

Sept 15 2024 Sermon Rev Jo Smith

Have you ever prayed like this?

“Lord, I am sick and tired of this.....(Insert whatever word you like here). I can't do this anymore. I want relief and rest and comfort. But where is it? Where is my rest? Do you care? Are you near? Have you forgotten me? Why won't you take this away...? I'm sick of this. I'm worn out. I'm brokenhearted for this mess we're in.”

Maybe you've had those thoughts run through your head but you wouldn't dare to call it a prayer. Why not?

This is not a pretty prayer. Its raw. Unsanitized. It doesn't reflect orthodox “Good and Proper” theology. These are the thoughts and the prayer of a person who is frustrated, overwhelmed, and angry. Anger directed towards God. Questions about God's goodness. Doubts about his love and care.

I've had these thoughts. I've prayed this prayer. I've asked these questions and had these doubts.

Maybe you are thinking, “Jo, you should never say such things. Those are not true. And you should know better since you're a minister.”

I get that. I know that those thoughts don't represent my best theological thinking. I know the things I have sometimes thought about God are not actually true about God. But they have certainly felt like it at times.

And I want to say this morning that God actually gives us permission to speak such things to him.

We are in the second week of our small series on the psalms. Last week Jack brought us a psalm of praise. There are several ways to categorise the psalms but for this small series we are going to look at psalms of praise, lament, imprecation (cursing) and pilgrimage.

So today.....lament.

What is a LAMENT? To lament means to outwardly and visibly express sorrow or mourning or regret. It can even mean to wail!!! To cry. To yell. Even Jesus lamented!

Hebrews 5:7 NIV "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears..."

Let this sink in. Picture Jesus out alone with His Father offering up LOUD CRIES and TEARS. The perfect Son of God, wailing, lamenting, crying. YES.

The psalmist is, in a way, accusing God of abandoning him. It's like saying, "Lord, you simply don't care. You've forgotten me. How could you do that?" The words are bold, disrespectful even, borderline blasphemous. The pain and grief we can experience in life can be untamed and vicious. If you have never experienced a time like this, I don't mean to be a gloomy pessimist, but you will someday. Life in this world will at some point bring us such pain.

Lamenting as it appears in scripture, specifically in the psalms, learning to take our pain and our complaints and our grumbling and our whining TO GOD....And the ultimate goal is to trust him more...even if the pain remains.

We could say that prayerful lamenting is to move from "Grief to Belief."

There is not a finite list of the things we can lament in this life but we can lament...

Broken relationships

Divorce

Death

Being laid off work

Disease

Sadness

Chronic pain

Wayward children

Abuse

Sins against us

In general, the darkness in this world

And not only major trials, we can lament many small things. In many circumstances of life, we can feel sorrow, sadness, anger and aloneness. And we may ask, "Can I *really* talk to God about this?" I believe that scripture tells us not only CAN we talk to God about it, we MUST talk to him. If the Lord Jesus lamented, so must we when the grief hits, when the pain strikes, when the world goes dark.

But culturally we've got some weird ideas about this.

You know I think there are two things going on for us culturally that are relevant for us here. Two ideas about what we are supposed to do with our grief and hurts and disappointments. One is the idea that we have to get over things, triumph, heal, move on and that we can do that by the strength of our own will alone. That if we follow the right processes, do the right things, we will triumph over the grief or the disappointment or the pain. We can "live our best life" if we apply the right attitude.

The other thing that is happening is a real temptation to cling to the status of woundedness or victimhood as a way to gain a voice, status and power in the culture.

Neither of these are helpful cultural ideas. And lamenting, taking our grief and our pain and our anger and our hurt to God has nothing to do with either of them.

So how do we learn to do lament? So that its helpful, even good for us? Not triumphing over our pain or those who have hurt us, or getting over it, or through it, whatever it is..... So that its not just whining and clinging to the misery?

We can look at the psalms of lament

One way we can look at these Psalms is that the psalmists typically pray through a framework of thought. Psalm 13, which I chose today is a good example.

This framework is not a formula. Lamenting to God is not like that. It can get messy. Yet we discover a pattern of sorts in the Psalms of Lament..one that can move us from grief to belief

There are four common elements to many of these Psalms.

The first element in a prayerful lament is that we...

Turn to God

Address God as you come to him in prayer. This is sometimes combined with complaint.

David prays to the Lord in vs. 1, "*How long, Lord?*" This sounds so obvious, but I need to say it. We can be quick to grumble in our hearts or complain to a friend. But the key here is to take those heartaches and sorrows and complaints directly to God in prayer. Please know I am NOT saying we shouldn't talk to other people about our pain. That is good and important.

But we must not neglect talking to God about our pain. For who is greater than He? Who is wiser? Who is the best Counselor you will ever talk to? Who has more power than the Lord? Who loves you more than He, for remember, He sent his Son to die for you?

What we see from David and other psalmists is that they acknowledge by faith that God is real and that he hears us. So the simple and obvious step of lamenting directly God.... needs to be a reality.

