

# **Lament and Missiology: Recapturing Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times**

Sahr Mbriwa

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## **Abstract**

From a biblical and Christological perspective, lament is movement towards purpose and meaning in sin and suffering. Further, lament embraces social, cultural, and theological tensions rather than retreat or dismissiveness. Yet lament is frequently missing in Western evangelical circles. In the early nineties, Cornel West described the need for prophetic voices that can speak with discernment, critique hypocrisy, build human connection, and offer concrete hope - aspirations that resonate strongly with the next generation. However, these prophetic aspirations are better addressed with intentional and sincere attention to gospel-centered lament in the life and mission of the church.

**Key Words:** discipleship, lament, leadership, prophetic thought, tension

## **Introduction**

Missiologists are rightly concerned about reaching and equipping current and future generations with the gospel (Hirsch 2010; Richardson 2013). But does that concern include lament? While much has been written on the value of lament for the Christian faith, particularly from the Psalms, lament remains by and large missing or minimized in the church and in New Testament scholarship (Campbell 2014).

Biblical lament is generally conceptualized as prayer to God in times of distress (Westermann 1974). Moreover, it is neither content with the status quo nor silent in the face of sin and idolatry (Brueggemann 1986). It creates space to confront injustice, past and present (Rah 2015). Finally, it also informs ecclesial practices that are counter-cultural yet build communities (Kim and Hill 2018).

Despite lament's multilayered value, its pervasive absence would suggest that either lament is simply not essential to Christian ministry and discipleship or many churches have not been taught and led to lament. In either case, the neglect of lament has arguably contributed to a loss of prophetic thought in the contemporary church. For the purposes of this paper, prophetic thought is a mindset and way of life that seeks to "demystify the categories [of racism, nationalism, sexism, etc.] in order to stay tuned to the complexity of the realities" (West 1993:20). Moreover, it involves "putting your life on the line but putting your life on the line with the assurance that there is a faith that means you will do the right thing regardless of the consequence and you are not looking for a quick fix or a quick victory over-night" (West 1993:65).

In an era of post-modernity and post-Christendom, what is often on display in vast portions of Western society are not churches that are cultivating prophetic thought and risking the ire of the masses and authorities, but churches that refrain from speaking truth to systems and powers. In the process, churches that fail to cultivate prophetic thought fail to make disciples who are prepared and empowered to engage, with wisdom, courage, and humility, the socio-political and theological complexities in their communities and other spheres

of influence. This article explores how framing lament as part of a gospel-centered movement can help Western evangelical churches [re]capture the sort of prophetic thought envisioned by West to impact present and future generations.

First, the article will provide a definition of lament with regard the governing narrative of the gospel. Second, the article will interact with Cornel West's *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (West 1993) for the sake of connecting lament to the need for prophetic voices that can speak with discernment, critique hypocrisy, build human connection, and offer concrete hope. Finally, the article will conclude with practical steps to help leaders and congregations teach and model lament.

### **A Framework for Gospel-Centered Lament**

On the subject of biblical lament, few scholars have had as seismic an impact as twentieth-century Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann. Westermann's writings, including *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (1965), later reprinted and expanded in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (1981), significantly illuminated the structure and significance of lament in the Old Testament. The insights of Westermann have shaped modern-day evangelical publications on lament to such an extent that his contributions must be considered in any thoughtful exploration of lament.

In her systematic study on biblical lament, Rosann Catalano asserts: "As regards the role of the lament within the structure of biblical prayer, so influential has been Westermann's work that it is now commonplace to recognize the lament as constituting one of the two poles between which the entire life of biblical prayer is structured" [the other pole being praise] (Catalano 1988:193).

For Westermann, at the heart of Old Testament lament was a dialogical movement from plea to praise as the people of God petitioned God in times of distress (Westermann 1974). This dialog tended to manifest as a prayer of the oppressed to YHWH in the hope that YHWH might attend to their prayers as He did in ages past (e.g. Ex. 2:23-25; Is. 64; Ps. 89). Thus, as a type of prayer, Westermann observed, "The true function of lament is supplication; it is the means by which suffering comes before the one who can take it away. Seen from this perspective, we can say that lament as such is a movement toward God" (Westermann 1974:32).

