

“Highly recommended.”—TIM KELLER

PAUL S. WILLIAMS

EXILES
ON
MISSION

How Christians Can Thrive in a Post-Christian World



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PAUL S. WILLIAMS



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To Nigel Swinford,
who set me on this course by helping me identify heroes
and meet Lesslie Newbigin,
and to Rodger and Carol Woods,
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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Prologue: Longing and Shame xi

Part 1: Enduring Faith: Christians and the Contemporary World

1. The Legacy of Modernity 3

2. Are We in Exile? 24

3. Two Temptations 41

4. Judgment and Mission 53

Part 2: Fostering Hope: From Alien to Ambassador

5. Learning to Lament 67

6. Calling, Citizenship, and Commission 80

7. Establish an Embassy 99

8. Know the Mission 115

Part 3: Ambassadors of Love: Exiles on Mission

9. Learn the Language 137

10. Stories of the West 156

11. Cultural Translation 184

12. Pilgrimage: A Way of Being 213

Bibliography 231

5

Learning to Lament

In the previous chapter, we saw how both the Old and New Testaments reframe exile from a paradigm of judgment and oppression to one of mission and opportunity. We may be strangers in a foreign land, but we need not understand ourselves as captive aliens or transient visitors. Instead, we can assume the role of purposeful ambassadors.

The remainder of this book is premised on the assumption that such a shift in self-understanding and identity is biblical, desirable, and possible. But a vital question arises from the discussion of the last chapter: *How* do we make the shift from alien or visitor to ambassador?

Much of the evangelical tradition conditions Christians to assume that if we know the right thing to do, we simply need to do it; if we see or understand something, this information will be enough to effect change. To put this starkly, it is perhaps obvious that this assumption is not so much wrong as inadequate in its understanding of human nature and God's character. This is so in two main respects.

First, ambassadorship is not something you can decide to inhabit. Ambassadors are appointed, not self-appointed.

Second, we cannot simply shift our identity based on our cognitive understanding, because exile is an *experience*, not merely an idea. Although

I have argued that exile is (for the most part) not an expression of God's specific judgment against us, this does not mean that exile is thereby rendered innocuous. On the contrary, it is deeply troubling, complex, and disorienting. Exile may not be an expression of specific judgment, but it still produces real suffering. Cultural dissonance is a jarring experience to live with, one that generates powerful emotions, especially of anger and fear. The temptations to assimilate or withdraw are potent; resisting them requires more than just correct thinking. We need to foster hope. Ideas must be accompanied with emotional maturity, character formed and sustained in community, and a willingness to take risks. Before we can truly function as ambassadors, these temptations, and the difficulties and emotions that make them so tempting, need to be faced and overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit. Facing our fears, controlling our anger, and overcoming temptation require honesty and vulnerability in the presence of God. Before we can experience fresh hope, we need to learn to lament.

Honest Lament

Perhaps the biblical book that you are least likely to hear preached is Lamentations.

We prefer to hear sermons that are edifying and encouraging rather than those that speak of grief, suffering, and the absence of God. Our culture encourages us to believe that wisdom can be gained without bothering with the tiresome need to reflect carefully on lived experience, that knowing the truth can substitute for doing it, and that resurrection power can come without having to carry a cross. In real life, however, there are no shortcuts. If we will attend to the suffering of exile, we will gain a much deeper understanding of Christ's suffering on the cross and the resurrection that followed it. We also put ourselves in a place to be empowered for Christ's mission in our exilic context.

Scripture does not encourage us to skim over our grief and anger at the suffering we experience. This is true throughout the Bible, and a survey of its contents reveals a nuanced, sensitive, and brutally honest engagement

with suffering. Over a third of the psalms are individual or corporate laments. Whereas the book of Job is an extended window on God's relationship with us in the context of personal suffering, Lamentations focuses on the suffering of a whole people. These examples—along with other passages in the exilic literature of Scripture¹—serve as a powerful testimony to the fact that God hears our laments and encourages us to voice our suffering.

