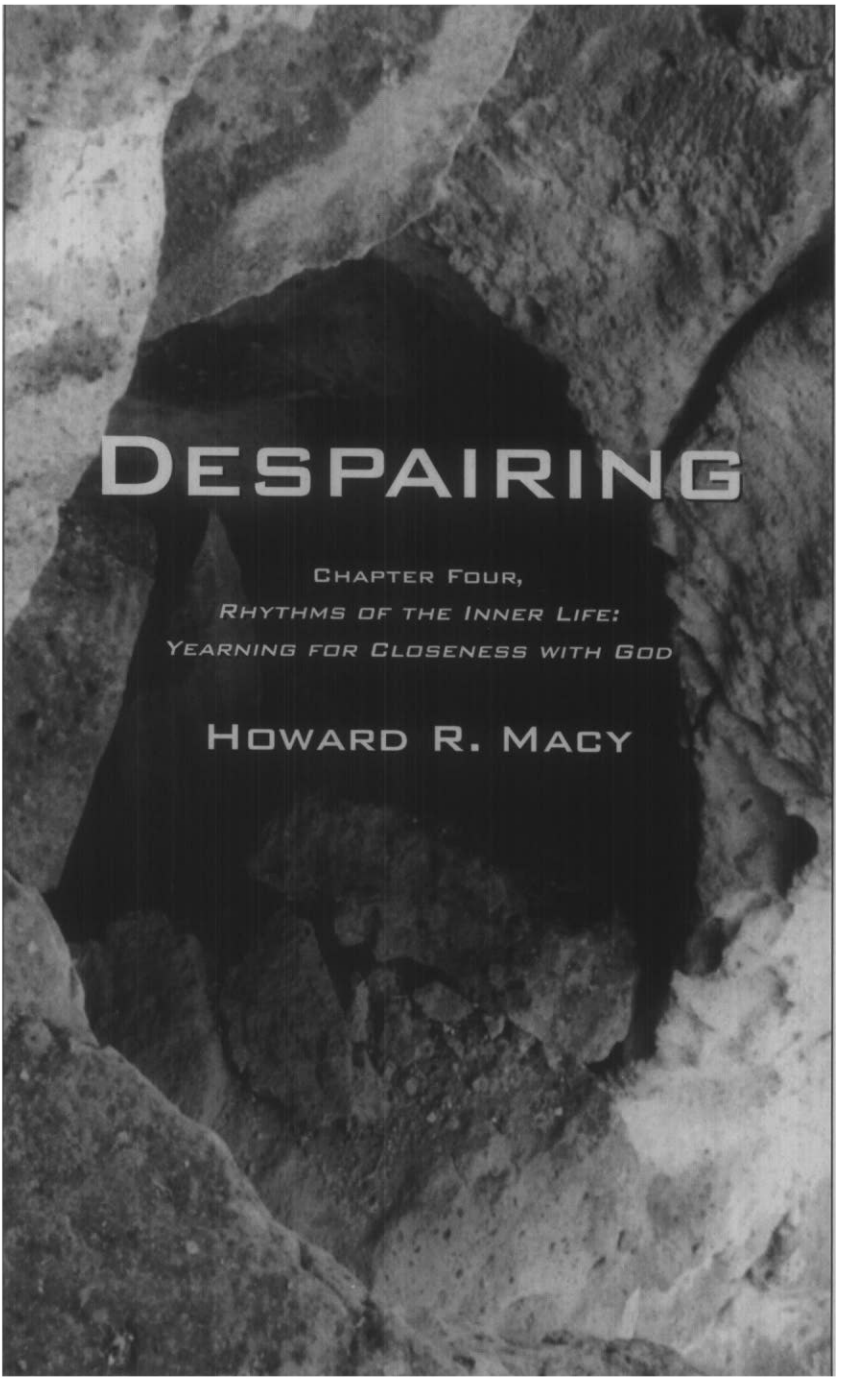
DESPAIRING
CHAPTER FOUR,
RHYTHMS OF THE INNER LIFE:
YEARNING FOR CLOSENESS WITH GOD
HOWARD R. MACY

My God, my God, why have you deserted me?...I call all day, my God, but you never answer, all night long I call and cannot rest.

