

# Discovering the Gifts of LAMENT

Reflections on an often  
misunderstood form of prayer

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**J**esus wept, notes the Gospel of John. And so do we. Like Jesus we weep at the gravesides of friends and loved ones. We mourn over the massive destruction wrought by tornadoes and tsunamis. We grieve painful ruptures in marriages, friendships, and congregations. Surely we ought to turn our tears into praise. Rejoice in the Lord *always*, instructs the word. Yet the word of God also teaches us that lament is a part of praise. The Book of Psalms is called *Tehillim* in Hebrew, which means *Praises* (*tehillim* is related to the word *hallelujah*, which means *praise God!*). And in this Book of Praises, the most common “praise song” by far is the song of lament.

Lament is a special form of prayer in the Bible. It is not simply mourning, although it often includes that. It is not merely complaint, although it tends to include that as well. It is never whining. As preacher Brian Blount writes in an essay in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, it is “the sound you hear at the human breaking point. [Lament] isn’t a whine that cries out from surrender or defeat or fear. It is the call of one who believes in the truth that despite all you see God *is* in control.”

From the depths of trouble, sometimes in anger, lament is fundamentally *calling upon God to be a redeeming presence in the midst of pain*. Let me say that again, in a slightly different way: lament is a cry of hurt, directed to God, asking God to help and heal in a situation of suffering, expecting God to help and heal.

The first thing lament does is tell the truth. It describes a situation as it really is. It is honest about the depth of the hurt. It gives voice and words to a pain that until then had been silent suffering. Covenant theologian John Weborg says that if you can name it, you take away 90 percent of its power over you. Lament does not pretend that everything’s okay, nor does it mouth platitudes about how God has a plan. The prayer of lament is not afraid to enter into the darkness and say exactly how dark it is. Lament means learning to sit in the darkness—with our own pain and with the suffering of others—without fumbling too quickly for the light switch. This is what Job’s friends got right, before they decided to start talking and said all

the wrong things: they simply went to be with Job, sitting silently with him, entering into his grief.

“Now when Job’s three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home.... When they saw Job from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:11-13).

The next thing that lament does is to demand that God do something about the darkness. Almost every lament psalm begins with an invocation of God’s name, a direct address to God. This means that the lamenter brings whatever he or she has to say into God’s presence, in the context of the relationship he or she has with God. Sometimes the psalmist gives God a reason why God should help: save me “according to your steadfast love” (Psalm 109:26). You have been merciful in the past, the psalmist reminds God. Do so again! Save, help, heal, rescue! Most of all, be present! What lament wants most of all is God’s presence in the middle of the trouble, because the ones who lament know that God’s merciful, life-giving presence transforms everything. Without God, we’re helpless. With God, all things are possible.

Lament is not shy or even very polite about asking for God’s help. It is bold and brash and demanding, just like the widow who refused to go away until the judge granted her request, just like the man at midnight who pounded on his neighbor’s door until he opened it (Luke 18:1-8; 11:5-13). *Pray this way*, Jesus instructs his disciples. Insistently, persistently, never giving up.

Why pray this way? Because God hears the cries of God’s people (Exodus 2:23-25; Psalm 6:8-9; Psalm 40:1; Psalm 116:1; Luke 11:9-10; 18:7). That’s the kind of God we have. One who hears, who indeed longs to hear our cries (Jeremiah 29:12-13). One who loves us with a

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steadfast, unwavering love. One who has the power to redeem. In fact, in the psalms, lament often intertwines with praise. There's no simple movement from lament to praise, as if lament is something we do once and then get over. Rather, the psalmist complains, and he praises; he doubts, and he trusts; he shouts out in anguish, and looks ahead to God's ultimate victory. All at the same time.

It might surprise us to notice that many of Jesus's public prayers were laments. Although Jesus often prayed in private (Luke 5:16), the Gospels record two of his prayers at the end of his life: in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross just before he dies.

"If it is possible, take this cup away from me" (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Jesus had predicted that he would suffer and die, and now he knows that time has come. He takes his disciples to the Mount of Olives where he throws

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himself on the ground in anguish and asks the Father if he really has to die. Meanwhile, his disciples fall asleep. Jesus laments alone, lifting his cry to God, asking God for help.

Jesus cries out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). On the cross, Jesus shouts a mighty cry of lament, using the words of Psalm 22. He is now in the deepest darkness there is—he has been abandoned and betrayed by his friends, arrested on dubious charges, tortured at the hands of the political and religious authorities, and mocked by the very people he came to save. And now, as he prepares to die, the Son of God feels separated even from his own Father.

