

David Lamenting: Prayers of Lament

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” David laments in Psalms 13 and guides us in lamenting too. The tragedy of this week reminds us how relevant lament is to living in this world. But how is it that we, mere mortals can and even should lament to the Holy, Awesome, Sovereign and Exalted God?

The Psalms, the prayer book of the Old Testament, gives us permission, in fact boldly leads us into prayers of lament. Old Testament Scholar Claus Westerman says that the Psalms embrace *both* joyful praise of God and lament to God; that they show both the heights and depths of human existence. The psalms honestly portray all the emotions that human existence entails in its terrifying and glorious rhythm of loss and rescue, cries for help and shouts of exultation, its defeats and victories, its weeping and singing. We need lament to fully live in this world so full as it is of suffering, evil, violence, ugliness, loss and tragedy.

Westerman organizes the psalms of Lament into two types: *Community Psalms of Lament* (Psalms 44, 49, 60, 74, 80, 83, and 89) and *Individual Psalms of Lament* (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 51, 52, Psalms 51-64, except 60; and 69, 71, 73, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130). They both follow the same basic pattern, beginning with a call to God, an introductory petition for help. Then follow laments in three forms: laments against God, personal laments, and laments about enemies. Usually in these laments there is a section which turns to God’s gracious acts, either in a confession of confidence or in review of God’s earlier saving acts on the people’s behalf. Then the petition comes, always as a request for God to turn again toward the psalmist, and then as a petition for aid and intervention. Often a third element is added: a petition against an enemy.

The *Individual Laments* also have a special, very clearly discernible characteristic of their own based on the fact that troubles of individuals are of a different nature than those of an entire community of people.

Also, the gap between trouble and rescue – between suffering and God’s help in suffering – ordinarily shows up smaller on the horizon of the individual’s life than on the horizon of the life of a people. In short, psalms of lament are everywhere in the prayer book of Israel. This not only gives you permission to lament to God but presses you to the intimacy of lamenting to God.

In Psalm 13, we watch David in the intimacy of his relationship to God lament. “How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever?” It feels like I’m not important to you God. It feels like you are distant, like you have forgotten me O LORD my God. “How long will you hid your face from me?” I want to know your smile. I want to feel your closeness again, to know your special love for me. “How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all my day.” I don’t like the ache of feeling alone, my God. I don’t want to just be in my heat. I want your presence. I want your counsel. I want you to be close to me. My heart aches because you, my LORD and my God, seem so far away. “Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.” With such intimacy David asks God for help. He says to the Almighty, I want your help, I want your answer, I want your consideration. I don’t want to die. I don’t want my enemy to win a victory over me and put me to shame. Finally, at the end of the lament, David’s heart lifts us to rejoice in God’s salvation (5-6)

The Psalms, and Psalm 13 teach us, that the great, holy and exalted God allows his people to come to him mourning, lamenting and grieving. He welcomes them to cry out to him, to berate him for being distant, to rail against him for being far away. God is not angry or intimidated when his people act thus. He invites them to come in their vulnerability, in their weakness, in their need and frustrations to him. This exposes a great weakness of our spiritual life as the church in the west: our distance and disconnect from suffering. We don’t know what to do with suffering. We don’t know how to face it, how to process it, what to do with it. So we shy away from grieving, mourning and lamenting in our spiritual life.

We act as if God is too fragile to be able to take our troubles, even though as parents with our own children we long for them to come in need, weakness and vulnerability and tell us their troubles.

Learning to pray prayers of lament can transform us! When we pray this way, we aren't stuffing our troubles or putting on a mask acting as if everything is great; nor are we trying to drown out our struggles with drink or sex or something else to numb the pain. No. We are processing our pain with the God who loves us and cares for us. And the God who invites us to lament listens and acts and draws near to His child!

So how can we learn to lament? First, we can practice the spiritual discipline of praying the Psalms through each month, morning and evening. This rhythm is set forth in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The practice is to pray the words of the psalms, and, as you do, adding to them your own words and processing, letting the Psalms lead you into praying. Praying the psalms this way will deepen and broaden your relationship with God. It will help you explore new ways of processing your heart with God, including lamenting.

Second, you can let the Psalms, including the Psalms of lament, lead you into the heart of Jesus. The Psalms were the prayer book of Israel, so they were the prayer book of Jesus too. Jesus would have grown up praying the Psalms. We know that he knew many by heart because he quotes them throughout his ministry. For example, he recites Psalm 22, a psalm of individual lament, from the cross. In Psalm 22 you are ushered into the holy place, Jesus' heart on the cross. You feel the awful consequence of sin: that Jesus was forsaken by God. You see Jesus in his forsakenness, lift up his heart to exalt God, "Yet you are holy," (22:3), then sink again into his broken, dying, miserable state: "But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people." And finally look to God in hope (vs. 25-31). In short, learning to pray the Psalms of lament will lead you into the inner sanctuary of the heart of Jesus, the Suffering Servant, who is not distant from those who suffer, who suffered and died for you so that even when God feels distant you can have the confidence of His never ending closeness and love.

Individual Prayer Guide

Take time this week to Pray through some Psalms. Maybe begin with praying Psalm 1 in the morning, and Psalm 2 in the evening, and so on. Our find a Book of Common Prayer, and turn to the Psalms you are to pray in the morning and evening of the day you are on. Take time to slowly, prayerfully read each psalm. As you feel led, add your own prayers and processing to the words of the Psalm. Dare to be honest with God. Let God know your frustrations, sufferings, and sadness. Tell him honestly how you feel about Him! And ask God to deliver you, come close to you, make himself known to you, deliver you. As you lament and grieve it may feel awkward. Remember in the west we aren't good at processing suffering this way. Remind yourself that your heavenly Father cares for you, wants to know your heart, and desires to comfort you.

Community Group Discussion and Prayer

1. What are some of the aspects of David's prayer of lament in Psalm 13?
2. Where do you struggle in praying prayers of lament?

Practicing Prayer in your Community Group

Take 20 (or so) minutes for each Community Group member to read through a Psalm (or two) of lament. Read a few verses of the Psalm of lament and then stop, giving people the chance to join their own prayers to that section of the lament. Continue on this way until you have completed praying through the Psalm.

3. What was hard/what was good about this time of "prayers of lament"?