

Hurt at Church: Learning to Lament

Introduction

Being hurt at church can leave us wrestling with sorrow in many different ways. As we begin to make sense of what has happened - how church has become a cause of pain in our lives, or in the lives of those close to us - there are likely to be many questions and uncertainties, alongside ongoing grief.

Areas of pain might include a growing or ongoing sense of betrayal and uncertainty about where fault lies. We might experience the misunderstanding of others and have questions around how best to respond. The predominant narrative sometimes paints those who've been hurt in a negative light, resulting in loss of friendship and fellowship, and an ongoing sense of injustice. We might experience a deep sense of loss associated with any or all of these.

We might also find we're questioning where God is, and how He has allowed this to happen. We might be asking how we can trust Him, when the ones who were meant to show something of his Shepherdly love and care towards us have loved themselves - or those we've sought to love and serve have turned against us.

There are many ways we could respond and seek to understand what has happened. Some of us might tend towards becoming angry and / or bitter towards God and other people. Others of us might veer more towards stoically carrying on, pushing down the questions and hurt, feeling confused, but hoping everything will be ok. We might be wondering how to respond faithfully in the midst of the suffering.

The path of lament

The Lord has given us a way to help process the pain we experience in this broken world. He has provided a framework for coming to Him, exactly where we are. God has given us the gift of lament for the times we find ourselves experiencing suffering and are unsure of how to reconcile our pain with the truths we believe about God's character. Lament is a gift of grace to us, which acts as the bridge between our understanding of our Father in heaven and our lived experience. Mark Vroegop in his book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* says that 'lament stands in the gap between pain and promise'ⁱ.

The Lord has given us permission, in fact he welcomes us, to bring all aspects of our sorrow, in all of their rawness, honestly before Him. He invites us to come to Him, with all our questions, and pour out our hearts to Him (Psalm 62:8).

The Bible contains many laments, as God's people down the ages have cried out to the Lord and sought to make sense of their suffering. A third of the psalms are laments, and these can help us, as we learn from those who've gone before. We also find lament in the books of Lamentations, Job, Jeremiah and Habakkuk.

The psalms of lament tend to follow a structure, which is helpfully set out for us in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. Lament isn't prescriptive, or a 'simplistic formula'ⁱⁱ, but helps to orient us as we try to make sense of our suffering. In His wisdom, the Lord has provided this framework to help us move in a redemptive direction in pain and confusion. It helps us to process the pain and move towards the Lord in growing trust

The stages of lament, as suggested by Vroegop, are as follows; firstly, the Lord invites us to turn to Him and then to bring our complaints. We then ask boldly what we would like Him to do, and as we move through these aspects of lament, we then choose to trust Him, to respond in worship of the One who holds all things in his hands.

The God to whom we lament

'It was just before the Passover festival. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end' (John 13:1). In John's gospel, we see Jesus, God's Son, heading towards the cross. Many times, throughout the gospel, the Jewish authorities try to arrest him, but each time, Jesus evades them. 'His time has not yet come'. In John 13, the time has now arrived. Jesus' crucifixion is imminent. John describes what Jesus is going to do at the cross. He describes it as 'love for those who are his own'.

As the pressure on Jesus increases throughout the gospel, we are shown his character. His love is seen in his continued service of others. As chapter 13 unfolds, Jesus washes the disciples' feet - this act of service is the forerunner of what He's about to do for the disciples on the cross. Jesus' love for others is seen in what he does, in laying down his life in loving sacrifice. He is the One who can be trusted. His love remains the same, and His character unchanging as the time for his death draws near. He did not recoil from what loving us required but loved us 'to the end'. His goodness is shown as He remains unchanging in His resolve to go to the cross. He is the one in whom we can fully trust, with the whole of our lives, as we seek to make sense of our sorrows.

Amid pain, when we need a refuge and a rock that can take the weight of our confusion, all that we need is found in Jesus. He has shown Himself to be good. When the pressure was on, Jesus did not recoil from the will of the Father but demonstrated His love for His Father and for His sheep. Jesus' death on the cross is an unchanging reality. As we live and experience the painful realities of having been hurt at church, we can approach the One who 'loved us to the end' and tell Him what is on our hearts.

And it is to that process of lament that we now, together, turn. In what follows there are passages to read, questions on which to reflect and guidance for prayer. Please work through this lament slowly, repeatedly, confident that the Lord is close.

