

Chapter 3

The Role of Lament in Trauma Healing and Missionary Care

By Steven Tracy¹

“It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ.
My hosanna has passed through an enormous furnace of doubt.”

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky

In the past several years we have seen a heightened emphasis on missionary care. More and more churches and missionary agencies have developed strategies to care for the emotional, spiritual, and relational well-being of their short and long-term missionaries. There is a growing awareness of the costliness of cross-cultural service. Our western affluence has made us particularly unprepared for and emotionally vulnerable to the harmful impact of human suffering, much of which is caused by injustice and abuse. Since for westerners most missionary activity involves a greatly increased exposure to human suffering, we must find ways to increasingly prepare missionaries to deal with these painful realities. The good news is that Scripture gives us a particularly robust and relatively unknown tool for emotional/ spiritual healing. This tool is lament.

Illustration of short and long term missionaries crippled by exposure to suffering and injustice.

¹ Steve is professor of theology/ethics at Phoenix Seminary and president/international director of Mending the Soul Ministries (MTS). He received his ThM from Western Seminary in Portland and his PhD in biblical studies from the University of Sheffield. Steve and his wife Celestia founded MTS to create abuse resources for Christian leaders. Steve has authored numerous books and is blessed to serve traumatized communities in east Africa.

Consider your response if a missionary said any of the following to you:

I loath my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked? Have you eyes of flesh? Do you see as humans see?²

God has torn me in his wrath and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me. God gives me up to the ungodly and casts me into the hands of the wicked. I was at ease, and he shattered me; he grabbed me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target. My face is red with weeping, dark shadows ring my eyes yet my hands are free from violence and my prayers are pure.³

God has turned his hand against me again and again all day long. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones; he has besieged and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship; he has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry out for help he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.⁴

In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. But you have rejected us and disgraced us... You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us

² Job 10:1-4

³ Job 16:9, 11-12, 16-17

⁴ Lam 3:4-11, 16

among the nations. You have sold your people for a trifle. Wake up, God. Why do you sleep?...Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?⁵

Break their teeth in their mouths, O God; Lord, tear out the fangs of the lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away. May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along, like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.⁶

They repay me evil for good, and hatred for friendship. Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children. May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation. May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord. He loved to pronounce a curse—may it come back on him. He found no pleasure in blessing—may it be far from him.⁷

To many modern western Christians, the statements above sound so harsh, dark, and faithless that they shock our sensibilities. Many of our churches would challenge or even silence anyone who prayed such prayers publicly. Many counselors would interpret such prayers by a client as indicative of great emotional and spiritual pathology in need of healing. But each of these statements from several different biblical authors are inspired Scripture. How are we to interpret this? More specifically, what is the role of raw, painful lament in the life of the believer, particularly one overwhelmed by human suffering?

⁵ Ps 44:8-12, 23-24

⁶ Ps 58:6-8, NIV.

⁷ Ps 109:5-9, 13-14, 17, NIV.

Costly loss of Lament in the Western Church

Various writers have done analyses of the most popular worship songs sung in evangelical churches and shown that lament songs are exceedingly rare.⁸ Rather, we tend to focus largely on triumphal, positives songs of victory in Christ. While praise songs of victory have their place, our failure to regularly practice biblical lament is incredibly costly. Walter Brueggemann argues that two of the costliest consequences of this failure are psychological inauthenticity (we develop shallow, unhealthy, and dishonest relationships with ourselves and God) and social immobility (we become paralyzed in the face of injustice).⁹ Thus, “the recovery of these [lament psalm] texts is urgent.”¹⁰

In another work Brueggemann suggests that the church’s failure to lament by singing only “happy songs” is most often driven not by faith but by “a frightened, numb denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life.”¹¹ Thus, failure to lament is costly for the believer. He persuasively argues, however, that practicing biblical lament through the use of lament psalms is a deep, pious act of faith and thus spiritually essential and enriching.

⁸ See for instance Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2002), 35-41. Pemberton notes that while lament comprises some 40% of the Psalms, it comprises 2-7% of the songs sung in evangelical churches. Most glaringly absent in modern worship songs are the themes most prevalent in biblical lament psalms: “the problem of enemies, unmerited suffering, and God’s failure to act or respond.” Thus, “we may lament, but in most cases we lament in such ways that our practice would be unrecognizable to the ancient psalmists,” 39.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick Miller (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 98-111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51.

