

# “But what if I’m not sad? Why would I lament if I’m not sad about anything?”

The question could come from two sources:

- First, from a misunderstanding of why Christians would lament when there didn’t seem to be any particular occasion worth lamenting. Aren’t Christians supposed to be joyful?
- Second, as a community of faith we don’t sing songs of lament. Our worship services are meant to give members a boost for the week. A lament song would seem out of place, maybe even inappropriate. Sundays were for lifting us out of the mire, not putting us back in.

The Bible gives us several good reasons why lamenting should be a part of our normal Christian worship, even if we are not lamenting our own circumstances.

## **We sing songs or recite scriptures of lament even when we are not lamenting in order to weep with those who are weeping.**

Although you may not be weeping or lamenting, it’s likely someone in our church circle or community is going through something deeply mournful: a person in a committed relationship who has just found out their significant other has been having an affair; a couple returning from the hospital after having a miscarriage; a single woman who has lost her mother and now fears the loneliness ahead without her last close relative; persons filled with regrets for words or deeds that caused someone harm or pain. On any given Monday through Sunday, many people are going through lamentable seasons of suffering, pain, and loss.

Paul calls us to “*weep with those who weep*” (Romans 12:15). But we are often ill-equipped to do so. Our individualistic culture has taught us to care for ourselves, not others. We know how to give high fives with our friends, but we don’t know how to weep with them. Singing lament songs or reciting lament scriptures together as a body of Christ not only allows us to fulfill that command to weep with the weeping, but also teaches us how to show care when we will need to lament in our own living room or across a table.

## **We sing songs of lament or reciting of lament scriptures even when we are not lamenting so that when seasons of mourning come, we know what songs to sing, scriptures to read, and what prayers to pray.**

The majority of people are unprepared for suffering and trials until that season has come. Only then do we sense just how empty of resources we are and how unprepared we really are. This is especially true of younger Christians, because they inexperienced in suffering or loss.

But on Sundays, when Christians gather to hear the Word taught and sung and prayed, we have an opportunity to practice lamenting. Does that sound strange? For example -

*If a Broadway actress comes to her performance with few rehearsals under her belt, she will be stiff, second-guessing cues, lacking confidence in her lines, and so on. But if she’s rehearsed over and over, hundreds of times, she comes to her performance with a kind of freedom and spontaneity that can turn a good performance into a great one.*

Similarly, Christians gather on Sunday or throughout the week to rehearse the things we hope for and sing about the things we have confidence in. We should regularly grieve because we know that seasons of lament are surely coming. We are part of living in a world

where lamentable things happen to each and every one of us, sooner or later. Lament even when you're not lamenting so that when those dark stormy drenching rain clouds come, you will be spiritually energetic and know what songs to sing, scriptures to recite, and what prayers to pray.

**We sing songs of lament and recite lament scriptures even when we are not lamenting because the New Testament calls us to.**

Paul tells the Ephesians to *"be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart"* (Ephesians 5:18-19). If we sing or read psalms, we're going to lament. Because many of the psalms include lament a case could be made that they should be a part of the daily meditative diet of the people of God.

**We sing songs of lament even when we are not lamenting because maybe you should be lamenting more than you are.**

A wise reader of scripture will discern that he/she doesn't come to the psalms just to be comforted, but also to be afflicted and often not feeling what they ought to be feeling. But God's Word teaches them how they ought to feel. When they feel comfortable, the Bible regularly calls them to reconsider what's causing the discomfort.

The apostle James addressed a congregation full of spiritual pride that didn't recognize the need to lament their sin. James told them, *"Be heartbroken and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom."* (James 4:9) Their sin, James claimed, was making them enemies with God (James 4:5), yet they were laughing and joyful. Remember, these were Christians!

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.

Make room in your singing and in your public and private prayers for lamenting. As your Pastor and Shepherd, I am called to prepare each of you for seasons of mourning so you won't be surprised when it comes. 5th Avenue Family & Friends, 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.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, oh, how are our hearts are heavy laden these day and tears are close to the surface as we watch the unwatchable, think about (and try not to think about) the unthinkable, bear the unbearable, cry out for solutions to the unfixable. Our groanings and pains are too deep for mere words. Tears come at the oddest moments. Despair crouches at the door, waiting to set up housekeeping in our souls.

"A voice is heard in Ramah (and in Milwaukee, Green Bay, Chicago, and Georgia, Florida, and Arizona and in Texas), deep anguish and bitter weeping. Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers, Grandparents weeping for children to safely return to school; for the eradication of systemic and intuitional racism; an effective and safe COVID-19 vaccine to rain down on our world; for there to be peace in all the lands; until all these situations have a positive outcome, they all refuse to be comforted, but they do not grieve as others do who have no hope. There is hope for our world, God decrees." (Jeremiah 31:15)  
(1 Thessalonians 4:13)

How does one respond to events that are as tragic and disturbing as what we have witnessed in our country the past few days, weeks, and months?

