

Todd Misfeldt

2017-08-13

Sermon – Psalms of Lament<sup>i</sup>  
West Valley Presbyterian Church

## Introduction

- Thank you, Jordon.
- Many of us in this room have experienced suffering.
- I think of Jordon and the Eldridge family. Yesterday was the memorial for Jordon's uncle. The Eldridge family has experienced more than their fair share of death and suffering in the last few years.
  - How do we respond when suffering touches our lives?
  - Is our faith of any use when we hurt?
  - Where is God when we suffer?
  - How do we pray when we suffer?

[[pause]]

- The good news is that our faith is something that we can depend upon
  - God is with us when we hurt.
  - We have examples of how to pray in the Bible.
- I want to start this morning, by going over three ways that people can respond to suffering:

[[slide]]

### Responses to Suffering:

- Questioning why
- Anger
- Silence

[[\slide]]

### Responses to Suffering:

- Questioning – why did this happen to me?
- Anger – it should not have happened to me, it is unjust
- Silence – we are numb

## Questioning Response - The Need to Know Why

- Let's look at the first response – Questioning
- When things happen, we want to explain it and find a reason
- In today's enlightened culture,
  - we almost need to explain everything, even the unexplainable.

## Explaining Evil – Theodicy

- This includes the need to explain why we suffer or why bad things happen to us.
- We often turn toward God and ask why did God allow this to happen.

[[slide]]

*Theodicy: the answer to the question of why God permits evil*

[[\slide]]

- There is a fancy word that expresses this—theodicy. Theologian Alvin Plantinga says that *theodicy* is the "answer to the question of why God permits evil".<sup>ii</sup>

[[slide]]

- **Perfect Plan Theodicy**
- **The Free Will Defense**
- **Soul Making Theodicy**
- **Cosmic Conflict Theodicy**

[[\slide]]

- People come up with various theodicies. I've take these names from Richard Rice, in his book *Suffering and the Search for Meaning* identifies are:<sup>iii</sup>
  - **Perfect Plan Theodicy** – In God's perfect plan for the world, there is a reason for everything, we just don't know it.
  - **The Free Will Defense** – God gave us free will.
    - Some people freely choose evil and we suffer the consequences of others' choices.
    - We have seen our loves ones make poor choices and how the suffering spreads to others.
  - **Soul Making Theodicy** – God is teaching us through this experience.
  - **Cosmic Conflict Theodicy** – It is a battle between good and evil and we get caught in the cross fire. We are part of God's army against Satan and sometimes there are casualties.
- There is some scriptural support for these different theodicies but there are also some problems with them.
  - First, some people use the same reason for everything.
    - For example, "God is trying to teach you something through this."
  - Secondly, this may make things worse and it may add an additional burden to our suffering.
  - Third, from a practical standpoint, an explanation may not help.
    - It may not be what we need to hear at that point in time.

## Biblical Response to Evil

[[slide]]

Lament: a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.

[[\slide]]

- What does the Bible say?
- The Bible is loaded with lament.
  - Generally, a lament is “a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.”<sup>iv</sup>
- In the Psalms alone there are “Approximately fifty-eight psalms may be classified as psalms of lament.”<sup>v</sup>
  - That is over 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the Book of Psalms.
  - I’ve given you a sample of these Psalms in the handout.
- Lament in the Bible is not just an expression of grief but there is always a turn to God and to trust Him.

[[slide]]

**Christian Lament: We express our sorrow or grief to God and recognize God’s presence with us.**

[[\slide]]

- This is what we need – a practical theodicy which helps the us cope with the suffering in our lives—What I’m calling a Christian lament.
  - A Christian lament is when we express our sorrow or grief to God and recognize God’s presence with us.

## Psalm 3 Context

- If this idea is new for you, let’s look at Psalm 3 to see how a Psalm of lament might help in a time of suffering.
- Psalm 3 is in response to the second time that David has fled for his life. This time his son, Ab’salom,<sup>vi</sup> (ab’suh-luhm) wants to kill David and take his throne.
  - The full account of this is told in 2 Samuel chapters 15-18.

## The Personal Lament Example of Psalm 3

- Let's turn to Psalm 3 to see how David responds to his suffering from the evil around him.

### Psalm 3 (ESV)

[[David first addresses the Lord. This is the way a psalm of lament begins. After that, we hear of David's complaint]]

[[slide]]

- 1 O LORD, how many are my foes!  
Many are rising against me;
- 2 many are saying of my soul,  
"There is no salvation for him in God."

[[Then David moves beyond complaint to an expression of trust]]

[[slide]]

- 3 But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,  
my glory, and the lifter of my head.
- 4 I cried aloud to the LORD,  
and he answered me from his holy hill.

[[After expressing his trust in the LORD David gives his petition]]

[[slide]]

- 7 Arise, O LORD!  
Save me, O my God!  
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked.