Westermann further characterized lament as consisting of three parties - God, the lamenter(s), and the enemy, i.e. the person(s) or situation(s) being lamented (Westermann 1981:169-70). From a structural standpoint, the interaction between these three parties more often than not shifted from the lamenter(s) first addressing God, to complaining and protesting, to praising and trusting God. In other words, though the lament gave voice to suffering, the lament rarely ended as a complaint since the primary concern was not merely to verbalize suffering but to trust God.

Ultimately, Westermann's emphasis on the Old Testament lament - informed foremost by the Exodus account with significant attention given to the Psalms - was for the sake of enlarging the church's biblical imagination with suggestive hermeneutical principles regarding individual and communal laments. That it, his intent was to help the church better appropriate the Old Testament pattern of lament for Christian faith and worship.

In contrast to the numerous examples of lament in the Old Testament, the presence of lament, specifically Old Testament patterns of lament, is not as obvious, albeit not diminished, in the New Testament (Eklund 2015). In addition, a lack of robust scholarly engagement with lament throughout church history, including the Protestant Reformation, has left questions of the role of lament for the New Testament church (Hughes 2004:81-117).

One question concerns whether the gospel offers paradigms on lament that might encourage Western evangelical churches today to intentionally incorporate lament in Christian faith and discipleship beyond, though not overlooking, the act of crying out to God. To state the question more succinctly, in what ways might the gospel help Western churches reframe and prioritize lament? This section suggests that for followers of Christ lament is not only dialogical, i.e., speaking to God in distress, it is also dialectical, in that it is movement towards God by way of the cross.

Though rarely interwoven with lament, the concept of dialectic, or the process towards truth by means of reconciling contradictions, has the potential to deepen our understanding of Christian lament. In Hegelian dialectic, the basic structural movement is from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. On the one hand, and broadly applying Hegelian dialectic to Judeo-Christianity, the triune God of the Old and New Testament, infallible and infinite, is not like man, nor are His ways like man's, nor does He fit neatly into the categories of man. Yet, He has also made himself known in clear and varied ways, e.g., creation, His spoken and written word, to fallible and finite creatures. On account of God's character and intervention, men and women can encounter God and through that encounter grow in knowledge of God, self, and others, not to become more than God but to reflect more of Him.

On the other hand, and specifically applying Hegelian dialectic to Christology, to know and follow God in Christ, in faith and practice, is to enter a process whereby one loses their life in order to gain life (Mk. 8:31-38; Lk. 14:25-35). Indeed, the cost of union, or reconciliation, with God in Christ is death. It is this tension with death for the sake of life in Christ that sets the stage for gospel-centered lament.

Lament fundamentally assumes loss. A loss, or death, has taken place in one form or another, whether physical, spiritual, emotional, or otherwise. In one sense, and seen frequently in the Old Testament, lament is a verbal reaction to the absence of God's shalom. It is an appeal to God, the giver and sustainer of mercy and justice, to make things right. As Westermann contends, "The lament implores God to be compassionate to those who suffer. This is its function: to appeal to God's compassion. All the multifarious forms of human affliction, oppression, anxiety, pain, and peril are given voice in the lament, and thus it becomes an appeal to the only court that can alter their plight" (Westermann 1981:264).

The underlying presupposition behind Westermann's statement is that we can bring ourselves, our sin, and our sorrows to God because all situations are subject to Him, and there is nothing and no one more powerful than He. Yet, the gospel narrative has as its foundation a crucified and defeated God (Moltmann 1974). Rather than render death impotent and ineffective, the cross of Christ presents us with a paradoxical crisis, namely the death of God in Christ. At the cross, the highest court of mercy and justice, embodied in Christ, is seemingly brought to naught. At the cross, death wins.

