

SUFFERING IN GOD’S PRESENCE: THE ROLE OF LAMENT IN TRANSFORMATION



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Abstract. Lament is a Christian practice modeled for us by Jesus. In this article, I argue that lament is a spiritual discipline that assists the sufferer to reconstruct meaning after the disorienting effects of the suffering. Drawing on the psychological literature on stress-related growth, I show how the structure of the psalms of lament facilitates the process of growth through meaning-making. Lament is a stylized form of speech consisting of five common elements that define a specific trajectory. The elements are an address to God, complaints, request, motivation (why God should act), and confidence in God. The trajectory of lament involves a psychological move from distress to praise, and from disorientation to new orientation. I argue that the meaning that is achieved is not primarily rational or propositional, but instead is anchored in the intimate, dialogical relationship with God.

Occasions for suffering abound. Tragedies large and small, sudden or chronic, interrupt the flow of our lives. They wrench us into attempts to resolve the situation, deal with the consequences, and wrestle with the meaning of the events. Those who are suffering often turn to their faith systems to obtain the support, guidance, and meaning they require to get through hard times. In fact, meaning-making in suffering appears to be one of the primary functions of religion. Philosopher Max Scheler wrote a century ago, “An essential part of the teachings and directives of the great religious and philosophical thinkers the world over has been on the meaning of pain and suffering.”¹ And religion, in the generic sense, serves this function well. A number of studies have shown that people who are more religious do

¹ Max Scheler, “The Meaning of Suffering,” in *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing: Selected Writings*, ed. H. J. Bershady (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 98.

better than those who are less religious in times of crisis,² and report greater meaning after traumatic events.³

But religions are not generic; they are particular. People are not generically religious; they are followers of a particular religious tradition. While all religions provide a meaning system for understanding suffering and practices for coping with it, they do this in a diversity of ways. Buddhism, for example, sees suffering as an illusion that results from an unhealthy attachment to the objects of our desire, including false belief systems, material objects, and even our sense of ourselves as a bounded self.⁴ The Buddhist religious practices that are recommended to overcome suffering include awareness of our attachments and the cultivation of detachment in order to overcome suffering.⁵

In contrast, from a Christian perspective suffering is not an illusion. It is a very real consequence of the Fall and sin's entrance in the world. The solution to suffering cannot be found inside of ourselves, but is found in God's loving provision of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is the savior who can sympathize with suffering because of his own suffering; he is the model for how to suffer. Through following Jesus' example, suffering itself can be redeemed and transformed as God uses it to accomplish God's purposes in our lives. This is a distinctive of Christianity. Suffering is not merely something to be avoided or eliminated, as in our secular culture. It is not merely something to be overcome, as in Buddhism. Instead, it has the potential to be transformed through the loving intervention of God into something that can benefit us. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him," says the apostle Paul (Rom. 8:28).⁶

Given this focus, it is no surprise that Christian practices to confront suffering also differ from those of Buddhism. An examination of Jesus' life suggests three interrelated practices that are central to overcoming suffering.⁷ First, suffering should be brought to God, lamenting the suffering and

² Crystal L. Park, "Religion as a Meaning-Making Framework in Coping with Life Stress," *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (2005): 707–729; A. Shaw, S. Joseph, and P. A. Linley, "Religion, Spirituality, and Posttraumatic Growth: A Systematic Review," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2005): 1–11.

³ Robert A. Emmons, P. M. Colby, and H. A. Kaiser, "When Losses Lead to Gains: Personal Goals and the Recovery of Meaning," in *The Human Quest for Meaning: A Handbook of Psychological Research and Clinical Applications*, ed. P. T. P. Wong and P. S. Fry (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998), 163–178.

⁴ B. A. Wallace, "Buddhism and Science," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. P. Clayton and Z. Simpson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 24–40.

⁵ J. Schlieter, "Endure, Adapt, or Overcome? The Concept of 'Suffering' in Buddhist Bioethics," in *Suffering and Bioethics*, ed. R. M. Green and N. J. Palpant (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 309–336.

