

## LAMENT

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.”*

This is the cry of the psalmist in Psalm 22. It is also the cry of Jesus as he hung on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But what place does lament hold in our prayer and worship today?

### What is Lament?

Lament involves expressions such as grief, sorrow, despair, doubt, anger, frustration, penitence, disappointment, confusion, loneliness, abandonment... These expressions form a rich part of the prayer and worship we see in the bible. Of the 150 Psalms, the most common genre is psalms of lament. And it's important to remember that these psalms were not just private poetry, but they were used in public corporate worship in the church. People joined together to lift their voices in lament to God.

But the language and practice of lament is something that we seem to have lost in our prayer and worship today. We too often focus on how we 'should' feel, rather than openly acknowledging how we do feel, and honestly working through those feelings before God. Perhaps we worry that our feelings of lament betray a lack of faith; that as followers of Jesus with hope in God, we are not 'allowed' to lament; that we don't have permission.

However, the biblical picture we have of lament is quite different to this perception. Biblical lament is not shown as an *absence* of faith, but rather it is *bold faith in action*.

In the words of D. A. Carson: “There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God.”

We see lament throughout the Psalms, in the book of Lamentations, in Job. But it's not just something reserved for the Old Testament and the old covenant. In the Gospels, we see Jesus lament over Jerusalem (Lk 19:41-44), Jesus lament on the cross (Mk 15:34); and in Romans 8, Paul refers to the groaning of creation over the state of the world, and how we also inwardly groan and lament as we await our restoration and redemption. We are broken people in a broken world; the need for lament is an inescapable reality.

Christian musician Michael Gungor says: “A Christianity that does not lament is a shallow Christianity. It is a medicinal, numbing balm we use to avoid living life in a world that is groaning. It is a Band-Aid to cover our wounds. Fig leaves to be sewn over our humanness. And many of us need to be saved from our addiction to this anemic, shallow substitute for Christianity.”

It's clear that lament needs to be a vital part of our rhythm of prayer and worship.

So how do we reconcile this with the exhortation in Philippians to "do everything without complaining" (Phil 2:14) or the warning in 1 Corinthians to not grumble like the Israelites in the wilderness? (1 Cor 10:10)

The distinction generally made is that grumbling is giving up on God and walking away from Him, whereas biblical lament is coming **to** God; lament is sometimes referred to as 'covenant complaint', where you are not letting go of God because of what He has promised. Here are some thoughts from a few different commentators:

“...the psalms of lament are not like the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness, who displayed a lack of faith in God's promises. Because of their faith in God's sovereignty, the psalmists have high expectations of God; and because they take God's promises seriously, they lament and protest when it appears that God is not keeping his promises.” (J. Todd Billings)

“To sing a lament against God in worship reveals far, far greater trust than to sing a jingle about how happy we are and how much we trust him... Lament cuts through insincerity, strips pretence, and reveals the raw nerve of trust that angrily approaches the throne of grace and then kneels in awed, robust wonder.” (Dan Allender)

“Lament is not about getting things off your chest. It's about casting your anxieties upon God, and trusting him with them. Mere complaining indicates a lack of intimacy with God. Because lament is a form of prayer, lament transforms our cries and complaints into worship. Walter Brueggemann says that undergirding biblical lament is “a relationship between the lamenter and his God that is close and deep enough for the protester to speak in imperatives, addressing God as ‘you’ and reminding him of his covenantal promises.” Anyone can complain, and practically everyone does. Christians can lament. They can talk to God about their condition and ask him to change things because they have a relationship with him. To lament is to be utterly honest before a God whom our faith tells us we can trust. Biblical lament affirms that suffering is real and spiritually significant, but not hopeless. In his mercy, our God has given us a form of language that bends his ear and pulls his heart.” (Will Walker & Kendal Haug)

### **How to Lament?**

Even once we have acknowledged our need to lament, and even once we have acknowledged that we have 'permission' to lament, it can still be hard to know how to approach it. Lament is something of a lost language in our prayer and worship, so we can often struggle to know how to express it. A helpful place to start is reading through some of the lament psalms and immersing yourself in the language and process of lament. Here are a couple of examples:

One of the common approaches for the lament psalms is to sit in the tension between who God is, what He has promised – and the reality of the current situation; that is, the tension between what the psalmist knows about God – His goodness, His past deeds, His faithfulness – and then compared to the bleak reality of his current struggle.

