



This sermon was the first of a two-part sermon series on lament that I preached at my church in 2006. This first sermon focused on Psalms and the second on Lamentations. In this particular worship service, the chorus "As the Deer" was sung and Psalm 77 was read before the sermon. Following the sermon I led the congregation in a lament prayer exercise following the 3-step pattern. Since that time, I have utilized this sermon as a foundation when introducing biblical lament in other congregations and worship settings, appropriately shortening and adjusting it pending the congregation's needs (i.e. mourning their losses/fears in the midst of pastoral transition, etc.) or liturgical calendar (i.e. Lent, Thanksgiving, World Communion Sunday, etc.). Please feel free to use parts of this sermon and adapt for your purposes.

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**"THE GOOD NEWS OF LAMENT: The Psalms Cry Out"
Psalm 77**

INTRODUCTION

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (say it loud) When you hear that cry and if you wanted to find it in the Bible, where would you go to find it? Which person comes to your mind when you hear it? This famous cry of Jesus was uttered before his dying on the cross. And often times we might think, "Wow...this crucifixion event must have really been a big deal if even Jesus hints at the possibility that God may have forsaken him." Or, "Well that is sure some way to talk to God...but since Jesus was God's son and divine, it must be okay for him to say those words, but we mortal humans dare not ever mention such blasphemous words."

The summer of 1998 was difficult for me: Tornadoes ravaged southwestern Pennsylvania destroying most of the existing structures of my boyhood farm; it was painful and exhausting to help my parents pick up the broken pieces of life. A few days later I conducted the graveside service of my 15 year old niece and brother-in-law who died of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning, secondary results of the tornadoes. And in the middle of that whole time of sadness and shock, one of my brothers who had previously been a youth pastor and who had left his wife and three young children, decided that he and his girlfriend would elope...my numb-struck family did not know how to respond. Then, 2 ½ months later I said good-bye to pastoring a church and people whom I loved so that I could do further seminary studies in Elkhart...though I knew the move was a good and right decision and one that I believed God wanted me to do, it still tore me apart; the transition of uprooting myself from one state to another took its toll.

"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." No, not all of these words do we find recorded in the Gospels as Jesus hangs on the cross...but he certainly cries out the first part of verse 1 of Psalm 22, from

which I just read the first two verses. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Have you ever felt like that in life? God seemed no where to be found? God’s voice and comforting presence was no where to be heard and felt? Abandoned and alone, you found no rest.

PSALM 77

Let’s take a closer look at Psalm 77. In this Psalm it is obvious that the author is in pain...the author is wrestling...the author feels that God is distant and unmoving in his life. *“I cry aloud to God, aloud to God that he may hear me. 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. I think of God, and I moan.”* Have you ever felt this way...that God was distant...that there was some sort of chasm between you and God that even the mere thought of God caused you pain? However, the chasm was NOT there because you did anything wrong or committed some heinous sin, but because life happened...you had your day of trouble.

There is more that I could tell you about that summer in 1998, but the point I wish to make is that by the time I moved to Elkhart in early September my soul had been zapped...I was spent. I cried out to God often...but I discovered that as I lived those days of my trouble, even thinking about God pained me greatly. I thought of God and I moaned. I was so troubled that I could not speak. I felt the furthest away from God as I ever did in life, NOT because I did anything wrong...BUT because life happened. However, even though I felt this great chasm between God and me, I also ironically felt the closest to God in my life. Quite a paradox...far away, yet near at hand.

Both Psalm 77 that was read and Psalm 22 that Jesus had quoted, are examples of Psalms of lament. Did you know that of the 150 psalms found in the Book of Psalms that between one-third and one-half are considered laments? These psalms far outnumber those of praise, thanksgiving, creation, and penitence. Later in life as I learned more about biblical lament and realized the powerful, gut-wrenching honesty found in such prayers, I wondered why I was never really taught to pray in this manner growing up. Why did it seem that I was led more to the psalms of praise and thanksgiving, and rarely, if ever, to those of lament? Did my faith community fear that lightening bolts may zap us if we talked this way to God? Did we think it sinful to accuse God of ever doing anything that may appear to be “un-God-like” or harmful?

These prayers are not mere complaints of a person or a people who have no relationship with God, but they actually demonstrate a deep commitment to that connection with God. God invites them to say anything and everything to God. Verses 7-9 of Psalm 77: *“Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”* Though this Psalm itself doesn’t give us specific clues as to what caused the author’s struggles...his “day of trouble”...in some ways it doesn’t matter because these prayers invite us to consider our own days of trouble, our own times of feeling



that God is distant, unloving, or allowing trouble to befall us...and then to honestly express ourselves to God.

