The Center Holds
Lamentations 3:19-24
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Horatio Spafford was a successful lawyer, businessman, and devout follower of Christ from Chicago. He was a picture of stability. But in 1871, a series of tragedies plagued Spafford and altered the trajectory of his life. First, Spafford lost his only son. Shortly after that, the great fire of Chicago devastated much of Spafford's real estate holdings, leaving him financially ruined. Two years later, in 1873, he planned a trip to Europe with his wife and four daughters; however, he was delayed by business, so he sent his wife and four daughters ahead of him on a ship.

On November 22, on their journey from the United States to Europe, their ship collided with another in the Atlantic and sank just 12 minutes later. The death toll from that accident totaled 226 people. Of those 226, all four of Spafford's daughters died. Miraculously, his wife survived. After being rescued, she reached Wales and sent a telegram back to her husband with two simple words, "Saved alone." His mind spinning, Spafford boarded a ship to get to his wife. He ended up traveling the very exact same passage to England. It was on that journey, so the myth goes, that at the same point where his four daughters lost their lives, he penned these words:

> **When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, with my soul. It is well, it is well, with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed his own blood for my soul. It is well, with my soul. It is well, it is well, with my soul. Spafford, It Is Well With My Soul, 1873**

What enables the soul to endure such a tragedy? Even more confounding is how does the soul come through that tragedy and pen those profound words of affirmation, the blessed assurance of God's presence in the midst of all of that? How does one hold to the triumph of faith and yet the despair of loss in the same experience? How could Spafford write those words?

How is Spafford taught from the Lord that it is well with his soul? This is a question that feels very Lentin. You stand this morning on the very first Sunday of Lent, which is a 40-day journey preceding Easter in which we meditate in the shadows of the ashes. This past Wednesday in this room, we held an Ash Wednesday service where those present received the marking of a cross on their forehead, made out of ashes, and they heard the words: For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Lent is a time where we look our mortality and our finitude right in the eyes, and we wonder aloud with the Lord, "What is this life? How is it that we experience both triumph and success?" In many ways, Lent is the season that comes, whether you're ready for it or not. You sit in the darkness a little bit longer because the profound mystery at the very core of our Christian faith is the resurrection, and that is not something you just stumble into. Resurrection and that mystery is something we must prepare our souls for because resurrection is always on the other side of Good Friday. It is always on the other side of death.

We are beginning a series through one of the more harrowing books of all of the scriptures. It's a Lenten journey through the Book of Lamentations. It's a series of teachings designed to lead us towards that Easter morning, what one author called "An exploration of life in the minor key." At its core, Lamentations is a concentrated, intense, and biblically focused view of the witness of suffering, which is one of the most unique yet common experiences of what it means to be human. There may not be a more universal experience than suffering. At some level, to be human is to suffer. No one gets an exemption.

So what does faith look like in this season? How can we, like Spafford, learn from the Lord and allow the Lord to teach us in those seasons to declare, "It is well with my soul." I want to look at Lamentations as a whole today. I want to do three things. I want to set the context, look at the center, and offer a practice for us through this season of Lent. That's the outline.

Context

To begin, the context. Before we hear the poetry of Lamentations, we need to stand in the rubble from which these poems emerged. Lamentations is five chapters long, and they are a collection of free-standing pieces of poetry that interlock and weave together, but they come out of the devastation of what the Bible calls the exile.

Now, this theme of exile in the Bible begins all the way back in Genesis, and you can find it through to the Book of Revelation. Exile, in some ways, is that idea of suffering. How do we live through the dark sides of the world? But this exile in which the Book of Lamentations emerges is known as the Babylonian Exile, which is the archetype example of which every other exile is a shadow of.

The Babylonian Exile took place in 587 BC, when the Babylonian Empire, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, ransacked Israel and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Proceeding that moment, for decades, Babylon had been a rising power. The Assyrian Empire, in the ancient world, had fallen, and the Egyptian Empire was weakened. The Babylonians saw the opportunity to extend the kingdom both north and west. In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar routed the Egyptians, eliminating any threat that they would rebuild and take hold of the area. That cleared the way for the Babylonians to rise to power with no one to stand in their way for the next 70 years.

At this point in Israel's history, the Israelite people had been split into two kingdoms—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. By the time of Babylon's rise, the northern kingdom had already been taken, so all that was left was the southern kingdom of Judah. If you hear the word Judah, remember that's the Israelites. Judah, at that time, was small. They were politically fragile, and they stood at a crossroads with Babylon bearing down on them. The political future of Judah really hung on how they responded to this Babylonian power. Would they submit to them or rebel against them?

