

What do you do with your pain?

The Gift of Lament

No-one ever teaches us how to cry. As humans, we cry instinctively. But what about lament? This is a term which may be unfamiliar to many of us. Lament is a unique gift from God which the church today has perhaps largely neglected.

As Christians, what do we do with our pain? There is so much brokenness in this fallen world we occupy and while none of us seek out pain, we will all experience it in different ways in our lives. I speak of pain in the broadest sense – the death of a loved one, the struggling marriage, the wrestle with guilt or doubt, a diagnosis or a chronic illness, the deep sorrow of loneliness, the unfair supervisor at work, the weight of infertility or wayward children. Or perhaps the pain in your life is defined by something different. The question is, how are you dealing with your pain and the complaints and questions arising from it?

Christian culture can sometimes simply encourage those who are suffering to continue to rejoice and to declare that you understand that the Lord will use this for your good and for His glory. This is all good and true, but do we also know the importance of taking space and time to recognise the sorrow and grief and respond to our hardships in honest ways?

Scripture is full of lament. We see it in the Psalms (one third of the Psalms are laments), Job, Lamentations and Jeremiah to name but a few. But what is it? Here is one definition:

Lament is the honest cry of the hurting heart, expressing the paradox of the pain of life and the promises of God's goodness.

Lament gives us permission to wrestle honestly with sorrow and pain and provides a pathway from heartbreak to hope. It is the biblical way to process our pain. It may not lead us to answers but it **will** lead us to Jesus.

What is the biblical pattern for lament?

In his book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*¹, Mark Vroegop describes four elements of biblical lament.

1 Turn: Resolve to turn your heart to prayer.

e.g. Psalm 77:1-2: "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying, my soul refuses to be comforted."

The Psalmist is in real pain and chooses not to remain silent, nor to simply talk or cry into his pillow. He cries out in prayer. Many people are afraid of lament because it feels too honest or hard or risky. But lament is far better than the alternative of despairing silently, away from the Lord. It can be hard to lament – it is an act of faith. But be encouraged by the many examples of lament we see in God's Word. Remember that praying in the midst of pain won't necessarily cause an immediate resolution but lament provides a pathway for us to pray through our struggles.

2 Complain: Clearly and bluntly share your sorrows with God.

e.g. Psalm 10v1: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

We need to be careful to avoid sinful angry complaint, but it's important to recognise that the Bible, being full of complaints, can teach us how to complain in the right way. "A lament honestly and specifically names a situation or circumstance which 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 Kingdom²." Complaint helps us see our situation and our feelings more clearly. It is the beginning of a path to reorientate our thoughts and emotions.

3 Ask: Boldly call upon God to act in accordance with His character.

e.g. Psalm 22:19: "But you, O Lord, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid!"

It is important to remember that the questions in our complaint may not always be answered before we move to the 'ask' element. David's request here in Psalm 22 is based on his knowledge of God from the Bible and in many lament Psalms we see David reminding his soul of who God is. Presenting our requests to God doesn't primarily serve to meet our needs but rather enables us to rely upon Him. There will be days when our requests feel weak and the turmoil in our hearts feels stronger than our confidence in God. In those moments, why not turn to the examples God gives us in His word from Biblical lamenters? Requests in the Psalms show us that we can call upon God to act in any circumstance. They range from 'Arise, Oh Lord!' (in effect, simply, 'do something Lord!') to a simple 'grant us help' or 'restore us' or a cry of the heart 'don't be silent – listen to me.'

4 Trust: Choose to trust in what you know to be true about God, even in the midst of pain.

e.g. Psalm 13:5-6: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me."

Although for many this may be the hardest step, it's important we don't get stuck at 'complain' or 'ask' but rather move to this final element of lament, remembering that the purpose of lament is always to bring us to a place of trusting in who God is amid pain and suffering.

This takes faith but it is possible, good and Biblical to do so. Remember that this step is not a once-for-all-time decision - our hearts **regularly** need reminded of who God is and what He has done for us. Take for example, the first affirmation of trust we see in Psalm 13: 'But I have trusted in your steadfast love'. Every Christian has a story of God's steadfast love in their lives and so we can repeat these words over and over with the Psalmist reminding ourselves of God's faithfulness in our lives. Choosing to trust does not mean our pain will be removed nor does it mean we will suddenly understand how God is working out His plan in our lives but it will let our eyes see who God is in the midst of it.

This article provides only a brief introduction to lament, but for now, let's begin to process our pain and sorrow in the way that God invites us to. If in the midst of your pain, you've not prayed to God for a long time, let me encourage you simply to take that first step and turn towards God in prayer. Or perhaps you are still praying but don't know how to express your pain to the Lord. Let me encourage you to use the words of one of the Psalms of lament (e.g. Psalm 3, 10, 13, 22, 31, 42, 77) as your own prayer or as a springboard to write your own prayer of lament to the Lord.

¹ Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), p29

² Stacey Gleddiesmith, "My God, My God, Why? Understanding the Lament Psalms," *Reformed Worship*, June 2010, www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2010/my-god-my-god-why.