

# IS IT OKAY TO COMPLAIN TO GOD?

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An elderly Christian lady told me she was deep in thought walking along the beach one day, when she suddenly lifted her heart to God and told Him, "God, I reckon I could do a better job of running this world than You seem to be doing!"

Her spontaneous prayer shocked her. Where did it come from? She had never spoken to the Almighty in such a fashion before. Was she to feel guilty about "telling God off" in her frank outburst? And what about you? Would you feel comfortable praying this prayer:-

O LORD, why are you treating me so unfairly? What have I done to deserve all this trouble lately? My days are filled with depression and darkness, and I am even doubting whether You know and care for my life anymore. What have I done to deserve this? It's like You have been a bear lying in wait to pounce all over me and to tear me to pieces. I thought that since I have trusted in You that I could count on Your protection. It seems not! For it feels like You have let me down badly. O LORD, it's as though You have betrayed me! What's going on here?

So, be honest now. Would you feel comfortable speaking to God like that? Have you ever been tempted to? And we certainly wouldn't consider that kind of prayer to rank amongst the great exemplary prayers of faith in Scripture, would we?

After all, when we think of exemplary prayer most of us think of the great prayers of faith that,

Conquered Kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight ... (Heb. 11:33-34). Yes that's our preferred model for praying!

But I wonder, have we failed to notice how common it was for God's people to complain to God about their troubles? Have we failed to notice that the prayer of complaint to God (the theologians, by the way, call this kind of complaining prayer 'lament') is also held up for our example and encouragement?

Perhaps we have been rather selective in our reading of the Bible at this point? Lament before God has been filtered out of our prayer and worship lives. In an age of positive thinking, the power of peaceful meditation should not be shattered by thoughts of complaint nor sadness.

Have we failed to notice that lament praying is *the most common type of psalm*, for instance? Yes you read that right ... the Psalm of Lament is the most common type of psalm, even more so than the one that says, **Praise the Lord, Come let us shout to the Lord with the voice of Triumph**, etc. And, have we failed to notice how prominent prayers of lament are in the books of **Job** and **Lamentations** (!) and the prophets?

Have we failed to notice that the greatest men and women of faith were not shy to bring their honest feelings of complaint, even outrage, to the Lord? Remember how,

Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Oh LORD, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did you ever send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he has done harm to this people; and You have not delivered your people at all (Ex. 5: 22-23)?

Remember how the Psalmist lamented,

Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble (Ps. 10:1)?

Remember how the mighty prophet Jeremiah said,

I am the man who has seen affliction ... God has driven me and made me walk in darkness and not in light. Surely against me He has turned His hand repeatedly all the day ... He has besieged and encompassed me with bitterness and hardship, in dark places He has made me dwell ... even when I cry out and call for help He shuts out my prayer ... He is to me like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in secret places ... He he has bent His bow and set me as a target for the arrow; He made the arrows of His quiver to enter into my inward parts... so I say, 'My strength has perished and so has my hope from the Lord' (Lam. 3: 1-18)?

Is it just me, or do you also find great encouragement in the honesty of these prayers? Perhaps there is more faith in a Lament that is able to protest and express raw emotions like that, than in a blind unquestioning, blase, *unthinking* submission that says, "Oh well, God's will be done?"

Do we think God is offended by our honesty? Do we think the God who made our emotions and our hearts wants us to bottle our feelings all up? Do we think Christians should be exempt from the proper expression of our "negative" thoughts?

## JOB

Think of poor Job. He is crushed. He has lost his children. He has lost his wealth. He has lost his health. He has lost his social status, for he who once sat at the gate of the city as the man of wise counsel being sought by all far and near, ends up sitting on the city dump in dust and ashes with the young men spitting on him in contempt. He even loses the respect of three of his closest associates, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar.

He is puzzled. What is God doing? Surely God knows he has lived a good and upright life? So why is God so silent? Why doesn't God hear his desperate cries? And what options are available to Job in all his perplexity and pain?

### 1. CURSE GOD?

Well, Job could just "curse God and die" as his wife suggests (Job 2:9)! This cursing is certainly what Satan was hoping for (Job 1:11; 2: 5). If Job takes this option then it only proves he is serving and loving God for what he can get out of the relationship. He's in it just for himself as Satan insinuated. But the man of faith, even in the blackness of such tragedy does not curse God.

Nor should we be too hard on Mrs Job ... perhaps she is only having compassion on her husband hoping that God would put an end to his suffering in an untimely death? It's often hardest for the relatives who are the same flesh and blood to see their beloved suffer horribly, even unjustly.

