

A Chance to Lament

It's Okay to be Angry

It's okay to be angry with God. It's okay to be upset, frustrated, irritated, and confused. When we observe the world around us—not just in general, but specifically in the current day—it is only natural to be unhappy about it, even to feel a sense of abandonment from God. Those feelings are not uncommon, and they are not something to feel guilt or shame over.

Unprecedented wildfires plunged Australia into a smoky darkness at the start of the year, only to be replaced by a global pandemic the likes of which has never been seen in this era. Disasters, both natural and man-made, plague the world around us; hate and prejudice divide the world into factions; authoritarian regimes prey on the poor and downtrodden.

It is almost cartoonish how chaotic and turbulent 2020 has been. No one, Christian or other, should feel guilty or ashamed at a sense of despair and anguish about the state of the world today. So the question is then, what *should* we do with those feelings?

Lamentations in the Bible

Fortunately, we have no shortage of examples of people who faced similar catastrophes in their lifetimes, and felt the same emotions we do today. The Bible is overflowing with examples of laments—not just the Book of Lamentations, but also half of Psalms and a huge portion of the prophetic books—especially those around the time of the exile, such as Jeremiah.

Now, the concept of complaining to God is hardly novel: I think it's fair to say most everyone alive has shouted out their frustrations to the heavens in futility. But one thing that is somewhat prevalent in the Bible and has not really survived the ages in the same way, is the idea of *communal* lament.

Communal Lament

Communal lament is the concept of crying out to God—in grief, sorrow, or anger, as a community of believers; to come together and share in the experience of releasing not just one's own frustrations, but the collective frustrations of the congregation. Only at funerals, and other rare occasions, such as national catastrophes, are such communal laments normally experienced by Protestant Christians today.

Personally, I think it is a shame there are not more opportunities in the church for structured, shared times of lament. But I think 2020 is as good a time as any to try.

Unfortunately, given health and safety restrictions, we won't be able to meet together for this, so instead, let us take Psalm 79, one such communal lament, which would have historically been read aloud to a congregation for all to participate in, and let each one of us reflect on it and reflect on our own feelings—individually in person, but together in spirit.

Psalm 79

Psalm 79, as just one of a number of communal laments in the book of Psalms, can serve as an example of one way we can pray to God in times of distress, and can even help us articulate the way we are feeling when words fail us.

Verses 1-4 establish the setting clearly as post-exilic. It was written by *Asaph* sometime after 586 BC. Babylon has taken Jerusalem; the Holy Temple is rubble—made sacrificially unclean by the presence of foreign invaders. The chosen nation of God has been wiped out by unbelieving heathens. The bodies of defeated Israelites are strewn around the city in shame.

The remaining Israelites must have felt shame and humiliation. "We have become a taunt to our neighbours, mocked and derided by those around us." They must have wondered if they were wrong about God all along. Before Babylon invaded, the Israelites believed themselves to be untouchable, like a child who thinks they can achieve anything as long as their dad is with them. The very thought that an all-powerful God would even allow foreign invaders into his chosen nation was unfathomable, let alone that he would allow his house—the temple—to be turned to dust.

Such a situation would be deeply traumatic—impossible for us to imagine today. In a situation like this, it is healthy, if not necessary, to take time to address such feelings: to grieve; to be angry; even to blame God, who is, after all, in control of all things.

Verse 5 is a familiar sentiment. "How long, O Lord?" Often, we can tolerate setbacks and losses, but too often those situations feel like they last an eternity, and our patience so quickly wears thin. It is only natural, if it must go for so long, to just want to know how long exactly—to know if the end to our unhappiness is in sight.

Verses 6-7 are a tempting position to take. "Let the *others* be in misery—not me!" "Why should I suffer when I have been your faithful servant, and the *others* have not?" This expression is not uncommon, even in the Bible. It is not unusual to feel like God should prevent terrible things from happening to his followers. After all, he has a plan and a purpose for our lives, right? It is often hard to imagine that the things that make us uncomfortable or unhappy could possibly be a part of his plan. It is one of the greatest dilemmas of the faith: the answer to which is a whole other sermon entirely.

Verse 8 can be a reminder to always ask God to forgive us of our sins, but it's always very important to remember that not everything bad that happens to us is a result of our sin. In the case of the Israelites, their exile was indeed a punishment from God, but that is not always going to be the case.

Sometimes we find ourselves in terrible situations and we don't know why. It is unwise and unhealthy to assume we are to blame, and to allow others to blame us for our situation. I can't stress that enough. Such lines of thinking can lead to heresies such as the Prosperity Gospel, wherein one's lot in life is solely a measure of one's faith.

Verses 9-12 make up a desperate plea for God to intervene—begging for divine intervention. In particular, the author of the Psalm gives reasoning for their pleas not simply

to be for their own relief, but for the glory of God. The cry for God to intervene is so that his name will be "known among the nations;" that justice will be served to those who have "taunted" God.

I don't know about you, but I have done this myself in the past. "God, if only you would just answer my prayer, I would tell everyone it was you, and you be glorified by answering my prayer!" It is comforting to know that is essentially a two-thousand-year-old prayer.

Verse 13, finally, is the Israelite's resolution to not allow this difficult time to overcome or overwhelm them. Their faith has been tested, and their faith has won. They are more resolute than ever to trust God, their shepherd; to remember what he has done and thank him for it, despite the current situation, and to praise him even while they are lamenting.

In this way, I like to think of praise and lament as not two wholly-opposed and contradictory kinds of prayer or psalm, but as two sides of the same coin: where one goes, so too, I think, does the other.

I find this last verse particularly profound. I am reminded of the lyrics of one of the only contemporary Christian songs of lament that I know: *Weep With Me* by Rend Collective. I am deeply moved by the solemn reminder that even though our situations can be utterly turbulent and chaotic, God is resolutely unchanging and steadfast; that he hears our prayers and listens to our complaints; that he empathizes with our anger and sadness; that he feels our pain and weeps with us.

"Yet I will praise You,
Yet I will sing of Your name.
Here in the shadows,
Here I will offer my praise.
What's true in the light
Is still true in the dark.
You're good and You're kind
And You care for this heart
Lord, I believe
You weep with me."