



BIBLICAL LAMENTATION¹

by Larry Hinkle

*For the Christian, our lament, when taken to our Father in heaven,
is proof of our relationship with God, our connection to a great Caregiver.*

N.T. Wright

Lamentation, a prayer for help coming out of pain, is very common in the Bible. Over one third (50 or so) of the psalms are laments. Lament frequently occurs in the Book of Job: "Why did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11). The prophets likewise cry out to God, such as Jeremiah does: "Why is my pain continuous, my wound incurable...?" (15:18) and Habakkuk: "...my legs tremble beneath me. I await the day of distress that will come upon the people who attack us" (3:16).

One whole book, Lamentations, expresses the confusion and suffering felt after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. We find something similar in the New Testament as well. People who are afflicted cry out to Jesus for help. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" (Mark 10:47).

Jesus himself was experienced in the practice of lament. Scripture tells us that, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of deep sorrows who was no stranger to suffering and grief..." (Isaiah 53:3, TPT). We see him weeping over Jerusalem for their rejection of the blessings of God, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem—you are the city that murders your prophets! You are the city that stones the very messengers who were sent to deliver you! So many times I have longed to gather a wayward people, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings—but you were too stubborn to let me' (Matthew 23:37, TPT). We see him also lamenting over the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:1-14). Jesus laments to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me...' (Mark 14:36). And in his agony on the cross, Jesus makes his own the words of Psalm 22, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?'"

¹ Adapted from: Donna Thomas, *The Healing Christ in Community: Equipping Leaders to Facilitate Healing Care in Small Groups*. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing. 2007), 63-70. Examples of Lament Prayers are as follows: **A Cry to God:** (a) Awake! Why are you asleep, O Lord? Arise! Cast us not off forever! Why do you hide your face, forgetting our woe and our oppression? For our souls are bowed down to the dust, our bodies are pressed to the earth. (Psalm 44:24-26), (b) How long, O Lord? Will you utterly forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I harbor sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day? (Psalm 13:2-3) **A Prayer in Anger:** How long do we have to put up with this, God? Do you have it in for us for good? Will your smoldering rage never cool down? Don't blame us for the sins of our parents. Hurry up and help us; we're at the end of our rope. You're famous for helping; God, give us a break. Your reputation is on the line. Pull us out of this mess, forgive us our sins—do what you're famous for doing! (Psalm 79:5, 8-9, MSG).

All About Relationship

In some respects it may appear that the practice of lament is a failure of faith, however, in reality it is an act of openness and trust in God. The reason that we are drawn to cry out directly to God is because deep down we know that our relationship with God really counts; “it counts to us and it counts to God. Even if we do not experience the closeness, we believe that God does care. Even if God seems not to hear, we believe that God is always within shouting distance. In the Scriptures, God does not say, ‘Do not fear, I will take away all the pain and struggle.’ Rather, we hear, ‘You have no need to fear, since I am with you’ (e.g., to Isaac, frightened of the Philistine king—Genesis 26:24; to the anxious Moses being sent to confront Pharaoh—Exodus 3:11-12; to the disciples when they see Jesus walking on the sea—Matthew 14:27) and together we will make it. . . . In lamenting we cry to God, ‘Why, O Lord?’ Our suffering is so big; it does not make any sense; it lacks meaning.” Yet, in and through the experience we develop a level of intimacy with God that would not otherwise be possible.²

A Lost Form of Prayer

Despite its wide-ranging presence in the Bible, we Christians have by and large lost touch with this dimension of prayer. Ruth Haley Barton states that, “The prayer of lament is that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God. Many of us have never been taught this way of praying and it is often missing in the worship of many congregations.”³ It is, however, a practice that we can recover.

It is often noted that almost all of the lament psalms (Psalm 88 is an exception) end on a sudden turn to praise (e.g., 6:9-11; 22:23-32). Scholars have offered various explanations for this, but from the viewpoint of prayer, the meaning seems clear. It is only after we lament, after we face and express the pain and negativity and get it all out, that healing can begin. In more theological terms, we can say that it is only by facing and going through the death that we can come to new life, to resurrection.⁴

The power of the lament is this: We come to God boldly, directly, defenses stripped away, with nothing standing between us and the Almighty. Standing thus, we can do nothing but speak the truth from our depth. This isn't to say that we suddenly have right understanding, only that we speak honestly of what we know. God meets us there. As the psalmist declares,

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. ... I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope" (Psalm 130:1, 5).

