

## Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

Questioning Under the Clouds: Has His Steadfast Love Ceased Forever?

Psalms 77

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*TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO JEDUTHUN. A PSALM OF ASAPH. <sup>1</sup> I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. <sup>2</sup> In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. <sup>3</sup> When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah <sup>4</sup> You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. <sup>5</sup> I consider the days of old, the years long ago. <sup>6</sup> I said, "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart." Then my spirit made a diligent search: <sup>7</sup> "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? <sup>8</sup> Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? <sup>9</sup> Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" Selah <sup>10</sup> Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High." <sup>11</sup> I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. <sup>12</sup> I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. <sup>13</sup> Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? <sup>14</sup> You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples. <sup>15</sup> You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah <sup>16</sup> When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. <sup>17</sup> The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side. <sup>18</sup> The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. <sup>19</sup> Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen. <sup>20</sup> You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Psalm 77)*

Although you do not remember it, the very first sound that you uttered when you left the muted, warm, and protected confines of your mother's womb was a lament. You entered the cold, bright, painful world in which you now live, and the first thing you did was cry. No one needed to teach you how to lament<sup>1</sup> because it is a natural part of the fabric of a world that is broken. To be human is to lament.

Tears and crying are how we enter the world, and tears and crying are what mark the final gathering of family and friends at our funeral. While we do many appropriate things to remember the loved one that has died, the simple fact is that death has taken yet another loved one from us, and that loss is shocking, painful, and wrong. I've never left a funeral thinking, "Now that's the way life should be." Instead I'm always left shaking my head about the brevity of life and the pain that is a part of our lives. Life is filled with lament.

Do you know what I have found over the last four-plus decades of my life? I've spent a lot of time dealing with pain. I've done a lot of lamenting – both internally and externally. But do you know what

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), 32.

else I've discovered? I've learned that while crying is very natural and easy, lamenting – the kind that is biblical, honest and redemptive – is not as natural. There is something about lament that at first makes me uncomfortable, even scared.

Think, for instance, of the last time that you sat with someone who was completely overcome with grief and sorrow. Or think of a funeral where you heard the audible sounds of weeping in a sanctuary. Those moments become etched in your mind and heart, and part of the reason why they are so scary is because we do not have a well-developed or a biblical category for lament.

We know how to cry. But we may not know how to lament.

### **Why Lamentations Now?**

Over the years, I have taught a few series on personal suffering and hardship. In 2009 I did a series on the book of Job, and in 2012 I did a series called "Honest to God," which dealt with tough questions coming out of the Psalms. Both of those series were intended to help us deal with pain on a personal level.

This study of the book of Lamentations is intended to look at the same concept of pain, but to look at it from two different perspectives: 1) To view pain in a corporate or community setting and 2) To consider what we should do when pain does not resolve quickly. In other words, where do you go when pain is widespread and when it does not look to end soon? What language do you use? What biblical categories are available to you? How do you pray? What should you think? How can you help someone who is in the middle of a season of lament? These are some of the questions that we will try to address.

I have chosen to take the next eight weeks to look at the subject of lament and the book of Lamentations, specifically, for the following reasons:

1. Pain is inevitable, and I want you to be prepared. I want to prepare you not only for the time when you will suffer personally, but also for a time when you are suffering with a circle of friends, your small group, a neighborhood, a city, or a nation. I want you to know how to lament corporately.
2. Pain creates strong emotions, and I want you to know what to do with them. Our tendency is either to deny them or to try to solve them too quickly.
3. Sometimes pain does not go away quickly, and I want you to learn to live in lament. I want you to see that lament is not just a path **to** worship, but it is a path **of** worship<sup>2</sup> and to see that it is the pen of pain that writes the songs that call us to dance.<sup>3</sup>
4. Suffering or lamenting well provides a great opportunity for evangelism as the world hears and sees a God-centered language that they do not have. Eugene Peterson offers this insightful thought:

*"... One reason why people are uncomfortable with tears and the sight of suffering is that it is a blasphemous assault on their precariously maintained American spirituality of the pursuit of*

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<sup>2</sup> Card, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Card, 63.

*happiness. They want to avoid evidence that things are not right with the world as it is – without Jesus, without love, without faith. . . . It is a lot easier to keep the American faith if they don't have to look into the face of suffering. . . . So learning the language of lament is not only necessary to restore Christian dignity to suffering and repentance and death; it is necessary to provide a Christian witness to a world that has no language for and is therefore oblivious to the glories of wilderness and {the} cross.”<sup>4</sup>*

I know you know how to cry, but do you know how to lament? Do you know how to deal with your own pain, the pain of others, or the pain of a community? Do you see the value and purpose of learning the language of lament? Do you see how important biblical lament could be to a world that does not have a categorical solution for suffering?