The use of these ‘psalms of darkness’ may be judged by the world to be *acts of unfaith and failure*, but for the trusting community, their use is *an act of bold faith*, albeit a transformed faith. It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all experiences of disorder are proper subjects for discourse with God...Everything properly belongs in the conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is to in fact withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God.¹²

The loss of lament is costly not only to believers but to the unbelievers all around them. Eugene Peterson, in an introduction to Michael Card’s fine book on lament, argues that lament is necessary as a witness:

to the men and women who are trying to live a life that avoids all cost, including the cost of their own soul...[O]ne reason why people are uncomfortable with tears and the sight of suffering is that *it is a blasphemous assault on their precariously maintained American spirituality of the pursuit of happiness*. They want to avoid evidence that things are not right with the world as it is...It is a lot easier to keep the American faith if they don’t have to look into the face of suffering, if they don’t have to listen to our laments, if they don’t have to deal with our tears.

So, learning the language of lament is not only necessary to restore Christian dignity to suffering and repentance and death, it is necessary to provide a Christian witness to a world that has no language for and is therefore oblivious to the glories of wilderness and cross.¹³

Biblical Tradition of Lament, Relationship to Suffering and Oppression

¹² Ibid., 52, emphasis his.

¹³ Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress 2005), 12, emphasis mine.

Lament is a canon-wide biblical practice in which individuals or groups cry out to God due to their emotional distress, physical danger, and spiritual anguish.¹⁴ It is characterized by honest, even raw emotional language in which the speaker articulates the pain he or she is feeling and the hurts, losses, and threats they are experiencing. This includes pain caused by other people as well as pain caused by God, particularly God's failure to intervene in the face of evil.¹⁵

Lament is particularly common in the wisdom and prophetic books, most notably Job, Psalms,¹⁶ Jeremiah, Lamentations,¹⁷ and Habakkuk. It is noteworthy that the entire book of Lamentations is a formal lament over the destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering of God's people. It is also very significant that while Psalms, whose name in Hebrew means "book of praise," contains about six major genres (hymn, lament, royal, remembrance, wisdom, and confidence), the biggest category by far is lament. Approximately 40% of the Psalms are lament, including individual and communal lament.¹⁸ There is considerable variation in the lament psalms, but they are characterized by tone (discouragement or even despair) in the face of great danger, need, and suffering. Longman notes that all of the lament psalms also contain at least some expression of trust in God,¹⁹ though this is much clearer in some psalms than in others. (Ps.

¹⁴ Soong-Chan Rah, in his excellent work on the book of Lamentations, defines biblical lament as "a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble," *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 21.

¹⁵ For instance, Hab 1:3, 13 "why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong"; "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitor and remain silent when the wicked swallows up?"

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann has written numerous books and articles on the Psalms and has some of the keenest insights on biblical lament. See for instance *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick Miller. A magnificent more recent work by another Old Testament scholar is *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* by Glenn Pemberton.

¹⁷ Three very insightful commentaries on Lamentations include: Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Orbis, 2002), Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, and Christopher J Wright, *The Message of Lamentations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015). Unlike the other two authors, O'Connor writes from a liberal theological perspective. However, she is respectful of the biblical text, has brilliant insights, and makes great real-world application. Rah writes from an evangelical perspective. Being Asian, he comes to the text with a most helpful perspective. He makes terrific application of Lamentations to injustices in our culture.

¹⁸ Individual lament Psalms include: Ps 3, 4-7, 13, 17, 22, 26, 31, 35, 39, 40-43, 52, 54-55, 58-59, 64, 69, 70-71, 77, 83, 86, 88, 109, 142-143. Communal lament Psalms include: Ps 12, 44, 60, 74, 79-80, 89, 94, 126, 137.

¹⁹ Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* (InterVarsity, 1988), 28.

44 and 88 contain little hope and little explicit trust in God other than the fact that the psalmist in lamenting is crying out to God, which is certainly implicit faith.) The lament psalms also reflect a common structure of seven elements, though not always in this order and often a given psalm will not contain all seven elements. These elements are: invocation (address to God); pleas for divine help; specific complaint(s); confession of sin or assertion of innocence; imprecation (curse on enemies); confidence in God's response; hymn or blessing.²⁰

Ultimately, the basis for biblical lament is that sin has shattered shalom and all of creation suffers under the curse of sin (cp. Gen 2:24-25 and 3:14-19). Until Christ returns at the end of the age and permanently removes sin, death, suffering, and mourning (Rev 21:4-8), we should and must lament. We see this truth explicitly affirmed in Romans 8:19-23, where Paul states that due to the effects of the curse “the whole creation has been groaning together until now” (v. 22). Furthermore, even believers, in spite of the fact that the Holy Spirit indwells them and they have the sure hope of eternal life “inwardly groan as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons” (v. 23).

