

The definition of our words can make a world of a difference.

**Proverbs 18:21 - words can bring death or life!**

We often make this verse about the totality of our words and what comes out of our mouth.

But what about *each* word?

When we lose our spiritual vocabulary... it can result in a decay of belief, instead of life.

The poet Christian Wiman asked the question that stirred the pot for this series:

*"Does the decay of belief among educated people in the West precede the decay of language used to define and explore belief, or do we sense the fire of belief fading in us only because the words are sodden with overuse and imprecision and will not burn?"*

When Solomon wrote his Proverb about the power of words, he wouldn't have had to look far for evidence. His own father, David, was the author of most of our Psalms.

We talked a couple weekends ago about Tim Keller's habit of reading the Psalms in their entirety every month for the past 20 years, as well as his explanation about how it fuels his prayer life:

*"There are other prayers in the Bible but no other place where you have an entire course of theology in prayer form, and no other place where you have every possible heart condition represented, along with the way to process that situation before God. Even the Lord's Prayer is more a summary of what we must pray—while the Psalms are a comprehensive program in how to pray it."*

Within what Tim Keller calls this comprehensive program we've got many varieties of Psalms:

Psalms of **praise and thanksgiving** - The ones that get turned into lyrics for worship songs.

Psalms of **trust and confidence** - I'd call these the devo Psalms. They give you the warm fuzzies at the beginning of the day and the fuel you need to face whatever it has in store.

Psalms of **protection and rebuke**—they are the ones we shout down the enemy with. The War Room Psalms, the ones you throw in the clip and fire off at fear, stress, and doubt.

**Messianic and royal** Psalms – they point to God's sheer glory and the eventual coming of Jesus

Psalms of **confession and repentance** – the ones that show David wasn't perfect but he was still a man after God's heart.

But the ones we don't prefer to read in the morning with our coffee, the ones we don't rush to memorize, the ones we don't convert into worship choruses... **the Psalm of Lament.**

They make up half to two thirds of the book of Psalms depending on who you ask.

Psalm 77 - *Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?*

*Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time?*

*Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?*

We like the Psalms of praise. Protection. Trust. Thanksgiving.

But we often don't know what to do with these Psalms of protest.

They are less theological and more visceral.

They aren't refined, they are rambling and raw.

We struggle because in the church culture we've created, we attempt to meet an unspoken expectation of being OK, an unspoken expectation in the church of having it figured out. So we refuse to lament. But the Bible doesn't.

I love this quote by the pastor and author **Chris Wright**:

*"Lament is not only allowed in the Bible; it is modeled in abundance. God seems to want to give us as many words with which to fill out our complaint forms as to write our thank-you notes."*

**Lament** is defined as an expression of deep pain and sorrow. Biblically, it's an honest vocalization of that deep grief to God.

And the abundance of lament isn't just found in Psalms.

It fills the pages of Job.

It's the focus of OT prophets like Habakkuk.

It's literally the name of a book in the Bible full of prayers and songs of lament that often hides right under our nose – **Lamentations**.

### **LAMENTATIONS 3:1-24**

This passage – words seemingly shouted at God... is in the Word of God.

I find it powerful that this Word of God is life, and it finds its place in our life- even in our grief.

**Phillip Yancey** once said Scripture show us that *"God seems to understand fully the grounds of our protest as well as our need to rage against the pain."*

What are the grounds?

In Lamentations the grounds for lament are the loss of Jerusalem and the devastating effects of Israel's sinfulness. These echo the same grounds all of humanity has shared for lament since the Garden. The Jews lost Jerusalem, the city of God. We all lost Eden, a place of walking with God. And we feel the devastating effect of sinfulness – the direct result of that fall.

And the reality is this - we're implicit in that sin! ALL have sinned and fallen short.

And yet God in his grace allows us to lament the brokenness that's the result of it.

