

The Lost Language of Lament

Psalm 6

Studies in the Psalms #6

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MUSICIAN Michael Card once spoke of “the lost language of worship.”¹ What language is that? Think about all the words you say here on Sundays. Keep thinking. There is an annual report on church music put out by the main licensing company of the top 25 worship songs for each year. One study analyzes the decade from 2003–2013.² I don’t think this will come as a surprise to you, but not one of those songs was a song of—are you ready for it? Not one was a song of lament. Lament is the lost language of worship in the contemporary church.

In our studies so far, I’ve said the Psalms help us express our holistic humanity. But with the loss of lament, contemporary worship excludes people. There are brothers and sisters here today whom God is uniting more and more to Jesus’ death through their suffering. And it can be hard for them when they come to church, bleeding and beaten down, wanting to worship, yet everyone else seems more united to Jesus’ resurrection in their happiness.

One writer says, “It is a ministry to Christians who are hurting, who are

¹ <http://www.crosswalk.com/11618048/> (Accessed February 16, 2016).

² Joshua Caleb Strickler, “Psalms of Lament as a Resource for Contemporary Christian Worship” (M.A. thesis: Northwest University, 2015), 35–36.

struggling with the distance and inactivity of God they are trying to trust, to shape and interpret their experience through the genre of lament. You will help those Christian draw near to God then they ever have before.”³

I’ve also said that the Psalms proclaim Christ; lament witnesses to and proclaims the Lord Jesus in the fullness of who he is. As we read, pray, and sing the lament Psalms, we pray the very words Jesus thought in his own inner anguish; we pray the very words he expressed in his grief; we identify with him in his struggles, trials, and weaknesses. And as we pray this way, we are assured because Jesus not only prays for us in our times of lament, but he prays with us. Amen?

As we turn to Psalm 6, we come to the first of seven lament or penitential Psalms.⁴ It’s another **Psalm of David** (title); it’s another Psalm of Jesus Christ, David’s greater son.

The Rightness of Lament

Notice first *the rightness of lament*. We’ve seen in just Psalms 1–5 so far a Psalm of wisdom in Psalm 1, a Psalm celebrating the King’s kingdom in Psalm 2, and Psalms of praise, hope, confidence, and trust in Psalms 3–5.

³ Eric Ortlund, “A Missing Piece in North American Worship.” <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-missing-piece-of-north-american-worship> (Accessed February 21, 2016).

⁴ Pss. 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143.

And just as it is appropriate for us as God's people to pray and sing in these moods with these words, so to lament is a legitimate aspect of our relationship with God. But what do we tell our kids growing up? "Don't cry." By doing so we are hindering their spiritual growth. We say that real men have stiff upper lips. We turn funerals into "celebrations of life." On national days of remembrance for the fallen we go about our normal routines. What if I wrote a book on lament? Do you think it would be placed right next to Joel Osteen's latest in which he says if you have the right positive attitude you can have anything in life? I think not. We need to learn how to lament and then allow for it, brothers and sisters.

The Reality of Lament

Next I want you to see *the reality of lament* in verses 1-4 And here's where it gets messy, right? It's one thing to say lament is legit it's another to do it. Look at how David begins, **O LORD**, but then he says some shocking things to our ears, **rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath** (v. 1). He goes right to the source in his lament, **O LORD**, but don't overlook that he also says, **your anger** and **you wrath**. Something is wrong in David's life but he doesn't say whether it was a particular sin he

committed or whether he's suffering under his general sinfulness that he shares with all humanity. We often "cry out that [we] are afflicted and miserable" but as John Calvin said, "scarcely one among a hundred looks to the hand which strikes."⁵ Don't forget that God is God when you're happy and when you are sad, when you have a lot and when you have a little.

And the reality is that whatever he has done, God is allowing him to suffer the consequences: **Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled** (vv. 2–3a). Children, did you hear that? Just like there are consequences for your actions with your parents so too there are consequences for your sins with God. But David is teaching us that when we suffer this way we are to go back to God our Father and beg him to help us. David's consequence was spiritual, psychological, and physical struggle. He says **I am languishing**. This word is used elsewhere of fields and vines that are withering in the heat. He says **my bones are troubled**. The bones were used as a metaphor of physical strength (Job 20:11; 21:24; Prov. 3:8; Isa. 58:11; 66:14; Lam. 4:7).⁶ He says **my soul...is greatly troubled**. He's in total anxiety, panic attack, stress, sickness, and absolutely feels crushed. How

⁵ Calvin, 66.

