

How to Cry the Psalms

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[0 : 0 0] This is the third in the series of sermons on the Psalms, and we're looking in particular at the Lament Psalms this morning. And as I was starting to say earlier, if I were to ask you to open your Bible at random, roughly in the middle, you'd land on the book of Psalms, and ask you to put your finger on a verse, chances are the verse you put your finger on would say something like, Oh Lord, how wonderful you are, how majestic, I love to sing your praises, something like that.

However, it would be equally as easy as possible for you to land on a verse that said, Oh Lord, would you please come to me and help me in my relief?

I am in dire trouble. I am in deep distress. Would you come please rescue me from my distress? That's very, very possible that could happen.

There are basically three types of Psalms in the book of Psalms. Basically, there are a few subtypes, but the three basic categories fall into hymns, Thanksgiving Psalms, and laments.

A hymn, as far as a psalm is concerned, is basically a psalm that praises the Lord in very general type categories.

[1 : 3 8] Saying something like, Oh Lord, you are great, and you are good, and we praise you for your greatness and your goodness. It's very general in its categories. And when it comes to hymns in the book of Psalms, there are about 38 of them.

So 38 of the psalms in the 150 psalms come under that category of hymn. There's a second category, and we call it Thanksgiving Psalms.

The difference between a hymn and a Thanksgiving Psalm is that a Thanksgiving Psalm thanks the Lord in particular for some specific reason.

We were in trouble. We were in deep distress. The enemy was attacking. They were spreading lies about us. I went through a terrible sickness.

But you, O Lord, rescued me and brought me back to health and healing and salvation. Well, for the Thanksgiving Psalms, there are about 17 of them.

[2 : 4 6] And then we come to another category, the third category, and it's called the Lament Psalms. And the Lament Psalm is where the psalmist cries out to God and asks God to help him for a particular distress that he is facing.

Again, it could be the slander of the enemy, the attacks of the enemy, some kind of sickness that has beset him. He's going into battle, and he needs the Lord's help because he is surrounded by enemies who hate him.

Well, let me just read for you very quickly here all the psalms in the book of Psalms that count as laments. Just the numbers of them, okay?

So here are the ones that categorize as Lament Psalms. Hold on.

55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 94, 102, 109, 120, 123, 126, 129, 130, 137, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143.

[4 : 45] Were you by any chance keeping count? Okay, well, in case you weren't, let me summarize. Hymns, 35, or 30, excuse me, 38.

Thanksgiving Psalms, 17. Lament Psalms, 68. The book of Psalms is a book full of praises to God, but it's also very, very full of people crying out to God in their distress.

Now, there are two basic problems with these Lament Psalms and the way we use them or don't use them in church today.

The first problem is they are, in fact, complaint Psalms. They're whiny Psalms. They're crying out Psalms. They're asking God, please do something for me.

So, I'm going to focus this morning on that particular problem that the Psalms are Psalms of complaint. Crying out to God.

[5 : 54] Asking Him to come to our relief. Asking Him for something. And not necessarily focusing on praising Him. And some people consider that to be a very deep problem.

There's a second problem with the Lament Psalms. And that is, and I'll talk a little bit more about this just a little bit later. But one of the problems about the Lament Psalms is this.

Quite often in these Lament Psalms, in fact, roughly half of them at least, the Psalmist does not only say, O Lord, come and rescue me from my enemy.

The Psalmist goes on to say, O Lord, will you come and please break the teeth in the mouth of my enemy? They are imprecations. They are cursing Psalms.

They ask God not only to come to the Psalmist relief, but also to do a number on their enemy. To kill them or break their teeth or make them wandering beggars in the earth.

[6 : 59] Now, that's a problem in itself. I'm not going to talk about it this morning. Sorry. Maybe I can come back some other time. It's a topic all its own. And there's not enough time to deal with it.

