

Sermon on Lament from Ephesians 5:14-20 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Lament is essential for the health and wholeness of the church.

Ephesians 5:15–20 “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. [17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, [19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” (ESV)

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A few weeks into our short Body Life series. Thinking of what it means to be the church. The body is led, the body is gathered, and today, the body is honest. We can think of this series as highlighting some of the key ingredients in Christ’s recipe for the church. What makes us sweet, savory, and nutritious!

Study in preparation for this series had me thinking about times I have tried to cook something without an essential ingredient or meals that lacked an element.

Stacy and I were hosting my boss and her husband at our new house for dinner. The evening went well and Stacy’s lava cakes were a hit for dessert. But after they left and we were cleaning up, we recounted how something felt off, like conversation didn’t flow all that easy and the meal went really fast. Then we realized we had the chicken-cordon-bleu on the table along with a loaf of bread. But we neglected to serve the salad or prepare the vegetables for dinner! It was weird because it was missing what it was meant for.

Serving dessert may have saved us embarrassment! But to this day I think of that night everytime we open our home to someone for a meal!

Coming out of the last year, it has been much like the reflection on that meal. As things slowed down, as we navigated new territory, and as we prepared to re-engage many of the things we were used to, I have tried to uncover who is invisible in the church (who is not served the way they should be), and what is missing that is essential for us as a body of believers.

As I have reflected, I noticed that I was learning to lament personally, for there was much to cry out to the Lord about (loss of momentum in ministry, loss of connection, experiences of trauma, injustice and hatred abounding; 2020 was full). But in my learning, I realized that I haven't led us well in lament.

Here in our rooting text, Paul is writing to the Ephesian church and expressing how it is they are to live together, how they are to be the church.

Ephesians 18b-20 “be filled with the Spirit, [19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,”

Filled with the spirit, together with lives that reflect wisdom, not folly. Addressing one another with psalms... Certainly Paul has in mind an overriding joy that is to be in the DNA of the church. But as I read this, the call to be people of the Psalms, I was struck that we can't neglect the minor key.

An honest church runs after joy but is also familiar with difficulty, the gravity of sin, the brokenness of the word and ourselves, and in all things turns to Christ for help, for salvation and restoration.

Because we are his body we are free to be honest about hardship and pain, to be raw before the Lord.

If the Spirit fills us, we will address one another in psalms... including lament... it is an element we can no longer forget to put on the table.

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Lament is normal and expected

While the modern church fails miserably in embracing the full character of prayer and worship in Scripture, more than one-third of Psalms, a key prophetic book, and the prayers of Jesus indicate that lament is part of life before God. It is a normal thing of life and God expects it from us.

Lament is in essence a prayer in pain that leads to trust.

“You might think lament is the opposite of praise. It isn’t. Instead, lament is a path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment. The space between brokenness and God’s mercy is where this song is sung. Think of lament as the transition between pain and promise. It is the path from heartbreak to hope.” Mark Vroegop - *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*

Lament requires right theology. If God doesn’t care about the depths of life, it would be pointless. We don’t have to fall in pits of despair or denial when we grieve because we know God is here. We don’t have to keep up appearances, “everything is fine,” because our Savior was a man of sorrows. We know that truth and trauma co-exist and we are still kept by Jesus.

If lament is normal and expected, what does it look like. There seems to be key elements of lament when we pray and sing, when we comfort each other. Turning to God, Complaining, Asking, and Trusting.

Psalm 54 “O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might. [2] O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth.

[3] For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life; they do not set God before themselves. Selah

[4] Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life. [5] He will return the evil to my enemies; in your faithfulness put an end to them.

[6] With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. [7] For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.” (ESV)

We **turn** to God in prayer, as our source, as our help, as our comforter. “O God... hear my prayer...”

Turning might be the hardest thing for us because we are conditioned to sort our troubles in other places. It is always funny to me that I am quicker to ask God for a parking space than I am for resolution of deep pain! But he expects us to lament to him, to turn to him.

Once we have turned, approached the throne of grace, we **complain**. This one makes us uneasy. We want to just be thankful, after all “we are doing better than we deserve!” But if David, the man after God’s own heart can complain, and Jesus on the cross can complain, surely we can follow their model.

Psalm 54’s complaint is light, “strangers have risen against me... the godless seek to kill me!” But elsewhere things can get more heated - “God you aren’t keeping your word!” “How could you let this happen to your people.”

"Laments talk to God about circumstances that do not seem to fit with what we believe to be true about him... Laments talk to God about the disconnect between experience and theology. If we believed God was unkind and limited, there would be no cause for complaint." And God is big enough for it. If he didn't want us to approach him in this way he would have kept it out of Scripture!

From our complaint we **ask**, this is the petition for help, deliverance. “Vindicate me by your might... uphold my life and return evil to my enemies, put an end to them in your faithfulness.” God, because you hear me and are my helper, restore what is broken, end the pain, bring healing...

I think laments train us to pray bigger prayers because they have to match the deep pain we experience and the answer to the impending darkness is tremendous light.

As we ask then we land on **trust**. Recounting who God is, and what he has done before. Learning to cling to hope because the One who promises is faithful. “Behold, God is my helper... I will give thanks to your name LORD for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble...” You have done it before, I know you can do it again.

We may not be able to see beyond the moment, in the tension of anguish and anticipation, but we can trust that God is who he says he is.

I think of the showcase Old Testament example of this in Lamentations. The prophet Jeremiah has witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God’s people. It is a raw book, honest, infused with deep pain. But he stays rooted in the sovereignty and care of God.

