

When should we pray?

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Date: 01 March 2026

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, you are the God who saves me. Day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you. Turn your ear to my cry.

I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life falls near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am like one without strength.

I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me. You have overwhelmed me with all your weight.

You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape. My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, Lord, every day. I spread out my hands to you. Do you show your wonders to the dead?

Do their spirits rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

[1 : 1 7] But I cry to you for help, Lord. In the morning my prayer comes before you. My Lord, do not reject me and hide your face from me. From my youth I have suffered and have been close to death.

I have borne your terrors and am in despair. 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 from me friend and neighbour. Darkness is my closest friend. The joyous start to Sunday sermon time, isn't it?

What a lovely psalm to bring you this morning, uplifting. I'm sure you're all feeling really, really good after hearing that. Psalm 88 is a real challenge and there's got some honesty about it, which we're going to delve into in a minute.

But I want to talk to you about genres of psalms first. They come in many, many different forms. So you have to remember that the book of psalms is like a book of poetry or a book of songs.

[2 : 4 7] And each of them have their own genre. And the genre that this would fall into is one called lament. It's not an often used word in general society.

I don't suppose many of you have gone to work and somebody asked you, how are you doing today? And you've gone, oh, I'm lamenting for X, Y or Z.

If you have, you probably work in an academic environment of which those kind of languages are normal. But those of us who grew up working in retail, if I said to my friends or colleagues that they asked me how my weekend was and I told them I was lamenting for something, they would look at me quizzically.

So what is a lament? What is it about? Well, I think you probably get the feel from Psalm 88. It's not a joyous place to be.

Lament has an element of maybe sadness or being angry and stuff like that. But I want to say that it is more than that.

[3 : 4 9] And so I'm just going to take you through kind of my feelings about lament. Before then, we use that idea and we apply it to Psalm 88 and we have a look at Psalm 88. So the first thing about lamenting is it's not just a general feeling.

It is directed. If you think about anger or sadness, they're often not. You're just angry or you're just sad. And they are emotions.

Whereas lament has an element of directed. And in the sense of the Bible, it is a prayer. Anger can explode in any direction. I don't know whether any of you are like that, that you've been wound up a little bit and the next thing you know, you snap.

And the person you're angry at can't do anything about the reason you're angry. But they just happen to be along in the way. Or maybe when you're feeling sad, you retreat to your bedroom or to a quiet place.

And you just sink within yourself, mulling over the things that make you sad. Lament has a different focus. It turns its view to God.

[5 : 02] In the book, in the Psalm 88, the writer is deeply distressed. Perhaps depressed, but certainly overwhelmed.

And I'm sure if I said to you, put your hands up if you've ever been in a situation where you have felt overwhelmed, many of us would say, yes, we've been there. We've been overwhelmed at times. We've been in places where life was really, really difficult. But he doesn't just go, oh. He cries out to the Lord.

And the key difference in lament is direction. It isn't just random. It isn't inward. It speaks to God. But not just about the pain.

So I think to kind of help you through this first section, if you imagine anger is all about shouting. Sadness is all about sinking into yourself.

[6 : 01] Lament, praise. And anger might say, that's wrong. And sadness might say, this hurts. But lament says, Lord, this is wrong.

And it hurts. Where are you in this pain? Lament assumes a covenant relationship. Lament assumes that you and I have a relationship with God.

Direct, personal, one that you can come and use. And as Dave has pointed out, at any time that is available to you, you don't have to wait to come on Sunday for the milestones moment for a vicar to pray for you.

That's not how access to God works. So lament assumes that you've got a covenant relationship with God. It dares to speak because lament prayers believe God exists.

Believes he's out there. And even in the darkness. I don't know whether you noticed when we were singing, Lord, reign in me. One of the verses says about darkness when it overcomes.

[7 : 12] Lord, will you reign in me. That reminded that our relationship with God is more precious in the times of difficulty. Means that faith has not died, even if joy has.

So lament holds pain and trust together. Pure anger can harden the heart. I read a really, really interesting story this week about a lady whose daughter died in a car crash.

And she experienced anger towards the man who was driving the car because he was over the limit for alcohol. And she was on cocaine, amphetamines and ketamine all at the same time.

And no wonder he crashed. And an iron railing impelled her daughter and she died. She was angry and angry and was wishing all sorts of bad things on this man.

And eventually she realized that she couldn't be any more angry. And she was just angry every day and she wanted to do something different with it. And so she looked for a way out of the anger and found forgiveness.

[8 : 23] Because that's what anger does. It just makes us hard. And pure sadness just drains hope. And you end up thinking that the world is a really difficult place.

It's the beginning of that sinking into depression. Lament refuses both those excuses. It doesn't deny the pain. I've seen Psalm 88.

It's brutally honest. But it also does not walk away from God. Why when we talk about these prayers is when you're having those difficult times and you want to say these things to God.

It's not about unbelief. And I think often people say, oh if I'm saying that where is God, that's unbelief. That's clearly a problem with me that I'm not showing enough faithfulness.

