

# To Languish & Flourish; Lament - St. John's Vancouver

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Date: 12 July 2020

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd like to begin today by making a confession. I've hated something, but I wonder if you have too during this pandemic.

In our introduction video to this sermon series, one of our pastors admitted that he hates the word, the new normal. And last week in our testimony, one of our members submitted that he hated self-isolation.

Well, in the book of Ecclesiastes, the author states that there is a time to love and a time to hate. And a part of us may love something about this pandemic, but maybe even a bigger part of us hates something about it at this time.

Well, my confession is that I've hated the word flourish. I don't hate people who use the word, but the word flourish irks me. That is until I came across the word languish.

Well, now flourish and languish are both used in the Bible about 15 times each. Yet I've heard flourish used, but never before this pandemic have I heard the word languish used.

[ 1 : 14 ] And I too was introduced to this language of languish and flourishing through the Ministry of the Sanctuary course. And it's a course used to build awareness and start conversations in local churches about mental health and illness.

We learned about many things, but the thing that I took away that was the greatest help to me were these two words, languish and flourish. I also came across these terms in a human development research by an academic named Corey Keyes.

And flourishes a life that is characterized by goodness, generativity, growth, and renewal. And languish is a life characterized by a lack of vitality sometimes, just distraught and disturbed.

Keyes research in 2007 revealed that 80% of people languish while only 20% of people flourished. In current research revealed by Stats Canada is showing us that Canadians are reporting that more than half of them, their mental health has worsened.

Well, I'll withhold all the other statistics from you, but suffice it to say or to raise this question, what makes us willing to use the word flourish in conversations more than languish?

[ 2 : 33 ] Why am I willing to hold out flourishing, but hide behind my back languishing? And of course, stigma is a part of that, but it's not the only reason.

Is it possible that lament actually may help us so that even those who languish find themselves thriving and not just surviving? And so today we're going to look at Psalm 42, a lament of a man who followed God and a leader of God's people.

He languished and he led God's people through lament. And in doing so, he doesn't prescribe languishing, but boy, does he ever permit it.

And today we'll look at three things from this psalm and by the psalmist, the situation of isolation, a condition of dryness and drowning, and then finally the consolation of hope.

So first, let's take a look at this situation of isolation. We know very little, if not nothing, about the historical situation. We may have a few clues in verses four and six.

[ 3 : 45 ] And in verse four, the psalmist remembers performing his purpose in life, his passion, saying these things that I remember as I pour out my soul. How I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts of song and praise, a multitude keeping festival.

Well, he remembers leading the people of God to the household of faith and worship. For whatever reason, this praying man and spiritual leader cannot lead his people to the house of God anymore.

Were the people of God in exile? Were the people in their own spiritual pandemic? We don't know the situation, but it's disturbing, isolating, and languishing.

This is relatable during our own pandemic. We remember the days of gathering with the household of faith. While we don't lead parades on major festivals like this man did, while we don't come from a distance like these people did to join in festival.

Who of us doesn't remember long for gathering side by side once again, just like this man did?

Well, another clue to the situation in verse six, he says, Therefore, I remember you from the land of Jordan and Hermon from Mount Mizar.

[ 5 : 09 ] These are places acquainted with the blessing of God. Geographically and historically, there were places of protection and proclamation of the Lord. The word of the Lord proceeded from these places as blessings from the hand of God for his people.

But this is not a happy memory for the psalmist. It's a painful one. He is grieving. He's languishing. And yet he cannot help himself from remembering these places.

He's like a loved one whose loss brings up places visited by family and friends. It would be easier forgotten places, but how could he possibly forget?

And so remembrance we see is a feature of lament. And can anyone of us relate to this? Isn't it interesting for St. John's very cave for how many memories we've generated in our current location where we're not meeting?

And did you ever think that you would long to gather again at the Oak Ridge site as much as you do now? To hear the pure word of God preached?

[ 6 : 17 ] To precipitate in the celebrations of baptism and communion, weddings, funerals? How does this leave the psalmist and the people of God?

Well, let's turn now to the condition. This condition of dehydration and drowning. Whatever the situation, the psalmist's condition is severe dryness, verse 1, and drowning in verse 7.

First then, this spiritual dehydration that he experiences. I love the way this psalm begins. As a deer pants for flowing streams, So pants my soul for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God. Now, the church is used to images for the Christian, but this is actually not one of them.

