

How to Lament - Bring Our Struggles to God

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Date: 17 September 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. So last week, we began a short series on the subject of Christian lament, and we will pick up where I left off.

However, I want to go back for just a moment and not only review, but also even clarify a few things. I often think of something James wrote.

He said, not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that those who teach will be judged with a greater strictness. So anyone who makes an effort to teach the Bible has a tremendous responsibility.

He must take it very carefully. And I'll admit, the subject of lament can be very challenging, and I believe we need to make things as clear as possible on at least a couple of points.

When it comes to lament, I provided a basic outline. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by trials, when we find ourselves in great despair, I said we, number one, turn to God in prayer.

[1 : 05] Number two, we bring Him our complaints. Number three, we make our requests. And number four, we express our trust in Him. Let's tweak that second bullet point, that second heading, just a bit.

Rather than say, bring our complaints to God, let's alter it to say, bring our struggles to God. And I'll explain why I believe it might be best to make this change.

Even last week, I could hardly use the word complain without mentioning there are caveats. There's an asterisk next to that word. I fear that that word is a bit misleading because generally when we think of complaining, that's not really something we want to be doing.

Especially when we approach God. It's never appropriate to accuse God of wrongdoing. It's never appropriate to malign Him or His character. It's never right to even express unthankfulness to God. That would put us right into the camp of the Israelites, who, you remember, grumbled that God had led them out of Egypt, out of their slavery, into the wilderness only to, you know, die of starvation or die of thirst.

[2 : 24] No, we never want to complain in that sense. To be clear, the Bible does use the word complain in a slightly different sense.

For example, David says in Psalm 142, verse 2, I pour out my complaint before him. I tell my trouble before him.

Now, if you read Psalm 142, David doesn't make any false accusations. He doesn't grumble that the Lord hasn't provided for him. He's merely pleading for mercy and confessing that he needs help. So he's not using the word complaint in quite the same way that we usually do. Literally, that word, as David used it, means meditation.

So, in other words, David is pouring out his troubled thoughts, his troubled meditations, if you will.

For the sake of clarity, though, I'd like to use different terminology.

[3 : 25] Rather than talk about taking our complaints to God, I'll refer to it as taking our struggles to God. Last week, I also began extolling the virtues of turning to God in prayer in times of trouble.

1 Peter 5 says, Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

So, without question, prayer should always be our immediate response. That's the first place we should go. And really, whether the circumstances are good or bad, we should go to the Lord in prayer.

We thank him for the good. We seek his help with the bad. And that's precisely the pattern we see in the laments throughout the Bible. However, however, not every part of every biblical lament is what I would call prescriptive.

In other words, just because we read the laments, you know, asking certain questions or praying certain words does not mean they provide examples of how to lament.

[4 : 43] The lament psalms, for example, they're not like the Lord's prayer that we find in Matthew 6 or Luke 11, where Jesus very explicitly says, When you pray, say this, and then provides the example.

We can certainly learn from all of the lament psalms. They're there for a reason. That's why they're in Scripture. But not everything in the Bible is prescriptive. Let me show you what I mean.

Last week, I quoted from Psalm 22. This is where David cries out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning?

Oh, my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer. And by night, but I find no rest. Now, for the sake of comparison, Let me read a portion of the very next psalm, which is very familiar to most of us.

This psalm was also written by David. In fact, this psalm was also written when David was in the midst of tribulation. But you will notice a stark contrast between the two.

[5 : 53] In Psalm 23, he says, The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. I shall not lack anything. For he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. So, David, he's facing trouble in both cases, right? His prayers, though, are considerably different from Psalm 22 to Psalm 23.

In Psalm 22, he wrongly feels that maybe God has forsaken him. And that's exactly how pain can make us feel sometimes. But it's not correct. He feels abandoned in that moment.

He feels alone. But we also know that isn't possible, right? God promised, I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. But in Psalm 23, David can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil because he's confident that God is with him.