If you have any lingering doubt over the spirituality of openly expressing raw anger, grief, and fear before God, I recommend reading Lamentations in one sitting. It is five chapters long and remarkably bereft of the kind of easy answers that we Christians sometimes give to one another in hard times. Its five chapters contain five “dirges” describing the utter devastation felt by the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem. God is described as “like an enemy” (2:5) who has treated his people worse than anyone else (2:20), ignores prayer (3:8), and attacks his people (3:11–12). The book ends by asking if God has rejected his people for good (5:22).

Although Lamentations does not censor itself in describing the full horror of the destruction of the city, it is nuanced in its understanding of who is to blame and what can be done. On the one hand, the human attackers are blamed, and God is expected to punish them for their behavior (e.g., 1:21–22; 3:64–66; 4:21–22). On the other hand, the suffering of the people is acknowledged as coming from God's hand as a just response to their own sin and disobedience (e.g., 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20). The literary center of the book (3:22–42) is a clear expression of hope in God's love, a call to confession and repentance, and a cry to God to forgive, relent, and rescue.

What would it look like for us to lament today?

To find examples of Christians suffering deliberate and violent destruction of their communities today, we would have to look to countries like Somalia, Syria, and Iraq. Christians in states like China, North Korea, and Iran have also suffered state censure, imprisonment, confiscation of

1. See, e.g., Ezra 9:5–15; Neh. 1:3–2:3; 9:1–37; Jer. 12:1–17; 20:7–18; Dan. 9:1–28; Hab. 1:2–2:20.

property, and other forms of persecution.² We may feel that any difficulty or suffering we experience in the West is not worth mentioning. This sounds like a spiritual attitude, but really it is not.

One of the most basic things we can do for our brothers and sisters suffering violent persecution elsewhere is to allow their witness to inspire us to maintain a pure and faithful witness to Jesus Christ in our own context.³ Maintaining that witness, however, requires both facing the grief, anger, fear, and sense of failure that we have and also allowing God to cleanse and soften our hearts so that we can bear witness to him more fully where we are.

The truth is, we also experience being forgotten and forsaken by God (Lam. 5:20) in the midst of our own cultural context. We have good reason to feel this way: many secularists seem increasingly intolerant of any expression of faith in public life. We've seen the impact of this attitude on believing employees in a wide range of sectors, but especially in state-funded jobs, where people have been disciplined or dismissed because of some minor expression of faith, such as praying for a medical patient who asked for prayer or wearing a cross as a piece of jewelry. The last few decades have seen people arrested or brought to public trial for speaking openly about Christian faith and the claims of Scripture and for trying to live out their beliefs faithfully in their own businesses and workplaces. A growing pressure to stay silent about one's beliefs is coupled with a growing feeling of shame about being a Christian as public denunciations, criticisms, and mockery of Christian faith become more common. While all this carries on, we watch—or sometimes try and fail to prevent—the kinds of choices our societies have been making in terms of the sanctity

2. The Open Doors organization maintains an international World Watch List of countries in which Christians face persecution and works to support believers in such contexts. See <http://www.opendoors.org> for more information.

3. My views on this have been informed by recent experience. Over the last few years I've had the privilege of meeting many Christian leaders around the Middle East—including from Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine—as I've traveled on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society. I've made a point of asking them what their message is for the church in the West. The two themes that stand out in their answers are these: "Don't compromise your witness" and "Don't forget us—pray and speak up."

of life, the treatment of the poor, the value of marriage, the erosion of civic and community life, and the apparent obsession with individualism, choice, and materialism.

We likely feel angry toward those initiating and championing these changes, as well as toward the various governments and courts that appear happy to dilute long-held freedoms of religion, speech, and conscience.

In my experience, many of us also feel a great deal of anger toward other Christians. Depending on which political wing of faith we identify with most, the content of that anger may differ. We may feel angry with weak church leaders and liberal believers who don't speak out clearly to defend the essentials of the faith, allowing, by their silence or prevarication, appalling legal and policy developments on vital issues to go unchallenged. By their compromise and accommodation to secularism, we feel the witness of the gospel is undermined. Alternatively, we may be furious with ignorant and critical Christians who crash around in public like bulls in a china shop, always sounding judgmental and shrill, damaging the credibility of the faith, and accommodating themselves to the insidious individualism and materialism of contemporary capitalism.