We need this topic, and we need the book of Lamentations because it helps us see, as William Cowper said, “behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.” Lament shows us this anew and teaches us how to thrive in the midst of pain and suffering.

### **What is Lament?**

Before we get into Psalm 77, I want to give you a few introductory thoughts about the subject of lament to be sure that we are on the same page as we begin our study. If you picked up our Series Study Guide, there are a number of helpful thoughts about lament on page two. Let me highlight a few and give you some additional thoughts:

- A lament is a loud cry, a howl, or a passionate expression of grief. It gives voice and words to emotions that believers feel because of pain, suffering, and the questions that surface.
- The Psalms are filled with laments. At least one third of the Psalter is a lament – forty-two are individual laments and sixteen are corporate laments.<sup>5</sup> Laments are found through the Old and New Testament.
- Psalms of lament provide much of the detail regarding the crucifixion of Jesus. Psalm 69:21 references the vinegar that Jesus was given to drink; Psalm 109:25 predicts the mock crowd; Psalm 22:18 references the soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothing; Psalm 22:16 says, “they pierced my hands and my feet”; and Jesus famously quoted Psalm 22:1 at the end of his life: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”<sup>6</sup>
- Laments can be personal, communal, or both. They can be confessional as a person deals with his sin or the sin of the nation. Laments can be imprecatory, as they deal with sins committed against us.
- Lament wrestles with the circumstances of life which raise difficult questions regarding the seeming absence of God's presence and the mystery of his purposes. In other words, laments ask at least two questions: 1) “Where are you?” and 2) “If you love me, why is this happening?” It is

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<sup>4</sup> Card, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Card, 119-120

the heart of Psalm 22:1- *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”*

- Lament is not the opposite of praise, even though it asks difficult questions and wrestles deeply. Lament is a path to praise. It is the transition from pain to promise. Lament is a place of wilderness through which God leads us. Lament wrestles with the brokenness in us and around us. Lament is the land between brokenness and God’s mercy.
- To lament is not to be faithless. Given the prominence of lament in the Psalms and throughout the Bible, to lament well is actually an act of faith. Problems, pain, and suffering are a part of what it means to be human. And to struggle, to question, and to lament is part of what it means to be a Christian. When you understand the problem of sin in the world, God’s power, the beauty of redemption, and the future plan, the heart of the Christian cries out in faith, “How long, O Lord!” (Rev. 6:10).

Every lament is really a prayer. It is the cry of a hurting, confused, pain-filled yet believing heart. Lament is an act of faith where we resist the temptation to stop talking to God because we are angry or disenchanted with Him. Laments express to God what He already knows about our hearts.

To cry is inherently human; to lament is inherently Christian.

### **Psalm 77: Praying and Remembering**

I have chosen Psalm 77 for the introduction to this series because it provides a wonderful example of both the depth of pain of a lament and the way that a lament brings resolution. Psalm 77 is filled with honest struggle, deep pain, tough questions, determined trust, and a biblical grounding.

The Psalms is ascribed to Asaph, according to Jeduthun. Both of these men were part of the priestly service, appointed by David (1 Chronicles 6:39) to lead the congregation in worship and to sing at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 5:12). Psalms 50 and 73-83 are attributed to Asaph’s writing.

We are not sure exactly what prompted the composition of Psalm 77. There are no specific hints as to what circumstances were plaguing the people of God at this time, but it is clear that the nation, as a whole, is suffering and that it may be due to God’s displeasure with them (see 77:9). Unlike Psalm 44 there is no specific mention of an enemy or a foe. It appears as though hardship has descended upon the people of God, and they are struggling.

This is a psalm that is both personal and communal. A singular person is speaking about his personal struggle and his questions, but he is doing so on behalf of a larger group of people. His lament is personal, but it is reflective of the broader community. The psalmist pours out his heart in a painful prayer while anchoring his heart to God’s faithfulness in the past. He prays in pain and remembers the past.

### **Praying in Pain**

Psalm 77 begins with “I cry aloud to God,” and then Asaph repeats himself for emphasis. He says again, “aloud to God.” The psalm starts this way in order to frame the tone of this text. He is in pain,

and he is not silent. However, he is not just talking, complaining, or crying; he is crying out in prayer. What we have here is a painful prayer that the psalmist is offering out loud to God.

