

Everyday Grieving

Acts 7:59-8:2

The Bible teaches us that there is a fundamental disorder in creation because of our rebellion. Loss and grief are simultaneously "natural", part of everyday life, and yet "unnatural", not the original intention. We are given a way to respond to the pain and misery that we experience and witness: lament. Just as the Christians in Acts 4, with their Jewish heritage, turned to the psalms to pray when persecuted, so they surely did when grieving Stephen's murder in Acts 8.

Over a third of the 150 psalms are classified as being laments: they are written by or for someone who is suffering. They give us a general pattern of how to lament (this order is described in *Rejoicing In Lament* by J. Todd Billings):

1. Come to God

But coming to God with sorrows that you want to weep about, in perplexity, with anger... these are all acts of faith because we are coming to Him. When we say to Him, "I am so upset", we are believing that He hears; when we ask why He has allowed something so terrible to happen, we are believing that He is good and powerful.

2. Tell Him what you're thinking and feeling

Again and again in the psalms we see a level of honesty that might shock us (e.g. Psalm 13:1, 31:10-12, 44:9 on) Lament involves grief and protest, with questions such as Why have You allowed this? Why have You done this? Where are You? Why don't You help? Don't you care? These questions may seem dangerous, almost blasphemous because they seem to call into question God's nature. But remember who they are addressed to: God! They are still expressing faith.

Come to God with your own words and feelings, tell Him what you've lost because of Coronavirus, injustice, your own foolishness, the choices God seems to have made for you.

We don't want to get stuck in grief and protest, but we mustn't avoid it either. By using psalms and other places in God's Word where complaints and fears and worries are expressed, we can be brought safely along the journey God wants us to go on.

3. Declare trust

Almost every psalm of lament ends with a statement of renewed trust (e.g. 13:6). No psalm records the problem being solved, the loss being amended, the pain being removed. But the psalmist is telling themselves that God is good and worthy of praise, sooner or later His goodness will be evident again.

Telling ourselves promises of God's goodness and love is one way to help ourselves when our minds feel overwhelmed (e.g. Lamentations 3:22-23, Psalm 23, Colossians 1:11).

We should also keep our eyes on the only true happy ending: life with God in the new creation. Jesus has begun this in us now (Isaiah 61:1-3, John 16:20) but it is only when we die / Jesus returns (whichever is the sooner) that our sorrow will truly and permanently be turned to joy (Psalm 30:11) and every tear will be wiped from our eyes (Revelation 7:17).

This was Stephen and the early church's confidence (Acts 7:59, re. 7:60 cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), and it must be our confidence too.

Extra section not included in the preach: how to help others who are grieving

Caring for those who have suffered loss, especially the death of family members, is commanded in the Bible (Deuteronomy 24:19, Romans 12:15, James 1:17). We can give both practical and emotional support, and we can help by what we say and do, and what we don't say and do. Because we love someone and want them to feel better, we may be tempted to try to cheer them up, or explain away any doubts they're having, or encourage them about God's good plans. It's much more helpful to listen and give empathy rather than answers, particularly in the early stages of grief.

A few other quick tips:

- Don't avoid them because you're not sure what to say or how to help.
- Don't ask how they are.
- Do tell them that you're sorry to have heard what has happened.
- Don't compare to another similar situation or say you know exactly how they feel.
- Avoid starting a sentence with the phrase "At least..." as this will appear to be undermining the significance of their loss
- If you can, share a good memory of the person they are mourning.
- Let them determine how long you talk with them; if in doubt, keep it short but genuine.
- Drop round a card/chocolate/wine/meal without expecting or needing to have a conversation.
- If you are texting or emailing your support, it can be helpful to end with "no need to reply."
- Text again after a few weeks or months or years, when others may have forgotten or moved on.

There is also much that should be said about lament regarding injustice but I have kept my focus on personal circumstances.

