

Biblical Lament: Dare to Hope in God

Psalm 13

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to dive into the ocean of grief to see if God's promises are true even there. All of us to some degree, some definitely more than others, know what it's like to be suddenly hit with tragedy and pain. In those moments, it can feel like we are being thrown off land, where we feel control and comfort and into the ocean of chaos, confusion, and challenge. As we sink deeper into our pain and loss, seeing the air bubbles of our hope trend upward while we continue downward, we become desperate for an answer. We become desperate for hope to return to us.

In his book "Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy," the author Mark Vroegop shares the sudden tragedy of losing his baby daughter, still growing inside his wife, just three days before delivery. Toward the morning hours of the day, Mark's wife awakened him with her pleas to God, "No, Lord! Please not this!" After hours of feeling no movement in her womb, they both rushed to the hospital to get the dreadful news that their baby was indeed dead. Mark described his emotional shock and pain as being cast into the deep with no hope of returning to control, comfort, or joy.

If there's one thing for certain from living in this fallen and cursed world, we are not set apart from sudden losses. Life is fragile, and we are not guaranteed even another day. We all stepped into this world with a cry. Although none of us remember the moment, the first sound we uttered after leaving the warm and protected confines of our mother's womb was a loud protest. We enter the world wailing. This opening experience of wailing acts as a stern warning that the world will be failing us in some way as we journey through it.

In such seasons of grief, it becomes difficult to trust in the promises of God. What seemed natural and easy in the good times suddenly becomes taxing and laborious in bad times. ***This message today is about daring to hope in God when we feel like we are sinking.*** To do this, we will be examining

multiple psalms whose shared theme is lament. Surprisingly, of all 150 psalms, more than one-third of them are laments, by far the largest category the book of Psalms offers us. You may think of a lament as a cry, but what we will discover this morning is that biblical lament is far more than just a cry. ***To cry is human, but to lament is uniquely Christian.***

Here's my definition of biblical lament: A prayer in pain that leads to trust. It is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness. You can see that lament is more than just an expression of sorrow or the venting of emotion. Lament talks to God about the pain. And it has a unique purpose: trust. ***It is a divinely-given invitation to pour out our fears, frustrations, and sorrows for the purpose of helping us renew our confidence in God.***

You may think that lament is the opposite of praise. It isn't. ***Instead, lament is a path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment.*** The space between brokenness and God's mercy is where this song is sung. It's the transition between pain and promise; the path from heartbreak to hope. ***Lament invites us to turn our gaze from the rubble of life to the Redeemer of every hurt.*** It calls us to turn toward promise while still in pain. You could say that lament is how we learn to live between the poles of a hard life and God's goodness.

Choosing to cling to a belief in God's goodness is essential to the process of lament. It is the great dare at the heart of believing in God. Belief in God's mercy, redemption, and sovereignty create lament. Without hope in God's deliverance and the conviction that He is all-powerful, there would be no reason to lament when pain invades our lives. Todd Billings in *Rejoicing in Lament* says, ***"It is precisely out of trust that God is sovereign that the psalmist repeatedly brings laments and petitions to the Lord...If the psalmist had already decided the verdict—that God is indeed unfaithful—he would not continue to offer his complaint."*** ***Therefore, lament is rooted in what we believe. It is a prayer loaded with theology.*** Lament stands in the gap between pain and promise.

In this gap, lament asks two questions: (1) “Where are you, God?” (2) “If you love me, why is this happening?” In its essence, our lament is wrestling with the problem of evil. If God is so good, why does everything seem so bad? If God is so loving, why does this situation seem like God has turned His face away?

These are honest questions that even the deepest of believers contemplate while in the ocean of pain. It doesn't mean we chuck our faith. It means that the emotional trauma has a way of clouding and questioning what we found easy to believe in easy seasons. It's here that believers must learn to lament rather than merely cry. The psalms have something to teach us about processing pain in a uniquely Christian way.

