

A Lament

Introduction

What Is Lament?

To process the pain of suffering in the midst of suffering, we must learn to lament!

Definition – **Zondervan Dictionary of Bible and Theology Words**: An expression of grief or sorrow; a lamentation. A lament psalm is a psalm in which a crisis is described and God's assistance is invoked.

- Book: *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* by Mark Vroegop
- Sermon Series: "Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy" at College Park Church in Indianapolis by Mark Vroegop

Vroegop: "Lament can be defined as a loud cry, a howl, or a passionate expression of grief. However, in the Bible lament is more than sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief. Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust."

Throughout the Scriptures, lament gives voice to the strong emotions that believers feel because of suffering. Lament is a way to wrestle with the spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, and theological struggles that surface in life, particularly in time of suffering and difficulty. Lament typically pursues the answer to at least two questions: (1) "Where are you, God?" (2) "If you love me, why is this happening?" Laments can be individual expressions or more corporate expressions. Laments can focus on a variety of situations: difficult circumstances in general, sometimes because of what others have done, and sometimes because of the sinful choices of God's people in particular.

Lament is not the opposite of praise. ~~It isn't~~ Instead, lament is a path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment.

Vroegop: "The space between brokenness and God's mercy is where this song is sung. Think of lament as the transition between pain and promise... Lament is the

honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness."

Why Lament?

We lament because we believe in God's mercy, redemption, and sovereignty. If we didn't hope in God's salvation and ~~we~~ whole-heartedly believe that he is all-powerful, there would be no reason to lament when pain invaded our lives. We lament because we believe ^{God is who he says he is} and because sin and its effects are real. We lament because this is the means by which we are able to live, and even to flourish, between the pressure of pain and the pleasure of promise.

comparing crying against lament

Vroegop: "Here is what I think the difference is between a human cry and a Christian lament. Crying acknowledges the reality of pain, the difficulty of loss, and emotional trauma of something bad happening. Crying is the outward and physical expression of painful emotions. It is an appropriate and natural response to pain, tragedy, loss, hurt, and disappointment. Crying is a human reaction to suffering of any kind. Lament is everything that I just described (it too involves crying), but with a deeper meaning and a different focus. Biblical lament adds something both underneath and above crying. Why is there any crying in the world? Where does crying come from? The Bible answers that question by telling us that the cause of death, pain, and tragedies is the presence of sin in the world. Underneath our tears and the reason that we are crying is the spiritual reality of a created order that is broken and flawed. Biblical lament expresses sorrow while acknowledging the bigger and ultimate problem of sin in the world. Christian lament grapples with a deeper problem, which is why Jesus was called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He, more than anyone who walked on earth, understood the depth of the problem embedded into our humanity. Above and beyond our crying, Christian lament adds something more to tears. It provides hope. You might think it ironic at first, but Biblical lament requires faith, and it is essentially a prayer. Christian lament knows the cause of sorrow, understands the solution, and longs for the promised deliverance. Lament wrestles with the tension that God is good, but bad things still happen. Lament

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struggles with the promise that one day there will be no more pain, tears, and death (Rev. 21:4), but that day has not yet come. Lament acknowledges the ultimate cause of suffering and longs for the promised resolution. Christians can truly lament because they understand the full story of redemption. Crying expresses sorrow over pain while Christian lament goes further; it interprets the cause and the trajectory of pain. That is why I believe that to cry is human but to lament is Christian.”

Lament provides a language that anchors our hearts to what we know is true until our emotions are in agreement.

Vroegop: “When the circumstances of life create dark clouds, I hope you’ll come to embrace lament as a divinely given liturgy leading you to mercy. This historic song gives you permission to vocalize your pain as it moves you toward God-centered worship and trust. Lament is how you live between the poles of a hard life and trusting in God’s sovereignty. Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God. Without lament we won’t know how to process pain. Silence, bitterness, and even anger can dominate our spiritual lives instead. Without lament we won’t know how to help people walking through sorrow. Instead, we’ll offer trite solutions, unhelpful comments, or impatient responses. What’s more, without this sacred song of sorrow, we’ll miss the lessons historic laments are intended to teach us. Lament is how Christians grieve. It is how to help hurting people. Lament is how we learn important truths about God and our world. My personal and pastoral experience has convinced me that biblical lament is not only a gift but also a neglected dimension of the Christian life for many twenty-first-century Christians. A broken world and an increasingly hostile culture make contemporary Christianity unbalanced and limited in the hope we offer if we neglect this minor-key song. We need to recover the ancient practice of lament...”