When we do, we think of sheep. Those animals who are dumb, dirty, distracted, deceived. But this time, it's not sheep.

[ 7 : 20 ] It's a deer. Now, if there are any children that are still with me, don't think Bambi, the Disney character. Think Mr. Tumnus, that Chronicles of Narnia character.

That man deer. Well, deer are not any better off than sheep. They're vulnerable to suffering and adversity. And this deer is languishing. He is utterly dehydrated.

So dire the situation and the condition, and real is the languishing. But to show us that our soul thirsts and longs for God.

And the psalmist isn't casual about the impact on his daily life. In verse 3, he prays, My tears have been my food day and night. The psalmist is sad beyond belief.

And this isn't just a little whimper, a sob. When a person is in serious depression, anxiety, we ask questions like, Are you eating more or less than usual?

[ 8 : 22 ] Are you sleeping more or less than usual? Day and night, this man's diet is tears. But tears can't nourish the body. Though maybe the soul can through lament.

Here's a man who languishes. And if that isn't bad enough, he's then taunted. Someone or body taunts him, doubting the very presence of God in verse 3.

Saying, While they say to me all the day long, Where is your God? Well, as if he doesn't feel God's absence.

And as confusing as that sounds, How do you feel the absence of God? Presence, yes, but absence? And if that describes your situation, Jen, join with this prayer.

If you are spiritually dehydrated, Remember the state of another praying man. On the cross of Golgotha, Our Lord cried, I thirst.

[ 9 : 28 ] A real man, In real time, And a real thirst. Literally, And spiritually. If you're this dry, Join with Jesus.

And know that he joins with you in saying, I thirst. Well, spiritual dehydration isn't bad enough. In the second stanza, It gets worse.

From dehydration to drowning. In verse 7, Deep calls to deep. At the roar of your waterfalls, All your breakers in your wave have gone over me.

Now, we're tempted to think romantically about waves and waterfalls. That's not what the psalmist has in mind here. Have you ever heard of the really gigantic wave in Hawaii called Jaws?

Ever seen the Niagara Falls? I know these aren't the ones that he has in mind, But the idea is real. The weight of the waves and the waterfalls in verse 7 Are positively overwhelming.

[10:32] From dryness to drowning. It's just way too much. What is the psalmist doing here? Well, I think the psalmist is giving us A drowning experience, Just in case the dryness one doesn't fit.

This is what he's experiencing. This is what it's like. Maybe for you too. And you can relate to this. Maybe spiritual dehydration isn't your experience, But maybe spiritual drowning is.

The pandemic is holding you underwater. It's so overwhelming that you wonder and worry. If it's God who's doing it. And notice the psalmist says, Your waterfalls, Your breakers, Your waves.

And listen to the effect that this has on the psalmist. He says, As with deadly wounds in my bones. I remember the first time getting thrashed by waves in Newport, California, On a beach there.

Not a broken bone in my body, But boy, was it ever scary. Yeah. I also have friends who are fortunate to even be standing After waves broke over them and broke their bones And gave them concussions.

[11:42] The psalmist is so broken, The pain so deep that he's barely alive. But here is a man who languishes. And again, he's taunted in verse 10.

The enemy and oppressors are kicking this man while he is down. They mock him and his God with the words, Where is your God? And let's face it.

This is the experience that he faces all day and all night as he languishes. Many of us have been triggered by this pandemic.

The pandemic itself is maybe a small T trauma, But we know that others it will cause PTSD.

Children, family, health care workers, The list of casualties goes on.

We try to soothe the pain with extreme behaviors, But no real relief. And we try to manage the pain, To defend or protect ourselves, But the pain is always underneath.

[12:43] I'm the psalmist and we need something more. It seems like the experience is hopeless. And nothing but languish. So is there any consolation?

Let's see. Let's turn and look and see if there might be a consolation of hope in this psalm. I wonder if the psalmist thought he'd find consolation in knowledge.

The psalmist, after all, is a worship leader. It's from the sons of Korah. He's a pastor or a priest. He traces his family, actually, All the way back to a relative of Moses and Aaron.

And that has to be good for something in a crisis. But that's what makes this even harder for the psalmist. His experience isn't measuring up to what he knows about God, Or what he thinks he knows about him.