Questions for group discussion: general

- Luke mentioned the view of Edinburgh Castle from Queen's Drive as one of his favourite places in Edinburgh – what is one of yours?
- What was new to you in what Luke taught us about lament?
- Why do you think lament isn't a common theme in churches like ours? What should we do about this?

Questions for group discussion: in smaller groups

- Were you surprised by the strength of the language of lament used in the psalms? How did it make you feel?
- If you feel able, share what kind of loss have you experienced during the current crisis, and how you responded to this, and to God.
- J. Todd Billings in his book *Rejoicing In Lament*, highlights four elements of lament: praise, protest, grief, trust. Which have been most difficult for you to express to God at times of loss?

Quotes used and considered

"Up until I was about thirty, I couldn't fathom why so many of the psalms were about pain. Now I'm thirty-five, and I can't fathom why so many of them are about something else."
Andrew and Rachel Wilson, The Life You Never Expected

"This is why it's so much easier not to love anything, because then your heart can never get broken." *Shauna Niequist, Bittersweet*

"You are always either listening to lies or telling yourself truth." *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

"Rather than being one-dimensional, our affections need to become agile and multidimensional through being reshaped by God through the Psalms. Let us grieve and protest and trust and praise together before the Lord. The Psalms give us a way to pray in many keys, major and minor, while directing us to the source of our true hope: the Lord and his promises... Cherry-picking only the praises from the Psalms tends to shape a church culture in which only positive emotions can be expressed before God in faith. Since my diagnosis with cancer, I've found that my fellow Christians know how to rejoice about answered prayer and also how to petition God for help, but many don't know what to do when I express sorrow and loss or talk about death... When worship expresses only 'victory,' it can unintentionally suggest that the broken and the lonely and the hurting have no place here." *J. Todd Billings, Rejoicing In Lament*

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable." *C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves*

"Getting over [his wife's death] so soon? But the words are ambiguous. To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he's had his leg off it is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce, continuous pain will stop. Presumably he'll get back his strength and be able to stump around on his wooden leg. He has 'got over it'. But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones; and he will always be a one-legged man. There will be hardly any moment when he forgets it. Bathing, dressing, sitting down and getting up again, even lying in bed, will all be different. His whole way of life will be changed. All sorts of pleasures and activities that he once took for granted will have to be simply written off. Duties too. At present I am learning to get about on crutches. Perhaps I shall presently be given a wooden leg. But I shall never be a biped again." C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

"But somehow, in many of the sanitised versions of mainstream modern Christianity, this tone of lament is gone. Which can only mean either we've somehow lost our hope for a better world, or are blind to the brokenness of this one. Or both." Ayomide Adebayo, "*Let Us Lament*"

"Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things ... I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he doesn't know how to stay quietly in his room." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

References for examples of Jesus's sorrow and grief

Isaiah 53:4, Psalm 22:1 (cf. Matthew 27:46), Mark 14:33-34, Luke 19:41, John 11:35, Hebrews 5:7

Recommended reading and listening

J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing In Lament*. Written by a professor diagnosed with incurable cancer in his late thirties, this is both personal and theological. Superb for understanding the psalms, lament, and more of God.

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. Intense and unguarded recording of his emotions after his wife's death. Extremely helpful for realising what grief may feel like.

Andrew and Rachel Wilson, *The Life You Never Expected*. The story of becoming parents to two severely autistic children, with theological and practical reflections on life and God.

"Let Us Lament", Ayomide Adebayo <https://docayomide.com/lament/>

"Learning To Lament", Jonathan Bell
<https://subsplash.com/churchcentral/lb/ms/+t5fsfc3?page=2>

"The Heart Is Not a Cup (There's a Better Metaphor)", Scott Swain
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/heart-not-cup/>

"Discover the Grace of Lament", Mark Vroegop
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/discover-grace-lament/>

"Not Moving On", Kay Warren

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10152032456227569&id=105128507568&stream_ref=10