⁶ All Scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁷ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, "Suffering as Formation: The Hard Road to Glory," in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Formation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Diane Chandler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

entrusting it to God. Lamenting in suffering is a common theme throughout the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. This practice encourages increasing dependence on and attachment to God. Second, virtue ("the fruit of the Spirit"; Gal. 5:22) should be cultivated in response to suffering. Suffering often brings with it opportunities to exercise, among other virtues, forgiveness, obedience, the practice of non-violence, and perseverance. Third, hope should be cultivated by keeping a teleological orientation that puts present suffering in perspective, as exemplified by the apostle Paul's words, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

The focus of this paper is on the first of these, lament, which paves the way for and facilitates the additional practices of cultivating virtue and perspective-taking. Like other Christian practices such as fasting, meditation on Scripture, communion, etc., lament is a spiritual discipline in that its regular practice shapes us in the developmental pathways of our faith. In the following sections, I introduce the biblical practice of lament and its status in the contemporary evangelical church, I show how Jesus modeled for us the practice of lament, and finally, drawing on the psychological literature demonstrating growth through suffering, I show how the elements of lament can be vehicles for personal transformation.

LAMENT THEN AND NOW

A quick search in dictionaries for the definition of lament reveals that it is "to express sorrow, regret, or unhappiness about something,"⁸ or "a formal expression of sorrow or mourning, especially in verse or song; an elegy or dirge."⁹ However, biblical lament is much more than this. It is not just an expression of deep emotion; it is this expression to a specific person, God. It is not just a formal expression of sorrow, but it also calls out to God for action. And finally, biblical lament contains an unexpected element that differs radically from "sorrow, regret, or unhappiness"; it contains sometimes exuberant praise to God. Lament is found throughout the Old Testament, paradigmatically in the Psalms, and these passages of lament are referenced extensively in the New Testament.

Unfortunately, lament as a Christian practice to guide us through suffering is not always recognized and taught in contemporary Christian settings in the Western world. The psalms most often read in congregations are those that offer praise and thanksgiving to God; those expressing distress are underrepresented in public worship. A recent study of contemporary hymnals concluded that only about four percent of hymns reflect the

⁸ "Lament," accessed February 27, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lament>

⁹ "Lament," accessed February 27, 2016, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/lament>

kind of lament modeled in the psalms.¹⁰ This stands in stark contrast to the forty percent of psalms in the hymnal of Israel that are laments.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann, who has written extensively about the psalms of lament, noted the costs of this neglect.¹¹ In his view, lament grants power to the sufferer in the relationship with God, affirming that the concerns of the sufferer are heard, valued, and taken seriously by God. Consequently, one loss resulting from the absence of lament is to render the sufferer voiceless, or to limit the sufferer to speaking only praise. Brueggemann sees this as a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense.

This deficit in the practice of lament seems to stem from inadequacies in our underlying theological beliefs about suffering. Influenced by humanistic perspectives stemming from the Enlightenment, and surrounded by technological and scientific advances that have allowed us a great deal of control over our environment, our culture has had the luxury of largely avoiding and marginalizing suffering. American Christianity has been criticized by Christians from other parts of the world where suffering cannot be avoided as successfully, as having a deficient theology of suffering.¹² Yet the Bible offers abundant resources for addressing suffering. As noted above, the Old Testament abounds with the language of lament. Large chunks of the New Testament (including the books of 1 Peter, 2 Corinthians, and the eighth chapter of Romans) give practical advice on facing suffering. Key to our understanding of how to face suffering is the directive in 1 Peter 2:21, which states, “This suffering is all part of the work God has given you. Christ, who suffered for you, is your example. Follow in his steps” (Living Bible). So how did Jesus face suffering?

JESUS AND LAMENT

As a practicing Jew, Jesus would have participated in the communal praying and singing of the psalms, including the psalms of lament. This formed the backdrop for his own personal practice of lament. Jesus consistently brought his suffering before God. Hebrews 5:7–9 says, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (ESV). Peter adds a nuance to this description, noting a specific way in which Jesus turned to God in his

¹⁰ Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 39.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986): 57.

¹² Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2013), 1–11.

suffering: he “entrusted himself” to God (1 Pet. 2:23). The verb tense used can be translated “kept entrusting” and indicates that this was a deliberate choice on Jesus’ part.¹³ Jesus kept “handing over” his sufferings to God.