And aren't those who know the most about God The ones who are supposed to flourish and not languish? Well, this man is languishing. But not for a lack of knowledge. And let's look and see what this man does know to be true about God.

[13:50] Two things. God is a living God. And God is his rock. In verse 2, the psalmist addresses and confesses in prayer to the living God.

Because God is not dead. God is living and breathing, unlike the other gods that are all around. And he turns to this living God. This man is not guilty of idolatry.

This is his lament, though. Though God is living, he has no hearing with him. His lament is, when shall I come and appear before God? The psalmist is in some kind of perpetual divine waiting room, it seems.

And God's not emerged from his room and given ear to this man, he feels. And the psalmist waits for a hearing, but not like a defendant in a courtroom. The psalmist has done nothing wrong.

He's not guilty of immorality. See, that's not the explanation for the separation and isolation that he feels from God. And if that's your experience, the psalmist is your companion.

[14:58] He was there before you and invites you and I, all of us, to lament. He invites us to lament when languishing by admitting just how hard this is. However, he's not calling into question that God is living.

He believes in a living God. Well, neither is he calling into question that God is like a rock in verse 9. I've had a lot of people in hospital and hospices and care centers.

And I sit with a lot of people who are anxious and angry and depressed. And I used to ask them, when you think about God, what kind of pictures of him come to mind? And I don't ask that question of people anymore.

But most of them, when I did, would say shepherd. Do you know how many times the word shepherd is used in the Psalms? Just once.

And do you know how many times the word rock is used with reference to God in the Bible? And 32 times. And so the psalmist prays, By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me.

[16:06] A prayer to the God of my life. I say to my God, Why have you forgotten me? Well, the psalmist doesn't put a pretty smile on the face of his experience.

If I ask, how are you? He doesn't reply or wouldn't reply, I'm fine. He doesn't find, but he's forgotten, according to his present experience, even though God is his rock.

Well, the psalmist's lament is this then. He knows that the Lord sends his steadfast love and sings a song over him, kind of like a lullaby.

But it's just not his present experience at this moment. His experience of God at this time is not a pleasant or a positive one. And that's a deep grief and spiritual depression for him.

And let me just say this right now, that if you're clinically depressed, it's really important that you see a doctor and probably a follow-up with a counselor. This psalmist, maybe, I don't know, maybe not, is clinically depressed, but certainly he's spiritually depressed.

[17:18] He's languishing and not flourishing. He is hopeless, but curiously at the same time, hopeful. This is what I love about this psalm. In the refrain, two times he says, Well, let me say that we all have times when we languish, that we're in turmoil and it seems hopeless.

We know God is the living God and our rock. Yet where is God? Our experience just doesn't seem to bear witness to that. And why does God do this?

Why does he withhold his presence from us? Why does he sometimes restrain our experience of him? Can a person languish and yet thrive at the same time?

Can a person both hold hopelessness and hopefulness together? Bruce Waltke, the Old Testament scholar, emeritus at Regent College said to me, to our class once on the book of Psalms, the closer you get to paradox, the closer you get to truth.

And this paradox throws us upon the sustaining grace of God. And the Lord does this so that we grow in patience. We pursue him.

[18:48] And we persevere in hope. So the Lord withholds just enough of himself from us so that by his grace, we dare to lament.

And through that, we know what it means to flourish and have hope in the Lord. Not just a kind of a wishful thinking. Through that, we know as Peter confessed in Matthew chapter 16, when Jesus asked his disciples, who do you say that I am?

And Peter, after he hemmed and hawed a little bit, confessed the Christ. That's who you are, Jesus. Jesus affirmed Peter's confession, going on to say, and upon that rock, that is Peter's confession, not Peter himself, but upon that confession, that Jesus is the living, the son of the living God, God would build his church.

Jesus laid claim to and fulfilled the two things the psalmist confesses here, that Jesus is the living God and he is the rock on which God builds his church.

And so when we, when you and I confess that Jesus is the living God and our rock, and not even the gates of hell will prevail against the church, and neither will the pandemic.

[20:20] And when we do, we are permitted to languish, which leads to thriving through lament. And when we do, the Lord can transform our hate into I hope.

And then we will know that Jesus is our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, because he is living and he will know, and we will know, that on Christ the solid rock we stand, on all other ground is sinking sand.

And so let me lead you with this blessing from Paul, from chapter 15 of Romans. Now may the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope.