

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Missiology Group



Responding to Pain and Suffering:

Mission and Lament



Pain and Suffering in the Psalms

Heather Major, reflects

***“How long O LORD?! Will you forget me forever?!
How long will you hide your face from me?!
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts?
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?!”***

Does any of this sound familiar?

In Psalm 13 the psalmist cries out to God in the midst of overwhelming circumstances, wondering where God is and how long the situation is going to last. He laments his circumstances and demands God’s attention and intervention. He is clear that there is nothing he can do under his own strength, he is entirely dependent on God and the psalm concludes with a declaration of trust and praise.

This psalm could have been written today.

Nearly a third of the psalms can be classified as ‘lament’ psalms where the psalmists cry out to God in complaint and protest. They express frustration and grief, sorrow and pain. They use brutally honest

phrases and metaphors and do not pull their punches in accusing God of neglect and failing to act according to his character. At its most basic, the act of lamenting is about voicing distress and suffering. It acknowledges the painful reality of life as we experience it day-by-day. But, it does not stop with pain and frustration. Rather it offers a perspective on the present reality and looks forward in hope, while affirming God’s character and ability to respond to the situation.

They are uncomfortable to read, but they also echo the cry of our hearts as we try to find God in the middle of overwhelming chaos. There is something liberating about reading and praying the psalms, knowing that the psalmists experienced the same range of human emotions that we experience today. Biblical lament is the honest reflection of human experience in relationship with God, reflecting the complexity of present reality and the author’s understanding of the character of God.

The Need for Lament

Over the past thirty years theologians have been engaging with lament and writing about the need to restore lament in churches.¹ In 1986, Walter Brueggemann wrote about “The Costly Loss of Lament”, challenging churches to recover a practice of lament in their public and private worship or find themselves suffering from “*psychological inauthenticity and social immobility.*”² Prayer and worship without lament become superficial at best, failing to engage with the reality of life and alienating people who are struggling. This can be particularly pronounced in white-majority evangelical churches which have prioritised the celebration of endurance and perseverance, accepting trials and hardships with resignation rather than protest. This is not the pattern we see in the lament psalms. The psalms found in the Bible offer a dynamic vocabulary for articulating the vast range of human emotional responses to life in all its chaos, yet for many they remain an untapped resource.

The lament psalms offer us a framework for honestly expressing our responses to the world around us. They affirm the importance of articulating and naming the realities of our situations and our emotions. Until we name hurts and pains and griefs, giving voice to them and opening them up instead of hiding them, they fester rather than healing. From a Christian perspective, failing to honestly engage with pain, suffering and frustration undermines our relationship with God and understanding of God’s character.

In the words of Glenn Pemberton, ‘We must restore lament, if for no other reason than language is the soil in which relationships grow. Soil too shallow to permit the harsh honesty and intensity of lament will never hold when the winds blow and the storms let loose their vengeance –when we desperately need language and relationship with the LORD to survive the night.’³

¹ Some examples of collected essays and articles include: Brown, Sally A., and Patrick D. Miller, eds. *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (1st ed.; Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Harper, G. Geoffrey and Kit Barker, eds. *Finding Lost Words: The Church’s Right to Lament* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017). Three help resources are; <https://thegoodgriefproject.co.uk>, <https://www.lossandhope.org> & <https://www.ataloss.org>

² Walter Brueggemann, ‘The Costly Loss of Lament’, republished in Patrick D. Miller, ed. *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 111. Emphasis original.

³ Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament*, 193.

⁴ Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again* (ACU Press, 2014), 69.

The Liminality of Lament

Lament is important because it is liminal: marking the threshold or transition time between two things. In Glenn Pemberton’s book *After Lament* (2014), he emphasises the fact that lament is the means to an end rather than the end itself.⁴ While it is essential to offer people a vocabulary and framework to express the depth of their pain and suffering, it is also important to walk alongside people through the journey of pain towards trust and hope. Biblical lament offers guidance for both.