[7 : 09] It's quite the contrast. So, as we continue the study, I don't want to give the impression that the kind of lament we see in places like Psalm 22 should be always, without exception, our default response.

No, not necessarily. God willing, we will be mature enough in our faith, we will be confident enough in God to respond as David did.

In Psalm 23, rather than Psalm 22. So, though we may struggle to trust God's promises at times, ultimately, we want to be a people of such resolute faith that we never question God.

We never have doubts, no matter the circumstances. Now, that's a high bar, of course. Again, given enough pain, we often have doubts.

And that's what we see in the lament Psalms. But that's a point I intended to make eventually, but I think it's maybe better to say now, sooner than later.

[8 : 19] In fact, let me go a little bit further. Again, not every part of the lament Psalms are prescriptive. When we read these, we don't commend these men in the Bible because they had doubts, or because they questioned God's faithfulness.

It isn't necessarily virtuous for David to cry out, my God, why have you forsaken me? These Psalms are not teaching us that it's good to have doubts, or that it's good to question God.

They're not teaching us that every emotion we feel is right or good. So what then are they teaching us? If these Psalms are not altogether prescriptive, what are they?

Well, they're descriptive. Think of Peter in the Gospels. We all love Peter because he's so relatable, isn't he?

He often says things in the moment that seem to sound right, or maybe they would have, things that we may have been tempted to say in those moments. But Jesus rebukes him.

[9 : 33] Why? Because what he says isn't right. And what do we learn from Peter? Well, we learn that even saints say the wrong things.

We learn that even saints speak impulsively. We learn that even saints can experience confusion and misunderstandings, right? In the Psalms of Lament, we may very well read things that betray a lack of faith on the part of the person who's speaking these words, which is never a good thing.

I mean, we commend the laments for having a measure of faith. They did, after all, turn to God with their laments. But that's not to say we want to emulate everything they've said.

We certainly learn from these laments. But what I'm trying to clarify is they're not precise formulas that we want to follow as though the Bible instructs us to lament just like this, pray just like this.

Anytime you have a trial, anytime you have trouble, do this, exactly this. Here's what we really see in the Bible's laments. These are two of the big takeaways.

[10:45] First of all, we see human beings speaking honestly, very candidly, sometimes very pointedly about their pain.

We get an intimate glimpse into their personal, heartbreaking turmoil. We see people who have felt the same way many of us have felt at times. Right or wrong, we see them giving voice to the struggle that is happening within their hearts as they wrestle with what appears to be this tension between God's goodness and their very difficult circumstances.

I believe that's why these laments in Scripture seem so powerful to us when we read them. Why they're so relatable. It's why we find Peter so relatable. If we've ever felt like these men felt, their laments, they resonate with us and they become very powerful.

Now I'm getting a little ahead of myself here, but let me share a second big takeaway before we go any further. In fact, you might say this is the biggest takeaway. If we learn anything from the Bible's laments, this is it.

The lament psalms aren't really about the lamenters. They're not even about the laments themselves.

[12:14] They're about the God who listens to those laments and cares. He listens and cares despite the lamenters' unfaithful doubting at times.

though they question Him, though they question His promises, He remains faithful to His people. He does not leave them.

He does not forsake them. Instead, He brings His mercy to their minds and He renews their hope in Him right in the midst of all of these questions and confusion.

That is why these laments end with praise of God. It's not because the lamenters lamented so well. It's not because their prayers were perfect.

It's because God is good and He is gracious. I read the following quote from Michael Jenkins last week. I'll read it again.

