

**OPENING:**

My name is Tim Basselin. I've been on the preaching team here for a couple years now. I'm a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, and I usually begin my classes with a devotional. Sometimes we pray for one another. Sometimes we talk about a piece of art or a poem. In choosing a devotional, I try to be sensitive to where my students are--maybe they're feeling the pressure of the end of a semester or maybe something is occupying our cultural attention, like Houston and then Florida and the Puerto Rico and then Vegas. I try to create a space where we can at least speak these things out into the open.

Two and a half years ago I entered class with this intention. I pulled up a couple of news stories just to lay out the facts from the weekend. As I began to list some details, 21 Coptic Christians kneeling on a beach in Libya, executioners standing behind them with swords, I began to cry. I had been reading about this for a few days. I had been praying for the families affected and for the Coptic church. But suddenly, speaking it aloud in my class, these kneeling men became my brothers and I began to lament.

This lamenting meant a couple of things. First, it was a dignifying of their humanity and a return of mine. It's very difficult in an age of constant news to feel the humanity of disasters or evil actions around the world. We're not built for constant grief. But this weeping also meant I had some serious questions for God. These 21, faithfully serving, choosing death over a denial of Christ! And yet it seemed like God was denying them. Is this the God I want to serve?

Today we're introducing a new series on lament. Maybe you've had times where you have experienced disasters in your life that made you question God. Or maybe you've avoided some difficult questions and feelings about disasters, because you fear everything will come crashing down if you begin to question. If so, you're not alone. We have built a society, and often even our religion, that tries to avoid pain at any cost. As we will learn today, though, lament is good. It is the path to healing and hope.

**MAIN SECTION:**

We have had a LOT of pain in this country over the last couple months. We saw hate marching in the streets in Charlottesville and then driving a car into a crowd of people. Then there was Harvey in Houston, Irma in Florida, Maria in Puerto Rico, Paddock in Vegas. Everyone grieves in their own way, but in our highly individualistic society, that means most of us grieve alone. Grieving is often very lonely.

I remember after 9/11 we were encouraged to go shopping. Now I understand the reasoning, as al-Qaeda meant to disrupt our financial systems. Shopping was meant as an act of defiance against them, getting back to the American way, but how does one mourn while shopping? How does one hurt or heal when there's an emphasis on the fastest way to move on, to get back to normal, to the way things were?

We have a similar problem in our Christian culture. We tend to pass over trauma quickly and try to get back to normal. And this begins by ignoring the pain. The taglines for two of the largest, national Christian radio stations are K-Love's simple "positive, encouraging music" and Air1's even more simple "positive hits." Last time I checked, being positive was not a fruit of the Spirit. Yet, many Christians seem to think this is the goal of the Christian faith. As if my purpose is to be able to honestly wear my #BLESSED t-shirt all the time. When positivity is the door keeper, there's not really much space for lament or for even acknowledging pain or anything complicated. I occasionally listen to this positive Christian music on the radio, but I very quickly grow weary of it, because it's too ... well, it's like eating cotton candy all day every day.

Most of our churches aren't much better. We've learned what keeps people coming back, at least in this society. Don't offend, don't be a downer. All messages and all songs should simply be positive, encouraging. I'm thankful for a teaching pastor who's willing to risk the truth of pain. And for a worship leader that picks songs that allow us to hurt as well as hope.

There are two books of the Bible that have a lot to say about lament. One is the book of Lamentations, which we'll be focusing on for much of this series. But today I'd like us to begin with the book of Psalms, which contains 150 songs, and many different types of songs. Some were meant to be sung when a new king was inaugurated. Some were sung as the people of Israel walked up the hill toward Zion and then entered the temple to do sacrifices. But the largest single grouping, about 1/3 of the Psalms, are lament psalms. Lament Psalms were an invitation for the people to express their grief and sorrow. They lived difficult lives, where death was common. Lament songs allowed them to mourn and to question. If all their music was just positive and encouraging, their religion would be very disconnected from their lived experience.

But difficulty was not unique to ancient Israel. We all face difficulty regularly. In fact, despite all our hospitals and medicines, still none of us are immune to death. I'd say there's about 1/3 of my life that doesn't fall into the categories of positive or encouraging, no matter how hard I try. Lament allows us to acknowledge that pain and to put it into a larger perspective, so that we can heal. Today we are going to look at one of the lament songs of the Bible, Psalm 77, what that movement from grief to healing looks like.

