

Psalm 13 (How to Lament)

Scripture Reading | Psalm 13

Sermon | “The Great Value of Lament”

INTRODUCTION

So we're going to talk about lament, this morning. I'm sure many of us have heard the word before. But I wonder: How many of us, know what it is? And how many of us know how to DO it?

A DEFINITION

Let's start with a definition, all right? The dictionary defines lament, like this: “Lament” is: “A passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” And that's a good place to START: “Lament” is: “A passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” But when we look at the Bible, we see one very important piece added to this: In the Bible, this passionate expression of GRIEF... is always directed to God.

So lament: Is a CRY to God, from out of your sorrow.

And sometimes a lament in the Bible is PRIVATE. But lament was also often, COMMUNAL.

Now LAMENT, has largely fallen out of practice, in our day, and in our culture. But do you know that over one THIRD of the Psalms, are songs of lament? The book of JOB, is FULL of lament. LAMENTATIONS(!), (the book): Contains exactly what its title TELLS us: lament. The prophets, (in the Old Testament), are CONTINUALLY, LAMENTING.

But these Psalms, and these books, are some of the LEAST POPULAR parts of the Bible today. And perhaps it's because we really don't know what to DO, with them. Because we don't know what LAMENT is. And so they don't resonate with us.

And all of this is to our DETRIMENT. Because lament is a God-given, biblical way, to deal with our pain and sorrow, and our experiences of injustice in life.

Now: Middle eastern culture, in the Bible, (and as I understand it, still today), is far more OPEN, in expressing their feelings. But WESTERN style churches, (and conservative Reformed churches): We can be so PRIVATE, in comparison. And we're NOT so comfortable expressing our emotions. We're much better at BURYING them. And HIDING them. ESPECIALLY when it comes to religion, (and our relationship with God).

But what I want us to learn this morning, is that LAMENT is a GIFT, that God gives us—and teaches us—to help us express our grief. And to help us work—FROM our grief—towards a place of TRUST and HOPE.

So it would do us GOOD, if we could RECOVER, the grace of lament. LAMENT, is powerful. It's meant to be a PART of the Christian experience. And our soul LONGS for it, (even if we're afraid to DO it). Because we are made, BY God, to express our emotions. In a good and RIGHT way. And lament is one of those WAYS.

And I would argue: Not only the home, but the church need to be place where we can learn to lament. And a place, where we feel FREE, to LAMENT.

I'm calling this sermon, “The Great Value of Lament.” So let me list some of the benefits. Here's a quick list of reasons why we need lament:

1. Lament is modeled for us in the Bible
2. Lament is such a large PART of the Bible, and so learning lament helps us to UNDERSTAND, this large part of the Bible
3. Lament enables us to express our emotions in a healthy way. Keeping our emotions bottled inside, can be very UN-healthy, physically, emotionally, AND spiritually; and can lead to sinful responses. But even just the EXPRESSION, of our emotions can be cathartic, (helpful). And lament allows us to do that.

4. Lament is often communal, and so it brings us together; and allows us to weep with those who weep; and to comfort and encourage one another
5. Hearing OTHERS lament, teaches us that we are not ALONE in OUR pain and sorrow; which can ALSO be of GREAT encouragement to us.
6. Lament is ultimately a prayer to God: And God not only CALLS us to pray, and to cast all of our anxieties upon Him, but: He is a God who ANSWERS prayer
7. Lament turns us TO God, in the midst of our pain. It admits: No, we don't have all the answers. And yes: There is pain and sorrow. BUT(!): I'm going to God with my complaint.
8. And finally: Lament is a path—a bridge—between our pain, and learning how to come to a joyful response, IN our suffering. Pastor Mark Vroegop puts it like this: "Lament is a divinely-given liturgy for processing our pain so that we can rejoice. Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust. It is not only how Christians GRIEVE; it's the way Christians praise God THROUGH their sorrows. Lament is a pathway to praise when life gets hard."

For those 8 reasons—and MORE—lament is good for us.

So(!) let's begin: One third of the Psalms, are Psalms of lament: How many of them do you know?

We're going to go through one of them, this morning: Psalm 13.

Now scholars have identified 3—and some, all the way up to 8 distinct elements—to lament. But I want to get to the very basic level of lament, as possible: So I'm going to go with the THREE elements-to-lament view. We could also call them: The three STEPS of laments. And we see these three here in Psalm 13.

1. WE CRY

The FIRST step, is this: The CRY. CRY. When God's people lament, in the Bible: They always begin, by CRYING OUT, to God. Some of them come with literal tears; some of them don't—and the REASON for their lament varies: From sin, to loss, to enemies,

to injustice, and more. But ALL of them come with REAL pain to God.

Here in Psalm 13, the CRY, is in the first two Verses: "How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?"