[13:17] He writes, The Psalms of Lament opened to us the greatness of a God who can not only hear but can also handle our pain, our self-pity, our blame, and our fear, who can respond to our anger, our disillusionment in the midst of oppression and persecution under the boot of tyranny and our sense of God-forsakenness in the face of life's most profound alienations and exiles.

now by saying that God can handle what we bring to him in our laments perhaps that passage implies we can say anything we want to God he won't mind he can handle it it may seem to imply that as long as we're being honest with ourselves and with our emotions it's right to say anything no and that's that's a big part of the clarification I'm trying to make yes God can handle anything we bring to him but that's not to say everything we bring in a moment of despair is necessarily right or good you understand what I mean it's not good to be angry with God it's not even good to be fearful it's not good to have doubts yet God is stunningly gracious toward his people as many of the psalms show us he hears our cries despite ourselves and he answers praise God for that now getting back to our outline last week we focused on turning to God in prayer when we suffer again sometimes our honest candid laments may very well betray a degree of of doubt or unfaithfulness but the point remains the best thing we can do is go to God in prayer turn to him for help second we bring him our struggles maybe that goes without saying but

I'm suggesting we be very specific go with me to Psalm 10 I started to read this last week but I'll read it again Psalm 10 the psalmist writes why oh Lord do you stand far away why do you hide yourself in times of trouble and let me stop right there for a moment here's an example of what I was talking about before these questions seem very accusatory don't they toward God obviously we can't really know the author's intention some commentators have suggested he wasn't accusing God of not caring he wasn't accusing God of not helping they said that he was merely reminding God of the optics you know this is how it seems there's a lot of people struggling here he's he's speaking hypothetically if you will on behalf of those who might lack faith as though he's saying Lord it certainly appears that you've hidden yourself

I don't know it seems more likely to me anyhow that he's speaking from pure heartache and frustration and frankly that's the thing to see here in this first verse we're not learning again how best to lament or the proper way to address God that's not what we're learning we're reading an example an example of how people have lamented this has been a historical reality for at least one man we can imagine him witnessing the injustice all around him we can imagine him falling to his

knees in desperation and crying out to God because he feels so utterly helpless Lord where are you he wants to know evidently he knows the promises of God he knows the goodness of God he has the expectation that God should be here doing something to help these people to stop the oppressors but after examining the state of things it appears that doubts have crept into his mind and he begins questioning the Lord

Lord where are you the thing to see here first of all is his desperation and second we see him turning to God where does he go even though he feels that the Lord is far off where does he go he goes to the Lord and third we see him being very specific about his struggles verse 2 in arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised for the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord in the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him all his thoughts are there is no God his ways prosper at all times your judgments are on high out of his sight for all of his foes he puffs at them he says in his heart

[19:01] I shall not be moved throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity his mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression under his tongue are mischief and iniquity he sits in ambush in the villages in hiding places he murders the innocent his eyes stealthily watch for the helpless he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket he lurks that he may seize the poor he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net the helpless are crushed sink down and fall by his might he says in his heart God has forgotten he has hidden his face he will never see it so the psalmist lays out his struggles before God in fact this is what makes his prayer a lament if everything was going right in the world the psalmist wouldn't need to lament of course this psalm is just one example of many approximately one third of the psalms are laments

Charles Spurgeon said of this psalm to the tearful eye of the sufferer the Lord seemed to stand still as if he calmly looked on and did not sympathize with his afflicted one nay more the Lord appeared to be a far off no longer a very present help in trouble but an inaccessible mountain into which no man would be able to climb the presence of God is the joy of his people but any suspicion of his absence is distracting among or beyond measure and that's where the psalmist finds himself distracted beyond measure and that's why he asked why oh Lord do you stand far away why do you hide yourself in times of trouble he's seen the plight of God's people he sees their struggle he sees how proud the wicked are and consequently how terribly oppressive they are toward the poor he seems to indicate that their pride has manifested itself through tyranny their pride has led to the oppression of the poor and he doesn't understand how this can be he's wrestling with that tension between a good and just God and God's apparent lack of action to step in and save his people to punish the wicked in the psalmist's mind the wicked have gone so far as to say to themselves verse 11