PSALMS OF ORIENTATION, DISORIENTATION, AND NEW ORIENTATION

The lament psalms can be considered a type of “psalm of disorientation,” according to Walter Brueggemann, a well-respected Old Testament scholar. If you look in your church bulletins I have included an insert that describes three broad-sweeping categories of Psalms – those of Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation. The psalms of Orientation express a confident, serene settlement on faith issues, and describe a happy view that God is trustworthy and reliable. Some types of Orientation Psalms include those of creation, law, wisdom, and well-being. In other words, the authors of these prayers were at a good place in life...all was going well and smooth...they had no faith crises or struggles...and it would be very easy to say, “Well, so long as we attend to our relationship with God, then all will be well.” And you know what, this type of attitude and posture may work in life, UNTIL...

...something happens that causes some level of disorientation about life or faith. The psalms of disorientation recognize that life is savagely marked by incoherence, a loss of balance, and unrelieved asymmetry. In other words, life is not all full of sunshine and daffodils...life may throw some fairly tough curveballs.

And finally, Brueggemann describes a third category of psalms, those of New Orientation, which include those of personal and communal thanksgiving, trust in God, and hymns of praise. But the difference between these psalms and those of the older Orientation is that the person has now come through a time of disorientation, and therefore the prayers of thanksgiving and praise have a much deeper aspect to it.

You know, it’s kinda like singing “Jesus Loves Me.” Many of us are taught that song as children and we believe it because “the Bible tells me so.” But then perhaps later in life we go through an experience when our friends don’t like us or we aren’t liking ourselves that much, and so we begin to question whether Jesus actually loves me or not...afterall, aren’t we taught to believe that we are wretched sinners. But then something wonderful happens and my friends like me again or I may feel better about myself or I may have experienced the grace of a forgiving God. So then singing “Jesus Loves Me” takes on a new and deeper meaning.

LAMENT STRUCTURE

Earlier in this service we sang “As the deer” ...it’s a favorite song of mine and the image of a deer literally takes me back to the days following our tornado-destroyed farm. But did you realize that this song comes from Psalm 42 which is a lament psalm? Listen to verses 9 and 10 of Psalm 42: *“I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?’ As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”*

Even though this Psalm references the fact that the author has some very real enemies that are out to get him, this is not the point of his prayer...THE POINT is that he feels that God has forgotten him...that God has abandoned him and that something has gone awry in the relationship between he and God. And as the author's enemies taunt him by saying "Where is your God?" he too begins to question, "Yes, where is my God in all this?"

Sometimes the psalms of lament are even more blunt with God and simply accuse God of wrong-doing. Listen to the opening of Psalm 74: *"O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?"* Listen to the opening of Psalm 60: *"O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; now restore us! You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open; repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering. You have made your people suffer hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us reel."* Wow! Dare we even think of singing such words in our church today?

Now, let's get back to Psalm 77 again to take a closer look at its remaining verses. The psalm does not end with all those questions of God in verse 9, but it moves forward quite profoundly. Verse 10 and following: *"And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed. I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old."* Verse 10 starts off with what I like to call, "The Holy but." Now in your Bibles the first word in verse 10 is probably "And," just like I have read. However, in ancient Hebrew they didn't necessarily have a word for "and," but instead there was a letter of the Hebrew alphabet that was attached to the front of the word as a prefix, and that letter was the "vav." And, that prefix letter could be translated, depending on the context, as either "and" or "but" or even "yet" or "however."

Well, rather than me suggest that the verse needs to be translated as "But I say..." just know it's possible to translate it this way. The real point that I want you to know about this: a key characteristic of lament psalms is that most have a pivotal turn or transformative moment where after they get done complaining to God, venting their raw emotions, or even accusing God of wrong-doing or neglect, there is movement out of this despair. There is a significant moment when the psalmist either pulls the bed covers off himself and gets out of the bed of depression, or is even helped out of the bed by God. This pivotal, transformative turn is often indicated by this particular Hebrew letter – The Holy But.

In some other ways, I prefer to think that using the word "but" better demonstrates the significant turn because the word "and" often connotes a continued course of action or continued storyline. BUT, the reality is that there is a distinct and noticeable turn in the storyline...no longer is the psalmist complaining, venting, or accusing, BUT they begin to remember a time when God was good. And in Psalm 77 we can read that the remainder of this prayer includes recalling the mighty works of God...the times when God saved God's people. And once people can begin to remember the specific ways that God has been involved in their lives, then God doesn't feel so distant anymore and soon the psalmist



begins to praise God once again. Verses 13 and 14 offer a type of praise to God: *“Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the one who works wonders...”*

Yes, there seems to be a purposeful form and flow to lament psalms. They are not mere complaints expressed to an uninvolved God, but instead they are powerful prayers of fidelity and faithfulness. They are prayers of deep intimacy between God and God’s people...an intimacy that invites authentic words and emotions to be expressed in some of the most raw and vivid ways possible. They are prayers that grant permission to grieve and protest. They are prayers that prepare the way for new understandings of God. They are prayers that promote solidarity with those who suffer. They are prayers that lead to a new orientation.

