

## **Lamenting in Difficulties with Faith**

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Shaped by the Psalms / Psalm 77

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### **Introduction:**

Prayer and worship are two vital aspects of knowing and following Jesus Christ, as they are the primary ways in which we communicate with God. Last week, we saw how Psalm 62 calls for us to “pour out our hearts before God” meaning we let our concerns, thoughts, struggles, and desires stream out of us like flowing water before God. We do this through prayer and worship, pouring out both our joys and sorrows to God. Today, in our “Shaped by the Psalms” series, we are considering a Psalm of Lament. To lament is to express the deep sorrows we experience over the fallen nature of our world and the perplexities we experience in life. Lamenting is a unique aspect of the Christian life, but I think many are right to suggest the church has almost lost its ability to lament, as our prayers have become more surface level in nature, and our worship following suit. Yet over one third of the psalms are lament. Not only that, but there is an entire book in the Bible called “Lamentations” that reveals the deep cries of one of God’s prophets. These things should point our hearts to this unique form of prayer and worship, and they suggest it is one the church would do well to recover. I don’t normally do this, but I am going to reference this book called “Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy” by Mark Vroegop often today as an encouragement to consider picking up a copy for yourself if you desire to grow in this kind of prayer and praise. It is a great introduction to help you be shaped by these psalms. In this book, Vroegop describes lament like this, “Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness... lament is rooted in what we believe. It is a prayer loaded with theology. Christians affirm that the world is broken, God is powerful, and he will be faithful. Therefore, lament stands in the gap between pain and promise” (Mark Vroegop, Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy, p. 25). We find laments throughout the scriptures that are personal, and others that are corporate. Laments can express repentance or desires for justice. Vroegop agrees with Stacey Gleddiesmith, who suggests four movements of lament, “(1) an address to God, (2) a complaint, (3) a request, and (4) an expression of trust and/or praise” (Vroegop, Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy, p. 29). These psalms teach us how to move in our hearts from plea to praise and give voice to the deep anguish we feel at times. Our passage for today is Psalm 77, which I believe will lay a foundation for learning how to allow these types of psalms shape our thoughts, actions, worship and prayers. Psalm 77 can be broken in 2 long stanzas revealing the psalmist’s movement from plea to praise, starting in verses 1-9, where we see,

### **An Expression of Genuine Anguish**

As we dive into a psalm of lament, it is important that we don’t gloss over any of its language and allow our hearts to feel the psalmist’s heart as he writes, never forgetting that what we are reading is God breathed words for our benefit. Look at the opening in verse 1, “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me.” The psalmist begins by highlighting where he has turned in his distress. Twice in the original language he uses the same phrase we read in the first line of crying out to God. The repetition signals something about the nature of his plea. Have you ever experienced something in life that moves you to cry aloud to God? I recall one in my life while I was working as a commercial loan officer. I was having a tough year and had been unable to meet my sales goals for the first time in my career. I was placed on a 90-day probation with specific goals set or I would lose my job. Our girls were young, we had just bought our first house a year before and finances were already tight. After about a month into the probation, the few loans I had in the pipeline were declined, and I began to realize I had little time to drum up some business because it took about 2 months for things to close. I went to one street in Fresno with several warehouses looking for loans. I remember vividly walking into each business, asking for a conversation with the owner and each one turning me away. As I walked back to my car, the reality of my pending job loss hit like it hadn’t before, and I sat in my car crying aloud to God, overwhelmed by what that reality would mean for my family.