God has forgotten he has hidden his face he will never see it this is the wicked speaking in other words they scoff at the very notion that God will ever do anything about it now I trust that you and I know better than to question God's sovereignty or his involvement or his wisdom in a case like this if not I encourage you to read the last few chapters of Job the Lord asked Job where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth in other words how can we possibly question God's sovereignty how can we possibly question his wisdom regarding the affairs of this world that's that's well above our pay grade and yet can't we relate to the psalmist here I can I think I think we can understand his frustration with the circumstances we can understand his deep desire to see the Lord step in quickly to rescue the poor to rescue the downtrodden and to avenge them by punishing the wicked for everything they've done isn't that what we're asking when we pray to the Lord Lord come quickly come quickly we're begging the Lord bring an end to the misery bring an end to the suffering to the injustice save us Lord avenge us even the psalmist is very clear and he's very earnest about what is bothering him right this is not what I would call a generic prayer that's said in passing you know it's not one of those short prayers that go Lord help the needy amen no it's it's more than that it's richer than that in most if not all of the lament psalms we really see a desperate desperate pouring out of these men's hearts before God just emptying themselves of everything that's troubling them and as we read them you know we can really sense their pain we can sense their frustrations if you can imagine that man laying prostrate on the floor as he as he pours out these words we can sense their confusion we can sense their helplessness there's a childlike quality to the laments these are not men who in these moments are displaying the kind of spiritual maturity

Paul did for instance when he said I will boast the more gladly in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me that's not what we hear in the lament psalms you may remember that even Paul pleaded with the Lord three times pleaded with the Lord to remove that thorn that was given him in the flesh whatever that thorn was Paul was desperate to have it removed he did not want it perhaps he lamented over it we don't know but he certainly took his struggle to God he pleaded with the Lord three times and what did God say my grace is sufficient for you my power is made perfect in weakness implied in that your weakness now in Paul's case God's answer to Paul's prayer was not to take away his trouble but to give him the supernatural means to bear it and that is an answer may not have been the one

[25 : 38] Paul was initially looking for but it is an answer and a sufficient one regardless Paul knew where to turn in that moment when he was hurting when he was struggling whatever it was he knew where to turn he knew to whom to turn with his struggles and that is the pattern of the biblical laments that we do want to follow every time we lay our struggles before God now our prayers may be very messy at times I don't know about you but sometimes I find myself rambling because I'm not really sure what to say I don't know maybe you've experienced this sometimes things become a lot clearer as that ramble continues like the lamenters in scripture we may find ourselves speaking out of pain we may find ourselves speaking out of confusion perhaps we find ourselves saying things that we should not say but we can go to the Lord in confidence each and every time that he not only sympathizes with us but that he is so full of grace where better to turn in our childlike helplessness than to our heavenly father where else would we turn however I'll say again that lament does not end with voicing our struggles this is not the totality of what lament is as we see in the Psalms lament is designed to carry us forward not to be stuck in that place forever so step one we turn to God in prayer step two we give him those burdens that we're carrying again Peter says cast your anxieties upon him because he cares for you by doing so by showing our humble dependence upon God we move closer and closer to leaving that complaining phase and toward resolution our lamenting is not the end it's a means to a much better end that's the idea now as for step three the pattern of the lament

Psalms typically shows us lamenters making requests of God we see that here in Psalm 10 verse 12 arise oh Lord oh God lift up your hand forget not the afflicted verse 15 break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer that is stop them from oppressing others call his wickedness to account till you find none in other words the psalmist says Lord intervene help the helpless render the wicked powerless hold them accountable for their sins now I don't think it surprises any of us that the the Bible's lamenters would make requests in their prayers that's a vital part of what prayer is we go to God with our petitions we tell him what we think we need emphasis on the word think because that's that's challenging because we don't always know what we need do we when Paul prayed to have the thorn in his flesh removed