For the remainder of our time, I want to show you the pattern of biblical lament, as seen in the psalms. There are four key steps:

1. ***Turn to God***
2. ***Bring your complaint***
3. ***Ask boldly for help***
4. ***Choose to trust***

BODY - TURN TO GOD

Our first step in the pattern of biblical lament is to turn to God. You will notice that the psalmists in the midst of their pain continue to address God. They don't push God out; they don't ignore His presence. ***Rather, they choose to involve Him in the process.*** Psalm 13 begins, ***“How long, O Lord?”*** Psalm 22:1 - ***“My, God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** Psalm 55:1 - ***“Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!”*** And Psalm 77:1 - ***“I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me.”***

As I've stated before, any of us can cry aloud, but is there a divine direction to our cry? ***If there is no divine direction, we remain in confusion.*** Notice in Psalm 13:1 that David isn't just talking or complaining or whimpering; he's actually praying. He's resolved to turn to God and talk to

God. ***We must learn the practice of pushing our hearts toward God in our pain.***

Anyone who's experienced deep loss can tell you this isn't as easy as it sounds. There could be a felt bitterness toward God, a legitimate anger toward God, or doubtfulness toward God's goodness. Struggling through these confusing emotions is not necessarily wrong, ***but our deepest problem comes if we allow disagreement with God to lead to a resentment of God.*** And sadly this resentment almost always means silence.

Yes, some people are uncomfortable with lament. They find it too honest, too open, or too risky. But there is 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 going to change. People who believe this stop praying; they give up. They are very much like the person sinking in the ocean of their pain who has concluded that surely God's goodness and power couldn't reside there.

However, lament teaches us not to give in to our emotions but to direct 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. ***Anyone can cry, but it takes faith to turn to God in lament.***

James Montgomery Boice, who pastored Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for 32 years helps us see the spiritual value of praying through our spiritual questions:

"It is better to ask them than not to ask them, because asking them sharpens the issue and pushes us toward the right, positive response. Alexander Maclaren writes, 'Doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkened, like poisonous mists

in the heart. A thought, be it good or bad, can be dealt with when it is made articulate.’”

Silence can be a soul killer, but encouraging and inclining our hearts in faith to turn to God is a soul sustainer.

BRING YOUR COMPLAINT

First we must turn to God, but secondly we must bring our complaint.

When you choose in faith to turn to God, what follows must be your honesty with God. God doesn't want your masquerade, your false show, your best act, or your pretense in prayer. He wants your raw emotion; your real self to come before Him just as you are. Some of us are afraid to approach God in this way. We think we must get ourselves put together as if we were going to see our boss or the king himself. But God invites our confusion and our frustration, even if it's directed at Him. He can handle it.

Have you ever found yourself praying a short prayer like this: “God, I know you're not mean, but it sure feels like you are today.” Such a prayer is a complaint—an honest and blunt conversation with God.

There's a tension in bringing a prayer like this to God. Complaining isn't a very positive word. We don't like complainers. It seems like the wrong response to situations where we should be content or thankful. But is complaining always wrong? It can't be. If you read the psalms of lament, you'll discover a lot of complaining! And apparently, they aren't sinful. But don't misunderstand: 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 you have a right to be angry with God. I think that is always wrong.

But I do think there is a place for a kind of complaining that is biblical. In fact, bringing your complaints is central to lament. Todd Billings explains: *“Writers of laments and complaints in the psalms often seek to make their ‘case’ against God, frequently citing God’s promises in order to complain*

that God seems to be forgetting His promises. They throw the promises of God back at him.”

Many people I know fall into one of two camps when walking through suffering: anger or denial. Some people are so filled with anger at God that they live in a self-made prison of despair and bitterness for the rest of their lives. Their pain gives rise to rage. And their spiritual life is never the same. Sometimes it even results in a complete rejection of Christianity as pain paves the way to unbelief.

