



Week 3: Lament

Week 3, Day 1: “My God, my God, why...?”

Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night but find no rest...*

⁹ *Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.*

¹⁰ *On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.*

¹¹ *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is no one to help...*

Understanding the Passage:

The Psalmist bluntly raises questions many of us have asked, or felt the need to ask, at some point in our lives: Why, God? Why the distance? Why the silence? We recognize the disorienting feeling of disconnection, the aching loneliness, the deep anger and hurt behind the Psalmist's questions. We wonder, perhaps, another “why” question: Why hasn't the Psalmist given up on God? Why does he begin by claiming, even now, the personal relationship he has with God (“My God, my God, why...?” (v. 1)) ?

One possible answer to consider comes in verses 9 & 10. Here, the Psalmist remembers and acknowledges how his relationship with God began even before he was born, and how God has been intimately present, protecting, and guiding him ever since. There is an implication of deep trust in

God's character and actions, which causes the Psalmist to turn to God instead of away from God, even in the midst of what he perceives to be distance, silence, and confusion. This is a grounded faith beyond feelings, a relentless trust beyond understanding. The fact that this psalm is the prayer Jesus himself offered from the cross in the final moments of his life on earth (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34) surely convinces us that the lament expressed is an essential practice that helps us voice our honest questions and deepest pain to our God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Is asking questions of God something you feel comfortable doing? If not, why not?
2. Looking back on your life thus far, can you identify a defining moment or season in which you experienced God's presence, faithfulness, grace, or love? How do you recall and draw strength from that experience in the midst of lament?

Week 3, Day 2: Does it even matter?

Psalm 73:1-17

³ *I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
⁴ *For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.*
⁵ *They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people...*
⁹ *They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues range over the earth.*
¹⁰ *Therefore the people turn and praise them
and find no fault in them.*
¹¹ *And they say, "How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"*
¹² *Such are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.*
¹³ *All in vain I have kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence...*

Understanding the Passage:

Behind the Psalmist's gut-level honesty is a question so many of us wrestle with: Why do bad things happen to good people, and why do good things happen to bad people? If our efforts to faithfully follow God don't spare us from bad things happening and if those who in no way seek to follow God get to enjoy health, prosperity, influence, and power, what's the point of trying to be faithful? Does it matter? The Psalmist describes wrestling with feelings of deep envy and resentment until he is exhausted from the effort and has come no closer to understanding whether faithfulness in life on this earth matters.

In verse 22 and following, though, his lament shifts, acknowledging what relationship with God *does* give us: constant presence, guidance, and promise of life to the full in the future. The Psalmist's circumstances don't change; some of his questions remain; yet he recognizes that being with God is his deepest desire, the hope that holds him, and the source of his strength to continue to be faithful, come what may.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do you reconcile times when someone's faithfulness to God does not correlate to a prosperous or easy life?
2. Do you bring your gut-level honest struggles to God in worship (v. 17)? If so, what have you found? If not, what's been stopping you?

Week 3, Day 3: "O Lord—How long?" (Part I)

Psalm 6

*...² Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.*

*³ My soul also is struck with terror,
while you, O LORD—how long?...*

*⁶ I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.*

*⁷ My eyes waste away because of grief;
they grow weak because of all my foes...*

*⁹ The LORD has heard my supplication;
the LORD accepts my prayer...*

Understanding the Passage:

Here, the Psalmist laments his physical illness and mental anxiety. He describes in vivid detail the depth of his grief, the weariness of his chronic pain in such a way that any of us who have struggled, do struggle, or have come alongside a loved one struggling in such ways will immediately feel a connection to his raw vulnerability.

"O Lord—how long?" the Psalmist asks. His voice could be ours, on behalf of ourselves or someone we love. The desperateness of his tone implores God to provide a concise, clear answer of immediate and full relief. God's answer is not immediate, though, and the dissonance of this unresolved question suspends our soul, our breath. Finally, in verse 9 the Psalmist shifts his verb tense, signaling a relief that may or may not be what he had asked for, but a relief nonetheless that is enough. To be heard, to be accepted by the God of steadfast love despite, or rather because of all our fragility, failures, and need, leads us to healing beyond what we have asked for or could ever imagine.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Does experiencing pain or anxiety draw you closer to God or away from God?
2. What example from Scripture comes to mind as you reflect on times when healing didn't come in the way you or someone you know thought it would or in the time frame desired?

Week 3, Day 4: "Listen to my cry"

Psalm 142

*With my voice I cry to the LORD;
with my voice I make supplication to the LORD.*

*² I pour out my complaint before him;
I tell my trouble before him...*

⁴ *Look on my right hand and see:
there is no one who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for me.*

⁵ *I cry to you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living."*

⁶ *Listen to my cry,
for I am brought very low...*

Understanding the Passage:

The Psalmist laments the depth of his loneliness with startling starkness: "there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me" (v. 4). The Psalmist's way of lamenting gives us permission to do the same, even pouring out our own complaints before God (v. 2). Naming what hurts in the safe space of God's loving, attentive presence opens us up to allow God to do the healing, restoring, connecting, hope-sharing work that only God can do.

The Psalmist has reached out to God in lament to share his pain and to call on God to do something to help bring him back into community. God meets him in the midst of his lament, the rhythm of which sounds and feels like breathing. Breathing in, the Psalmist receives reminders of God's faithfulness; breathing out, the Psalmist acknowledges and releases his pain.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you struggle with complaining? Have you ever complained to God? How does this psalm help you think about reframing complaints to God in the form of lament?
2. Is there a friend, small group, club, or other group that keeps you vitally connected to community?

Week 3, Day 5: "How long?" (Part II)

Psalm 13

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*

² *How long must I bear pain in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

³ *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,*

⁴ *and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

⁵ *But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

⁶ *I will sing to the LORD
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

Understanding the Passage:

The now familiar question of, "How long?" drives the cadence of this psalm. The Psalmist begs God for an answer. (v. 3) In this lament, though, we don't learn if he ever gets a clear answer and, if he does, whether it's the answer he's looking for or not. What we do hear is the Psalmist decide to

continue wrestling with God until an answer does come. He reflects on the past ("I trusted in your steadfast love" v. 5a) and chooses to let that trust shape his respond to his painful present and uncertain future. Note: The Psalmist envisions a day when he "*shall* rejoice in [God's] salvation", when he "*will* sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me." (vv. 5b-6) For now, he remains in a posture of lament.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do you feel about books or movies that end on a cliffhanger, or jazz music whose chords end with the dissonance? Do you enjoy the suspense and see it as an invitation to fill in your own interpretation of how and when it resolves? Or does it drive you crazy to not be able to read, see, or hear the resolution?
2. Do you find it permission-giving or intimidating to consider sitting in lament for a season and not rushing on too quickly?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. How would you answer the opening question Amy asked: What is your go-to response when you encounter something difficult, painful or broken in the world? A. Pass the ice cream; B. Fixate on something you can control; C. Distract, distract, distract; D. Go on a rant or ramp up sarcastic comments?
2. How would you define lament?
3. What might the practice of lament teach us as individuals, as a church, or as a society?
4. Of all the things Jesus could have said from the cross, of all the prayers he could have prayed, why do you think he picked Psalm 22?
5. What changes for you when you bring your whole self, even your unresolved questions, complex confusion, serious doubts, deep concerns, pain, and hurt, to God in worship?
6. How easy or difficult is it for you to believe that God truly does welcome lament as a faithful way to process life's questions and pain with him?
7. Is there a specific situation in your life that you sense God may be inviting you to respond to with lament?

Prayer requests and other notes: