

May Young

Walking

with

God

Through

the

Valley

Recovering the Purpose
of Biblical Lament



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Introduction

When I began my research as a biblical scholar, I had no idea that lament would be my area of interest. What could have been a gloomy topic ended up being one that sustained my soul through my own trying times. My interest in this topic began when I went through a personal trauma. I was a young wife with two small children, married to a pastor who was church planting. We struggled through ministry and other family obligations, but due to his unfaithfulness, I found myself feeling alone and abandoned. My life fell apart, and I was devastated.

It was through this experience that I learned about lament—a much-needed practice that sustained me through one of the most difficult times of my life. No one taught about lament in the church when I was growing up. Although I knew that life was not perfect and that we all go through trials, I was not equipped to face something so life changing and overwhelming. I did not know how to move on or process my feelings. I was broken and distressed to say the least. I could not eat or sleep for two weeks because I was so depressed. My life felt like a bad dream that I hoped would dissipate when I woke up the next morning, but when the morning came and my circumstances remained the same, I did not know what to do.

I felt abandoned, betrayed, lonely and lost, and the only solace I found was when I prayed and read the Bible. Sometimes my prayers were just tears and loud sobbing as I offered up my pain to God. Other times, I expressed my fears and anxiety about what the next steps were.

I found myself reading the Psalms incessantly because they gave voice to my pain and uncertainties. I cried out to the Lord in my loneliness, and the truth in the Bible gave me hope. However, like the psalmist in Psalms 42–43, I found my emotions vacillating. There were days I felt hopeful that better days were ahead and that the Lord was with me, and other days I mourned the loss of a marriage and the sadness of a broken family.

Through that period, I felt like I hit rock bottom, but much to my surprise, my lament did not lead me into an endless abyss of hopelessness. Rather, lament led me straight into the arms of God—my true Rock and foundation. I realized that he was with me in my pain. He was close to me when I had no one else. He understood my feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Even when I vacillated in my emotions, his presence was close. There were times when my doubts got the best of me, but I had to remember the truth in his word.

My journey was not linear but rather a winding path that gave me hope amid a broken world. The laments found in Scripture became the catalyst for the healing that my soul longed for. These prayers gave me permission to voice my pain to God and to wait on him even when I did not see any immediate change in my circumstances.

LAMENT FOR TODAY

As I continued my studies on lament and as I experienced healing power myself, I quickly realized that lament was not just something for my personal life behind closed doors. Rather, lament can serve as a healing agent for entire communities of people. We are living in a time of uncertainty, with increased feelings of anxiety and depression stemming from isolation, racial injustice, wars, an increase in gun violence, and political unrest. The current social climate not only has caused anxiety, depression, suffering, and grief but has also left us angry, confused, perplexed, and even numb about how to handle everything that is constantly bombarding our eyes, ears, and hearts.

While lament is found throughout Scripture, it seems that only recently has the church recalled its importance. When I began teaching at Taylor

University, a Christian liberal arts university in Upland, Indiana, I spoke about lament in several of my classes. Each time, several students confided that this was their first exposure to this concept or that they had not heard much teaching on lament in their own churches. While there has been an increased awareness of lament in the past few years, many still do not know how to practice lament or why it is important for our whole selves.

Furthermore, there is skepticism about lament in some spaces. I have even spoken to some Christians who view lament as antithetical to faith or confidence in God. Questions still abound: Is it not wrong to question, doubt, or wallow in grief? Does it not just exhibit weak faith? Is lament just being sad? Why do we need to keep rehearsing our pain? What exactly is lament? How does it help? How do we actually practice lament in our personal lives or as a community? These are just some of the questions and sentiments that have been raised.

DEFINING TERMS

Lament can be broadly understood as “expressing the reality of suffering,” or more specifically expressing what one feels in the midst of pain.¹ These expressions are demonstrated through various means or practices. To be sure, the practice of lament and the concept of lament are not necessarily equivalent, however, because individual practices give form to the concept of lament, I will be referring to them interchangeably.

Of course, one does not have to be a Christian to lament, but the concept and practice of *biblical* lament goes beyond the general understanding of merely expressing the reality of suffering. Too often lament is viewed as a practice or end in itself. Some have even become stuck in their pain as they continued to rehearse their suffering. Although this book does encompass the general nature of lament—that is, the expression of the reality of pain—its main focus is on biblical lament, which is rooted in the foundational understanding of the lament genre found in Scripture. As we study lament, it is important to distinguish between lament as a

¹Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 150.

genre or type of literature in the Bible and the practice or concept of biblical lament. Understanding the genre of lament in the Bible will help us in our practice.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL LAMENT? UNDERSTANDING HOW GENRE INFORMS OUR PRACTICE

While the Bible describes people lamenting—for example, Job (Job 3), Jeremiah (Jer 11:18-20), Habakkuk (Hab 1), and Paul (2 Cor 12:8)—it also features a specific lament genre, or type of literature, which is found primarily in the Psalms. This genre is composed of prayers that are characterized by a specific form with common elements. In chapter three we will discuss these elements and the lament genre in detail as well as examine how the Hebrew terms for lament are used in the Bible. Understanding these common elements will help clarify how biblical lament is a much deeper process than just expressing our suffering. Chapter four will explore how lament as a genre in the Bible is similar to and different from the lament of other societies in the ancient Near East. These distinctions offer further guidance for the practice of biblical lament in our own lives.