Jesus laments! The Son of God sings the song of pain. Yet Jesus does not just tell the truth about his hurt and his hopes. He does not simply cry to God for rescue. He also clings to hope that the Father has *not* forsaken him. In the garden, he prays, "Please take this cup," but he also prays, "Not my will but yours be done." On the cross, he wails, "Why have you forsaken me?" but he also prays, "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

He complains, and he praises; he doubts, and he trusts; he shouts out in anguish, and looks ahead to God's ultimate victory. All at the same time. Jesus's laments take us from the deep despair and darkness of Good Friday and the grave, to the blinding light and astonished joy of Easter morning and resurrection.

This is precisely the space where lament lives for us as Christians—in the hopeful tension between Good Friday and Easter morning. It is often said that we live both in the "now" and the "not yet." The "now" is all the ways we experience the resurrection life and the kingdom of God in our lives today—the power of forgiveness and reconciliation, the gifts of the Spirit, the joy of new life in Christ. But the "not yet" recognizes that we live in a world still rife with sickness, death, sin, war, injustice, broken relationships. We lament for all the ways we live in the "not yet." But lament also clings to the stubborn hope that there is a *someday*, when God will wipe away all the tears and all our lament finally does resolve into praise.

A friend asked me once, what does lament *do*? What difference does lament actually make? To answer that question, I want to tell three stories.

1) A friend's fiancée broke up with him after five years of dating. He felt he'd lost not only his present but his future as well. He struggled with feeling deeply betrayed and uncertain about whether he would ever be able to trust again. These are the words of his lament: "It is not enemies who taunt me—I could bear that.... But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company" (Psalm 55:12-14). He is still in the darkness, but he sees occasional glimpses of a new future, a new life, perhaps even a joyful life, without his former fiancée in it.

2) Another friend lives in the East End of Durham, North Carolina, a neighborhood at the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Thirty people are shot to death every year in Durham (a city of 250,000 people), mostly teenagers and young adults, mostly in the East End. In addition to generational poverty, the residents of this predominantly African American neighborhood struggle under the immense weight of systemic racism. You might say that the entire East End lives in a state of communal lament, grieving



for the life and health of their community. They cry out along with the prophet Habakkuk: “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry out to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2). Yet it would be wrong to look at the East End and see only the pain of lament and not the praise. Through my friends there I see tenacious joy and persistent trust and insistent hope in a God who redeems. The East End is one of the places that has taught me the power of lament—as both the truthful speaking of real pain and the refusal to give in to bitterness in the face of that pain.

3) Another friend struggles with God’s silence. God who was once vibrantly present is now devastatingly absent. “I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’” (Psalm 42:9). Jesus, too, prayed words from this psalm, in Gethsemane: *My soul is deeply grieved, even unto death.* “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (Psalm 22:1-2). Jesus also cried out in the words of Psalm 22 from the cross. This friend is learning that faith lives in the darkness. Sometimes, perhaps even often, faith is not certainty. It is choosing to believe despite the evidence, to hope in things unseen (Hebrews 11:1).

What difference does lament make to these

situations? What gifts might it bring?

**Faith.** Lament shapes pain into prayer. As someone said to me after reading one of the darkest, angriest lament psalms, “I hope I never need this prayer, but if I do, I’m glad to know it’s there in the Bible.” The practice of lament holds hope and fear, loss and trust, rage and praise together.

**Honesty.** Lament invites us into an honest facing of the darkness. It helps us name the darkness for what it is. It teaches us not to minimize or avoid pain but to carry it along with our joys into worship.

**Compassion.** Sitting alongside Job on the ash heap without speaking is not easy, but it is the one thing Job’s friends got right. Lament draws a private, silent hurt into the community where it can be held and heard together. “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

**Hope.** The longing of lament for God’s justice and peace enables us to see our way into a new future, with unexpected possibilities.

**Courage.** The lament psalms are not for the faint-hearted. They are bold and brash and demanding. But they are also patient. They never give up. “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD” (Psalm 31:24).

Lament is faith in pain. Lament is trusting that God can bear our anger and receive it as prayer. As an authentic part of the life of faith, lament can put a new name on our sorrow and lead us to a place where we can believe that someday we will sing a new song (Psalm 40:3). We might not be there yet. It is so very dark. The word of trust is sometimes very faint and the shout of pain is very loud. But lament nurtures in us the longing for God’s good future and points us toward it.

Jesus prayed, “Your will be done,” and he taught us to pray that way too. We know that God’s will is to redeem the whole creation and to wipe away all the tears, and so this prayer often sounds a lot like a lament. Jesus also teaches us to pray, “Your kingdom come.” This is an urgent plea. It demands that God show up in the darkness. Help! Save! Redeem! *Come!* This is also the concluding prayer, the final petition, the last lament, at the very end of the Bible: *Come, Lord Jesus! Rescue! Hear! Heal! Be with! Come. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.* ■