The Israelites who had sinned and refused to repent, causing their own exile – yet he gives these same children the freedom to complain to him even when it's their fault. God's mercy is so abundant that he lets you cry to him even when it's your fault in the first place

And this lament by the Israelites is placed in Holy Scripture. It's a part of Jewish worship.

Psalms. Lamentations. Job. Habakkuk. The list of space God gives to lament in scripture goes on and on.

But the times you've heard lament addressed in the church in sermons or conversation may be a far shorter list.

When we don't give space to lament in our life the same way God gives it space in scripture, It gives us a shallow definition of prayer. Ironically - it gives us a shallow hope.

## PRAYER - FAKE vs. AUTHENTIC

You have to ask- what kind of God allows this kind of lament? What kind of God would then put it in scripture?

One that desires humble honesty, not appearances.

One that wants authentic relationship in every season, not a religious routine.

Consider the book of Job - it is a book full of lament spoken by Job, spoken and no doubt at times shouted toward the heavens. We don't think of these tirades as prayer, but he was addressing God, which is prayer in its essence.

We see at the beginning of Job, that the devil want to test Job's belief. He all but makes a bet that Job would quit on God if he suffered. At times when you read Job's lament it seems like the devil was right, because all of this can sound like unbelief:

*"Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?"*

*"Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light?"*

*"Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?"*

But hear me: **Lament is NOT unbelief**

You're talking to a God. Complete and utter unbelief wouldn't talk to him. He's not there.

It's notable that in the book of Job, his companions speak ABOUT God.

Job spoke TO God. Some 58 times he calls out God directly. This is lament.

*The author Madeline L'engle once said- "The second I'm furious with God, I'm totally close, because you cannot be furious with somebody who's not there."*

Similarly, the author **Anne Lamott** has said- *"My belief is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like you at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in you," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said... and it would almost bring tears to my eyes... for the courage it takes to get real- really real."*

When we refuse to lament... when we don't take how we truly feel to God...

When we don't tell the truth... when we don't apply the courage to get real...

We don't just keep it fake. We end up worshipping a fake god.

We lean into an idol - my own strength.

***"God will never give you more than you can bear"***

The subtext of that statement reeks of self-reliance.

I can do it on my own. I can make it in my own strength.

To refuse to lament is to head in the direction of this idolatry.

It's to buy the lie that "I've got this." "I'm good."

But to lament is to relearn the reality of our humanity.  
That there's no avoiding pain and suffering. And to lament is to remember that we need God's power, his grace... we need HIM.

Jesus is living, eternal proof that God doesn't abandon us in our lament. He joins us. And we see in the accounts of Jesus' life, that Jesus himself laments. In **Luke 13** I was reading this morning as He laments over Jerusalem as they'd continually rejected a call to repentance. In **Mark 14** he laments on his own behalf as he cries out for the cup of suffering to pass from him. And from the cross he quotes David's Psalms of lament, **Psalms 22**, crying out "*My God, why have you forsaken me?*"

**When we refuse to lament...** we look around at the rubble and give into cynicism. This is all there is. Paul writes in Romans 8 that creation is broken, prone to decay, groaning. That's reality. To deny that reality and it's suffering is to ignore the truth of scripture. But that's not to give way to cynicism and a posture of "This is all there is." Because Paul writes in that same chapter: *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.*

Lament speaks to our HOPE. **CYNICISM vs. HOPE**

### **Lamentations 3:21-24**

*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!"*

It's an overwhelmingly short ray of hope among the hurricane of grief in Lamentations. Yet hope is present. Like the sun, it's ever present- even when it's behind the cloud of grief. It peaks between the clouds of Lamentation to remind us of reality - the hope found in God.

Lament in our culture is synonymous with venting – it's done for the sake of getting things off of our chest. But biblical lament is ultimately done to set our eyes back on God. Lament isn't just keeping it real in prayer, it's connecting your hope again to a very real God.