How does lament relate to abuse? While some of the lament psalms and some of Job's lament were occasioned by illness (Job 2:7-8; Ps 38-39, 88; 102), the overwhelming bulk of Old Testament lament is occasioned partially or entirely by abuse.²¹ Even in several of the illness lament psalms the psalmist laments because of his enemies (Ps 6, 13, 112). And most of the lament psalms very specifically identify threats of harm from evil doers (verbal and physical abuse) as the cause of the lament. It was specifically the presence of seemingly unrestrained

²⁰ Ibid., 27. Pemberton condenses the structure of lament Psalms to five elements: address; complaint; request; motivation; confidence, *Hurting with God*, 66.

²¹ Ps 3:1; 5:6; 7:1-2; 12; 31:13; 35:4; 44:11, 22; 54:3; 55:21; 59:1-4; 64:1-6; 69:19-21; 70:2; 74:4-8; 79:1-4; 80:16; 83:1-8; 94:1-7; 109:1-5; 126; 137; 139:19-20; 140:1-5; 142:3-4.

abusers which precipitated Habakkuk's bold lament. Lamentations is the most graphic biblical lament literature and is occasioned by extreme verbal, economic, physical, and sexual abuse.

It is important to understand that biblical lament, while it may to the uninitiated appear to reflect a lack of faith in God, is ultimately predicated on a relationship with the covenant keeping God. Ellington explains that lament reflects "the experience of loss within the context of relatedness. A relationship of trust, intimacy, and love is a necessary precondition for lament."²² Hence, failure to lament is actually what reflects lack of intimate relationship with God. Pemberton astutely notes that biblical lament reflects authentic dialogue with the God we long to have a deeper relationship with, a God who has confused and even hurt us by his actions (or more often by his inaction). In fact, we desire intimacy with God so strongly that we refuse to pretend everything is OK when it is not. We refuse to practice the false humility which keeps us from speaking the truth about our experiences and feelings. Thus,

[T]he psalmists challenge us to decide how serious we plan to be about our relationship with God. And here the greatest danger is not our questions but our silence... Oftentimes, we never ask God difficult questions because we are never disappointed or confused by God—and we are never disappointed because we never really expected God to do anything in the first place.²³

Lament in the New Testament (NT)

Some theologians argue that Old Testament (OT) lament has little or no place in the life of the believer. It is argued that lament is present almost exclusively in the OT. This is largely

²² Scott Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 7.

²³ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 172.

explained by appealing to the manner in which Christ's sufferings transform the NT believer's understanding and experience of suffering. In the church age believers are called to rejoice when they experience trials and suffering (Rom 5:3 Jas 1:2), even when they suffer abuse (Acts 5:41; I Pet 1:6). Thus, lament is eliminated for the NT believer.

The Presence of Lament in the NT in Abridged Form

Is this correct? Do we find lament in the NT? The specific form of lament has certainly changed between the testaments. The fully structured laments found in the OT are exceedingly rare, almost nonexistent, in the NT. For instance, there isn't a single instance of the multi-element lament found over and over in Psalms. But this does not mean that lament is absent. In fact, it is found in numerous places but in an abbreviated form.²⁴ For instance, Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who repeatedly lament (Matt 5:4; the verb for "mourn" is in the present tense suggesting ongoing action). While Jesus does not give his followers a sample lamentation, the mere fact that he issues such a blessing presumes the practice of OT lament. Additionally, NT writers directly quote the OT some 283 times, and 41% of these are quotes from the Psalms, many of which are lament Psalms.²⁵ Jesus alluded to the Psalms over fifty times, and again, many of these allusions come from the lament Psalms.²⁶ The clearest examples of Jesus' use of lament is found in some of his last words from the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) and "into your hands I commit my spirit," (Luke 23:46) direct

²⁴ For a further development of this concept, see Ellington, *Risking Truth*, 162-82.

²⁵ NT citation of lament psalms includes imprecations. For instance, Peter quotes from Ps 69:25 ("may their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents") and Ps 109:8 ("[m]ay his days be few; may another take his office") and applies it to Judas in Acts 1:20. Paul cites from Ps 109:22-23 ("[L]et their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually" in Rom 11:9-10 and applies it to hardened, unrepentant Israel.

