

## PSALMS OF LAMENT: HOW TO COMPLAIN

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Psalm 130

I want you to imagine that you are a resident of the nation of Judea about 2100 years ago. It is the first century BC—100 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. You are Jewish and you observe the traditions of your faith which include making pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem. You do this at least once a year when you and your family journey to the capital to attend the festival accompanying one of the Jewish holy days.

Normally, on the day of your departure for Jerusalem, you wake early and load the donkeys with blankets and food. Your family convenes and together they start out on the road. Along with you are your immediate family as well as extended family of aunts and uncles and parents and cousins and second cousins and their families and so on. Your entire village may even join with you. And why not? Traveling is safer in numbers. And certainly more fun. The festival is a time to relax and enjoy, to visit with friends.

At the end of the first day's travel, you all stop and make camp. You sleep under the stars. The next day, you resume your journey, and the closer you get to Jerusalem, the more people join with you on the road. They are all heading to the capital and are in a festive mood.

And as you walk together, you do what people have done for generations, you sing. Because your destination is a religious festival, you sing the songs of your faith; you sing the psalms from your scripture. On some songs, everyone joins in singing together. On others, one group of travelers takes the lead while the rest sing responses—their voices echoing through the hills. Other times, the verses are passed from group to group. The singing is infectious. Everyone participates. The words are inscribed on your heart. The music sets the mood for the festival that lies ahead.

During this season of Lent, I have been preaching this series of sermons called Psalms of Lament. Of the 150 psalms in our Bible, roughly 50 can be classified as a lament. A lament is a cry to God from someone in distress. A lament can come from an individual suffering illness, depression, or grief. A lament can come from an entire people or nation who are imperiled by an invading army, or a plague, or a natural disaster.

These psalms of lament follow a pattern. They each begin with a cry to God—a plea that God will hear them. Then we find a description of their suffering. And finally, there is a praise and thanksgiving that God hears their cry.

Our reading for today is Psalm 130. As psalms of lament go, this one is not as 'lament-y' as others. It is nowhere near as intense as, say, Psalm 102 where the psalmist is near death from sickness. That person describes their fever as making their *bones burn like a furnace*. Psalm 130 is much lighter in tone, but still potent in meaning.

In addition to being a psalm of lament, Psalm 130 is also labeled as a Psalm of Ascent. It is one of a group of psalms that were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Jerusalem sits on a hill. One always "goes up" to Jerusalem. Today, we think of north as being "up," as in "I'm going up to Maine," or "down to Florida." A psalm of ascent would be psalm for the road up to Jerusalem. Its purpose is to prepare the people for the upcoming holy observances. It reminds them of the purpose of their pilgrimage. As Christians, we do the same thing. We have hymns that we sing during Advent and Lent that prepare us for the coming holy day. For example, in a few moments, we will sing the Lenten hymn, *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*. This prepares our hearts for Easter. As you read Psalm 130, imagine that you are walking a dusty road surrounded by family and friends singing these words together.

Psalm 130 begins with appeal to God. *Out of the depths I cry to you, O YHWH. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!* What are these *depths*? Maybe the depths are the waters of creation when the cosmos were chaos and God had not yet induced order. Maybe they are the depths of despair. Maybe they are the depths of sin. Maybe the depths of Hell. But out of these depths the psalmist cries to God, calling God by name, pleading to be heard.

Following the cry to God is the lament. In Psalm 101, no one is dying, no nation is being invaded. Instead, the lament is a confession of sin. The person confesses that, yes, if God were to tally up any person's sins, they would not be blameless. Not one is blameless. No one is pure. We are all corrupted by our sins. What we find here is a simple confession. It is admission of the brokenness of all people. As we read in Paul's Letter to the Romans, *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

However, within this simple confession is the reminder that where we find sin we also find God's judgment, and we find forgiveness. God examines us, identifies our sins, and yet chooses to forgive. That is why we gather in worship, that is the root of our reverence—to praise the one whose great power is the power to forgive. For the psalmist, this power of forgiveness is the source of all hope.

Psalm 130 concludes with the plea that all Israel—all people—embrace this hope. Yahweh is love; Yahweh is the power to forgive and the power to change.

Many years ago, I had a parishioner that always complained. Each Sunday morning, I would enter the sanctuary before worship and go around speaking to

members of the congregation. Eventually, I would make my way to this woman, sitting in her seat in her pew (we'll call her Polly), and I'd say, "Polly, how are you doing today?" And immediately she would launch into a litany of complaints. It was as if she had been bundling up these complaints all week and was about to burst. In my opinion, she didn't have much to complain about. She did have some health issues, but nothing more serious than other people in the room. Her children and grandchildren lived near her and saw her almost every day. They all came to church together. To me, her constant complaining seemed unwarranted.

This went on for years, until one Sunday I just couldn't take it anymore, and I interrupted her and said, "Polly, tell me something good. Something good must have happened this week." And I'll never forget the look that came across her face when I said that. She stared at me with a mixture of surprise and anger and disgust. It was as if I had suggested that she poison her dog. And she wouldn't speak to me for weeks.

I never really figured it out. I guess that to her I was God's representative and she had her complaints to bring before God. And she wasn't going to be denied that opportunity. But the problem with Polly's complaining was that it didn't lead anywhere. It was just whining. She wasn't asking for healing or confessing her sins. She didn't want to be changed. She couldn't even see God among all her clutter. She was deep in the depths and did not even realize it.

I imagine that when I announced this sermon series on Psalms of Lament that some of you assumed that I would be reading to you about serial complainers. But that is not what these psalms are about. Yes, these psalms are difficult because of the raw emotion of people living on the brink of collapse. But the psalms of lament are also powerful statements of faith. They express the hope that our God hears us and cares for us, that our God judges our sins and yet forgives us. The principal plea of the voices in the psalms of lament is not that God fix their situation. (If God chooses to heal their suffering, they won't turn it down.) The primary plea of these laments is that God acknowledge their lives and their sins. This is their plea, "I am a person; I have sinned; forgive me Yahweh."

The psalms of lament remind us that it is okay to complain to God. In fact, God invites it. Jesus tells the parable about the woman who demands justice from a judge. She pesters him until he capitulates. The point Jesus makes is that if this unjust judge relents to this woman's ceaseless begging, just think how easily God—who loves you—will listen (Luke 18:1-8).

And then, on the night before his impending crucifixion, Jesus sat alone praying to God, and he complains saying, *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done* (Luke 22:42). We are free to complain to God, but we must do so seeking God's will, not our own.

To complain to God is to exert our faith in the covenant with God. God promises to be our God if we will be his people. By calling to God in prayer and lament we are expressing our faith in this promise. We are not throwing prayers to the wind in an off-chance hope that they may catch the attention of some random deity, but we are praying directly from the depths to our own God who claims us and promises always to listen and deliver us to salvation.

In these final days of Lent as we approach the day of Easter, we should be preparing ourselves like pilgrims heading up to Jerusalem—crying out from the depths of our sin and singing our confessions so that we may stand before the God that we can call by name. Amen.