But I do want to focus on that first one. This whole idea of having to go to God when we are hurting, when life is not treating us the way we think it should.

And sometimes this doesn't sit very well with our sensitivities. After all, have you ever gone to a church service and some leader of worship at the very beginning of the service said, Okay, you need to make sure that all your troubles and all your cares and all your concerns were hung up there on the coat rack out in the foyer.

Don't bring them in here. All we're going to have in here is positivity. Well, that's a problem. But for some people, that is the way they view the Christian faith.

It's all light, all goodness, all happy. And it's not ever dark or filled with complaint or doubt or distress.

[8 : 18] Now, before we actually begin to look at some of the Psalms, I want to read some quotes to you from a Christian author that I'm sure most of you have heard of. His name was C.S. Lewis.

He died in 1963. And Lewis, of course, as you know, wrote many great books. He was an apologist for the Christian faith, the renowned author of that whole Chronicles of Narnia series.

As you may also know, if you know anything about C.S. Lewis or you've watched the movie Shadowlands, he married fairly late in life to a woman named Joy Davidman.

But their marriage, their married years, were not happy ones because of her illness, her sickness, her cancer.

And after she passed away, several years after she died, C.S. Lewis wrote a book entitled, A Grief Observed. I want you to listen to some of the things he says in this book.

[9 : 24] Lewis says this, Go to God when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain. And what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.

After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer your wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.

There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And then Lewis says, The problem I'm facing is not that I'm in much danger of ceasing to believe in God.

The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The confession, or the conclusion rather, I dread is not, so there's no God after all, but rather the conclusion I dread is, so this is what God's really like?

Deceive yourself no longer. And then, after his wife died, many people tried to comfort Lewis. And one of the comforts they tried to give him was, she's in God's hands now.

[10 : 41] And here's what Lewis said in response to that. She was in God's hands all the time. And I have seen what those hands did to her here. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body?

And if so, why? If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good, or there is no God.

For in the only life we know, he hurts us beyond our worst fears, and beyond all we can imagine. If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then he may hurt us after death as unendurably as before it.

And then one last passage from Lewis. He also is now reflecting on the path they went through during her illness. And at one point during his wife's illness, there was a remission.

It seemed like she was going to get better. But then she got worse, and she died. And so Lewis reflects on that and says this, what chokes every prayer and every hope is the memory of all the prayers Joy and I offered, and all the false hopes we had.

[12 : 02] Not hopes raised merely by our own wishful thinking, but hopes encouraged, but hopes encouraged, even forced upon us by false diagnoses, by x-ray photographs, by strange remissions, by one temporary recovery that might have ranked as a miracle.

Step by step, we were led up the garden path. Time after time, when God seemed the most gracious, he was really preparing the next torture.

Now at that point, you might be thinking, Lewis has gone too far here. I mean, this is the kind of stuff that God nuked the Israelites for in the wilderness when they complained like that. But interestingly, the Psalms are just as honest, just as brutal in their language as Lewis is being here in this book.

And yet, the Psalms are in the Bible as word of God. It is not just the psalmists who say this out of their own deep hurt and affliction.

It is God who inspires them to say that. And God welcomes those who come to him and bring their concerns and their complaints.

[13 : 26] He wants to hear them. And he empathizes, sympathizes, and loves those who complain to him. Now, in the past, you may have heard several things about what it means to go to God with a complaint or a lament or what prayer is.

But I want to correct some of those things and then we'll begin to look at some of the Psalms themselves. First of all, what prayer is not or what asking God for things, I want you to note what it is not.

It is not a way of doing self-help therapy. It's not a therapeutic exercise. It's not going to a psychologist and learning more about yourself.

It is not communing with your own soul. It is not venting or getting rid of your frustrations. Sometimes people will say prayer and crying out to God is more about you than it is about God.

But that's not true either. And sometimes I hear various preachers, and I've read it in lots of books, say this. Prayer is about changing yourself.