²⁶ James Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2016) 4.

quotes from two lament psalms: 22:1; 31:5. And these are not the only times Jesus lamented. His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane is clearly lament in the context of impending suffering of horrible abuse (Matt 26:38-42). The writer of Hebrews implies that lament characterized Jesus' earthly life: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death (Heb 5:7). In keeping with first century Judaism, the Psalms would have been Jesus' prayer book, making it all but certain that much of Jesus' lament prayers throughout his life would have been drawn from the lament psalms.

Finally, we should also note that while fully developed laments are not found in the NT, lament is frequently alluded to in various ways. (1) Several times in the gospels individuals in great need, who are suffering physically and or emotionally, cry out to Jesus for help (Matt 20:30; Luke 9:38). This is the essence of OT lament. Crying out to God is repeatedly said to be the precipitating factor for his response of deliverance.²⁷ Ironically, much of Job's great pain and anger at God stemmed from the fact that when the poor cried out he delivered them (Job 29:12), and yet when he (Job) cried out to God there was no deliverance or response. (2) Lament occurs in the context of desperation and pain. Thus, in the OT lament literature lament is often associated with tears.²⁸ Similarly, the tears of Jesus as well as those of his followers over the human suffering around them suggests a life of lament in keeping with the OT lament tradition.²⁹ (3) As was discussed above, in Romans 8:19-23 Paul refers to the reality and necessity of NT believers "groaning" due to the violation of shalom in the Garden of Eden. And this groaning is ongoing and lifelong. For their entire earthly lives, until they experience the restoration of shalom in heaven, believers groan. This is an unmistakable reference to lament.

²⁷ Ex 22:22-24; Josh 24:7; Jud 3:9; 6:6-8; I Ki 17:20-22; 1 Chron 5:20; 2 Chron 14:11-12; Esther 4:1; Ps 18:6; 30:2; 31:22; 34:6; 107:6.

²⁸ Ps 6:6; 39:12; 80:5; 102:9; Is 22:4; Jer 9:1; Lam 2:11.

²⁹ Luke 7:44; John 11:33; Acts 20:37; Phil 3:18; 2 Cor 2:4; Heb 5:7.

Changes in New Testament Lament Content

So, the form of lament is somewhat different in the NT, but lament is still robustly present. Even more striking, however, are some (partial) changes in the content of NT lament. These changes are best understood in terms of progressive revelation, the concept that God reveals more truth to his people over the course of biblical history. These lament changes are most specifically related to views of the afterlife and one's enemies. We will deal here with the latter

Evil Doers/Enemies

The NT reflects a more gracious posture than does the OT due to the life and death of Christ. For instance, the OT lamenters repeatedly cursed their enemies and asked God to utterly destroy and not forgive them (Ps 10:15; 109:5-13; 137:8), while Jesus taught his followers to bless their enemies, pray for them, and beseech God to forgive them (Matt 5:43-44; Luke 23:34). These OT/NT changes are not as severe as they initially appear since God's love for rebellious Israel is a repeated theme in the prophets and God's judgement on unrepentant sinners is clearly taught in the NT. Furthermore, the concept of treating one's enemies with kindness and grace, while not dominant in the OT, is nevertheless affirmed.³⁰ But some explanation of NT teaching regarding one's enemies and how that relates to lament is warranted. These changes are decidedly Christological.

(a) God and his people lamenting for their enemies.

³⁰ Ex 23:4-5; Lev 19:17-18; Job 31:29-30; Prov 24:17; 25:21.

While we see glimpses of God lamenting over sinners in the OT (cf. Gen 6:6; Is 63:9; Hos 11:8) this truth is much more robustly developed in the NT through the life and work of Christ. This is very clearly seen in Matthew 23:37 where Jesus laments over Jerusalem and expresses his deep sorrow over her impending judgment and failure to respond to him (cp. Matt 9:36). Furthermore, Jesus not only laments over sinners but gives his life to save them from their sin. Similarly, the Apostle Paul laments over hostile Jewish unbelievers, declaring “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” for my brothers (Rom 9:2). In fact, in this passage Paul goes so far as to say that he would wish himself to be eternally damned, separated from Christ (hypothetical use of the imperfect tense) if that would cause his hostile Jewish brethren to trust in Christ. Concern for the spiritual well-being and restoration of one’s enemies is not entirely absent in the OT. This was the very issue which Jonah stumbled over and Jeremiah grieved over (Jonah 4:1-3; Jer 8:18-9:1). But it is not developed as it is in the NT because Christ had not yet come.