Psalm 22:1, 2

Many seminarians go to school so they can learn to lead others in the life of faith. Not Frank. He was in seminary desperately trying to salvage a few shreds of faith for himself. He had become a Christian as a young adolescent, and his warm piety had eventually led him to serve the poor in a nation bordering on war. His own government had proclaimed its peaceful intentions there, but he soon learned its gunships routinely destroyed peasant villages and farmlands nearby. Frank's angry disbelief was galvanized into rage and despair when bombs fell on campesinos with whom he worked and he saw for himself women and children fleeing in terror, many with gaping wounds, all pierced to the heart. *Why?! Why does this happen? Why does God permit this?* The questions so burned themselves on his heart and shattered his faith that he could scarcely hear an answer though he earnestly wanted to. His struggle for faith was overwhelmed by despair.

Less dramatic but more common is Stephanie's story. Though raised in the church, not until she was a young adult did Stephanie come into a faith that sparkled with life. The first weeks and months of discovery were a time of adventure and excitement. Energy and joy spilled over on everyone around her (often to their envy), and Stephanie thought her spiritual high tide would last forever. It didn't. Though she scrupulously tended her new life, periods of time came when prayer was difficult, devotion was more duty than delight, and life seemed more ordinary than thrilling. She, like many of us, was tempted to indict herself for spiritual sloth, to conclude that the sparkle maybe had been too good to be true, and to lower her hopes—or abandon them altogether. She struggled in faith, wondering about its meaning and its possibilities.

Frank's and Stephanie's stories are not unusual. Even after longing for God and finally coming into faith, many people struggle, even to

the point of despair. Though despair is almost too strong a word here, since it signifies the loss of hope, still it points accurately to the depth of distress that is possible for even the faithful. The struggles for faith are not mere trifles or charades. They sometimes jar us to the core.

Many modern teachers gloss over this reality. From the Cathedral of the Perpetual Smile to First Happy Baptist, there are plenty of people who would mistakenly have us believe that the life of faith is basically one long joyride. To sustain this illusion and the quest for the Holy Grin, they transform the church program into a religious amusement park hawking a thrill-a-minute, fun-filled experience, complete with emotional roller coasters, religious variety shows, verbal trick mirrors, and more. Such teaching is a half-truth at best, a shoddy imitation of authentic joy in faith. Both the Scriptures and our experience refute it.

The fact is that the life of faith includes struggle. We suffer dryness and "the dark night of the soul." We hear the piercing question, "Why?" and blush at not having a tidy answer. We cringe and cry out when life seems hollow and unfair. We smart under the sting of mockery and lies aimed at us. We sometimes plead, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But even when we see the struggle in ourselves, we are tempted to conceal rather than disclose it. Sometimes we even put on our brave face before God. After all, to admit struggle seems to be admitting that we have failed as disciples. So while we feign joy, we trudge on, silently stooped by our burdens, and we secretly waste away. What we need to do, instead, is to unmask our struggle and despair and to learn, as people of faith, how to encounter them.

At this point the Psalms are a helpful guide, for songs of struggle—the laments—are the most common type of song in the Psalter. The Hebrew singers often sang "the blues," and the way they did it can teach us about our own times of darkness and how to open them to the light.

Though old and sometimes shrill, the lament songs still echo the themes of our despair. We hear in them our insistent question, "Why,

if God is good, does life often seem unfair?" They sing of our bewilderment and anger over people who lie to us, gossip about us, and even try to ruin us. Even the melancholy strains of abandonment and loneliness come alive to us, for sometimes the psalmists, too, felt God mysteriously absent from them. The perennial question, "Why?" Enemies. The apparent absence of God. Though times may change, the lyrics of lament are timeless.

