

## Lent Course – Session 3 on Lament

So, hopefully after Andrew's opening two sessions we are now becoming more used to the idea of the Holy Spirit as the stable, always present, core player in our prayer and spiritual lives. The spirit empowers, guides and is our source of strength for love and service.

I hope you are excited by this and are looking forward to exploring further how we can discern and encourage the operation of the spirit to make us more Christ-like. Andrew will be talking more about these things in future weeks.

But this week I'm afraid I am going to risk being a bit of a wet blanket, I am going to point out to you that we live in a fallen world where all sorts of awful things happen.

These things can happen to us and the ones we love, and similarly dreadful things also happen to other individuals, groups or even more widely in national and international scenarios. War, sickness, plague, oppression, destitution, violence, natural disasters, man-made

disasters. There is no end to the list of horror in the world.

And all these things distress and appal us, they seem entirely inconsistent with a world created and sustained by a loving and just creator.

The mind-numbing awfulness of such events often renders us speechless in prayer, unable to even think about how to begin to pray into a situation.

If we can find no words and sometimes no hope in a situation, then perhaps, we fear, even the holy spirit cannot lead us into effective prayer.

So this evening, I am going to talk about lament, an ancient form of prayer, which I believe is underused and much misunderstood in the Western Church, to our great loss.

[slide] The Oxford English Dictionary defines lament as – ‘to express profound sorrow for; to bewail’. So, lament in common usage has to do with sadness. If we wanted a mental image of this sort of lament, your mind might run to the distressing images of distraught families trying

to come to terms with the violent death of a loved one, perhaps as in Gaza in the past year or so. [slide ]

This dictionary definition, however, though connected with biblical lament, falls short of the sort of lament we see in the bible, particularly in the Psalms, and which I suggest should play a greater role in our prayer lives.

The best definition of biblical lament that I have come across is this [slide]:

‘the unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God’

This very definition gives a clue to one reason why I believe lament is rare in the western church. We find it unsettling; we find the idea of bringing our complaints, anger, grief, despair and protest to God unsettling because God is holy, is other, is apart - surely shouting at God about the horrors in the world is as pointless and absurd as throwing snowballs at the sun.

But of course, you are fast learners, and you will instantly tell me that we have seen already in this course that this model of a remote God is not biblical. God is not like the sun, remote and unapproachable. As Andrew has repeatedly been saying, the truth is that we are indwelt by the spirit of God, God is intimate and dwells with us by grace, just as in Christ we dwell in God.

So very quickly we can bat aside this first reason why lament is rare in our prayer. Far from being lofty, and above our horror and outrage, God wants to be intimately engaged with these things that impact us and his creation. So on this logic we should be lamenting.

But even with such a good biblical understanding, there are other cultural reasons why Lament doesn't often form part of our prayer life. Lament also seems unsettling to us because we are modern minded people, creatures of our age. Lament by its very nature is an expression of uncertainty, frustration and a feeling of impotence.

It uncovers a dissonance between what we understand of the character of God and elements of the world we see around us that are surely quite the opposite of what God would want. Lament is thus seen as an expression of confusion and even doubt.

Mystery, uncertainty and doubt are not popular in our rationalistic and triumphalist modern age. We are taught by our culture that everything can be explained by the rational mind, everything can be controlled through clear thinking, science and technology, and everything is inexorably moving forward to some wonderful, human built utopia

And as Western Christians we have not been immune to this spirit of the age and these modernist certainties have invaded our faith. We mentally separate the spiritual and the practical. The practical troubles of the world we subconsciously feel will be dealt with by science and reason, and God is mainly concerned with our spiritual lives and so our spiritual salvation, a salvation which we feel depends on us believing, not doubting.

So we must fix our best plastic smiles on our faces in all circumstances and do our best to exude joy to all, no matter how much we are suffering, no matter what horrors we see our world, no matter how persecuted Christians are overseas. Proper Christians, we think, must be certain; uncertainty is weakness, doubt is unacceptable.

[pause]

But this is, in truth, foolishness and ignores the reality of the world around us where pain and injustice abound and there are hard questions for those who will allow no uncertainty in their faith.

