

Lament

Hello to all soldiers, adherents, and friends of The Salvation Army Southmount Corps Ministries

2020 has been an unprecedented year. And no one knows how long these pandemic restrictions will go on for or how bad it might still get. In these times of turmoil, and as we 'celebrate' Christmas, may I suggest to you that we recover the lost practice of lament. N. T. Wright wrote a beautiful piece for Time magazine recently on resisting the temptation to offer explanations for our current crisis. He invites us to remember that Christianity offers us a way to lament that leads to hope.

“It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what’s happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell.”

But what exactly is a lament? Is it a gripe session? Is it venting? Is it a synonym for grief? The Book of Psalms—an ancient collection of songs and prayers from a people who were no strangers to suffering—can guide us in this practice. Here are 5 ways to understand what lament is, which I've adapted from an article by Dr. Glen Packaim, which will hopefully help you through this season of the year.

1. Lament is a form of praise to God.

Old Testament scholars estimate that two-thirds of the psalms are laments. Yet the title of the compilation is “praises” (Hebrew *tehillim*). How could a collection which includes so many complaints be considered praise?

It's helpful to define our terms. In common usage, the words lament and complaint are interchangeable. But in the Scripture, complaint and lament occur in different contexts and can be distinguished as different concepts. In the wilderness, Israel complained to God about the lack of bread and meat and water (Exodus 16-17). They assumed the worst about God: He wants to kill us! The people who had been dramatically rescued from Egypt and saved through the Red Sea turned on their Deliverer, painting Him as the villain.

Their complaints were a way of putting God on trial; of "testing" God. But in the psalms, in worship, Israel asks God to answer according to His unfailing love, because He is a God of justice and righteousness, and because He has been faithful in the past.

By contrasting Israel in the wilderness with Israel in worship, we can say that a complaint is an accusation against God that maligns His character, but a lament is an appeal to God based on confidence in His character.

2. Lament is a proof of our relationship with God.

Israel brought their lament to God in the psalms based on His covenant with them. These prayers and songs were not vain attempts to convince a distant deity to notice them. They were not like the priests of Baal dancing and cutting themselves to conjure a response. These were a people whom YHWH—the sole sovereign Creator—had called His "firstborn." They were asking the LORD God to act accordingly.

For us, our lament, when taken to our Father in heaven, is proof of our relationship with our covenant keeping God.

3. Lament is a pathway to intimacy with God.

By laying every emotion and every experience before YHWH, his covenant God, the psalmist is reinforcing a bond of intimacy with God. The Torah was organized into five books of God's instruction—His word to His people. The Psalms are organized into five books, guiding us in how to “answer God.” The God who speaks calls us into relationship. Lament is one of the ways we respond.

4. Lament is a prayer for God to act.

Lament in the Bible is not simply an outlet for our frustrations. Though venting may be beneficial in and of itself, a lament is a form of prayer. And prayer is not passive. Many of the laments in the psalms are calls to action. They plead with God to pay attention to them and to act on their behalf. In fact, many Old Testament scholars identify “petition” as an essential element of a lament psalm. For example, the Hebrew word for “hear”, *shema*, appears 79 times, as the psalmist implores God to listen attentively to his cry. The psalmist appeals to God's character and covenant and asks for His attention and action.

The New Testament takes us further. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He wasn't giving them something to do to pass the time. He was inviting them to participate in the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven. In Paul's epistles, his prayers were not the preamble but the premise for his letters, embodying his theology and ethics in his doxology. In fact, for Paul, prayer is one of the ways God is acting. As Professor Wright has said, “when we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then somehow, God is praying within us for the pain around us”.

5. Lament is a participation in the pain of others.

Praying the psalms of lament is not only for your suffering; it is for solidarity with the suffering of all our brothers and sisters in Christ globally. We love our neighbor when we allow their experience of pain to become the substance of our prayer.

Lament is not our final prayer. It is a in the meantime prayer. Most of the lament psalms end with a “vow to praise”— a promise to return thanksgiving to God for His deliverance. Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, we know that sorrow is not how the story ends. The song may be in a minor key now, but one day it will resolve in a major chord. When every tear is wiped away, when death is swallowed up in victory, when heaven and earth are made new and joined as one, when the saints rise in glorious new bodies...then we will sing at last a great, “Hallelujah!”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Maranatha and Merry Christmas,

Brian Coles, Major

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