Learning to Lament

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[0:00] Now, let's read together from Psalm 44. We're going to read Psalm 44. So, we've been thinking about how to grow in our relationship with God, how the Psalms help us because they give us words to speak to God. They talk to us about the attitudes of our heart. And here we come to one of the Lament Psalms, where a group of songwriters here, the sons of Korah, in their pain cry out to God. There's a lot of theology and truth in here, as well as honest complaint. So, let's hear it, and then we'll think about it together. This is God's Word. 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 people 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.
[2:28] 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.
So there is a national lament to help us think about lament. And it's important that we do that because as we well know, suffering is all around us. Whether that takes the form of illness or redundancy, whether it's a prodigal children and the breakdown of family, whether that's rejection that we face, loneliness we suffer, grief we experience. No one is immune. And we need to face it with realism. And that's where the lament songs come to us as gifts of grace from a merciful God. They are songs in a minor key. And even as we read it, I'm sure we heard it. These are personal, honest, raw songs of faith. One third of our psalms are laments, reminding us that suffering is not unusual and an outlier, but rather it's normal and indeed central in many ways to the life of faith. And the lament psalms are so helpful for us as Christians because they give voice to the dilemma that we face as we begin to think about our circumstances under the hands of a sovereign God. So we have on the one hand, here is what I know to be true of God from His Word. Here are the realities I expect to find in relationship to a faithful and loving God. But life sometimes brings us the exact opposite. And that's where the laments come in. The laments, in a sense, are the songs that

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nobody wants to sing, that nobody wants to sing, but they provide for us such valuable help and comfort when it's time for sorrow and suffering. To grow in our relationship with God, the laments, they teach us about honesty, to voice our fears and our struggles and our complaints, and to keep trusting in God's character and to keep trusting in God's promises. An image that might be helpful as we go through the psalm is to think of an airline pilot flying through dense fog so that he can't see out of his cockpit and he has to rely on his control panels in order to guide him safely. What are the control panels for us as Christians when we find ourselves in the thick fog of suffering? They are the steadfast love of God and the unchanging character of our God. And recognizing His grace and mercy comes to us day by day.
[6:28] So we're going to use Psalm 44 for a short time. I'll lament after a national disaster, after the armies of God's death, the armies of God have been defeated in battle and the people have been scattered.

To help us to see some of the steps that we find in biblical laments, four steps that we can recognize in biblical laments that we might make them our own so that as we suffer or as we pray for those who suffer, we have biblical language, biblical steps that we can take.
The first step, and we see it in the first eight verses of our psalm, is that we are to turn to God in prayer. So this psalm, now we're told, is written by the sons of Korah. So they are the worship leaders of Israel. And so here they are in the face of national defeat, picking up their harps to sing a song.
And what is it that they sing? Where does their song begin? It begins with prayer. We have heard it with our ears, O God. The whole psalm is prayer. But what is it that they begin talking to God about as they see their armies defeated, killed, and scattered? They go back to the past. They begin reflecting on God's past acts of redemption, of those moments in their history when God fought to deliver his people who trusted in him. Verse 3 says, it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them. That's where victory comes from. God's light and God's love shining on his people. And then the songwriters, they move from the past to the present.
In verses 4 to 8, they say, just as the people of the past trusted in you delivered, so we are trusting too. You are our hope. You are our boast, they say. There is that recognition. God is our only savior.
[8:38] God is our only rock of refuge. So the first place lament turns is to the unchanging God of redeeming love. Here is the foundation for our faith, and it's a foundation that we need to build before the storms come, to recognize that God is trustworthy, that God is good, that God is loving.

Just as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, that we need to build our lives on his word, on his truth. We need to have that knowledge that God is a loving redeemer. That's the control panel that needs to guide our flight of faith, that God is sovereign, and that God is savior. In my prayer time on Friday, I was reflecting on a verse in Psalm 115, which says, our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases. I'm a reminder of God's sovereignty over all things, that God permits all things.
But here's what we need to recognize, that knowing God is sovereign over our lives, that God permits all things, that can add a sense of pain, can't it? To know that God could stop this thing, that God could change my circumstances but doesn't, can add pain and challenge to our thoughts at the same time as it provides comfort to know that we're in the hands of our Father. And we're going to see in Psalm 44 that sense of wrestling, that the Christian response in the end is to trust God in the fog and to pray with trust. Now there's a very helpful book written by a pastor called Mark Vrogop called Deep Clouds, Dark Mercy. I'd really recommend it if you are suffering, if you're looking to help people who are suffering, looking at the laments as God's mercy. And he talks about lament and these lament prayers and songs standing in the gap between our pain and God's promise. And we see that faith brings both tears and trust. Lament calls out in pain to God, clinging to what we know is true of God, while all the time wrestling with our circumstances.
So Psalm 44 begins with blessing in the past, and that in a sense only adds to their sense of misery and confusion in the present, but it also brings comfort, as they know that God is unchanging, the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so they look back with hope to the God they know who is their redeemer, savior. As followers of Jesus Christ today, we must learn to pray the gospel, to find hope and strength as we remember the greatest of all stories of redemption, as we look back to the cross to see God's love for us in Christ, to recognize that we have been redeemed, not with perishable things, but with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus, that he has saved us from judgment, he has taken our guilt and shame, and he has set us free. And it's on that basis that we

