

The Grace of Lament – Psalm 77

My name is Jason Taylor. I am the Biblical Soul Care Pastor here at Coram Deo. It is my privilege to share the Word of God with you today.

We are going to look at a psalm this morning, so please turn with me to **Psalm 77**

Ps 77:1, “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God and He will hear me.”

“**I cry aloud to God**” frames the whole context of the psalm. The psalmist, Asaph, is not afraid to pray to God. He is in pain and is not whimpering...He’s reaching out to God. His way of praying may feel foreign or even strange as he prays out of his pain. Maybe your are in a place of pain today.

I’m going to read you some prayers that come from a painful place. What is your initial reaction to these?

Please, GOD, no more yelling, no more trips to the woodshed

Treat me nice for a change; I’m so starved for affection.

Can’t you see I’m black-and-blue, beat up badly in bones and soul?

GOD, how long will it take for you to let up?

GOD, are you avoiding me?

Where are you when I need you?

Long enough, GOD— you’ve ignored me long enough. I’ve looked at the back of your head long enough.

Should we pray to God like this? These are from the Message translation of **Psalms 6, 10, and 13**

A more literal translation would sound like this:

Ps. 6:1-3 “O Lord, rebuke me not in Your anger, nor discipline me in Your wrath. Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But You, O LORD—how long?”

Ps. 10:1 “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide in times of trouble?”

Ps. 13:1 “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?”

These are Hebrew laments. A long forgotten but deeply biblical way of praying. It is encouraging for me to hear that some of the ministries of our church like women’s, students, and soul care ministries have recently taught how to pray a lament. If you are in ministries such as these, today will be a good reminder for you. But I personally find, that we are largely unfamiliar with this type of praying.

Because it is foreign, we may have some initial objections:

- a) *It feels disrespectful.* Can we really talk to God this way and He not open up the earth and swallow us up?
- b) *It is uncomfortable.* My assumption for this is that we generally want to keep our lives balanced: our emotions, our reactions, our theology. But lament doesn’t seem balanced at all. Rather, it feels heavy and painful. Raw and uneven. Feelings focused rather than solution focused.
- c) *It seems immature.* I personally find that we tend to view lament as an immature way to handle our emotions. It is something children do—children are natural lamenters. No one teaches a child to cry. They just do it...right out of the womb...they complain because they want back in there. But, there is no better way to be scooped up into the comforting arms of mother or father, than to cry. The same is true for us with our Heavenly Father.

The Bible is crystal clear. God wants us to find our comfort, mercy, and hope in Him. Therefore,

1) **Turn to God**

“I cry out 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.” (77:1, 2)

Biblically, a lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trusting God. It is the honest cry of a hurting heart, wrestling with the paradox of pain and the goodness of God.

The psalmist writes, **“In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord” (v. 2)**. Through prayer, he cries out to the Heavenly Father expressing the anguish of his soul. He knows that God, **“will hear” (v. 1)** him.

As the Dread Pirate Roberts famously said in the classic movie, *The Princess Bride*, “Life is pain...Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something.” But, in the pain, prayers of lament lead us from the pain to the comfort of our amazing Heavenly Father.

Lament is bittersweet. Bitter in the circumstances of life, brokenness of a lost world, injustice of a society, and in my crushed expectations. Sweet in that it is a pathway of faithfulness leading to experiencing God’s compassion, goodness, hope, comfort, and mercy. It is a grace of God.

The author knows that the hope in the midst of his pain is found in the relationship he has with God. Asaph is not the only biblical author that believed this.

The Bible is full of lament:

A. The **whole book** titled, “Lamentations”.

- A book for the faithful left in Jerusalem, to mourn for Zion’s disaster, God’s judgment on Ancient Israel’s sin, and pray in the hope of her renewal.
- It was likely written to be prayed or sung on worship services devoted to asking God’s forgiveness and seeking restoration to a covenant relationship with God

B. 72 out of 150 Psalms (48% of all Psalms)

- **Personal**—An individual vocalizing pain, grief, fear, or some other strong emotion (3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 39, 42, 43, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 120, 141, 142)
- **Corporate**—A group or nation vocalizing pain, grief, fear, or some other strong emotion (12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126)
- **Repentance**—An individual or group expressing regret or sorrow for sin (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143)
- **Imprecatory**—An individual or group expressing outrage and a strong desire for justice (35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140)
- **Partial**—Sections of lament within other psalms (9:13-20; 27:7-14; 40:11-17)
- **Debatable**—Psalms that some consider to be lament in total or in parts (14, 36, 41, 52, 53, 63, 78, 81, 89, 106, 125, 129, 139)

C. You find large portions of lament in Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the minor prophets

Lament encourages us to turn our gaze from the rubble of life to the Redeemer of every hurt. It takes faith to lament. God wants us to cry out to Him in our pain. Giving God the silent treatment is the ultimate unbelief. Our silence is a soul-killer.