When Jesus was faced with the suffering of others, as when Lazarus died, he lamented. When faced with his upcoming death in the garden of Gethsemane, he lamented. His modeling of lament on the cross is detailed in Matthew 27, where he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). This cry is a quote from Psalm 22, a psalm of lament. Johnson notes that “Jesus, in lifting up the lament from Psalm 22, is situating himself directly within that long line of servants who have suffered unjustly for God”¹⁴—and who have, by the way, lifted up their suffering to God. And shortly after, Jesus quotes from yet another psalm of lament, Psalm 31:5, crying out, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,” (AKJV) before dying.

When we follow Jesus’ example, “following in his steps,” we find at our disposal the resources that he drew on. Key to these resources is an honest, intimate relationship with a loving God, embodied in the form of the psalms of lament that shaped Jesus’ own prayers in the midst of suffering.

LAMENT AND TRANSFORMATION

We turn now to an exploration of why lament can be a powerful spiritual discipline for those going through times of suffering. Although lament occurs throughout Scripture, it is found in its purest form in the psalms, where our study will be focused. Lament is not merely pouring out our heart to God, nor is it complaining or venting. Instead, lament has a specific structure. It is a stylized form of speech consisting of five common elements that define a specific trajectory. The elements are an address to God, complaints, request, motivation (why God should act), and confidence in God.¹⁵ The trajectory involves a psychological move, a transformative move, from distress to praise.

The structure of lament is significant, facilitating this transformative movement. Suffering is disorienting. As Brueggemann notes, “[U]nexpected circumstances challenge the old world view and previous suppositions.”¹⁶

¹³ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Selected Studies from 1 Peter Part 1: Following Christ’s Example: An Exposition of 1 Peter 2:21–25,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 553 (1982): 32–45.

¹⁴ William Stacy Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 81.

¹⁵ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 65.

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 19–22.

Similarly, psychologist Crystal Park notes that suffering occurs when events in our world do not make sense.¹⁷ According to her meaning-making model, people's understanding of the event itself challenges elements in the person's worldview. To reduce distress, people must adjust their views of the event or revise their goals and beliefs about the world to accommodate the new information. To recover, the discrepancy must be reduced through a meaning-making process that changes either the view of the specific situation or the worldview beliefs. This meaning-making process allows for growth through the transformation of our views about God, the world, ourselves, and even the suffering itself.

This is where the structure of lament comes in. In praying through the lament, the structure of the lament begins to restore some sense of order in the midst of chaos. In this way, it serves a similar function to many other rituals in life that mark important transitions. Wedding ceremonies, funerals, and graduations all provide structure that allows for formulations of new ways of living, of being in the world. The structure of these rituals helps us create new meanings. Similarly, the structure of lament organizes and facilitates the process of meaning-making in suffering. It moves the sufferer from disorientation to a new orientation.

The structure of lament additionally aids the sufferer by providing words to express the experience of suffering. Wolterstorff emphasizes this point by noting that "lament is the languaging [*sic*] of suffering, the *voicing* of suffering."¹⁸ Therapists know the power of offering interpretations, which are often simply assistance in articulating for clients what they may be experiencing but are having difficulty putting into words. Verbalization of the suffering is what allows it to be expressed interpersonally.

However, words do not simply reflect experience; they also shape experience. Writing of lament, Brueggemann notes, "[Language] does not simply follow reality, reflect it, but it leads reality to become what it is not ... The speaker calls forth new reality."¹⁹ Elsewhere he writes, "[O]ur work ... is to let our voices and minds and hearts run back and forth in regular and speedy interplay between the stylized and sometimes too familiar words of *Scripture* and our *experience* ... the words of Scripture bring power, shape, and authority to what we know about ourselves."²⁰ The shape of lament causes our verbalized experience to be molded by encountering the reality of God and his character. When we express our experience in the form of lament, and allow our experience to be shaped by the words of the lament, our experience itself is transformed.

¹⁷ Crystal L. Park, "Religion as a Meaning-Making Framework in Coping with Life Stress," *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (2005): 707-729.

¹⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "If God is Good and Sovereign, Why Lament?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 42. Italics in original.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 26.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1982), 16. Italics in original.