If you haven't experienced moments like this, chances are you will at some point in your life, and when you do, let the confidence of the psalmist ring in your ears at the end of verse 1, "and he will hear me." The one who knows the Lord will hear cries out to God like this. We even discover that Jesus Christ lived in this kind of anguish, as Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." It is right and righteous to cry aloud to God. Notice, next, the deep discouragement expressed in verses 2-3, "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. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints." This cry comes in a day of trouble, and the intensity of his anguish is so much that he stretches out his hands in prayer before God refusing to let his soul be comforted without an answer. He then describes moaning as he remembers God and his spirit fainting as he meditates on God. Listen to the expression of his feelings and emotions. The thought of God provides no comfort for him in this moment but leads him instead to exhaustion. Church, recognize these emotions and feelings are something the Lord is not scared of. He moved in the heart of this psalmist to record these for us to hear. This should move us to do the same in our times of pain and sorrow. Yet, often in our pain, we instead go silent, holding back our thoughts and feelings. But as Vroegop rightly says, "Giving God the silent treatment is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief." He continues, "Despair," he says, "lives under the hopeless resignation that God doesn't care, he doesn't hear, and nothing is ever going to change. People who believe this stop praying" (Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, p. 32). Don't go silent in your pain, but instead let the honesty of the psalmist move you to pray in these ways during the darkness. Yet, we find this is not even the end of his expressed anguish. Look at the next move of his heart in verses 4-6, "You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, the years 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." He speaks of God keeping Him from sleep and ending at the point where he doesn't know what to pray anymore. Then he begins to consider the days, and years past. He calls on himself to remember his "song in the night" which is likely the joy he once had with God, meditating on that time and its contrast with his present situation in hopes to help his heart. However, this doesn't lead to comfort, but sends his spirit on a diligent search, leading to the deep questions of his heart. Pay attention to the questions he asks in verses 7-9, "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" These questions reveal the doubts in his heart as he wonders about God's disposition toward him, and they are centered on God's covenant keeping love. There is an honesty here that should pierce our hearts. How often do we have doubts and questions like this? How often do we openly and honestly bring those to the Lord? I believe Mark Futato is spot on with his commentary on this moment, saying, "Here the Holy Spirit instructs us that such questions are not off-limits in prayer; rather, God invites us to engage in such brutal questioning before his face in prayer" (Mark D. Futato, "The Book of Psalms," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, 255). This doesn't mean we let our hearts lean into thinking the answers to questions like these are yes, but, church, this expression of genuine anguish shows us there is a vulnerability we are welcomed to have before the Lord. The key, we find, is not to remain there but go deeper in our lament. The next stanza shows how the psalmist moves through his lament to praise, in verses 10-20, through,

### **An Appeal to Recount God's Faithfulness**

Translators are unsure whether verse 10 belongs at the end of the cry of verses 1-9, or the beginning of the movement to praise in verses 11-20. So, some translate the Hebrew as a further expression of grief with a declaration that the right hand of the Lord has changed, and others, like the ESV, as the turning point towards praise, with an appeal that it hasn't. I lean towards the translation of the ESV, but we should note that either translation will end at the same point. Look at verse 10, "Then I said, 'I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.'"

When he speaks of the right hand of the Most High, he is speaking of the Lord's authority and power as king. The right hand of God was often specifically spoken of as a symbol of His power employed to deliver His people. I am persuaded the appeal is an appeal to the questions of his own heart. How will he answer the questions that have come from his diligent search? By appealing to the years of the right hand of the Most High, the years of God's display of power and deliverance. This is what he then does in verse 11-12. Look there with me, "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." Verse 11 is the first mention of God's covenantal name, Yahweh, in this psalm, translated "Lord" in all caps. Note how everything changes at this point, even his style of writing. He engages in deeper thought, using the word remember twice, along with ponder and meditate again. The focus is on the deeds of God, wonders of old, all His work, and His mighty deeds. Each phrase in these two verses are almost entirely synonymous, reading like he is saying the same thing four times, revealing a dedication to recount these things. Pick back up in verses 13-15, "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. You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph." His attention turns to the uniqueness of God. Vroegop captures the significance well, saying, "The focus shifts again from the historical works of God to the very character of God. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? (v. 13) Notice how different this rhetorical question is from the previous six questions! This is an important turning point" (Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, p. 35). God's way is holy, uniquely set apart in its perfection. God is one who works wonders. God has made known His might as He redeemed the people of Israel. Verses 13-14 echo the truths sung by the people coming out of the bondage of Egypt in Exodus 15:11, where they say, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" This connection is likely the reason for the ending calling them "the children of Jacob and Joseph." His remembrance has gone back to the greatest moment of deliverance in the history of the people of Israel, their redemption from bondage in Egypt. This leads to our understanding of verses 16-20. Look there with me, "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." Verses 19-20 point to the parting of the Red Sea where God delivered the people of Israel fully from the hand of Pharaoh. Yet, notice, how the focus of verses 16-18 is on creation, speaking of the deep and the earth trembling. God's might didn't just cause the Egyptians to tremble, but the very aspects of creation on display during the Exodus are depicted as in fear of God. The waters were afraid and obeyed His voice. The clouds and skies bent to his purposes, bringing forth His thunder and lightning. God was using everything to accomplish His will, and the psalmist depicts these things as God physically making His way through the water, but as the end of verse 19 says, "your footprints were unseen." Do you see how he is recounting the work of God? It was clearly on display though particular evidence of it wasn't seen by the human eye. He is remember how God made a way, but you couldn't see Him walking it. This is a reminder to his heart, and ours that God is often moving in ways we don't see. Yet, one truth always remains, shown in verse 20, while through the hand of Moses and Aaron, God was lead His people like a shepherd. And as God led his people like a shepherd, he will lead the psalmist too. Church, note the focus has shifted from cries of grief to proclamations of praise. His lament turned into praise as he appealed for his heart to recount God's faithfulness. This brings us to the end of this psalm of lament and moves us into the practical ways it should shape our thoughts, actions, worship and prayers. Let me suggest two things Psalm 77 teaches us to do through lament. First.