How Do We Lament?

Most biblical laments follow a pattern as God takes grieving people on a journey. This poetic odyssey usually includes four key elements: (1) an address to God, (2) a complaint, (3) a request, and (4) an expression of trust and/ or praise.

Four words to help us learn to lament: turn, complain, ask, and trust.

- In the address, the heart is turned to God in prayer.
- Complaint clearly and bluntly lays out the reasons behind the sorrow.
- From there, the lamenter usually makes a request for God to act— to do something.
- Finally, nearly every lament ends with renewed trust and praise.

Vroegop: “Finding an explanation or a quick solution for grief, while an admirable goal, can circumvent the opportunity afforded in lament— to give a person permission to wrestle with sorrow instead of rushing to end it. Walking through sorrow without understanding and embracing the God-given song of lament can stunt the grieving process.”

We do ourselves a disservice when we do not follow the Bible's example of lament!

Racial tension:

- Much I disagree with in terms of how our culture and society is describing the reality of what is happening now, is laying out the reality of what has happened in the past, and seeking a way forward.
- Even the voices inside the church which are trying to give direction and forge a way forward too often present suggestions, arguments, and plans that at are at best illogical and at worst profoundly unbiblical even if offered with best of intentions.
- We are at a bad spot.
- What I have been contemplating this week is what role lament could have played—should have played—in the church in this time in this trial.
- We are not good a lament.
- What would the conversation sound like if we seriously and sincerely lamented with people of colour in regards to the pain and heartache they have experienced and are experiencing?

*Recent events
are caused
to consider
the importance
of lament*

Psalm 44 ESV

To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah.

- ¹ *O God, we have heard with our ears,
our fathers have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:*
- ² *you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;*
- ³ *for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm save them,
but your right hand and your arm,
and the light of your face,
for you delighted in them.*
- ⁴ *You are my King, O God;
ordain salvation for Jacob!*
- ⁵ *Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down those who rise up against us.*
- ⁶ *For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.*
- ⁷ *But you have saved us from our foes
and have put to shame those who hate us.*
- ⁸ *In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah*
- ⁹ *But you have rejected us and disgraced us
and have not gone out with our armies.*
- ¹⁰ *You have made us turn back from the foe,
and those who hate us have gotten spoil.*
- ¹¹ *You have made us like sheep for slaughter
and have scattered us among the nations.*
- ¹² *You have sold your people for a trifle,*

demanding no high price for them.

¹³ *You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.*

¹⁴ *You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.*

¹⁵ *All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face*

¹⁶ *at the sound of the taunter and reviler,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.*

¹⁷ *All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant.*

¹⁸ *Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way;*

¹⁹ *yet you have broken us in the place of jackals
and covered us with the shadow of death.*

²⁰ *If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,*

²¹ *would not God discover this?*

For he knows the secrets of the heart.

²² *Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*

²³ *Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!*

²⁴ *Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?*

²⁵ *For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.*

²⁶ *Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

Turn – v1-3

Vroegop: “Belief in God creates challenging questions, and lament provides the opportunity to reorient your hurting heart toward what is true. But in order for that to happen, you have to turn to prayer.”

¹ O God,

- Pray the works of God
 - The focus was the conquest of the Promised Land – probably because this psalm describes a military defeat.
 - They had been told these things by their ancestors.
 - They fought with their own weapons and their own physical strength, but it was God who drove out the other nations, who planted them in their new land, who caused them to flourish, who delighted in his people.
 - The psalms of lament instruct us that in our difficulties, despair, destitution, dejection, and down times, we must turn to God in prayer.
- Pray your struggles
- Pray your questions
- Pray your pain
- Pray the words of God
- Pray the character of God
- Pray the gospel
 - Vroegop notes that often the psalmist anchors his questioning, his hurting heart, to the single greatest redemptive event in the life of Israel, the exodus and conquest.
 - We as, disciples of Christ, need to do the same. We need to yoke our prayers of frustration and pain to the single greatest redemptive event in the history of the world, the death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - GOSPEL - *By GOSPEL we mean the great Christian truths of who ~~that~~ Jesus is and what Jesus has done.*

Application: Refuse to give God the silent treatment.