Still others seem to think that godliness means a new form of stoicism. They try to project an air of contentment that feels like denial. “Everything is fine,” they say. But you know it isn’t. As I’ve seen people in pain, it seems someone either needs to coax them off the cliff of their anger or out of the cave of hiding their honest struggles.

Biblical lament offers an alternative. ***Through godly complaints we are able to express our disappointment and move toward a resolution. We complain on the basis of our belief in who God is and what He can do.*** Lament is how those who know what God is like and believe in Him address their pain: God is good, but life is hard. Stacey Gleddiesmith provides a helpful explanation: *“A lament honestly and specifically names a situation or circumstance that is painful, wrong, or unjust—in other words, a circumstance that does not align with God’s character and therefore does not make sense within God’s kingdom.”* → ***Lament is a language of a people who believe in God’s sovereignty but live in a world with tragedy.***

This is a part of the grace of lament. It’s part of the beauty in having a God like the God we have. He doesn’t say come when you have it together; He says come when your life is falling apart. It’s why He runs to embrace the prodigal son; it’s why He reaches out to touch the leper; it’s why He chooses to dine with tax collectors and sinners; it’s why He welcomes the thief on the cross into paradise; it’s why He chooses to restore Peter after

he denied Jesus three times. It's why He welcomes your pain into His presence.

What we have is a loving permission and graceful invitation to bring our frustrations with honesty and our questions with humility. There is something helpful and right about regularly laying out the specifics of our pain. Psalm 55:2 says, *“Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked.”* And in v.17 it says, *“Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.”*

In Psalm 77:7-9 the psalmist offers up some concerning questions:

- *“Will the Lord spurn forever?”* (v.7)
- *“Will he never again be favorable?”* (v.7)
- *“Has his steadfast love forever ceased?”* (v.8)
- *“Are his promises at an end for all time?”* (v.8)
- *“Has God forgotten to be gracious?”* (v.9)
- *“Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”* (v.9)

Honestly praying this way recognizes that pain and suffering often create difficult emotions that are not based upon truth but feel true, nonetheless. It's good to come before God with the real pain of our souls, unresolved and unfiltered as they are: Your honest complaint may sound something like:

- “Why did you take my baby?”
- God, why did you take my spouse so early in life?
- God, why did I have to be laid off from that job?
- God, why do I suffer every day with this chronic pain?
- God, why did that relationship have to end that way?
- God, why am I stuck doing this during this season of my life that I had other plans for?
- God, why does my kid have to suffer in this way?

What we learn is that the psalmist turns his powerless position into a platform to call out to God. His blunt complaint is an opportunity to redirect his heart. Rather than allowing painful circumstances to rule him,

creating bitterness and despair, he lays out his angst. This specificity sharpens his prayer. The frustrations expressed in lament push him further toward God, not away. This is an essential blessing of lament: ***Laments turn us toward God when sorrow alone tempts us to run from Him.***

While you shouldn't skip the practice of complaint, you also shouldn't get stuck there either. Complaint was never meant to be an end in itself. In the same way a surgeon's cut is meant to heal, so complaint is designed to move us along in our lament. You are not meant to linger indefinitely in complaint. ***If you never move beyond complaint, lament loses its purpose and its power.*** We bring our complaints to the Lord for the purpose of moving us toward Him. We allow the honest opening of our souls to become a doorway to the other elements of lament.

ASK BOLDLY FOR HELP

This brings us to our third step in the pattern of biblical lament: ***Ask boldly for help.*** There are times when we become jaded in our approach to God because of past unanswered prayers. We can become scared to hope again. It's this cautious and careful attitude that can cloud our conversation with God. It limits what we pray for, in fear that we will only be let down again. It's the reason why some of us struggle so much to enter new relationships after our being heart-broken by a previous one. It's hard to open our hearts in love again after being let down so hard before. We can be tempted to do the same with God. ***We can be stalled in our requests out of fear.***

Yet here we see the boldness of the psalmist! He asks God for what he wants no matter how many times he's been let down before. In Psalm 13:3 he says, ***“Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.”*** In Psalm 10:12 he says, ***“Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted.”*** In Psalm 22:19 he says, ***“But you, O Lord, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! Save me from the power of the lion!”***

This next leg in the process of lament involves confidently calling upon God to act in accordance with His character. It's how lament moves from the why question of complaint to the who question of request.

