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Cultivating A Theology of Lament

One of the great holes in the fabric of the American church is the ability and willingness to mourn, to lament, to weep and grieve.

Yes, we are called to revel and celebrate the goodness of God, but we're also called to lament. Most of the Psalms in the bible are lament.

60 out of 150 Psalms are lament. That's 40%. Consider the contrast of psalms of praise (41 or 27.3%)

Our church gatherings must make room for lament, because this is the only thing that can heal our sadness.

The biblical psalms feature several remarkable expressions of lament. In these laments, the worshiping community expresses grief and frustration at the brokenness of the world, even in situations in which the community is not directly culpable or blameworthy.

Biblical laments are a witness to God's desire for honesty in worship. No experience in life is too difficult to be brought before God.

“We live in a fallen world, where awful, incomprehensible things happen. When an obvious and egregious injustice such as this one is done, we should stand where God does and see this as real evil, not as an illusion of evil. This means that our response to such should not be some sort of Stoic resignation but instead a lament with those around us who are hurting.” – Russell Moore

A lament is an implicit act of faith in which the community of faith turns to God as its only source of hope and comfort.

We can start with sadness for our own life tragedies: relational ruin, personal trauma, individual sin.

And we can enter into solidarity with the suffering of the world as well: victims of natural disasters, systemic oppression, the principalities and powers of racial and economic injustice, broken families, physical and emotional abuse.

A Biblical Pattern of lament

Throughout the bible, there's a bit of a pattern to lament. Not formulaic, but there's some commonalities there. It's not winning or complaining, but it's deeper than that.

So, very briefly, I want to give us a pattern for lament, something we can mimic and continue on our own lives. Please write this down, we'll also make it available online.

Seeing these different parts of lament shows that laments are different from just whining and complaining: lament is not about pouting because we don't get our way. Instead, lament is what occurs when deep faith confronts deep suffering: we suffer, and in our faith, we turn to the Only One who can do anything about our suffering, the God who is in charge and who cares for us. Laments are:

Addressed to God

We recognize that He is the One who is in control. This is a recognition that there are spiritual forces at work in the world, and God is the one over all. We have a tendency to justify and naturalize everything. We address God because the root of evil in this world is Satan and his demons and schemes.

Psalm 42:1-2

*[1] As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
[2] My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God? (ESV)*

Involve an affliction or complaint

When we lament, it's because something has gone wrong. In our life, in our culture or community, something has disrupted our sense of justice or rightness.

Psalm 42:3

*[3] My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
"Where is your God?" (ESV)*

Contain a request

When we lament, we are expressing our desire for God to do something about it! Maybe we've hit rock bottom, or maybe we know that whatever happened, is totally overwhelming and out of control.

Usually, they end with confidence and praise

Having addressed God with our complaint and request, we are confident that God is in control, and we praise him for his watchful care. Even if we don't feel like, this is a discipline for our soul.

That last one's key. I call it the turn. We have to turn and see our lives and this world, broken and fallen as it is, in the context of a loving Father God.

Look at Ps 44 for example:

Psalm 44:15-18

*[15] All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face
[16] at the sound of the taunter and reviler,*

at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.
 [17] *All this has come upon us,*
though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant.
 [18] *Our heart has not turned back,*
nor have our steps departed from your way; (ESV)

As a people, we must learn to lament. But we also must learn how to find our hope in God and not in the things of this world.

Psalm 42:5

[5] *Why are you cast down, O my soul,*
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation (ESV)

A Corporate Prayer of Lament

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Why, Lord, must evil seem to get its way?
We confess that our sin is deeply shameful;
but the wicked are openly scornful—
they mock your name and laugh at our dismay.

“

The Church:

We know your providential love holds true:
nothing can curse us endlessly with sorrow.
Transform, dear Lord, this damage into good;
show us your glory, hidden by this evil.

“

Why, Lord, must any child of yours be hurt?
Do all our pain and sorrow somehow please you?
You are a God so jealous for our praises—
hear this lament as prayer that fills the earth.

“

The Church:

We plead: Repair the brokenness we share.
Chastise no more, lest it destroy your creatures.
Hear this lament as intercessory prayer,
and speak your powerful Word to make us hopeful. Amen.