

## Introduction

This morning we're continuing our sermon series, 'Summer in the Psalms.' Each week, we've been looking at a different psalm, but these aren't just random, one-off psalms. Each psalm we've looked at represents a certain type/genre of psalm. In week one, we looked at a *Thanksgiving* psalm, showing us that we can give thanks to God even in times of suffering. In week two, we looked at a *Royal* psalm, helping us to delight in our perfect King Jesus. And last week we looked at a *Praise* psalm, calling us to sing with enthusiasm and joy.

What Pastor Jack and I hope is that this sermon series will help and equip you to read the psalms for yourself. That you would be able to turn to a random psalm and say, 'Oh, I see what's going on here. This sounds a bit like a praise psalm, or a royal psalm, or a thanksgiving psalm.' And knowing that will help you know how to read and understand it.

This week, we're going to be talking about a type of psalm called a *lament* psalm. To start, we just want to think about *what* a lament is and why it might be helpful to us. And then in the second part of our time together, we'll look at Psalm 13 and learn *how* to lament. So, why lament? And then, how to lament.

## Why lament?

I have clear memories of being a teenager, and hearing older Christians say, 'Oh, I love reading the psalms. They're so powerful and helpful.' And so I would try to read some psalms, but often they just didn't really resonate with me. I particularly struggled to relate to the psalms of lament. We don't use the word 'lament' very much these days. According to the dictionary, it's 'a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.' And incredibly, there are more than 60 lament psalms. That's more than 42% of all psalms!

And yet when many of us read a lament psalm, like Psalm 13 that we just read before, we feel uncomfortable. We don't quite know what to do with it. We think to ourselves, 'Is he allowed to say that to God?' Imagine if someone in your Growth Group kicked off the prayer time by crying out, 'Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?' We'd be concerned, wouldn't we?

How can a Christian say that? I mean, what about 1 Thessalonians 5 – '*rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances*'? What about James 1:2 – '*consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds*'? What about Philippians 4:4 – '*rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice*'? Lament feels wrong because it seems like the opposite of the rejoicing that's meant to characterize the Christian life. And yet 42% of the psalms are filled with cries of pain and complaints to God. So how do we make sense of this? Mark Vroegop, an American pastor and author, suggests that actually, lament is not the opposite of rejoicing at all. It's actually how we get to rejoicing. It's how we process our pain so that we *can* rejoice!

[slide] I owe a debt of gratitude to Mark Vroegop for helping me learn about lament this week. He's written a number of articles and a book called, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*. I've found what he has to say incredibly helpful. I've borrowed from it heavily for this

sermon, and I'd highly recommend his book to anyone who's really struggling at the moment, or seeking to help someone who is, or just wants to learn more about biblical lament.

Mark is public about his own story, about how he and his wife lost their unborn daughter just 3 days before she was due. He describes the crushing grief and devastation that came as they sat in the ultrasound room searching for a heartbeat, as his wife gave birth to the body of their 9-pound baby girl, as they buried her in the ground and embarked on a journey of heart-break and sorrow.

In the aftermath of this event, Mark realized that he and his wife didn't really know how to deal with their grief. And he also quickly learnt that most of the Christians around him didn't know what to do either. He writes that many people avoided the subject, and that, 'When people stayed in the conversation, they often responded in unhelpful ways. In moments of attempted comfort, people said things like "I'm sure the Lord will give you another baby," "Maybe more people will come to faith because of the death of your daughter," or "The Lord must know he can trust you with this." Every person meant well. I appreciated their attempts to address our pain. But it became clear that most people did not know how to join us in our grief. Lament was just not familiar terrain.'