At its most basic level, the practice of lament offers a way for us to process suffering, injustice, pain, and disappointments because we live in a broken and fallen world. Instead of avoiding these disappointments and hurts, lament helps us to engage these pains so we can move forward. Unfortunately, we live in a context that is great at avoiding conflict and discomfort. Instead of dealing with our pain, we numb it with busyness or entertainment. We would rather spend hours surfing the internet, scrolling through social media, distracting ourselves with retail therapy, binging on Netflix, playing video games, or participating in other addictive habits rather than facing the pain, anger, confusion, and loneliness we carry in our hearts. Some even turn to other, more self-destructive behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, and other addictions to quell these troublesome feelings or silence the pain. It is no wonder that the World Health Organization reports that more than 300 million people worldwide are estimated to live with depression, and adults are not the only ones dealing

with stressors.² When surveyed in 2017, 40 percent of teens reported feeling irritable or angry within the past month, and over a third reported feeling nervous, anxious, or overwhelmed.³ As these numbers continue to skyrocket after a worldwide pandemic, is there any hope for us moving forward? How are we to cope with these bleak statistics? Are we destined to live our lives bogged down by anxiety and depression?

Psychologists affirm that the healthiest way to move forward is to feel our feelings. Failure to do so could result in negative consequences for not just our mental health but also our physical health.⁴ A twelve-year follow-up study found that the suppression of emotions may lead to earlier death, including death from cancer.⁵ This correlation between our emotions and physical health reinforces that we are whole persons who engage life emotionally, physically, and spiritually. How we process our pain, doubts, questions, and anger will inevitably affect our emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

The practice of lament found in the Bible is ultimately an act of faith. When we face struggles, our instinct is usually to turn away from God or shut down, but lament encourages us to press in and engage God even in our brokenness and despair. This instinct to retreat from God is evident early in the Bible. After the fall, Adam and Eve hide from God instead of turning to him—perhaps because of doubt, pride, sin, shame, or the pain of disappointing God, or perhaps all of these. As we continue to live in this broken world, these same factors have also influenced our own desire

²World Health Organization, “Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates,” 2017, <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/254610/WHO-MSD-MER-2017.2-eng.pdf?sequence=1>.

³Kathleen Smith, “6 Common Triggers of Teen Stress,” *Psycm*, updated October 21, 2022, www.psycm.net/common-triggers-teen-stress.

⁴This study examines the correlation between anger, anxiety, and depression and cardiovascular disease. While the findings show that the overlap of all three may lead to a disposition toward negative affectivity, their research cites an extensive list of studies that have researched these correlations. Jerry Suls and James Bunde, “Anger, Anxiety, and Depression as Risk Factors for Cardiovascular Disease: The Problems and Implication of Overlapping Affective Dispositions,” *Psychological Bulletin* 131, no. 2 (2005): 260-300.

⁵Benjamin P. Chapman, Kevin Fiscella, Ichiro Kawachi, Paul Duberstein, and Peter Muennig, “Emotion Suppression and Mortality Risk over a 12-Year Follow-Up,” *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 75, no. 4 (October 2014): 381-85. See also Philip J. Quartana and John W. Burns, “Emotion Suppression Affects Cardiovascular Responses to Initial and Subsequent Laboratory Stressors,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 15, no. 3 (September 2010): 511-28.

to turn away from God during difficult times. Unfortunately, I have heard countless stories from friends and others who left the church or stopped praying when they experienced deep pain, doubts, anger, and disappointments in their lives. Instead of dealing with these issues, they retreated from others, including God. Many in times of crisis have even declared that the Christian life just did not work for them. In other words, they did not feel that the Bible or God had much to offer when they faced challenging situations.

Are they right? What does the Bible have to offer us when we are suffering? Too often, many just quote Romans 8:28, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Does this mean we need to be people who grin and bear all circumstances? After all, God is working all things for the good of those who love him. Is there no room for struggle or doubt? I have heard of people who lost children to terrible accidents, only to face church members who told them that even in this, God had a purpose. At the time, they were definitely not comforted by this thought. Instead, many wanted to shut down and not engage further with such insensitive statements. While God may have an ultimate purpose for this seemingly senseless loss, quoting this verse only exhibits a callousness to suffering and pain.