To be sure, resurrection follows and with it much reason for the Christian to praise God. But why not simply avoid the grave? Why must death be part of the gospel? Yet, the death of Christ points to the wisdom and power of God (Is. 53; I Cor. 1-2). Moreover, it is precisely on account of Christ crucified that the cross of Christ validates Christian lament; lament not simply as reacting to whatever might be wrong but also contending for life in the face of death's assaults since the cross does not remove pain and death from the Christian. Rather, it redefines the Christian's relationship to death and to the kingdoms of this world. As such, to follow Christ is to follow Him to the death of life as we knew it and to the life that is found in Him. By paving the way through the grave to new life, what is revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ is that death must give way to Christ and His kingdom (I Cor. 15).

Throughout the epistles, the Apostle Paul expounds on the Christian journey as dying to one's life in order to live to a new life. Though the word "lament" is rarely used explicitly in the epistles, lament by nature of its proximity to death and dying is implicit in Christian discipleship. Consider briefly the following examples which also give direction to how the Christian might engage some of the sins and systemic issues of the twenty-first century. In II Corinthians 5-6:13, Paul exhorts followers of Christ to live as ambassadors of reconciliation who embody the message of the gospel. The Christian is to live a life that is so compelled by the love of Christ that it is atypical and perplexes the world. Consequently, the death that takes place will include dying to the fear of man and to the judgments of the world, in anticipation of the judgment of Christ.

In Ephesians 2, Paul reminds the Christian that to live in Christ is to die to paradigms rooted in self-gratification, including hostility with others based on class, ethnicity, and nationality, for the Christian has been raised with Christ to live as kingdom citizens of an international household in which Christ is the chief cornerstone. Consequently, the death that takes place will include dying to self-interests, such as those tied to tribalism and nationalism, for the sake of being a blessing to others.

Finally, in Colossians 2:6-23, Paul challenges Christians continually to reevaluate their view of power, and to remember that they have been buried with Christ and have died to the powers and authorities of this world. Therefore, they are no longer subject primarily to the philosophies and traditions of this world but are to take every philosophy and tradition captive to Christ.

While the Christian has been raised by faith and the power of the Holy Spirit into the resurrection of Christ, to be fully realized upon His return, faith here-and-now in the risen Christ does not shield or excuse the Christian from loss and sharing in the struggles and hardship of others. To merely theorize or spiritualize the gospel, as if it had little to no bearing on Christian mission and practice, is to domesticate and trivialize the person and work of Christ. In contrast, to take Christ seriously is to engage the cross of Christ and the consequences of it for faith and life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it this way: "Those who enter into [Christian] discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying; such as been the case from the very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death" (Bonhoeffer 2001:59).

In other words, to follow Christ is to move towards a God who invites us into a crucified life. This movement to God by way of the cross is part of what it means for the Christian to lament, to live in the tension between death and new life, in both praxis and proclamation. It is the tension

between building intimacy and friendship with the least of these and our penchant to live detached from the least of these. It is the tension between confronting death and all the ways it might manifest in systems and relationships and our penchant to avoid despair and death. It is the tension between speaking honestly about loss and hope and our penchant towards triumphalism and cynicism. It is the tension between relinquishing control for the sake of submission to Christ and our penchant to control all outcomes for ourselves and others.

### **Lament and the Need for Prophetic Thought**

Reframing lament as part of the fabric of the gospel has potential to help the church embrace rather than reject the tensions of a cross-shaped life, as well as enrich prophetic thought. In the last few decades, Cornel West has been instrumental in provoking academic discourse on prophetic thought and the lack thereof in the church and other religious communities.

As a Christian thinker, public intellectual, and political activist, West is in many ways a modern-day prophet, particularly in the United States. That is, he aspires to speak the truth in love, with courage, to modern-day powers and systems, whatever persecution might await (Yancy 2001:1-16). While he is widely known for his philosophical and socio-cultural analysis of American society, such as in *Race Matters* (1993), his reflections on prophetic thought as outlined in *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (1993) and in earlier works like *Prophetic Fragments* (1988) provide insights that supplement discussions on lament and prophetic thought.