(b) God and his people sacrificially loving their enemies.

The greatest differences between OT and NT lament relates to the NT call to sacrificially love one’s enemies based on the example of Christ. Again, love of enemy is not entirely absent in the OT but it takes on an entirely new dimension based on the life and death of Christ. Christ the creator of the universe loved the very creatures who hated him (1 John 4:10; Rom 5:8). And this incomprehensible truth directly relates to one of the OT lamenters greatest complaints—namely, that God the righteous judge is allowing evil doers to continue to abuse with apparent impunity. In other words, justice is being thwarted. Only in the NT do we clearly and fully see that God himself, the righteous judge, paid the penalty for sin to uphold his own righteousness and to justify sinners (Rom 3:21-26). While this truth does not fully explain why God allows so much

evil and resultant suffering in our world, and thus we lament, it powerfully shows that God has most sacrificially acted to uphold his own righteous. Thus, since God's love for his enemies caused him to suffer and die for them, this truth must shape how NT believers lament.

The Compatibility of OT and NT Lament—Blessing and Cursing

Asking God to bless one's enemies and also asking God to curse unrepentant evil doers are not incompatible. Even in the lament psalms we see the author asking God to avenge his enemies and to "fill their faces with shame, that they may seek your name" (Ps 83:16). Asking God to bring pain, shame, and partial retribution on evil doers so that they might repent is, rightly understood, a blessing. The lament prayer of Ps 83:16 is in keeping with the prophet Ezekiel's declaration that God takes no delight in the death of the wicked. Rather, God desires that they would repent and live (Ez 18:22, 32; cp. 2 Pet 3:9-10). At the same time, God is holy and just. He most assuredly will judge all unrepentant evil doers. This in fact is the basis for imprecatory laments. For instance, in Psalm 7:6, 9 David prays for God to judge his wicked enemies because "God is a righteous judge and a God who feels indignation every day. If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword" (v. 11-12). It is very important to recognize that the NT does not ask believers to simply let go of their demands for justice on unrepentant evil doers who harm them. Rather, we are told to not seek revenge and entrust retributive justice to God. We are to "leave it [retribution] to God" since God is the one who says "vengeance is mine" (Rom 12:19; Deut 32:35). James Adams picks up and expands on this theme, arguing that the imprecatory psalms are not as harsh or inappropriate as they initially appear because the various imprecations are directly related to the curses God promised to send on those who violated the covenant stipulations found in Deuteronomy 28 and 32 (curses on the fruit of the womb, sudden ruin,

plagues, etc.). Thus, he argues that it is not inappropriate for OT or NT believers to use the “war psalms” as he calls the imprecatory psalms, to pray asking God to do what he has already promised to do.³¹

Furthermore, God will eventually bring perfect justice. And that justice will involve utter destruction of unrepentant sinners. When Christ the lamb returns he will come as a roaring lion with his angelic army and a sword coming out of his mouth to slay the wicked and execute judgement on the nations (Rev 19:11-15). So, when we pray “your kingdom come” (Matt 6:10) or “Maranatha! Our Lord come! (1 Cor 16:22) we are implicitly asking for God to bring judgement. This is the context for imprecatory lament. And it is a very appropriate lament for church age believers. Paul himself, who had such love for his unbelieving enemies that he repeatedly risked his life to share the gospel pronounced a curse (imprecation) on those who hate Christ as well as on those who distort the gospel (1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:9). This is very similar to the psalmist declaring hatred for those who hate Yahweh (Ps 139:21) and asking God to destroy them (Ps 5:10).

Finally, we should note a very important use of OT lament at the end of the NT in Revelation 6:10 when martyred saints cry out for vengeance on their evil abusers: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” This is a very significant lament showing organic relationship and direct continuity between OT and NT lament.³² “How long O Lord” is a frequently repeated phrase in the lament

³¹ Adams, *War Psalms*, 78. While Adams argument is insightful and helpful, his casual dismissal of any other perspectives mitigates against his model. He does not seem to recognize any changes in OT and NT lament, including the ethical dilemma of NT saints praying a blessing on the one who dashes the brains out of the children of his enemies (Ps 137:9).