I said it earlier: Lamenting isn't unbelief.  
But I'll take it a step further.  
NOT lamenting leads to unbelief. It feeds it.

The narrative exists that to be a man, to be tough, to be hard- it meant nothing bothers you. You never show pain. Never let anyone see that they hurt you. And this isn't specific to manhood. This is a common refrain for all people. Something hurts you? Bury it. Something causes you pain? Repress it, forget it. You're fine. Shake it off. Keep it away from the surface, where you have to deal with it or share it.

**"I FEEL FINE"**– the phrase "I feel fine" comes to mind because of a man named **Jocko Willink**. He's a former Navy SEAL turned author and the host of a leadership and discipline podcast. He recently told a story about scuba training where trainers would do all kinds of [and I

quote] “traumatic things to you” while you were underwater with your scuba gear on. Rip the gear off. Pull on the facemask. Tie the regulator hose in knots and create mayhem. When you’d eventually come to the surface, what you were supposed to do immediately was shout: “*I FEEL FINE.*”

Jocko said, and I quote: “*they said it was some proof that you were neurologically OK. I’m not sure if I believe that. I think what they were really doing was programming us for when there’s total mayhem and chaos, and we get a chance to get our breath, instead of freaking out, we just look up and say, “I FEEL FINE.”*”

Now there’s value in this kind of training.

But I don’t wonder if WE haven’t been programmed, in our FAITH, that when we step out of total mayhem and chaos into the presence of a close friend, or the presence of God in prayer, that we’re supposed to simply say “I FEEL FINE.”

Books like Lamentations and the Psalms would strongly suggest otherwise. Scripture programs us to lament. To take the pain, the traumatic things you’re experiencing, and don’t ignore them or suppress them – take them to God. Write them down. Shout them at the sky. Fill out your complaint form. God can handle it.

We bury our hurt and pain thinking it goes away. It’s dead and buried.

But when we bury our hurt and pain, we don’t forget it as much as we subconsciously add it to our foundation.

The fruit of me living like this as a youth into early adulthood?

I became a cynic. A pessimist. Prepared for the worst.

You would think I find Jesus and live happily ever after as my life is changed and I no longer live pretending I’m okay when I’m not.

But in our church culture we subconsciously aim to meet an unspoken expectation of being OK, an unspoken expectation in the church of having it figured out.

When you show up to church and are asked how are you doing, we’re supposed to say the churchy version of “*I feel fine.*”

That’s not to say you should come in here and bleed on people starting with the greeter at the door who asks “how are you doing?” But we should have people in our lives that we lean into when we aren’t fine. And we should certainly feel permission to come into God’s presence and say the same.

Yet so often we’ve been programmed to say “*I feel fine*” rather than lament.

But the danger is, NOT lamenting leads to unbelief.

Why? If you aren’t offering your grief to God you’re living with it.

Reality wins and hope dies.

You get stuck in suffering and death and forget the resurrection.

Cynicism will push you away from God.

Lament pulls you into His presence. It reattaches you to hope.

Lament isn't venting. It's reconnecting.  
Lament serves as the jumper cable that gives us hope again.  
And yet just like when our actual car needs a jump, we find help in another person pulling alongside of us.

We are called to *'weep with those who weep.'*

That takes empathy. But too often we seem more interested in deciding whether a people group we aren't a part of should be weeping or not. Or when it's an individual, we are more inclined to respond immediately with our favorite churchy cliché to solve their weeping and sweep them quickly back to rejoicing.

What is right up there with *"weep with those who weep"* in the Biblical commands that should fuel empathy? ***Be slow to speak, and quick to listen.***

Everyone in the body of Christ wants to be God's mouthpiece.  
We all too easily and all too willingly step into Job's friends shoes.

But we so often speak not because of the person suffering's discomfort.  
We start talking because of our own.