Look at the other references to prayer that follow in the first two verses:

- "... he will hear me" (v. 1b)
- "In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord" (v. 2a)
- "... in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying (v. 2b) (a reference to a prayer posture)

Clearly the psalmist is reaching out to God in the midst of his pain. While we do not know what the source of his pain is, we can see that he is struggling (more on this in a moment). But what I want you to see from the outset relates to what I said earlier about lament being a prayer. It takes faith to pray in the midst of pain. To lament, even with its messy struggle and tough questions, is an act of faith as one opens his or her heart to God.

So I want to establish from the outset that prayerful lament, with all of its tension and challenges, is better than silence. There is still hope in lament, even if it does not resolve quickly. Many people are afraid of lament, but I would tell you that there is something far worse: silent despair. Here is something that is very counterintuitive: lament and despair are complete opposites. Despair is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief and a denial that God exists, while lament is one of the deepest and most costly demonstrations of belief in God.<sup>7</sup>

If you have ever worked with a couple who is having marital problems, you know this to be true. One of the sure signs of a broken and hopeless marriage is a refusal to even speak to one another. When you hear that data point, you know that things are really, really bad. Strange as it is, I have found myself rejoicing when a couple says, "Well, we fought off and on all week" if the previous weeks have been marked by an absence of talking. Starting to talk, even if it is messy, is a good place to start.

I think the same thing is very true for our relationship with God. I have no doubt that there are several of you today who have stopped talking to God. You have stopped praying. And I hope that today you will be encouraged and motivated to start again. Or maybe you have a friend who is really struggling, and there are some things that they pray that make you wince. Before you jump in too quickly, can I just encourage you that at least they are praying. It's a start. Prayers of lament take faith, because the pain or the tough questions are not always solved quickly.

Notice the Psalmist's description of the emotional struggle within himself in verses 2-4: <sup>2</sup>... *my soul refuses to be comforted.* <sup>3</sup> *When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah* <sup>4</sup> *You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak (Psalm 77:2-4).* He is praying, but it is not bringing comfort or encouragement or rest or resolution. His prayers are not "working." And yet he is praying.

Take note of the fact that lament does lead us to resolution, but it is not always a resolution that is quick or timely. Grief is not tame, and lament cannot be used like linear equation. Lament is where

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<sup>7</sup> Card, 55.

you go while in pain with the faith-filled belief that one day God will bring resolution to all of this. Lament is where you live or (better) *how* you live when your life doesn't end like a Hallmark movie.

But there's more here than just prayer. The Psalmist is dealing with very difficult questions. In verses 5-9 he makes a turn away from just focusing on his pain to considering the central question: *Why isn't God doing more?* He begins to "consider the days of old," "to remember my song in the night," "to meditate in my heart," and "to make a diligent search." He is thinking, and it is painful, because it leads to difficult questions.

The Psalmist lists six pointed, rhetorical questions: 1) Will the Lord spurn forever?, 2) {Will He} never again be favorable?, 3) Has His steadfast love forever ceased?, 4) Are His promises at an end for all time?, 5) Has God forgotten to be gracious?, and 6) Has He, in anger, shut up His compassion? Notice that he is questioning the favor, the love, the promise, the faithfulness, and the compassion of God.

Does the Psalmist really believe that God is not loving and is unfaithful? I do not think so, and the rest of the Psalm will bear this out. But he does something important here. Talking this way is an honest recognition that pain and suffering often create difficult emotions which we know are not based upon truth. But they feel true nonetheless. Pain creates many kinds of tensions, and these honest rhetorical questions are a vital part of lament. In fact, I would tell you that honest, humble, pain-filled questions offered in prayer to God are part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. After all, Jesus himself said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000), who pastored the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for thirty-two years, said this about these kinds of questions:

*"... It is better to ask them than not to ask them, because asking them sharpens the issue and pushes us toward the right, positive response. Alexander Maclaren insists that asking such questions is good. He writes, 'Doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkening, like poisonous mists, in {the} heart. A thought, be it good or bad, can be dealt with when it is made articulate.'"<sup>8</sup>*

Boice speaks as only a pastor who has dealt with people's pain for decades can speak. He knows that God is able to handle our difficult questions. As a father I know this to be true. When my children question my actions from hurting and humble hearts, I'm inclined to listen, and it only makes me love them more. In many respects I'm glad and affirmed when they really want to understand.