I learned to look carefully at Psalm 77 from one of my favorite Old Testament theologians, Walter Bruggemann. He understands theology to work in a circle of what he calls orientation→disorientation→reorientation. Theology occurs, he says, because we're going about our normal lives when something happens. So the day I did the devotions about the Coptic Christians, I was kind of going through the motions, doing what I normally do, which isn't necessarily bad or unspiritual. But suddenly, this story disrupted my normal routines and even began asking questions of my understanding of God. I became disoriented. God wasn't acting as I thought God would act, and so I had to confront my understanding of who God is. Maybe you know what I'm talking about because of a recent tragedy in your life, or a lost job, or the end of a relationship. We all experience disruptions where we begin to question God's goodness. That's theology, and we all do it.

Theology is coming to know God more fully, to grow in our relationship. And Bruggemann says that a big part of how that growth occurs is through us being disoriented from the way we currently understand God. It is in this cycle of orientation→disorientation→reorientation that faith grows. For it is in the disorientation that we have the possibility of learning to trust God and we then are able to be reoriented with God in new and more profound ways.

Let's look at Psalm 77 to see how this works.

I'm going to read out of the NRSV translation of the Bible, and I'll tell you why shortly. Pay attention to the Psalmists' use of "I," "my," and "me" in the first half of this Psalm.

- 1 I cry aloud to God,  
aloud to God, that he may hear me.
- 2 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.
- 3 I think of God, and I moan;  
I meditate, and my spirit faints. *Selah*
- 4 You keep my eyelids from closing;  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
- 5 I consider the days of old,  
and remember the years of long ago.
- 6 I commune with my heart in the night;  
I meditate and search my spirit:

I don't know if you were counting, but that was 18 times in the first 6 verses. 18 I's my's and me's. Self-obsessed much? But that's ok. The Psalmist is grieving. We are all self-obsessed when we're hurting. And it's ok for us to do that ... It's included here in this Psalm, and there is a place in Christianity, and at this church, for your hurt.

Now, in vs 7, a change is made. The Psalmist begins to question God. But, although the Psalmist is now addressing God, he is attempting to bring God into the orbit of his pain. You could say he's trying to bring God down to his level.

Let's read the next few verses:

<sup>7</sup> "Will the Lord spurn forever,  
and never again be favorable?  
<sup>8</sup> Has his steadfast love ceased forever?  
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*

Those are some tough questions. They're certainly not positive and encouraging. Many of us have probably even been told NOT to ask questions like this when we're hurting. We've been told we just have to believe our way through it, to not doubt, because doubt shows we don't trust God. But that's simply not true. If I have questions about my relationship with my wife, it doesn't mean I don't trust her. It means we have some stuff to work out, and it's actually in that working out of stuff that we become closer and I learn to trust her more.

This Psalm reminds us that it's ok to ask tough questions of God. Most of the book of Job is asking tough questions of God. Most of the lament Psalms asks these types of questions. There's a place in Christianity and in this church for you to ask tough questions.

Now vs 10... it's the linchpin of the whole Psalm. Everything turns on this verse. Let's read:

<sup>10</sup> And I say, "It is my grief  
that the right hand of the Most High has changed."

WOW! That is quite the accusation. And you notice, it's no longer a question. It's a statement. God. Has. Changed. This is difficult. It's problematic for our religious understandings that are more comfortable with a God that does not change. In fact, this is so problematic that very few of the hundreds of different translations of the Bible actually translate this verse literally, as the NRSV does. For example, here's what the most popular translation, the NIV, says:

<sup>10</sup> "Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:  
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand."

Talk about putting a positive spin on a statement. For the Hebrews, God's right hand was his hand of power and action. This is believing our way through it. Assuming the problem is with me. There's not development of a relationship, just me falling in line where I should have been all along.

But this is what we tend to do when our faith is only attempting to be positive. We just start trying to remember the good things and hoping that those happen again. We have no ability to face and name the bad stuff. You see, it's a risky business to truly lament, because true lament asks questions of God and challenges our understandings of God. Lament sometimes accuses God of being in the wrong, of changing the rules of the game on us. This makes our religious systems uncomfortable, even our translations of the Bible get scared.