West has long been a vocal advocate of the black prophetic tradition and its impact on life in the United States, regularly citing examples such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ida B. Wells. His admiration for and interest in prophetic thinkers (black and non-black) is not solely to exegete the strengths and shortcomings of American democracy. More extensively, it is for the sake of cultivating future generations of prophets who are deep thinkers and cross-cultural activists.

In addition to addressing educators and scholars, West makes effort, through his writings and lectures, to inspire younger generations not to be content to go through the motions of life uncritically and aimlessly, but to be radical practitioners and critical learners of humility and love. His observations on prophetic thought in relation to social movements can also be constructive for the church as the next generation increasingly disaffiliates from the church's message and ministries in response to life's troubles (Pew Research Center 2015).

For West, to be a Christian is "to look at the world both through the eyes of its victims and through the Christocentric perspective that requires Christians to see the world through the lens of the cross" (Anderson 2001:148). That is, West's worldview involves an emphasis on the centrality of Christ and the cross in human history, and subsequently seeks to identify with and engage the suffering of human experience, not only to alleviate suffering but to share in the life of Christ.

Such a Christian worldview, particularly as it promotes solidarity with social outcasts and the oppressed, undergirds West's vision of prophetic thought. According to West, there are at least four features of prophetic thought urgently needed in postmodern times. These features include speaking with discernment, critiquing hypocrisy, building human connection, and offering

concrete hope. While West does not interact much with lament, this section suggests that each of the features he highlights can be pursued to greater effect with gospel-centered lament.

As it concerns speaking with discernment, West's vision refers to "...the capacity to provide a broad and deep analytical grasp of the present in light of the past" (West 1993:3), as well as remain "attuned to the ambiguous legacies and hybrid cultures in history" (West 1993:4). In other words, prophetic thought is concerned not only with an honest assessment of present conditions and turmoil, but also with the machinations of history and their effect on the present. Related is how prophetic thought must be careful neither to romanticize nor to demonize the past, but to approach historical developments from a myriad of disciplines and voices in order better to understand the present.

In relation to discernment, gospel-centered lament seeks to interpret the present through the lens of redemptive-history while looking ahead to the return of Christ. That is, it engages the histories of cultures and civilizations with primacy given to the social and theological implications of the redemptive-historical death and resurrection of Christ. Given Christians' allegiance to the kingdom of Christ, discerning historical developments ought to be a comprehensive, multidisciplinary affair as they have been empowered, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to speak honestly about the kingdoms and politics of this world, past and present. Moreover, gospel-centered lament analyzes history not in terms of the arbitrary metrics of "good" and "evil" or "success" and "failure" but in terms of the economy of the kingdom of God and the need for the grace and mercy of God in human affairs.

As it concerns critiquing hypocrisy, prophetic thought values truth-telling by "accenting boldly, and defiantly, the gap between principles and practice, between promise and performance, between rhetoric and reality" (West 1993:5). That is, prophetic thought addresses the inconsistencies in our agendas and decision-makings, especially as they manifest in systems and powers. Such pointed critique is not only for the sake of assessing discrepancies in our dealings with one another; it is also for the sake of fidelity to the task of nurturing authenticity and integrity in our systems and relationships.

In relation to hypocrisy, gospel-centered lament involves speaking and receiving truth, which also means forsaking hypocrisy. However, the pursuit of truth in the person of Christ will include confronting deceptions and misrepresentations, in ourselves and others. This pursuit creates a tension whereby to participate in Christ's death is to live in truth rather than endorse or perpetuate non-truth, or half-truth, either tacitly or overtly. Lament, then, augments the task of critiquing hypocrisy by its commitment to speak truth in love, though this will likely also lead to situations of discomfort and disorientation, given our propensity to dilute and dismiss the truth.

As it concerns building human connection, prophetic thought practices empathy by "never losing sight of the humanity of others" (West 1993:6). That is, prophetic thought seeks to (re)affirm and restore the humanity of others, rather than dehumanize or rob others of their inherent value and worth. Connecting with another does not necessarily mean that one must agree or approve the thoughts, behaviors, or words of the other. Rather, it is the task of seeking to understand the other, however different they might be.