Water up to my neck

These Psalms surprise us, often, in how deeply the singers feel their distress. Even granting the exaggeration typical of Hebrew poetry, their pain leaps out at us. "I am worn out with groaning," writes one. "Every night I drench my pillow and soak my bed with tears; my eye is wasted with grief..." (6:6, 7). Another sings of being exhausted from misery. "How much longer," he asks, "must I endure grief in my soul, and sorrow in my heart by day and by night?" (13:2). These troubles have aged them beyond their years (6:7). Of course, we need not hear such complaints merely as grand hyperbole. At this point we should not be surprised. Don't we know, too, what it means to be so careworn that we toss restlessly on our beds, vainly trying every method we know to get to sleep? Don't we know what it means to lose our appetites or to hesitate to go out in public for fear that we might at any moment break into tears? Sallow faces and vacant stares, the fruit of despair, are not far from any of us. Few of us have escaped being robbed of energy and a measure of life itself because of betrayal, grief, and other struggles of the soul.

Several of the psalmists are so burdened that they see themselves teetering on the brink of death itself. They complain, for example, that they are being overwhelmed by the chaotic primordial waters, the waters through which one passed into the realm of the dead. Death threatens imminently when the singer cries out, "Save me, God! The water is already up to my neck!...I have stepped into deep water and the waves are washing over me" (69:1, 2). This and other Old Testament allusions to rescue from the waters often portray a sense of impending death.

One Psalm links this picture specifically with the most common Old Testament image of death, Sheol, the world of the dead:

> For the waves of death encompassed me;
> The torrents of destruction overwhelmed me;
> The cords of Sheol surrounded me;
> The snares of death confronted me.
>
> 2 Samuel 22:5, 6; Psalm 18:4, 5
> (New American Standard Bible)

From the dim and dusty precincts of Sheol, in which all the dead reside, one neither returns nor praises the Almighty (as the despairing psalmists eagerly point out to God). Often, then, the singers cry out for rescue from their struggle as they see their lives "on the brink of Sheol" (88:3).

For the psalmists, death does not merely end life. It also invades our living and steals away its vigor. So when the psalmists cry, "The water is already up to my neck!" it is not just primitive hysteria. Instead, it describes graphically how deeply spiritual struggle can reach us. We are coming to understand this again as we see ever more clearly the interplay between body, mind, soul, spirit, psyche, or whatever other components into which we are prone to compartmentalize ourselves. Now we know, for example, that stress causes sickness. We see that in response to spiritual and psychological torment, our bodies often fashion diseases precisely to answer and express our pain, even to the point of death. I have seen a person develop a strong physical allergy to a place she detested and a young man fall victim to a crippling disease born of his own rage. We are told that grief can trigger cancer. Stress can ruin our hearts. In brief, spiritual struggle can have powerful, even physical, effects in our lives. It can be, literally, sickness unto death.

The timeless "Why?"

"Why?" is not only one of the most persistent questions in the lament songs, it is one of the most urgent questions of all humankind. Fueled by visions of fairness, justice, and the power of God, "Why?"

expresses our deep uneasiness and even open anger that the world is out of whack, that things are not as they are supposed to be.

One of the glaring inequities the psalmists see is that they suffer though they are innocent. In Psalm 44, for example, the singer expresses this very directly when he bemoans the defeat and disgrace into which his people have fallen:

> All this happened to us though we had not forgotten you,
> though we had not been disloyal to your covenant;
> though our hearts had not turned away....
> Wake up, Lord! Why are you asleep?...
> Why do you hide your face,
> and forget we are wretched and exploited?
>
> Psalm 44:17, 18, 23, 24

Elsewhere, when the psalmists base a plea for deliverance on innocence, the question "Why?" surely is not far from the surface. "Why hold back your hand?..." (74:11). "Why have you deserted me?" (22:1). "Why do you forget me? Why must I walk so mournfully, oppressed by the enemy?" (42:9, 43:2). "Why do you reject me?..." (88:14).

Job, the classic case of the innocent sufferer, pushes this point to its limit. In his final defense speech (Job 29-31), Job details his innocence so thoroughly he makes even his sympathizers blush for him; then he ends with a flourish: If I can ever get a fair hearing with God, he says, "I will give him an account of every step of my life, and go as boldly as a prince to meet him" (Job 31:37). In Job's story, the question "Why?" is written in huge letters as a background to every page.