³² David Aune notes, “Rev 6:10 is essentially a prayer for vengeance, with precedents in the OT in the so-called imprecatory psalms.” He furthermore notes that “how long” in these texts is uttered in the context of impatient prayer due to the lamenter’s “perception that too long a period has intervened between the commission of an outrage and it just recompense,” *Revelation 6-16* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 407.

psalms.³³ It is a cry of anguish by those experiencing and witnessing seemingly interminable evil. It is a lament which calls on God to directly and quickly pour out divine retribution on one's enemies. This lament shows that the OT imprecations are not foreign to the NT. Nor do they peter out after Christ's resurrection. Rather, the book of Revelation, detailing the final stages of salvation history, is largely structured around God's gracious response to this imprecatory lament asking for divine judgement (cf. Rev 16:4-6 which declares the answer to the martyrs' prayers). Ironically, God's mercy shown to his suffering people often requires his judgment on hardened evil doers. For instance, Psalm 136 is a beautiful remembrance psalm, celebrating and praising God's repeated work in the life of Israel. The psalm is structured from beginning to end using the phrase "his steadfast love endures forever" in each of the twenty-six verses as a response to a loving act of God. Many of these acts, however, involve destructive judgement on Israel's enemies (v. 10, 15, 17-24). Loving deliverance for them necessitated consuming judgment on their oppressors. God's love and his justice are not at odds with each other.

The Practice of lament

Michael Card suggests that no one needs to be taught how to lament. Rather, they just need to know that they have permission to do so.³⁴ While there is some truth in this statement, given the fact that lament is so foreign to our western cultural experience, it would be helpful to give a few suggestions for practicing lament.

1. Journal your lament prayers and experiences

³³ Ps 6:3; 35:17; 74:10; 94:3; 119:84.

³⁴ Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 53.

Lament is generated by painful, confusing, disquieting experiences. Thus, it is often difficult to fully understand, let alone prayerfully articulate, exactly what one is feeling. But if we wait to lament until we have a full understanding of our emotions, we can easily become paralyzed and never lament. So, many of us find that a great place to begin is by writing down our feelings in prayer to God. It is best to simply begin the process, not worrying about proper grammar or even the “right” wording. As one begins this process, it is amazing how after a while words begin to flow on the page like water out of a dam overflow chute. In the process, we may start to better understand the jumble of confusing emotions and thoughts filling our heart and mind.

As we engage in the process of journaling our laments, God may speak to us, either at that time or later as we reread our journaling. It is interesting how often in the lament psalms after pouring out their raw emotions the writer voices a dramatic shift in tone, having gained a new positive perspective on God’s faithfulness and his inevitable justice toward abusers (cf. Ps 73:17f). Often this involves remembering a time in the past or recently when God worked on the psalmist’s behalf (Ps 3:4; 13:6; 60:16). For instance, in Psalm 77 Asaph was experiencing sleepless despair. He could find no comfort or relief. In his lament he asked whether the Lord had permanently rejected him. He asked whether God has forgotten how to be gracious to him. Then he experienced a dramatic turning point as he remembered God’s past faithfulness: “I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder your work and meditate on your mighty deeds” (v. 11-12). Reading our past journal entries (which should contain laments, praises, and answered prayers) can powerfully remind us of past times God has intervened and delivered us, giving us a new perspective on our current situation.

2. Focus on being honest not on being polite, polished, or “correct”

Relational intimacy requires honest communication. God would have every right to establish and require a “master/ slave” relationship with humans. But amazingly, he has initiated a love covenant with his people (Deut 7:6-8; Luke 22:20), one that he likens to the loving intimacy between a husband and a wife (Is 54:5-8; Hos 2:14-15; Rev 19:7-8). Jesus went so far as to tell his disciples that he no longer called them servants but friends because he communicated so fully with them (John 15:15). He in turn, desires honest communication from us. Deepening intimacy in any close relationship requires honest, authentic communication. God is not impressed with nor does he desire his people to simply “do what they are supposed to do” and “say what they are supposed to say” in a detached, ritualistic manner. That is what the Pharisees gave God. They honored God with their lips but their hearts were far from him (Matt 15:8). The only way we can build a truly intimate relationship with God, particularly when we are overwhelmed with grief, disappointment, and loss, is to cry out to God from the depths of our heart. This will often be “messy.” But we must not wait until we can form the “right” words which seem suitable for a prayer. Rather, lament is best begun by candidly emptying our hearts out to God. Peterson has captured well the importance of focusing on honesty not politeness or correctness.

