



Week 2: Psalms of Lament

Day 1

Psalm 13

A Psalm of David

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!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Commentary

This week, we are studying the psalms of lament. Forty percent of the psalms contained in scripture are psalms of lament – more than any other type. This makes sense when we think about how we as humans tend to spend more time complaining than praising. And yet, we tend to shy away from lament because we often feel like it shows too much doubt in God.

Lament may seem like it is the opposite of worship, but it is actually an act of the faithful. If things in your life aren't going well – if your marriage is falling apart or you have lost your job or your child has cancer – you could choose to turn your back on God. In fact, you might interpret those circumstances as God not existing. But the act of lament shows that you have faith that God is there and that God is good. Lamenting says, "Lord, this is too much for me, but I know that it is not too much for you."

In this Psalm, David recalls how God has dealt bountifully with him and so he places his trust once again in God, even in the midst of feeling like God has given up on him.

Reflection Question

Can you recall a time when you felt like God was really present? Write down some notes about it so that you can pull them out when it feels like God is far away and as a reminder that God has “dealt bountifully with you” just as with David.

Day 2

Psalm 10:1-8, 14, 17-18

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—

let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,

those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.

In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”;

all their thoughts are, “There is no God.”

Their ways prosper at all times;

your judgments are on high, out of their sight;

as for their foes, they scoff at them.

They think in their heart, “We shall not be moved;

throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.”

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;

under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.

They sit in ambush in the villages;

in hiding places they murder the innocent.

But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,

that you may take it into your hands;

the helpless commit themselves to you;

you have been the helper of the orphan.

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;

you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear

to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,

so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

Commentary

Psalms of lament fall into two categories – communal lament and individual lament. Psalm 10 is an example of an individual lament. The psalmist is bemoaning his current state: that of being persecuted by those who are more powerful. From the world’s perspective, it looks like the persecutors are able to get away with everything – the deceit, oppression, murder. And the psalmist laments how much pain and grief they have brought about, asking God why God is not interceding. His psalm ends with a proclamation of God’s judgment, which is a common technique the psalmists used to remind themselves and those who read their words that God will eventually right all wrongs.

Reflection Question

Why is it important to describe what we believe about God in our prayers to God?

Day 3

Psalm 88

O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you;
incline 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,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah
You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.
Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you? Selah
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?
But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?
Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Commentary

The psalms, though contained in the Holy Bible, are not the word of God. They are a collection of words **to God** and not God's words **to me**. Not only do they offer us a peek into the prayer life of King David and others, but they offer us a pattern on which to model our own prayers. And the psalms of lament remind us that one of the most important components of prayer is honesty.

The author Glennon Doyle writes about her children not having to wear special “church clothes” on Sundays to church, but instead being allowed to wear exactly what they feel like that day. She writes, “Wear what you want... God knows who we are inside anyway: so wearing an uncomfortable, fancy costume (literal or figurative) to church is a little like getting really dressed up for an x-ray.”

When our prayers are in Sunday clothes, they are not true outcries to God. Psalms of lament are the opposite of Sunday clothes... they are the yoga pants we all feel like wearing to church but don't because we think we have to look perfect on the outside. They are honest, even if that honesty is embarrassing. Psalms of lament don't try to sound like the prayers of perfect believers... they are the truthful cries of hurting believers.

Reflection Question

What have you wanted to say to God but have held back because you thought it would be too honest to share?

Day 4

Psalm 22:1-11

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;
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;

scorned by others, and despised by the people.

All who see me mock at me;

they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—

let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

On you I was cast from my birth,

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Do not be far from me,

for trouble is near

and there is no one to help.

Commentary

Think about a relationship you have been in with a significant other. Chances are, you spent the first few months of that relationship on your best behavior. Even if you were frustrated with the person you were with, you might have bitten your tongue or restrained yourself from sharing anger. You might have also tried to hide the parts of you that felt less than perfect. But then, as your relationship progresses, you eventually open up and share the imperfect parts of yourself. You express disappointment or annoyance when you see the imperfect parts of your significant other. And what happens is that it feels

like a wall has come down and you have much more open communication. You begin to feel fully known.

Much like in a romantic relationship, it is only when we express the full spectrum of how we are feeling that we grow closer to God. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, "I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I've been closer to him for that reason." We begin to see that God can handle all of us, warts and all.

In this psalm, the psalmist shows that honest questioning can co-exist with faithful assurance in God. They do not have to be in conflict with one another. The writer asks God why he has been forsaken and why God doesn't answer him. But in the same breath, he recalls that God has kept him safe and asks God to continue to stay near to him.

Reflection Question

Do you remember when you first started being really honest with God instead of trying to pray perfect prayers? What did that feel like?

Day 5

Psalm 69:1-5, 16-18, 33

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.
More in number than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without cause;
many are those who would destroy me,
my enemies who accuse me falsely.
What I did not steal
must I now restore?
O God, you know my folly;
the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.
Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.
Do not hide your face from your servant,
for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.
Draw near to me, redeem me,
set me free because of my enemies.
For the Lord hears the needy,
and does not despise his own that are in bonds.

Commentary

The theologian Walter Brueggemann describes laments as "refusals to settle for the way things are... acts of relentless hope that believe no situation falls outside [God's] capacity for transformation."

One of the hallmarks of faithful lamentations is that while they are prayers of protest, complaint, and grief over a disaster, they also contain an appeal to God for deliverance. They arise from faith in the power and willingness of God to save. Lamentations insist that the world is a system in which divine intervention is always possible.

In this psalm, the movement from anxiety and fear to hopefulness is achieved through remembrance of God's previous works. The psalm does not come to an answer to problems wrapped neatly with a bow, but it orients the writer and the reader to the source of answers: God.

Reflection Question

How have you settled for the ways things are rather than calling out to God for change?