It was in that great period that God raised up the prophet Jeremiah, who had repeatedly warned the people of Judah and the political leaders of Jerusalem that the combination of Judah's unrepentant sin and social oppression, mixed with some rampant idolatry, was bringing about the punishment of God. God displayed his wrath by removing his protection. Babylon came in and did what they did to every other country in that space and wiped them out.

So for years, Jeremiah had pleaded with God's people to turn back from injustice, give up the idols, and stop trusting in political alliances with those around them. But the people and the leaders refused to listen to Jeremiah. They refused to repent. They labeled Jeremiah a traitor. They tried to silence him through violence and imprisonment. In fact, at one point, the king of Judah, King Jehoiakim, deliberately burnt a whole scroll containing 23 years of Jeremiah's preaching as a blatant, defiant act against the word of God.

Shortly after that, Jehoiakim, acting alone, took up battle against Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar quickly struck back, murdering Jehoiakim. His son surrendered the city of Jerusalem to Babylon, purely in an effort to stop the devastation for ten years. Judah continued, though, to compromise with Babylon, and at the same time, they were not heeding the warnings of Jeremiah about perpetuating idolatry. Ultimately, Nebuchadnezzar decided to finish what he had started. He invaded Judah, and the city fell. That's what we read in Jeremiah 52.

> **On the tenth day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, who served the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army, under the commander of the imperial guard, broke down all the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile some of the poorest people and those who remained in the city, along with the rest of the craftsmen and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon. But Nebuzaradan left behind the rest of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields. Jeremiah 52:12-16**

Now it's hard for us to sit in the devastation that this passage is communicating. If you are reading the Bible in a year, you will come to this place in Jeremiah, and it should strike you with such grief that it takes a long time to comprehend what the people of Israel had just experienced. The towns and villages were destroyed. Nebuzaradan comes in and sets fire to the temple of Yahweh, which was more than just a church building. It was the center of life. It was what the whole identity of God's presence dwelling with the people represented. The royal palace in Jerusalem was destroyed, or, in the words of Jeremiah, "Every important building, he burned down."

The siege lasted for 18 months, during which time all the worst effects that you can imagine of siege and warfare ensued. They cut off the food supply and brought starvation to the people. Death and disease were rampant. Eventually, the king of Judah was captured. His sons were killed right in front of him, and then they plucked his eyes out, carrying him off to die in Babylon. For anyone who survived the starvation and slaughter, were made to march on a thousand-mile journey by foot into exile in Babylon, where they then had to restart their whole life in a foreign land. You'll hear me quote Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright a few times throughout this series. He has an excellent commentary on the Book of Lamentations. He says this of the devastation of the temple.

> **This was unquestionably the most traumatic moment in the whole history of the Old Testament. Not only was there massive human suffering at every level of physical and emotional experience, not only the devastating demolition and incineration of their ancient and beautiful city, but there was also the utter humiliation of their national pride. As a small but independent nation that had a history in the land stretching back to Joshua, the devastating undermining of all that they had thought was theologically guaranteed—Davidic monarchy, the City of Zion, and the very temple of their omnipotent God—was gone. What possible future could there be? How could the present even be endured? It is out of that unspeakable pain that Lamentation speaks, daring to describe the indescribable, and to utter the unutterable, and to do so in poetry of astonishing beauty and intricacy, though soaked in tears. Christopher Wright**

It goes without saying that at this point, the Babylonian exile is the most horrendous and catastrophic event that takes place in the entire Old Testament. That is the context. The context is exile. Exile is when the scaffolding of all of one's life is stripped away, and all that remains is God. This isn't just an ancient reality. I mentioned this is a designed theme throughout the Bible. This is the key point of exile.

This theme dates all the way back to Genesis and goes all the way through to Revelation. See, exile is the moment where it's not just about losing land, not just about losing all that made you feel secure, but exile is when the structures that you trusted collapse, where you're forced to question if God is trustworthy.

Exile is the disorientation of life in the ashes, exile is the experience of life in the minor key, as Wright wrote, "Soaked in tears." Many of us will not experience the literal loss that the Israelites experienced in this moment, but all of us have come in through some form of exile: a broken relationship, a dream that was shattered, a sense of safety that seems

lost, the version of this future that we assumed would be ours, and life had a different way. We experience our own exile, an existential experience of questioning God. It's often that experience alone of questioning God, who is, for some, in many respects, the most certain thing we know about ourselves. But what happens when that seems to shake?