THE TRAJECTORY OF LAMENT

Meaning-making in lament has a specific trajectory, leading the sufferer from plea to praise.²¹ The meaning-making movement in lament can also be seen as a relational movement: the sufferer moves from a place of tension with God around God's permitting the suffering or failure to intervene, to a place of intimacy and trust out of which flows praise. Significantly, the sufferer is not the same at the end of the trajectory. Something transformative has happened over the course of the trajectory. Meaning has been made, and change has occurred. In order to understand more fully how this occurs, we turn now to the components of lament.

THE COMPONENTS OF LAMENT

While various alternatives regarding the structural components of lament have been offered,²² I will draw here on Pemberton's scholarship.²³ Pemberton notes five common elements in the psalms of lament: an address to God, complaints, request, motivation (why God should act), and confidence in God.

The address to God. Unlike many other psalms, where God is often invoked at length, the psalms of lament typically begin with a terse cry-out to God: "My God!" or "Oh, Lord!" Biblical lament is interpersonal; it is a turning to God. It is not lonely catharsis. One transformative element in this relational movement has to do with the sufferer being allowed to bring the suffering before God. Brueggemann draws on object relations theorist Winnicott's description of the mother-child relationship to make this point. In bringing the suffering to God, the believer can take initiative in the relationship with God and be responded to. This process allows for intimacy and for the development of trust in God, key to mature faith. There is modest empirical support for this premise. In a study in which college students were instructed to pray through the psalms of lament, increased involvement with these psalms was, in fact, correlated with reports of intimacy with God.²⁴ In contrast, when the sufferer is limited to only praise and worship in relationship to God, the believer's experience is rendered invisible in the relationship. God does not respond relationally; he only acts. When bad

²¹ Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 57.

²² E.g., Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28 (1974): 26.

²³ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 65.

²⁴ Kimberly N. Snow et al., "Resolving Anger Toward God: Lament as an Avenue Toward Attachment," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 2 (2011): 130-42.

things happen, God cannot be invoked, leaving the sufferer to take responsibility for what is happening or to deal with it on his or her own. Fear and guilt result and may lead to a kind of faith characterized by resentment toward God, or performance-based kinds of faith. As Brueggemann notes, “[T]he absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.”²⁵

The complaint. In this second component of lament, the cause of the suffering is brought before God. The disorientation in the face of suffering is expressed. There is a remarkable array of causes of suffering represented in the psalms of lament. As summarized by Pemberton, they include bodies that are not working well, disease and pain, disappointments in life, depression, people in our lives who by no fault of our own have become our enemies, people who lie about us, take us to court, scheme to cause us trouble or shame us and try to take advantage of us at our weakest moments, lifelong friends who abandon us at our time of greatest need, who turn on us, and who return trouble for all the good that we have done for them.²⁶ And sometimes God himself is the cause of the lament: a God who all too often seems absent and unresponsive when we most need him, who does not intervene in the world or in our lives as we expect, and on occasion, who behaves in such bizarre ways we are left wondering about God’s faithfulness. It would appear that nothing is off-limits when it comes to expressing our suffering to God.

Yet some sectors of Christianity do, in fact, see some of these expressions—especially those indicating anger at God or doubt regarding his actions—as off limits. Sufferers may respond with guilt when these feelings toward God emerge, or feel cut off from God when these things cannot be expressed directly to God. Their faith may be questioned and their continued suffering seen as a deficit in their Christian maturity. The content of the psalms of lament reassures us regarding God’s interest in hearing about all aspects of our experience. And ironically, turning to God to express the full range of our emotions and to petition him is actually an act of faith, rather than a demonstration of its absence. Why bring suffering to God if God is helpless to address it?

This expression of suffering is a crucial element of lament. In lament, suffering is not denied or minimized. Suffering is not dealt with by explaining it away or by distracting ourselves from it. It is recognized, and in so doing the experience of the sufferer is legitimized. Research suggests that processing the suffering cognitively and emotionally is necessary for growth to occur.²⁷ This processing may take the form of unintentional, often in-

²⁵ Brueggemann, “Costly Loss of Lament,” 61.

²⁶ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 31.

