

Chapter 4: The Prayer of Lament

So far in this study we have learned that God is the God of *all* comfort (II Corinthians 1:3). In Chapter two we discovered the two anchors from Hebrews chapter six – covenant and character. God made an oath, and He cannot lie. For whatever you are facing – to the faithful, God *will* be faithful. In the last study we reviewed the power of the spoken Word: The comfort of God is enacted as we cry out to Him – faith is dialogic.

Today's study focuses on the prayer of lament as a vehicle for God's comfort. David, the shepherd boy who later became King of Israel, was a typology of Christ. In other words, David's suffering prophetically foreshadowed the suffering Christ. During times of suffering David wrote psalms (prayer songs) of lament.⁴ A lament is an expression of sorrow or grief. King Saul was envious of David, just as the pharisees and King Herod were envious of Jesus. David and Jesus were both fled for safety from envious kings who intended to kill them (David from King Saul; Jesus from King Herod). During the time of hiding, David wrote psalms of lament. His words of suffering mirrored the eventual words of the Christ on the cross.

David's psalms of lament teach us how to pray during times of suffering. There are four basic elements:

- 1) Plea or petition for help
- 2) Lament: Description of the suffering

⁴ Aurelius, Carl Axel, "Luther on the Psalter," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 203-04; Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 13-20; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970): 17-21.

3) Statement of trust: But God...

4) Praise based on God's historic action, character, and covenant⁵

During the times of incredible sorrow, we are often unable to pray. Our minds are numb or anxious and distracted; there is a lump in the back of our throat – we fight back tears; our tongue is stuck to the roof of our mouths, silenced; and our bodies serve merely as an empty shell housing a broken heart. It is during times like these that we turn to the psalms of lament to provide the words we need but are unable to utter.

In chapter 2 we learned that comfort – no matter the situation - is found *in Christ*. Our hope, our comfort is rooted squarely in God's character and His promises. As we learned, there is no other god other than Yahweh who makes promises to His children *and cannot lie*. The psalms of lament teach us the same. God's comfort is enacted with a statement of trust (But God...), followed by a rehearsal of His character, promises, and historic action. Help is *expected* from God. God is confronted with his promise, previous blessings, and His Name – reputation.⁶

Please select and read one of the following psalms of lament for your current need. As you read the psalm, write down one sentence for each basic element. Make note of the enacted comfort of Christ as you focus on elements #3 and #4.

⁵ James Waltke, James Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 2014), xii – 3; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 268-69.

⁶ Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1980), 53-54; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 259-73.

- When needing help read Psalm 13
- When feeling weary from suffering read Psalm 102
- When feeling sorrowful for personal sin read Psalm 51
- When desiring the comfort of Christ read Psalm 77
- When feeling anguish of heart read Psalm 22
- When mocked or betrayed read Psalm 55⁷

As it is difficult to pray during times of greatest sorrow, allow the prayer of David to be your prayer using the four elements in the psalm. Paraphrase David’s words to closely align with your situation. If words do not come, pray David’s psalm as your own.

I am choosing the above Psalm # _____ for my current need. The following are the words of David from the psalm that also apply to my situation.

1) Plea or petition for help: _____

2) Lament, or description of the suffering: _____

3) Statement of trust: “But God”: _____

⁷ Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 21-40; 65-116; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 46-55.

4) Praise based on God's historic action, character, and covenant: _____

Chapter 4 Study Questions

1. As you reflect on your circumstance, create a melody. As you sing (aloud or in your spirit), rehearse God's character, promises, and historic action throughout the day.
2. What change/s do you notice in your thought life and emotions as you focus on God's character, covenant, and historic action? Describe your current emotional, mental, and physical health in contrast to earlier.
3. While rehearsing "But God..." what change do you notice in your ability to trust?
4. Create a poetic psalm of lament using your notes on pages 18 and 19. Begin with a plea, followed by "But you, O Lord." End with a final statement of trust based on God's character, promises, and historic action. When the enemy hurls doubts and confusion, re-read your personal psalm, focusing on the fact that you serve a God who not only *can*, but he *must honor his divine character and promises* until there is victory.