There are four questions here. Each beginning with this question: "How long?" "God, You've FORGOTTEN me." "God, You're HIDING from me." "God, I have SO much anxiety!" "God, my enemies—people—are hurting me." "How LONG?!" "YOU are not HELPING! How LONG?!"

Lament has this cry. This cry is often called a complaint. And often: The complaint comes when—what is happening in their life, doesn't seem to line up with who God is, in His character.

Like Psalm 77, "My soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints ... has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut out His tender mercies?" Right? GRACE is missing. MERCY is missing. Do you hear the CRY? The pain?

Now here's the problem: We can be, very uncomfortable with this. We don't want to hear someone talk about their pain. And we don't feel right doing it OURSELVES: And so we can respond with one or two wrong ways. Right? These are NOT good responses... but we so often have them, (either one, or BOTH of them):

WE NEED TO BE HAPPY

One: When we hear someone talk like this, the first thing we do, is try to cheer them up. We want to move to rejoicing—as quick as we can. And we say things like, "Well hopefully it will get better soon." Or, "You have to trust in God." And I'VE probably said these things. But these are not often the right response, to the situation. For one: It implies that this

CRY, (this complaint), means we're NOT trusting in God. And that simply is NOT true, every single time.

God's people, in the Bible, (in lament), take the time to let all the pain and anger out. And we need to recognize this. And we need to allow ourselves, to linger here.

Michael Card writes: "Tears are often being wiped away now before ANYONE has a chance to weep." Jeremiah in Lamentations Chapter 3, takes the time to grieve. He says: "The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss."

So that's one wrong response, to this cry (this complaint): This feeling that: We need to move on, and quickly. We need to cheer ourselves—or we need to cheer this person up. We need to HELP them. Well often, the WAY to REALLY help? Is to sit with them in their sorrow. Allow them the opportunity to express their grief, without judgement. And be patient.

THIS IS SIN

Now here's the second wrong response we can have: We can think, that expressing these emotions, are sinful. If we were to hear someone speak out loud, the same words that a third of the Psalms use, many of us might believe they're sinning.

But they're the words of God's people in Scripture. And they're INSPIRED Scripture.

In his book, "A Praying Life," Paul Miller addresses just this. He says: "We think laments are disrespectful. God says the opposite. Lamenting shows you are engaged with God in a vibrant, living faith. We live in a deeply broken world. If the pieces of our world aren't breaking your heart and you aren't in God's face about them, then ...you've thrown in the towel."

Now lament, is not just crying out in anger and frustration: It's crying out and complaining: to GOD. It's being open and honest to God. It's baring your soul to the one who MADE your soul.

Do you know where we turn, if we have no way to express our pain? Emotionally: We turn to bitterness or anger. PHYSICALLY: We turn to alcohol or drugs; or food. Or suicide. But the Bible offers a different way: Lament. CRY out to God. Be honest. And cry out with others, who LOVE you, to God. "Bring all of your anxieties to God, because He cares for you."

What if we were a place where people were open—where we felt free—to turn to one another—and to God—INSTEAD of turning to the bottle. And He would hear our CRY!

You know what biblical lament tells you? It tells you: It's okay, to acknowledge your pain. It's okay, to give voice to your sorrow. Or your fear.

It's okay. In fact: It's MORE than okay: It's biblical.

Do we know how to cry out, to God? How many of your prayers, in your life, have sounded like this, (these are just taken from some of the Psalms): "How long, O Lord will you utterly forget me?" Or: "Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off? Why do You hide in times of distress?" Or have you ever prayed like this: "O my God, I cry out by day, and You do not answer; by night, and there is no relief for me."

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!" "My soul ... is utterly terrified; but you, O Lord, how long..." How long.

It's okay. The BIBLE gives us permission, to speak like this. God INVITES us to cry to Him. He invites us to QUESTION: "God where ARE you? God, how can this HAPPEN?"

So the Psalm writer cries out to God. And, (in this case), tells Him his frustration: "How long?"

2. WE ASK

So that's the first step: We CRY, to God. Here's the SECOND step in lament: We ASK. We CRY and then when we're DONE crying—or in the MIDST of our crying: We ask—GOD—for help.

Tabletalk magazine writes this: “The psalmists then ASK for help. They beg God to rescue them. They ask for relief from their pain. They ask for help and salvation. Whatever their needs are, they ask God to step in and provide for them” And this is what we read in Verses 3 and 4. After crying “how long,” David now asks: “Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; Enlighten my eyes, (give light to my eyes), Lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed against him”; Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.”

So LAMENT... is NOT despair. Lament is NOT despair. Despair cries out: And concludes there is no hope. But LAMENT, (as someone put it), cries out and: “invites us to DARE to hope in God’s promises as we ask for His help.”