I expect most readers will identify with some of these woes. Perhaps you feel embarrassed in some way at your own emotions about the state of the church in the contemporary world. I suggest that we would have cause for much greater concern if these examples failed to arouse grief or anger in us. Lament about the state of things when things are, in fact, bad is a sign of health, showing that God's Holy Spirit is still getting through to us. In Ezekiel's vision of the appalling wickedness and idolatry taking place back in Jerusalem, it was those who lamented the state of the nation and the temple who were marked out for protection from the judgment to come: "Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, 'Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it'" (Ezek. 9:3-4).

However, honest lament must go beyond identifying what grieves us, what we're angry about, and who we blame. We must also ask ourselves to

what extent we are at fault. We must move to confession. A healthy posture for Western churches for a while would be one of grief and lament over the state of our culture and our complicity in it.

We need to invite God to reveal the heart attitudes that underlie our grief and anger. Are we sharing in his own grief in—and then also his grace for—the state of the world? Are we angry at the persecution and suffering we’ve experienced because of our faithful witness to Christ (in which case, we need to forgive)? Or are we resenting the loss of influence and status that the cultural Christianity of the recent past has afforded us (in which case, we need to repent)? It is crucial that we shed all traces of the sense of privilege that cultural Christianity has given us if we are to escape the snares of temptation and move from an identity of alienation toward one of ambassadorship.

As we do this, we may be ashamed of the compromise and assimilation we see in our own life. We may feel that we have failed God and are disqualified from serving him. Equally, we may be repulsed by the consequences of our ghetto mentality. We no longer want to stay in the fearful and reactive “us and them” mentality we’ve adopted toward non-Christians. With respect to our own part in the growing antipathy toward faith in our own societies, we can ask: Have we truly been distinctive in our lifestyles so that we function as “salt” in all our relationships? Have we been clear and confident in the gospel, able to shed Christ’s light and “give the reason for the hope that [we] have” to whoever questions us (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15)? Have we treated other believers with the love and grace of Christ? Are we able to truly love our enemies in our attitudes and actions? Is our trust truly in God, or is it in our favorite interpretation of the Bible or our intellectual grasp of theology?

The point of asking these questions is not to condemn. Feelings of failure and shame are more likely to make us vulnerable to the temptations of exile than to help us move into a more faithful and missional mode. Instead, the point of honest anger, grief, and confession is to exercise humility before God, admitting to ourselves and one another before him what he already knows but we often dare not acknowledge. The chief sin

for us all is the pride of autonomy—thinking we can work things out for ourselves, that we alone are the “faithful remnant” that God has preserved and is relying on, that we alone understand the signs of the times and know what to do, or that we alone are beyond Christ’s power to forgive, heal, and transform.

Active Listening

Simply expressing our anger and grief will not achieve a great deal. It may be cathartic, but without a response from God, it is a lonely cry in the darkness. Honest lament for Christians, however, presupposes a loving God who hears, understands, and cares. It presupposes a living God who speaks, blesses, and acts. This is why Christian lament must be followed by active listening—an expectant waiting for God to respond to us.

Lamentations encourages us to adopt this posture of attentive waiting. The core of the book’s message is to be found in the heart of Lamentations 3, where amid all the grief, wailing, and lament, we find these words: “I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (3:24–26).

This attentive stillness of spirit allows God to show us our hearts and help us consider our actions. The same passage goes on to urge: “Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD” (Lam. 3:40). Seeking God, testing our ways, and returning to him obviously assumes that God will allow himself to be found by us and will forgive us and answer us. Notice, too, that the pronouns in these verses are both singular and plural. It is important to be able to cry out to God alone from the depths of our hearts. It is equally important to share our grief and confess our sins with others. This is not merely wise human advice. There is a powerful anointing of God that is released for our healing when we come together as believers and humble ourselves before one another with a focus on “return[ing] to the LORD.” Often it is in such a context that we will encounter God through the words, care, and prayers of other believers.

