

The Gifts of Lament

Lamentations 1:1-6

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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*How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.*

²*She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.*

³*Judah has gone into exile
with suffering and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.*

⁴*The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter. (NRSV)*

One evening, you and your spouse are caravanning back home from a soccer game. You and your spouse are driving separate vehicles because each of you went to the soccer game right after work. During the trip home after the game, your spouse is up ahead while you follow in the rear. As your spouse drives through an intersection, you see a pickup truck smash into the driver's door of your spouse's car. A minute later you stand beside the wrecked car—and your spouse's eyes are closed, unconscious. By the time the ambulance screams to the emergency room of the hospital, your lover and best friend is dead.

What do you do now?

If you're a biblical person, you will probably lament.

The poetry in front of us this morning form the opening lines of Lamentations. A whole book of the Bible on lament! But not just this book. 67 of the 150 Psalms also voice lament, which is about 45% of the Psalter. Oodles of people in the Bible lamented at one or more times of the life: Hannah, Job, Naomi, David, Jesus, and others.

Worship in ancient Israel didn't just happen in the voice of praise. Worship also happened in the voice of lament. We're familiar with the language of praise, which includes thanksgiving, adoration, and giving God honor. Praise stirs up in us emotions of joy and delight, satisfaction and peace. Lament is more or less the opposite of praise. Lament uses the language of complaint and accusation. People lament when they're feeling angry, cheated, jilted. Praise and lament are both directed to God, but in starkly different voices.

The people of God figured out a long time ago that praise just doesn't fit some situations. Only lament fits. Only lament feels right. The day before I worked on this sermon, an old friend of mine lost a grandson in a bicycle accident. The grandson was riding bike near his home in Florida when a car hit him. Only 20 years old, cut down in the prime of life. When my friend heard the news, I don't think he felt like praising God. Lament fit the situation far better.

In 586 BCE, the people of God in Judah found themselves in a similar situation where praise wasn't in the cards. That year the Babylonians, who then fielded perhaps the most powerful army in the Near East, captured Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. The Babylonian army destroyed the temple, a number of houses and other buildings, collected most of the portable wealth, rounded up some of the leading citizens, and hauled both wealth and VIPs back to Babylon. They extracted the best and brightest from the city and carried it away. Jerusalem was now a shadow of its former self.

To get a sense of what this may have been like for the Judeans, imagine the city of Goshen after being captured by an invading army. Think what it would be like to live here with the courthouse and the banks destroyed, grocery stores and gas stations with nothing to sell, downtown stores with mostly bare shelves, the Brew without coffee, your

home riddled with bullets, manufacturing plants on the south side bombed, and church buildings, including our church building, burned to the ground. Bethany Christian Schools? Scorched. Goshen College? Gaping holes in the buildings. To top it off, some of our friends and family members would be dead.

I don't think a single one of us would feel like praising God. We'd feel shocked, grieved, angry—and we'd feel like lamenting. In such a scenario, I bet that for the first few months we'd turn to again and again to the book of Lamentations. It would become our main biblical book. These lines of poetry would speak to our context. They'd come alive.

I don't know if you have much experience with lament. Sometimes in private conversations I've invited people to pour out their laments to God. Some people go ahead and experiment with lament, while others decide not to.

Yet of the people I've known who've tried lament, they generally find that it provides an emotional and spiritual breakthrough. It's cathartic. It allows them to say what they really feel. It helps them be authentic with God.

In lament, you can basically say anything you want to God. If you feel that God isn't being fair, you can say so. If you feel God has abandoned you, you get to say so. If you think God is being a jerk, well, you can be honest and tell God that's what you think.

In lament you can also communicate any emotions. Are you mad at God? Let anger enter your prayer. Are you in the depths of pain and suffering? Describe it to God, without mincing words.

I used to be afraid that God would strike me down dead if I got too extreme in my laments—you know, if I got too mad at God or said something so outrageous and unacceptable that God would wallop me. There might be a limit to what God finds acceptable in lament, but if there is a limit, I haven't discovered it yet. I've said some fairly nasty things to God in the last few decades, and let loose with some pretty raw emotions. If God was offended by what I said, I haven't noticed. And in any case, I'm not dead yet.

A major turning point happened for me when I memorized one of Jeremiah's most extreme laments, in Jeremiah 20:7ff. As I lived with this text over the month it took me to memorize it, I slowly began to feel Jeremiah's depth of emotion. Listen to this selection of verses:

*O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day;
everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, "I will not mention God, or speak any more in God's name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.*

*Cursed be the day I was born!
The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying,
"A child is born to you, a son," making him glad.
Let that man be like the cities that God overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon,
because he did not kill me in the womb;
so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great.
Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?*

Memorizing these verses was a turning point. Yes, it feels risky to tell God in a moment of hot anger that God is being a jerk, that God isn't doing what I think God

should be doing. And yet when I've dared to do this, something significant and life-giving happens. Maybe not right away, but eventually. God and I move into a better space. Sooner or later, things shift and I'm able to praise God once again.

Do you know why we have permission to lament? Because we have a covenant with God. In this covenant, God make commitments to us and we in turn make commitments to God. On God's side, God commits to be with us, to save us, to give us life. God commits to being good and powerful and involved in the life of the world. On our side, we commit to honor and serve and be loyal to God. Therefore when it appears that God is not living up to God's side of the covenant, you and I are free to lament.

Lament consequently becomes a way to remind God of God's own covenantal agreements. Lament is a way for us to hold God accountable. Lament is saying to God: "You're not doing what you said you would do. As far as we can tell, you're behaving irresponsibly in this situation."

In the theological judgment of Israel, a life of integrity and health before God includes both lament and praise. Some seasons of life fit better with praise, some better with lament. More often, life might be a mix of the two.

One more thing. If you can lament in your suffering and anger, that means you and God are still in relationship with each other. Far better for you to let God have it in the depths of lament than to walk away from God and never come back. Far better to voice your frustration to God than let it explode sideways onto your spouse or children or dog. Far better to be honest with God than to pretend everything is fine and end up living a lie.

Lament engages God. In our worst pain, we reach out in trust that God is still around, still available. The underlying message we send in lament is this: "You, God, are still important to us, even though we're thoroughly vexed with you right now."

For this reason, lament is a way to live the truth of Paul's lofty eloquence in Romans 7: that nothing—neither trauma nor tragedy—can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.