It is bad enough to suffer innocently, but it adds even further frustration and puzzlement to see scoundrels prosper. The singer in Psalm 73 complains that though the wicked are arrogant, powerful, violent, and insolent toward God, yet they have bodies that would be the pride of a health club, they have no pain, and they are making money hand over fist—they are "well-off and still getting richer!" (73:12). Such apparent inequity baffles and tempts the psalmist:

After all, why should I keep my own heart pure,
and wash my hands in innocence,
if you plague me all day long
and discipline me every morning?

73:13, 14

The psalmists felt keenly the questions that thrust themselves on us each day. Some of them come to us from our televisions and newspapers. Why so much bad news? Why are people, even in the name of God, constantly at war? Why must many thousands of children each day starve to death, while their rich counterparts pay dearly to slim down at diet camps? Why do world leaders so often exude cold arrogance and greed? Some of our questions come from the neighborhood of our lives. Why is a young mother like Sally stricken with leukemia? How can his boss get away with firing someone as good as Joe? Why does Frank abuse his kids?

Many of our questions "Why?" however, don't force themselves on us from the outside, but erupt out of our own molten cores. *Why doesn't it seem to make more difference that I'm alive? Why, if God is with me, do I fail so often? Why, when I've done my best, is everything going wrong? Why bother? Why?*

One of the psalmists came near despair in answering his question:

Has God forgotten to show mercy,
or has his anger overcome his tenderness?

"This," I said then, "is what distresses me:
that the power of the Most High is no longer what it was."

77:9, 10

Perhaps God isn't loving. Perhaps God isn't powerful. Such bewilderment illustrates, I think, that the anguish of such questions may be even greater for people of faith than for others. Because we hope in a God who intends that the world should be just and who is loving and powerful, we have an agony over the dissonance between the way things are and the way they are supposed to be, to which the nonbeliever has no claim. Because of faith, the question "Why?" can

become a crisis. So rather than deny the power and poignancy of our questions, we must admit their reality and their legitimacy. We do struggle and even despair, and as I will suggest, acknowledging that can be a first step toward rescue when the "water is up to our necks."

Dogs and lions

Not only do the psalmists struggle with "Why?" they also are unnerved in the face of their enemies, attackers who, by the singers' account, are bigger than life and twice as mean. The theme of "enemies" is one of the most frequent in the Psalms, but it is also one that proves troublesome to modern readers. Despite its difficulty, however, the "enemies" language can teach us, for it is about people we know and live with. It is about critics and detractors, about cheats and liars, about double-crossers who don't say what they mean and don't mean what they say. The psalmists' enemies are like people we meet every day.

We shouldn't be surprised or offended that the psalmists have enemies. The singers haven't sought them and don't seem to delight in the fact that others are out to get them. Frankly, enemies are a part of real life. Though it makes nice funeral rhetoric to say of the deceased, "He didn't have an enemy in the world," it's rarely true. From the prophets to Jesus, and to our own time, it is clear that people who serve God faithfully will have enemies. So will nearly everyone else.

The psalmists, however, claim to have premium-quality enemies, a horde of people despicable enough to stock a soap opera. They lie constantly and cheat. They are smooth talkers whose tongues are razor sharp and full of poisonous venom (52:2; 55:21; 64:3; 140:3). They are treacherous and cunning people, whose persuasive words hide the war in their hearts. They twist the psalmists' words, spy on them (56:5, 6), set traps for them, pay back evil for kindness (109:5), and hate peace. They are like a pack of vicious dogs or a lion with fangs bared, eager to tear their victim limb from limb (22:13, 16, 20, 21; 57:4). They're so bad that they "prefer evil to good, lying to honest speech" (52:3). Worst of all, they actually think they can get

away with it. Over and over again the psalmists complain that the enemies believe that God ignores their wickedness or that he cannot or will not act to disrupt their schemes. While the struggling psalmists began to doubt whether God would act, their enemies had already decided that they were perfectly safe.