While there is a call to a variety of actions and responses to the injustices and the racism, the need to wear a mask and to continue social distancing, our Christian tradition also offers us the prayer of lament. This prayer gives us a way of being with God and with each other during times of deep and incomprehensible loss, struggle, anger, misunderstanding, fear, and longing.

The prayer of lament is that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God. Many of us have never been taught this way of praying and it is often missing in the worship of many congregations.

The prayer of lament is a place to begin as we seek to respond to the sin, the brokenness, and the complexity of our life together as human beings. It is tempting to rush to problem-solving and fixing when the situation is so dire, but I hope we won't.

Let us stop, at least for a moment Sisters and Brothers, and lament *together!* Let us stand in solidarity with our black and brown brothers and sisters who continue to experience such tragic loss; let us mourn with them the tragic loss of another black or brown persons and affirm that black lives matter. Let us grieve for the law enforcement officers who lost their lives while trying to keep the peace. That there are good and bad people in our world. Let us acknowledge complexity, that we don't have answers, and cry out to God together for the peace and justice that seems to allude us at such a time as this. We need you loving God. Please hurry, renew a right spirit in your world. In the name above all names Jesus, our Lord and Savior we pray.

Prayers of lament are a form of worship and faith. We worship God even in the midst of pouring our difficulty out before Him. Instead of backing away from God during a hard time or a dark night, we face the pain and worship Him with it. As an act of love, we offer it all to God. We lay everything before His Throne.

## **EXODUS AND LAMENT PSALMS**

*Out of slavery, their cry for help rose up to God.* (Exodus 2:23)

There are traditions of lament in the biblical books of Exodus and Psalms that provide the paradigm or model for biblical lament. While the first sound of lament in the Bible is the cry of the blood of Abel, who is slain by his brother Cain in the book of Genesis, it is the liberation narrative of Exodus and the pervasive laments in the Psalms that have most influenced Jewish and Christian forms of worship and helped shape secular movements for social justice worldwide.

The exodus/liberation experience of the Hebrew slaves in bondage in Egypt (ca. 1300 B.C.E.; Exodus 1–15) is a story that moves from suffering and lament to rescue by a God characterized as both compassionate and all-powerful, a God who intervenes against injustice to answer the people's cries. It should be noted that the biblical materials present Moses as quite adept at lament and complaint, as in the following:

Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their

ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” (Numbers 11:11–15)

## PSALMS OF COMMUNAL LAMENT for WEEKLY DEVOTIONALS – 13 – 18 JULY 2020

Psalm 44.  
Psalm 60.  
Psalm 74.  
Psalm 79.

Psalm 80.  
Psalm 85.  
Psalm 90

You may want to write down your own prayer of lament using the words “though” and “yet” to begin to phrase your lament. Do this when you are facing difficulty or when people in your life are struggling and you desire to be an intercessory for their pain and/or loss. Use this exercise in prayer for all moments in your life.

- Find a quiet place with God - Being alone with Him is a necessity for this kind of prayer.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you - She will lead you in a prayer of lament. She will open up your heart to God.
- Be in God’s presence - We are often so much in a hurry but a prayer of lament takes time spent in God’s presence. Give yourself wholly to God.
- Write down the “though” circumstances in your life - What difficulties and challenges are you right now facing? What pain or grief do you feel? These are the “though” circumstances.
- Offer these things to God - Offer God the hard things as a sacrifice. Don’t ask for anything.
- Worship God by completing the phrase - “Though these things have happened, yet \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Worship God in a series of yet statements.
- Bless and praise Him even in spite of the difficult things.
- Be ready to witness the great effect this will have on your life.

### *A Prayer of Lament for Those Who Cannot Breathe - Rev. Prince Rivers*

Holy God, a cloud of grief hangs heavy over our heads and I feel like I cannot breathe, so give me the strength to pray. I raise my hands toward the sky and I lift my eyes to the hills which is where my help comes from. Lord, when the names of people who have been choked, shot and assaulted is too many to count I know that not one soul has been forgotten by mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, cousins and friends. They remember laughs and smiles, dreams and struggles, talents and personalities.

Now these men and women are gone. Father, how long must we listen to the cries and screams as blood stains the sidewalk? How many videos must we watch before we begin to see a change?

Help me, God. Help us. Help all your children. Help our nation. Help us examine ourselves. Help those of us who are sad and angry not to let these deaths be in vain. We do not pray for vengeance, but we do thirst for justice. We hope for healing between neighbors and officers called to protect and serve. We long for the day when young black and brown men will live long enough to be old black and brown men and parents will not have to say ‘good-bye’ too soon. Our hope is in you, God. Deliver us from all our fears. O God, come quickly to help us. O Lord, come quickly to save us. In the name of the one who came that we might have life and have life more abundantly. Amen.