We ASK. We PLEAD. And we KEEP asking. In the ASKING step: Lament calls upon God to be true to His own character, and to keep His own promises

Now, a few things: We don’t RUSH ourselves—(or someone else)—into this step. Some of the Bible characters cried and cried: And they cried until they had no tears left to cry. And THEN they were able to move and ask for help. So again: It’s a process, of the heart.

And neither is there anything FANCY, or profound, that you have to say here—in your prayer—as you ask. This is true in GENERAL for prayer—which should be simple. But especially in lament: At this point, you are really still, in the midst of your crying—or you’ve just BEEN crying, and you have NO strength left: And it just might be a whisper. A couple words “*God, help.*” And you ask: Because you know: God is a HELPER!

Do you know that the Lord JESUS lamented? And we HAVE His lament written down for us. Do you know WHERE? Well there are SEVERAL. But one I’m thinking of: Is Psalm 22. The only part of Psalm 22, that we hear Him say audibly, on the cross, is when He cried out: “My God, My God: Why have You forsaken Me?” (Psalm 22, Verse 1). But the rest of the lament that He prayed, is there. In Psalm 22.

In Psalm 22, Jesus’ CRY, continues until Verse 10. And then we have a moment, (in Verse 11), where He stops: And He turns, and ASKS His Father for help. He prays: “Do not be far from Me, For trouble is near; For there is none to help.”

But THEN(!): In Verses 12-18, He goes BACK into crying out and bringing His complaint to God. And that happens too: In step 2, we can often move back to step 1.

But then He returns again, to asking for help, in Verse 19. And He leaves His complaint behind. But His asking, is SIMPLE. And He uses (he REPEATS) the exact same simple words as He prayed in Verse 11: “But You, O LORD, do not be far from Me.” This should be of great encouragement for us, for when we can BARELY find the words to pray. You may know: If this simple prayer was good enough for the Lord Jesus: It is good enough for you.

Ask God for help.

Mark Vreogop, writes: “To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.” Because lament asks God for help.

And this is a way WE can help those who are in pain: First, when they cry: Sit with them. And listen. But also, (when they’re ready): PRAY with them. Don’t rush to cheer them up. Certainly DON’T give them false assurances that you DON’T have, that everything will be okay. But also (if you can): Don’t JUST say, “I WILL be praying for you.” But ask, “Can I pray WITH you? Here.” Praying FOR someone is good. But a person in pain might NEED to HEAR someone pray for them.

And pray simple: Ask: “Lord help.” Or: “Lord come near and save.” Psalm 13: “God, consider and HEAR.” Psalm 10: “God, lift up Your hand.” Psalm 71, “God help me quickly.” Psalm 22, “Do not be afar!”

Asking—in our lament, (or hearing someone else ask God for help on our behalf), strengthens our resolve, to not give up. In our doubts, it keeps us from despair. We will, at times, experience God’s absence; we will, at times, feel alone and confused; and we will, at times, doubt. Even the Apostle Paul tells us (2

Corinthians 4:8), that he was, “perplexed, but not driven to despair.” And even the ACT of asking, itself, can be a LIFELINE.

And if YOU grab it yourself—or someone else puts your hand to it—it matters not. Only that you come to have HOLD of it.

And the remarkable thing, as New Testament Christians, is that behind these short prayers, and simple words: There’s SO much more. Behind these short prayers of faith, for the Christian, is the understanding of what God did, in Jesus, to save us from our sin, and to redeem us from our pain. We’re not just calling upon GOD: We’re calling upon a God who loves us, and who has given His life to SAVE us. And who’s defeated sin for us.

And so even in our short, tear-filled, prayers, the gospel is being brought to our mind. The Lord JESUS is spoken to us. Reminding us: God CAN. And God CARES.

Mark Vroegop says, “This turning to God in the midst of our pain, is incredibly significant. Because to lament—with ALL of its messy struggles; and with all of its tough questions: Is ACTUALLY an act of FAITH, where you: Open your heart, to God—while you are still filled with FEAR; with DOUBTS; with questions.”

Alright: That’s step 2. Though it’s not always linear. Sometimes you go back to step one, and then on to step 2 again. But there IS a progression nonetheless, IN lament: From CRYING, to ASKING.

3. TRUST

And now here’s step 3: TRUST. Cry, Ask: And then there’s TRUST.

And THIS is where lament aims to bring us. And what we see—again, and again, and again—in the Bible—is that lament ends HERE. With a confession of TRUST in God.

In Psalm 13, this is how the Psalm ends—in Verse 5 and 6, (notice how the Psalm turns, on the word,

“but”): “But I have trusted in Your mercy; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, Because He has dealt bountifully to me.”