I want us to pause and think about the significance of that statement for a moment. Think about the video that we watched just before the sermon, about the chaotic, hurting state of our world. Think about all the violence: the wars, the terrorism, the shootings. Think of the disasters: the eruption of a volcano in Tonga, the death of 6 kids on a jumping castle in Devonport. Think of the COVID situation, the fear, the uncertainty, the rifts that come between us as we wrestle with the best way to respond. And think about what's going on closer to home, those of us mourning the loss of loved ones, whether miscarried babies, a friend, a parent, or a long-loved spouse. Think of those battling cancer, dementia and Alzheimer's. Think of those living with chronic pain, with past trauma, with depression, with anxiety. Think of those who are infertile and long for a child, of those who are single and long for a spouse, of those with wandering children who long for them return to the Lord. Think of those families in a season of difficulty, or those marriages that have fallen on hard times. Think of those who are oppressed by racism, or sexism, or domestic abuse. Think of those with stresses and frustrations at work, or because of unemployment, or feeling aimless in life. Think of those who feel spiritually dry and empty, or plagued by doubts, or crushed by Satan's attacks and the relentless pressure of temptation. Think of those who feel they don't belong, who feel alone, who feel like misfits.

Friends, this is the world we live in. And the people around us simply don't have the words to express or process the pain they're experiencing. It is us, Christians, the church, who have the framework, the worldview, to make sense of suffering. We're the ones who know that God made this world perfect, that it has been ruined by sin, that Jesus is redeeming it, and that one day he will wipe away every tear, right every wrong, and make all things new. These four key stages of redemptive history – Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration – are so important! They tell us that we live in a world full of both glorious hope *and* immense suffering. They remind us that we live in a world that is groaning, waiting, hoping.

Christian, this is where you live. You live in the in-between. The question is, *how do you live in this place?* A place of promise and pain? A place of hope and hurt? A place of salvation and suffering? What do you do when you know the promises of Romans 8, that we can never be separated from God's love, that he works all things for good – and you believe those promises! – and yet the pain doesn't go away?

According to the Bible, whether in the book of Psalms, or Job, or Lamentations, the answer is that *we should lament*. Lament is a language, a vocabulary, that helps us to express our pain to God. I

wonder whether we know this language here at Riverbank? Or is lament a foreign language to us? Could it be that we don't really know how to lament? In our prayers from the front? In the songs we sing? In our Growth Groups? As we stand beside graves and hospital beds? As we love our friends and family? When someone opens up about a struggle they're going through?

What is lament? Mark Vroegop says, 'Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.' I love that definition... I tried to come up with my own this week, but I couldn't think of anything better. 'Lament is a *prayer in pain that leads to trust.*' This morning we want to use Psalm 13 as an example of how to lament. We can think of it like a recipe... a lament recipe. Psalm 13 shows us that biblical lament has a basic formula which we can use again and again, with different words for different situations. This formula has 4 keys stages: Turn, Complain, Ask, Trust. Let's look at these one by one as we walk through Psalm 13.

## 1. Turn

Turn to God. It's right there in v1, don't miss it. 'How long, *LORD?*'

As Christians, we often don't know how to deal with deep pain because it doesn't seem to fit with our theology of being victorious in Jesus, of having hearts full of peace and joy all the time. So what do we do? We often deny our pain and downplay it. We tell others and ourselves that we're fine. We bottle it up. Some of us have a collection of these bottles, a creepy shelf of jars full of strange slimy things, pickled and floating. We tell ourselves that Christians shouldn't have doubts or experience days of hopelessness. And so in our conversations with other Christians and in our prayers to God, we vocalize what we think we *should* feel, not what we're actually feeling. We keep doing the things that we see other Christians do... even though we might like we're slowly shriveling on the inside, like our faith is becoming a little less authentic, like our salvation is a little less meaningful every day.

We might manage to live in denial for a long time, for years even. It's not too hard to bail out the water while the waves are small. But then one day our boat gets hit by a 10-meter wave, and it shatters us. It drives us to despair. We feel like we can't go on. We feel crushed. We feel abandoned by God and don't know where to turn.

