

LIFE with Jesus in Worship

Lament

“Learning what to do with our pain and grief is a large part of the Christian journey. . . Christian culture can say, ‘If you are filled with faith, you won’t get hurt, confused and discouraged. You won’t feel hopeless or have a life filled with pain and loss.’ This myth doesn’t do justice to our lives, to Scripture, or to the life of Jesus.” – Adele Calhoun.

INTRODUCTION

If we listen, a haunting shout of agony from two thousand years ago may pierce the ears of our heart: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” cries Jesus as he dies on the cross (Matthew 26:46).

It is difficult to write or read anything with his tormented voice in our minds. So please take a breath. Pause. If there is something you’d like to say to him, please do.

The anguish of Jesus—his humiliation, torture, rejection, and agonizing death—means many beautiful and mysterious things. Certainly, among them, is that he shares with us every conceivable pain of life. He also models for us how to live with God as we suffer because shouting as he does to his Father, he expresses his pain through the ancient practice of lament. We can do the same.

We find his exact words in Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” The psalmist goes on to pour out his suffering to God, “I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me...they have pierced my hands and feet—I can count all my bones,” (Psalm 22).

By quoting the first verse of this psalm, by tradition, Jesus invokes the whole of it. Indeed, it aptly describes his suffering.

Psalms of Lament

Many psalms express similar feelings. In fact, lament pours out of perhaps two thirds of the psalms:

- “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping,” (Psalm 6:6).
- “How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1).
- “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged,” (Psalm 25:16).
- “Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold. . . I am weary with my crying out,” (Psalm 69:1-3).
- “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:6).
- “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked,” (Psalm 82:3-4).

When we lament, we pour out our heart to God; we practice emotional authenticity. Psalms of lament include outpourings of grief, trouble, confusion, anger, fear, or a painful sense of injustice or abandonment. We find no one in the scriptures putting on a pious mask with God. Instead, we see God's friends express themselves with raw abandon. And Jesus does the same.

But lament does not stop with cries of anguish. Lament involves a certain choreography. Like movements in a specific dance, lament comprises certain essential movements of prayer: an address to God, a complaint or expression of pain, a cry for help, a statement of trust, an expression of praise. Through this choreography, lament weaves our grief, fear, and anger into a story of faith and truth.

We see these movements in Psalm 22:

Address

"My God, my God!"

Notice that the psalmist begins with an address of belonging, intimacy, and covenant love. The psalmist calls out "my God."

Expressions of pain and trouble

"I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest."

"Many bulls encompass me . . . they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravaging and roaring lion."

"My tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death."

Cries for Help

"Oh, you my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog!"

Affirmations of Trust

"Yet you are he who took me from my mother's womb. . . on you I was cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God."

"You have rescued me."

Expressions of Praise and Faith

"Yet you are holy . . . in you our father's trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them."

"I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation, I will praise you: You who fear the Lord, praise him! . . . For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted and he has not hidden his face from him."

"All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you."

Purpose and Benefits of Lament

Lament clears a pathway for authenticity in our relationship with God. Sometimes in our faith tradition (evangelical Christianity) we feel the pressure to deny our negative emotions to avoid dishonoring God or belying the hope he has offered us. But stuffing our dark feelings to pretend joyfulness pushes us into inauthenticity and shallowness, even perhaps toxicity. Jesus, along with the writers of the psalms, shows us a different way.

To put it in another context, imagine what it would say about your relationship with your closest friend if you never let them know when you felt sad or grieved? Or imagine if someone offended you and you never spoke to them about it but instead let a cool distance grow between the two of you? Lament helps us to do the opposite of these things with God—to preserve or even deepen our intimacy with him in the midst of our suffering.

Lament also connects us with those who suffer around us, as prayers of lament include our grief over injustice, “Oh, let the evil of the wicked come to an end!” cries the psalmist in Psalm 7, for example. Grieving with God over the evil in the world draws us closer to him and maybe into action as we grow to share his heart. Keeping silent, we nurture blame of God in our hearts and grow to think poorly of him.

