

## Summer in the Psalms

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## Summer in the Psalms Psalm 44 – Psalms of Lament<sup>1</sup>

I heard an ad on the radio for a doctor who claimed to have a solution for people suffering from nerve pain in their hands and feet. The tag line for the ad was, “Imagine living pain free for the rest of your life.” If you’re struggling with chronic pain like me, you might be ready to pick up the phone. You’ll do anything to escape the gnawing ache and the hot needling feeling of pain.<sup>2</sup>

It is in those moments of what seems like hopeless pain and trouble and crisis that the Psalms of Lament were written, and it’s to those that we can turn.

We are continuing our sermon series called “Summer in the Psalms.” There is incredible depth and richness in the Psalms that for many of us has remained undiscovered and untouched.

We learned that the purpose of the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is this: ***Psalms is a book of prayers to help you obey God’s Word and stay faithful to Jesus Christ.*** That’s what the Psalms are helping us do this summer and hopefully for the rest of our Christian lives.

Our goal is that, by the time we are through, you will have a greater ability to pray with more depth and authenticity, no matter what it is you are praying about or what you are going through, because the Psalms cover it all.

We talked about the different types of Psalms – there are different styles or types that we recognize and can group them in. Today, like I said, we’re going to learn the value of the Psalms of Lament.

If you grew up in church, and you were taught to put on a happy face, to let a smile be your umbrella, to keep your complaints to yourself, then you might struggle with the lament psalms. Maybe you were raised to believe that being a Christian means

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<sup>1</sup> Sources of research:

- Stephen J. Lennox, *Psalms: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999)
- David Thompson, *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2015)
- Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973)
- Allen P. Ross, “Psalms,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985)
- John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ps 19
- W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms* (Old Tappan New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2016/august/preaching-on-suffering-in-pain-free-culture.html?utm\\_source=preachingtoday&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_term=19007004&utm\\_content=664613069&utm\\_campaign=email](https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2016/august/preaching-on-suffering-in-pain-free-culture.html?utm_source=preachingtoday&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=19007004&utm_content=664613069&utm_campaign=email)

you are always supposed to be happy and smiley and that if you're not, then your faith is weak or that you are not a good Christian. Listen: *we need faith that is real*. No one needs a shallow, insipid faith. We need a *real* faith that isn't afraid to be honest when things are going bad for us; *that's* the kind of faith the Bible displays and instructs. So let's look first at...

## 1. The *Purpose* and *Place* of Lament.<sup>3</sup>

When things were going bad, the writers of the Psalms were not afraid to tell God, "This sucks!" I know no better way to say it. Life has those kinds of times—the kind when it's hard to put into words how hard and painful it is. Have you ever been there? If not, keep living. Give it about ten minutes. It's inevitable.

The good news is that the Bible has given us a gift in the Psalms with examples on how to grieve the tragic sufferings of life, and gives us words to say and prayers to pray. It's called *lament*. If we will pay attention to them, these Psalms will help both you and me as we process life's dark days. It's just that there's a right way and a wrong way to do it.

And it starts with the fact that we've got to be...

### - *Honest*

That's the thing about the lament Psalms; they are uncomfortably honest. And why shouldn't they be? God knows what's going on, and God knows what's in our hearts and on our minds. If you think about it, if we are not honest with God about how we are feeling when life is horrible, who are we trying to kid? It's dishonest and lying to God to pretend to God that you aren't mad or upset or hurting.

It is a fact that the people of God are no strangers to indescribable difficulty. We suffer, right along with the rest of creation. Don't pretend that you don't. Don't think you are a bad Christian if life is tough. We suffer just like everyone else and sometimes *more*. The difference is that we have help and a hope that others do not. For centuries, the church has found God to be her refuge. Psalm 46 says:

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." (Psalm 46:1-3, niv)

We meet God in places of trouble. That's the point of God's "chesed," His ever-present love – remember? He loves us and is with us through it all. He doesn't promise that we'll never have trouble in this life. Jesus said:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33, niv)

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the material for this section comes from:

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2016/august/preaching-lament-psalms.html>, and from <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/psalms-of-lament>

We actually come to know God more deeply in seasons of weeping. We don't despair and lose hope, but instead we take our tears with us to God. Ours is the testimony of Psalm 126:

“Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.” (Psalm 126:5, niv)

There may not be a better time than today for us to understand the style or category of Psalm called “lament.” As a church we've lost two dear saints in the last week and a half; Loretta Daughtrey and Tom Wickenhagen. Some of you, like Diana Christie-Bales have lost loved ones as well. On a much larger scale, our nation grieves the tragic and evil mass murder of innocent people being gunned down, whose killers were driven by hate – one of them racism in the name of immigration reform. Meanwhile our nation's politicians, special interest groups, and extremists are splitting our nation apart at the seams. Their greedy and evil ambitions are taking morbid pleasure in politicizing the tragic mass shootings and the destruction of immigrant families. My God, set aside your political agenda and just grieve for the horrible things that are happening and the drastic downward direction our nation is going. And please don't contribute to it with hateful rhetoric. We are being threatened from abroad and weakened from within. And the common sense Christians are sadly staying out of the political fray, so the vacuum is being filled by radical right-wing white supremacists on one side and anything-goes antipha on the other side. Christians are lumped into one side or the other by the media, so that good, solid Christians are being pushed further and further out of the public square. My friends, we have reason to lament.

And that's the second thing about the Lament Psalms: they are...

- ***Communal***

There can be all kinds of reasons why we might be in the situation we are in as a community. There are homeless in our community. There are drug addicts in our community. There is poverty in our community. There are gangs and abuse and sex trafficking and robbery and murders in our community. Is it our fault? Well, maybe not directly. But that's not the point; the point is it is happening, and it's hard to fix. Expand that to what's going on in our nation and the reasons increase exponentially. This is a *perfect* time and place for the lament Psalms. They were written to respond to a crisis that disrupts the life of the community and nation. In laments, a critical or crisis event calls into question the conviction that God will always protect his people from injustice, chaos, and death. Life is anything but fair and rarely is it just. So where then is God?

Lament reminds us that we are in this together. What hurts you hurts all of us. We hurt together, just like we celebrate together. Psalms of Lament help us do that. We don't wallow in self-pity and inaction. But we are honest in our pain. That's what lament Psalms do.

Here's the formula: the lament psalm looks *backward* at praise (they will usually recall God's saving acts from the past), and then they look *forward* to thanksgiving and salvation (praising God for his desire to save them). Meanwhile, they also look

unflinchingly at the *present* reality of pain and at God's apparent slowness to save, and lament is honest enough to call God out on it. So they are honest, they are communal, but they are also for you as the...

- ***Individual***

Church: why do we think we have to hide our pain? Why do we have to hide our struggle from each other and God? Let me take a poll: how many of you, at some time in your life, have gone through agonizing and painful circumstances in your life? If you didn't raise your hand, well, brace yourself because it's coming. We've ALL gone through it, and we will go through it again, as long as our feet are firmly planted on the dirt of this earth. So why would we think, when we are around each other, that we need to pretend that everything is okay? Now I understand it's not appropriate for you to come up here and start detailing your complaints against God. But neither do you have to pretend you are "okey-dokey." That's why we have small groups, so you can be honest with a small group of people whom you know and love and trust, who hurt because you hurt, pray for you, and come alongside and help. If we can't be honest with your close friends in church, where in the world are we going to be honest? The only place left outside the church is Cheers (where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came.) **You need to be honest in your pain with *somebody*, and the best somebody is God and another believer.** And you can use the lament psalms in your personal prayers to help you be honest and put things into perspective. But here's the key: communal lament is something we do publicly but together as a church, using the biblical model of lament, and involves what is happening to all of us. Individual lament happens between you and God and with close friends or your spouse or small group, but still using the biblical example of lament. Otherwise, you are just whining for the sake of whining. Make sense?

So let's look at...

## 2. An ***Example*** of Lament: Psalm 44

Real quickly, I just want to give you a major overview of Psalm 44, which is a good example of the kind we are talking about. But I should say that it's worth noting that the book of Psalms contains more lament psalms than any other style. That should tell us that the lament was a regular part of the liturgy of Israel's worship in the Temple, synagogue, and their family life. They knew what it was like to suffer and wonder about God's apparent slow response, and they made it a regular part of their worship.