Although each of the psalmists' enemies qualifies easily as a candidate for the Villains' Hall of Fame, we can't tell exactly who they are. The psalmists don't name them, and they use bombastic clichés to describe them. Yet we should guard against merely spiritualizing or generalizing the enemy. To the Hebrew singers, the enemies were not distant or cerebral. Certainly the psalmists knew of spiritual warfare, but they generally describe a distinctly flesh-and-blood conflict. Their life, goods, and reputation were at stake, and to make it worse, sometimes God didn't even seem to care. To see the enemies as a general category holds them at arm's length and discounts the power of the psalmists' experience. The first singers, at least (and many since them), have known their enemies personally.

Just like the psalmists, we know enemies are real. Though we may not use the same exaggerated language as they did, the words we do use of our enemies are often as intemperate and sometimes more inelegant than theirs. We, like the psalmists, are hurt and dismayed. Who among us has not been lied to and cheated by people we trust? Haven't we all been under the eagle eye of someone eager to broadcast our slightest error in ridicule and gossip? Some of us have had our bosses scheme to get rid of us. Others have been maligned by the envious and fearful. All of us at some point have been taken advantage of, lied about, smiled at by backstabbers, and much more. Sadly, the villainy of such "enemies" is universal. It even thrives in the community of faith. What makes this situation worse for the psalmists and for us is that we not only seem helpless in the face of our enemies, but we sometimes wonder whether our Divine Helper will rescue us in time. The real sticking point is not just that we have enemies, but that they often appear to have license to do whatever they please. In this we share with the psalmists the struggle of faith.

Vengeance and babies' heads

Many who are offended at the enemy language of the Psalms are troubled most by the "curses" some of the singers seem to hurl at their enemies. To wish that schemers would fall victim to their own traps seems just enough, but frankly, some of the "curses" are bitter and even brutal. One can understand, certainly, how a singer who had seen the Babylonians cruelly destroy his nation might wish that his oppressors' babies have their heads bashed against the rocks (137:9). But this is excessive in the larger context of both the Old and New Testaments. Certainly the Psalms talk about "hating" enemies, though even this terminology may have had a more technical or restricted sense than we see in it. On the other hand, the Old Testament clearly sees that vengeance belongs to God (Deuteronomy 32:35) and advises people to feed hungry enemies (Proverbs 25:21, 22), counsel that Paul quotes with approval to the Christians in Rome (Romans 12:19, 20). Careful study reveals that the cursing language is neither as vindictive nor as pervasive as it first appears, yet honesty compels us still to acknowledge (and perhaps to be troubled by) its presence. Before we wallow in self-righteousness, however, we ought to recognize, as C. S. Lewis and others have pointed out, that though these cures may not be a model for our behavior, they may well be a mirror.[1] Our own angry desires to get even may also well exceed the boundaries of both justice and compassion.

We must also see the psalmists' plea for "vengeance" in the context of their desire for God's just rule. The Hebrews did not view God as a cosmic hit man out to settle a score for them at their whim. Instead, they saw Yahweh as a sovereign ruler eager to establish peace and justice throughout the world. *Vengeance* in the Old Testament is a function of God's just and righteous rule. It has nothing to do with fits of temper or holding a grudge, traits we rightly see as unworthy of God. Vengeance is redressing wrong. It is delivering the oppressed. It is calling criminals to account and effecting the wise and compassionate rule that the whole creation welcomes with joy (Psalms 96; 98). And it is God's, not man's, business.

---

[1]C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 22-25.

That is why the psalmists neither take vengeance (or justice) into their own hands nor curse their enemies directly. Instead, when they complain about the injustice they suffer, they appeal to God, whose right and obligation it is to see that justice is done. Even bitter complaints about the enemy are finally left in the hands of God.

