

Psalms: Cry Out to God for Help Sunday, 7/18/21

Last week, we wrestled with the uncomfortable reality that all too often our lives more closely resemble those of the wicked rather than the righteous. But what we can't do, God has already done, if only we'll turn to Jesus and ask for help. This week, we embrace the age-old practice of crying out to God in lament. Believe it or not, some ways of lamenting are likely to be more helpful to you than others.

For a great many people, there were more things to complain about over the last year than usual. There's nothing inherently wrong with the act of complaining, to others or to God, provided the motive and the approach are healthy. One wrong turn that we sometimes take is to complain about things in an exaggerated and self-centered way, as if our experiences in life are much worse than they really are and as if the objective reality of life finds its epicenter in ourselves. You can think of that as the Eeyore syndrome, if you like. Healthy complaint takes a more honest assessment of the facts and recognizes this is a big world that's filled with billions of other people. It also seeks the good of the whole over the long run, and not just the good of the self in the moment. Even more crucially, it recognizes God's sovereignty and plan for restoring creation.

Another wrong turn we take in our complaint is to assume hostile intent, or any involvement at all, on the part of another person, freely venting our anger on unsuspecting others without even bothering to consider the possibility that we've made faulty assumptions. Are you really sure that your friend or your spouse wronged you? Is God really to blame for your car accident? Nobody deserves to be clubbed over the head by your complaints. Healthy complaint seeks a just resolution through honest relationship along with generous portions of humility.

In the Psalms, we find a different kind of complaint that we've come to call lament. At a casual reading, it would be easy to think that Biblical laments are nothing more than a venting of emotions along with a litany of complaints against God and one's enemies. Pastor Mark Vroegop notes that Biblical lament is actually a form of prayer, and instead of simply dumping our anger and anxieties on God, the purpose of lament is to rebuild our confidence

and trust in God.¹ Toward that end, most Biblical laments follow a similar pattern of intentionally turning to God, boldly asking for God's help, and then choosing to trust. Listen for this pattern as I read our second lament for the morning. I'm reading Psalm 88, from the New Living Translation.

{Read Psalm 88 NLT}

Psalm 88 begins with a pretty typical call to God: "O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out to you by day. I come to you at night. Now hear my prayer; listen to my cry." That's quite a bit milder than Psalm 6, which begins with this address to God: "O Lord, don't rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your rage."² The image of God being angry might be a difficult one for us to accept, but note how personal, direct, and honest this address to God is. There's no elaborate preface that extols God's goodness, just a frank assessment of the psalmist's greatest fear and need. Something difficult, something unbearable is happening to the psalmist, and right or wrong, the Psalmist has assumed that he's done something to provoke God's judgment. In fact, the writer of Psalm 88 also seems to suppose God's wrath, when he writes in verse 7, "You anger weighs me down,"³ and again in verse 16: "Your fierce anger has overwhelmed me."⁴

I think the psalmists deserves credit for turning to God in the face of what they believe to be God's judgment. Many of us would rather run and hide than face God's wrath directly. But that's the beauty of the laments- They seek out God, immediately and directly, no matter what the problem is, and put trust in the idea that it's more than just an exercise in self-expression.

Having turned to God, the psalmists give most of their ink to their complaints, which rely on common images in their appeal to God for help. Crying is an almost universal condition described in the laments. "My eyes are blinded by my tears."⁵ "I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears. My vision is

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dare-to-hope-in-god>

² Psalm 6:1. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

³ Psalm 88:7. Ibid.

⁴ Psalm 88:16. Ibid.

⁵ Psalm 88:9. Ibid.

blurred by grief; my eyes are worn out.”⁶

When was the last time that you cried? Was it this morning? Yesterday? Or has it been a long, long time? There’s something about crying that’s both normal and cleansing, even though the occasions of our tears are often painful and difficult. Crying is one way that we communicate and process the deep feelings that accompany significant events in our lives. Jesus himself wept, and so we know that God fully understands the language of our tears.