Vroegop: “It takes faith to pray a lament. To pray in pain, even with its messy struggle and tough questions, is an act of faith where we open up our hearts to God. Prayerful lament is better than silence. However, I’ve found that many people are afraid of lament. They find it too honest, too open, or too risky. But there’s something far worse: silent despair. Giving God the silent treatment is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief. Despair lives under the hopeless resignation that God doesn’t care, he doesn’t hear, and nothing is ever going to change. People who believe this stop praying. They give up. However, lament directs our emotions by prayerfully vocalizing our hurt, our questions, and even our doubt. Turning to prayer through lament is one of the deepest and most costly demonstrations of belief in God. ... Disappointed by unanswered prayers or frustrated by out-of-control circumstances, these people wind up in a spiritual desert unable— or refusing— to talk to God. This silence is a soul killer.”

Trust – v4-8

Vroegop: “Choosing to trust requires reinforcing what we know to be true. Prayers of lament are designed to remind us that God is worthy to be trusted— even in this!”

Why does the expression of trust come so early in this psalm, not following the turn-complain-ask-trust paradigm that Vroegop suggests? My best guess is that this was such a devastating loss for the nation, that the good news had to precede the bad news or even the lament might be too much to bear.

They have experienced God’s works for themselves; Through God foes have been defeated, not through our own doing. God has saved us, not our own doings.

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Where do we see their trust?
~~Where is there trust?~~

- First line of this section: “You are my King, O God”
- Last line of this section: “In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever.”

Vroegop: “This is one reason why I’m passionate about lament. It has the possibility of providing a pathway and a language that allow people not only to deal with the reality of their pain but also to be refocused on the trustworthiness of God. As we wait for future deliverance, our spiritual posture need not be passive. While there may be painful circumstances beyond our control, our waiting can be spiritually productive as we intentionally follow the pathway to trust. That is why trust is active patience. We keep trusting by lamenting.”

Laments are designed to lead us toward decisive, faith-filled worship. Learning to lament leads us to trust.

Application: Do not wait.

Do not wait for the pain to stop before you declare your trust in God.

Do not wait for the tumult to subside before you express your faith in the Lord.

Do not wait for the fear to disappear before you choose to believe in God’s promises.

Complain ⇒ This section/facet causes me concern. We need to be careful here. In the Exodus story bad things happened to **Vroegop:** “If you read the psalms of lament, you’ll discover a lot of creative complainers.

complaining. You’ll find expressions of sorrow, fear, frustration, and even confusion. In other words, the Bible is full of complaints. And apparently they aren’t sinful. In fact, they were set to music as an entire congregation sang their

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frustration. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not giving you permission to vent self-centered rage at God when life has not turned out like you planned. I'm not suggesting for a second you have a right to be angry with God. I think that is always wrong. But I do think that there's a place for a kind of complaining that is biblical. In fact, bringing your complaints is central to lament."

v9-25

This section contains the lamenting of the people for their disastrous defeat and for the devastating humiliation they feel. From their experience, from their perspective, these were the conclusion they arrived at.

Bring questions.

- "If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God discover this?"
- "Why are you sleeping, O Lord?"
- "Why do you hide your face?"
- "Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?"

Bring frustrations.

- "But you have rejected us and disgraced us ... You have made us like sheep for slaughter ... You have sold your people for a trifle ... You have made us the taunt of our neighbors ... yet you have broken us ... and covered us with the shadow of death."

Application: Pray the Bible

Vroegop: "I needed the boundary of biblical language to keep my lament on track." *Use the boundary of biblical language to keep you on track.*

Ask

Vroegop: "We pray differently when we're hurting and desperate. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. Pain has a way of awakening us to our need for God's help. It shines a spotlight on our powerlessness to control everything. We are never more aware of our frailty than when hardship comes our way. This is

one of the blessings of suffering if we allow lament to lead us. The various trials of life can become a platform to reaffirm our dependence upon the Lord. The requests of lament can become the place where we celebrate our need for God's help. In this way, our requests become more than just expressions of need. These petitions are prayers of faith anchored in what we believe about God."

²⁶ Rise up; come to our help!

Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!

We need to, having turned to God in prayer, having declared our fealty and trust, having laid out our pain and frustrations before God, ask him boldly for help, for salvation, for redemption.

Application: Be bold in prayer for others.

Boldness begets boldness!