True prayer, true speech to and about God, never uses theological platitudes to deny the reality of the world.⁵

N.T Wright adds that it is not part of our Christian vocation to be able to explain everything—but to oftentimes simply lament. The Spirit himself rises up to, “intercede on our behalf, pleading to God with emotional sighs too deep for words.” And as the Spirit laments within us, “so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell. And out of that there can emerge new possibilities, new acts of kindness, new scientific understanding, new hope. New wisdom for our leaders....”⁶

² (Guinan. Website Article: *Biblical Laments: Prayer Out of Pain* <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Mar2002/Feature2.asp>).

³ *eReflections*, <http://www.transformingcenter.org/2016/07/prayer-lament-breathe/>

⁴ (Guinan. Website Article: *Biblical Laments: Prayer Out of Pain*).

⁵ Diane Jacobson. “Lament As True Prayer.” <http://findarticles.com/?noadc=1>

⁶ N.T. Wright. “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To,” <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

Writing a Lament

Read prayerfully through any biblical Psalm of lament. Prayerfully write out your feelings to God in the form of a lament.

1. Write the meaning this issue has for you personally.
2. Allow your true feelings to flow into the lament.
3. Spend time in silence listening for God's response to you.
4. As you feel led, praise God for his ongoing presence in your life.

After writing your lament you may want to share it with a pastor, spiritual director, trusted friend, or small group (including a healing prayer group) who will listen and hold you in prayer as you express your feelings in this way. As a conclusion to this experience, consider your responses to the following questions:

Follow-up Evaluation

1. What did you feel while engaging in this activity?
2. What physical reactions did you experience?
3. How did this activity cause you to struggle?
4. What most surprised you?
5. What new discoveries did you make about God, yourself or others?
6. Reflect for a moment on what the Lord might want you to know about his love for you?

My Lament

Lamenting in Group

“Lamenting in the group context is a high and holy moment. Its sacredness is not to be sabotaged by a lot of talking from the facilitator. As always, the Holy Spirit is invited to come and minister and speak during and after the lament is read. Group support in the grief process holds great value for all who participate in a healing group. In this type of group experience, there is no attempt on the part of its members to fix, make personal judgments or find resolution for each other’s issues. They quickly learn to depend upon each other for care and compassion while expressing their deepest hurts while listening to the Spirit’s comfort and counsel. This truly has biblical roots as observed in the Israelite community who learned to mourn as God’s tear-stained people, and in the garden experience of Jesus.”⁷

Testimonials

“I want to say thank you for sending me the Biblical Lament material . . . This morning when I was reading, writing and praying I looked and read the Lament material again and the paragraph about the power of the lament just made me cry and to thank God for the understanding that he is using [my] counsellor and spiritual direction to bring me to where he knows I need to be. My journey makes more sense to me. I am ok and I need not feel guilty for the road I am on. Jesus is still with me and will not allow my feet to slip off his course for my life.”

“My husband had two surgeries at the same time. During the waiting period, the stress began to build up inside of me. I watched other patients’ doctors come to the waiting room and speak with their loved ones while I heard nothing. As I reviewed notes from a recent spiritual formation retreat, I was drawn to a session on Biblical Lamentation. As I wrote out my own personal lament, a wonderful peace flowed over me. I ended my lament with praise and thanksgiving for what God had done. It was over four hours before I learned that the surgeries were successful and my husband would be okay. I felt I was not alone and God was taking care of things. Laments are blessings!”

If you bow low in God’s awesome presence,
 he will eventually exalt you
 as you leave the timing in his hands.
 Pour out all your worries and stress upon him
 and leave them there,
 for he always tenderly cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7, TPT

“Are you weary, carrying a heavy burden? Then come to me. I will refresh your life,
 for I am your oasis. Simply join your life with mine. Learn my ways and
 you’ll discover that I’m gentle, humble, easy to please.
 You will find refreshment and rest in me.
 For all that I require of you will be pleasant and easy to bear.”

Matthew 11:28-30, TPT

⁷ Donna Thomas, *The Healing Christ in Community: Equipping Leaders to Facilitate Healing Care in Small Groups*. For further information on individual healing prayer and/or healing prayer groups, contact Dr. Larry Hinkle at office@OdysseyinChrist.com.