Exile is the context of the Book of Lamentations. It's the context for the season of Lent. But quite frankly, exile is also the context in which we come to experience God. It's out of that wreckage that this harrowing book of poems emerges. I love that there is a book entirely dedicated in the scriptures to lament because the scriptures never flinch at the reality of suffering.

It doesn't necessarily even offer tidy answers, but what it understands is that suffering is a part of the human journey, and out of the wreckage of the context of exile, whether it's Israel's or your own, this book of poetry emerges to offer us language, to offer us something to navigate those seasons.

The Center

That brings us to the second movement this morning—the center. There are a few things about the book that will help us identify and locate the center. The Book of Lamentations is a unique book in the scriptures. It's a collection of five poems, masterfully compiled and constructed by an anonymous author who survived the exile that I just described. The Book of Lamentations is described as an acrostic poem, which is a biblical form of writing in which you start with a sentence. We label that A. Then you say something separate to that, which is B, which then all points to C. That then literally works its way back down that to B, but with that little dash showing it's difference—mirroring A—A, B, C. Ba.

In the ancient world, they didn't have bold, italics, underline, or any other way to emphasize a point, so the acrostic form of writing was the way in which the biblical writer showed the point of everything that was being said. The Book of Lamentations is designed in this way, but even more so, just to respect the poet of Lamentations, we have to see how beautifully crafted this letter is.

There is the literary design of the Book of Lamentations. Chapter 1 is 22 verses, and it's written in the form of an alphabet poem, which means that each one of those verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. For our language, it would be from A to Z. You won't see that in the English language because it's in the Hebrew, but chapter 1 is 22 verses, in which the first verse starts with *aleph*, and the second with *beth*, and the third with *gimel*, and on and on and on. Chapter 2 repeats this 22-verse alphabet poem.

Chapter 3 differs from that. It's the center. So the way the poet describes that is instead of giving one verse per letter, the poet gives three verses per letter. So there are 66 verses in chapter 3, organized in that alphabet structure. Then we work our way back to chapter 4 with 22 verses, and so on. Then we get to chapter 5, and chapter 5 has 22 verses, but it is what I have called a chaos poem. The poet loses the alphabetical order of the verses and rather just writes. Scholars have interpreted that as it feels like for the first four chapters, the poet is holding together all of the chaos, but by the fifth chapter, he just comes undone and can no longer hold it together.

The reason I show you this incredibly ordered and structured format is that it is in intentional and in direct contrast to the disorder of pain. The poet is writing with intentionality, with brilliance, with a master poetic form, and yet is describing some of the most tragic, chaotic experiences of what it means to be human.

It's the poet saying, "I want to explore Israel's suffering from A to Z." Every corner of it. Every part of the suffering is articulated, but pay a little more attention to the form because in Lamentations, not just the content, but the form itself is preaching to us. If you pay attention to this as someone grieving and entering suffering, what you find is you start talking about suffering, but somehow, intuitively, when you are giving the alphabet, and you begin at A, which it might be a long way off, but you know Z exists. It's placing suffering in the context that shows suffering is difficult and long, but it is not infinite. There is an end to it. There are, in fact, only 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

As you explore this suffering, it feels unending. When you're walking through an exilic period, it's right in your face, and you can't imagine the end. But the poet reminds us that suffering is finite. It is not infinite. Listen to the way Eugene Peterson talks about this tension.

Sorrow and suffering are not infinite. Any serious discomfort, illness, hurt, or loss seems at the time of impact as if it will go on forever, getting worse all the time. But, in fact, it does not. There is either healing or death. There comes a time when either life ends or the suffering ends, but the subjective feeling of endlessness and suffering is, in fact, false. Peterson

Some of you are here this morning, and you're in that exile experience, and you're somewhere between A and H in this poem, and it feels unending. It does you no good for me to tell you that it's only temporary. I would never do that sitting with you. I would rather enter and share that space with you. But we try, as best we can, to zoom out and see that suffering is not the totality of human experience. It is significant. It often colors a lot of our time, but it is not total.

In our world, one of the most common ways that we deal with another's suffering, in the modern world, is we just try to avoid it. We make light of it, not meaning in a joking way, but we try to rush through it. We try to gloss it over. We attempt to shortcut through it, because suffering's painful, and that's counter to everything that our world teaches. We want to get to the other side quickly.