Chapter 5: Times of Refreshing

The first step in acquiring humility is to recognize one's pride. If there is one quality that we are unconscious of in ourselves, it is pride. Everyone else can see it in us, but we cannot see it in ourselves. When was the last time you heard someone complain that they deal with pride? We talk about struggling with spending too much, eating too much, or even admit they are bad-tempered. But seldom does anyone discuss their pride. For a quick self-assessment, circle your answers to the following questions:

- 1) Do you find that pleasure doesn't necessarily come from having something, but from having *more* than others? Yes No
- 2) When you receive praise, your thought life goes from "I have pleased this person" to "What a fine person I must be to have accomplished this"? Yes No
- 3) Is pride one of the qualities you disdain in others? Yes No
- 4) Does it bother you when you are snubbed, discounted, or in general, overlooked? Yes No
- 5) When someone points out your faults, do you react defensively or in anger? Yes No
- 6) When someone slights you, do you look for the next opportunity to pull them down? Yes No
- 7) Do you try to take attention, friends, roles, or titles from others because you can? Yes No
- 8) I don't struggle with conceit (yes = agree; no = disagree). Yes No
- 9) I am concerned with what people think about me (yes = agree; no = disagree) Yes No
- 10) I lift myself up by talking about others' faults Yes No

The less you believe you struggle with pride, the more you struggle with pride. An answer of "yes" to any of the above questions is an indication of pride. Pride is inherently competitive - it looks down on others. The proud wants to be the big shot. Pride is enmity

between individuals, and between an individual and God. Pride is full of self: An anti-God state of mind. The proud are joy-stealers – within themselves, and everyone else around them. They are so busy competing and comparing themselves with others, they forget to look up.⁸ As such, pride is the source of all other sin.

Litany of Humility

O Jesus! Meek and humble of heart, hear me.
From the desire to be esteemed,
Deliver me, Jesus (repeat after each line)
From the desire to be loved,
From the desire to be extolled,
From the desire to be honored,
From the desire to be praised,
From the desire to be preferred to others,
From the desire to be consulted,
From the desire to be approved,
From the fear of being humiliated,
From the fear of being despised,
From the fear of suffering rebuke,
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear of being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected,
That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it (repeat after each line)
That others may be esteemed more than I,
That, in the opinion of the world, others may increase and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred to me in everything,
That others may become holier than I, provided that I may become as holy as I should,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it. Amen.⁹

In the teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began with: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Spiritual poverty is a

recognition of our need for God - a counterpoint to pride. Humility is a reflection on God as the giver of our gifts. We give thanks to Him for making us an instrument of His glory for the benefit of others. Just as Moses' face shone when in God's presence, our faces shine as a reflection of God's glory, not as a looking glass for ourselves. Spiritual poverty – a recognition of our need for God - is the most direct pathway to receiving comfort. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6) "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15).

Many consider repentance in negative terms, for the word reflects things that most try to avoid - tears, vulnerability, and humility. Not so with God. It is at the time of our brokenness that the Lord rescues, redeems, restores, and makes new. "Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10). Fruit in keeping with repentance is times of refreshing before the presence of the Lord. "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). The psalmist describes the process as the two-fold repentance and rejoicing.

Repent. Admit your need for God and sorrow for sin. "I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and *heard my cry*. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand (Psalm 40:1-2). During Old Testament times, the Israelites rend their garments in mourning over their sin; today we rend our hearts.

Rejoice. He put a *new song* in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him" (Psalm 40:3).

In February 2017, as part of my degree program at the Institute for Worship Studies, I conducted a study on repentance and rejoicing. As part of the study, we hosted a special service during the season of Lent, providing the opportunity for all to prepare their hearts for Easter – the day of Christ’s resurrection. 75% of attendees circled “yes” to the final question, “I experienced a new level of joy, peace, or healing upon repentance.” Through humility, repentance is a gift, for it ushers in the comfort and refreshing presence of the Lord.

Chapter 5 Study Questions:

1. Which of the assessment questions having to do with pride hit you “square between the eyes”? How do you see that quality operating in your life?
2. Have you ever experienced refreshing in the presence of the Lord upon humble confession of your sins? Why do we wait so long to call out and recognize our need for God?
3. What factors in this culture make the exercise of humility so difficult? What changes would occur in your circles if humility was practiced?

⁸Os Guinness, *Steering Through Chaos: Vice and Virtue in the Age of Moral Confusion* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000), 41-43, 60-68.

⁹<http://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/litany-of-humility.html>

¹⁰John Miller, *Repentance*. (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1982), 36-38; Sproul, R. C., *What is Repentance?* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014), 31-34.