Jesus didn't keep silent. When He was in agony and grief...Jesus lamented. He didn't focus on His circumstances, instead He focused on His Father. (Rather than called 72,000 angels to wipe out Israel—Matthew 26:53)

- He turned to the Father in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36)
- He shared a complaint, "My God why have you forsaken Me?" (Matt 27:46)
- He asked boldly for this cup to pass (Matt 26:39a)
- He rested in trust in the Father's will (Matt 26:39b, 54)

His belief drove His actions in the midst of the pain. He knew the plan of salvation and obeyed the Father.

Events	Process	Belief
Night before Jesus was to die on the cross	Calls seventy two thousand angels and wipes out Israel (Matthew 26:53)	I will be King

Events	Process	Belief
Night before Jesus was to die on the cross	1. Turns to God (Matthew 26:36) 2. Shares complaint (Matthew 27:46) 3. Asks boldly (Matthew 26:39a)	Trusts the Father's will (Matthew 26:39b, 54)

Hebrews 12:2 says, "Looking unto Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

In the midst of the pain, Jesus endured pain by lamenting. He cried out to the Father, bridging the gap between His pain and His joy. Now He is seated in eternal bliss at the right of hand of the throne of God.

2) **Complain to God**

Pray your struggles.

Ps. 77:2b-4 "...My soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak."

Lament is not necessarily a quick fix. Asaph, the psalmist cries out but "(his) soul refuses to be comforted." Lament is not a simplistic math formula that leads to immediate answers. X + Y = Z. It's not like that. Rather it is the song you sing that one-day God will answer and restore. It's relational, not scientific. Notice how Asaph, the psalmist, repeatedly goes back and forth between his sorrow and his thoughts of God. He says, "When I remember God, I moan." He also writes, "When I meditate, my spirit faints." Lament encourages to pray through a struggle in a life that is not perfect, and it brings us to the sovereign, good, comforting God of the universe. It is God who upholds us. Notice how Asaph continues, "You hold my eyelids open". He can say this at the same time he feels sorrowful "I am so troubled that I cannot speak." Asaph continues to cry out to his God and Father, the only One who can comfort his soul.

Does this mean that I can only complain to God? Can I vent to my friends or family?

This is a good question. Truthfully, a whole sermon could be preached on what the Bible has to say about this question. Ultimately, it is a matter of your heart when complaining to friends.

Here are two questions to consider when you find your heart wanting to complain to other people.

- Do I have a deep faith in God bringing contentment even though I am dissatisfied with my circumstances?
- Am I speaking my dissatisfactions out of faithful hatred for sin, zeal for God's glory, and love for God's people, or am I wrapped up in myself?

When a friend comes to you and complains, grumbles, or vents about the pain of their life, don't stop at being a listener. Ask them to lament together with you. Weep with those who weep. Lament with those who lament. Bear each other's burdens in this way.

And always know this...complaining, grumbling, and venting to God is faithful. Proper lament is an act of faith. It is faithful to complain to God and lean on His sovereign goodness to bring your heart to rest and contentment.

It is faithful to

3) **Ask God Your Questions**

Pray your questions

Ps. 77:5, 6 "I consider the days of old, the years of long ago. I said, 'Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart.' Then my spirit made a diligent search"

Asaph wrestles with why God isn't doing more to return the days of old, the times in Ancient Israel that were better than they were for him in his day. He writes, "Let me remember", "Let me meditate" and "My spirit made a diligent search" There is much thinking and reflecting, leading to six rhetorical questions:

Ps. 77:7, 8

1. "Will the Lord spurn forever?"
2. "Will the Lord never again be favorable?"
3. "Has His steadfast love forever ceased?"
4. "Are His promises at an end for all time?"
5. "Has God forgotten to be gracious?"
6. "Has He in anger shut up His compassion?"

Does Asaph really believe these things about the Lord? Probably not as the rest of the psalm will show. But, Asaph is honest and raw about how he feels. Honestly asking questions often reveals emotions that feel true but are not based on truth. However, asking these questions are a real part of being in relationship with God. It takes faith to lay our painful questions before the Lord. Anyone can cry but it takes faith to turn to God in lament.

Let's remember Job. His life was full of crushed expectations. It was not going the way he envisioned. He lost his wealth, health, and children, all in a very short period of time. He was only left with his wife who advised him to, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9) and his friends who told him that he must have sinned an all this calamity must be his fault.

He was full of questions and actually demanded that God show up and answer them. So, one day, God did show up, only He didn't answer Job's questions as he expected. Rather, God gave Job a glimpse of how much He manages in the universe, how He has to think about more details than Job could possibly imagine, and how minute Job is comparatively. God gave Job a glimpse of His majesty, sovereignty, and power.