Lament is brutally honest, giving vent to the rich and varied fullness of human emotion, but it is grounded in a confidence that God can, and does, intervene in human history, based in God’s character and covenantal promises. There is a place for quiet contentment and trust in the One who holds all of human history and still weeps over the death of a friend, even though Jesus knew he would raise him from the dead (John 11:35).

Using Lament in Mission

So how could lament serve mission?

Lament is a missional tool that enables Christians to engage in the messy realities of people’s lives while pointing them to the One who gives peace and hope.

Many people are struggling to make sense of a world in which there is pain and suffering. As we deal with the ongoing tension and uncertainty around Covid-19, Brexit, the climate crisis and widespread injustice, it is clear that humankind is unable to ‘fix’ the world. It is overwhelming and exhausting, contributing to high burnout rates, particularly among those in caring professions or those involved in ministry. Alongside the visible disruption caused by Covid-19, there is an invisible tsunami of declining

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

mental health among people from all backgrounds and experiences. Many people have been overwhelmed by circumstances, unable to weep over lost loved ones or missed opportunities, battling on with a ‘stiff upper lip’ or putting on a ‘happy face’ in order to carry on.

As we continue to wrestle with the impact of Covid-19, there is an opportunity for churches to provide spaces where people can be vulnerable, expressing their pain, frustration and anger. Rather than trying to ‘fix’ the situation, churches and individual Christians can affirm the validity of emotional responses to the world we live in by sitting with people in their pain and encouraging them to engage in lament. *(This may require addressing any overarching narrative of celebration or joyful*

*perseverance that marginalises the voices and experiences of suffering and distress).*⁵ The biblical laments offer a vocabulary for articulating emotions and directing them towards the One who is capable of offering peace.

If Christian churches adopt biblical lament as a model for mission and restoring healthy relationships between people and God, then there is no place for false professions of celebration or satisfaction when life is not going well.

Life is messy. How will we deal with it? Perhaps it is time to try lament.

⁵ Carl Trueman addresses this vital question in his chapter ‘What can Miserable Christians Sing?’ in *The Wages of Spin: Critical Writings on Historic and Contemporary Evangelicalism*, (Fearn: Mentor, 2004), 157-63.

Lament Exercise

Write and/or pray a lamentation.

Here is a template, adapted from the structure provided by John Swinton (*Raging with Compassion*, 127-128, adapted from Anne Weems) and used by Carla Grosch Miller to help you:

You may want to use this guide or use a psalm as model – Psalm 13 is a nice short one.

Key Elements of Lament

(They can appear in whatever order you feel necessary, or as many times as you feel necessary – Remember, Lament is about honestly articulating your pain, frustration, grief, etc. and that will look different for each person.):

1

Address God

Use any names or titles that you are comfortable using or express qualities of God's character that relate to the thing you are praying about.

(You can use more than one, or even repeat them multiple times.)

2

Make your complaints

Give voice to what you are dealing with and be detailed.
(You may want to use your experience of the pandemic as a starting place.)

What has happened? Who is hurting and why? Whose fault is it? How are you feeling about it?

This may include an expression of confession or penitence. Give God the full range and blast of your anger, hurt, fear, frustration, etc. (God is big enough to handle it and is not afraid of your doubt/anger/pain and messiness.)

3

Make your appeal or petition

What do you want God to do?
What is your hope/expectation of God's intervention?
Why is it needed?

4

Express trust in the character of God or the grounds of your relationship with God

This may be a short section or a long section and may even be only one phrase or sentence.

Has God been faithful in the past? Is there a specific aspect of God's character that speaks to the situation? Who is God?

5

A vow of praise or expression of hope (ONLY IF YOU ARE READY!)

Terrible things have happened, *and yet*, I will praise you...
And yet I can look forward...
and yet I will not be overwhelmed

because God is faithful...

This is optional Not every psalm concludes with praise (see Psalm 88). Some finish with a statement of trust or with another cry for God's intervention. Do not put a good face on something if it is not honest. Lamentation is about honest vulnerability that facilitates deepening relationship.