Prayer is not particularly ‘nice.’ There is a recognition in prayer of the fiercer aspects of God...Psalm language is not careful about offending our sensibilities; its genius is its complete disclosure of the human spirit as it makes response to the revealing God. Given the mess that things are in, it will not be surprising that some unpleasant matters have to be spoken, and spoken in the language of our sin conditioned humanity, for the language of prayer is, most emphatically, human language. It is not angel talk.³⁵

³⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 41-42.

A few years ago I was again on my way to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to conduct several weeks of trauma care. I knew it would be a very difficult trip as Congo has one of the highest sexual violence rates in the world and one of the highest percentages of refugees. The suffering there is overwhelming. I had an unscheduled 24-hour layover in Europe and thus had extra time to read the Scriptures and journal. I thought this would help prepare me for the pain I was about to witness and experience. But instead of this being a fortifying, encouraging exercise, it was an excruciating painful one. That day I read several chapters in the Book of Jeremiah. One verse in particular, triggered a cascade of painful memories and harsh emotions. It reads, "Leave your fatherless children and I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust me" (Jer 49:11). About a year earlier I had been in refugee camps in South Sudan. I had wept many times over the starving children I had witnessed. I have counseled countless abuse survivors in the US who were molested by abusers who took advantage of the vulnerability of children being raised by single mothers. So, this promise in Jeremiah felt like obscene divine mockery. Instead of pretending I didn't feel that way, I began to journal. My journaling wasn't polite. It wasn't "correct." But it accurately reflected real emotions I needed to articulate to God. And, as often happens in the lament psalms, in the process I did receive some comfort that helped me continue to trust in spite of my pain and unanswered questions. Here is a bit of what I wrote:

God, how can you make such promises. How dare you. It feels like you are mocking the innocent. You say 'give me the most vulnerable and I'll take care of them.' How about those children gassed to death in Syria last week. I saw pictures of their contorted bodies. I know you saw them too. How about the children (and adults) bombed to death last week, on Palm Sunday no less, in Egypt. What did your promise mean for them? How about the millions of hungry, traumatized African refugees, most of them women and children? How are you feeding or caring for them. God how about that single Congolese mother we met two years ago who began selling her body after

watching her own children go hungry for 7 days. God I can't feed or protect these children and their mothers. But you can. You promise to. Why promise what you aren't going to deliver. God, I feel so angry right now. I feel betrayed by you. But much worse than my pain, what about the ones you said you'd care for. How about their pain. Can I trust your promises?

God, I get so tired of wrestling with you. There is so much pain in our world. Why do you let me see and experience pain you aren't relieving. God I know you care. Easter week proves that. Jesus, how could I doubt your love when I picture you on the cross. I know you will wipe away every tear. But in the here and now while people suffer it is so hard to reconcile your promises with my experiences. It seems like a small consolation that in Jeremiah 30-31 you promise to those suffering that you will have mercy on their descendants. Am I missing something? Is my faith just weak? I'm not exactly sure but I am committed no matter how bleak it gets to keep wrestling with you and lamenting. Jesus I believe. Help my unbelief.

3. Articulate the Full Range of your Dark Feelings, Struggles, and Doubts

Closely related to the previous point, when we lament we should articulate the full range of our feelings, including our negative feelings. As we've already seen, biblical lament passages articulate the full range of human emotion, from pain, doubt, rage, and despair, to faith, hope, and joy. Ironically, aching emotional lament and joyful praise are inextricably connected. Most of the lament psalms articulate praise and hope after articulating negative, often very dark emotions.³⁶ (Though this is not always the case. Psalm 44, 88, and the book of Lamentations end without clear hope, demonstrating the fact that our prayer should be honest and not contrived.) Heartfelt, genuine praise does not emerge in a vacuum but often flows out of deep wrestling with God. Scripture shows that God gives us permission and encouragement to articulate the full

³⁶ See for example Ps 6:9-10; 7:17; 22:25-31; 31:19-20; 69:33-36; 73:23-28; 77:10-20.

range of our feeling to God. Pemberton notes that we face much pain and disappointment in this life. Our bodies are weak and mortal. People, including lifelong friends, hurt, disappoint, and betray us. And most painfully, God sometimes acts in ways that seem bizarre and cause us to question his faithfulness. Therefore: “All of these struggles and more are at the heart of lament. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing held back, nothing taboo. These psalms teach us that there is nothing a believer may not say to God in lament as long as the lament matches the honesty of our praise.”³⁷