But Lamentations doesn't provide such shortcuts. It offers a structure that guarantees there is an end, yet it walks through, exploring every corner, turning over every leaf. Somehow, in the midst of all of that disorientation, the poet of Lamentations is trying to get us to see that we can explore it and lean into it, but there is something that God is bringing to bear through it that ultimately brings us back to the center.

As I reminded you, the middle, chapter 3, is unique amongst the five poems. The other four are written communally, speaking of the communal experience. But that middle chapter has this individual voice

burst onto the scene, and it begins to describe the experience of the individual.

So in your Bible, flip over to Lamentations chapter 3, and I want to look at these core verses. Because it is what the poet is trying to draw our attention to through the whole thing. It's as if the poet's saying, "You cannot experience suffering without remembering this thing."

> **I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Lam. 3:19-21**

Remembrance is a key element of suffering. It's a key element of grief and lamentation. Suffering is never abstract. It's rooted in a time and a moment. It's generally rooted in an inflection point that almost separates your life from a before-and-after type of understanding in the world.

Suffering begins with remembrance, but there's a grace in the specificity that suffering is bound to a historical moment. If suffering is abstract, there can be no end, but if suffering is specific, it's bound to a moment, and that moment will carry a significant ripple. Some suffering that will ripple out to the rest of your life, and you will never be done experiencing it, but its specificity means that it's finite.

Pain is bound by memory, and that means that pain is not all there is. There is both pain and joy. It's forever bitter and may forever be downcast, but it is not total in some respects. You can think of depression as grief and suffering that becomes unbound from time and becomes your total abstract experience of the world. That's where we need to step in and remind ourselves that even though it's bearing down on you, it's located in a moment. Putting that depression back to being bound to a moment in time allows us to find healing. It allows us a moment in which we can invite the Lord in to heal the wounds that ripple throughout our lives.

So the poet remembers his affliction and wandering, and what he's remembering is 587 BC when Babylon broke in and ransacked the city. But verse 21 says that he calls to mind, and therefore he has hope. What a contrast! Just two verses earlier, he is remembering his affliction, and now the poet has hope.

> **Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." vv. 22-24**

I get the sense when I read this that the poet is almost coaxing his soul to remember that which is most true, which is that God is faithful. The more literal translation, by the way, to call to mind in verse 21 is called to heart. The English translators change that because in the modern world, we think of the brain as the center of our person. It holds consciousness, but in the ancient world, it was your heart. Your heart is that which dictates the life of the human.

So when the poet says, "I call to mind," don't think of recollection, but think "I call in my soul who God is." And when we do that, when we remember in the core of who we are, who God is, we have hope. Notice that the center is not abstract. The center of everything here in the poem is faith. But also note that it's not your faith, it is God's faith. It's God's faithfulness. Because when we're walking through that exilic moment, you may have no faith to muster. It is not about your ability to muster that faith. What the poet remembers from that time is God's great faithfulness. It is the poet recalling that if God is eternal, then the character of God is also eternal, and therefore God's faithfulness is eternal.

Not just that, he says it's the Lord's great love, or your translation may say compassion. That's the Hebrew word *hesed*—faithful, enduring love. It's God's kindness, beauty, love, and mercy. And verse 23 cements all of it. It says God's mercies are new every morning. I don't know if you were up this morning before the sunrise, but it was a pretty good reminder of it. I couldn't help but smile as I sat there reading over this sermon, praying for you all, and after the week of rain and storm we had, that sun just lit up the sky.

His mercies are new every day, every single morning. It is not about our strength. It's not about our ability to muster faith through the grief, but rather we just turn, take whatever little strength we have, and aim it towards God's faithfulness. The faithfulness of God is what was lodged in the memory of the sufferer here.

It's interesting to me that the Hebrew people had two events that bookend their life, the Exodus and the Babylonian Exile. In the Exodus story, it was the definitive story of salvation. It was God liberating and freeing the people from slavery. It was in that moment, as they were wandering for 40 years in the middle of nowhere, not certain of what the future held, that God gave his presence and his manna every single day. Sustenance every morning, but only for that morning. The instructions were that every morning God would rain down this flaky bread-like substance to sustain the people in the wilderness, but they were to only take enough for that day. They had to trust God day after day, morning after morning. They woke up to the mercy of God every day.

When we experience exile, an appropriate response is to wonder how to get on the other side of it as quickly as possible. But what I've found in my time, and I haven't suffered much, but I've experienced some things, is that the Lord gives us enough for the day, and he invites us to walk with him, morning after morning. I, like the poet, can stand here like so many of you and confess, "Great is thy faithfulness, Lord." The center of the center of the poem is reminding us that, amongst the wreckage, amongst all of the pain and the hurt that you experience, great is his faithfulness.