God said no Paul that thorn that's precisely what you need when John Newton prayed for more faith in his hymn I asked the Lord that I might grow he didn't get what he anticipated did he maybe I should say he didn't get it in the way he anticipated at the end of the hymn he says he quotes the Lord who says tis in this way I answer prayers for grace and faith once again though I'll remind you that our prayers they're not always perfect are they we are those helpless children seeking our heavenly father's provision his guidance his help not always knowing exactly what he will deem best for us this is why we amend our prayers with your will be done not my will but your will even Jesus prayed my father if it be possible let this cup pass from me nevertheless not as

I will but as you will someone once confessed to me that he struggled to pray because he felt like prayer was a kind of catch-22 he wanted his prayers to always be in line with God's will but as he told me he didn't know what God's will was always he wasn't sure what God's will would be in a matter so he found himself crippled unable to make any petitions to the Lord and I pointed him to the Lord's prayer in the garden the night before his crucifixion in that case Jesus he knew his father's will yet he still expressed his desire my father let this cup pass from me if it be possible now to be clear Jesus wasn't rebelling against his father's will in fact he is very clearly submissive to his father's will because he says not as I will but as you will now granted Jesus wasn't making a demand of God in that case it's more like a I don't know what you'd call it a hypothetical request yet he still expresses his desire if it be possible let this cup pass from me he effectively says no father I don't want to suffer in this way but I will we petition the Lord in our prayers of lament we make our requests we tell God what we think we need though we may be well aware that we don't know what

we really need and that can become our prayer as well Lord I don't know in Psalm 22 after David asked my God my God why have you forsaken me he continues his prayer by saying in verse 11 be not far from me for trouble is near and there is none to help be not far from me is that a perfect prayer I read a little book on prayer by Alistair Begg a couple of years ago I guess it was and in it he says something about the foolishness of praying Lord be with me or

[32 : 37] Lord be with us I never thought about it before because I'm pretty sure I prayed something similar to that countless times throughout my life without giving it a second thought David prays it in Psalm 22 be not far from me be not far from me Lord well what's wrong with that prayer well on the one hand there's really nothing wrong with it it simply expresses a desire to feel the Lord's presence in most think about it because God already said I will never leave you so when you're asking the Lord to be with you well the Lord already said I'll never leave you we're finite creatures right our prayers are not flawless but as we learn from the Psalms particularly the lament Psalms when men are praying from deep pain and confusion and fears perfection is not really the point when trouble is near and there is none to help as

David said we fall before the throne of grace with all of our imperfections pleading with the one who is perfect for help before I go any further let me also add that we should make our petitions with boldness and by boldness I mean first of all we should make them with clarity as much as possible we make it clear about what we're asking the petition in psalm 10 is pretty clear break the arm of the wicked and evildoer put a stop to them do whatever it takes to render them powerless they're destroying your people there are several ways the psalmist could have prayed that he could have simply said Lord help the afflicted but no he says break the arm of the wicked and evildoer call his wickedness to account till you find none he's seeking more than help for the poor he's seeking justice he wants men held accountable for their evil deeds and by boldness

I also mean we need to make our request as though we believe we're praying to a sovereign God with whom all things are possible do we pray that way think of the story Jesus told of the man who had a visitor show up at midnight and he didn't have any bread to serve this man and so he goes over to his neighbor's house and knocks on the door and what does his neighbor say what are you kidding me don't bother me now I'm in bed my kids are in bed I can't help you I cannot get up to give you anything and Jesus implies that this man because he is so relentless because he won't take no for an answer finally the neighbor gets out of bed gives him the bread he desired and then Jesus says because of his impudence I believe the NIV says shameless audacity because of a shameless audacity he will rise and give him whatever he needs and

I tell you ask and it will be given to you seek and you will find knock and it will be open to you now I've heard it said that we should pound on the door of heaven until we get an answer now I don't know whether or not that's the best way to phrase it but please remember that we do want to pray boldly at the same time always humbly so don't confuse the two boldly yet humbly again Peter says humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God casting all of your anxieties upon him go boldly but humbly go to the Lord believing he can answer your prayers such a simple thing isn't it when I think of bold prayers my mind always goes back to Martin Luther years ago I saved a letter that he had written to a friend and ministry companion I believe his name was Myconius Myconius was very sick and by all appearances he was on his death bed and here's what