Thankfully, the Bible has so much more to say than Romans 8:28. We are not called to a stoic acceptance of life’s pain and hurts but rather engagement with God in the midst of these dark valleys. Instead of moving away or disengaging, lament invites God into our doubts, pain, and struggle, setting us on a path to become people of resilience. Often we mistakenly think that we can overcome our pain and doubts without ever truly facing them. But they do not just disappear because we do not acknowledge them. Instead, we need to do the hard work of feeling and working through these dark thoughts in order for us to move forward and grow. Through the practice of lament, we are able to be a people of God filled with hope and resilience. When we press into our pain in the presence of God, we are reminded that we are not alone. As the psalmist recognized, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear

no evil, for you are with me” (Ps 23:4 ESV). The only way we can truly find healing and strength to move forward is when we turn to God and acknowledge his presence as we face pain, confusion, and doubt.

THE STATE OF LAMENT IN THE CHURCH

Why is it that churches so often fail to model this critical practice for the life of the church? When I was growing up, most individuals in the church did not share their painful experiences while they were going through their dark valleys. What they shared were the triumphs after the difficulties had passed and they saw God’s faithfulness. Why do we hear so many stories about those who have overcome difficulties only *after* they have experienced victory? Sometimes we were not even aware that they were struggling. Why do we not hear from Christian believers and their testimonies while they are *in the midst* of their pain and suffering?

To be sure, it is inspiring to hear about those who have overcome very difficult circumstances, but why does hardly anyone share the struggles that led to these victorious outcomes? This lack of transparency inevitably creates a culture of triumphalism with little room for deep struggle and doubt. Perhaps this precedent has contributed to our unwillingness to practice lament and be honest about our pain when we are going through difficulties, both individually and collectively. Perhaps this has also contributed to feelings of isolation when we are struggling.

When authenticity is promoted in the church, many do not want to be vulnerable for fear of judgment and feeling humiliated by others. Some people, when they voiced their struggles in the church, received pat answers and were expected to overcome these issues in a timely fashion. Sadly, what ends up happening is that when people face hardship, the last place they want to be is in the church. Many have even abandoned their faith because they did not see God working or bringing the same victorious outcome that others testified to. There are also those who feel that their struggle is taking too long to overcome and have become disheartened. These patterns cause us to hide our difficulties because we are afraid that we would appear weak in faith. The judgments of those around us often lead us to portray an artificial strength that God never called us

to display. In its haste to communicate the triumphant message of Jesus, the church inadvertently communicates that to experience loss, sadness, and grief is to be a failure.

While we can all think of stories where there was no room for grief and sadness, it is important to note that statistics also corroborate these experiences. A study by Lifeway Research reveals that 59 percent of those with mental health challenges and 65 percent of family members of those with mental health challenges want their church to talk more openly about their struggles.⁶ When we do not openly discuss mental health and other difficulties, a triumphalist culture in the church is reinforced. The church becomes a place to put our best foot forward. This should not be the case. The church is the body of Christ. As Paul exhorts, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26 ESV). We should be just as comfortable sharing in one another’s suffering as we are rejoicing over one another’s triumphs.

Even while noting the value of lament, it needs to be noted that lament is not a substitute for professional health care. While it is important to recognize that lamenting is more than just airing our complaints or wallowing in our despair, it is not a magic bullet that will cure us of all our mental health issues and does not replace therapy or other treatments prescribed by licensed professionals. It is important to seek out professional mental health care when appropriate. While some treatments may incorporate aspects of the practice of lament, mental health issues are complex and often require additional important expertise, which I will not address due to the focus of this book.

My experience with students and personal reflection on the church has made me aware of the importance of understanding and exploring what the Bible teaches about lament. While it has been encouraging to see many advocating for lament recently, there is so much more for us to glean from Scripture and scholarship on this topic.

⁶Bob Smietana, “Mental Illness Remains Taboo Topic for Many Pastors,” Lifeway Research, September 22, 2014, <https://research.lifeway.com/2014/09/22/mental-illness-remains-taboo-topic-for-many-pastors/>.

CORPORATE LAMENT

Until now, I have spoken about lament mainly as something we can practice as individuals. Lament, however, is also necessary for the corporate body. While pain is often felt individually, it always has implications for those around us, both for how the sufferer interacts with the community and how the community responds to the sufferer. It is unfortunate that many have found the church to be a callous place when they are suffering. Many are at a loss as to how to respond to those who are suffering, so instead of engaging, we just avoid those who are struggling in order to minimize awkwardness. But we need to heed the popular adage that the church is to be a hospital for those in pain, not a museum for saints. Lamenting together as a body of Christ will help us move closer to actualizing this ideal. Especially amid our current context, the church needs to be a healing presence for the world.