In leaving vengeance to God, the psalmists teach us that even the most perplexing points of our struggle and despair must stand under God's sovereign wisdom. When our enemies prevail, life is unfair, justice is not done, and the Kingdom is clearly not established, we must choose to affirm, even through our complaint, "that tho' the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet."[2] Even though this is sound teaching, the New Testament tells us that justice isn't good enough. The Psalms move us from personal revenge to justice, but Jesus moves us from justice to mercy. Consigning our enemies to God's justice and relishing the prospect that they are going to get what they deserve is one thing; it is quite another to ask God to show them mercy. Yet in some of his hardest teachings, Jesus pointed beyond the Psalms in just this way. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," he said (Matthew 5:44). "Forgive just as you are forgiven" (see Matthew 6:12, 14, 15; 18:23-35). Over and over again he said it, and he demonstrated it in his dying words, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing..." (Luke 23:34).

I prefer justice. I would rather be vindicated and see the tables turned on those who have hurt me. So it is hard to picture my enemies and then pray, "God, please bless John and Mary with all your blessings. Forgive them, and show them your mercy and kindness." That prayer tests my love, for it reveals whether forgiveness is still just words or whether it has taken root in my heart. I soon learn how far I have followed Jesus, who prayed specifically for my enemies and for me when he prayed, "Father, forgive them." To follow Jesus, I must prefer mercy.

---

[2]Maltbie D. Babcock, "This Is My Father's World," *Great Hymns of the Faith*, ed. John W. Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Singspiration Music, 1968), 39.

How much longer?

The other prominent question in the lament songs is "How long?" "...Yahweh, how long will you be?" (6:3). "How much longer will you forget me...?" (13:1). "How much longer, Lord, will you look on?" (35:17). This agonizing question also belongs distinctly to people of faith, for it contains at least scraps of hope. "How much longer?" presumes that God must act to resolve the singer's distress. It rests on the conviction that God cannot and will not endlessly tolerate the menace of this moment. If the question whispers of hope, however, it cries out eloquently of anguish.

One of the principal reasons for the psalmists' distress is that, in the face of all their troubles, God seems to have abandoned them. The One who could rescue them seems to look on idly (35:17) or to be standing off to the side, having deserted them (38:21). The Almighty, on whom they have relied, seems to have forgotten about them at the worst possible time (13:1; 42:9; 44:24) and in shocking unconcern has even fallen asleep (44:23). These bold charges point to the crisis of our spirits—our sense of desperation and God's apparent distance. We need help now, not after God arises refreshed from an afternoon nap. We have trusted and prayed and pleaded, yet God seems to have left us to fend for ourselves, like nonswimmers thrown into deep waters. The water is up to our necks, and not even God will toss us a lifeline. Sometimes God doesn't even seem to be standing by. The presence of God has disappeared entirely. "How much longer will you hide your face from me?" the singers implore (see 13:1; 44:24; 88:14). Could it be forever? Religious feeling fails completely, and the withering winds of God's hiddenness sear our souls, leaving a barren wasteland. Here we have entered the wilderness, the "night of the senses," the "dark night of the soul." In such times we long for the warmth, the inner assurances, the feelings that the God whom we love above all else is near. We even interrogate and accuse ourselves, ruthlessly searching for anything on our part that might block the intimacy that has slipped away from us. Yet we despair, like Job, that despite our eagerness and innocence, God seems nowhere to be found. Numbness and doubt overwhelm joy and confidence. "How long will you hide, Lord?"

Perhaps worst of all is God's silence. "I call all day, my God, but you never answer...," accuses one singer (22:2). Another pleads, "God whom I praise, break your silence" (109:1). Here is barrenness turned cold. Any response, even anger, would be better than no answer at all! In this lonely silence, experience shatters all easy platitudes about how God answers every prayer. Answers, indeed! In the silence we can almost hear our words of prayer tumble to the floor, and we may blush at how preposterous even attempting words seems. We wonder whether it really matters, whether we're even heard, let alone responded to, or whether prayer is merely a naive and comforting way of getting dreams and frustrations off our chests. As the hollow stillness seems filled only by our own words, sometimes we struggle to pray at all.

When we feel left on our own or are unable to feel or hear God, we may well join the ancient singers in pleading, "How much longer, Lord?" Though it is a question tinged with hope, it is also a measure of our struggle as adventurers in faith.

