

I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Introduction. Guests.

B. We are continuing in a series called Honest Reflections – which has been a study of the Psalms. Today we are looking at Psalms of lament, which you can think of as songs you sing (prayers you pray) when you are sad and disappointed, maybe with life, perhaps with God.

C. This morning we are not lamenting as much as we are talking about it. But we do have a lament service tonight. Mike will be framing all of that.

D. Right now, let me point us in that direction by reading from Psalm 88:1-9: READ

E. You hear the pain and frustration in that prayer. Maybe those are the kind of prayers you have been praying lately – or they are the kinds of prayers you should be praying lately. Honest and raw and expressive of a lot of frustration with life and God.

F. In a few moments, Mike will be unpacking Psalm 88, right now...

II. Introduction

A. Well, that is different. Not a very typical transition video. Not the kind of music we tend to play. But it is reflective of today's theme. As we noted a couple times already, this is not a lament service – that is tonight. But today's topic is lament. It's about giving voice to being sad and disappointed with life and God. And you can hear the theme in that song, in that chant, which is taken mostly right from Psalm 88

B. We try to be more upbeat during our weekend services – to bring some energy and encouragement. The thinking is, life beats us down and we can all use a bit of encouragement. For the record, we do not set out to design services simply to encourage people. I am less against that than I used to be.

1. Back when I was a management consultant, I did a fair bit of corporate training or speaking at business events. But I would not take jobs when people said, we want a motivational speaker. I went out of my way to make it clear that I was not that, in part because this was around the time of Chris Farley's Saturday Night Live sketch about being a motivational speaker and living in a trailer down by the river. But partly because as a consultant I held that the right person in the right job with the right management culture didn't need a motivational speaker.

C. As I have grown older, I am more sympathetic with the need for encouragement and motivation. But that is not what we set out to do here. You are not an audience we are trying to encourage and motivate, you are a congregation that gathers for worship, instruction in God's word, prayer and the sacraments. So, leaving you encouraged and motivated is not our chief goal. But we have an eye on it.

D. However, we need to lament. To face sadness – to own it and bring it before God and process it. The way forward is actually backward. Religious people tend to deny their emotions – especially the negative ones. Secular people often defer to their emotions. Deify them. The right path – that which is modeled in the Bible – is to pray our emotions. To bring them to God, which of course means we must face them ourselves. God already knows our heart better than we do. But praying the prayers he gives us to pray can help us.¹

E. Let me take a half step back. We are looking at the Old Testament book of Psalms – which is 150 chapters long and filled mostly with prayers.

1. There are some meditations – and we have looked at them. But most of the Psalms are prayers, and they break out in categories. There are Psalms of Praise, Psalms of Thanksgiving, Wisdom Psalms, Royal Psalms, and also Psalms of Lament. And the last category is the largest - about one-third of the Psalms are lament. These give voice to sadness. They use the language of suffering.

2. Soong-Chan Rah, the author of the book, *Prophetic Lament*, writes: Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need. But lament is not simply the presentation of a list of complaints, nor merely the expression of sadness over difficult circumstances. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. The hope of lament is that God would respond to human suffering.²

3. These Psalms often start or contain the word, “why?” or “how long?”³ Why are you letting this happen to me? How long are you going to let it go on? Why won’t you answer my prayers?

4. Usually the Psalmist is pretty angry.⁴ Most of the time the writer starts in a bad place but ends in a good spot – the writer gains a new perspective and leaves on an up note. Sometimes the writer starts in a bad spot and ends there as well – such as in Psalm 88, whose last words are: “the darkness is my closest friend.”

F. Many people are surprised by how honest these prayers are – how raw the emotions, how forcefully people address God.⁵ But we shouldn’t be. In addition to lament Psalms:

¹ Our hearts are drugged by inattention to God, by sin, and by the soul's diseases. We don't feel much of anything spiritually. Sermons on psalms remind people who hardly know the sound of their own inward voice (let alone the Holy Spirit's) what it is like when the godly pray or weep, complain or worship. Lee Eclov.

² Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, IVP, 2015, p. 21.

³ Mother Theresa’s posthumously published book, *Come Be My Light*, is filled with this kind of language.

