

What to do with my Tears? (Psalm 88 and The Lament Psalms)

Throughout the summer we are walking through the book of Psalms together as a church. And the desire is to draw closer to God through this journey. And the book of Psalms uniquely helps us in this journey as it is filled with songs from all experiences of life. So the Psalms have a way of connecting with us in a unique way. I read about a girl named Stacey who had gone on a mission trip to Ethiopia. She said, “within a few short months of my return I was unemployed and living in the basement of a friend’s parent’s house. My home had burned down and a friend of mine had committed suicide.” Stacey fell into a deep depression. And she said, “During my depression, the only Scripture passages I felt able to read were the psalms—specifically the lament psalms.” (the kind of psalms that we are going to look at this morning).

There are different kinds of psalms that people have categorized over the years. And one kind of psalm is found more frequently than all the others. 1/3 of the psalms could be classified in this way. They are called lament psalms. In other words, they are songs of mourning, songs that were birthed out of sad moments. In these laments, the writers pour out to God their sorrow, anger, fear, longing, confusion, desolation, disappointment, and depression. These are songs written in the midst of sadness.

Can you think of some of the sad songs that are famous in our culture? I thought of a few...Everybody Hurts by REM, Candle in the Wind by Elton John, Tears in Heaven by Eric Clapton, I will Remember You by Sarah McLachlan, Good Riddance by Green Day (this song was big when I graduated high school and says that all the good times are done and over. Hope you enjoyed them while they lasted); Yesterday by the Beatles; Total Eclipse of the Heart by Bonnie Tyler (what depressing lyrics: “once upon a time there was love in my life but now I’m only falling apart. There’s nothing I can do a total eclipse of the heart.”); Hurt by Nine Inch Nails (the song touches on drug abuse, suicidal thoughts and deep emotional pain. It’s dark and depressing); The River by Bruce Springsteen’s (a guy has to give up all his dreams and aspirations)

You see...sad songs, whether about death or a breakup or depression, are regular expressions for us. Sad songs will always be there because our lives are full of sad moments, sometimes fairly trivial and other times downright

traumatic. So, it makes sense then that the greatest songbook of all time is full of songs inspired by sad and painful circumstances. Is there a way to walk through painful and difficult and sad times in life? And if so, how? The lament psalms help us. And if you are not sad right now then may I say something to you: sadness will come, many people around you are sad, and sometimes (maybe more often than we realize) we should lament; we should be sad (I will show you in a minute).

This morning we are going to read the most challenging of the Lament Psalms, Psalm 88 and ask what it can teach us.

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite. [1] O LORD, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you. [2] Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! [3] For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. [4] I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, [5] like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. [6] You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. [7] Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah [8] You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; [9] my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you. [10] Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Selah [11] Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? [12] Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? [13] But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. [14] O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? [15] Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. [16] Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. [17] They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. [18] You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness (Psalm 88 ESV).

Again, I said that this is the most challenging of all the Psalms. The Psalms are often raw and intense but they at least end hopeful. But Psalm 88 begins in pain and ends in pain. Heman, the writer, says that darkness is his closest companion. He complains to the Lord and he does so without praise or

thanks to God or a recognition that he is growing through the pain or that there is hope for the future. It is just darkness from beginning to end. But it has tons of lessons for us. Let's see a few...

First, darkness is inevitable. For Heman, he has lost his friends, he is facing death, he has suffered since he was young (he had a sinful father and probably had a tough childhood), he is not esteemed right now but looked down upon, and he is deeply depressed. He trusts in God but in his feelings he doesn't sense God's presence. He feels abandoned by God. There is no sense that he feels God's love and care and presence. Sometimes we go through seasons like this. Darkness and sadness cannot be avoided. You might wonder, "how does that help?" Because expectations have so much to do with how you process what comes to you. Let's say before you enter into a room you were told "this is the presidential suite" and then you walked in and it was small, it wasn't overly impressive, it was basic. You would be letdown because a presidential suite should be impressive. But imagine you were told that the same room is a prison cell. When you walk in, your response might be more like, "hey, its not that bad." Your expectations control how you experience the same set of circumstances. This is why James says: "do not be surprised when you encounter trials of many kinds."