Let me put this in a more simple way. When I was a youth pastor, it was inevitable that on some youth group function or activity or trip, sooner or later some student would think we weren't being fair to them, so they'd whine, "That's not fair!" And my standard response, which they came to memorize and would repeat back to me was, "Nobody said life was fair. But God is good." *That's* basically what the lament psalms remind us of.

So let's look at Psalm 44. I'd like to read it for us, and I'll ask you to stand as I do. Then I'm going to give you the major components of this Psalm. This was written by the "sons of Korah" – they were sort of like the worship leaders for Israel.

"We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago. With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our ancestors; you crushed the peoples and made our ancestors flourish.

It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them.

You are my King and my God, who decrees victories for Jacob. Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes.

I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame. In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.

But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies. You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us. You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations.

You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale. You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us.

I live in disgrace all day long, and my face is covered with shame at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge. All this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant.

Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals; you covered us over with deep darkness.

If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart? Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.

Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love." (Psalm 44, niv)

Anyone recognize that last phrase? It's chesed!

Okay, so let me quickly show you how this psalm is organized, and then let's learn some application from it.

A lament Psalm usually **begins with a direct address to God (vs. 1)**. They start off going right to the source. Then they **remind God of his past deeds and present potential (vs. 1-8)**. Often in Scripture when people rehearse God's great deeds of the past or what God can do in the present, they are doing it to encourage their *own* faith, reminding themselves. But in the laments, they are sort of passive-aggressively reminding God of what he's done for other people, but *not* doing for them.

Then, there is **honest complaint to God (vs. 9-22)**. As you heard in this psalm, they are honest with God about their situation, and their disappointment with how God seems to not be doing anything. Does that make you uncomfortable? Then you are missing out on a powerful part of your prayer life, and, actually, you are being dishonest with God.

This is followed by a **heartfelt request for God to act (vs. 23-26)**. Usually we avoid our honest feelings and just do this last part. But we really can be honest with God. Often in the lament psalms – especially the ones used in worship together, there is also a **statement of trust (vs. 1-8)** and a **promise to praise God (v. 8)** when he does finally act. Does that make sense? Those are the things that make up a lament, and that serves as an outline or a model for your prayer when you are in pain or in difficult circumstances, and you need to be honest with God. I hope you wrote those down, because you'll want to use it; if not now, then the next time you are in those situations. Or maybe after you watch the national news. Have you got them? Ready to move on?

So now, quickly, let me give us some direction...

### 3. Our *Response* to Lament

I want to talk for a minute about how we deal with these situations, and then how as Christians we can allow God to work in our lives when we experience seasons of lament. I don't want to oversimplify suffering, which is a very complex issue, but there are three responses<sup>4</sup> that we Christians usually choose, one of which is...

#### - *Escape*

The escapist Christian rejects suffering in all its forms. They don't deny that pain exists; but they claim it shouldn't exist for a person of strong faith. They think, "Christ healed the sick, diseased, and oppressed in his time, and also does it in ours. God's intent for us is pain-free living and if we're stuck in some kind of agony, something is broken on our end, not God's. You just need increased faith and must work harder to do more good things, then you can get back to being pain-free." If

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Norman, *ibid*

you've been around the church long enough, you've heard some version of that. But it's wrong and its not biblical. The second approach is simply to...

- **Tolerate** the painful circumstance.

These folks are honest enough to see the flaws in escapism and they want to be realists, so this theory thinks this way: "The original sin in the Garden of Eden introduced brokenness in the world. We are living in the midst of that fallout. Death, tragedy, disease are the natural consequences of humanity's first and continuing rejection of God's will. They figure that followers of Jesus will eventually move past the circumstances, either at the point of death or at Christ's return. Suffering is just something we're stuck with until heaven." They end up white-knuckling through suffering, trying to tolerate but not being honest with God about how they feel.

But the Bible shows us a third way. Lament tells us we can't escape it and we don't have to just tolerate it. The writer of Hebrews shows us this third way when Jesus faced the most intense, agonizing pain in human history as he hung on the cross:

"For the joy set before him he endured the Cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

For the joy set before him...there was a *purpose* that was greater than the *pain*. We, though, live in a pain-avoidant society, but God says we can...

