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SADNESS

Blessed are you who weep now.

—LUKE 6:21

Unless those who proclaim the Gospel acknowledge honestly that darkness . . . they might as well save their breath for all the lasting difference their proclaiming will make to anybody.

—FREDERICK BUECHNER¹

A BROKEN WORLD

We live in a broken world. Divorce fractures a family, a child abandons the faith, a friendship sours over a word that has wounded and refuses to be healed, or a prolonged loneliness leads to a crippling depression. The loss of meaningful work provokes suicidal thoughts, while the burden of unpayable debt plunges a family into poverty. An unexpected death leaves one heartbroken, even as experiences of chronic pain rob the joy from life's simplest pleasures.

And feelings of emptiness, quiet despair, or repeated failure characterize particular seasons of our life in an acute and painful way.²

Other experiences of brokenness occur at a societal level. A city is yet again ruined by floods, which leave its citizens displaced and bitter. Forest fires devour homes and animal life. A terror attack decimates a public market. Systemic racism leads to a nightmarish cycle of violence. Religious persecution turns an entire community into a refugee people without a home. Volatile oil prices put entire industries at risk. And the outbreak of a viral infection causes the death of millions.

Poverty, oppression, disease, genocide, and environmental decay—they all mark our world in some way.

On April 17, 2010, my wife and I lost our first baby to a miscarriage. This took place on my thirty-eighth birthday. For months afterward we carried around a gnawing pain—a pain that slowly ate us up from the inside, leaving us profoundly disoriented. On September 11, 2011, our daughter Blythe came into the world. Hope again surged in our hearts. Other children would now come easily, we thought. Our dream of a big family—five children!—could still be achieved, our advancing years notwithstanding.

Two days shy of Christmas 2014, after months of fertility treatments, we lost our second child to miscarriage. After this our marriage suffered considerably. Our communication repeatedly broke down, and our capacity to meet each other's needs dissipated. Small hurts flared up into angry conflict, and each of us resorted to surrogates that we hoped might dull the pain but that only made things worse.

There are still days when the pain feels almost unbearable. Neither of us is getting younger, our parents are growing older, our friends' children are reaching their college years, and the train, so it feels, is passing us by. What we needed then was language to say out loud what our hearts can only grasp at with inarticulate groans. What we needed, quite desperately, was a community to bear witness to our sadness. Above all, what we needed was to know that God can handle our broken hearts and our raging words of protest.

This is what the psalms would offer us—then and now. Here are prayers of lament that furnish us with language for the seemingly unspeakable. Here are songs to name the sorrow in the company of the faithful. Here are poems that give coherent shape to our incoherent feelings in the presence of our Maker, who has, it often feels, seemingly abandoned us to our inconsolable pain.

Give ear to my words, O LORD,
Consider my groaning.
Heed the sound of my cry for help.

(Ps. 5:1–2 NASB)

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
For I am lonely and afflicted.

(Ps. 25:16 NASB)

What the lament psalms have offered us in our hour of need, they offer to all who find themselves in need: edited language to give expression to our unedited emotions.

What then is the basic pattern of psalms of lament? What are their thematic concerns? And what is the good news they offer to each of us?

THE BASIC SHAPE OF LAMENT PSALMS

A careful reader of the Psalter will soon discover two types of lament psalms. One type gives voice to an individual's concern, such as Psalms 5, 6, 17, 22, 41, 88, and 109. Here topics include experiences of abandonment, sickness, abuse, loss, and so on. While wholly personal, these individual laments have been incorporated into the public life of Israel's worship through communal discernment of the final editors of the Psalter, and they hereby become any given person's lament. Psalm 6:6–7 is illustrative:

I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
My eyes waste away because of grief;
they grow weak because of all my foes.

A second type gives voice to communal experiences of lament, such as Psalms 44, 74, 83, 85, and 89. The topics that occupy these public events of loss include drought, famine, epidemic, national devastation, war, and so on. Psalms 44:13–14 and 74:1 offer us good examples of this type:

You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.
You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.

O God, why do you cast us off forever?
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep
of your pasture?

The majority of the lament psalms end in affirmations of hope or confessions of praise, as Psalms 5 and 7 vividly show us. Others, like Psalms 44 and 88, end on a grim note. Both kinds, however, belong in Holy Scripture; and, for that reason, they belong in our practices of personal and corporate devotion too.

