

Practicing Lament

Prayers of lament give voice to the pain, hurt, and rage experienced in the face of suffering and injustice, whether individual or communal. We are often tempted to hide that which reveals our human vulnerability, finiteness, and/or limitations by only praying prayers that are well-articulated, emotionally composed, and mostly optimistic. However, the Bible certainly attests to the validity of authentic prayer and calls us to openly and honestly express our pain to God. No prayer brought before God is ever too offensive, too audacious, or too emotionally intense.

Biblical laments typically include the following elements:

1. An honest **complaint** which expresses one's hurt, sorrow, hate, or despair, either personal or on behalf of another person or group.
2. The complaint is always **directed at God** with the expectation that God will intervene even if God is not held directly responsible for the lamentable circumstance(s) or experience(s).
3. An **expression of trust** in the faithful character of God. Lament is not mere catharsis; it is intended to bring us to a place of deeper trust in God.

It is important to note that while most biblical laments contain these elements, they do not usually follow a single pattern or structure. In many cases, particularly in the book of Psalms, the poetic movement of the prayers of lament is not linear; that is, the writer tends to fluctuate between complaint and expressions of trust. Understanding this dynamic interplay between the verbal articulation of one's lament and one's trust in God is crucial for understanding the purpose of lament as a whole; for, noticing the poetic movements reveals that lamentation itself is a faith-filled act of trust in God regardless of whether or not the pray-er is able to explicitly articulate and express their trust in God.

1. **Movement from lament to trust:** In some instances, the writer begins with lament but gradually moves towards and ultimately ends with a verbal expression of trust (e.g.: Psalm 13)
2. **Movement between lament and trust:** In other cases, the writer goes back and forth between articulating their complaint and articulating their trust (e.g.: Psalm 31)
3. **No apparent movement:** Even still, there are other examples where the writer never explicitly expresses their trust in God. It is these prayers of lament which demonstrate most clearly that lamentation itself is an expression of trust (e.g.: Psalm 88)

When writing your own lament:

1. Take a moment to evaluate where in the movement of lament you find yourself. What is it that you are lamenting? What kinds of emotions arise as you consider and reflect upon the lamentable circumstance? Please note that your lament can either be personal or on behalf of another person.
2. Consider whether there is a helpful metaphor or image that you can use to describe how you are feeling.
3. Do not hesitate to write down whatever comes to mind as you pray, whether it be questions, accusations, or agonising cries for help. If you find yourself experiencing a sense of embarrassment or shame for what you are feeling, don't dismiss it or suppress it. Rather, allow what you are feeling to rise to the surface and spill out from your lips. Transformation and healing happen when we are willing to admit to ourselves and to God that which is dark and painful.