Now here’s the thing: When we’re reading laments, in the Bible, this PIVOT—from crying and asking... to TRUSTING—and even to PRAISING and REJOICING—can seem very abrupt. And even strange.

It’s led some critical scholars, (liberal theologians), to conclude that some of these laments are written by two or more different people. Because the tone is so different—from the beginning to END. So someone ELSE must have written the ending, they conclude.

And we would disagree with that. Scripture says DAVID wrote Psalm 13: Not David, and someone else who wanted to add a happy ending to what they thought was a depressing Psalm. This is the same writer.

But yet: The change in mood IS very abrupt. And startling.

But it’s very important that we RECOGNIZE that this IS the same author. David—who wrote verses 1 through 4, ALSO wrote verses 5 and 6. And it’s important that we SEE this, because this tells us that if verses one through FOUR are OUR feelings... then verses 5 and 6 can be our feelings TOO!

That we TOO, can turn, from pain, and questions, to trust and praise.

This third step—of trusting—is part of lament, just as much as the crying and pleading are.

But yet how do we explain the abrupt change?

Well there are two answers: One: While the three steps of lament ARE chronological, (that is: there is a progression from step 1, to step 2; then to step 3): While the three steps of lament ARE chronological: They are rarely—if EVER—INSTANT.

We can READ this Psalm through in one sitting: But in real time, in David’s life, the working of this

lament would have taken days; or weeks; or perhaps even months.

Christina Fox, in *Tabletalk* magazine, writes: “We might wonder, how do the psalmists go from feeling as though their lives are ending to praising God? The laments do not take place in real time. Before writing, the psalmists have gone through a journey of wrestling with their thoughts and emotions, of crying out to God over and over, and of reminding themselves of the truth. And in so doing, they respond in trust and praise God: Like in Psalm 86:12: “I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.”

So that's one answer: It's instant as we READ it. But how long was it, for David, between his crying and his asking—and then his trusting? We don't know.

But here's the second explanation for this sudden change from crying and asking, to trusting in God: God answers our prayer. Simple as that. God answers our prayer. And He HELPS. He HEARS us. And He COMES to us.

And when He comes to us: Sometimes He changes our circumstances, and sometimes He doesn't. But in biblical laments, this is what we see always see—over-and-over again: The one lamenting is lead THROUGH their sorrows, and into a place where—having handed it all over to Him—they TRUST God; and PRAISE Him. And even some: rejoice.

Mark Vreogop writes: “It is a powerful ending to blunt and honest (laments). Every lament is designed to become this kind of pathway to praise. This minor-key song expresses the full range of human emotions so that we draw the right conclusion: “Hard is hard, but hard is not bad”... Throughout the laments, the writers often reference God's character, His past acts of salvation, His power and wisdom, His love and faithfulness. As the psalmists cry out to God—and remember who God is and what He has done—they end their laments with a response of trust, praise, and worship.”

And to that I would add: It's not just that they END there. It's that God BRINGS us there.

And if you're hurting, God can bring you there. You don't have to bring yourself there. You throw yourself upon God, in all your messy pain and frustration: And He will bring you there.

And He can bring you there, because one day, long ago, He brought His Son there. His Son who suffered a greater pain than you or I will ever have to suffer. And as He hung on the cross, Jesus, CRIED out to God. And He asked His Father to save Him. And His Father heard His prayer. And though He needed to suffer these things for a while, after three days, God raised Him from the dead. And restored unto Him—not only His life—but His JOY. And then Jesus says to God, through Psalm 22:21: “You have answered Me.” And the Psalm ends with Him PRAISING God the Father, over and over again. With this declaration: That OTHERS will praise Him as well.

This is the pattern for OUR suffering. Without Jesus experiencing that, our suffering and pain would have no end. But because He suffered—we may know that OUR suffering (for all who come to Him)—will end like His. With worship and praise. And yes—even one day—with us raised to new life, and fullness of joy, in the presence of God, our Savior.

CONCLUSION

Part of the reason we have times of corporate worship, is to remind ourselves—in a world of pain and sorrow that we ALL experience: That the Bible is true. That Jesus is alive. And one day, sorrows and suffering, will be no more. Because of Him.

That's lament: Cry, ask, trust. CRY to God. ASK God. TRUST in God.

Mark Vreogop, once again, ends like this: “So friend: Come to Jesus with your pain. Open your heart again, and start talking to God about what is going on in your life. Be assured He LOVES you: He CARES for you. Despite how hard life can be.”

“Walk with your friend who is hurting. Join him or her, in their pain. And in our lament, let us help one another learn how to trust.”

“Lament, is a grace. A sweet grace. A HARD grace.
It’s a prayer, in pain, that leads to trust. And there is
grace for those who discover, how to sing this minor-
key note.”

Let us pray