To me, these are some of the richest and deepest expressions of prayer found in the Bible. They often end with a resounding joy and praise but ONLY because they have known sorrow and deep despair. They are prayers that exude a deep trust in God’s faithfulness, but ONLY because they have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. These were the prayers of the stuff of life, and probably explains why they are the largest group of psalms. These were the prayers that invited us to engage God with some of the harsh realities of life rather than escape it.

As I have now been involved in some form of pastoral ministry for the past twelve years of my life, I get concerned that we in the church rush people to praise God without truly acknowledging some of the rougher and painful aspects of life. And if we did that over and over, I believe that this type of praise without acknowledging some of our raw emotions can lead to a form of escapism and denial. We somehow think that if we only praised God more, then all will be better. And then if nothing changes we guilt ourselves into praising God more and more...and so the vicious cycle continues to the point where “praise” might function like a harmful drug that offers a “false high” and enables us to escape the realities of life.

Now, before you think that I am suggesting that we should never praise God or sing songs and hymns of praise, that is not at all what I am inferring because I do believe it is right and necessary to praise God. But what I am suggesting is that there are certain types of deep and sincere praise that only stems from bringing to God the “not-so-praiseful” aspects of life. And if we are honest with ourselves and with God, those disoriented times of life can only lead to a new orientation if we acknowledge the truth of our situation. The lament psalms seem to indicate that “the Holy but” cannot happen until AFTER we honestly express ourselves to God.

THE FLOW OF LAMENT

On your bulletin insert I have suggested a 3-step flow or movement that portrays many of the biblical laments....and in a few minutes, each of you will have opportunity to offer your own 3-step prayer of lament. The first act or step of lament is to argue with God



and let yourself be angry by pouring out your raw feelings to God. Then, you'll recall a time when God has been good...a time when God's help in the past carried you through. Then finally, you'll move into a time of praising God and telling God, "Thanks!"

Now, I do have one word of caution and one word of grace before concluding this sermon. Engaging in biblical lament in this 3-step manner should not be treated as a magic formula so that we feel better in life and deny our true struggles. The reality is that for many of us it may be extremely difficult to pour out our raw emotions of anger and despair the one minute, and then the next minute offer some sort of wonderful praise to God.

One of the graces that I receive from these lament psalms is that we do not know how long it took the psalmists to write their prayers. Perhaps they were able to sit down in one 10 minute span and go from raw pain to remembrance to praise...BUT, it's also possible to consider that the laments took weeks or months or years to write. Maybe the author wrote Act 1...then set it aside for several weeks or months before ever being in a position to begin to remember God's faithfulness to them in the past. Then after composing Act 2, perhaps they set aside this prayer for days or months before ever being able to honestly and genuinely offer praises up to God.

One of the disservices that I have experienced at times in my growing up is that sometimes we expect people to simply "get over their grief" and rush to praise. Or, we may get messages like, "If you praise God more, then all your troubles will go away." Or we may be told, "Your grief and despair is a sign that you are not right with God." I believe that biblical lament shows us the fallacy of such unhelpful attitudes and counsel, but invites an explicitly raw connection to God.

CONCLUSION

Before we enter into a time of prayer, I do want to acknowledge a unique psalm of lament...it's Psalm 88. This psalm does not end in praise and therefore does not follow the 3-step pattern of lament...the psalmist remains in despair and kinda leaves us hanging. I am grateful this psalm exists in our Bibles. And next week as we continue this brief exploration into the Good News of Lament, we will take a look at a book in the Bible that also appears to leave us hanging. In the holy words of Lamentations, the author rails against God over and over and over...5 chapters worth! But the other interesting reality of this book is that God never speaks...God does not rebuke the author or tell him to take his pity party elsewhere. God does not say, "Oh, trust in me and all will be well." No, God does not speak...ever...in this book. But I will share more next week about this fascinating behavior of God.

PRAYER OF LAMENT

After next week's sermon there will be opportunity for you to be anointed. But today as a response to the sermon, you will now engage in your own prayer of lament. Please turn to the bulletin insert that describes the 3-step flow. As we enter into this time of prayer, a song will be played on the piano as you simply pray through the 3 steps in your own words.



We won't take a long time to do this...just a few minutes...so you may want to move through each of the steps in a concise manner. However, if you find yourself wanting to stay in one of the acts and not move onto the next step, that's okay...stay there. I will then conclude our time of prayer.