



## Prayers of Lament

The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds there is a time for *everything*... including things we think of as “unpleasant” or “unfaithful” like weeping, mourning, or breaking apart. (Eccl. 3:1-8). In these days of isolation, unrest, frustration, and loss, many of us are feeling lots of uncomfortable things.

These uncomfortable feelings can lead us to feel separated from, angry at, or even abandoned by, God. Where do we go with that?

The good news is that Scripture gives us permission to take our feelings directly to God: Remember Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Scholars tell us that this phrase was likely not only an expression of Jesus’ personal angst, but also a recitation of the beginning of 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?  
O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer by night but find no rest.’

Psalm 22 is one of the famous psalms of *lament*. These psalms give us not only *permission* to bring our difficult feelings to God, but they give us a model for doing so, that can lead us into deeper relationship with God. There are 150 psalms, and 61 of them can be considered psalms of lament. Here are some that are probably most familiar:

‘How long, O lord? Will you forget me forever?’  
‘How long will you hide your face from me?’  
‘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?’  
‘Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!’

Ps 13

‘O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence, let my prayer come before you; inline your ear to my cry.’  
‘For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.’  
‘I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;  
‘I am like those who have no help’

Ps 88

Lament is a powerful form of prayer. A form that our tradition has shied away from, to our detriment. Walter Brueggemann names the three prophetic tasks as: Reality, Grief and Hope. Lament is an important part of both naming our reality and processing our grief, so that we can find our way to hope.

The Psalms can help give us language for lament, and they also provide a template for articulating our own. Most psalms of lament generally contain four elements: Complaint; Petition; Trust; and Praise. We can employ each element, and draft our own prayers of lament.

In the 'complaint' section, we pour out our grievances to God in faith. We remind God of his promises to us, and explain the ways in which things are not right, and must be changed. We might use images, symbols and metaphors to articulate our feelings in and about the situation in which we find ourselves. For example, see some of the images from Psalm 102:

'My days pass away like some, and my bones burn like a furnace.'  
'I wither like grass'  
'I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop'  
'My enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse'  
'You have lifted me up and thrown me aside'

In the 'petition' section, we tell God what we'd like God to do. We might seek deliverance from our suffering, to know the presence of God, forgiveness, restoration of relationship, justice, peace, joy, hope, or whatever else we need.

In the 'trust' section, we acknowledge prior times when we were aware of God's blessings or evidence of God's action in the world (from scripture or our own experience). We affirm prior instances of deliverance and restoration, and express hope that we receive it now. For example, see Ps. 59 ("you have been a fortress for me and a refuge in the day of my distress.")

In the 'praise' section we *promise to* praise God in the *future* (though we probably can't manage it right now—this is a lament, right?). It's another expression of hope and trust, and of the expectation that God will deliver. For example, see Ps. 59 ("I *will* sing praises to you for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love.") or Ps. 43 ("I *shall again* praise him, my help and my God.").

I invite you to use this format to craft your own personal lament psalm. You might apply this structure to your feelings about some aspect of our current situation (COVID-19, racial tensions, political tensions, etc.) or to any other season of "disorientation" in your life, past or present. How might you address God ('why have you forsaken me?', 'how long?', 'where are you?'). What words or images express the way your complaint makes you feel? What do you need? Why do you bring your complaint to God, anyway? And finally, what promise can you make to God?

In the coming weeks, we'll be 'personalizing' the prayers of the people, to include the joys and sorrows closest to *our* hearts. If you're willing to share your psalm of lament to be woven in with those of your fellow parishioners (anonymously) please send a copy to [Cheryl](#). Thanks!