4. Model your lament after the heart of God

We have seen that God’s love and his justice are not at odds with each other. Our laments should reflect both of these divine attributes. It is very appropriate to pray for God’s justice and his vengeance on unrepentant abusers. At the same time, we must not lose sight of God’s love for sinners, including abusers, and his desire that they repent so that they can experience life and blessing (Ez 18:23). In the early stages of abuse trauma our laments may not reflect this balance. That is understandable and often unavoidable due to the impact an evil doers’ actions have had on us or those we love. But we don’t want to stay in this place. In time we want to learn, with God’s help, to see the world as he does and to have his heart toward abusers. For the most painful, destructive abusers in my life I am learning to lament asking God to: (1) strike them down (by being incarcerated, losing their physical, social, economic, or political power, or if need be by killing them) so that they cannot continue to abuse others, thus showing mercy to their victims (Ps 58:6-7). (2) Engulf and overwhelm them with shame (humiliating them and driving them to their knees) so that they would seek God (Ps 83:16). (3) Work powerfully in

³⁷ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 31.

their life so that they would come to know Christ who died for them, so that they would not experience divine judgment but would experience God's blessing (cf. Jonah 4:2, 11). (4) Hold them fully accountable for their evil deeds and judge them eternally if they remain unrepentant (cf. Ps 5:10; Rev 6:10).

5. Persevere

Lament is hard painful work. It requires us to acknowledge and face negative emotions we would much rather ignore, deny, or numb. It forces us to by faith take our pain to the God we can't control, the God who appears silent, the God who may well not respond when or how we desire. Thus, we must persevere when we lament. It is never a quick, easy process. But God promises to honor those who persevere in prayer. For instance, in Jesus' parable of an unjust judge and a desperate widow in need of justice, the widow pesters the judge for help until he finally gives in and grants her request. Jesus' commentary on the story is this, "will not God give justice to his elect, who cry out to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7). Similarly, Jeremiah, whose suffering and resultant laments were life-long and extreme, declares in the midst of some of his darkest laments that "the Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks for him" (Lam 3:25). Lament requires dogged perseverance.

6. Lament over the suffering of others as well as your own

Biblical lament often seems strange to many Americans. Most of us, particularly middle and upper-class whites, enjoy great material blessings, security, access to excellent health care, and law enforcement and judicial systems which are relatively efficient and fair. Many of us have been spared from physical and sexual abuse. Many of us cannot begin to relate to the chronic

injustice, unchecked evil, and widespread grotesque suffering prevalent in most of the ancient and much of the modern world. Many of us cannot relate to the suffering and injustice other Americans are experiencing. Thus, there is much to lament, even if we are not currently needing to lament for our own experiences. God commands us to “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). In our western comfort we can even become smug at our emotional tranquility and lack of anger at destructive injustice. Brueggemann forcefully addresses those who respond to the anger expressed in various lament psalms by saying to themselves:

‘This psalm does not concern me, because I have never been that angry.’ Such a response may be spoken as though it were a virtue, but I suggest it reflects someone who is only half living. It is a good idea, when encountering a psalm like this to ask, ‘Whose psalm is this?’ If I am not able to pray that way today, then I can ask, ‘Who needs to pray that way today?’ It could be the woman who is victimized by rape who knows that kind of rage and indignation...It could be the voice of a black in South Africa (or here?) who has yet again been brutalized or humiliated by the system...

Through this psalm the believer may join in the prayers of those who take God seriously and whose destiny is so heavy that they need others to join in these prayers with them.³⁸

7. Use the Psalms as a template for your prayers.

While a few dozen of the Psalms have an identified setting, the vast majority do not. And even the ones that do are not obviously connected to the event they are said to be related to (Ps 51 is a rare exception). This allows the broadest possible application of the lament psalms. Categorize some of the issues you can particularly relate to in various Psalms (betrayal, public shame, verbal abuse, threats from arrogant, dangerous abusers, despair, sense of alienation from God, anger at

³⁸ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 87.

the prosperity of the wicked, loneliness, etc.) so that you can easily find relevant Psalms when you are experiencing those issues. Pray through the various lament Psalms and adapt them to your own situation. I have found Derek Kidner's short commentaries to be very helpful in preparing me to pray the Psalms.³⁹

Conclusion

One of the most neglected tools for missionary care is the biblical practice of lament.

³⁹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* and *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975).