

Selah: Lament

Psalm 22; Matthew 27:46; John 16:33; Romans 5:3-4, 8:18-28, 12:15; 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; James 1:2-4; Hebrews 5:7-10

Selah is a powerful moment of pause in the Psalms. It is an intentional space for reflection and listening. Often in these moments is when we begin to feel our hearts connecting with God more clearly and when we allow space for surrender in trust to God's will. These moments are where transformation can begin.

Today we are talking about Lament. We live in a dark world and we need to learn how to sing in that darkness. The Psalms teach us not only what to believe about God, but how to bring our whole selves before Him...the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

What is Lament?:

Lament is the language of faithful people who are living between the curse of Eden and the promise of the restoration of Heaven and Earth. Lament is not the absence of faith. It is faith refusing to let go of hope even in the midst of grieving the brokenness of the world and longing for the day when Christ will make all things new.

Selah... We aren't very comfortable with silence or sadness. In many ways, we have become experts at escaping discomfort. When we are bored...we scroll. When we are anxious...we distract ourselves. When we are grieving...we are told to "stay positive".

Even in church we often rush past the discomfort of Good Friday to the relief of Easter Sunday. We are good at celebrating. We know how to worship in victory. But we have forgotten how to worship in sorrow. Yet almost 1/3 of the Psalms are songs of lament. Apparently God thought we would need words for our tears just as much as songs for our triumphs.

So what exactly is lament? Lament is *not* complaining. Complaining talks *about* God. Lament *is* talking *to* God. Complaining assumes that God doesn't care while lament assumes that He does.

Lament is not giving up on God. It is refusing to let go of Him. The Psalms don't teach us what to feel. They teach us where to take what we feel.

Lament is something that we are all born with the capability of doing. Think of a baby crying for their needs. It is not meaningless whining or complaining. It is crying out in confidence that their needs are going to be met. But it seems that we forget somewhere along the way. I think it has a lot to do with our culture.

Suffering:

One of the most influential religious ideas in the modern world is that suffering itself is the enemy. Buddhism (one of the fastest growing world religions) begins with an observation that Christians would actually agree with: Life is full of suffering. The difference is how we perceive and react to it.

In Buddhism, suffering is ultimately something to escape. Freedom (nirvana) comes through eliminating attachment and desire. If you are an independent, unfeeling robot, nothing can hurt you. Suffering is, therefore, an obstacle to overcome.

Christianity tells a radically different story. The Bible never calls suffering good, but it does insist that God can use suffering for our formation.

Read James 1:2-4, Romans 5:3-4, Hebrews 5:7-10, and John 16:33. Jesus never promises life *without* suffering. He promises His presence *within* suffering.

The Christian answer to suffering isn't escape. It is Emmanuel (*God with us*). God doesn't waste suffering. He redeems it.

Balance of Joy and Sadness:

One of the most surprisingly biblical movies in recent years is Pixar's *Inside Out*. Joy spends the entire movie trying to protect Riley, their girl, from Sadness. She believes that happiness means eliminating sorrow but the opposite happens. The more Joy suppresses Sadness...the less Riley actually feels. She doesn't become happier. She becomes numb.

Near the end of the movie, Joy finally realizes something. She has to surrender. She has to let Sadness do what Joy never could. It is only when Riley fully enters into and admits her grief (held in the safe embrace of her parents) that healing begins...with a *sigh*.

Her core memory becomes both yellow and blue as Joy and Sadness occupy the same memory. **Where joy and sadness can coexist is where peace is found.** Isn't that a beautiful image of the Christian life?

Read what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10. Not just sorrow but not just joy. It's a constant balance of both. Often you have to surrender to a moment of sorrow before you can return to a life of joy. Suppressed sorrow doesn't produce joy...it produces numbness.

Psalm 22:

The Psalms teach us that joy and sadness are not enemies. They are companions. Jesus weeps over Lazarus while knowing resurrection is moments away. Jesus mourns over the city of Jerusalem while knowing the promise is about to be fulfilled. Jesus endured suffering on the cross for the joy of the world.

Jesus cried out in lament from the cross. Read Matthew 27:46. This cry did not come from a place of lost faith. It was actually a recognition of God's enduring faithfulness. Jesus was quoting Psalm 22. It is believed by some scholars that this Psalm was written when David was fleeing for his life from Saul (Side note - the new animated movie *David* has a powerful song during this scene based on this psalm.)

Read Psalm 22:1-21. This part of the Psalm is a cry of anguish. David pours out his heart, feeling abandoned by God during a time of severe affliction. He uses vivid, metaphorical language (surrounded by bulls, lions, and dogs) to describe his tormentors. He also details physical suffering, noting his bones are out of joint and his garments are being divided by lots. He is being dehumanized by others and he is broken. But...he doesn't end there.

Read Psalm 22:22-31. The second part of this Psalm is a song of deliverance! The tone shifts dramatically to a declaration of praise. David expresses confidence that God has heard his cry and the psalm concludes with a prophetic vision of all the nations and future generations turning to worship the Lord.

All Jewish people would have been familiar with this Psalm. It was Hebrew tradition to reference the first line of a psalm to bring to mind the full prayer. So when Jesus cried out "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" it was not a sinful declaration of resentment to God. It was an intentional statement of faith to lead every Jewish person within earshot into the prayer of Psalm 22, through the shared journey of lament, and to bring them to the last line: "*They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!*" (Psalm 22:31)

Community Lament:

Lament is not just an individual experience. We tend to try to make it entirely personal. But when we do that, it just becomes about us. Biblical lament is experienced in the context of

community. Israel lamented together. The prophets lamented together. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem with his disciples.