[14 : 44] Not about changing God. But all those things that I just read, I disagree with them strongly. Prayer, by its very definition in the Bible, is asking God to do something.

It's not venting. It's not therapy. It's not getting in touch with your soul. It's coming to God and pouring out before Him your complaints, your desires, your laments, your wishes, your hope, and asking Him to answer those prayers.

In essence, when you cry out to God and ask Him to do something for you, you are in essence saying, God, you are doing things one way right now.

I would like to ask you to do them differently. It's telling God that you have a disagreement with Him as to how He is running His universe.

It is imploring God to change His mind. There is a great book on the Lament Psalms written by, I don't know if this is Swedish or Norwegian, Ingvar Floisvik, something Scandinavian anyway.

[16 : 00] And he wrote a book entitled When God Becomes My Enemy. And in this book, he has this very telling paragraph. He says this, It is sometimes said that prayer is primarily to change us, to open us for God's activity.

This is not what we see in these psalms. The psalmists pray to change God. They want Him to relent from His wrath. to change His course of action concerning them.

And to let them experience His steadfast love. They think that He might change His mind in response to their prayers.

Now, before I go any further, let me just lay down a caveat here. I'm a Calvinist. I'm a five-point Calvinist. In fact, I'm even worse. I'm a seven-point Calvinist. And I'm a Calvinist because I believe that God is sovereign.

God has always decreed what He's going to do. He has always known what He is going to do. His plan is eternal. He has never had to change His plans.

[17 : 10] He has never had to say, Okay, plan A didn't work. Let's go with plan B. He's never done that. At the same time, from our perspective, God expects us to come to Him and pray and ask Him to do things differently.

And that is also part of what God's sovereign plan is. So, let's just get a bit of a flavor here for how these lament psalms sound.

So, I'm just going to read a few verses for you and highlight how deep the psalmist's distress was. Psalm 6.3 My soul is in anguish.

How long, O Lord? How long? Psalm 10.1 Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Catch that again. Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? This happens over and over again in the psalms.

[18 : 18] The psalmist does not simply say, My enemy is the problem. My pain is the problem. My sickness is the problem. My financial condition is the problem.

More often than not, the psalmist says, God, you are the problem. Why do you stand so far off? Why aren't you answering my prayers? It happens time and time again in the psalms.

Psalm 13, verses 1 and 2. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my soul? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Or Psalm 22. And we're going to come back to this later, but I'll read the verses for now. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?

[19 : 21] So far from the words of my groaning. This is Jesus. This is the prayer he prayed from the cross. Oh my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer.

By night and am not silent. Psalm 38, verses 1 and 2. O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.

For your arrows have pierced me and your hand has come down upon me. Psalm 43. You are God, my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?

Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? And then I'm going to read some verses here from Psalm 44. What's so important about this particular psalm is that in this psalm, the psalmist says in particular, O Lord, horrible things are happening to us, even though we have not abandoned you, even though we have not broken the covenant.

Now, frankly, if you look at the history of Israel in the Old Testament, they did lots of things that were wrong. As someone has said correctly, some people say the Old Testament Israelites had a genius for coming up with great ideas like monotheism.

[20 : 52] The real state of affairs is the Israelites had a genius for finding new and creative ways to sin. That was their genius. But it is also true that there were times in Israel's life when she was faithful to God and God still permitted horrible things to happen to her.

This is what we see in Psalm 44. I'll just read a few verses from that psalm. 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. My disgrace is before me 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 was bent on revenge.

[22 : 17] And now catch this. All this happened to 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 and 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, O 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 were brought down to the dust. Our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us. Redeem us because of your unfailing love.

[23 : 27] And then Psalm 74 verse 3. Why have you rejected us forever, O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?

And then Psalm 80 verse 4. O Lord God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?

Now there's one more psalm that I want to read some verses from. But before I do, I want to say something about the way the lament psalms are structured in the book of Psalms.

