even composed some hymns.<sup>40</sup> Spurgeon compiled the hymnal *Our Own Hymn-Book* for his own congregation (combining Isaac Watts' *Psalms and Hymns* and John Rippon's *Selection of Hymns*). This in itself is evidence of Spurgeon's interest in singing all the psalms, including lament psalms. The first part of the hymnal (titled "The Spirit of the Psalms")<sup>41</sup> consisted of psalms or paraphrases of all 150 psalms along with 70 alternate versions, making a total of 220 psalms to sing.<sup>42</sup> Spurgeon's personal

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. ("For the Troubled").

<sup>39</sup> *MTP*, vol. 19 (1873), 686 ("Consolation for the Despairing;" preached Dec 7, 1873).

<sup>40</sup> See Music, "Hymnody," 174–81; Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth*, 260–67.

<sup>41</sup> The second part was simply called "Hymns."

<sup>42</sup> Music, "Hymnody," 176. A similar emphasis on the psalms is found in the successor to this hymnal used at the Metropolitan Tabernacle today (*Psalms and*

interest in singing psalms is further evidenced in that he authored 14 of these psalms and slightly edited another one (on Psalm 120).<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, of these 15 psalms, eight of them are (what we label today as) lament psalms.<sup>44</sup>

The psalms and hymns that were sung from the hymnal are often listed at the end of each sermon or exposition in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*. Sometimes Spurgeon's own psalm composition that is based on the lament psalm that he preached is also sung. Thus, on the occasion of the sermon ("Earth's Vanities and Heaven's Verities") and exposition on Psalm 39, the congregation sung Spurgeon's hymn on that psalm. The following are two of the verses:

3 What is there here that I should wait,  
My hope's in Thee alone;  
When wilt Thou open glory's gate  
And call me to Thy throne?

4 A stranger in this land am I,  
A sojourner with Thee;  
Oh be not silent at my cry,  
But show Thyself to me.

Likewise, when the sermon "Consolation for the Despairing" (on Psalm 31:22) was preached (see Spurgeon's reference to the inscription of this psalm above), one of the hymns sung was Spurgeon's on Psalm 70. Three of the four verses of that composition are as follows:

1 Make haste, O God, my soul to bless!  
My help and my deliv'rer Thou;  
Make haste, for I'm in deep distress,  
My case is urgent; help me now.

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*Hymns of Reformed Worship*, London: The Wakeman Trust, 1991, see the preface by Peter Masters).

<sup>43</sup> Spurgeon wrote a further 10 hymns and edited four other hymns.

<sup>44</sup> Although the Hymnal was adopted by other Baptist churches of the time and remained in use at the Metropolitan Tabernacle long after his death, Spurgeon's own compositions did not become popular.

3 Make haste, for I am poor and low;  
 And Satan mocks my prayers and tears;  
 O God, in mercy be not slow,  
 But snatch me from my horrid fears.

4 Make haste, O God, and hear my cries;  
 Then with the souls who seek Thy face,  
 And those who Thy salvation prize,  
 I'll magnify Thy matchless grace.

A similar acknowledgement of sorrow and distress is seen Spurgeon's adaptation (from the Scotch Psalter of 1641) of Psalm 120.<sup>45</sup>

3 My soul distracted mourns and pines  
 To reach that peaceful shore,  
 Where all the weary are at rest,  
 And troublers vex no more.

5 But as for me my song shall rise  
 Before Jehovah's throne,  
 For He has seen my deep distress,  
 And hearken'd to my groan.

Although other examples could be given, these verses show many of the themes highlighted in Spurgeon's sermons and expositions of lament psalms. In this way, Spurgeon not only spoke about the benefits of lament psalms and encouraged grieving believers similarly to express their sorrows to the Lord, he led the congregation in following the instructions of the psalmists to express these laments corporately in song.

## **Conclusion**

In seeking to recover lament psalms in church life today we have in Charles Spurgeon a model of how this may be done. Although faltering

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<sup>45</sup> See above on Spurgeon's exposition, and sermon "The Sojourn in Mesech."

in places himself, nevertheless, he encouraged his congregation to see the benefits of these psalms. As part of his ministry of shepherding the flock, he anticipated potential objections to sorrowful themes, so he oriented his congregation to the benefits of applying these psalms to the sorrowful in their midst and in anticipation of their own seasons of grief. Spurgeon also helped his congregation to see the benefit of these psalms in helping his congregation to know how to express their sorrow and in providing them with a pattern of taking their cries and pleadings to the sovereign Lord as the only One who can help. Spurgeon also drew attention to the benefit of lament psalms by reassuring sorrowful believers from these psalms that they are not alone. Such distresses are not the only experience of believers; but all true believers do experience them in various ways. They anticipated Christ's own suffering and such sorrows are also the experience of all who follow Him. Finally, since these are songs and directed to musicians, they are meant for public worship. This is something Spurgeon encouraged with the use of psalms in congregational singing and his own compositions based on lament psalms. In this, the congregation immediately applied the encouragements of the sermon and not only sang songs of joy, but also corporately took their cries and pleadings to the sovereign Lord and Savior on the basis of his promises in his word.