Death often figures in the lament psalms, either literally or figuratively, with a variety of images. Sometimes it’s the image of a grave, sometimes a pit, or simply a somewhat opaque reference to Sheol. Biblical ideas surrounding death evolved over time, even within the Old Testament period, so we have to be a little careful about importing our Christian views of death when we read the Psalms.

“Going down to Sheol” was sometimes used as a synonym for dying, with Sheol generally referring to the place of the dead, which in ancient cosmology usually meant somewhere underground. There was no early notion of heaven, hell or purgatory, but there was a belief that the dead somehow were gathered together in some distant, deep, and dark place.

You can find many convergent ideas surrounding death in the lament psalms. In Psalm 88:3, “death draws near,”⁷ or as the NRSV renders it, “my life draws near to sheol.”⁸ In verse 6, a slightly different allusion to death: “You have thrown me into the lowest pit, into the darkest depths.”⁹ Perhaps my favorite is this very rationale appeal to God from Psalm 6: “For the dead do not remember you. Who can praise you from the grave?”¹⁰ That’s an appeal that’s repeated in Psalm 88: “Are your wonderful deeds of any use to the dead? Do the dead rise up and praise you?”¹¹

We know, as Christians, that Christ defeated the power of the grave, and that Jesus came that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”¹² But even with

⁶ Psalm 88:6-7. Ibid.

⁷ Psalm 88:3. Ibid.

⁸ Psalm 88:3. New Revised Standard Version.

⁹ Psalm 88:6. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

¹⁰ Psalm 6:5. Ibid.

¹¹ Psalm 88:10. Ibid.

¹² John 3:16. New International Version (2011).

that clear hope before us, we're seldom eager to rush to the end of this precious life that God has blessed us with. We know that we will indeed praise God in our next life, but until then, there's nothing wrong with crying out to God and asking for this life to be sustained.

There are so many other vivid images in the lament psalms. Can you relate to any of these? Have you been there? Is this where you're at? Have you ever felt trapped, left with zero options in an impossible situation? The psalmist cries out to God for you: "I am in a trap with no way of escape."¹³

Have you ever felt alone and friendless? The psalmist cries out to God for you: "You have driven my friends away by making me repulsive to them."¹⁴ And again, "You have taken away my companions and loved ones. Darkness is my closest friend."¹⁵

Have you ever felt sick, depressed in body, mind, and soul? The psalmist cries out to God for you: "Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. I am sick at heart. How long, O Lord, until you restore me?"¹⁶ And again, "I have been sick and close to death since my youth."¹⁷

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by something, like you're drowning and can't save yourself? The psalmist cries out to God for you: "They swirl around me like floodwaters all day long. They have engulfed me completely."¹⁸ And, "with wave after wave you have engulfed me."¹⁹

Thankfully, the lament psalms don't usually leave us in our complaints. Instead, we usually find some assertion of trust in God near the end, leaving us with hope that in the midst of our distress, our faith in God can grow. In Psalm 6, we find that near the end: "[T]he Lord has heard my weeping. The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord will answer my prayer."²⁰ It's strangely absent at the end of Psalm 88, and we have to circle all the way back to the first verse to find it: "Lord, you are the God who saves me."²¹ It's short, but it's there.

¹³ Psalm 88:8. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Psalm 88:18. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

¹⁶ Psalm 6:2-3. Ibid.

¹⁷ Psalm 88:15. Ibid.

¹⁸ Psalm 88:17. Ibid.

¹⁹ Psalm 88:7. Ibid.

²⁰ Psalm 6:8-9. Ibid.

²¹ Psalm 88:1. Ibid.

Seventeen and a half verses of lament, and half a verse that addresses God and acknowledges God's power and compassion. Perhaps that's as much faith as the psalmist could muster. Perhaps it's enough. "Lord, you are the God who saves me."

The laments are a gift to us, inviting us to approach God with an honest and open heart in the most raw and challenging moments of our lives. The laments are also a bit of a prod, reminding us that complaint was never intended to be our destination. Instead, the lament psalms remind us that our goal and our salvation is always found in building up our faith in Christ, even in the midst of life's greatest trials. The Lord will hear your weeping. The Lord will hear your plea. The Lord will answer your prayer.

Please take some time now to reflect on your need for God's compassion.



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