With psalms of lament—individual and communal—there is a recognizable pattern. Psalm 13 represents the typical pattern of such a psalm: a complaint, a petition, a resolution.

A Complaint (vv. 1–2)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,
 and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
 How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

A Petition (vv. 3–4)

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
 Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
 and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
 my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

A Resolution (vv. 5–6)

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
 my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
 I will sing to the LORD,
 because he has dealt bountifully with me.

While there are plenty of variations on this pattern, the complaints are directed chiefly to God. Psalm 3:1 says this: “Oh LORD, how many are my foes!” Psalm 10:12 adds, “Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up Your hand. Do not forget the afflicted” (NASB). What are the complaints about? They may be about God, about one’s life, or about a presumed enemy. Psalm 38:3 states, “There is no health in my bones because of my sin.” Psalm 72:4 asks of God, “Save the children of the needy and crush the oppressor” (NASB).

The kinds of petitions the psalmists make of God range widely. They include requests for healing, deliverance, vindication, provision, and protection, and, in the cases of confession of sin, forgiveness. The final resolution of a psalm of lament may involve a confession of trust; it may involve a resolve to praise or a promise to obey; or it may involve a confident affirmation of God’s own faithfulness, even if there is no empirical data to prove it. Eugene Peterson observes:

[The primary language of prayer is people] calling out their trouble—
 pain, guilt, doubt, despair—to God. Their lives are threatened. If they

don't get help they will be dead, or diminished to some critical degree. The language of prayer is forged in the crucible of trouble. When we can't help ourselves and call for help, when we don't like where we are and want out, when we don't like who we are and want a change, we use primal language, and this language becomes the root language of prayer.³

THE PSALMS OF SADNESS

One of the most striking things about these lament psalms is that they include the interrogation of God. This, as it turns out, is a divinely approved form of address.⁴ Psalm 121:4 confesses that the Lord is the one who neither sleeps nor slumbers but watches over us. But in Psalm 44:23, the psalmist dares to say, "Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever" (NIV). Here, the psalmist sounds like Elijah, who taunts the priests of the god Baal:

Shout louder! . . . Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.
(1 Kings 18:27 NIV)

Is this the way one speaks to the Maker of heaven and earth? Is this how you talk to the Holy One? Is this how we ought to address the Sovereign God? According to the psalmist, the answer is, at times, yes.

It is a daring theology on display. Finding himself in acute pain, the psalmist mouths off. He presses the Lord for an answer, but the Lord keeps silent. "Do not be silent!" the psalmist responds (Pss. 35:22; 109:1). It is yet again evidence of the kind of visceral honesty that belongs in the place of faithful worship. This is no faithless cry against the Almighty. This is not the attack of an atheist. This is the wrestling-out of faith *in the presence of the Lord*. For the psalmist, there is no "civilized" speech; there is no stiff upper lip or quiet resignation. There is only more intense address *before the face of God*.

It is not only the psalmist's life that is at stake; it is also—and more importantly—the Lord's name that is at stake. It is God's reputation that is in question. It is God's character and capacity to fulfill his promises that are at issue. "Deliver us . . . for your name's sake," the psalmist exclaims in Psalm 79:9. Brueggemann comments that while such prayers may trouble us, and we may resist praying this way often, they are thoroughly biblical:

The speaker is *honest enough* to know that yearning, and the speaking is *faithful enough* to submit the yearning to God.⁵ (emphasis original)

The psalms of lament are full of imperatives: forgive (Ps. 79:9), heal (Ps. 6:2), vindicate (Ps. 43:1), deliver (Ps. 31:15), sustain (Ps. 119:116–117). The most frequent imperative is *remember* (Ps. 74). These psalms invite the faithful to speak out loud what needs to be confessed in the assembly of God's people: *Remember me! Remember us! Remember your promises!*

Whether God responds or not in the moment or much later or beyond the life of the psalmist is another matter. Whenever the psalmist voices his complaint, it is the sign of an active, not a passive, faith. In Brueggemann's words, "Such prayer is intense, dangerous, and urgent. It moves deeply beneath our usual innocuous prayer in which nothing is at stake, because in this kind of prayer, everything is at stake."⁶

Plenty of these psalms lead to silence or to the dust (Pss. 4:4; 28:1; 39:9). For some the silence may be oppressive. For others it may further confuse their idea of God. For still others the silence becomes an occasion to hear the still, small voice of the Lord. This voice cannot be heard in the clamor of protest. It cannot be heard in the whirlwind of busyness that distracts us, if only temporarily, from our pain. It can be clearly heard only in the silence. It is the voice of the one who sees and hears. Psalm 55:17 is representative:

Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.