Chapter 6: Redemptive Suffering

God is too complex for simple formulas. Some preachers promote an incomplete “gospel”: Give a financial donation and you will experience health and wealth. Contribute to the ministry and your disease will be cured. Give, and you will experience financial blessing. These teachers hold that God is like a bubblegum machine - give a quarter (to God), and you will receive bubble gum. They treat prayer like an ATM: Put in a piece of plastic (prayer), and you will be financially rewarded. God hears and He answers, however His answer is not always in the manner or the timing we expect – or demand. God is God; we are not. God is sovereign; we are not. As a good Father, He knows what is best for us.

Pray for healing. Go before the throne of grace with boldness. We are taught to ask, and to ask with perseverance and faith. God is a faithful, healing, loving God. I have been healed many times throughout my lifetime in response to prayer. Being outside of time, God always heals the faithful. Healing is a certainty in and throughout all eternity for the one who has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not a certainty in this lifetime. Like the biblical examples of the man born blind (John 9:1-41) and the Apostle Paul’s physical infirmity (2 Corinthians 12:6-7), God often has a redemptive purpose in our suffering.

Although it seems to defy reason, suffering is a pathway to God’s comfort. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). One cannot experience comfort without trials and grief. It is interesting that the Good Shepherd of the twenty-third psalm carries a rod and a staff. Shepherds use the rod for correction and as a guide for wayward sheep, keeping them in safe pasture. The rod is also used for protection, warding off potential

predators. What comfort is there in an earthly father who does not establish limits and boundaries for his children? The same is true for our Heavenly Father. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4b). God allows us to experience deep valleys for our good – to improve us and to reprove us. Like the Apostle Paul, we are to rejoice in our sufferings, for adversity produces virtue – when we are weak, then we are made strong.¹¹ “That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (II Corinthians 2:10). In the midst of the suffering we develop trust in God who not only understands our suffering but prays with us.

God does not necessarily remove the suffering but provides comfort and endurance through the trial. There is comfort in the God of *all* comfort. There is comfort in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, whose office it is to be an abiding presence – we are not alone. As the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit came and made his dwelling *in us* – there is no separation between God and those who have placed faith in Christ. The abiding, indwelling Holy Spirit is a covenantal peace. There is comfort in the pardoning grace of Jesus, the Son, who understood our sufferings and carried our sins and diseases upon himself on the cross. There is comfort in the promises of the Gospel, the Scriptures of truth which are written for our consolation. There is comfort found in the body of Christ who comes alongside to bear our burdens. And there is comfort in knowing that those who have placed their faith in Jesus will someday enjoy communion with God, the angels, and saints for all eternity. Comfort is the result of the

confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39).¹²

Afflictions are the vehicle for releasing God's presence in the life of the Church. The ability to experience God's comfort and to comfort others is through the participation in the life of Christ through his Spirit. Suffering – and experiencing God's comfort through it – is part of the redemptive ministry of Christ. The Christian life is a paradoxical combination of affliction and comfort. The purpose of the trial is so that we may comfort others. As referenced in the passage below, there is a concern for "us" in the Apostle Paul's writings. The suffering we experience is not our own. Just as Christ's suffering overflows to us, so, through Christ, our comfort overflows to others. Christ's suffering was redemptive; the Apostle Paul's suffering was redemptive. So, too, our sufferings are redemptive - flowing from us to comfort others with the comfort we have received from God.¹³

Praise be to the God and Father of our LORD Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort (11 Corinthians 1:3-7).

What of suffering as it relates to comfort? What about the cry of the sufferer who feels unjustly burdened? The real answer to comfort lies in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one who took on our infirmities, suffering for our sakes in all forms. Jesus is our only hope in suffering,

for in him, and through Him, God is with us. Jesus is our only hope for complete fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit, our Comforter. In the midst of our suffering we develop trust in God because of the work of Christ who not only understood our suffering but prays with us.¹³ We join with David as we pray, “Thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4b).

Chapter 6 Study Questions:

1. Like a good parent, God understand that we must grow in our ability to exercise faith like a “weaned child” (Psalm 131:21). Unlike a newborn, a weaned child has developed trust that the parent will meet their needs.

What is something you asked God for, but did not receive at the time of the request?

In hindsight, was the request good for you at that point in your life?

What did you learn from God’s discipline of withholding what you wanted but did not need at the time?

2. Do you approach your prayer life as that of a “weaned child” – with trust in the Almighty? How would you like to grow in this area?
3. What are some ways in which God has used your area/s of suffering to bless others? What positive impact has your suffering had on others in your sphere of influence?