[[Finally, David expresses certainty that God will respond. David praises God.]]

[[slide]]

- 8 Salvation belongs to the LORD;  
your blessing be on your people!<sup>vii</sup>

## For All of Us

- Lament is not just for David but it is for all of us. It is a tool that enables us to engage with God in our time of suffering.
- Instead of leaving us with an intellectual explanation for suffering,
  - a lament turns our focus from our situation to trust in God.
  - It reminds us and assures us that God is there.

## Second Response – Anger

- In the first response, we question.
- What about expressing anger?
- In suffering, we can become angry because of the injustice of our suffering. We might question.
  - I did nothing to deserve this suffering or you might feel as if your body as betrayed you.
- Is anger a sin? No. Anger is an emotion. It is what we do with anger that matters.
  - In Mark 3:5 Jesus gets angry with the Pharisees who were testing Him as to whether or not Jesus would heal on the Sabbath.
  - Instead of sinning in his anger, Jesus heals the man with the shriveled hand.
- Anger can rob us of our trust in God and our hope in Jesus.
- Instead we must move past our anger and into dialogue with our loving father.
  - A faith that is alive is a faith that is in dialogue with God.

[[Slide]]

Psalm 3 is a dialogue between David and God.

[[\slide]]

## Third Response – Silence

- The last response to suffering is silence.
- You might ask is this bad?
  - Shouldn't we just suffer in silence?
  
- The silence makes it worse. It makes us feel alone. Jesus does not want us to be alone.
  - In John 14:16 Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will be us forever.
  - He is with us, especially when we suffer.
  - He will not abandon us.
  
- An expression of lament allows us to vocalize our feelings of hurt, anger, or rage at our suffering.
  - More importantly, lament begins the movement from anger to one of trust and hope in Jesus.
  - This trust and hope is what our silence can also rob us of.

## Not enough Faith

- We may be silent in our suffering because we may feel that expressing it is wrong.
  - I think of my highschool football coach telling in our physically suffering to “suck-it-up”, just deal with the suffering, act like it is not happening, and continue on.
- Some say that lament is unnecessary,
  - hasn't Jesus' death and resurrection eliminated the need for lament?
  - The Old Testament cries of anguish have been superseded and rendered unnecessary?”
- Because you want to express lament at your situation,
  - Does that you do not have enough faith?
  - No! you are wrong.
- The charge the person suffering does not have enough faith puts the burden upon the sufferer.
- We live on a fallen world and the presence of suffering is very real.
- Theologian Walter Brueggemann notes that in this type of situation “there is a terrible temptation to change pain into guilt.”<sup>viii</sup>
- Do not put this burden upon yourself.
  - You are guilty of nothing!
- Brueggemann adds “psalms of lament are the voice of the innocent—not the voice of the guilty.”<sup>ix</sup>
- Instead of silence, we must cultivate the growth of a two-way relationship between God and the us.

[[pause]]



## Practicing Lament

- In my personal experience, when I've been down, I've looked through the Psalms trying to find something that would express what I was feeling.
  - At times, I found something but at other times I couldn't.
  
- If you can't find a psalm that matches your feelings,
  - do not despair—you can compose your own psalm of lament!
  - Just as we can use the Lord's Prayer as a template for our prayers, so, too, can we use a psalm of lament as a model for our own lament.
  
- You can write your own personal Psalm of lament.
- I challenge you to do so this week.
  - Because it is a skill that you should have in your prayer tool box.
  - We as Christians need to be ready to respond in prayer when suffering happens.

## Writing a Lament

- Writing your own psalm of lament is not hard. You can refer to Psalm 3 as a guide. It is therapeutic. It connects you to God.
- How do you write your own Psalm of lament? Scottish theologian Swinton gives these instructions for writing your own psalm of lament: (handout in bulletin)

[[slide]]

### Parts of a Psalm of Lament

1. Address the psalm to God
2. Vocalize the complaint
3. Express trust in God
4. Appeal/petition for action by God
5. Express certainty that God hears and will act
6. Praise of God and express assurance of love for God<sup>1</sup>

[[/slide]]

---

<sup>1</sup> John Swinton, *Raging with compassion : pastoral responses to the problem of evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 128.

## Instructions for Writing Lament Psalms<sup>2</sup>

1. **Address the psalm to God:**
  - a. First we addressed to God as David did.
  - b. We call God by name, through a title, a phrase, or a metaphor reflecting an image of God.
  - c. We can call on God by using many names.
  
2. Next we **vocalize the complaint:**
  - a. list out complaint(s).
  - b. This is what brings us to prayer.
  - c. Several complaints can be mentioned.
  
3. Next an **express trust in God.**
  - a. This flows from the first part
  - b. It is an expression of faith in spite of the complaints.
  - c. This is usually a simple one-sentence statement.
  
4. Next there is an **appeal or petition.**
  - a. This is our cry that God intervene
  - b. It is often accompanied by a reason for needing that intervention.
  - c. Several petitions may be set forth.
  