But there's a third way of dealing with hardship, a way which doesn't involve denying reality or being crushed by reality. Psalm 13 shows us the alternative: *we go to God with our pain.* Why has God included over 60 lament psalms in the Bible? Because God is inviting us to come to him – not just with praises, but with burdens and complaints and questions. He's saying, I want to hear it. Try me! Cry to me!

And when we come, we aren't met by some shallow philosophy about silver-linings and 'you'll be okay.' We aren't silenced and forced to feel things we don't feel. No, we're met by a God who is tender, who cares, who listens, who understands. Remember that amazing passage in Hebrews 4 that we looked at on Christmas Day: Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses because he was tempted in every way, just like us. Isn't that the friend we need in times of hardship? Jesus entered our devastated world, he walked through the blood-soaked trenches, he sat in the dust of the refugee camp, he shed tears with those gathered around the hospital bed. Jesus is the ultimate proof that God wants a genuine, deep *relationship* with us - a relationship of honesty, a relationship that is robust enough to handle conflict and complaints and questions.

So that's exactly what the psalmist, David, does in verses 1-2. He turns to God and he voices his complaint. First step to lament: turn. Now second, complain.

## 2. Complain

<sup>1</sup>How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

<sup>2</sup>How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

What's the crisis that David's talking about here? Some think it's some kind of illness or depression, but we really don't know. I think the fact that it's vague is a blessing to us because it lets us borrow these words and apply them to our own struggles. Some laments are individual, like this one. Others are corporate, as God's people cry out together because of some national disaster or threat.

David's complaint begins in v1 by pointing the finger at God. Look how bold he is! When he says, 'will you *forget* me forever?', he isn't talking about God's memory but about God withholding blessing and help. In the Old Testament, to *remember* someone is to help them. David says, God, why aren't you helping me? Why aren't you blessing me? This is what hurts him most... not that he's missing out on some particular good thing, but that the hardship makes him think God has turned away. The root of David's pain is that he feels like God has abandoned him. Isn't the same often true for us? We cry out and say, 'God, it doesn't feel like you love me right now, it doesn't feel like you're blessing me! Have you left? Have you forgotten me?'

Then in verse 2, David's complaint focuses not only on God but also himself. He speaks about wrestling with his thoughts, and having sorrow in his heart day after day. His emotions are in turmoil, and he can't control them. If this is your experience, if the battles you fight are often with your emotions and your thoughts, let this encourage you.

Verse 2 also mentions an enemy who threatens to triumph over David. Again, we don't know what this refers to, but we do know that as Christians our greatest enemy is Satan, the evil one. David feels like evil is winning, like righteousness is losing. And so he cries out, 'God, is this what you want? Where are you?'

So verses 1-2 cover a wide range of struggles: struggling with God, struggling within ourselves, and struggling with enemies. And David brings all of it to God. Notice his complaint takes the form of questions. This is often all we can do when we bring our pain to God. We ask, why? How long? Where are you? Have you forgotten me? If you still aren't sure whether it's okay to do this... remember that Jesus himself cried out while he was on the cross, using the words of Psalm 22 – 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' His relationship with his Father was so intimate, so loving, so deep... and so the pain of suffering and separation was even more intense.

I really want you to grasp this concept this morning: *mature Christians lament*. Godly Christians who are close to God still struggle and groan and cry out. In fact, I think that lament is actually a mark of spiritual maturity, because it shows that you know God, you love God, you miss his presence, you crave his blessing, you can't conceive of life without him... and so when it *feels* like he has turned away from you, you turn and you voice your complaint.

That's what we see in v1-2. Then, in verses 3-4, David begins to ask God to act. Turn, complain, and now third, ask.

### 3. Ask

In verse 3, David asks for three things, and he asks with boldness.