### **1) Confidently Express Your Grief and Sorrow to God**

This psalm, and other laments like it give us confidence to express our grief and sorrow to God openly and honestly. A confidence to cry aloud to him, to ask questions, and even express our exhaustion. Lamenting is an appropriate way to pray and worship, yet we seem to fear expressing our feelings like this. Some of this is because we have bought into the lie that faithful believers don't grieve like this, maybe because we have misunderstood Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Church, Paul doesn't say we don't grieve at all, he says we don't grieve without hope. We can express our grief and sorrow before God because we know this is not the world as He created it to be, and even God grieves sins effect on our world. We can and should confidently express our grief and sorrow to God. Mark Vroegop ends his book with a call to let lament be our way of prayer in grief, giving six reasons why, "1. It is a language for loss... 2. It is the solution for silence... 3. It is a category for complaints... 4. It is a framework for feelings... 5. It is a process for our pain... 6. It is a way to worship" (Vroegop, Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy, pp. 160-161). Let the psalms of lament move you to confidently express your grief and sorrow to God and faithfully embrace others grief and sorrow. Second,

## **2) Let God's Faithfulness Overwhelm Your Grief**

If we only express our grief and sorrow and never appeal to the faithfulness of God, we have not completed the biblical process of lamenting. An appeal to God's faithfulness in the past helps to solidify our trust and hope in His continued faithfulness. The psalmist looked back to God's redemption through the Exodus, but we have something far greater to appeal to. We look back to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We appeal to God's faithfulness as Jesus, the Son of God, took on flesh and dwelt among us, exercising perfect power and authority over both the natural and spiritual realms. We appeal to God's faithfulness that this Jesus is the one who died on the cross and suffered a gruesome death as a substitute for our sin. We appeal to the power of His resurrection that proves that His death was sufficient, and the power of His Spirit that is now at work within us secured by His atoning sacrifice. Church, place your trust wholly in Him, knowing because of His death and resurrection it is well with your soul, and let God's faithfulness in securing your redemption overwhelm your sorrows and grief, giving you hope for the future, when He will return to make all things right.

### **Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in an extended time of response, let me encourage a specific kind of response today. Lean into discovering how to lament. You could read psalms of lament, or the book of Lamentations afresh. Maybe order a copy of Dark Clouds, Deep Mercies for yourself. If you are interested, I have printed a few appendixes from the book that provide the structure of laments and samples of how to write your own that you can grab at the information center in the foyer. Even if you aren't in a season requiring lament, learning how to lament can prepare you for one, or help you walk with others through theirs. If you are not in a season of lament, know also that your singing in this time of response could be exactly what someone around you needs to hear this morning in their season of grief. So, sing of God's faithfulness. If you are in one of a season of grief and sorrow, know that you are free to lament here. You can cry aloud to God in this time of response, coming to kneel before him or even seeking prayer from our prayer team who will be worshipping on the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Church let's seek God's grace together as we respond.

Would you pray with me as we lean into what God has for us?