Yet Job, I think, rightly rebukes his wife's sneers and tells her she is speaking **as one of the foolish women**. Cursing is not a viable option for the person of genuine faith.

### 2. SUICIDE?

Then, Job certainly gets so desperate that he **opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth (Job 3: 1)**. However, note carefully that even wishing he had never been born does not translate to suicide.

Wishing he had never been born, or even that God might let him die is a far cry from committing suicide for this man of faith.

Indeed, in the Bible, committing suicide is never an option for the man or woman of faith. That path, whilst understandable when we see what some poor souls have to endure, is at the end of the day a confession that one has lost all hope in deliverance from God. This is an attitude Job never takes.

*Sometimes it takes more faith to live than to die!* It takes more faith to continue to complain to God in the midst of one's living hell than to give up by committing suicide.

### 3. STOP PRAYING?

For many, another course of action when suffering is to just stop praying altogether. When tragedy strikes and life becomes unbearable many just give up talking to God. It's instructive to note that in all the book of Job only two persons actually talk directly to God. One of course, is the Devil himself. What a sinister and snide tone he adopts in his speech to the Almighty! The other who speaks directly to God is Job himself. Throughout his ordeal Job never stops praying --- even if it be lamenting!

Job's three friends are full of words *about God*. They are full of theology *about God* and His operations in His world. But I find it amazing to note that not one of them once actually speaks *to God* in prayer for Job! And have you noticed that every time after Job answers the speeches of his "comforters" that he always goes and talks to God in prayer himself!? He does not stop praying, even if his prayers are full of complaints and questions, even allegations. He does not stop praying even if God seems to have turned His back and be indifferent.

The important thing is that his prayers are full of complaints **to God**! Yes indeed, Job's prayers are full of lament and pleas for a better deal ... **Oh that I might appear before You Lord and state my case!** In other words, even Job's prayers of complaint prove that the most precious thing to him in his distress is his relationship with God! His suffering drives him to God, not away from God.

Pouring out his hurts and his angst in prayer only proves how Job longs for the presence of God again! At the end of the day it was his lament in prayer that made all the difference for Job. The Bible says, **God is near to the brokenhearted ((Ps. 34:18). And, He upholds all who fall, and lifts up all who are bowed down (Ps. 145: 14).**

The time of our desperation and spiritual dryness is the very time we need to pray, yet in my experience I have found that one of the first things we are tempted to do when tragedy strikes is to give up praying. But as [John Newton](#) said,

**If we are not getting much out of going to God in prayer, we will certainly get nothing out of staying away.**

True, it is hard to concentrate in the midst of tragedy and darkness. Our minds are consumed and confused. And it does take time to work these questions through. But if we continue to pour out our complaints to God, God will not abandon us, and in His time we will be healed.

### 4. NO FALSE CONFESSION OF SIN!

After all has been said and done, God finally appears to Job and speaks to him. God does not blame Job for the way he has spoken about Him or indeed to Him. God is not offended by all of Job's complaints and expressions of raw honesty. In fact, God commends Job and says he **has spoken what is right of Me (Job 42: 7)**. Indeed, Job has;

Resisted the temptation to go through the motions of repenting so that God would have to ease his suffering and restore his blessings. This was the response suggested by his friends. Since they believe that he must have sinned, they urge Job to repent in order to have his former life restored.

If he were to follow their advice, Job, knowing that he had not committed such severe sins, would be simply using God for personal gain. He would be undertaking a godly action (a prayer of repentance) not because he believed it, but simply because it was the pathway to blessings. This is the very thing that the accuser asserted in 1: 19 --- that Job did not fear God for nothing, but for what he could get out of it. This path would not be the way of faith for a righteous person, because it would be using God as a means to an end, not an end in himself. <sup>1</sup>

No. Job will therefore not even use feigned confession to improve his lot. Being a man of integrity he refuses to falsely repent just to gain comfort. He knows he has not committed any wilful sins. He will not even pretend repentance!

And this brings us to one of the most mistranslated and misunderstood verses in the whole Book of Job ... **Job 42:5-6**. The well-known and loved King James Version reads,

**I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore, I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.**

On this translation it would appear that Job's lamenting before God does seem to have been the result of unbelief after all! However, some translations do seem to better understand that the Hebrew here may be translated as, **Therefore I retract, and I repent of (or from) dust and ashes.** <sup>2</sup>

On this translation Job is actually saying, "I am changing my current course of action --- mourning and lamenting --- and I am no longer going to sit here in this dust and ashes. In other words, now that God has appeared to him and spoken to Him and rejuvenated him with His reassuring Presence, Job is actually saying he is going to get on with his life again. Dust and ashes are no longer appropriate for one so visited by the God of all grace!