The Practice

Then verse 24 lands at the moment of trust in which he says, *"I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'"* Now that brings us to the third movement of this sermon, the practice. Because the question still stands, how did Spafford write those words? "It is well

with my soul?" How do we walk through that desert? What tools do we have? What ways do we, like the people of Israel, walk through exile, walk through this Lent?

Well, the practice is that of lament. You can hear the word lament in the word lamentations. That's because they're the same word, and most of it is one of the most common forms of Christian prayer that rises up out of the ashes. Forty percent of the Psalms are a lament. Fifty to 60 of the 150 psalms are lament psalms. That is interesting for a book that's literally titled Praise. Lament poems, like that of Lamentations, function through three primary ways.

A Form of Protest

Lament is a form of protest. It is a way of looking at the brokenness of this world, drawing everyone's attention in, including God's, to say that this is a horrible thing happening in the world that should not happen. Lament is an active form of prayer that protests against the brokenness of the world.

A Way of Processing Emotions

On top of that, lament is a way of processing emotions. It's a way of reading through poetry and venting our anger and dismay at what tragedies are taking place, caused by either our own sin, sin done to us, or sin done around us. But the lament Psalms do not hold back. They express the raw nature of the emotional state of the individual.

A Place to Voice Confusion

It's a place to voice confusion. So many times, the Psalms of lament are framed by questions for God: Where are you? Think of Jesus on the cross, quoting a psalm of lament in Psalm 22. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Lament was on the very lips of Jesus himself. None of this, the protest, the voicing of emotions, or the voice of confusion, is looked down upon in the scriptures. In fact, quite the opposite. The scriptures encourage the raw honesty of the heart. We can open up and be vulnerable to God.

They restore a sacred dignity to human suffering. The Christian view of suffering is so unique compared to the ways in which we understand suffering in the world. The modern humanist way of viewing suffering is to see suffering as a deficiency. It's usually placed in the category akin to sickness. The only way our secular, imminent world can handle suffering is simply to say something has gone wrong; therefore, it needs to be set right. We must find the source of it and eliminate it. By doing so, we may abide by the American myth of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which is a beautiful creed to try to live and organize by. I'm not down on that, but I do want us to see that there is no room for suffering in that creed.

The risk to organizing a life around this creed means that anything that hinders it must be removed, that there is no dignity to that experience, as universal as suffering is. That mantra risks diminishing and demeaning the sufferer. But the Christian perspective offers a dignifying response to suffering. It says suffering is a part of the human experience. It has a category called sin in which we understand the fracture and the ripple effects of sins done by us, to us, or around us. All three of those are the source of suffering.

That does not mean that suffering is punitive, meaning God coming down and punishing you for your sin, but it does mean that sin has rattled the world in such a way that the very fabric of creation is now producing things like cancer and brokenness. You realize that is a result of the broadest categories of sin. Sin, with its death and all of its friends, has rattled the world so much that we come up against it and experience the sharp edge of it.

I loved that song we sang about the blood of Christ, but I couldn't help but think, when we sang that line, "Death, where is your sting," that it needs to be rewritten. Because some of us in here are feeling the sting of death. You've lost a loved one. You've experienced the diagnosis. It is true that one day, on the other side of resurrection, we will be able to look at death and mock it, but that has not happened yet. Death does, in fact, still sting. That's a song rooted in the hope to come, but we still feel it.

Lament is the practice that you and I have to protest against the brokenness of this world, to voice our emotions, and give voice to the confusion that ensues when we do that. A theologian named Nicholas Wolterstorff lost his adult son tragically. He wrote, "Grief was the price I paid for love." The modern world has no category for suffering, and if you simply want to eliminate it as an obstacle, you eliminate the very concept of love because love is necessary with human agency. Love must be chosen, which means there is also the inverse of that. One can choose to live for oneself, which the biblical writers call sin. That then perpetrates brokenness. That's Genesis 3.

God, in his sovereignty, gives us a level and a modicum of sovereignty over our lives. Which means we have the choice to live how we desire, and that is the birthplace of both love and suffering. So, of course, we experience the sting of that, but to remove all of it means to remove the possibility of love. I don't think you and I would really want to do away with that. It means you open up your life to vulnerability.