The neat division between the spiritual and the practical is false – and it is exposed in the hard questions - Why does misfortune visit the faithful? Why do the wicked prosper? Why does God allow oppression and violence? Why does God let Christians suffer at the hands of other faiths?

In the psalms, the hymnbook of Israel, more than half the psalms contain lament about

these very subjects. For the psalmists there was no practical vs spiritual divide – God was lord of all the earth, lord of the practicalities of the world as well as human spirituality.

So the psalmists continually asked God the hard questions. I believe that we must admit that by doing this the psalmists were a lot more honest than we are when it comes to confronting tough and unsettling subjects in our prayers.

[slide] So, I want to make the case this evening that ignoring lament limits our prayers. I believe that because they lamented the psalmists had a much more robust and effective relationship with God than we seem to have.

Let me look at two examples of why I would argue that Lament enhances rather than threatens our relationship with God.

[slide x2]

Many of us here have had the privilege, and the trial, of bringing up children. We have therefore experienced the deeply interactive nature of

that relationship. As a parent the journey starts with a very simple principle. What I say is true and definitive. And initially, for our toddlers, we are the fount of all authority and all knowledge. But it doesn't last very long. The questioning of authority, the pushing of boundaries, starts early and when children reach their teenage years, we find ourselves negotiating what sort of long-term relationship will be established.

How do you react as your parental authority and decisions are critiqued and questioned as your children get older? If handled well, it will lead to mutual respect and understanding - a deepening, not a lessening of relationship.

On the other hand, if you insist that your child must always give you smiling obedience without complaint or comment, it is not a real relationship – it is coercive, abusive behaviour.  
[slide]

In the same way God built us for relationship with him as his children, so as we become more mature in our faith and seek to question him he is willing to respond and will acknowledge and enter into our doubts.



[slide] A covenant relationship, like a parental one, must always allow for two-way conversation, we must never accept an image of God that demands coercive unquestioning obedience.

And my family simile also extends to my second point.

In a family, as well as there being a need for effective communication on authority, there must also be ways to appeal for justice. 'It's not fair' is a common cry in any gathering of children, and in the same way, the issue of justice is a crucial one in the covenant relationship between God and his people.

If a parent responds to a complaining child, by saying 'that's just the way things are - suck it up' - then the child will gradually stop expecting justice and will stop respecting the justice in that family.

[slide]

In the same way the lament of Israel deliberately brought issues of justice before God. When their suffering seemed unbearable, they would come to their God pleading for action to end the injustice.

Lament is not a cry for a holy hug, for God to make us 'feel better' in a place of pain, it is a cry that seeks to mobilise God into a course of action that is consistent with his character. It is a cry for justice.

[slide] In our covenant relationship, the throne of God must be more than a place of praise, it must also be the place that is prepared to hear the cry for justice.

[slide] So, to summarise, the lack of lament in our prayers reflects faulty thinking about our relationship with God, who is both intimately part of our lives and deeply concerned with the material as well as the spiritual things in the world.

As God's children we need to know that God is available for our doubts, our uncertainty, our confusion, and our cry for justice. God wants to

hear our Lament, our cry for his action in the darkest places, the fact that we lament is, in fact, the mark of a healthy relationship with our creator.

So, having established the importance of lament in prayer, how does it actually operate within the new covenant relationship that we have with God the Father through Jesus and the Spirit.

This is a complex subject, so I have enlisted the support of a man called Tom Wright who is very good at unpacking complex subjects.

[Tom Wright video]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-gdnxiYBm8>

There was a lot in that, including some ideas that may be unfamiliar to you. A link to the video should be in the homework for you to view again. But let's try to unpick it a little.

In the first part of my talk, I was largely drawing on how prayers of lament operated within the

old covenant between God and Israel. The old covenant was a trust agreement between Israel and its God, a relationship where God dwelt among his people in the temple, and the intention was that, through the obedience of Israel to God's direction, God would bring blessing to all the nations, not just to Israel.

Of course, that covenant broke down because of the disobedience of Israel, and through the sacrifice of Jesus we now operate under the new covenant whereby those who believe in Jesus receive forgiveness and as we have been emphasising on this course disciples of Jesus become indwelt by the holy spirit of God.