In relation to building human connection, gospel-centered lament is about learning to live in union with Christ. To live in Christ is to love God and others, and sometimes in ways that might contradict popular conceptions of love. Such love creates tension for the Christian, as Christ does

not merely call the Christian to an abstract ethic of love or community. Rather, Christ calls the Christian to follow Him, thereby situating Himself at the center and as the arbiter of Christian love and community. Subsequently, the Christian's spectrum of community and relationships ought to expand, as to love as Christ loved is to die to the ease and preference of loving those whom we would deem loveable, and instead to love both the oppressed and the oppressors.

Finally, as it concerns offering concrete hope, prophetic thought includes the willingness "to engage in an audacious attempt to galvanize and energize, to inspire and to invigorate world-weary people" (West 1993:6). That is, prophetic thought involves inspiring and mobilizing revolutionary acts of human interaction that transcend the status quo and encourage people to take more imaginative risks of what it might look like to improve oneself and one's condition so that everyone might thrive, especially those with less privilege and less resources. This prophetic call is to initiate and participate in tangible acts of service to others, as well as not to settle for defeatism or mediocrity.

In relation to offering concrete hope, the hope of gospel-centered lament is not only that sin and death will one day come to an end but that the resurrection power of Christ has broken into the here and now, as a foretaste of what is to come at the end of the age. Therefore, the Christian can protest sin and suffering as well as live in and move through the tensions between life and death, with a hope that is both earthly and eschatological, both fleshly and spiritual.

### **Practices to Teach and Model Gospel-Centered Lament**

As Western evangelical churches tend to the task of reaching and raising the next generation of prophetic thinkers amid growing disillusionment with the church, the following four practices are intended to encourage further conversations and vision casting that bridge lament and prophetic thought in the life of the church.

1. *Church leadership should make it a priority to live among, and interact regularly with, the marginalized and oppressed in their communities.* As goes the leadership, so goes the church. Consequently, one can often trace a lack of prophetic thought in the church to the leadership. Leaders focused on managing the church as a business and maintaining the status quo will likely perpetuate a consumer-driven mentality that is content with the status quo. God can and does work through all types of leadership philosophies and personalities. However, leaders that are willing to live sacrificially and meagerly - especially in contexts in which money and material comfort have the first and final word - will tend to have more opportunities to demonstrate through their life, and not only their preaching, the joy and struggle of following Christ in the power of His Spirit.

2. *Churches should plan to create as much space in their corporate worship to weep and grieve as they do praise.* The pervasive emphasis on a triumphant faith often leaves no room for any other emotion to be expressed corporately, such as anger, confusion, and sadness. This imbalance creates a false dichotomy between praise and lament, as well as invalidates and denies the effects of disorientation and suffering. Moreover, an overemphasis on joy and praise fails to teach and permit the church body to give voice to pain.

3. *Discipleship must involve a variety of disciplines and theologians.* The next generation is no longer as familiar with scripture as previous generations who have had gospel influence in their heritages, nor is the coming generation interested in giving primacy to theology in an isolated

sense. While the twenty-first century is a new and challenging discipleship frontier, the task of discipleship remains the same as it was with the first disciples, namely a life-long, multifaceted process of following Christ and developing a Christ-centered perspective in all subjects. This situation calls for Christian thinkers and leaders willing to read widely, to interact with theologians from different tribes including those outside their comfort zone, and in the process help the church learn to engage conflicting ideas with curiosity, humility, and tact.

4. *Leaders and congregations ought to fast and pray together often.* The work of the church is not ultimately the result of planning, strategizing, and executing, though it is certainly not less than those items. It is primarily the supernatural work of the triune God to call a people to Himself, through His Son, in the power of His Spirit. Gospel-centered lament seeks to encounter this God, and prayer and fasting are reminders that we are dependent on Him for faith and life.

### Conclusion

The gospel is the good news of the risen Christ. But it is also news of the crucified Christ. This dual emphasis on the death and resurrection of Christ creates space for gospel-centered lament; that is, to follow Christ to the cross through the tension between the lingering effects of death and the longing for a full and prosperous life. Learning to navigate through that tension is sorely needed as the church engages the current and next generation.

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