

Good Mourning

Mourning is biblical, and biblical mourning is good.

- Define Lament
 - a prayer in pain that leads to trust. (Mark Vroegop)
 - the “liturgical response to the reality of suffering” (Soong-Chan Rah)
 - the language of disorientation. (Walter Brueggemann)
- There is a whole book dedicated to it.... Lamentations.
- Psalms of lament
 - Lament makes up at least one third of the Psalms. There are anywhere from 5-7 main categories of Psalms, and lament makes up the largest one.
- Address American Christian triumphalism
 - I have to say that mourning is Biblical, because our American Christian (especially evangelical) tradition acts as if it is not..
 - “Positive, Encouraging, K-Love”
 - CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) Top 100 songs is full of song like.... “How Great Is Our God,” “Glorious Day,” “The Blessing,” “See a Victory,” “Great Things”... MAYBE 5 out of 100 qualify as lament.
 - Compare to secular radio... ___% of top 100 songs are about heartbreak
- Decline of the Western church... I wonder how much of it is due to the fact that we don’t give space for lament.
 - People need to know that the church is a safe place to grieve... And **If we do not give space for people to mourn/ suffer/ grieve, they will leave the church to do it.**
- **Lament is a pathway to praise (not a cul-de-sac of sorrow) which avoids the ditch of denial and the ditch of despair.**
 - Lament should always lead us to praise... But in the context of a society that minimizes suffering, and obsesses over victory and strength, too often lament is *replaced by* praise.

Denial

- To avoid the “cul-de-sac of sorrow” Christians have interpreted verses like these to prescribe an unrealistic, unhealthy habit of denying grief...
 - James 1:2// Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:16// Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.
 - **These verses reflect God’s intention for us to arrive at joy, but not by avoiding the necessary path of lament.**

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- There are other Scriptures that actually instruct us to grieve...
 - Isaiah 22:12-13// At that time the Lord, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, called you to weep and mourn. He told you to shave your heads in sorrow for your sins and to wear clothes of burlap to show your remorse. But instead, you dance and play; you slaughter cattle and kill sheep. You feast on meat and drink wine. You say, "Let's feast and drink, for tomorrow we die!"
 - Lamentations 2:18-19// Let your tears flow like a river day and night. Give yourselves no rest; give your eyes no relief. Rise during the night and cry out. Pour out your hearts like water to the Lord.
- In other words... **"What you don't pour out, leaks."** - Pastor Justin
 - This is my struggle... I tend toward denial... personal story of breaking my hand.
What you don't release not only leaks, it can explode!

Despair

- Though mourning is biblical, not all mourning is good. There is such a thing as bad mourning. And that bad mourning takes us into the ditch of despair.
- When you first start studying for a driver's license, one of the first things you learn is not to overcorrect... If you're trying to avoid an obstruction in the road or another car, you should never yank the wheel in the opposite direction or else you could end up losing control of the car and careening in that direction... When it comes to our grief, we often overcorrect. When we realize that denial is not an effective way to process grief, the response may be to jerk the wheel in the opposite direction into the ditch of despair.
 - Psalm 126:5-6// Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.
 - An analogy that points to the productiveness of our grieving, but also the possibility of misplacing our grief. It shows there is a way to suffer well, and also a way to waste your suffering.
 - Think of a farmer taking all of his seeds, throwing them in the trash, or standing in the middle of the road, throwing it into the wind. There are ways to waste your grieving that produce no fruit in your life.
- The fruit of despair looks like...
 - Hopelessness
 - Pessimism/ Cynicism
 - Self Destruction... gluttony... hedonism...
 - Rage/ Violence
 - Apathy
 - Bitterness/ unforgiveness/ resentment/ hatred
 - Guilt/ Shame
 - If any of these are the fruit of your mourning, then there's a possibility that you are not mourning good.

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- Disclaimers...
 - I want to be careful, and make clear that I am not demonizing the emotions themselves... Anger, for example, is not sinful. What can dangerous and what indicates the bad fruit of despair is that those passing emotions have now settled as attitudes, as habits, as mindsets.
 - I also want to acknowledge that depression is a real thing. In addition to what we feel in our hearts, our minds, and our spirits, we also have a body to contend with. Some bodies are predisposed to chemical imbalances. Some of you have experienced Traumas (with a capital T) that have actually changed your physiology (The Body Keeps the Score). And if that's your situation than what I'm saying here tonight is not a complete cure for your pain.
 - "Lament is a tonic not a cure." As long as we are alive on this earth we will encounter suffering.
 - So, if you are someone in despair, I don't want you leaving, feeling guilty about that. But I do want to offer hope in the reality that you are not suffering alone. I want to point to a biblical tonic that both affirms your feelings, but also provides a pathway to praise.
- **Biblical lament is a pre-plowed field where we can sow our sorrow and expect good fruit.**

Good Mourning: Turn, Complain, Ask, Trust... Mark Vroegop

- **Turn to God**
 - That might sound obvious and even trite (it is trite if offered alone, without the other 3 elements of lament), but it needs to be said. Why?...
 - Psychological experiment on college students who had experienced a break-up... When they looked at the picture of their ex, both the pain and addiction centers of the brain lit up. It was equivalent to the reaction of a cocaine addict in withdrawal.
 - When we are suffering loss, our biological wiring tells us to reach for something to comfort us. If we can't get our hands on the thing or the person we lost, then we will reach for things that will light up the "reward centers" of our brain... give us a hit of dopamine.
 - Is it any wonder that alcoholism and opioid addictions went up after the pandemic?!
 - Addiction is not always as drastic as drugs... there's also ice-cream... and social media.
 - When we turn to social media to vent our anger, grief, frustration, we are reaching for the shallow reward... a hit of dopamine.
 - This is all the more reason why we need to intentionally choose to turn to God when we grieve. **Lament is not just complaining, it's prayer.**
- **Complain**