²⁷ Lawrence G. Calhoun and R. G. Tedeschi, “The Foundations of Posttraumatic Growth: An Expanded Framework,” in *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*, ed. L. G. Calhoun and R. G. Tedeschi (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006), 3–23.

trusive thoughts about the source of suffering during the early stages of suffering. The focus of this intrusive processing is often on trying to grasp the reality of the situation, trying to comprehend it. This unintentional processing paves the way for more intentional processing, in which the focus is on figuring out ways to cope with the situation, and finally, grappling with issues of meaning, trying to figure out how this even fits with one's worldview. This latter, intentional processing is crucial for growth to occur;²⁸ some studies suggest that the amount of growth is directly related to the amount of intentional engagement with the life crisis.

The role of grief deserves special mention here. Clinical psychology has long seen mourning as necessary to growth. Conversely, the failure to mourn can lead to decreases in functioning, such as "more primitive organizations of self and other, defenses, and reality testing."²⁹ Life is filled with losses, some of them the minor losses of everyday life, others more traumatic and devastating. When these losses are acknowledged as such, and the sadness and anger is experienced, then the object of loss can be gradually relinquished. Grieving is painful and sometimes gut-wrenching, so at times mourning is resisted and loss is denied. But when these feelings are acknowledged, they are able to be shared with others, processed, and over time, they become more bearable. Religions often provide rituals for structuring grief in order to facilitate this process. Lament, of course, constitutes such a ritual within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Brueggemann writes, "[T]he lament Psalms ... do their work of helping people to die completely to the old situation, the old possibility, the old false hopes, the old lines of defense and pretense, to say as dramatically as possible, 'That is all over now.'"³⁰

This profound engagement with suffering runs counter to currents in our culture. The suffering of others makes us uncomfortable, and consequently we often attempt to help those who suffer by distracting them or pointing out the potential benefits of their situation. The psalms of lament, which were often prayed in community, encourage us to stand with others through their suffering. The way out of suffering is through it, not around it, and the psalms of lament allow us to plumb its depths.

The request. An important transition occurs from complaint to request. Lament does not get stuck in the experience of the suffering, but is constructive. Westermann sees the inclusion of petition as essential to the practice

²⁸ Jeanne M. Slattery and Crystal L. Park, "Meaning Making and Spiritually Oriented Interventions," in *Spiritually Oriented Interventions for Counseling and Psychotherapy*, ed. Jamie D. Aten, Mark R. McMinn, and Everett L. Worthington (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 15–40.

²⁹ Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, "When Mourning Never Comes: What Happens when Individuals, Institutions, or Nations Fail to Mourn after Trauma," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 54, no. 4 (2014): 594.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 30.

of lament. He writes, “There is not a single psalm of lament that stops with lamentation. Lamentation has no meaning in and of itself ... The lament appeals to the one who can remove suffering.”³¹ Wolterstorff distinguishes two kinds of requests for deliverance: deliverance from suffering, but also deliverance from the threat of meaninglessness.³² The psalmists ask, “Why? Why is this happening? What sense does this make?” This distinction highlights the distinction between the difficult life event itself, and the disorientation it produces. Both are brought to God for deliverance.

It is in the request that we see the presence of hope. We are not left to wallow in our misery. Our petitioning to God brings with it the reminder that God can act and situations can change. Lament communicates the imagined possibility of alleviation of the suffering through God’s intervention.

Hope is central to meaning-making, and consequently to flourishing. In fact, hope is a common component of all theories of meaning, an intuition that also has experimental support.³³ Meaning-making must evoke hope in order to lead a sufferer into a better place. Research supports this claim. For example, one study found that hope mediated the relationship between a sense of meaning in life, and well-being.³⁴ In other words, hope is one of the reasons that people with meaning in life flourish. And people who identify with a religion tend to report greater hope.³⁵

Hope is sometimes used in very vague ways, to express optimism or even wishful thinking. However, hope has a distinct theological narrative throughout Scripture. The development of hope as we turn to God with our requests is shaped in the New Testament with a particular eschatological vision. The vision is one of suffering leading to glory. For example, in 2 Corinthians 4:17–18 Paul says, “[O]ur light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” “Glory” appears to be a kind of shorthand for salvation, and more specifically for that part of salvation having to do with the process of transformation that will make us like Christ, resulting in our ultimate transformation into glorious Christ-likeness. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, who with unveiled faces

³¹ Westermann, “The Role of the Lament,” 26.

³² Wolterstorff, “If God is Good,” 44.

³³ David B. Feldman and C. R. Snyder, “Hope and the Meaningful Life: Theoretical and Empirical Associations Between Goal-Directed Thinking and Life Meaning,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2005): 401–421.

³⁴ İlhan Yalçın and Asude Malkoç, “The Relationship Between Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being: Forgiveness and Hope as Mediators,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 16, no. 4 (2015): 915–929.

³⁵ Robert G. Kunzendorf and Franz Buker, “Does Existential Meaning Require Hope, or is Interest Enough?” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 27, no. 3 (2007–2008): 233–243.

contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

The hope offered by our faith does not pit our current suffering against the eschatological glory to come. If it did, then our faith would, indeed, be a faith that silences the sufferer by simply distracting us from our current circumstances. Instead, our hope legitimizes our experience of suffering in two ways. First, the suffering itself is reconceptualized as a mechanism that can bring us closer to that eschatological vision ("our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us ..."). Second, the difficult events in our life are not diminished by minimizing their consequences in our lives or by denying their existence. Instead, resolution of our pain is achieved seeing our current afflictions in the light of our eschatological hope ("an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen"; ESV). We are reminded that we live in a transitional age, and that our current suffering is transient, but our future hope is eternal. Christ has defeated suffering and death, but we are still living in anticipation of the end of the story. There is still the need for lament in our hope; we "groan as we wait" (Rom. 8:22–23). Our suffering does not disappear, but it is set in a different context; not the context of our current life, hopes, and dreams, but the much larger, glorious (to use the biblical descriptor) reality of our future hope. The context makes all the difference.

The motivation. This component of lament is the one that might sound the strangest to our modern sensibilities. Psalms of lament often include reasons why God should answer the petition. To put it in plain terms, psalmists seem to engage in divine arm-twisting, if that is what it takes to get God to answer. In this and other psalms of lament, there are some common reasons given for why God should intervene: his reputation, his consistency with past actions, the speaker's guilt, the speaker's innocence, a promise of praise, the helplessness of the speaker, and the speaker's trust in the Lord.³⁶

Regardless of the intent of the psalmist in reminding God of why God should act, this component of lament serves an important function in the life of the sufferer: it is a reminder of who God is. In this part of the psalms of lament, the psalmists implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) acknowledge God as God. This reminder has two aspects. The first is the reminder of our position before God. God is God, and we are not. God is the creator and we are the creature. God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. We are not. Suffering often makes our limitations very clear to us. It provides us with an opportunity to acknowledge our finitude, our vulnerability, our lack of control—in short, our need for God. Intimacy with God is not the intimacy of peers. It is more like the intimacy of a parent and child, in cosmic proportions. So lament reminds us of our position in relation to God.

³⁶ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 31.

The second aspect has to do with the character of God. We are reminded of how God has powerfully acted in the past, and we are reminded of God's "name." God is a just God. He is also powerful, and can act on behalf of the sufferer. So bringing our suffering to God reminds us of who he is. The very act of crying out to God shapes us relationally, reminding us of who God is, and who we are in relationship to God.

The expression of confidence in God. The transition into this part of lament is often marked with the word, "but." It signals a contrast, a movement into a new way of experiencing reality. In most psalms of lament, this part of the psalm sets the reader "on a course to trust, wait, hope, take refuge, or, as expressed in various metaphors and figures of speech, to rely on the Lord."³⁷ The transition can seem quite abrupt, leading Brueggemann to say, "This movement from *plea* to *praise* is one of the most startling in all of Old Testament literature."³⁸ The psalms of lament are often silent regarding why or how this shift to praise occurs. Has God already acted? Perhaps. But the role of lament in producing transformation suggests that even when God has not yet acted, the ritualized movement through the lament can lead the sufferer to this place of praise. As we pray through the psalms, our desires, affections, and perspectives are reshaped. Eugene Peterson says that this is the lesson of the psalms, "that all true prayer pursued far enough will become praise ... It does not always get there quickly. It does not always get there easily ... But the end is always praise."³⁹

So is praise the outcome of the process of lament, or is it part of the process itself? It can be either, or both. In some cases, the movement through lament brings the sufferer to this new place where praise is generated from the heart. For others, the words of praise themselves may be needed to nudge the heart further in this direction. In these cases, praying the words of praise and worship at the end of the psalms of lament are formative, leading people out from the valley of despair into a focus on God.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In addressing our lament to God, lament introduces the possibility of intimacy with God as we are seen deeply by God. Bringing our complaint to God shows us that nothing is off limits, and allows us the transformative

³⁷ Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian Press, 2014), 53.

³⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), 56. Italics in original.

³⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 122.

experience of sitting in our grief and pain. The request for God to act elicits hope as we are reminded of who God is. In reminding God of why God should act, we ourselves are reminded of who we are in relation to God, and of God's character and the ways in which he has acted on our behalf in the past. The final expression of confidence is both pathway and outcome. It directs our attention away from ourselves and toward God, molding us until we fully reach this place of trust and confidence.

Conspicuous by its absence in the psalms of lament are any attempts at theodicy. We might expect an explanation of God's actions, perhaps, in the culmination of the psalms in praise and worship. But the absence of any theodicy suggests that the praise to God is not in response to sufferers finally understanding how an all-powerful, all-loving God could allow suffering to happen. The meaning-making that occurs does not seem to take the form of abstract, propositional defenses of God's actions, or lack thereof. The meaning-making, instead, seems to be of a relational kind, relying for resolution on reminders of who God has been in relation to us in the past (as recalled during the "motivation" phase), in the present (as experienced in the process of calling out to God and pouring out the circumstances of the suffering), and in the future (as hope is elicited in the plea to God to act). This is consistent with Westermann's observation that "[i]n the West, God-talk is characterized by objective thinking about God ... but in the Old Testament, talk of God is characterized by dialogical thinking ... an event between God and man."⁴⁰ This is also consistent with contemporary psychological understandings of meaning. Speaking of meaning-making in bereavement, Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies state, "Although meaning is sometimes framed in terms of interpretations, beliefs, and self-statements ... [meaning] also resides and arises in language, cultural practices, spiritual traditions and interpersonal conversations, all of which interact to shape the meaning of mourning for a given individual or group ... [meanings] are anchored in our attachment bonds to significant others."⁴¹ Clearly, lament is a spiritual tradition intended to anchor the sufferer more deeply to God.

Park's meaning-making model suggests that distress is caused by a discrepancy or gap between our understanding of the cause of our suffering, and our worldview. This gap can be bridged by changing our view of the cause, or by changing our worldview. The psalms of lament assist in this process. When our theological worldview is weak, lament bolsters it by reminding us of the foundational reality of a loving God, and the reality of our relationship to God as creatures, but also as intimate dialogue partners. Lament also helps us bridge this gap by putting our suffering in the context of this larger reality, increasingly bringing it into the redemptive domain of

⁴⁰ Westermann, "The Role of the Lament," 22.

⁴¹ Robert A. Neimeyer, Holly G. Prigerson, and Betty Davies, "Mourning and Meaning," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 2 (2002), 248.

this loving God who is in control of this world that we find so uncontrollable. We find relief when the source of our suffering becomes woven deeply into the fabric of God's faithfulness, celebrated in the psalms.

The psalms of lament are a rich resource for the suffering Christian, and for those who come alongside them. They are a spiritual practice, a spiritual discipline to which we can submit ourselves as a way to be changed by God. In them we find venues for bringing a wide array of difficulties before God. I am not suggesting here that lament functions as a kind of magical formula, that simply saying the right words will instantly change our experience. As with all spiritual disciplines, we engage in their practice as a way of collaborating with the Holy Spirit in our transformation. This is not a one-time thing, but a regular practice that provides structure to our slow molding into Christ's image. Sometimes we are told, "just trust God; just have faith," as if these were easy things that simply required a decision. They are not. While a decision can be made to turn to God, to engage in lament with God, trust and faith do not automatically follow. They are the result of a process, an interpersonal process. Drawing on Augustine's insights, theologian Todd Billings writes, "[T]he Psalms are given to us as a divine pedagogy for our affections—God's way of reshaping our desires and perceptions so that they learn to lament in the right things and take joy in the right things."⁴²

The God of the Psalms has not changed. That God has remained open to our lament. Instead, we have changed, failing to carry on our part of the conversation with God about suffering. Let us respond to God's initiative, picking up our end of the conversation, and bringing all our cares to God, because God cares for us.

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⁴² J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 38.