As church together we then take on the role of Israel, we become the people amongst whom God dwells and so become the people through whom God seeks to bless all nations.

And this is the role of the church in the world. God intends that each and every day we should be the presence of God through the Holy Spirit in a hurting world. We should be bearing witness to God's grace and love in this broken world until that day when Jesus returns.

But we aren't there yet! Until Jesus comes, I'm afraid that we aren't promised that we will live blissful, hardship free, lives. To be sure there will be blessings as we walk in the company of our God, but living in a fallen world, there will be also plenty of opportunity for lament. And that is what Tom Wright was addressing.

I made the case earlier that the absence of lament in our prayer means that we are failing to explore the full extent of the covenant relationship we have with our God.

But Tom Wright is actually saying even more than this. He is saying that if we are not lamenting we are failing in our job to bring the presence of Jesus into the places where the world is in pain.

For this, Wright is leaning on St Paul in Romans 8 who says [slide] that those of us who have the first fruits of the spirit are groaning inwardly, alongside the groaning of all creation, as we wait for the return of Christ.

We groan because, although we are part of God's new creation, we are still living in a fallen world. There is a dissonance, a sense that things seem out of kilter. We groan inwardly, we hate what we see, but we don't really know what to pray. This is lament.

We are not called to put a brave face on things and pretend nothing is wrong. We are meant to groan to God. [ slide] Wright even says that it is our Christian vocation to do so, and the Holy Spirit groans with us and will take those groans to God, interceding on our behalf to the one who can understand. Even if we don't know what we are praying for, the letter to the Romans tells us that because of the spirit, God discerns our needs from our cries of anguish.

In Lament we are given permission to take all that troubles us to God, in fact we are supposed to bring these things to God. We are not throwing snowballs at the sun, no matter how incoherent our lament is, the indwelling spirit of God, that Andrew has been so keen to emphasise is the centre of all our prayer, intercedes with the Father, providing a motivating call to action, asking him to

intervene, to bring healing and love into these situations that trouble us, and in which we can see no way forward.

As Tom Wright says, we won't necessarily be aware of God's answer but our prayers to God are never in vain. Evil runs deep in creation and much of it will not be removed until the earth is filled once more with the glory of God at the second coming.

But for now, it is the church that has the vocation to be fully engaged in the world, led by the sacrifice and example of Jesus, and empowered, guided and strengthened by the spirit of God.

Yes, we are called to be Jesus' hands and feet in direct action but at least as important, and possibly more important, is our vocation to lift the darkest, most broken and hurting elements of the world to the creator in prayer. Lament, As Tom Wright says, was very much part of Jesus' experience and so it should it be for us as his disciples.

But I just want to add one further thing. I think that, despite recounting the story from the book of Daniel, Tom Wright didn't fully make the link between lament and praise.

Most of the psalms of lament, actually have a shape which turns to praise. The psalmist first says 'there is stuff going on that I don't understand and which I really can't cope with...help me Lord.... but then goes on.... 'And yet in faith I will still praise my God' and then the psalm will often end with wonderful words of faith and praise.

A writer on the Psalms called Christopher Ash, says something very similar to Wright, but with a twist. He writes: [slide]

'the moment we address our lament upwards in prayer to the true God.... And when that prayer is heard in heaven, it becomes something more than the outpouring of human sorrow. It contains within itself, by the ministry of the Spirit who groans in and through our prayers, the seeds of a future rescue, and therefore of praise.'



Prayer of Lament is part of our vocation. But important as lament is in our prayer, lament will never be our final prayer. Lament is only a prayer 'in the meantime', a prayer that is necessary only before Christ returns to renew all things.

That is when Lament will end. As it says in the book of Revelation at that time [slide] '[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more.'

All these things, death, mourning, crying, pain and tears will have passed away with the new creation and there will be no further need for Lament.

So only 'for this age' are we called to lament. It is our vocation, our duty, to bring situations of pain, tragedy and tears to God, and in this way, we bring the Holy Spirit of God into these into these situations.

We must pray lament now, but we also praise now, because we know that Jesus rose again

and so sorrow and despair are not how the story ends.