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trust, and it's on that basis that we turn in prayer. So we take our heartbreak, and we take our questions to the cross. What do we see when we go to the cross? When we go to the cross, we see that God is not against us, that God is for us.
[12:52] We see there a God and Savior who knows suffering. He's not disconnected from us in our pain that we feel.

And we also have in Jesus and his resurrection a promise of victory and certain hope beyond suffering. And so as we lament, we turn to God in prayer. But there is another step that we see in the laments, and we see here in Psalm 44, there is complaint, honest complaint to God. Now it's fair to say that complaining and complainers are not usually regarded as positive. But this is different because this is a complaint of faith. And again, remember that a third of the Psalms are laments, have this complaint element. So it is biblical to complain to God, not to complain about God, but to complain to God. And it's important to notice that the Psalms are always going to be doing this based on the covenant relationship that they have. So in light of who God is and what God can do and who God has been to us in the past, there are these expressions of disappointment, confusion, complaint. Here in Psalm 44, we can see them very briefly in verses 9 to 12, they have been rejected, humbled, and defeated.
God is pictured as a commander who has abandoned his army to defeat, to slaughter on the battlefield. There is exile, there is national disaster. In verses 13 to 16, there is humiliation and disgrace.
You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us, the ungodly nations adding insult to injury for the people of God as they face shame and mockery because of their defeat. And this leads the sons of Korah towards protest in verses 17 to 22. They say, all this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you, we had not been false to your covenant.
So sometimes the people of God suffer setback and defeat because they've walked away from God, but they're saying, not this time. We were faithful, but yet we're suffering.
[15:36] They were obedient. There was no trace of idolatry that the sons of Korah could recognize in their national life. But what's happened is the path of obedience has led them into the jackal's den, has led them to the place of darkness, has led them to the place of slaughter.

And so complaint emerges, because here they are in the gap between God's promises and their pain. You said obedience would bring covenant blessing, but our life today feels like curse. Perhaps we recognize that experience. But notice how raw and how honest the sons of Korah are. I think it's so important for us as Christians to know God can handle our honesty. God already knows our hearts and our hearts and our minds. So we should always talk to him honestly about how we feel.
Look at a verse like verse 22. Yet for your sake, we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.
[16:59] They talk of the suffering that is part of loyalty towards God. And they're struggling. Derek Kidner, who commentates on the psalm, says they are wearing battle scars owing to their loyalty to God. And they're feeling that pain.

In their suffering, we recognize an echo of Jesus, the man of sorrows. Jesus on the cross who would take up a lament.
Psalm 22, as he cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The cross stands for us as proof that there is mystery in the fact that here is Jesus, the one truly obedient one. And yet at the same time, here is Jesus, the suffering man of sorrows.
The children of God do suffer and we are loved. And there is mystery there, but there is truth there. And we see it again at the cross.
But what do we learn when it comes to complaint from a psalm like verse 44? For us in our suffering, it's important for us to, in the first place, pray humbly to stand under God rather than standing over God in judgment and anger.
[18:35] We have a help. If we are struggling and suffering and we don't know how to pray in our tears, pray the psalms. 44, 13, 6. There's so many of them.

We can pray honestly. And it's important that we also, and we'll see this is where the psalm goes next, we need to pray more than just complain.

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We don't simply want to complain. We also want to ask for relief and we want to keep trusting. So our next step, and we see it here from the sons of Korah, is that we are to ask boldly for God to intervene.
I'm sure in different ways we know that suffering is an exhausting experience. It can be hard to cope when you're constantly living with fear and worry and doubts.
But there's this wonderful confidence in the laments that calls on God, asking boldly for deliverance.
[19:57] And of course, this is drawing confidence from what the songwriters know of God's character and God's promises. So again, they're calling to mind their life in the covenant and calling God to act on that basis.