- **Redeem** the pain.

This might be a new concept to you, so let me show you what the Bible says about...

#### 4. **Redeeming** Suffering

*The Bible doesn't deny suffering or times of lament; it gives us hope in the midst of it.* We face suffering on all levels of life, and I think we've made that clear today. There are three spheres of suffering, and right now as a people we are going through all of them. There is:

- **Societal** suffering.

We are feeling it in our society today. There is:

- **Congregational** suffering.

In the last week we've lost in death two people who matter very much to our church family. And of course there is:

- **Personal** suffering.

But here's the thing: all suffering, in whatever sphere, can be redeemed.

If anyone has a report card from the school of suffering, it's Paul. In fact, if you read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33, you'll see his inventory of the suffering he's gone through in order to tell people about Jesus. We don't have time to read it, but let me remind



you: Five times Paul gets forty lashes minus one. He's beaten with rods three times, survives a stoning attempt, and is shipwrecked three times. Apparently, Paul keeps signing up for this. And that's the point: if we are living our lives as people with purpose for Christ, we can put our suffering into perspective.

Our culture is committed to pain-avoidance. We have a nation-wide epidemic of the abuse of pain medications, which the drug companies and crooked politicians have exploited in order to make money at the expense of our pain. We do *anything* to avoid pain.

Paul's solution in such situations is simple: surrender. Paul basically said:

**"I only have one goal: spreading the gospel. You can take everything else. My possessions, my comfort. Everything." (- Paul)**

Look at how Paul suspends his rights in Acts 16. After he and Silas deliver an unnamed slave girl from a demon, her owners incite a riot. Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned without due process. But being in jail isn't necessarily a setback, it's an opportunity. Their midnight worship service declares their faith in Christ to a captive audience. You know the rest, there's an earthquake, a jailer gets converted, and there's a family baptism in the early morning hours. If Paul and Silas had lawyered up, there never would have been this dramatic jailhouse evangelism moment.

The rest of the story is a moving snapshot of what redemptive, gospel-oriented suffering can do. The morning after their stint in jail, the Philippian magistrates order Paul and Silas' release. Oddly enough, Paul won't leave (Acts 16:37-40). Why not? Because there is more opportunity to share the Gospel if he stays. Paul knew that the judges and jailers didn't have legal standing to arrest, punish, or imprison them. But he let them beat him and hold him anyway. Why? Because Paul knows the fledgling church in Philippi needs all the help it can get. It's small and fragile and needs time and freedom to establish roots. So instead of advocating for his own rights, Paul embraces a punishment he doesn't deserve. Then, rather than suing the city for damages, he asks for an escort, and so Paul "buys" political protection for his friends—Lydia, the slave girl, and the unnamed jailer. Essentially Paul's message to the local branch of the Roman Empire goes like this: "I'll leave quietly, and you'll leave my friends alone." Paul risked his well-being and personal safety to go to the mat for those he loves. So Paul's list of horrible experiences isn't an unwarranted whining about the miscarriage of justice or some kind of bragging rights. It's a celebration of a bold love that embraces suffering for the glory of God and the good of others. Listen: God does not cause your suffering; he's not doing it to you for your own good. *Suffering just happens*. But God's "chesed" means he loves you; he is *with* you in your suffering and *through* your suffering, and he can use you *in* your suffering.

**So look for how God can use whatever you are going through for the glory of God and the good of others.** It doesn't mean you try to escape the pain or simply tolerate it. It means you are honest with God about it, lament it, but you can also look for ways to redeem it. We can say with Paul:

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-12, niv)

Then, our pain has a greater purpose. Our lament isn’t empty complaining, but has a redemptive reason. Then, in the midst of our lament we can say:

“We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18, niv)

Be so devoted to Jesus that you will let him use you even in suffering.

So we’re going to close with a time of prayer. Do you need to lament; to be honest with God about something? You can come to this place, called the altar, that we’ve set apart for special prayer, and pour out your heart – your anger, your pain, your disappointment when God didn’t do what you wanted him to. You can be honest. Then, commit yourself to Jesus, and look for the opportunity that your pain provides to glorify God and help others. To live as a person with purpose.

*Prayer*