How to complain

The very fact that the lament songs abound in the Psalms suggests that they can teach us how to cope with struggle in the life of faith. The German Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann has observed that lament has been largely excluded from the Christian tradition,[3] and insofar as he is correct, it is a great loss. One of the best ways to meet our struggles is to learn from the psalmists how to complain.

The first lesson the Hebrew singers teach us is simply to be honest. Frankly, the honesty we need can easily elude us, particularly in the Christian subculture that prizes constant happiness and perpetual spiritual victory. In such settings (and even privately) it is much easier to smile and blithely praise God than to admit to spiritual struggles. If we are to progress in the inner life, however, we must acknowledge our despair, as well as our successes, to ourselves and to God.

---

[3]Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 260-65.

Besides the psalmists, other Old Testament figures display the kind of integrity we need. Moses showed it, for example, when he was surrounded by sand, by the burdens of leadership, and by angry Israelites who had tried every manna recipe in the book. "Why do you treat your servant so badly?..." he complained to God. "If this is how you want to deal with me, I would rather you killed me!..." (Numbers 11:11, 15). To this we could add Elijah, Jeremiah, Job, and others who complained, argued, and even accused God. Even if they didn't see their situations accurately, they were honest about their struggles. Perhaps their examples can embolden the more timid of us, who have been taught the pragmatism of being polite, if false, to our betters. Lies born of courtesy and fear don't fool God and certainly don't help us. To deal with our struggle at all, we must at least be honest.

We must not, however, confuse being honest with merely being crabby. The lament songs make this clear as well, for they include much more than cries of distress and pleas for deliverance. One of the major elements in the lament is the singer's confession of trust in God. Another is some expression of assurance by the psalmist (or in words addressed to him) that his plea will be answered. A third typical element is praise, either lifted now or promised for the future. Thus the themes of trust, assurance, and praise move us sharply away from complaint alone.

To insist on the whole pattern of the lament is not just to protect God from constant whining, though such noise surely tests even the Divine patience. Nor will proper complaint become an easy cure for our struggle. It can, however, push back despair by rekindling our hope.

Just as trust stands at the center of the lament song, sandwiched between moans of distress and cries for help, so it is central to the renewal of hope. The confession of trust, in this instance, works something like a magnifying glass I played with as a boy. I thought it a scientific marvel that by focusing the rays of the sun on a pile of dry, brittle leaves I could actually ignite a fire. In a similar way, declaring our trust gathers, like a glass, our scattered shreds of hope and intensifies them to kindle our spirits.

We must not, however, confuse confessions of trust with feelings of trust. When we are in despair, we may not feel trust at all. Indeed, our struggle is often over whether we even can trust. When we feel left in the lurch and ignored, feelings of trust do not come easily. In their stead, then, we must choose to trust. Trust becomes a matter of will.

Choosing to trust also requires that we remember. We must not seek to whip up feelings so much as to recall the character of God. Those who have known God can remember how God has helped them in the past. They can recount the traits of God's character, especially power, tenderness, and faithful love. By choosing to affirm what we have known of God, we focus those scattered recollections into a ray of hope.

I have often marveled at several people whom I consider to be modern "saints," particularly for the way that they can endure spiritual struggle. In their lives it seems that burden and serenity can walk hand in hand. The reason, I believe, is that they know God so well that they also know that any feelings of abandonment or betrayal can only be temporary and misleading, not final. "God will not forsake me," they insist. "God is not like that." Here is an important clue to meeting our questions "Why?" and our other struggles. Even when we are pushed to the wall of despair, we can choose to confess our trust. In our present distress, we, like the psalmists, can remember God's goodness. We can choose to answer the whys of doubt with "But God isn't like that."

To declare our trust also highlights the relationship already established between God and his people. The psalmists use it, to be sure, to try to prod God into action. But, more important, it establishes a context for our present distress. When we do not understand our circumstances or "what God is doing," we can still have confidence in that relationship. The point is not that God can deliver or has delivered, but that this God in whom we have trusted is our Deliverer. It is precisely such a binding relationship that Paul understands as he tells the Romans that nothing—persecution, attack, poverty, spiritual powers, even death itself—can separate us from the love of God. In fact, through these trials, "...we triumph, by the power of him who

loved us" (Romans 8:35-39). So the confessions of trust remind us, even in our wilderness, that we as people of God are sheltered and sustained by the One whose faithful love endures forever.

