

The Practice of Lament

A quick search in dictionaries for a definition of lament reveals that it's: to express sorrow, regret or unhappiness about something, or it's a formal expression of sorrow or mourning. But Biblical Lament is actually much more than this. It's not just a formal expression of sorrow.

When we experience loss, grief is inevitable. In St. Augustine's terms, we're each a collection of loves that bind us to people, places, and practices. Whenever these bonds of love are severed, we grieve. Grief isn't a choice; we're subject to it whether we like it or not.

Lament, by contrast, is the exercise of spiritual agency in the face of loss. As a spiritual practice lament seeks to incorporate the experience of loss into the broader story of our lives before God. Where grief threatens to shatter the coherence of our story, lament re-opens our hearts to the possibility of a recovered sense of wholeness. Lament doesn't internalise our pain, sorrow or loss, but helps us to call out to God. So it's not just an expression of deep emotion resulting from loss, it calls to God for action and ends in praise to God. To lament is to join a long line of those who have wrestled with God in the midst of their sorrow.

We find lament throughout the Old Testament. Most clearly we find lament in the Psalms and these are referred to extensively throughout the New Testament. The Psalms are the Prayer Book of the Bible. As such they encompass the full range of human experiences—and in particular make room for experiences of suffering through Psalms of Lament.

As a practicing Jew, Jesus would have participated in the communal praying and singing of the Psalms of Lament. And this formed the backdrop for his own practice of lament. Jesus, consistently brought his his own experience of suffering to God. In Hebrews 5:7, "*In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who is able to save him from death.*" Jesus regularly practiced handing over his suffering to God.

When Jesus was faced with the suffering of others as when Lazarus died, he lamented. When faced with his impending death in the Garden of Gethsemane, he lamented. On the cross he cried out, "*My god , my God. Why have you forsaken me?*" Quoting from the start of Psalm 22, a Psalm of lament. Before He died He quoted yet another Psalm of lament. when he cried out, "*Father into your hands I command my spirit.*" (Ps 31:5) So when we follow Jesus' example in suffering, we find at our disposal the resources that He drew on, including lament.

But why is lament such a powerful spiritual discipline for those going through times of suffering? Suffering is profoundly disorienting. It shakes up our assumptions about the world, about our place in the world, about the way that we think things should be.

In the Bible the psalms of lament are more numerous than any other genre of psalm. These cries for help appear to us to be impious. They express bitter doubt. They blame God for evil. They are angry, impatient, and demanding. "*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me*

forever?” (Ps. 13:1). Yet that’s precisely why they can be extremely helpful for us when we find that we have no words to express the depth of our negative feelings.

The psalms well up from the deepest recesses of an individual in their pain, sorrow, grief or distress, but they’re intended to be spoken or sung collectively. It may strike you as a little strange to be this honest about your pain and sorrow in public, but doing so as a community, addresses directly what is often the most intolerable part of our suffering—the fact that we each tend to do it alone. Lament is about naming our pain and allowing us to share it in the community of faith.

So far, what we have been discussing would apply to Lament as practiced in many faiths. In Christianity there is however an additional and very powerful dimension to Lament in its relationship with Christ’s Lament. To enter into the practice of Christian Lament is to participate in ancient customs by which we join our suffering to the suffering of Christ and share our individual grief at loss with both God and others who enter into that grief with us.

The scandalous mystery of Holy Week is that God suffers. The divine and human Christ himself experiences the feeling of abandonment as he takes upon himself the world’s plight. In what is the ultimate fulfilment of the practice of Lament he speaks the words of Psalm 22: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*. Jesus’ cry of dereliction troubles us as we hear it and reflect on it. Is God such that he abandons us? Has he abandoned those who are struggling for breath in overcrowded hospitals? Does he abandon those who are losing their livelihoods in the pandemic,. Will He abandon those grieving the loss of a loved-one?

Christ’s entering into the fullness of suffering and lamentation means, paradoxically, that God hasn’t abandoned us. In Christ, God enters so fully into ‘God-forsakenness’ that it ceases to be God-forsakenness. Christ’s cry of dereliction declares that God has chosen to be with us precisely in our darkest moments.

Lament, then, doesn’t insult those who suffer or grieve by offering bland theoretical explanations for the problem of suffering. It doesn’t compound their misery with cheerful optimism. Lament isn’t a satisfying intellectual argument, but rather something that can only be experienced through the practices of prayer, which offer something far more powerful—the presence of the living God in our lives.

The greatest danger in suffering isn’t in the physical pain—however real—that it produces. Rather, the greatest danger suffering poses is the way it threatens to strip our lives of meaning. Suffering, grief and loss can make of us powerless victims, destroying our sense of personal integrity and moral agency. However, by joining our experiences of suffering to those of Christ, suffering can become the ultimate site of meaning in our lives. As Paul says: *“our suffering with Christ is the basis of our being glorified with him”* (Romans 8:17).

Lament isn’t merely complaining—though it certainly requires that. Abandoning ourselves in Lament before God allows us to express the full depth of our pain, loss, despair and grief and invite other Christians to join us in calling upon God for help. In lament we shift the burden of making meaning out of our suffering from ourselves onto the God who cares for us, and cast ourselves on God’s mercy for deliverance from our affliction.