⁶ Augustine, 106.

weird we would seem to be to the saints of old if there sat with us in front of a television and watched ad after ad after ad for prescription medications for this ailment and that ailment. Obviously there is a time and place for medication, but David is saying that a lot of our body and soul struggles are rooted in our skewed relationship with God.

And so he cries, **But you, O LORD —how long?** How long will this last? How long will you be silent? How long will you be distant? How long until you help? Have you ever laid in bed asking that at night? But note that he prays this lament as a believer. Four times he has already addressed God by his intimate covenant name, **LORD**, and now he does it again: **Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love.** Here is the special name of God and here again is that special word **steadfast love**—*chesed*—the Lord’s faithfulness to keep every one of the promises he’s made to us. In his lament that the Lord is afflicting him he leans on the very same Lord! We learn how to pray here, brothers and sisters! We are to appeal to God in the most intimate way we can, “Father.” And we are to appeal to him by turning his promises into prayer. Isaac Ambrose once wrote that “we are required to pray, to repent, and believe, we are not to seek strength in ourselves, but to search into the covenant and turn the promise

into prayer.”⁷ Thomas Manton said, “One way to get comfort is to plead the promise of God in prayer, show Him His handwriting: God is tender of His Word.”⁸ When we go to God in prayer we tell him what he’s already told us in his Word.

The Reasons for Lament

David then offers two *reasons for lament* in verses 5–7. These may sound strange to us. Children, maybe you’ve learned some words in a different language. At first it sounds really strange because you don’t understand. The first time I was in Brazil as I was walking through a church everyone kept saying, *força*. But when I learned this meant “strength” and that they were saying it as a prayer for God to grant me strength in the pulpit, then it made sense. In the same way we have to learn the language of the Bible, which is strange to us at first. So what are the reasons for David’s lament?

The first reason is the Lord’s loss of praise. He tells God that if he dies he cannot offer to God praise. God created us to glorify him, but **in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol** (he means the grave) **who will**

⁷ *Prima*, 19–31.

⁸ Sermon 26, verse 25 on Psalm 119.

give you praise? (v. 5) Obviously, as David himself is going to pray elsewhere in the Psalms such as Psalm 16, we do praise God in heaven; but from our vantage point in the midst of lament, if we die, God does not receive our earthly praise. As he says in Psalm 30, “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?” And we can learn to pray this way as well.

The second reason is David’s fullness of sickness: **I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears** (we’ve seen him crying in Psalms 3:4-5; 4:4); **I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes** (vv. 6-7). Learn to pray not by being a complainer about God but by making your complaint to God.

The Result of Lament

The Psalm ends with *the result of lament* in verses 8-10. Now notice the shift in his attitude here: **Depart from me, all you workers of evil** (v. 8). Why would he pray this when he’s just been lamenting? Here’s why: **for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.**⁹ **The LORD has heard my**

⁹ This is the answer to 5:3 (Futato, 46).

plea;¹⁰ **the LORD accepts my prayer** (vv. 8–9). The result of lament is confidence, brothers and sisters. When you cry out to God he not only promises to hear but also to answer!

And he's so confident in God that he can say, **All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled** (v. 10). In contrast to his being in trouble in agony in verses 2–3 his enemies would be troubled in terror. **They shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment** (v. 10). Look at the play on words as he prayed in verse 4 for the Lord to turn to him in help, and as he does, his enemies would be turned away from him. What a prayer! What a God!

I can't tell you how much these early Psalms, especially Psalm 6, has meant to my soul. And we're only getting started! Let us learn to lament to our loving heavenly Father, through the Son he loves and who loves us, in reliance upon the assistance of the Holy Spirit in all our times of anger, anxiety, stress, and turmoil. Amen.

¹⁰ This is the answer to 4:1 (Futato, 46).