And I should just sort my life out and be more faithful and God will come. It's not about unbelief. It's about being wounded in the moment. In a way that if anger would say I'm done and I'm walking away from you, from faith, from everything.

[9 : 24] Lament says I don't understand but I'm still here. So it's not about walking away. It's about saying I don't understand why I'm going through this but I'm still here. The lament is bringing our anger and our sadness into a conversation with God.

If we're honest, I think, as our Christian language often leans towards celebration, doesn't it? We do love to come together and say that everything, the victory's in Christ and it's all good.

That's what we quite like to do. Most of our worship songs are set up exactly like that. Very rarely do I or Dave come and bring you a worship song that is all about death, destruction and despair and

asking God where is he.

Because I think if I put that on, you'd be like, hold on, what's going on? But Psalm 88 is that. The scriptures, I think, we see here are more realistic than we often are.

They speak not only of joy but of anguish, not only of praise but of protest. Lament is a prayer spoken in the pangs of pain. And so, I want to just help you as we go into Psalm 88 just to really say that clearly.

[10:43] Let's remember that we can pray at any time to God who we have that covenant relationship with and that the lament is not about unbelief. It's about not understanding the place we're in and seeking God in that place.

And we know that to be true because the Psalms aren't given to us just as a piece of historical context.

We don't just read Psalm and say, oh, that's how the Israelite people were. If that's what it was its job, it wouldn't have made it into the Bible. It'd be some dusty Hebrew text sat somewhere that scholars study to tell us what was going on thousands of years ago in the Middle East.

But it gets incorporated into the Bible as one of the books because it gives us the language that we need when we have none. They teach us how to pray when everything feels wrong.

So, let's apply some of that knowledge now as we head through Psalm 88 and try and wonder what does Psalm 88 say to us as God's people today.

[11:53] So, Psalm 88 follows a pattern that even in its darkness is common with lament Psalms. And I'm going to take you through that pattern because my hope is that we don't just teach you today about Psalm 88.

We teach you about how to approach any Psalm that you pick up and you read and you go, ooh, this is a bit dark. Ah, oh, this is. Maybe you'd be tempted just to skip over it because I don't want to go there because maybe it's going to be challenging.

Instead, you're going to go, oh, I remember what Garen said about how these Psalms are put together. And I'm going to use that in this time of understanding. Equally, you might be sat here today and maybe you've summoned up the will to get to church today, but you don't really feel like all those praise songs that we've done.

You don't really feel like all the joy that we often talk about. And you've come today in brokenness, in difficulty, in a challenged place. And you're looking around and thinking nobody else understands where I'm at.

Well, this Psalm helps you know that there was at least one human being who walked this earth, who knew exactly where you were, knew exactly how you felt, and knew exactly what to do with those feelings.

[13:08] So, the first thing the writer does is turns to the Lord through an invocation. He says, oh, Lord, the God who saves me day and night, I cry out before you.

I cry out to you. I seek you. Notice that the first action isn't to say, I'm disappointed.

I don't know why I'm even bothering. But actually, the direction is to turn to God. That even in despair, he names God as the God who saves me.

There's a recognition that the God that is out there is the one who can provide relief. So, remember that lament begins by addressing God.

It assumes that we have a relationship. That's where it starts, with an assumed relationship with God. And then, and I think this is the bit that we often feel a little bit more about in our prayer life, is the complaint comes.

[14:15] You might say, who are we to complain to God? I'm just little Gareth who lives in Newton Abbot, and you know, I'm not special. Maybe this person here was really special, and he's allowed to complain to God.

No. It's in here to help us learn, so therefore, that says that each of us are able to complain to God. And so, the psalmist makes this complaint. Talks about his soul is full of trouble.

I'm counted among those who go down to the pit. Now, the pit there is the idea of death and hell. The actual kind of Hebrew word there is sheol, which is where they placed those people who died and were out of relationship with God.

That's how bad this person's feeling. Like, God, I feel like I've got so much trouble that I might as well be one of those people in the pit, in the fiery furnace away from you.

He doesn't sugarcoat the language. He doesn't try and find a way of making it sound nice, like, oh, I'm feeling it's a bit difficult at the moment, God.

[15:35] I'm not feeling like you're with me, God. Oh, do you think, you know, I could feel a bit more of your presence? Like, I feel like you've sent me to hell. Don't think you could be more honest with God.

It's not sanitized. It's raw. The psalmist feels abandoned, forgotten, cut off. He feels like a living corpse. Biblical lament gives each of us permission to describe our pain truthfully.

No pretending. No spiritual cliches. No rust resolutions. Only honesty. Let's take a moment to think. When, if ever, have you ever prayed to God honestly about how you feel? Have you ever sat there and said, this is where I'm at?

If you've never done that, today you are permissioned to do that. To have that relationship with God.

[16:41] So then there's the appeal. So we've had the invocation, the reaching out to God. We've had the complaint, naming what's going on. This is how I'm feeling. Then the appeal. Crying for help.