Praying through pain means that we deal honestly with the strong emotions that we feel and the difficult questions that we face. So, is there anything that you've stopped talking to God about? Any questions that you've not asked? Have you asked those questions with the wrong heart? Is there someone near you who is lamenting and who you need to help a little differently in light of this text?

Lament is humbly praying through the pain. It leads us to worship while also being worship.

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<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42-106: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 640-641.

## Remembering the Past

This Psalm began with the repetition of “aloud” twice in verse one, and now we see another important repetition in verse eleven: “remember.” Psalm 77 illustrates both the journey and the destination of lament. Verses 1-9 set up the tension, and verses 10-20 resolve it. I chose this psalm so that you can see this easily, but not every Lament ends this way and this quickly. The book of Lamentations will take a different format and method of resolution.

However, this is where Biblical lamentation ends. The cry of the cross yields to the empty tomb. “My God, my God why . . .” gives way to “He is not here, for he has risen, as he said . . .” (Matt 28:6). Or as Paul said in Romans 8:18, <sup>18</sup>*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* Lament eventually leads to joy and resolution, but getting there may not come quickly, easily, or in a time frame that fits your expectation.

In the interim, we need to remember. And that is what begins in verse 10. Asaph makes a very significant shift with the word “Then” and the subsequent appeal to the history of God’s powerful deliverance. Notice the language connected to his remembering:

- (v. 10b) – “appeal . . . to the years of the right hand of the Most High”
- (v. 11a) – “will remember the deeds of the Lord”

The reflection then shifts to a more personal appeal, as if Asaph is talking directly to God:

- (v. 11b) – “Yes! I will remember your wonders of old”
- (v. 12) – “I will ponder all your work and meditate on your mighty deeds”

Asaph is looking back and reflecting on the works of God in Israel’s past. His lament has brought him to the place where he is now remembering the numerous ways in which God has indeed proven Himself to be trustworthy. And then the focus shifts from the historical works of God to the very character of God:

- (v. 13) – “Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?” Notice this rhetorical question and how different it is than the previous six questions.
- (v. 14) – “You are the God who works wonders; you make known your might among the peoples”

Asaph’s remembering is now becoming more and more focused. It has shifted to history and to the character of God, and do you see where it is specifically headed? Verse 15 provides a hint, which becomes fully evident in verses 16-20.

This prayerful lament finds its hope-filled resolution in the ultimate moment that defined the people of Israel and their relationship with God: the Exodus. Verse 15 talks about redemption and the children of Jacob and Joseph, a clear reference to their time in Egypt. And verses 16-20 talk about the Red Sea crossing, a defining moment in the life of Israel, using similar language to the Song of Moses

which the people sang after witnessing the defeat of Pharaoh. These verses are filled with powerful and comforting language:

*<sup>16</sup> When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. <sup>17</sup> The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side. <sup>18</sup> The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. <sup>19</sup> Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen. <sup>20</sup> You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Psalm 77:16–20 (ESV)*

In the Exodus and the Red Sea Crossing, God's power and His care for His people are very clearly seen. Do you see what Asaph does here? He anchors his questioning, hurting heart to the single greatest redemptive event in the life of Israel. He took his heart back to the foundation of everything. And as he talks about this moment, he uses words that are so incredibly precious: "Your way was **through** the sea . . . yet your footprints were **unseen** . . . you led your people like a **flock** . . . (Ps 77:19-20).

The Exodus was an anchor for Asaph's lament. There was no greater moment in Israel's history. It defined his understanding of God's character and gave him hope in the midst of the dark moments of lament when it seemed as though God had forgotten about His people. The Exodus was an anchor for his weary soul. Remembering began to lead him through his lament.

### **Lamenting Like a Christian**

For the Christian, our Exodus event – the place where we found deliverance – is the cross. It is where our questions should be taken. It is the foundation of our hope and confidence that no matter how dark, bleak, or difficult life may be, God has already proven Himself to be for us and not against us.

*<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32)*

Therefore, we can lament the pain, the brokenness, and the sufferings of this life while anchoring our hearts to the bedrock truth of the grace of God. We can lament and join in the lamentation of others as they wrestle with difficult emotions and challenging questions. We can keep praying and keep seeking and keep wrestling. We can cry out to God in our human pain, and we can do so with a hope that one day God will make everything right. In our lament we can still trust.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

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