

How to pray when it hurts

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I didn't totally stick with my notes... Added a bit about how Israel had to learn the difference between grumbling (which led to the Wilderness years) and lamenting.

How to pray when it hurts

Every Sunday people come to our church gathering sad, mad or glad

Singer songwriter Michael Card wrote "we were created to live with God a garden, yet we wake every morning in the desert of a fallen world." We come here either sad, mad or glad

Sad - because we are in a season of sorrow, disappointment, difficulty or heartache for ourselves or our loved ones.

Mad - because we are angry at an injustice or difficulty

Glad because we are thankful and aware of the blessing of God.

There's often pressure to be glad, or put a brave face on it, when inside we feel like anything but.

Good at praise, not very good at lament

It was interesting that I was researching a pondering today's topic from the book Disciple of intimacy - charismatic authors are pretty rubbish at this idea of Lament, but the Catholic material is very good and helpful. We are good at praise, not so good at Lament.

I can only think of one Lament chorus "Great is the darkness". Even Rend Collective with their jiggy Irish worship songs that express praise in the midst of darkness are not really Laments.

What is lament?

Lamentation, a prayer for help coming out of pain, is very common in the Bible. Over one third (50 or so) of the psalms are laments. Lament frequently occurs in the Book of Job: "Why did I not perish at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11). The prophets likewise cry out to God, such as Jeremiah does: "Why is my pain continuous, my wound incurable...?" (15:18) and Habakkuk: "...my legs tremble beneath me. I await the day of distress that will come upon the people who attack us" (3:16).

One whole book, Lamentations, expresses the confusion and suffering felt after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

We find something similar in the New Testament as well. People who are afflicted cry out to Jesus for help. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, shouts out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" (Mark 10:47).

Jesus himself laments to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me..." (Mark 14:36). In his agony on the cross, Jesus makes his own the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...?"

Despite its wide-ranging presence in the Bible, we Christians have by and large lost touch with this

dimension of prayer. It is something we need to recover.

When we feel blessed in life, when we experience goodness and wholeness, we turn to God in praise and thanksgiving. But what happens when we experience just the opposite? What happens when we are overcome by the presence of chaos, brokenness, suffering and death, or by a sudden sense of our human vulnerability

Why we must learn to lament

Charlie Cleverly wrote in the discipline of intimacy that if he wrote a book on prayer without a chapter on lamenting it would be a lamentable book.

We must learn how to lament because in the midst of darkness and despair it is planting seed of hope in that soil of exasperation and despair, expecting that God will come through in the end. It is creation groaning to be restored to God.

Jesus understood that lament was the only true response of faith to the brokenness and fallenness of the world. It as Michael Card writes, provides the only trustworthy bridge to God across the deep seismic quaking of our lives.

As charismatics we know God triumphs, we expect healings and signs and wonders, but at times the triumphalism misses the process. We get embarrassed even panicky when situations come our way that have no answers. Funerals can be like that – we don't have the answer why a child was killed by a drunk driver, or a young mum dies of breast cancer. The best answer is to show up – that's often a big part of lamenting together – just showing up!

I want to give answers, but like Job's friends they aren't very good – Job ended up not getting answers, but getting God. And that is the essence of lamentation – pouring out to God and finding Him right there in the midst of it all and getting hope.

Lamenting is redemptive suffering – it's not psychology, getting things off your chest. It's about true worship – offering up as a sacrifice your brokenness and pain to God. It's a loud religious ouch!

We can be a bit deterministic and rationalistic about faith. If we cry out like Jesus and the Psalmist – “My God, My God why have you forsaken me” we can think oh my goodness, I'm losing my faith. But we are not – we are trusting our entire being to God. As Paul wrote – of being perplexed but not driven to despair in 2 Cor 4:8 he was showing us that despair is giving up on God – perplexion, expressed pain and doubt are signs that our faith is alive and kicking.

Lament is not a failure of faith it is an act of faith. Deep down we cry out directly to God in pain, because we know that deep down our relationship to God counts – it counts to us and it counts to God.

How to lament from the Psalms

There's something like 50 community and individual Psalms of lament – 1/3rd! I can think of one chorus!

One of the best loved is Psalm 42 – let's read it. There are 5 elements we can unpick the Lament Psalms that will help us to pray when it hurts

To God

Start with God! Many of the Laments start with “Oh God!”

Psalm 130:1 “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice!” When it hurts we go to God. Because we know he is the only One who can help. It feels like a dangerous posture – to be pouring out complain to the Lord. It could as one writer put be rejected by God. But Israel discovered it is taken seriously in a way that permits newness.”

Just like all prayer we start with God!

Tell Him how it really is

Psalm 42 I am thirsty God – I'm dry Where are you? My tears have been my food day and night. People around me are saying where is your God?

In 2021 language – God I'm calling you but just getting a voice mail message –

Heartfelt question “How long O Lord, will you utterly forget me?” Ps 13:2

Sickness Heal me O lord for my body is in terror Ps 6:3

Loneliness and alienation “My friends and my companions stand back because of my affliction” Ps 38:12

Danger and mistreatment “O Lord... save me from my pursuers” Ps 7:2

Even aging! “Cast me not off in my old age” Ps 71:9

There’s a lot of feeling in the Psalms, feeling that can be in us too. We are crying out to God in a way that says “Lord, this is how I am feeling, I leave it to you.” We are getting it out and in that way we can reflect more constructively. If we don’t express what’s going on inside and deal with it constructively, they go deep underground and pop up later in destructive ways. Lament is a constructive way to deal with our feelings.

As Psalm 142:2 says – I pour out my complaint before Him; I tell my trouble before Him.

Help!

Alongside telling God how it really is, there is nearly always an plea for help. As we pour out our hurt and pain to the Lord we are planting seeds of hope, expecting that God will come through!

Ask for the presence of God in the midst of what you are going through. When David was pouring out his heart in Ps 51 after blowing it he cried out to God “Do not cast me away from your presence, do not take your Holy Spirit away from me.” He didn’t pray, don’t take my kingdom away, don’t take my army away – he knew what was most important, what mattered most – the presence of God. He begged God for it.

Max Lucado wrote Do likewise. Make God’s presence your passion. How? Be more sponge and less rock. Place a rock in the ocean, and what happens? Its surface gets wet. The exterior may change color, but the interior remains untouched. Yet place a sponge in the ocean, and notice the change. It absorbs the water. The ocean penetrates every pore and alters the essence of the sponge.

God surrounds us in the same way the Pacific surrounds an ocean floor pebble. He is everywhere — above, below, on all sides. We choose our response — rock or sponge? Resist or receive? Everything within you says harden the heart. Run from God; resist God; blame God. But be careful. Hard hearts never heal. Spongy ones do. Open every pore of your soul to God’s presence. Here’s how.

Lay claim to the nearness of God. Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. — Hebrews 13:5 NIV

Trust

Eventually the Lament Psalms get to trust and praise. All but Ps 88 end on a sudden turn to praise. Only after we have lamented, faced our pain and got it all out, that healing can begin. We go through the valley of death to new life and resurrection.

Yet and But are used. Yet I will praise you!

Psalm 42:11 Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

Praise

Maybe you need to take time, may be we expect people to get over it too quickly, especially in grief. As Charlie Cleverly put it in the book “he’ll never get over it” – loosing a child.

But like the Psalmist we choose to praise – I will praise the Lord. And I will call on His presence.