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- Complaint in the Psalms... Imagine someone opening up the Bible study with a prayer like this? How would you react? How uncomfortable would you feel?
 - Ps. 13:1-2, MSG// Long enough, God—you've ignored me long enough. I've looked at the back of your head long enough.
 - Ps. 44: 23-26, MSG// Get up, God! Are you going to sleep all day? Wake up! Don't you care what happens to us?... If you love us so much, Help us!
 - Lamentations 1:16, NLT// No one is here to comfort me; anyone who might encourage is far away.”
 - Ps. 22:1-2, NIV// My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
 - Each of these complaints are actual Psalms in Scripture... Ps. 13-2; Ps. 44:23-26; Lam. 1:15; Ps. 22:1-2
- God gives us permission to wrestle with these things... to come to him with our doubts and voice our complaints... Although, our complaints are incomplete if not accompanied by the other 3 elements of lament.
 - **When we enter into the realm of complaint, we are holding a tension between what we know to be true about God and what feels true in the moment... God gives us space to voice our worst fears and feelings.**
 - But as I said earlier... feelings are different from attitudes, mindsets, and habits.
 - God gives us space to express our feelings, and then invites us to move forward in the process of lament.... **That's the thing about music... music moves.**
- **Psalms are songs..**
 - There is therapeutic value in singing along to the words of a sad song...
 - “Music allows us all to experience our collective heartbreaks, our collective feelings of separation of loss, in a way that is safe, contained and shared. The music reaches our emotions, deep in our bodies as opposed to our heads. Music also moves, and moves us along with it, so that we can let our feelings take us somewhere, rather than feeling stuck with them.” - psychotherapist, Mark O'Connell
 - God ingeniously gave us the gift of complaint in the form of songs, because God knows that songs must eventually end.
- “Set a timer for 15 minutes, turn on a sad song, and lean into the grief. When the timer dings, you're done. Move on with your life.” - Harrison Ford, Shrinking
- [Songs of Lament Playlist](#) (click for link)
 - “I Don't Have to Pretend,” Victory Boyd//
*I don't have to pretend like everything's okay
That's not what Jesus meant when He said to have faith
If you see me crying, I'm being true
Instead of lying about what I'm going through*
 - “God & Prozac,” Chris Renzema// (Chemical imbalance)
I believe in a gospel and a God who is good

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*But these chemicals don't always work like they should
Hung up on this heartache, and the distance between
The way that I'm feeling and what I believe*

- "The Dark Night of the Soul," Levi The Poet// (Death)
It's not that I don't believe. It's just that sometimes faith feels more like cataracts than clarity.
- "W.D.Y.K.A.G?" King's Kaleidoscope & Propaganda// (Imprecation & Protest)
Burn it all down! Burn Babylon Down!
- Through lament God gives us space to fully vocalize our complaints without getting stuck in them.

Ask Boldly

- Exodus 2:23-25//
 - *Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. But the Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act.*
 - All the mighty exploits in the book of Exodus were only possible because the Israelite people raised their complaints to God and their petitions, expecting that he would answer.
- "The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering." - Soong-Chan Rah
- "The power of lament is its ability to summon God's help" - Walter Brueggemann
 - "Psalms of disorientation are prayers that seek to mobilize God on the assumption that if you don't summon God nothing will happen." (Brueggemann)
- Over and over again through Scripture we see that God acts on behalf of people who are suffering... once they cry out.
 - Jairus' daughter who was dying, the woman with the issue of blood, the lepers, Blind Bartimaeus... "Son of David! Have pity on me!"
- This is why lament is a pathway to praise, because when we raise our cry for help God answers! Our petitions give opportunity for God to answer our prayers so *that* we can praise him for what he will do in response.
 - **But when we bypass the petition, we reveal our lack of trust either in God's power or his willingness to save us.**
 - **Lament is a tool God's given us to express our emotions, yes, but also as a means of connecting to his power... and to his steadfast love.**

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- Too often Christians want to point to suffering and grieving people, who are voicing their complaints, as if they are the ones who lack faith. But actually, it is those crying who reveal a deep belief in God's power to save. No one's wants to be seen as a "cry-baby" or a Debbie Downer, because it's a sign of weakness in our culture... But to God it represents strength in our relationship with Him. That we still believe that we are desperately in need of Him.

Trust

- In the psalms of lament, *trust* looks like the pivot words "even so" or "but" or "yet" or "and"...
- Lamentations 3:19-24// *The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. **Yet I still dare to hope** when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!"*
- **We can trust in God because his faithfulness is not dependent upon his feelings.**
 - Too often, our faithfulness is... When we are grieving is when we are most likely to stop turning to God and start turning to others sources of comfort. When we are grieving is when we are most likely to let our complaints turn to cynicism. When we are grieving is when we stop crying out to God and start depending upon our own effort to save us. But if we trust in who God says he is, he can meet us in our grief and give us the grace to praise Him anyway.
- **We can trust in God because his faithfulness is not dependent upon his feelings, *and* because He chooses to feel them, nonetheless.**
 - The Creator of the universe does not need to experience grief and suffering, but he did experience it (in the most extreme sense) so that he could meet us in our suffering.
 - "My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me!" Matthew 27:46
 - Jesus not only experienced what you experience but he *chose* to experience it so that he can meet you in the suffering... and pull you through to new life!

Closing

- Those in the ditch of denial... pour out!
- Those in the ditch of despair... ask!