The writers of these lament psalms are bold in their requests! They call upon God with such authority that it seems as if they are commanding God to act. It's their confidence in God's character and their knowledge of His past deliverance that compel them to make such bold requests. ***The writers of lament stake their claim on what God has promised to do.***

However, these requests do something more. Boldly asking God for help based upon who He is and what He's promised eclipses the complaints. I say "eclipses" for a reason. It captures the fact that *why* questions are not always answered before we move into requests. ***Just as one heavenly body moves into the shadow of another (picture) during an eclipse, so too the why questions and the who questions coexist, but not equally.*** Who God is becomes the more prominent reality while not removing the lingering questions. As we make our bold requests, "Why is this happening?" moves into the shadow of "Who is God?" → This is why we need to ask boldly.

I've come to love the word "yet" in my understanding of lament. It marks the place in the journey where pain and belief coexist. It's how we gain confidence to ask boldly, despite the sorrow and grief we feel. ***"Yet" means that I choose to keep asking God for help, to cry out to him for my needs, even when the pain of life is raw.*** Yet reminds us that sorrow doesn't have to end before we ask God for help. ***Part of the grace of lament is the way it invites us to pray boldly even when we are bruised badly.***

Is there anything you've stopped asking God to do in your life? Has the pain of circumstances or have the disappointments of unanswered prayers led you to a resigned silence as to what you want to see God do? Maybe

yet can become your new favorite word in the Bible! Perhaps it could be the bridge that leads you to make your request with a new level of confidence.

As Christians living under the New Covenant of Christ, we are not only invited, but commanded to pray boldly. Hebrew 4:16 says, *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* What is the basis of this confidence? Why should we bring our heartfelt requests to God? The answer is connected to Jesus’ own experience of the brokenness of our world...which brings about His sympathy. ***We ask boldly because He understands deeply.***

When we sing a song of sorrow, the Man of Sorrows comes to meet us. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). Because He understands our pain, He feels the emotion behind our requests. It’s like a father who knows the weight of his son’s sorrow because he went through the very same thing many years back; it changes the way he hears and responds to his son’s supplications. You see, Jesus knows from experience that this world is not as it should be; it’s the very reason He chose to lovingly come in the first place. Our lament can have bold requests because He first boldly came to us in love.

CHOOSE TO TRUST

This brings us to the final step in the pattern of biblical lament. ***We must choose to trust.*** Turning to God in prayer, laying your complaints before Him, and boldly asking for help were meant to bring you to this point: to invite you to make the decision of faith-filled worship. ***Laments are designed to lead us toward decisive, faith-filled trust and worship.***

We can see David make this transition to trust in Psalm 13:5: *“But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”* Psalm 55 ends with the last phrase, *“But I will trust in you.”*

In lament psalms the word but marks a critical and consistent turn toward trust. Michael Jenkins, who wrote “Inhabiting the Psalms of Lament,” suggests that *“words such as but and however are found in every lament because lamenting trust is not merely a mental assent to knowledge; it is a decision to trust despite what circumstances might lead one to believe otherwise. Words like but, however, and yet mark the intentional shift from the cause of the lament to trusting in the One God who stands above the lament.”*

But let’s remember: Trusting in God’s promises doesn’t end the pain, but it does give it purpose. We mustn’t make the mistake of thinking that trust is something you decide once and for all as you are walking through pain. It’s not as if you pray one lament prayer and you never need to lament again. ***Life isn’t that simple. Grief is not that tame.*** Those who have experienced a traumatic loss know that grief can come like sudden waves over their head in the least expected times, even many years after the loss. ***Therefore, we must enter into lament over and over so that it can keep leading us to trust.***