The Christian category of suffering doesn't just flippantly or naively walk into suffering. Rather, Romans 8 talks about how God can use the brokenness of this world to make something beautiful. It isn't that God causes all suffering, but he does meet us in all suffering, and says, "I will take all of that carnage and do something with it." It's almost impossible in the moment of your exile to know that. But when we zoom out in moments where we're not in that exile, we remember God's mercies are new every day.

Every day God is working in the brokenness of this world to bring about beauty, and lament is our opportunity, our practice, to enter into that process with God. But the Christian story and the Christian understanding of suffering are ones that dignify it. This is a part of the brokenness of this world, but we can bring it before God, who can work to heal it.

What does lament look like in a very practical way? There are four typical movements of lament. Turn to God, voice your complaint, ask

boldly, and choose to trust, but they are not always linear. When you look at the lament psalms, the first step is to turn to God. Look at Psalm 13, where I'll briefly show you these four movements.

Turn to God

Put simply, the first step in lament is to turn your affections to God. This is what we call prayer. You first address God, bringing those prayers to him. Sometimes this is combined with complaint. At times, it is when the author of the psalm or the prayer will reflect on God and also immediately then voice the complaint. But nonetheless, it is prayer aimed at God.

"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (v. 1). Notice it's couched in the complaint. The psalm is asking how long does he have to wait, but it's aimed in the direction of God. This is the first step of lament to somehow, out of the ashes, turn our affection to the Lord. To pray in pain, even with its messy struggles and tough questions, is an act of faith. It reminds us that God is there.

When I talk with people who aren't believers, who've experienced brokenness, often the impulse in their souls is to turn to God. It's a grace of the Lord, some way in which he's already working in the carnage to say that you can bring all of that to him. Prayerful lament is better than silence. It's better than stuffing it down and just turning inward.

Voice Your Complaints

The second is voice your complaints. The second movement gives you the space to express your raw emotion. It's to identify, in blunt language, the specific pain or injustice. "Why" or "How" is often part of the complaint. This is the hardest part for me. In times of lament, it's scary, it's challenging. I feel like I'm doing something wrong. When I, in some ways, shake my fist at God, but the Psalms open up the opportunity for that. It says to name specifically and boldly the pain that you are carrying.

"How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (Psalm 13:2). A bold declaration, "God, where are you? You are supposed to be here. You are supposed to show up. Are you going to let my enemy triumph over me?" It's specific; it's bold; and it's naming the exact ache that's centered in the psalmist's heart. It's important to note that lament doesn't always lead to immediate solutions, but it does bring an opportunity to give voice to it. Half of the battle of healing is just speaking it.

Often, when you are in moments of suffering, what you need is not someone with answers, but someone to hold space and listen. And the lament psalms remind us that God is always present. He is close to the brokenhearted. He's ready to hear the raw emotion that you experience, and you can, in fact, let loose before God. It is a place where we come to the full honesty of our grief and pain, where we allow God's presence to meet us in the very thick of it.

Ask Boldly

That ultimately leads to the third step, which is ask boldly. The lament psalms always move from turning to God to voicing their complaint, and calling out to God to move in their direction. When we ask boldly, we specifically call on God to act, but it has to be in a manner that's consistent with his character. Often, you can express things, like the times in the Psalms where it talks about crushing your enemies. That is voicing complaint, that is not asking boldly for God to move. Do you see the difference? That is not consistent with God's character, so therefore, he's not going to act on that. Rather, ask boldly for God to bring about whatever healing is needed. That is a very good and healthy prayer. You see it in Psalm 13:3-4: *"Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall." (vv. 3-4)* The psalmist says, "Waken up my eyes. Bring the light back to my life." He is asking specifically for the Lord to act in accordance with his character.

Choose to Trust

We come to the fourth step, which is choose to trust. Almost all of the lament psalms end with some moment where it says "Yet" or "But, I trust in you." Trust is the act of patience. It's the ability to say, amongst all of the chaos, "I don't know where the way forward is, yet I trust in your mercies every day." It's the ultimate affirmation of God's worthiness to be trusted and to commit to praising him. We see it in verses 5-6. *"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me" (5-6).*

These are the movements of Lament. Horatio Spafford, 125 years ago, went through some of the most harrowing times that a person could go through. Yet the Lord taught his heart to say, "It is well with my soul." Not in avoidance, not in some flippant naivete, but rather through the work of lament, which created space for him to give voice to that.

If I were to summarize all of this, whatever exile you're in, I'd put it this way. Lament is faith in exile. That's what faith looks like in exile: it is to lament. You don't have to have the answers. You don't have to have it all buttoned up and looking tidy. Lament is faith in exile. "Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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