But you know what? God's not scared. Go ahead and question.

Question God.

The Bible is full of people having questions for God. In fact, the night before Jesus' death, when he was in the garden of Gethsemane, he was questioning God's way, asking if there was a different one. And then on the cross, he cried out the Psalmist's lament from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

"Why have *you* forsaken *me*?" Have you ever felt that way before? Has your soul ever cried out to God with this question? If so, you're in good company: the Psalmist and Jesus.

I'm focusing on this point, because whatever else lament may be, it has to at least be honest questioning that does not skip over or try to avoid our real pain. And we are so very good at hiding our real pain, even from ourselves. So, for you, being honest with your pain may mean some crying before God and letting him have a piece of your mind. It may mean even more digging than that; it may require work with a therapist to help you uncover the pain you've been told to cover up all your life, the pain you can't really even see but is wreaking havoc in your life. Hopefully as we walk through this series the next month, you'll find the courage to do one of these, and learn to be a little more honest with your pain.

So what difference does it make? Isn't lament really just self pity? How is this important? Let's see what happens in the remainder of Psalm 77. Here's a clue. I's and my's all but disappear and are replaced by yous and yours

- 11 I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;  
I will remember your wonders of old.
- 12 I will meditate on all your work,  
and muse on your mighty deeds.
- 13 Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is so great as our God?

14 You are the God who works wonders;  
you have displayed your might among the peoples.

15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

16 When the waters saw you, O God,  
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
the very deep trembled.

17 The clouds poured out water;  
the skies thundered;  
your arrows flashed on every side.

18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.

19 Your way was through the sea,  
your path, through the mighty waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.

20 You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Anybody count the ‘yous’ and ‘yours?’ There’s about 20 of them. About the same amount as there were I’s and me’s in the first half of the Psalm. That’s interesting. Bruggemann says of this second half “Nothing has been resolved; but everything has been recontextualized.” It’s true that lament does not solve problems. But, it’s in the moment of honesty, of questioning, that God can come and be present and we can begin to experience more of who God is.

The new context in this Psalm is a picture of God leading his people out of Egypt, out of slavery, through the parted waters of the Red Sea. In the ancient near east culture, the oceans were understandably scary. Storms couldn’t be predicted, so anything could happen if you set sail on the sea. In many cultures’ origin stories, like Gilgamesh, the waters are the source of chaos and the world’s evils.

When we consider Harvey and Irma and Maria, we can see how true their thinking was. In contrast to other cultures’ views, though, Vs 19 says that God’s way is “through the sea, through the mighty waters.” God is not afraid of the chaotic waters of your life. In fact, they become God’s path for you to escape slavery. The verse goes on to say “and yet .. God’s footprints were unseen.” I find that to be so beautiful and true. God’s footprints are not seen. God doesn’t show up and give us no choice but to believe. God is present, and God acts, and

God asks that we recognize his movement and witness his salvation. This is how faith is created and developed, not by God overpowering everything and showing off, but by God being there for us and inviting us into relationship.

In explaining the way lament operates in the cycle of orientation→disorientation→reorientation, Bruggemann writes of the biblical perspective that “Disorientation is not viewed as a faceless situation nor as a passage, but as a trouble in the relationship.” I think we too often see our problems as faceless situations, as difficult passages meant to make us stronger, as hurdles to get past. Bruggemann suggests the writers of the bible see these troubles as trouble in our relationship with God. We often see blessings in a relational way, giving us good feelings about God. But do we see our troubles in life relationally as well, calling into question God’s way in the world. What if we did?

The first time my wife yelled at me, I curled up in the fetal position in the corner of our tiny apartment. I didn’t know what to do. In my family growing up, we didn’t yell at one another. When she yelled at me, what it meant for me was that whatever the problem was (And I have NO idea what we were arguing about) it was more important to her than I was. But Robin taught me that our relationship was always going to be stronger than whatever disagreements we would have, and that our honesty with one another was actually the closest intimacy. It’s often been in our arguments that we’ve truly found out who we are and how deep our love is. It’s been in my greatest moments of weakness that Robin has been able to be there for me and show me the depth of her love that extends beyond my biggest screw-ups.