The psalmist says, I call to you, Lord, every day. I spread out my hands to you. The appeal is a central idea around lament.

It's not just venting. I don't know whether you see people on Facebook, don't you? Like there's a thread about something and somebody comes on. I don't need any reason.

I'm just venting. Just venting my anger about the parking in Queen Street. I'm just venting my anger about the hospital and how hard it is to get in. It's not that.

You're not just yelling into the void about something. I'm thinking, well, I just feel a little bit better. It's pleading with God to make a change.

[17:40] Even when God feels, because we've recognised that the psalmist thinks that he is in the pit. He's amongst the living God dead. He thinks that God is so far away. He keeps on praying day after day.

Notice that every day. It's not just one prayer of lament he's talking about. He's saying, every day, God, I come to you. Every day I unrelentingly come and bring you my heart's problems and how I feel.

Day after day, morning after morning, night after night. Faith is sometimes nothing more than continue to pray when nothing changes.

Anytime, anyplace, anywhere, all times. And we then see the wrestling with God.

Is your love declared in the grave? Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? The idea of God hiding his face is a common one you'll see throughout Psalms. The idea that God shows his face, shows his love to those and actually hides himself away is an often thing about how people felt at this time.

[18:53] And I think sometimes we can feel that way. We can look out amongst our peers in our Christian churches and we can say, oh, that person is spiritual. That person's life seems really good. And God isn't with me.

He's with that person, but he's not with that. And you start to worry about why is God not showing his faith? Why? So the psalmist argues his case. He reminds God of his covenant love.

That's a regular thing, like this idea that we say, we've got an agreement, God. I gave my life to you. I gave my life to you. Come and do something. Come and be present with me.

There's a boldness here. The psalmist believes God is good. And so he presses him on it. Lament allows us to wrestle without walking away.

You don't have to have it all sorted. You can have a dialogue with God. And he won't send you away because of it.

[19:53] Sometimes I think it's like the relationship that you might have with your child. That when they're annoyed about something, when they want something, they might keep on talking to you about it. And I don't say to my children, away with you.

I'm done. I'm not interested anymore. I might not agree with their problem. I might not agree with their point of view. But I don't send my children away.

And like our loving father, he doesn't send us away when we're not happy with the way the world is going. Now this is where Psalm 88 departs from any other psalm.

All other psalms finish with a move towards trusting or praise. It's where the psalmist says, I am going to continue praising God irrespective.

Psalm 88 doesn't do that. It ends by saying, you've taken my friends and my loved ones from me. The darkness is my closest friend. There's no neat uplift. No sudden breakthrough.

[20 : 53] No tidy bow of this is it, complete. And that's precisely why this psalm is such a gift to us. It tells us that unresolved pain is still welcome in the presence of God.

And if you are experiencing unresolved prayer, it doesn't mean you're a bad person. You are with the psalmist in the Bible saying, I wrestle with this day and day and day.

And we don't know whether there's a part two to this psalm. We don't know what happened to this psalmist after this. What we know is in the moment, this is where he was. So, what do we do with this?

As I hopefully promised Pauline when we were discussing how she had to read probably one of the most miserable parts of the Bible, that there was some hope there.

I said to Pauline, I can't give her a 180 and make it all sound really, really nice. But we can at least direct it in the right direction. So, when prayer seems unanswered, when darkness lingers, when God feels hidden, Psalm 88 does not tell us to pretend.

[22 : 12] It doesn't tell you just to pull yourself together and sort your life out. It doesn't tell us to suppress our emotions and our feelings. It doesn't tell us to fix it quickly.

It tells us to bring it to the Lord. It tells us to keep praying. It tells us to continue recognizing the relationship that we have with the God who saves.

It tells us to keep speaking even when all we can say is, Why? Why?

Why? Why? Why?

Why?

[23 : 56] have failed or you don't understand who God is, you are praying the prayers of the Bible instead. You are meeting with God in that place.

And the God who you at that time might feel is hidden, is actually present. He's actually there with you and is ready to hear your prayer.

So, do not be ashamed of times when life is difficult. Bring it to God in prayer.

This has been the theology section for what happens in midweek. If you've said, I don't know whether I can make it, I don't know whether it's worth going to those prayer things that they're doing in the middle of the week.

If this has touched you and you've thought, oh, this is important. Tomorrow afternoon here at 12.30, we're going to help you write your own lament.

[24 : 58] We're going to help you do that process of saying, how do I reach out to God when times are difficult? We're going to do that again on Tuesday night, sign at 7 o'clock, and we're going to help you find that space.

So, if this has hit you today, and you say, I want to learn how to do this, I want to, you know, I've got some stuff going on, come to those sessions. Come and take theology and make it practice.

Don't just sit here and go, that's fine for you to say, Gareth, but I don't know what you want us to do. Come this week, come and help us, help you to meet with the God who wants to hear your prayers, even in the time when you feel like you're in the pit.

Amen.