Lamentations 3:1–3 “I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; [2] he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; [3] surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long...” (ESV)

Lamentations 3:19–25 “Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! [20] My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. [21] But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

[22] The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; [23] they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. [24] “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

[25] The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.” (ESV)

Lament brings us to the settled realization that God still loves, still grants mercy, is still our portion and hope.

We can trust because Jesus lamented on the cross, reciting Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Bringing us forgiveness and to his way of life, he goes through lament to life. And now Jesus lives to petition the Father on our behalf, freshly applying our justification and hearing our lament and cries for help.

He hears and he acts.

“He’s not enjoying your struggle, but it’s producing something in you that fits with God’s good heart toward you.” MV

In lament we turn to God, we complain to him, we ask for help, and we learn to trust him. Honestly, it teaches us maturity in the faith, roots us where we belong in Christ and his care.

“The historic minor key of lament gives us permission to vocalize our pain while moving us toward God-centered worship. It is an act of faith as we turn to God, lay out our complaints, ask God to keep his promises, and reaffirm our trust in him. Lament is more than tears and crying. To cry is human. But to lament is Christian.” MV

Wonderful for the individual, but this must also happen corporately!

Lament disciplines the Church

While many of the lament Psalms are first-person, there is also a collection of corporate laments modeled for the church. It is just as important that the body laments.

Lamenting as a body of believers fulfills the call to bear one another's burdens - if we are to take being honest about life and following Jesus in the midst of it, lament must be part of our experience.

It serves to teach us, to stabilize us, and to help us find hope where it should be found. And for those going through pain, maybe even unable to fully articulate it, it serves as a salve for the burn, the body becomes a safe place to walk through pain.

Because there is space to suffer, there is space for God's healing work. And health and wholeness are what we long for!

Lamenting as a church benefits us even if we don't find ourselves lamenting. Addressing one another in psalms...

We lament as a gathered people to weep with those who are weeping. As Paul exhorts the church... **Romans 12:15** "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." (ESV)

We know this is supposed to be our thing, but we are terribly ill-equipped for it. We live in a day that says you should be more inclined to rejoice when others are weeping... Well at least i am not as bad off as that guy! Or we don't tolerate Debbie Downers...

Singing and praying laments together not only fulfills this command to weep but it teaches us how when we are across a table or sitting on the couch together.

We lament as a gathered people in preparation for seasons of mourning. The orchestra only sounds beautiful, playing the range of keys, when it has had abundant practice. Lamenting corporately is just that for us.

Today I may not recognize my personal lament, but singing with the saints is practice for when the crisis comes, when the diagnosis is delivered, or when the efforts fail. Being ready in season and out of season to live with hope.

We lament as a gathered people because you should probably be lamenting more than you are! We are well-versed in going to the psalms for comfort but we can't miss how they are meant to afflict us into repentance at other times.

"Laments poke us in the chest and force us to wonder whether we are making light of our own sin or making light of the suffering in our own congregation and community." John Starke

Lament serves as the opportunity to turn again to Christ, to be honest about our sin, about our pain, our unmet expectations, to ask for help and see God for who he is again.

Being whole as a people is being honest. Not hiding, but together learning to trust the One that holds all things together by the power of his word.

"Christians, be acquainted with grief, even if you are not grieving, so you can sympathize and mourn with those who are. That's what our Savior taught us to do by his example. He left the joys of heaven to be acquainted with our grief, and now he stands as a sympathetic high priest." John Starke

Maturity as a body, health and wholeness is not found exclusively in lament. Maybe Paul in Ephesians 5 wanted joyful living as the benchmark. Even so, the way there is honesty before each other and before the Lord.

It is one of the ingredients.

A body of believers familiar with lament, acquainted with their brokenness, dwelling with it in the midst of it, weeping with those who weep, addressing one another in psalms, and encouraging each other to trust will find it is exactly what we are meant for.

Jared Wilson tells the story of how he planted a church at the same time as a friend. Jared's church had the hip lingo, the music, the media presence, and his friend's church just had traditional preaching, singing and caring for each other. Alas, Jared's church was non-existent six years later. His friend's however is flourishing. "When we started this church, we didn't have anything to offer but our brokenness. We were broken people gathering together and offering up ourselves to God. And when broken people offer their brokenness up to God, He does miraculous things." - Pastor who just did normal church

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Embracing lament in the church is restocking the shelves with an essential ingredient. With it we learn balance and find wholeness in Christ, together. The recipe works and it is the way to health and wholeness.

Shall we pursue it together?!

Poem by *Matt Pilgrim*:

"I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt." Acts 7:34

"Child, I've seen your affliction!"
Weeps Shepherd over flock.
"Wait upon me!" Cries time's master
To those slave to the clock.

"Your affliction is known to me"
Says True Master to slaves,
"I have counted every tear shed
Over your loved ones' graves."

"I have seen you breaking your backs
Under Pharaoh's harsh rule.
I have seen your faith be tested,

By fallen men so cruel.”

Oh, the faith required to trust
A sovereign God like mine
Who perfectly causes all things
To just so intertwine.

Wars, pandemics, and brokenness
Surprise not this, our King.
He says “I give and take away,
I’m Lord of everything.”

He says “I make calamity
And I make well-being.”
There is no pain or hurt hidden
From our God, all-seeing.

Yes, friend, He’s seen your affliction
And knows it in His bones.
He bore it in His hands and side
To melt hearts hard as stones.

My Jesus knows affliction well
Enough to know what it earns.
Enough to know the Father
Sees gold in what he burns.

In your affliction, look to Christ
He’s paved the road ahead
The suffering Man of Sorrows
Knows those for whom he bled.

He sees the Jew chained in Egypt
And, friend, he sees you too.
For dying to set captives free
Is what He came to do.