Among other things, corporate lament offers an opportunity for us to stand alongside those who are hurting. We when practice lament corporately, we are giving witness to the pain and suffering of our fellow brothers and sisters. Suffering and pain are part of the fallen world in which we live. Acknowledging this fact is not a sign of defeat. In our acknowledgment, we are facing these realities with truth. This process offers a path for us to move from despair to resilience.

Corporate lament also encompasses times when the church as a community must come together in response to suffering or injustice that surrounds us. As we will see in chapter two, the communal lament prayers in the Bible are in the context of suffering experienced by the community collectively. Such situations require us to wait on God together. Sometimes communal lament can be quite uncomfortable because we do not have the answer to the problems and pervasive evil around us, but it fosters authentic community. In discussing Lamentations 5, the final chapter of Lamentations and the only communal lament, Kathleen O'Connor notes that the ending of the book

expresses the community's doubt about God's care and about God's character. It utters the unthinkable—that God has utterly and permanently

rejected them, cast them off in unrelenting anger. . . . Such is the ending of this book, and I think it is wonderful. It is wonderful because it is truthful, because it does not force hope prematurely, because it expresses what many in worlds of trauma and destruction know to be true.⁷

Corporate lament calls us together to engage God in truth, humility, and waiting. Perhaps we have lost this focus in our churches today.

THE ROAD MAP FOR DISCUSSION

The remainder of the book will be divided into two main sections. The first section will introduce some basic categories and context for understanding lament in the Bible, for example, explaining the difference between individual versus corporate lament. Additionally, this section will discuss the different facets of the lament genre that move beyond the mere expression of sadness. As we explore the lament genre, we will see how these examples help to inform our practice of lament and the process of lamenting. There is greater depth and dimensions to lament than just the typical caricature of sadness. We will also investigate the difference between laments in the Bible compared those in the ancient Near Eastern context and address the theological and theoretical reasons for the purpose of lament.

The second main section of this book will explore some specific laments within this genre to see how they inform us about a variety of situations including doubt, anxiety, injustice, and grief. While many think that lament as a genre is focused mainly on feeling sorrow or sadness, the Bible shows us that lament encompasses a greater range of emotions. In fact, the biblical authors lament a variety of situations and circumstances. Early Christian monk and theologian John Cassian (AD 380) observed,

Not every kind of shedding of tears is produced by one feeling or virtue. For in one way does that weeping originate that is caused by pricks of our sins striking our heart. . . . There is too another kind of tears, which are caused not by knowledge of one's self but by the hardness and sins of

⁷Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 88.

others. . . . And these (tears) were certainly not caused by the same as those that arise in Psalm 6 from the person of the penitent but were due to the anxieties of life and its distresses and losses, by which the righteous who are living in this world are oppressed.⁸

This is important to highlight as we consider the practice of lament and the various contexts of lament in Scripture. If we fail to recognize the broad spectrum of lament, we will have a limited understanding of why this practice is important for our Christian faith. To be sure, sadness is an important part of lament, but this is only a portion of what we see in the Bible. Highlighting these differences in the biblical genre of lament will help to broaden our understanding of the process of lament both individually and collectively.

This second half of the book will also discuss lamenting in the context of six broad categories with examples from the biblical genre of lament alongside personal testimonies of individuals who have practiced lament in difficult times. Chapter five will focus on lament in the context of sin and repentance. We often see this in the clarion call of the prophets to the people of Israel and Judah. They were called to lament their sins and return to Yahweh, who loved them, and this point has significance for our own contexts as well. Chapter six deals with lament in the midst of doubt and questions. The Bible gives us examples of godly people who questioned God and even doubted his goodness. As we will see, God is not afraid of our questions and doubts. Chapter seven will explore how lament helps us when we face anger, injustice, and unfair circumstances. God is the ultimate judge, and we can bring our case to him. Honesty of expression in these circumstances helps us to deal with emotions that can sometime overwhelm us. Lament also helps us when we deal with loneliness and abandonment. Chapter eight will show us that we are not alone in this struggle; the psalmist also wrestles with such thoughts. In chapter nine we will turn our attention to the experience of sickness and physical pain. Lament may be especially applicable for those struggling with

⁸Dean O. Wenhe and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 539.

chronic pain or other physical ailments. Lastly, in chapter ten we will consider lament in the context of death and loss. As we can see, these topics will touch on some relevant circumstances that require practical guidance. These chapters will explore how the practice of lament, informed through biblical lament, is an appropriate response not just for individuals but also for the church as the body of Christ.

There is much more to explore on each of these topics in our lives before God. The purpose of this book is to begin the conversation and to show that lament is a deeply rooted biblical concept. As we journey together, we will see that the Bible has a great deal to offer us regarding the practice of lament that will shape not just our individual lives but the churches and communities in which we find ourselves.

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