Lament has given way to hope. So Job retracts his feelings of being hard done by and is ready to resume normal relationships in society. And this is the very thing he does in the next verses. He is ready to put the dust and ashes behind him! He says, **"I now reject my lamenting and will move away from sitting in dust and ashes. I am taking a new direction!"**

## OBJECTION

It has to be said, there are some sections in today's church which think prayers of lament are not the examples Christians from the New Testament onwards should be adopting. Hasn't the coming of Christ changed all of this? Don't we now live on resurrection ground? Aren't we **more than conquerors through all these things?** Don't **we know that God is for us, so who can be against us? And since God did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how will He not also with him freely give us all things? And who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Rom. 8: 31-39).**

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<sup>1</sup> McKeating, *Central Issue* as quoted by Lindsay Wilson in *Job: The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K. 2015, p252

<sup>2</sup> The majority of uses of *nhm* in the Niphal mean "change one's mind" or "reverse a decision" and God is often the subject of this action so no wrong is intended. The NASB is one translation that reads Job as saying, **"Therefore, I retract"** which is to say, I withdraw my complaint(s).

And doesn't the Apostle Paul also tell us to **rejoice in the LORD always? And in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to let our requests be made known to God (4:6)?**

Before answering this decent objection, we need to see that there is a pattern in all the lament prayers in the OT. They do start with bitter complaints and searching questions and raw emotions and strong cries with tears. Yet they invariably end with petitions of faith and hope.

For example, after Jeremiah's lament we recorded earlier, the prophet ends on this note of hope; **This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail, they are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness (Lam. 3: 21f)! In other words, after honest lament comes renewed hope. We can never move on and find this healing unless we are first honest before God (and ourselves). We live in a fallen world where suffering is real and in our faces. No point denying this or watering it down.**

True faith, genuine faith, God-honouring faith is adult enough to face reality and express perplexity. Real faith keeps on going to God, keeps on talking to God, even when He seems not to be hearing. Which is to say, strong laments to God do not prove one is denying God. At the end of the day, Job's laments (and there are at least 7 of them in the book!) prove that Job is refusing to give up on God.

As another aptly puts it,

There was more faith in such deeply questioning protests and scepticism than in the pious affirmation of untroubled, but blind, certainty. <sup>3</sup>

Or as Tennyson expressed it beautifully,

There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds. <sup>4</sup>

And the amazing thing is that when God finally shows up and speaks to Job, God Himself endorses Job's speech. **Twice** does God say Job had spoken what was right about Him! It was not only at the beginning when God told Satan that Job was upright and blameless (**Job 1:8; 2:3**) but that what Job had said about God during his debates with his three friends was also right (**Job 42: 7-8**)!

God's endorsement of what Job has said of him surely establishes that bold, assertive, even accusatory speech to God by one who is righteous is part of faith, not sin. Such words addressed to other human beings may well be sinful; but, when poured out to God in times of great stress, they can be part of a robust and persevering faith. Lament and God-directed complaint may not be socially acceptable, but they are theologically sanctioned in this book. <sup>5</sup>

But we still haven't answered the objection. Isn't lament praying an anachronistic practice that should be confined to the Old Testament?

**JESUS IS THE BEST EXAMPLE OF ALL.**

My answer to this would be to go to Jesus! He is our ultimate teacher, our best example. Did not our blessed Lord die with a lament on his lips? As he hung there in agony, with the curse of our sins upon him, Jesus felt abandoned and accursed of God. And he quoted a Psalm of lament, **Psalm 22**,

**My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?**

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<sup>3</sup> Davidson, *Courage to Doubt* as quoted by Lindsay Wilson, *Job*, p 254.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 257

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p 347

Jesus felt it appropriate to find words that truly expressed his innermost feelings. First the lament then the victory cry! Even our Lord's final cry of victory, **"It is finished!"** was only arrived at after, and through, honest expression of doubt and lament! God is never offended by such honesty.

Yes, it's quite Okay when occasion seems to require it, to complain to God and ask "why" and "what's going on Lord?"--- provided we don't always sit in that state, but recognize when it's time to move on.

Rest assured, that if we do complain to God and pour out our doubts and questions to Him, that in His good time we will be able to move on in renewed hope and power through His promises and presence that never fail.