Lament: finding our focus

The Lord sees and knows what we are experiencing: He listens and responds to the cries of His children (Psalm 116:1-2; 35:15). He tenderly works out His purposes in the detail of our lives. As we come to lament, having been hurt at church, there is likely much that is on our hearts.

Lamenting our struggles isn't likely to be 'one and done'. There is no single prayer with which we can navigate the pain. But we can come to the Lord with one aspect of the pain at a time, bringing before Him a particular feature of the struggle. The focus of lament might change over time, and we can continue to bring to Him the struggle and grief that is on our hearts as He leads us forward.

Take a few moments to reflect on these questions. Doing so may help you identify a focus for today's lament:

- What is uppermost in my thinking / struggle / confusion?

- What am I pre-occupied with at the moment?
- What feels particularly painful?
- What feels particularly confusing?

Aim to identify just one aspect of your pain to lament today.

Lament: Turning to the Lord.

In *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*ⁱⁱⁱ, Vroegop helps us to understand '...in order to lament, we must resolve to talk to God'.

We are often inclined to turn away from the Lord in the pain. Lament encourages us to turn to the Lord instead. When we lament, we don't have all the answers. The struggle is ongoing. Turning to Him is an act of faith and is the opposite of becoming resigned to a belief that God doesn't care. It recognises the God who holds us in His hands, even if we don't understand Him, or how to make sense of our circumstances.

Some examples from the psalms of people turning to the Lord in confusion and pain include:

'I cried out to God for help;

I cried out to God to hear me.

When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;

At night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted.

I meditated, and my spirit grew faint' (Psalm 77:1-3)

'Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God.

Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer' (Psalm 4:1)

The psalmists were resolved to keep turning to the Lord. Turning to the Lord in lament is not turning from the pain and confusion. Lament brings it to Him. He invites us to come to Him. Lament is personal.

Take a few moments to reflect on these questions:

- How can you make some of the opening words from the Psalms (above) your own? Do the the opening words of other Psalms reflect your heart more?
- How will you address the Lord? Sovereign Lord, Good Shepherd, Father ...
- What are you able to say about God that you know to be true, in the middle of the pain and confusion? What can you affirm about his character and purposes?

Then turn your thoughts into prayer.

Lament: Bringing our complaint

As we live with pain, see injustice or experience brokenness, questions might be raised in our hearts towards God. Why would a good God allow such pain? The psalmists were familiar with bringing their complaints before God. We can be honest with Him about the questions we have.

We might feel that God is distant, or that He hasn't responded to us. We don't have to pretend this struggle isn't there and carry on regardless or give up in despair. The Lord invites us to bring precisely these things to Him. We can take inspiration from the psalmists who bring their questions with such depth of emotion.

'How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?' (Psalm 13:1-2)

'Why, LORD, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?' (Psalm 10:1)

'Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favour again?

Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?

Has God forgotten to be merciful....?' (Psalm 77:7-9)

Our complaint isn't license to be angry with God. We are not seeking to put God in the dock and tell Him where He has gone wrong, but to bring our confusion and questions to Him. All of our confusion rests on an underlying belief that God is who He says He is, and that He is sovereign over all things. It is the commitment to this belief that raises the questions.

The lament psalms bring the complaints of God's people before Him. In doing this, they move in a direction, towards God, not away from Him in disbelief.

Take a few moments to reflect on these questions:

- What questions concerning your suffering do you want to ask of the Lord?
- What is causing you to be confused?
- In what ways are your experiences nudging you to wrestle with what you know of God's character and activity?

Bring your questions and complaints to the Lord, with an attitude of humility and honesty. Be as clear and specific as you can.

Lament: Asking boldly

The purpose of lament is not to stay in complaint, but to move through it, towards a growing trust in God. Asking boldly helps us move through complaint towards choosing to stand on the truth that God is who He says He is. It is the 'yet' that is reached; the pain is brought before the Lord, and isn't resolved, and 'yet', His character is unchanging. Our requests will be varied, and specific to our circumstance and struggle.

The psalms are varied in what they ask of the Lord.

'Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.

Do not forget the helpless'. (Psalm 10:12)

'Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death'. (Psalm 13:3)

'Do not be far from me, for trouble is near

And there is no one to help'. (Psalm 22:11)

These prayers are bold. The psalmists call on the God whose character is unchanging. As we saw in John 13, Jesus' love didn't waiver as the cross drew nearer; 'He loved them to the end'.

'Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.' (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Take a moment to reflect on these questions:

- What do you want to ask God to do in the midst of the suffering?
- How do you want God to act, in light of His character?
- Who is God to you in this trial?