The lament Psalms in many ways point to the fragility of everything. Some of the lament psalms are birthed out of relational conflict, others are birthed out of the sins of the authors, others are birthed out of family strife, others are birthed out of illness. What are they telling us? Everything in this world is incredibly fragile, including our very lives. Everything can fail us at any moment. So, our health can fail us at any moment, our reputation can fall apart in an instant, our beauty and youth fades so fast, relationships fall apart, finances can be lost so quickly. So we shouldn't be surprised when things fall apart.

Second, it is right and good to lament. It is right and good to mourn. In the lament psalms, the psalmists mourn because of what's wrong in the world. The lament psalms recognize that evil exists and it causes suffering. This is why I say it is good for us to lament. We live in an evil, sinful, broken world and for us to not lament would be problematic. God weeps over the world and all that is wrong in it. Jesus was a man of sorrows. Would it not make sense then that God's people would also weep?

So, what should we lament over? We should lament over our own sin. A number of the Psalms are people mourning over their own sin. When was the last time you mourned your sin and the damage it has caused to you and others? We should lament over other people's sins. When we have people in our lives who are living in disobedience to God and hurting others and themselves, we should mourn. We mourn over the injustice, suffering and pain in our world. There is human trafficking, injustice, crime, political upheaval, orphans, poverty and these realities should lead us to weep. We mourn over a world that doesn't know Jesus Christ. 82% of the people in the northeast have no relationship with Jesus Christ. There are 6000 unreached people groups in the world. We should weep over that. Do you realize how many people sitting around you right now are hurting? We are to mourn with those who mourn. Do you do that? Don't you see? We are to be people who lament, who mourn. The fact that 1/3 of the Psalms are laments should tell us something: mourning is a part of walking closely with God. I had a professor in school who would get emotional sometimes when talking or praying. He said once: "as I have gotten older, I have just learned to mourn more. God wept over Israel as they rebelled, Jesus wept at the grave of his friend, the prophets wept, Paul wept for the lost. We are not without hope but we mourn."

Third, in our laments, we complain to God not grumble against him. Notice who Heman is talking to: he is going directly to God and making his complaint to him rather than grumbling about God. Here Heman is bringing his complaints directly to God. Here is the difference: when we complain to God instead of grumble against him we are in essence saying: "God I know you to be good and faithful and righteous and just but what I am experiencing right now doesn't jive with that." And complaining to God instead of grumbling about him is a cry for help. Heman is not just venting; he is crying out to the One who can do something. My AC stopped working yesterday. I can complain but it won't do any good. I need to bring it to the attention of someone who can fix AC systems. You see, laments are not venting sessions but cries for help. They are expressions of dependence upon God because evil is beyond anyone else's power to fix. Lament is at its root, a form of struggle and protest. Tremper Longman says, "Laments are prayers of sufferers who do not simply acquiesce to their suffering."

Fourth, times of darkness are some of the very best places to learn about God's grace. Heman is not being respectful here. He is saying: "I want to praise you and declare your faithfulness but I can't because I am being

crushed.” He is mad. If you look at verse 15 on, it is especially harsh. He basically says, “from my youth, you have not been there for me.” It sounds like an angry teenager speaking to his or her parents. He is not speaking reverently to God. Many would say he is speaking blasphemously to God. He is certainly exaggerating (“you have never been here for me”). Why would God allow this Psalm to be in the Bible? Doesn’t this make him look bad? Derrick Kinder in his commentary wrote: *the very presence of these prayers are a witness to God’s understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate.* God didn’t censor this. God didn’t take it out. By keeping it in the Bible, he is saying I am still the God of this man. He knows how we talk when we are desperate.

I remember a time when I was a teenager and I just went off on my Dad. We were out by the basketball court in our yard and I complained to him. I thought he wasn’t being fair about something, I was upset with him, and I was going through some stuff at the time. And all I remember was that he didn’t cut in, he didn’t get mad at me for questioning him, he was gracious and at one point in the midst of my complaining I started to break down and he just hugged me. The lament psalms point us to the gracious nature of God to treat us with kindness as we question him.