We see this in Psalm 22:

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

***Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?***

***My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.***

*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the one Israel praises.*

*In you our ancestors put their trust;  
they trusted and you delivered them.*

*To you they cried out and were saved;  
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

***But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.***

***All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.***

***“He trusts in the Lord,” they say,  
“let the Lord rescue him.  
Let him deliver him,  
since he delights in him.”***

*Yet you brought me out of the womb;  
you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.  
From birth I was cast on you;  
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.  
Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help*

And so it continues, pivoting between the human situation and the divine truth, and the tension between them. As Matt Jacoby observes, you could get rid of that tension by expecting less of God and making excuses for Him; or you could deny the reality of the situation; but the Psalmist increases the tension between them, showing the boldness of true faith.

Another example is Psalm 44, which starts with a declaration of all that God has done in the past, remembering His good deeds, and then essentially uses that information to make a case before God in the midst of suffering. See the progression across these selected excerpts:

<sup>1</sup> *We have heard it with our ears, O God;  
our ancestors have told us  
what you did in their days,  
in days long ago.  
With your hand you drove out the nations  
and planted our ancestors;  
you crushed the peoples  
and made our ancestors flourish.*

...  
<sup>7</sup> *...you give us victory over our enemies,  
you put our adversaries to shame.  
In God we make our boast all day long,  
and we will praise your name forever.*

***But now you have rejected and humbled us;  
you no longer go out with our armies.  
You made us retreat before the enemy,  
and our adversaries have plundered us.  
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep  
and have scattered us among the nations.***

...  
<sup>17</sup> ***All this came upon us,  
though we had not forgotten you;  
we had not been false to your covenant.  
Our hearts had not turned back;  
our feet had not strayed from your path.  
But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;  
you covered us over with deep darkness.***

...  
<sup>23</sup> ***Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.  
Why do you hide your face  
and forget our misery and oppression?***

***We are brought down to the dust;  
our bodies cling to the ground.  
Rise up and help us;  
rescue us because of your unfailing love.***

A final key example of lament is found in Psalm 88, often referred to as the 'dark' psalm because it doesn't contain any kind of hopeful declaration – the final line is 'darkness is my closest friend'. The psalm both begins and ends with pain and darkness. But the important thing to note in this psalm is that he is still coming to God. Even in the darkness, he chooses to cry out to God.

Read the full psalm here: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2088>

Listen to a choral setting of Psalm 88 here: <https://soundcloud.com/lauren-fiona/the-darkness-psalm-88>

### **Where to from Lament?**

Psalm 126 says: "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them."

Lament is a process that helps us work our way through to praise.

"Lament is not an end in itself. There should be no question that God does not want us to sing lament as the staple of our worship, nor should it be our internal hymn of choice. But lament opens the heart to wrestle with a God who knows that sorrow leads to comfort and lament moves to praise as sure as the crucifixion gave way to resurrection." (Dan Allender)

Because through all of this, God is with us – He is with us in our lament. Our own lament is just a taste, a window, into God's lament for the world. How much more does God's heart break over the pain and injustice in the world? Over the suffering endured by his people? We see this most clearly in the cross – that in God's lament over the state of the world, over the brokenness of his people, He sent His own Son to die, to claim final victory over sin and death, to make a way for ultimate restoration. God's salvation plan is bigger than us; and even in our lament, we can put our trust in Him.

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