5. Our appeal is followed by an **expression of certainty that God hears and will act.**
  - a. We assure God that we do not doubt, even in the midst of its doubt.
  - b. In everyday life, we may follow a request with "I know you will do this for me."
  
6. The conclusion is **Praise of God and express assurance of love for God.**
  - a. The community assures God of its love.
  
- The **hope** of the lamenter is in the ultimate promise of the Gospel—
  - **not for** victory, vengeance, or earthly restoration
  - but ultimately for togetherness with Christ forever in heaven.
- Christian lament results in an intimacy with God and a hope in the future.

[[pause]]

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

- In these past few minutes, I've talked about why the practice of Christian lament is important.
- If we suffer we do not need to look for reasons but we need to look for the almighty God that is always with us.

[[slide]]

**We express our sorrow or grief to God and recognize God's presence with us.**

[[\slide]]

- We need a practical theodicy, such as is provided by the psalms of lament,
- I encourage you to express your lament when needed. Don't dwell upon your problems but turn to the almighty God who loves you, and to Jesus who died so that you may be with Him forever in heaven.
- I encourage you to be prepared for those times by studying the biblical psalms of lament, and to practicing writing your own psalm of lament.
  - Remember that God is always by our side wanting to be with us and to strengthen His relationship with you.

## Jesus' Example at Gethsemane

Even Jesus at Gethsemane demonstrates a form of lament. In Matthew 26:38–42 Jesus voices His problem and says in v. 38

<sup>38</sup> ... “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

And in v. 39 Jesus gives His petition to God:

<sup>39</sup> ... fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”

And finally, in v. 42 Jesus puts His trust in the Father when He says:

...  
<sup>42</sup> “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

Jesus expresses a lament. He addresses His father. He describes His situation. His petition is that He asks for the cup to be taken from Him. But finally, He submits to God's will. God is with Jesus, even in this dark, dark time for Him.

[[pause]]

## Prayer

Please join me in prayer:

Dear Lord.

The world seems to crumble around us. We ask why and we look to You for explanations.

But we do not need explanations to feel at peace.

We need you Lord and You are with us.

Give us peace in these troubled times. Be with us, comfort us.

Your name is Immanuel or God with us (Matt 1:23).

Of this we are certain, with our own explanations there can be doubt, but we can be certain that God will be with us..

We trust that

no matter how bleak things seem to be,  
no matter what happens,  
that we will be with you in heaven in the end.

Praise be the name of Jesus.

Amen.

## Psalm of Lament

July 29, 2017

**Scripture Passage:** Psalm 3

**Psalms of Lament:**

Psalms of individual lament: i.e. Ps 3; 4; 13; 22; 31; 39; 57; 69; 71; 77; 139.

Psalms of communal lament: i.e. Ps 12; 44; 74; 79; 80; 94.<sup>3</sup>

**Parts of a Psalm of Lament<sup>4</sup>**

1. Address the psalm to God
2. Vocalize the complaint
3. Express trust in God
4. Appeal/petition for action by God
5. Express certainty that God hears and will act
6. Praise of God and express assurance of our love for God

**Instructions for Writing Lament Psalms<sup>5</sup>**

1. They are addressed to God. The community calls God by name, through a title, a phrase, or a metaphor reflecting an image of God. This section can call on God by many names.
2. They contain a complaint. This is what brings the one praying to prayer. The psalmist relates the undesirable situation. Again, several complaints can be mentioned.
3. There is an expression of trust. This flows from the first part and is an expression of faith in spite of the complaints. This is usually a simple one-sentence statement.
4. There is an appeal or petition. This is a cry that God intervene and is often accompanied by a reason for needing that intervention. "I am worn out with my groaning" (Ps. 6:6). Again, several petitions may be set forth.
5. There is an expression of certainty. The community assures God that it does not doubt even in the midst of its doubt. In everyday life, we may follow a request with "I know you will do this for me."
6. The conclusion is a vow of praise. The community assures God of its love.

---

<sup>3</sup> Leland Ryken et al., [\*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery\*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 484.

<sup>4</sup> Swinton, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Brueggemann, Walter. "The Friday voice of faith." *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (2001): 12-21.

Rice, Richard. *Suffering and the search for meaning : contemporary responses to the problem of pain*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014.

Swinton, John. *Raging with compassion : pastoral responses to the problem of evil*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.

---

<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all scripture is from *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Plantinga, Alvin (1974). *God, Freedom, and Evil*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 10.

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Rice, *Suffering and the search for meaning : contemporary responses to the problem of pain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

<sup>iv</sup> Oxford Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/lament> (accessed July 21, 2017).

<sup>v</sup> Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 858–859.

<sup>vi</sup> See 2 Samuel 3:3.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ps 3.

<sup>viii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Friday voice of faith," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (2001): 19.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.