Fifth, the darkness is not meaningless. When you are in the darkness, darkness feels absolute. Heman felt like God’s rejection of him was complete and that God had totally abandoned him. We know from 1 Chronicles 6 that Heman was the leader of the Kohathite guild of musicians and poets who wrote some of the psalms. The Psalms from these guys are in the 40s (I think 42-49) and in the 80s. So, Heman led people to worship God and some of those songs are still being sung today. We just read one. Because of the darkness, he has helped encourage billions who have read the Psalms throughout history. Now, he couldn’t see it. He saw darkness and purposelessness. Do you think Heman had any idea that 2500 years later that people around the globe would be opening up the Bible and talking about his songs? You see, he was wrong! God had not abandoned him! God was working and continues to work through him! The darkness wasn’t final. The absolute appearance of darkness wasn’t real.

And the same is true in our lives. The darkest moments are some of the moments that God is using the most. You may never see it but if you hold on then God will use those times.

Sixth, God is worth clinging to even when he doesn't bless. Yes, Heman is complaining to God but he is still clinging to Him. He still calls him Lord and God of my salvation. He is committed to crying out to God daily. Heman's life is actually saying something amazing about God. The rest of Scripture tells us a little more about Heman. Heman was the grandson of the prophet and judge Samuel. It was, in part, the mistakes and sins of Heman's father, Joel, that led Israel to request a king. Some of his deep struggles with depression seem related to a difficult childhood. One thing we know for sure about Heman is that he was a faithful servant of God. Despite the sinful example of his father, Heman lived faithfully before God. He is at numerous times called wise. It even says that he led the worship of God's people with "joy." So, despite his depression and his anger with the way his life has turned out, Heman never left God and he stayed faithful to him. In doing so, Heman showed that he loved God for God and not just for the benefits he brings.

People always say that hard times show you who your real friends are. Why? Because real friends stick with you. They aren't just in relationship with you for the benefits; they love you for you. The same is true for God. One of the ways you know if you really love God for God and not just his benefits is what happens when you suffer. Do you cling to him and keep following him? This is why our darkest moments are the greatest opportunity for God to get glory in our lives. In Heman's story, Satan is defeated and God is shown to be worth following even when we get nothing.

I had a friend who passed away last week. She dealt with incredible pain and suffering in her life. A horse fell on her and nearly killed her, she had diabetes most of her life, she had three heart attacks and multiple surgeries for that, she lived on dialysis until she got a new kidney from my dad, and she had cancer multiple times and died from it in her mid 50s. And one of the main things that people said at her funeral was how she faithfully held on to God in the midst of everything. God's worth was shown in her life because she clung to God when she was experiencing loss.

And this leads us to the main lesson of this text: in your sadness, endure. Perhaps the greatest lesson of Heman's life was that of endurance. He was faithful. He kept following God, he kept crying out to God, he kept praising God (we don't see that here but we know that it was true), he was a blessing to others, he persevered through the hard times. What a legacy! I will take that legacy over "he was successful and well liked and lived a comfortable

life and died old.” If Heman teaches us anything here it is to keep pressing in to God, keep calling out to him, to endure!

Before we close we must see the last lesson of this text (at least the last one we will touch on). Perhaps the greatest encouragement we can take from this passage is the way it was echoed by Jesus. This Psalm points us to him. Before Jesus went to the cross he was in the Garden of Gethsemane begging God to not have to go through the cross. All his friends left him and he was alone. Before and during his crucifixion he was mocked and scorned. As he was dying darkness fell upon the land and he cried out “my God, why have you forsaken me?” And yet he said “not my will but yours” to the Father. He endured the suffering of the cross for you and me. Ponder that for a minute. Jesus was totally abandoned by God so that we would never have to be. Realize that through the darkness of Jesus’ life, God will save billions and restore the world. So, the darkness in our lives is not meaningless! God can and does use it. And remember that Jesus died to crush sin and evil so we should mourn when we see it’s presence in our lives and others. Will you mourn this morning? Psalm 126 encourages us to “sow our tears” that we might reap a harvest of joy. Let’s use our moments of sadness well and let’s mourn often over the brokenness in this world in order that we might experience the joy of knowing the One who will fix it all.