Ask him to act in accordance with His eternal character. Bring your petitions to the Lord.

Lament: choosing to trust.

We make a choice at this final stage of lament. The psalmist has poured out his heart, in both complaint and request, honestly and humbly before the Lord. He has moved towards his God. He now chooses to lean on, and trust in, the One he knows to be true. Despite the confusion, he knows and is able to testify, as he looks back on his life, that his God has shown His love, has saved him and been good to him. He is able to sing the Lord's praise in the midst of suffering, even if nothing about his circumstances have changed.

'But I trust in your unfailing love;

My heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me'. (Psalm 13:5-6)

'I will declare your name to my people, in the assembly I will praise you.

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you descendants of the Lord, praise him!

Revere him, all you descendants of Israel.

For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one,

He has not hidden his face from him

But has listened to his cry for help'. (Psalm 22:22-24)

'The LORD is king for ever and ever,

The nations will perish from his land.

You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted,

you encourage them and you listen to their cry,

defending the fatherless and the oppressed,

So that mere earthly mortals

will never again strike terror.' (Psalm 10:16-18)

Take a few moments to reflect on these questions:

- Where have you seen the Lord's unfailing love and faithfulness to you? Can you look back on your life, and recall how He has loved you? Can you look back through history and remember His love?
- What reasons do you have to praise God, even if you don't have all the answers to your suffering?
- What reasons do you have to trust, given His faithfulness? How have you seen God's faithfulness in your own story?
- How is He growing you even through this suffering?

Turn these thoughts into prayers of commitment and praise.

Lament is a gift from a loving Father to his children, to help us move towards the One who is our refuge and hope, as we respond to the brokenness in our lives with faith. Lament is one of the ways God's grace is manifest to his children. We don't have to turn away from Him in our confusion. The Lord knows our frailties and offers us a way forward, towards Him, when life is hard.

It helps us to persevere (Colossians 1:10-12), as we wait for Him to act, either in this life, or in the one to come. It's a way to actively wait. Lament helps us to stand on God's promises, even when we cannot see how they are being fulfilled. God does not ask us to flick a switch from unbelief to trust. It is through our turning and speaking that He is leading and helping us, guiding us towards what we really need. Through lament, He is growing in us a heart that is resting in his steadfast love, dependent on Him, and able to praise Him with hope, through all of the storms of life.

Choosing to trust is an ongoing process. As we pursue lament, we will be helped to see our circumstance increasingly through God's lens of truth, mercy and hope.

Seeking to be faithful to the Lord in the midst of suffering is not easy. The Lord knows the specifics of our weakness and struggle. Lament is one of the gifts we are given to help.

Next steps

As you continue to lament, there are other avenues you may like to explore.

- Who are the trustworthy people in your life, who you could ask to pray with you about some of the things you've been lamenting? The Lord puts us in Christian community because we're not made to be able to manage life on our own. Trustworthy people are a gift.
- Turning to God through singing / listening to worship songs which praise Him and remind us of His love and faithfulness can be very encouraging, especially where it continues to be hard to trust. This playlist from BCUK may offer some help: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6A2c9QIXbEb-kfBrOVejfRC?si=147b5d46a52d4ed3>
- God's word will continue to be a significant refuge in the midst of struggle, where we find hope. As we continue to read God's word, He will be at work by His spirit, helping us to grow in understanding Him, and to rest in the hope that He alone brings to our lives. You might like to consider mediating on Psalm 18:1-2; Psalm 34:15 and Psalm 146.

When we have been hurt at church, there is much that we can question about how we've understood people and where we've placed our trust. Verses such as these can help us to lift our eyes to see the Lord, who alone is wholly trustworthy, and on whom we can lean with the full weight of our lives.

- How has the Lord uniquely made you to enjoy Him and His creation? Are there things you enjoy doing which might be an expression of the way He's made you and / or of the gifts he's given? Taking some time to be in creation, or to pursue some of the particular gifts he's given you, can be important steps in recovering from the hurt. Can you enjoy in a long walk, some wild swimming, reading faithful Christian literature written outside the particular culture where church hurt has occurred, creative hobbies, music or sport?
- Continue your reading on lament with books such as:

- Rejoicing in Lament by Todd Billings
- Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy by Mark Vroegop

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)*

ⁱ M Vroegop, Dark Clouds Deep Mercy, p26

ⁱⁱ p33

ⁱⁱⁱ P31