A number of psalms of lament lead a worshiper to the dust. Psalm 22:15b says, “you lay me in the dust of death.” Psalm 44:25 says, “We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground” (NIV). Within the context of the psalms, “the dust” represents the opposite of voluntary worship. It is a place of misery and exhaustion. It is a place for the depressed. The dust is as low as it gets for *nephesh hayah*, living beings.

Yet here, in the dust, in lowliness, a window of hope opens up for the faithful. For if it is from the dust of the earth, the *adamah*, that God forms our primeval parent, Adam, then it is also from this place of divine creativity that something new can be born. Carroll Stuhlmueller remarks, “Silently lost in adoration within the dust before God is preparation for the ultimate answer to all questions: one’s becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus.”⁷

The dust, under this light, becomes good news for the faithful. In Christ’s economy, things do not die without reason; they die in order to be resurrected. In fact, it is the Lord’s pleasure to raise the poor from the dust (Ps. 113:7). The psalmist writes:

As a father has compassion for his children,
 so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him;
 for he knows how we were made;
 he remembers that we are dust.

(Ps. 103:13–14)

In this place of lowliness, we are delivered from the damaging idea that our happiness rests in our self-sufficiency. Our happiness rests instead in utter dependence on our Father in heaven. In the dust we receive the Holy Spirit, who renews us in the life of Jesus, the firstborn from the dead.

This, of course, does not mean that everything will be resolved in our acceptance of silence or lowliness.⁸ Faith is a gift, yes. Faith certainly frees us to embrace the goodness of God in the face of suffering. But it does not mean that happiness will always mark our lives. For those

who experience systemic injustice, there is often no clear resolution. For victims of abuse, who may still have painful scars in their bodies and psyche, there are often unanswered questions. For the broken and the powerless, there is frequently only one option: the need to endure.

Yet for people such as these the psalms give a voice. They, too, have a place in the company of God's people. The psalmist prays, "Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up against me" (Ps. 59:1). In Psalm 88:1–4, the psalmist cries out:

O LORD, God of my salvation,
 when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
 let my prayer come before you;
 incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of troubles,
 and my life draws near to Sheol.
 I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
 I am like those who have no help.

The psalms offer yet another gift. In the face of incoherent experiences, they offer us a coherent poem. This may seem like an odd gift. Who needs a poem when you need justice or a livelihood? Who wants a rhyme when we want a family member back from the dead? But when nothing makes sense, the lament psalms give coherence to the incoherence of our world.

They offer a beginning, a middle, and an end, instead of a seemingly meaningless narrative. They present a rhythm of sounds instead of a cacophony of noise. They suggest an orderly world of metaphors, instead of a disordered mess of thoughts and feelings. And in offering these things, the psalms reframe our sense of life. And they do so in light of a particular history.

It is important to remember that these psalms do not resolve to pure subjectivity; they reside instead within a tradition. Frequently the

psalmist takes upon his lips the familiar words of Israel's confession: "For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you" (Ps. 86:5). Here the psalmist declares in faith the creedal words of his forebears, the words of the Law and the Prophets (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; 2 Kings 19:19; Isa. 37:16).

We are not the first to experience doubt, the psalmist reminds us. Our experiences of anger and depression are not original, even if they are personally felt as if for the first time. Others have been there. Others have crafted words in faith that bear repeating. We stand in a tradition as the people of God, and that tradition hands over to us good words.

These words need to find themselves on our lips and said out loud, again and again, in the company of others with whom we can share our pain so they can work their healing power on us. They heal us by offering us an opportunity to become whole, rather than leaving us fractured by our losses and disoriented in our sadness. They heal us by offering us hope in the form of words that name realities, helping us to make sense of often-senseless things. And they heal us by bringing us face to face with a God who is compassionate and gracious, abounding in love, faithful till the end (Ps. 86:15).