There are several elements that usually come to the front in these lament psalms. They may not always be there, but they're almost always there.

In these lament psalms, First, there is an invocation which simply says, O God, listen to me. Open your ears as I voice my complaint.

[24 : 32] So there's first of all this basic idea, O Lord, hear my prayer. Then second, there's a plea for help where the psalmist says, Lord, come to my relief.

Rescue me in my distress. Then third, there will be a description of the distress. The enemies are attacking. I'm sick. I'm on my deathbed.

People are slandering me, telling lies about me. There are several complaints that could be there, but they usually end up being very specific in these lament psalms. Fourth, in these psalms, there will be an expression of trust.

I know, God, that you can help me. That's why I'm coming to you, because I know you are a God who is able to save those who come to him. In some of these psalms, there will also be a confession of sin.

The psalmist will say, I know I have sinned, and I come, and I repent, and I ask you to come to my relief. In other psalms, in fact, even in the same psalm, the psalmist will say, I am innocent, O Lord.

[25 : 42] Even in the very same psalm where he says, I'm a sinner, he will also say, but my heart is toward you. I have not turned back from following you. I am innocent.

Please come and save me because my heart is in the right place. I'm following you. Then, as I mentioned before, quite often in these psalms, there will be an imprecation or a curse.

O Lord, please make sure that you see to it that my enemies get what's coming to them. That that will often be the psalm. But then, there's one more element which comes in every single lament psalm.

How many psalms did I tell you were laments? 68. That's right. 68. And this occurs in every one of them. Near the end of the psalm, the psalmist turns from complaining and praying and asking God to help him to praising God and saying, O Lord, I know that you hear me.

You have come to my relief or I know you will come to my relief. I give you a vow of praise, O God. I sing your praises because I know the help is coming.

[27 : 01] Okay, I lied. 67 of the 68 lament psalms. But there's one where that doesn't occur. And perhaps this is the darkest psalm of all of them in the book of Psalms.

Psalms 88. I'll read just a few verses from that psalm. Verses 5 to 7. The psalmist says, I am set apart with the dead like the slain who lie in the grave whom you remember no more who were cut off from your care.

You have put me in the lowest pit in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

Verses 14 and 15. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth, I have been afflicted and close to death.

I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. And in about that place in the psalm where you expect the psalmist to turn from his complaining and praise God, instead, the psalm finishes this way.

[28 : 20] Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me. All day long, they surround me like a flood.

They have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me. And now the last line, the darkness is my closest friend.

That's how the psalm ends. Maybe that psalm is there to show us that there are not always easy resolutions, even in our complaints to God.

Let me begin to come to the close now. Having surveyed these psalms, let me close by giving some implications that we should be able to take away from having had this exposure to this idea of lament in the psalms.

The first implication is this. The biblical psalms of lament invite us to be honest with God. The biblical psalms of lament invite us to be honest with God.

[29 : 32] God is a big God. He can take it. And when we complain to Him, the important thing to catch from that is that we are complaining to Him.

We acknowledge Him as God. He is the only one to whom we can bring our cries of distress and always expect to be heard. Whether He changes our situation or not.

By going to God in prayer, by honestly laying out our complaints before Him, we acknowledge that He is God. The second thing I think these lament psalms do is that they help us to avoid the trite, soundbite character of much of evangelical Christianity.

I grew up in the 60s in North Carolina. Went to a church there, I won't say what kind, but basically every Sunday I could count on coming in the church, sitting down in the pew, and then some worship leader, some song leader, or maybe I should call him the master of ceremonies, would come with an 88-teeth smile and say something like, everybody happy?

Say amen! And that is the one time when I think I wished I had a shotgun. But the interesting thing is that's the way we expect our Christianity to be.

[31 : 05] That's what the church service is all about. It's supposed to make us happy, but that is not what the Bible is about. It is about blessing us.