⁴ Martin Marty calls these Psalms “wintry.”

⁵ Eugene Peterson, who did PhD work in Hebrew translation, ended up translating the Bible into a more common American vernacular (now called *The Message*) in large part because of his frustration over how the

1. There are other lament-oriented sections of Scripture – such as the book of Lamentations, which was written by Jeremiah in the 6th century BC as a Lament for the fall of Jerusalem.
2. We are told that Jesus – the perfect person – was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
3. And this world is broken. If you are paying attention, sad is often the right response. I had a sad week. All kinds of things went wrong or were disappointing. And I am not even thinking about the weather or the Cubs falling out of the lead.
4. There are political things happening at a global, national and state level that are very disappointing. There were the shootings in Virginia. And close to home, there were some very poor choices made by people that will cause real devastation and pain for others.

G. So, this Psalm – and tonight’s Lament service – are well timed. Let’s walk through Psalm 88 line by line.

III. Psalm 88 - as you turn there let me note that it was written by Heman the Ezrahite, a man suffering Job-like afflictions. It is dark. Heman’s story is bleak and seemingly hopeless.

A. V1: **Lord, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before You. Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry!**⁶ That could be a quiet request, but if you know the Psalm, you know it isn’t. As you will see, Heman is yelling. He is angry and he is calling God out. In fact, you are going to hear blame.

Psalms read in English. He feels that they are too polished and polite and do not capture some of the real, earthy authenticity of the Hebrew text. In light of this you may find it helpful to read the Psalms in his translation. It is called the Message and is available free online. Go to Biblegateway.com. // By the way, those who are not surprised by the Psalms of Lament usually are surprised by the Imprecatory Psalms – in which people call down judgment on others, demand that enemies be cursed and killed, etc. One author calls them the “I hope you get hit by a truck” Psalms. Some read these and do not understand what they are reading. They think the Bible is advocating this. No. They are advocating being honest with God. They are given us prayers to pray when we are this mad or sad. Not everything we find in the Bible is there for us to apply personally. With some of these Psalms the point is less: think this way. It is more, see how completely open we can be before God. This is hardly limited to the Psalms. The Book of Job contains the bad advice of Job’s friends. They are there as examples of how not to be friends. So, first we learn what the words mean, then we understand that they are in Job as an example of bad advice! Another example is the Book of Ecclesiastes contains Solomon’s wandering thoughts. For a while, I said to myself, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” That is not the advice he gives in the end, so those who adopt it as the way we are supposed to think are heading in the wrong direction. Lament Psalms give us the honest thoughts of broken people. We are hearing them vent against God. That doesn’t mean all of their thoughts are fair or right. What it means is, we can be honest with God. He can handle our thoughts and fears.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon said: "The best style of prayer is that which cannot be called anything else but a cry." He also said: "Tears are briny rivulets of liquid prayer that point us to the Throne of Grace."

B. **V3: 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** (people have numbered me among the dead); **I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom You remember no more, for they are cut off from Your hand.** There is a children's book from the 70s called, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. It was written by Judith Viorst. Heman – the author of Psalm 88 - is having a Terrible, Horrible, No Good. Very. Bad Day.

C. And here comes the blame. **V6: You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and You overwhelm me with all Your waves. Selah**

1. This is a word we do not know how to translate. There have been a lot of theories about it. A lot of speculation. A lot of doctoral dissertations advancing a lot of ideas. Many think it might be some sort of musical notation. We do not know.

D. **You have caused my companions to shun me; You have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow.** You hear the heart ache – and more than that, the discouragement with God. Which doesn't mean Heman has given up faith. He does not.

1. This is not the time to be philosophical, but it's worth noting that his troubles have not caused him to stop believing in a good God. Injustice like this is not only a problem for those who believe in a loving God. Those who do not are left trying to explain why anything is evil or why it feels wrong.

2. Different sermon. I will simply note, Heman is not walking away from God. He is venting to God.

E. **V9: Every day I call upon You, O Lord; I spread out my hands to You. Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise You?** He is making the case for God to get involved. If you let me die, I cannot praise you. (This is not a very good argument. God doesn't need or profit from our praise. But it's an argument and it reflects the way we often feel. "Hey, I am doing you some favors here, and you are not keeping up your end of the deal.")