Pointing to this relationship not only connects us to the past, but also points with hope to the future. The psalmists vow to praise God for a future deliverance, and in making this promise, they anticipate that their relationship to God will continue. In the same way, when we can promise to praise, we declare, even in the face of trouble, that we have not been abandoned.

In teaching us how to complain, the lament songs suggest not only honesty and confession of trust, but also patience. The devotional masters often counsel patience during difficult times, but it may see surprising to see it in the lamenting psalmists. After all, they often beg the Lord to "come quickly," and their urgent pleas frequently seem to border on hysteria. Surely we can understand how a singer who sees himself "on the brink of Sheol" might not say, "But take your time, Lord." Still, "come quickly" seems to shove patience aside.

In spite of that initial impression, patience and complaint can occur together, for complaint, at least in the Psalms, is rooted in hope. Complaint is not giving up. It grows, instead, out of believing that God will yet come to deliver. Job provides an ideal example of this point. For thousands of years now, Job has been lauded in story and maxim for his patience. Yet clearly he complained more bitterly than any other character in Scripture. The measure of his patience was not that he submitted quietly to his circumstances and to his self-righteous friends but that he refused to give up. Jesus told the story of a widow who badgered a judge until she finally got justice (Luke 18:1-8). Any parent knows how endlessly children can beg and whine as long as they think they still have a chance to get what they want. So there can be a confident patience in complaint, as there was for the psalmists, because it doesn't give up. It doesn't abandon hope.

Yet another dimension to patience is born of the knowledge that there are rhythms or cycles in the inner life. Certainly there will be times of ecstasy, when everything seems to go right and life is filled with joy.

But barrenness, too, comes as a natural part of the rhythm of the spiritual life. Patience recognizes that such dryness may not not symbolize failure, but may instead signal and stimulate continued growth.

Part of our struggle, of course, is to understand why such times come. Some writers suggest that God sends them to rouse us from spiritual sloth, to spur us on in our love for God, or to make us less dependent on our feelings and more dependent on God alone. Perhaps so. Because they have spurred my growth, I can imagine that God has sent me difficulties that have stripped away false securities and shattered hindering comforts. At the same time, some of our struggle clearly grows out of things that God has not sent to us, things that are evil and patently contrary to God's will. Yet in these, too, patience is required, for the process of God's victory over our circumstances and the healing of our spirits often takes time.

Patience, then, recognizes and yields to the rhythms of the inner life. It both answers and is built into the psalmists' question, "How long?" Even to ask, "How much longer?" declares that the rhythm must change, that the dance will follow the dirge.

To learn from the psalmists' laments the ways of honesty, trust, and patience helps us when we are caught in despair. But even these, as useful as they are, supply neither easy formulae nor instant cures. There are none. Struggles will come. We'll be tempted to choose pious sham over truth. We may stammer our confessions of trust. Our cries for help may sound more pushy than patient. Yet for those who know God, that is not the whole story. The pulse of the Creator's heart resonates in the secret chambers of our own, so that we know somehow, deeply, that despair is not the last word. We know somehow that though we have had occasion to cry out, "God, why have you abandoned me?" we will yet say, "I will praise you before all peoples, for you have not hidden your face from me, and you have answered me when I called" (see 22:22-24).

Howard Macy lives with his wife Margi in Newberg, Oregon, USA. They have two adult children. A member of Newberg Friends Church, Howard is a recorded minister in Northwest Yearly Meeting. He teaches religion and biblical studies at George Fox University, where he is chair of the Department of Religious Studies.

Rhythms of the Inner Life: Yearning for Closeness with God was published by The Barclay Press, 110 Elliott Road, Newberg, OR 97132 USA; phones 800-962-4014 (within the US), 503-538-7345. Online ordering is available (www.barclaypress.com).

THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of
Friends World Committee for Consultation
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street • Philadelphia, PA 19102-1498 • USA

Printed on recycled paper

4-97/3250/GS