To say that we should expect the living God to respond to us is theologically true and basic. Yet it is precisely on this point that many contemporary Christians struggle. Indeed, it is perhaps in this that the existential reality of exilic alienation is most keenly known: the feeling that God is absent. For many Western believers, it is a sad truth that a personal encounter with the living God—in which I know in my heart that I have been addressed directly by the Maker of heaven and earth—is either a distant memory or a fading hope.

Our tendency to “practical atheism”—to carry out our work and daily decisions *as if* God is uninterested—contributes greatly to a sense of God’s absence. If I don’t believe that God is relevant to or interested in a part of my life, then I’m not likely to pray about it in any serious manner. If I don’t pray, I’m not going to have any answered prayers. Nor am I likely to be attuned to God’s presence and activity. When the only things I pray about are either crisis situations for family and friends or what, for me, are abstract situations affecting largely anonymous people overseas (which, I suggest, is indeed the typical makeup of many Christians’ prayer lives), then there is little scope to see the kind of specific answers to prayer that build our faith and confidence that God is present and at work in the world. Moreover, if I am not praying about the detail of my daily life, I’m implicitly assuming that God is not interested in it except perhaps in some spiritualized or highly generalized sense. Any difficulties that I then experience become obstacles for me to deal with alone while God watches to see if I’ll screw up. This is hardly a spirituality of hope!

By contrast, Scripture presents God to us as one intimately engaged with the detail of our lives, one inviting us into dialogue and relationship with him at every level. We find a God who desired to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day; who accepted hospitality from Abraham and Sarah, asked why Sarah laughed at his promise, and allowed Abraham to shape his judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah; who answered the specific prayer of Abraham’s servant in his search for a wife for Isaac; who saw the suffering of his people in Egypt and came to deliver them; who gave detailed instructions about health and safety, land management, economic exchange, and

the impartiality of the courts in the promised land; who taught Solomon wisdom through observation of ant colonies and wild animals; who noticed the faithfulness of the obscure Rekabite family⁴ and used them as an example for the rest of Israel; and who persisted in teaching the grumpy and heartless Jonah that he cared about the pagan citizens of Nineveh.

The exilic prophets record God's extended response to the Jewish lament over the destruction of Jerusalem. In Isaiah 49:14–15, God hears and answers the specific cry of Lamentations 5:20–22:

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me."

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!"⁵

Jeremiah 29:10 records God's promise to rescue the people from Babylon ("When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come for you"), and Isaiah 44:28 specifies that it will be Cyrus, king of Persia, through whom God will deliver his people and return them to the land. The famous passage in Isaiah 52:7 is the prophetic announcement of a military messenger that this deliverance is at hand: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion 'Your God reigns!'"

These prophetic promises were realized when, in 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia did indeed defeat the Babylonian army, occupy Babylon itself, and subsequently issue a decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (see 2 Chron. 36:20–23; Ezra 1:1–4).

There are three important lessons for us here in the nature of God's responses to Israel.

4. See Jer. 35.

5. The consensus of modern scholarship is that Isa. 40–66 was written much later than the first part of the book and that the prophecies of Isa. 40–55 were written during the Babylonian exile.

First, God cares and is present to his people. He engages with the detail of our lives. He sees our situation, and he listens to our cry. He speaks a specific reply. God does not leave us in our suffering but remains very present to us.

Second, God oversees history. God is sovereign over all nations and peoples, whether they acknowledge him or not, and is able to accomplish his purposes even through the actions of those who serve other gods (such as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus). This is no less true of the modern empires and ideologies that appear to overwhelm and intimidate us today. God is bigger than secularism, capitalism, environmentalism, Marxism, and globalization. He is King in the world, not just in the church.