F. And he stays in that theme for a bit. **Is Your steadfast love declared in the grave, or Your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are Your wonders known in the darkness, or Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to You; in the morning my prayer comes before You."**

G. **O Lord, why do You cast my soul away? Why do You hide Your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer Your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.**

IV. OK, so if this Psalm was available on iTunes, I am not sure it would get a lot of requests. But it would get some. There are times to face the sadness.

A. I had a fraternity brother that used to crank sad songs whenever a girl broke up with him. He had large speakers and he'd put them out in the hall and blast sad love songs – his favorite was *Sail On* by the Commodores – whenever a girl broke up with him. Sometimes we want to listen to this kind of music. And the point is, sometimes we need to. And God gives us the prayers to pray and the songs to sing to process what is going on in our heart and move forward. This may be exactly the kind of prayer some of you need to be praying right now, because not much is working for you.

V. Four Take-aways – one: we can be honest with God about our disappointment with God.

A. In fact, God gives us the words to use to voice all of our pain and confusion – and they are words of white-hot rage. They are almost certainly harsher words than we would come up with on our own.⁷

B. I do not use words like this in many settings. I'm not comfortable with that much drama. Part of this is my background. My journey to faith included a brief religious phase. And there I found myself trying to act better than I was. And to hide any feelings of disappointment with God. But the bigger deal was my family growing up. I had a very good family on so many fronts, but a big message was, if you are disappointed with things, stop complaining and win. If you tried harder you'd get a better result and you wouldn't be in this situation. Being disappointed is what losers do. Do not show weakness. Just win. Do not cheat to win and be humble in winning, but if you are sad because things didn't go your way, work harder. Win. If you would win you wouldn't be disappointed.

C. Psalm 88 is calling us to say: you can express your frustrations and disappointment. And you can even direct them to God. He is big enough for the real you – for your anger. He can handle the truth. He will even give you the words to use. And they do not pull any punches.

D. As an aside, He already knows how you are feeling. God knows everything about you. He knows you better than you know yourself. The question is not, can He handle what is going on in your heart. The question is, can you? Bring your real self to God. Don't vent on others. Come directly to God with your disappointments.

VI. Take Away Number Two: We can be honest with God about our sadness.

⁷ Back in the 4th century, an early Christian leader named Athanasius pointed out that “the other Scriptures speak to us, but the Psalms speak for us.”

A. This is close to point one, but I think it's a bit different. Let me note, I've already said that religious people tend to deny their feelings – which can lead them to stuff them and later be overwhelmed by them. And I have already noted that secular people increasingly deify their feelings. “I need to be true to how I feel.” What is being advocated in the Psalms is a third way. It is processing them before God. It is being in touch with yourself enough to give voice to your feelings.

B. This assumes that sometimes sadness is the right response.

C. This doesn't mean we have to be sad all the time. There are a bunch of other Psalms that are calling on us to be thankful, to sing with joy. But it does mean there are times when you can acknowledge that you are sad because the world we want to live in is not this world.

D. But it means, we can be sad – indeed we should be sad from time to time. I had a very good family, but as I noted before, if you were disappointed it meant you were not trying hard enough. And if you were sad, it meant you were being weak.

E. There were no tears. I remember being reprimanded for crying when I was about ten and not crying again. And I didn't even realize that was odd until I was in college, and my roommate said, I've never seen you cry. And I said, I don't cry. I haven't cried in ten years. And he said, “I wouldn't advertise that if I were you. There are reasons to cry.” And so I worked on it.

F. I am not saying it's fun to be sad, and I am not saying it's good to be depressed. But being depressed about depressing things means your heart works. Which is why we occasionally offer smaller Christmas gatherings for people who are facing a very hard Christmas – and do not want to try to be happy

G. That is why I will look up people after the death of a loved one and often cite Acts 8:2.

H. Being honest with ourselves means that we have to be in touch with our emotions. Not necessarily to follow them. Emotions – like our thoughts – can be wrong. But we should understand them. And we need to know we can bring them – anger and sadness – directly to God.