Read what Paul said in Romans 12:15. Lament is not about wallowing in our own suffering. Lament is directly tied to the original sin in the Garden of Eden. It is about mourning everything that is broken in the world (families, communities, justice, children, creation.)

Paul writes about the tension of living in between the curse and restoration. Read Romans 8:18-28.

First, I think this last scripture (v28) is one of the most misquoted scriptures. We tend to read it as “God works all things for the good...” But what it really says is “*in all things* God works for the good...”

What’s the difference? We read it as if God is going to *fix* the situations to make *them* good. But what it really says is that God is going to *use* the situations to make *us* good.

Second, three times Paul uses the word “groaning.” In the original Greek, there are 3 different words used to describe groaning.

Groaning:

Romans 8:22 - “*The whole creation has been groaning...*” uses the Greek word *Stenazō* which means “Creation Groans.” This is like a deep sigh or an aching cry. Creation itself is groaning like a woman in labor. The earth knows something is wrong and longs to be restored.

Romans 8:23 - “*We ourselves... groan inwardly...*” uses the Greek word *Systemazō* which means “Believers Groan Together.” The prefix *syn* means together. The church groans together. Lament is communal.

Romans 8:26 - “*The Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for word.*” uses the Greek word *Stenagmos* - “The Spirit Groans.” Sometimes grief reaches a place that language cannot. We only have tears, silence, sighs. Paul says that even there, the Holy Spirit is praying. He is translating our tears into prayers.

Think about that. Creation groans. The Body of Christ groans. The Holy Spirit groans. God doesn’t stand outside suffering shouting instructions. He enters it (*Emmanuel*). He groans and weeps with us. That is the Gospel.

Example of Lament:

There are places where the groaning of creation becomes impossible to ignore; where words can reach the brokenness and pain. Foster care is one of those places.

A friend of mine who is a biological mom, adoptive mom, and a foster mom writes her feelings into poems when the pain is just too much. I asked her permission to read one of her poems to you today. It serves as a modern prayer of lament about the time her son was first brought into her home as a foster child.

Fragmented Pieces

*Screaming, Kicking, Hiding... Pain.
In a scrunched ball hidden in the darkness.
A child.
Unable to understand.
Unable to comprehend the reason for his
PAIN.
Stomach aching. Head pounding.*

*Trauma.
One home after another.
New rules.
New smells reminding - this isn't home.
Different routines.
The building blocks once formed have fallen.
Who am I?
Where do I belong?
Am I loved?
The answer - blurred, unclear.
Chaos within. Disaster without.*

*Voices Once Powerful
Now Silenced.
Hands Gentle & Kind
Now Bound.
Feet Once Moving
Stilled.
How?
Rules. Policies. Procedures.
Robotically Deconstructing Families
Knotted and Wrapped in Red Tape.
This is where compassion is buried.*

*Who will pick up the fragmented pieces?
The Lord.
"The Lord is near to the broken hearted and He saves the crushed in
Spirit."*

*Jesus reaches into the brokenness.
"Who will be the hands and feet?"
His gentle call awakens my soul.
Walking into the storm
That only my Savior can calm.
WE rebuild.*

*Overwhelmed & Weary
He Renews My Strength*

*My Savior Still Calling
"Awaken Church!"
Hands Joined
Connected.
Hope Multiplies.
Healing, Mending...*

*The Broken Restored.
Sounds of Laughter, Screams of Joy.
Families Reunited.
Permanency Found.*

*The child whispers
"I am His.
I Belong.
I. Am. Loved."*

*Truth ignites the candle, piercing the darkness.
The enemy is defeated.*

Notice the movement. Pain. Questions. Confusion. Calling. Hope. Restoration. This isn't just one child's story; it's creation's story.

Who picks up fragmented pieces? The Lord. Then He asks, "Who will be my hands and feet?" The Church.

Lament isn't passive. Lament moves us into compassion which inspires us into action. Too often Christians think our hope is escaping earth, but in Revelation 21, John paints a different picture. Heaven comes down, the Tree of Life returns, the river flows, and the nations are healed.

"No longer will there be any curse." Genesis begins in a garden and Revelation ends in a restored Garden-city. Every lament whispers, "This is not how it's supposed to be." Every promise of Revelation answers, "I know...I'm making all things new."

Christian Hope:

C.S. Lewis wrote, "*They say of some temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.*"

That is not wishful thinking. That is the Christian hope. So what do we do with all of this? We tell God the truth, carry someone else's sorrow, become the hands and feet of Jesus, and live with hopeful longing. We don't deny suffering or worship suffering because we follow the Savior who: entered suffering, transformed suffering, and promises one day to end suffering forever.

Lament is not the opposite of hope. It is hope refusing to be silent while the world is still broken. We *lament* because we know that this isn't Eden, *hope* because Christ has risen, *serve* because the Kingdom has begun, and *wait* because one day every tear will be wiped away. Every fragmented piece will be restored and the curse will finally be undone. Until then...we *groan* together, *hope* together, *worship* together, and *weep* together.

Reflection Questions:

- How has your understanding of lament changed?
- Why is it important to lament?
- Psalm 22 progresses from anguish to deliverance.

- What can we learn from this Psalm about how to lament?
 - Consider a time you lamented something. Did your anguish move into deliverance?
- What part of this broken world do you lament? How does that lament move you into compassion and action?