So that the complaint is overshadowed again by thoughts on who their God is. Mark Vrobuk, in his book, Dark Clouds Deep Mercy, he uses the picture of an eclipse.
You know, where one object passes in front of the other, sort of concealing the thing behind. So that the psalmists here are still wrestling with the fact that God appears to have abandoned, allowed his people to suffer, but they don't just keep their focus there.
So that the complaints are still there. The why questions are still there. But what now comes to prominence, again, is the character of God. And the fact that they have a God to call on who is powerful and who is faithful.
And so they're very bold in their prayers. Verse 23, awake, Lord. Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself. Do not reject us forever. Take decisive action, Lord. Fix what's broken.
[21:14] Be actively involved in our circumstances. Verse 26, rise up. And help us. Rescue us. They want a fresh experience of God's deliverance in their lives.

And if you've got your Bible in front of you, you'll notice that their bold asking is in connection to their complaint. So in verse 9, they complain that God has rejected us.
But then in verse 23, they ask God, do not reject us forever. In verse 17, the complaint is, all this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you.
And then in verse 24, why do you hide your face and forget that our misery and oppression, that experience leads them to bold asking.
Lament lays out pain clearly. Lament lays out pain clearly and asks God to intervene. Such a helpful pattern for our lives, for our prayer lives.
[22:29] And recognize, too, that lament isn't just for national tragedies or the huge moments of personal suffering that seem to almost overwhelm us.

But perhaps, too, in the many small ways that we experience trials and suffering. To recognize, here's the character of God. To lay out before God, here's what's happening to me.
And to ask God to help on the basis of His character and His promises. And let me say, too, how important this is for us as we look to be Christian friends, brothers and sisters to one another.
When someone is suffering and they feel weak, it can be hard to pray. And we know this, I'm sure. This is where the faith of another can serve to strengthen and give confidence.
As we can stand in the gap and we can pray for those who suffer. We can stand with them and ask boldly of God for them. And it's a real strength and encouragement when a brother or sister in Christ does that for us.
[23:41] And in all of this, remember Jesus, our man of sorrows, the one who understands us and is for us. And their asking, final step in lament, leads them to trusting.

See, there is a decisive choice that we all have to make as we find ourselves in the middle of suffering. Will I trust God?
Laments are those songs that we sing, those prayers that we offer in the thick fog of suffering. And they're the ones that will lead us to a safe landing place.
And that safe landing place for us as Christians is resolving to trust our God. And we see it as the psalm ends.
That their song has been guided all the way along by this control panel, which is your unfailing love. This is a prayer of faith based on God's covenant love.
[24:48] Here are the sons of Korah. They are complaining and they are trusting, even when the fog doesn't lift. Even before there is resolution, they have resolved to trust.

This active choice is made. I will trust in my trustworthy God. What they reflect on in Psalm 44, God's love is steadfast.

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God is our Savior. God protects his people. So there is that choice. They're not going to simply lean into their suffering where perhaps bitterness, frustration, disappointment might live.
But they are going to lean into God and his unfailing love. Paul picks up on Psalm 44 in Romans chapter 8.
Notice how he uses this. In verse 35 of that great chapter, Romans 8, Paul says, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
[25:56] Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, and here's Psalm 44, 22. For your sake we face death all day long.

We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Will those things separate us from the love of Christ? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
There's this beautiful sense in which Paul takes Christian suffering and he wraps it up in that promise of God's unfailing love. He points the suffering believer to Jesus to see that our suffering is wrapped up in his wonderful love.
That whatever causes us to lament as the people of God, it will not and cannot separate us from God's love as we know it in Jesus. So we have the truth that in Christ we will suffer and we can worship.
There are groans, but there will be glory. And so we are called in the end to trust. Trust in the one who gives us strength to keep on trusting him day by day.
[27:20] So that we would turn to him in prayer. That we would bring our complaints to him honestly. We would ask boldly for mercy and deliverance and we would resolve to trust him always.

Just as we close, there is an inscription in Copenhagen Cathedral put there by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian philosopher.
And in that stone in Copenhagen Cathedral, Kierkegaard has written, We believe that God is great enough to harbor our little lives with all their grievances and that he can lead us from darkness through to the other side.
And then underneath, he wrote the words of 1 Peter 5, 7, Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you. We trust that God can take us safely to safe harbor and we pray and we cast our cares on him, trusting that he will do it.
So we can use the language of lament. And we use it as we stand in the gap between God's promises and our pain.
[28:51] Now let's pray together briefly.

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