VII. Take Away Number Three: We do not know how to lament.

A. Our culture doesn't really know how to lament. Our churches do not know how to lament. We do not really even have songs for it. We have: *How Great Is Our God, Here I am to Worship, Indescribable, Victory in Jesus*. But we do not have the kind of songs we find in the Psalms or that we find in some traditions, like the slaves – such as, *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*.”

B. We need to learn to process the hurt in part because then it loses its power over us and we are not to act on it.

VIII. Point Four: The last point I'll make is, we need to do some work in advance.

A. There are so many areas in which we are bad at this. There was a report out this week that 40 percent of the US does not have \$400 in an emergency. I see people with such weak relationships with God that they are not prepared to face a setback. I know lots of people who do not have friends who can step in to help them in a crisis.

B. The Psalms do not really work until they become as well known and as viscerally charged as something like The National Anthem. Where you know the next line by heart and the song puts you into a certain frame of mind.

C. The Psalms have to be broken in and fit like well worn jeans. Only the difference is, with the Psalms we are actually the ones that are adapt. Old jeans are comfortable because they have come to fit us. With the Psalms part of what is going on is that we are coming to fit them.⁸ We are training ourselves to think differently.

D. Which is why it's best to memorize them. I have not done much memory work in the Psalms. I have a son who set out to memorize fifty of them.

E. Short of that, read them every day. Pray through a Psalm every day. There are Psalms for just about every occasion – every emotion.⁹ They express your thoughts more profoundly than you can. Think of the Psalms like a Swiss Army knife. When you know them well then you know what kind of blade to pull out.

IX. So, I have three assignments:

A. First, pick a Psalm, any Psalm – and memorize it. I do not want to hear any whining about memorizing an entire Psalm. My oldest son is working on memorizing fifty of them. And I was talking with a guy the other day who had just about every line to two movies down pat: Caddie Shack and Napoleon Dynamite. There are more profitable things to put in your mind

⁸ Imagine that this psalm is a perfectly tuned, six-stringed guitar. (It is, after all, a perfectly tuned soul song.) Our people come to church each carrying their own guitar, out of pitch from a week of rough treatment and disuse. The preacher's job is to tune their heart-guitars to David's heart-guitar. So we help them tune to v.1. The preacher might ask, "Have you ever felt like you're calling God, and he doesn't pick up? Like you keep getting his answering machine? 'Come on, God,' you say, 'pick up! I know you're there.'" In saying that, the preacher is tuning the hearts of his people to v.1. Can you can hear in your mind a guitar player tuning her guitar? A string plucked and resonating. Then she turns the tuning key—woowwaawo—till it matches the perfect pitch. That's our goal: preaching each stanza to tune hearts to the pitch of Scripture. And when we come to the end, their souls are in tune with the psalmist's, and they're ready to sing for themselves, and with all the other singers. David's psalm becomes *their* psalm. We preach in order to tune their hearts to sing God's grace. (Lee Eclov, Tune My Heart to Sing Thy Grace, Preaching Today, March 1, 2004.

⁹ Calvin describes the Psalter – which is a term sometimes used to refer to the collection of all 150 – as “an anatomy of all parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.” John Durham, Psalms: Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 4, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), p. 41.

- B. Show up tonight for the Lament Service.
- C. Be sure to bring your view about your problems back into focus via the perspective of the cross.
1. One of the great themes of the Hebrew Bible is that God identifies with the suffering. There are a lot of texts that say this: if you oppress the poor, you oppress me. I am the husband of the widow. I am the father of the fatherless.
 2. Christianity goes one step past that. We declare that God showed up and became vulnerable – and involved in suffering and death. He didn't come as an emperor or general. He came as a carpenter, born in a manger. And on the cross we see the ultimate wonder. We see that God knows what it is to suffer. God knows what it is to lose a loved one to an unjust attack
 3. John Stott said that he could never believe in a God if it were not for the cross. In a world of real pain, how could one worship a god who was immune to it?" But he was not. And that shows his love.
 4. And that love needs to shape how, in the end, we see the disappointments.