Luther wrote to him this is just a passage I command thee in the name of God to live because I still have need of thee in the work of reforming the church the Lord will never let me hear that thou art dead but will permit thee to survive me for this I am praying this is my will and may my will be done because I seek only to glorify the name of God that's bold uncomfortably so granted that's a letter to a friend not his actual prayer but that's the kind of boldness Luther often displayed now I'm not suggesting that we emulate his brashness which often got him into trouble but one thing is clear to me when I read Luther when he prayed he prayed knowing all things are possible with

[38 : 09] God I don't think there was a doubt about it in his mind he didn't rule anything out he didn't assume his friend's illness was too severe for God to restore him quite the opposite this is nothing to God he can rise my friend out of that bed restore his health completely he prayed with a belief that God could very easily restore him to full health he prayed that God would restore him to full health not just could but would and all for his own glory God's own glory and by the way Meconius did get better he actually outlived Luther by two months maybe an even better word to use then boldly would be confidently pray confidently the author of Hebrews said let us then with confidence with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find

grace to help in time of need this is very important when we feel as forlorn as many of the Bible's lamenters felt when we feel helpless perhaps when we feel hopeless it helps to know that we have a God who listens who cares and who is able to answer he's able to do something now having said that I'll also mention something Oswald Chambers once said about prayer he said our prayers are heard not because we are in earnest not because we suffer but because Jesus suffered and that's the heart of all of this that's precisely what the author of Hebrews tells us again he writes in Hebrews 4 since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens Jesus the son of God let us hold fast our confession for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but one who in every respect has been tempted with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find help in time of need our prayers can be heard and answered we can have confidence when we approach God for help because Christ lived righteously because he died for our sins and because he now makes intercession for us that's why God hears our prayers through Christ so we have no reason to be anything less than confident when we who are in Christ turn to God in our suffering the confidence is not in us the confidence is in him I like what George Mueller wrote in his autobiography he said prove the faithfulness of God by carrying your every want to him in other words let God show you just how much he loves you let God show you just how much he cares when facing trials do not remain silent do not turn away from him don't get stuck in the first stages of lament let your request be known ask him for specific help petition him with confidence on the basis of Christ who intercedes for you in those moments as you are praying tell him what you believe you need and you may discover that in his infinite wisdom he knows you need something else altogether but make your requests known petition the Lord I can give you several examples from the Psalms but we're out of time let me just say this is a vital step a vital step in lament because it begins turning us away from our problems to the answer and that's answer with a capital A I'm talking about God himself as we petition God with our specific requests we begin lifting our heads out of the fog bear and we get a much clearer view of the heavenly father we're looking at him as those helpless children saying Lord I need help here's what I need and when we begin to get that better view of the heavenly father what are we reminded of we're reminded that he is sovereign over all of our tragic circumstances he's not powerless as we petition him we're led to think more deeply about who he is and what he's done we begin to think more about what he's capable of doing as well as what he has already promised to do now we're out of time but next week we'll consider the fourth part of the pattern we see in the biblical laments where we move from making requests to God to a renewed trusting God let's pray gracious and loving father we recognize the remarkable privilege that is ours to approach your throne of grace with confidence because of the finished work of [43 : 57] Christ Jesus Lord in times of tribulation I pray we won't be silent or turn away from you embolden us to present our petitions clearly articulating the depths of our hearts and our fears our longings let us not hesitate to ask for your intervention for your guiding hand in our lives leaning on that intercessory grace of Christ yet as we lay our burdens at your feet may we do so with a heart open to your wisdom to your will Lord we acknowledge that your understanding surpasses ours so even as we make our requests known we submit ourselves to your sovereign will trusting that you might sometimes respond with a grace that redirects our desires that changes what we believed we want aligning them with your holy and perfect will and it's in the mighty and precious name of Christ who stands in that gap for us that we pray amen