Third, and perhaps most important, God has a vision for us that is good. Although God *can* direct world history and major events toward his ends and *does* punish sin and unfaithfulness in the process, that is *not* God's delight. "For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone" (Lam. 3:33). Rather, what God wants is a people whom he can dwell with and who honor his name and character through their actions. Israel's prophets addressed this directly because it was obvious that, despite the ending of the Babylonian exile, sin would quickly lead to repeated failure and further judgment. Jeremiah foretold of a new covenant in which the law would be written on the hearts of God's people (Jer. 31:31–34), and Ezekiel prophesied that it would be God's own Spirit that would be poured out on each person to effect this (Ezek. 36:26–27). God's intent for people is not that they simply repeat a cycle of sin, failure, confession, and forgiveness. While true repentance and forgiveness are crucial, what God wants for us is life, fruitfulness, blessing, and stability. God wants to see us break out of the cycle of failure and sin and enter a cycle of fruitfulness and life. God wants us to flourish, not merely survive.

These examples of active listening, and the promise of God's response that they convey, are repeated and developed in the New Testament. As Jesus prepared for his death and resurrection, he knew that the disciples would feel forgotten and forsaken. Thus, he promised the Holy Spirit as his presence with them while he is bodily absent: "I will ask the Father, and

he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16–18).

Jesus knew that he was about to experience absolute exile from God as he took the entirety of humanity’s sin upon himself on the cross. Having resisted the many temptations to assimilate or withdraw that challenged his own faithfulness, he then endured shame, mockery, and injustice at the hands of the religious and secular powers of his day. He entered into our exile with us. Jesus’ longing for a redeemed people was more powerful than the shame of mockery and injustice. He received the full consequences of our sin and the horror of separation from the Father. He absorbed into himself all that the powers of evil could throw at him and, in doing so, exhausted their power. This is how Christ overcame the world and how we are freed from the cycle of sin, judgment, and exile. In Christ, the sins that would justly lead to our judgment and alienation from God are forgiven. In Christ, the powers of evil that would attack and destroy our life in God have been defeated and the promises of a new covenant and the outpouring of God’s spirit are fulfilled; we inherit them in and through Jesus Christ.

Anticipating both his victory over all the powers of evil on the cross and the persecution of his followers that would ensue (Rev. 12:17), Jesus also encouraged his disciples concerning their suffering and his victory: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

True Worship

As Jesus’ words penetrate our hearts, we will find an authentic spirit of worship beginning to bubble up within us. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). If, knowing the worst about our heart attitudes, anger, and sin, God is still for us, then we can take great comfort in his presence. And if Jesus truly has overcome all the powers of evil and death, is King of kings and Lord of lords, and is establishing a kingdom that

cannot be shaken, then his presence is also empowering. We need not fear the “isms” and ideologies of our own day or the trials of persecution and suffering that are beginning to reemerge in the West. Our hope has a firm anchor in God’s promises: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35, 37–39).

Becoming aware that God knows us thoroughly and is nevertheless for us gives us great confidence. It is this confidence that enables us to move into the spirit of praise that is the foundation of ambassadorial living. A spirit of praise and worship is what enables us to “sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land” (cf. Ps. 137:4). A spirit of praise arises from and builds up our confidence in God and in the gospel. A spirit of praise in others is the goal of the ambassadorial ministry of reconciliation—that people will see and experience the goodness of God and praise him for it.

Psalms 138 captures well this spirit of praise and worship as a response to God’s answer and presence in a time of real trouble. The psalm is part of the last book (section) of Psalms (starting at Ps. 107) that many commentators believe was collected together for use in the postexilic period. It is placed directly after Psalm 137, the psalm we considered in chapter 3 that exemplifies the weeping and anger of the Babylonian exiles.

Psalms 138 speaks of God’s deliverance from the midst of troubles, his answer to a cry for help, and the confidence that comes as a result. The praise of the psalmist is directed toward God, but the hope of the psalm is oriented outward, toward the nations. The psalmist wants to praise God publicly; wants to proclaim all other gods, ideologies, and creeds as false objects of worship; and yearns for the nations to also sing and praise when they hear God’s words and see his ways made visible to them. May this psalm also be our prayer.

Of David.

I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart;
before the “gods” I will sing your praise.

I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.

When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.

May all the kings of the earth praise you, LORD,
when they hear what you have decreed.

May they sing of the ways of the LORD,
for the glory of the LORD is great.

Though the LORD is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;
though lofty, he sees them from afar.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.

You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.

The LORD will vindicate me;
your love, LORD, endures forever—
do not abandon the works of your hands.