In this respect, lament allows us to embrace an endurance that is not passive. Lament helps us to practice active patience. Trust looks like talking to God, sharing our complaints, seeking God’s help, and then recommitting ourselves to believe in who God is and what He has done—even as the trial continues. ***Lament is how we endure. It is how we trust. It is how we wait.***

Rebekah Eklund, who wrote, “Lord, Teach Us How to Grieve,” provides this helpful summary: *“The prayer of lament rejoices in God’s saving actions in the now and hopes urgently for God’s saving actions in the future, the ‘not yet’ of the eschatological timeline...Those who lament stand on the boundary between the old age and the new and hope for things unseen.”*

This is why lament is so important for us to learn how to do well. ***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.

So in closing, how do we incline our hearts, which are so feeble in their faithfulness, to choose trust in God in the midst of the pain? ***First, we must choose to recite God's promises in His Word.*** This is why it's important to memorize God's Word, to preach it to ourselves in our times of doubt. Allow God's Word to be a balm to your wounds. When you struggle to know the truth yourself, let God's Word do that for you. Recite it; memorize it.

Secondly, we must recall God's past goodness to us. Looking back on your life, how have you seen God prove His faithfulness to you? Think back on the moment He saved you; think back on a time that He provided for your needs when you were at the end of your rope. Think back on a day when He gave you strength to endure when you had it not in yourself. ***This is why it's important to record God's goodness to you.*** Keep a journal of all God's acts of kindness to you - the places you saw His footprints when you couldn't walk any further yourself.

Even in the middle of our grief, there comes a time where we must look back on God's kindness and choose to claim it even for today. In Psalm 77, one of the repeated words is *remember*. Following the list of questions of complaint in v.7-9, there is a Selah - a pause. He then transitions in v.10 by saying, ***"Then I said, 'I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.'"*** In what follows, the psalmist makes a decisive transition from looking at the pain of his circumstance to the forever faithfulness of God.

He says in v.11, ***"I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples."*** → Oh, how important it is in our remorse to remember all that God has done!

The psalmist concludes by choosing to remember one specific act of God's loving deliverance for His people. It's the ultimate moment that defined the people of Israel and their relationship with God: That event is ***the Exodus out of Egypt***. → He says in v.16, referring to the parting of the Red Sea, "*When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled.*" Continuing in v.19, "*Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*"

Do you see what is happening here? ***The psalmist anchors his questioning, his hurting heart, to the single greatest redemptive event in the life of Israel.*** This moment defined his understanding of God's character. The exodus was an anchor for his weary soul.

For the Christian, the exodus event—the place where we find ultimate deliverance—is the cross of Christ (picture). This is where all our questions, our heartaches and pain, should be taken. The cross shows us that God has already proven himself to be for us and not against us. Even Paul in Romans 8 quoted the lament psalm of Ps 44: "*For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*"

Jesus bought the right to make everything right. Even if we are "killed all day long" or are "like sheep going to the slaughter," nothing—no sorrow, no disappointment, no disease, no betrayal, not even death—can separate us from God's love. ***Lament prayers celebrate this truth with tears.*** This moves us to our last way to lead us into trust: ***Resound God's praises in the pain.*** The Bible says we are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. ***Let your praise be a pathway towards healing.*** When it feels like you are drowning in the ocean of your pain, with no ability to breathe, let alone sing, choose to sing a song to God anyways.

We began by saying we wanted to dive into the ocean of grief to see if even there God's promises were true. ***Christian, God's promises are true no matter where you go - no matter how dark or distant your place.*** He is there, enabling you to breathe, enabling you to hope, enabling you by His mercy to continue another day. Allow biblical lament, and the pattern I outlined today to be a way to process your grief, to find a way forward. Choose again today to dare to hope in God.

CONCLUSION

To conclude our service for today, the elders and a few other couples will be stationed through the perimeter of the WC. They are available for prayer. This prayer time is specifically for those who carry laments that would like prayer.

CLOSING PRAYER