CONCLUSION

In the end, to ignore these words or to choose more "polite" words is to believe that God cannot handle our broken humanity. It is to believe that God has forgotten how we are made. But God has not forgotten. God has not run out of compassion. In Christ he suffers with us. In Christ he shares our brokenness. He, too, knows what it is like to pray with loud cries (Heb. 5). He, too, grieves and feels distress (Mark 13). He, too, weeps (Luke 19). He, too, has felt abandoned and forsaken (Mark 14–15).

What we find in these psalms of lament, it is important to stress, is never *mere* sadness. We find instead sadness before the face of God. For

here there is never mere complaint; here there is complaint brought *to* God, rather than kept *from* God. Here there is no victim mentality, even if the psalmist is a real victim of violence who requires vindication. Here there is a wholly honest reckoning of pain *within the community* of those who seek to be wholly human, as hard as that may be, wrestling with God, not apart from God.

John Calvin sums up well these psalms of lament: “[Here] we have permission given us to lay open before [God] our infirmities, which we would be ashamed to confess before men.”⁹ This is an incalculable gift. It is a gift that Phaedra and I receive as we mourn all the small and big things in our life, alongside a community of those who seek to walk with Jesus, trusting that these psalms are God’s chosen vehicle for making us not just whole and holy but, by the Spirit, more deeply compassionate to our suffering neighbor.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is one thing from this past week that you feel needs to be lamented in your own life? What is one thing that calls for lament in your own community? What is one thing that deserves to be lamented at a national or global level?
2. What is one thing that is hard for you to lament? What are things that might be easier for you to lament?
3. What kinds of experiences help you to feel your sadness? What makes it hard for you to feel sadness? Do you feel embarrassed by it? Ashamed? Scared? Does it feel wrong, like you might be the only one to feel what you feel?
4. What do you think might be lost by not sharing our sadness and our laments as a community? What do you think might be gained by sharing these feelings as a community?
5. What is one passage in the psalms of lament (Pss. 5; 7; 13; 22; 35; 42–43; 59; 88; 109) that resonates with your experience of lament?

6. In what specific way do you wish for God, or for others, to be present to you in your lament today?

EXERCISES

1. Find a moment to be silent. If all you can manage is five or ten minutes of silence, thank God for it. In this moment of silence, be present to whatever it is that has caused you to feel sad or upset. What is one thing that comes to mind as you reflect on this experience? In what ways do you feel that your sadness is bearable—or unbearable? In what ways do you feel that your experience is seen or unseen by others, or even by God? Give yourself permission to feel the sadness without the need to apologize or explain it. Trust that God is with you in your sadness. Invite God to be present to you in your sadness. If you feel the need to give expression to your sadness, consider praying one of the individual psalms of lament, such as Psalms 6, 11, 17, 26, 38, 41, or 86.
2. Write out your own psalm of lament, following the basic pattern presented in the chapter on poetry. Write your complaint to God. Write a specific petition of God. Write a resolution to trust that God will hear and heed your petition in a timely fashion, even if it is not according to our timetable. Give yourself permission to end, like Psalm 13, on a tone of hope, or like Psalm 88, in the dust and darkness that may feel all too real. Trust that you are not alone in this experience, but that God in Christ is with you, that the Spirit of God intercedes for you “with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26), and that others are in a similar place.
3. Study a specific psalm of lament. As you go through the study, consider memorizing parts or the whole of a psalm to carry in your head and heart those words that might enable you to name reality and to embrace what is true—or at least to stumble toward the truth.

4. Share with one another a personal or corporate occasion for lament. Consider also praying Psalm 41 antiphonally—that is, back and forth, as a kind of call and response. Consider ways in which you might be intentionally present to one another’s laments throughout the coming week. Consider ways you might walk with one another through laments without feeling the need to offer immediate practical solutions.
5. Craft a prayer based on one of the communal psalms of lament (Pss. 44; 74; 77; 79; 80; 83; 85; 89). Consider using this prayer in your communal times of worship and prayer.

PRAYER

Merciful God, you who weep with those who weep, who rescue those who have been oppressed, who incline your ear to the needy, who draw near to the abandoned, who bind up the brokenhearted, who raise up those who are laid low, and who feel compassion for those who are broken in body or in spirit: hear our prayer. Do not be deaf to our pain. Have pity on us in our affliction. Bring an end to our distress. Preserve our lives. Rescue us. Heal us. Be near to us this day. We pray this so that we might join the company of those who take refuge in you and praise your holy name. We pray this in Jesus’ name, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, on whom we cast all our cares. Amen.