The choreography of lament presses us to express faith and trust in the midst of our pain and trouble; it offers ways of opening our wounds to God and applying the balm of comfort at the same time.

Finally, praying psalms of lament in particular grounds us in our faith story. When we find the words to express our suffering right there in the psalms, we know two things. First, our suffering has not moved us outside of God’s story. God’s people for thousands of years have suffered the way we suffer and have prayed to God about it. As Richard Foster puts it, when we lament, “We are on not a rabbit trail, but a major highway.” Second, because we find the words of our pain in God’s words, we know he sees us and understands; he *gives* us the words to complain and moan to him. His words might even grant us courage to pray what we couldn’t pray otherwise. Again, Foster speaks to this: “The ancient singers really knew how to complain, and their words of anguish and frustration can guide our lips into the prayer we dare not say alone.”

THE PRACTICE

Praying the Lament Psalms

- Regular psalm reading

The Psalms comprise the prayer book of the Bible. If you make a practice of praying them every day, you will quickly find words of lament.

One way to do this is to carve a quiet space in your day each day. You can pray along in the Psalms until you find words expressing something that resonates with you. Stop there. Pray those phrases slowly, allowing them to become the cry of your heart. You may want to write them down.

Then continue through the psalm, looking for promises, words of faith and hope. If any of them speak to you, sit with those words as well, allowing the faith and hope to act like a balm on your soul.

- Praying specific psalms.
You may want to turn to specific psalm you know matches your feelings or circumstances. Here is a sample list:

Psalm 6: I feel sad to the point of death.

Psalm 10: I feel God's absence: the wicked prosper as they oppress the poor

Psalm 13: I feel forgotten by God

Psalm 22: I feel abandoned by God and mocked and attacked by others

Psalm 42: I feel desperate and downcast

Psalm 54: I have been attacked and betrayed by a friend or loved one

Psalm 77: I am facing overwhelming trouble

Additional psalms of lament: 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 17, 26, 27, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129

Praying our own Laments

You can also write your own lament. Try to follow the choreography of lament:

Address

- Who is God to you: Your Father? Your Shepherd? Your Rescuer?

Expressions of pain or trouble

- What is bothering you?
- What are your honest feelings about this?

Cries for help

- What do you long to see God do on your behalf?

Affirmations of trust

- How have you trusted God in the past?
- How do you feel invited to trust him now?

Expressions of praise and faith

- Please ask the Holy Spirit to give you an expression of praise: what can you praise God for?
- What verses about God's faithfulness or promises can you find to finish your lament?
- If you have written a lament, please keep it and use it for prayer during this season until it no longer expresses your heart.

HELPFUL VERSES

"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Isaiah 53:3

“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death.” Hebrews 5:7

“Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” Psalm 62:8

“Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord!” Lamentations 2:19

“My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” Psalm 42:3

INTERESTING QUOTES

“Tears are like blood in the wounds of the soul.” – Gregory of Nyssa

“Remember, honesty is where the real power is with lament, so try not to filter your emotions and words.” – *Practicing the Way*, Prayer Practice

“Lament is a cry of belief in a good God, a God who has his hear to our hearts, a God who transfigures the ugly into beauty.” – Ann Voskamp

“Times of seeming desertion and absence and abandonment appear to be universal among those who have walked this path of faith before us. We might just as well get used to the idea that, sooner or later, we, too, will know what it means to feel forsaken by God . . . The first word that should be spoken is one of encouragement. We are on not a rabbit trail, but a major highway. Many have traveled this way before us.” – Richard Foster

“The liquid entreaty of tears is a huge part of the biblical text. . . Tears and prayers of lament won’t solve the problem of suffering, but they can staunch the raw nerve of pain by throwing us into the arms of God.” – Adele Calhoun