What if we stopped ignoring all the bad stuff in our lives, trying to sweep it under the rug, act like it doesn’t exist? Has that ever worked for you in any relationship you’ve ever been in? What if instead we lamented honestly before God and gave God the opportunity to answer our cries, to be there for us, to love us in ways we’ve never imagined possible, because we’ve just been too busy trying to be positive and encouraging about life?

For the next six weeks, we want to invite you to be honest with yourself, with your church family, with God. We’re going to work through the book of Lamentations - it’s a collection of poetry that reflects on the Exile, which was the most devastating event in the history of God’s people. We’re going to let the book of Lamentations teach us how to lament together. We’re going to learn how to be honest about our disorientation as we search to reorient ourselves in God’s way.

We’re mainly going to focus on what the process of lament looks like at the ground level, in our everyday lives. But the book of Lamentations is about cultural lament as well. As we learn to

lament at the individual level, Lamentations also invites us to lament as a people, as a culture. And so, at the end of the series, we're going to come together on the evening of Sunday, December 3, to talk about one of the most divisive, painful issues in our culture: Race.

Over the last couple of years, our culture has experienced disorientation. We're recognizing that something is deeply wrong. And there's a temptation for a lot of us to try to go backwards, to try to get back to that previous state of orientation, to ignore what's causing the disorientation. But we can learn from Lamentations how to lament our racial history together and become a holy voice in our culture, calling our nation to a place of justice, a reorientation in God's way of flourishing for all peoples.

At the end of Lamentations we will find that lament happens best in community. It is not a lone-wolf thing that you have to figure out and grieve correctly before becoming a whole person who is able to reenter society. No. Lament when done well is communal. It is something we figure out together and help each other through. And isn't this what we see over and over again when our country experiences tragedies? The stories we are drawn to are people helping people. And it's messy a process. There's no one right way to do it. But we do it best when we do it together, not alone. Wrap-up

### **Communion + Examen**

#### **[Communion Slide]**

Which brings us to communion. Communion is the most ancient and the most true lament. Together, we face the brokenness of a world that would crucify a pure soul, the purest soul ever to live-- and we lament. We lament our broken world. We lament our own participation in Christ's crucifixion. We admit that we have been broken and in need of salvation. We admit that we continue to participate in systems of evil and continue to need salvation. And we confess that Christ's death and resurrection is our only hope. And somehow in this lament we are offered salvation and resurrection life. You do not need to be a member here in order to participate in communion. If you feel the need to lament and the need for something bigger than yourself to heal our world's wounds, you are welcome to join us as we believe Jesus' death and resurrection are the answer to this world's pain.

Examen:

Before communion, though, I would like to lead us in a prayer of examen that considers our lament.

1. What in your life this last week needed lament?



2. What questions do you have for God?
3. What's an item in your life that has needed lament for a long time?
4. What questions do you have for God?

**Prayer:**

Lord today as we sit with the pain of our very broken world, we feel forsaken. And we ask, Why have *you* forsaken *us*? We are hurting today. We hurt for friends and loved ones and people created in your image who have been devastated by Harvey, Irma, Maria, mass shootings, white supremacy, sexual harassment. How long o Lord? How long? How long until you come and make all things new? How long until we recognize our own sin? How long until we begin to fight for what is good? Forgive us Lord. And come. Come and heal us. Come today as we take communion together. Come be with us as we confess that you are our only hope. We ask that these wafers and juice become a spiritual food that changes us by your grace. Open our eyes to see you at work, you going before us, you healing the nations. Amen.

**Assignment/Blessing**

Thank you to all who are supporting Catalyst both financially and in serving. Your faithfulness in this area helps us continue to do what God is calling us to do. If you want to begin contributing in those ways, more information is in the mini and on the next step cards.

Again, thank you to the guests with us. We know it can be hard to connect with a new Church, so we wanted to make it as easy as possible to do that. We created a next step called Newcomers Lunch we do once a month (the next one is October 15). It's right after we worship together, and in about 45 minutes, we feed you, tell you who Catalyst is, what God is doing here, and we give you a next step to get connected. If you'd like to sign up, you can check the box at the top of the tear off we did earlier, and drop it in the box by the door on your way out. Either way, thank you again for worshipping with us.