**"Me Too"** – a prominent pastor had one of those sermon clips about the power of a me too. A gift of our struggles is the ability to relate and empathize. Me too can be a gift. This isn't to say he was wrong. But me too can also be an opportunity for us to step into narcissism. We're uncomfortable in the presence of suffering. Our soul knows it shouldn't be this way. So we talk about what we're comfortable talking about: ourselves.

Me too is powerful.

But the other side of the coin is this:

**Proverbs 14:10** says **"Each heart knows its own bitterness."** Some pain is truly unique.

**2 Corinthians 1** Paul speaks clear as day how God delivers us through pain so we can comfort others in their pain, and share the comfort we received.

There's a power in me too that I'm not trying to deny.

But that verse isn't about some shared pain that's the same for everyone. It's about the shared comfort. And often that comfort is found in a God who listens and cares.

Many times when I'm itching to reach and try to relate and say me too, or I've got a scripture locked and loaded... I do well to **remember my ears.**

There's such a healing peace that comes when we realize that God wants to hear our lament.

He hears. And he doesn't just hear our prayers – he listens.

This reality reassures us of our dignity.

God listens. He listens well.

***Why don't we?***

We as a church realize this call to be God's body.  
We rightly rally to be His hands and feet. We want to be His mouthpiece.  
We do well to remember our ears.  
Our listening can be just as radical an instrument of healing as our words.

**Psalm 116:2** says:

*"Because he replied by speaking directly to my situation, I'll call on him as long as I live."*

Only no it doesn't... it says:

***"Because he has inclined his ear unto me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live"***

That's a scripture to remember when we're have the itch to quickly respond and lob scriptures at people to pull them out of their place of lament. When we pull people quickly out of their lament, we forget that laments make up so much space in scripture. Lament is a gift we deny too many people, because we don't sit with them and listen, we don't give them the time and space.

NLT: ***"Because he bends down to listen..."***

Gives us what the word "inclines" means. To turn and give one's full attention. To bend down...

Raj fakes injuries so we will incline our ear to him. What he wants is for us to pick him up and let him put his face right in front of ours, and we kiss his fake booboo's and smother him with love. I realize at some point we have to stop. We can't do that forever.  
But this is reality for kids who grew up in orphanages.

You step into orphanages full of babies... it's silent.  
They're taught that in your mess, if you cry, nobody's coming.

It's the inverse of Psalm 116:

*Because nobody inclined their ear to hear me, I no longer call out...*

You know what that is? A loss of hope.  
That's not how its supposed to be. Praise God that he doesn't leave us orphans.

May we be those who- like God- incline their ear to hear.  
May we be those who- like Jesus- don't say get it together, but step down to join in suffering.  
Even when- like the Israelites- it's the result of our own sin.

Madeline L'engle... the full quote...

*"The second I'm furious with God, I'm totally close, because you cannot be furious with somebody who's not there. And when I'm furious with God what I'm like is my son when he was about two, and would do something that was unworthy, and he would hit at me, and I would grab him and hold him tight until the monster had gone and the loving little boy was back. And when I'm doubting God that's what I'm like. I want God to wrap me in the everlasting wings and say 'There there, it's alright.' And that cosmic affirmation of "Yes, I know it's terrible, I know it hurts. But be patient, it's going to work out. I'm not going to lose, I'm going to win. It's alright."*

That's the conversation and affirmation the process of Biblical lament arrives at.  
It doesn't deny the terrible, hurtful, situation.

But it tethers it to hope again. It tethers it to our eventual victory and restoration.

Lamentations 1 & 2 may seem to be our reality.

But may Lamentations 3 be our prayer...

***"I still dare to hope when I remember this!"***

And may Romans 8 be our hope:

***"what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later."***

Lament has been the gift we've let sit under our tree.

For some of us... that means we've all but stopped praying.

We've drifted from home to cynicism.

We're in the middle of the convinced we can handle it.

"I FEEL FINE" you tell your soul.

God help us to lament. Remember our humanity. And remember your divinity.