Job's response, "I put my hand over my mouth." (Job 40:4b)

But, God allowed Job to question Him, In fact, He said that Job was righteous. So, Job was righteous because He faithfully cried out to God and asked Him his questions. Job lamented. He was also righteous because through his sorrow, he chose to trust God.

4) Trust God In Your Pain

Prayer turns us around

Ps. 77:10-13 "Then I said, I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High. 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?"

Prayer leads us through personal pain and difficult questions to God's truth that anchors our soul. In all we feel and all we question, there comes a point where we must call to mind what we know to be true. Here Asaph uses words such as "remember", "meditate", and "ponder" to point to the process of calling to mind God's truth.

The entire psalm shifts with the word, "Then". Asaph is moving past feelings and questions and faithfully remembers truth. He remembers God's powerful deliverance, "I will appeal, to the years of the right hand of the Most High." And "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember Your wonders of old." "I will ponder all Your work and and meditate on Your mighty deeds." Asaph is looking back and remembering the powerful, mighty hand of God. The same hand that can intervene in his hurt and grief.

He then shifts from the historical actions of God to the character of God. "Your way O God is holy." And "What God is great like our God?". This is an important turning point in the psalm. It makes lament full of grace as he turns from honest and raw questions to expressions of trust and hope. You may or may not have answers to the questions asked, but the answers aren't the hope described here—it's the greatness and holiness of God that is our hope. The truth of who God is and our relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ—that is our hope.

Hurting people have permission to grieve, but not aimlessly or selfishly. Biblical lament redirects people to what is true despite what they are walking through.

As we think about our lives...generally, there is a gap in all our lives—a gap between what we know and what we do. We know we should trust God, but during troublesome times in our lives, we often fail to live out what we know to be true. This is not meant to be an absolute statement, rather it's a generalization. When we are hurting, we struggle to obey God. But, Asaph gives us the remedy. He gives us the answer to our problem. How do we do what we know to be true? We "remember", "meditate", and "ponder" on God. As we meditate on God's character and works, it gives us confidence to face the trouble this life brings. We remember his holiness and greatness as well as His salvation.

Notice how the last section of the psalm encourages us to...

5) Pray the Gospel

Ps. 77:14-20 "You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your might among the peoples. You with Your arm redeemed Your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. When the waters saw You, O God, when the waters saw You, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; Your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of Your thunder was in the whirlwind; Your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. 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."

This section describes the work of God to save Ancient Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to the Promised Land. God displayed great works of power "the waters saw You, they were afraid," and "Your way was through the sea". He also gave them leaders who taught them and led them to God. "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." God went to incredible and miraculous lengths to keep His covenant with Ancient Israel. He is so good and so amazing, and this gives us great confidence in God today.

The truth that will heal us today is the redemption that Jesus' gives us through His life, death, burial, and resurrection. He leads us out of the bondage and slavery of sin and to the hope of life with Him.

This truth anchors us in the midst of the storm.

We could let our feelings produce a life like this:

Events	Process	Belief
Betrayed by a friend	Sorrow leads to distrust of others and withdrawal	I am unworthy of friendship

Or we can faithfully lament producing a life like this:

Events	Process	Belief
Betrayed by a friend	1. Turns to God 2. Shares complaint 3. Asks boldly	God is enough for me. He loves me. He will never leave me or forsake me.

Topic Index with Psalms for Various Struggles

- 1) Death of a loved one—Psalms 22, 25, 28, 42, 57, 61, 142
- 2) Loss of a child, miscarriage, or stillbirth—Psalms 13, 22, 28, 42, 57, 60, 74, 142
- 3) Relationship conflict—Psalms 10, 25, 35, 43, 59, 64, 94, 109
- 4) Infertility—Psalm 13, 22, 28, 42, 57, 60, 70, 77
- 5) Betrayal—Psalm 10, 35, 56, 69, 71, 77, 94, 109
- 6) Unfair treatment—Psalm 13, 22, 25, 31, 35, 69, 70, 86
- 7) Abuse—Psalm 22, 43, 55, 56, 60, 69, 70, 94
- 8) Isolation/loneliness—Psalm 42, 55, 60, 71, 74, 123, 141, 142
- 9) Job or ministry loss—Psalm 25, 31, 42, 57, 60, 80, 85, 90

This psalm like many of the psalms listed on this chart were written by an individual. They were personal laments to God. But, these psalms were sung in the tabernacle (the OT church). They became corporate laments.

I challenge you to use these psalms to write your own personal psalms of lament. But, then go a step further. Go to a trusted friend and lament with them. Pray and trust God with your sorrow, together.

When a friend comes to you and complains, grumbles, or vents about the pain of their life, don't stop at being a listener. Ask them to lament together with you. Weep with those who weep. Lament with those who lament. Bear each other's burdens in this way.

Let's pray.