

Prayer in the shadows...

Praying when we (or our times) are troubled

Psalms of Lament

More than a third of the Psalms in the Old Testament are in lament form – that is, they bring to God prayers of grief, disappointment, anger, and complaint. Psalms of lament traditionally begin with an outpouring of negative feelings before ending on a more trusting note. So there is both *complaint* and *confession*, *protest* and *proclamation*, *anger* and *affirmation*. This doesn't mean that in the lives of God's people there was a quick or easy movement from one to the other, but we see the process amplified in the format of the Psalms.

Israel's Psalms include both individual and community laments. Psalm 44 is a communal lament using "us" and "we" language. Psalm 13 is an example of individual lament, using "I" and "me".

Psalm 44:23-26

Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?

We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.

Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love.

Psalm 13:1-2

How long, 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?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Lament is one way we bring our honest expression to God – expecting that he is big enough, good enough, loving enough to hear our cry – and respond. Jesus can do something with and about our suffering. Instead of hiding it or pretending we're OK, we identify and bring our pain, sadness, hostility, disappointment, irritation, trouble, and despair to him and ask him to change us or change our circumstances. It is fundamentally a practice of trust and worship.

In the Scriptures we find questions and statements of lament directed to the Triune God – honest wonderings concerning God's presence/absence and activity/inactivity, and sometimes cries of total desperation. We read these alongside reminders of trust about who God is and what he has done or has promised to do.

Questions and statements of lament from Scripture:

- How long, O Lord?
- Why have you rejected us?
- How long will the enemy triumph?
- Help, O Lord.
- Restore us, O Lord.
- Lord, have mercy.
- Rise up, O Lord.
- I am desperate.

Remembering God's goodness - statement of promise or trust

- The Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.
- I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.
- The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.
- Your steadfast love endures forever.

The practice of lament reflects our human dependency on the Almighty as we first recognise our need for help, and open ourselves to a conversation with the living God where we ask him to hear us, to help us, and to heal us.

PARTICIPATE AND RESPOND: Writing a communal lament together

If you are gathering as a group in person or via zoom, share with each other at each step. If you are writing this on your own but as part of a bigger project, simply reflect on each step. Consider inviting a friend or family member to do this exercise with you.

1. Reflect and share one thing you are lamenting right now. Where do you most want to see God intervene, but not see it?
2. After sharing, take a minute to write out your lament. If you're on zoom, you might want to share this in the chat function. Write your lament using "us" or "we" language:

E.g.

*"O God, how can you be glorified by the divisions in your church,
the hatred we show to one another as your people?"*

*"Jesus we are so tired of not being able to gather together in person.
We are weary and desperate for human contact. Help us!"*

3. Consider and share some positive *truths* that you want to hang on to by faith. Write your expression of trust or statement about God that is important.

*"But for me, it is good to be near God; I have made the lord God my refuge..."
Psalm 73:28*

"Jesus is making all things new and he is coming soon."

4. Read your statements of complaint again, and then read the affirmations of faith, creating the movement from *complaint* to *confession* that characterises the lament psalms.