- First, *look!* ‘God, I feel like you’ve hidden your face from me... now please look at me.’
- Second, *answer!* ‘God, I feel forgotten, I feel like this has been going on too long. It’s been too long since I felt your grace, your blessing, your favour. Please answer my prayers.’
- And then third, *give light!* Give light to me eyes or I will sleep in death. Without you, God, I’ll die. Who else can take this sorrow from me? Who else can rescue me from my enemies? Give me light, give me relief.

We even see David bargaining with God in verse 4. He says, God, you’ve promised to deliver me. You’ve staked your reputation on this. But if you let me fall, my enemies will be victorious. David is praying on the basis of God’s promises. That’s something we can learn to do too.

- God, you say you delight to save sinners... so why won’t you save this person? Please do for them what you’ve done for me.
- God, you’ve promised to build and grow your church... so why is that little church down the road struggling so much? Please strengthen them.
- God, you’ve promise to raise up gospel workers... so why are there so many churches without pastors? Please provide.
- God, you say that the Christian life is meant to be full of joy and hope... so why can’t I feel that? Please lift the darkness.
- God, you say that your Word is alive and beautiful... so why am I finding it so hard to understand it? Please make the Bible more meaningful to me.
- God, you say that Christians have the power to overcome temptation... so why can’t I break this addiction to pornography? Please set me free.
- God, I know you have the power to heal the sick... so why won’t you take away this cancer? Please bring healing.

David turns to God, he complains about his suffering, he asks for God to intervene. And then last, in verses 5-6, he chooses to trust. Turn. Complain. Ask. And trust.

### 4. Trust

That’s what lament is. It’s *a prayer in pain that leads to trust*. This is where lament leads... not to denial, not to despair, but deeper into the arms of God. Every lament psalm ends with some sort of expression of confidence or praise... except Psalm 88, which I preached on a few months ago.

Notice the shift in verse 5. *But*. ‘But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.’ What causes this shift? There’s no indication that David’s circumstances have improved. I think the change comes from David’s prayer in verses 3-4. As he brings his prayers to God, *he chooses to trust*.

He focuses on three things in particular: God’s unfailing love, God’s salvation, and the fact that God has been good to him.

‘Unfailing love’ is the Hebrew word, *hesed*. This isn’t an emotional love based on feelings – it’s God’s loyal, steadfast, covenant love. David says, I trust in that. Actually, I think the ESV’s translation is better: ‘I *have* trusted.’ David is looking back, over the years of his life, reminding himself of who God is, how God has never let him down yet.

And so, having looked *back* to God’s faithfulness, and having cried out about his *present* pain, David’s prayer finishes by looking *forward* to the future... and he chooses to trust. Again, the ESV is better: ‘my heart *will* rejoice in your salvation. I *will* sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.’

Notice something about this lament. It began with questions, lots of questions. And the good news is, it doesn’t end there... but it doesn’t exactly end with answers either. God doesn’t give David all the reasons for his suffering. What he gives David is a renewed confidence in God, to keep walking with God and wrestling with him and waiting on him.

That’s worth noticing as people who are learning to lament. This is what makes the words of lament different from offering simplistic explanations about silver-linings. We may not understand our grief and pain any better than before. The suffering may even continue for years to come. But in the midst of this, lament leads us to trust the God who is with us in our pain, the God who has pledged himself to us through his son Jesus Christ, the one who experienced rejection and abandonment on the cross so that we could be adopted into God’s family and never cast out.

## Conclusion

Turn. Complain. Ask. Trust.

I hope that you can take this formula with you and let it be a recipe for lament.

- Perhaps to lament over what’s happening in your own life, whether that be something intensely painful or just the occasional blues.
- Perhaps this language of lament will help you care for someone else who’s struggling. Maybe it will help you to share their pain, to weep with those who weep.
- Perhaps our musicians will help us to sing more songs of lament.
- Perhaps our service leaders will incorporate lament into our services more frequently.

Perhaps we’ll find that lament helps our church to be more effective in outreach, as we offer hurting people words that meet them in their pain.