Bring Your Complaint

After we turn to God, we move to a second element of lamenting: COMPLAIN. Yes, we really can complain. But we do it towards the Lord.

Identify in blunt language the specific pain or injustice, and we tell God about it. *Why* or *how* is often part of the complaint.

Again, look at David's words recorded in the Scriptures:

1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day? How long will my enemy dominate me?

We read this, and if we regard God as holy, powerful, and eternal, perhaps we are shocked. The words seem rude. Arrogant. Demanding. And the words taken by themselves are not true. Surely God has not forgotten him. Certainly God is not unjust or uncaring. Surely God is not powerless.

So this seems shocking that this might actually be good. But a good lament begins this way because this is honesty. This expresses what we feel at times... though we may hesitate to admit it. This is HOW we can talk to God about real pain. Deep heartache. True sorrow.

So first, we TURN TO GOD.

Second, we COMPLAIN TO GOD.

Then we move to a third element in lamenting: ASK.

Ask Boldly

Look at verse 3. By faith the psalmist boldly asks God for help.

3Consider me and answer, Lord my God. Restore brightness to my eyes; otherwise, I will sleep in death.

The psalmist expresses faith in God by asking Him for something important. Something heartfelt. Something necessary. He boldly asks the Lord to hear his prayer and answer him. Because remember, our laments are not simply to whine and complain, and get something off our chests. No, in biblical lamenting, we are desperately searching for answers. We are thirsting for God. Somewhere deep down in our pain and confusion, we know we need the Lord. We might barely be able to speak, but we know we need him.

And so we ASK BOLDLY.

And then this moves us to a fourth element that we commonly see in the Psalms of Lament: TRUST.

Choose to Trust

We remember the Lord. We reflect on his attributes and his deeds. And then we affirm his worthiness to be trusted, and we commit to praise him.

Now look at the last two verses by David in Psalm 13:

5But I have trusted in your faithful love [lovingkindness]; my heart will rejoice in your deliverance.

6I will sing to the Lord because he has treated me generously.

This is the end goal in our laments to God: to trust him even in our sorrow. To believe that he is good and powerful even while we are still in the midst of our pain. To give thanks to God for who he is even if we don't have all our questions answered. The goal is not necessarily to have the trial end, though we can certainly ask for that.

The Lord Jesus in the Garden just hours before his crucifixion “asked boldly,” *“Father, if possible, take this cup of suffering from me.”* But the beautiful end to that prayer is this fourth element: trust. He trusted in the Father. He concluded, *“Yet, Father, not my will but your will be done.”* In his agonizing lament—a lament deeper than any of us will ever know— Jesus entrusted himself to his loving, powerful, gracious Father in heaven.

So there we have it: four common elements in the Psalms of Lament: We TURN to God. We COMPLAIN. We ASK boldly. And we move towards TRUST. Let me be clear, this movement towards trust may not happen for you in a single prayer, it might take months, or years, or a lifetime. Of praying this pattern of prayer for our hearts to be genuinely transformed.

But let me be clear again: these four elements are not a formula. This is not a quick solution to our pain and our troubles. But here we see a pattern that God himself has given to us and for us. And in extremely difficult moments, we may not get to this fourth element of TRUST quickly or easily. We may spend days lamenting and crying out.

Real life can get very messy. And lamenting is often not a one-time-fixes-all process, like writing out a short, 6-verse lament like Psalm 13, and everything is good and easy now.

But still, we see patterns like this that God has given to us to grow in our trust in him even in the midst of dark days.

Remember, the goal of lamenting is to move from Grief to Belief.

When we do, does the trial change? Maybe not.

But WE change. Our hearts are transformed. Our minds are calmed. Why? Because the Lord ministers to us through the wisdom of his Word and the power of his Spirit.

When we read these Psalms, we find the psalmists wrestling between their pain and their knowledge of God. In their heads, they know who God is. They know his attributes. But in their trials, the circumstances and the emotions seem to deny such things.

Grief and pain can be untamed and vicious. So we must learn how to give voice to our pain.

The Scriptures teach us how to voice it to God.

We want to remember that lamenting leads us back to the gospel.

We remember the pain and suffering caused by sin.

We realize our frailty.

We believe in Christ's restorative work on the Cross.

We remember that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, can sympathize with us.

We are reminded of his great love and mercy.

We believe his Spirit now dwells within the heart of the believer.

And importantly, we remember the promise that someday soon in the resurrected world, all things will be restored to a glorious wholeness.

This is the hope that sustains us.

Let's pray:

Dear Father in heaven, You and your Son understand pain. You sympathize with us. And you love us tenderly. We yearn for the day when all pain and sorrow and tears will be gone. But until then, would you help us learn how we can and must talk to you in our pain? Help us not to remain silent. Help us not to sinfully grumble. Help us learn the vocabulary of lamenting, and to move from Pain to Peace. And from Grief to Belief. Thank you for being so good to us, best proven by the love you have shown through the death and resurrection of your Son, through whom we will by faith someday soon experience everlasting joy and glory