It is about helping us in our sorrows, but it's not about making us deliriously happy. It is about coming to God and being honest and acknowledging that we are hurting.

And all those cliches that we use, things like he's just a prayer away, or God is good all the time, or that song that goes on forever and ever and ever, he'll never let you down, or God always answers prayer, or just a little talk with Jesus makes it right.

Those are the kinds of things that just don't very well represent what our Christian faith is about. Our faith is about praise in the midst of adversity, going to God when we are in great need.

It is about loving God and holding on to him when everything around us says we shouldn't. It's about faith and not sight.

[32 : 25] A third implication, and this again has to do with our church services, I think these lament psalms tell us that there ought to be more in our corporate worship by way of lament than we have generally allowed or wanted.

I believe that these psalms that come from the hymn book of ancient Israel and were employed by them and sung by them in their worship ought to be sung in our worship as well.

And in fact we did some of that with those first songs that we sang. We acknowledged that the waves are high. We acknowledged that the sorrow is deep.

And I think we should do that. And when horrible things happen to members of our community death, sickness, financial setbacks, loss of a job, those are the kinds of things that we should talk about in our services and use them as part of our corporate worship, acknowledging that that is what God wants us to do to bring those things to him.

And then one last implication and I think it's very important for us to recognize this. It was the Psalms of lament, the complaint Psalms, the complaining Psalms.

[33 : 50] It was the Psalms of lament that occur most frequently on the lips of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and in the Gospels.

Far more than any other type of Psalm by far. If we want to pray like Jesus did, we need to learn how to lament.

Just a few examples. Jesus in that last week before his death, his crucifixion, he turned to the Psalms for words that would bring him comfort, but also words that would express his grief.

He said, they hated me without a cause. Words that come from Psalm 35 and Psalm 69 and Psalm 109.

As Jesus climbed the Mount of Olives going toward Gethsemane, he cried out to his disciples and he said, my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow even to the point of death.

[35 : 01] And those words, you can't tell it so much in English, but in the Greek and Hebrew, they're very close to what we find in Psalm 42 and Psalm 43.

As Jesus is eating with his disciples, he says, he who shared my bread has lifted his heel against me.

And of course, that comes from a lament psalm, Psalm 41. In John 2, Jesus says, zeal or rather his disciples remembered this about Jesus, that with regards to the temple, Jesus said, zeal for your house has consumed me.

And the same psalm says, the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. And then, of course, as we already mentioned, you have that messianic psalm par excellence, where Jesus cries out to God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And so many theologians have such a hard time with that psalm. How could God have turned his back on Jesus? How could there be a separation between the Father and the Son?

[36 : 23] How could that be? And yet, I refuse to believe that when Jesus said those words on the cross, he was simply trying to add a nice little literary flourish to the crucifixion.

I think he meant them. He at that moment felt forsaken by his God. And it does us no good as those who were in solidarity with Jesus to deny it when we feel forsaken too.

So, my brothers and my sisters, I want you to be encouraged and you say, well, that's not a very encouraging sermon you give this morning. I want you to be encouraged to cry out to God in your distress because he is the one on whom your hopes all rely.

And let me also assure you that when you do, when you go to God in prayer and you cry out to him, the Holy Spirit himself is crying to God too with groanings which cannot be uttered and Jesus Christ himself is praying for you too.

He too still in heaven intercedes for you lamenting for you as he prays to the Father and that is great encouragement.

[37 : 44] Let's pray. Our God, we acknowledge this morning that this life can be a life that is full of trouble full of distress full of hard things and these hard things don't just happen to non-believers they happen to us they happen to those who confess your name they happen to those who put their trust in you and we don't always know why they happen sometimes we have a good idea but we are not always privy to what your reasons might be and even when that happens we pray that you would cause us like your son Christ Jesus to throw all our cares on you believing indeed that you do care for us we ask this in Jesus name amen we guest on you guys we have to