

A Song of Lament

Message #2 in the series "Summer Playlist"
The Book of Psalms: God's Songs for Life"

Psalm 42

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Songs have a way of taking us on mental journeys, right? For example, there are some specific songs that when I hear them being played – usually in the grocery store, since they seem to always play songs from the 80s while I'm there – I'm sent back in time to when I was a teenager. Like . . .

- **John Denver** – "You fill up my senses..." – Every time I hear that song, I think back to one of the girls I dated in high school. Oh, that song makes me nauseous. In fact, any John Denver song makes me nauseous. Not good.
- **Styx** – "Come Sail Away" or "Babe" – With these songs, I'm 16 years old again. This was my favorite band and two of my favorite songs. Ahhh, yes....
- **Gloria Gaynor** – "I will survive" – Oh my gosh, in my memory, I'm seeing a disco mirror ball, I'm wearing bell bottom pants, wide collar silk shirts and I'm wearing platform shoes at one of our school dances.
- **Kool & the Gang** -- "Celebration" (Celebrate good times, come on!) – This song? High school, college, seminary... well, it has translated well over the years.

What about you? Are there specific songs that make you remember certain events in your life? How about songs that make you feel a certain way – because they trigger memories?

I know for me, for some reason when I listen to Frank Sinatra, I get sad. The same thing happens when I listen to Harry Connick, Jr. Now, I love Sinatra and I love Harry Connick, Jr., but their music just triggers a nostalgia in me that makes me sad for some reason.

How about this? . . . Are there songs that you put on *intentionally* when you're feeling sad? When you're feeling angry?

Why do we play those songs? I think perhaps it's because they give voice to our pain, or they give voice to our anger, or they give voice to our relational indigestion. When we don't have the words for what we're feeling, often a song is what we go to in order to express ourselves.

Either that, or we go on Facebook, right? There's a lot of things I like about Facebook. I like having it as a platform for pictures or using it to keep in touch with friends. But what I don't like about it is that it has become a forum for people's complaints.

Let's be honest... we're really good at complaining, right? And some people – especially on Facebook and Twitter – they have what really could be called the "spiritual gift of irritation."

But have you noticed something though? Have you noticed that people who complain a lot don't like being around people who complain? In fact, they complain about the complainers!

But what I have really noticed is that, in spite of the fact that we complain a lot . . . I mean, A LOT . . . we really don't know how to lament.

There is a difference between complaining and lamenting – at least, there is in the Bible. When we complain, we are venting our pain, a grievance, or a violation of our rights. A lament, however, is an expression of grief – a deep, raw, honest, cry about loss. To complain is to cry about. To lament is to cry out.

Those who complain don't necessarily realize this, but they focus primarily on their entitlement, on their inconvenience, on their own sense of injustice. Regardless of the content, when they voice their complaints, complainers really are just talking about themselves. They see their situation through eyes of disappointment or resentment. Those who lament, however, see their situation through eyes of regret -- through tears of sorrow or suffering. Complainers grumble. Lamenters grieve. A complaint is an *accusation* leveled against God or another person or situation. A lament is a *prayer* to God – expressing anguish about a person, situation or place, but within the context of trust in a God who the person believes cares (even if they don't see the evidence of that care in the current situation).

A lament is a prayer. It can be a song, a poem, or simply a calling out to God. It's raw, it's honest, it's often harsh in what it says to God. Yet, the hallmark of a lament is that it ends with a choice – a choice to trust God with the situation we're in *regardless of how we feel*.

There are quite a few laments in the Old Testament book of Psalms . . .

Psalms 22, for example, starts with –

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.*

Pretty direct. Pretty honest. The author cries out to God. But notice verse 3 –

*³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

"Yet." "Yet" is a powerful word in a lament. It's a choice to continue to trust in God's faithfulness – in spite of the fact that you may not see the evidence of God's care in the moment.

Or how about **Psalms 77**? Psalm 77 is an example of a lament that comes from the seasons of our lives when we are forced to wait. Waiting is hard for us, right? It sure is for me! We don't like to wait. We have become a people who expect service quickly, answers when we want them, internet service within seconds, and recovery to be quick. And when things go unresolved? We don't deal with that well at all. In fact, we have been trained by the 30-minute sitcoms and by the 2-hour Hallmark movies -- that any discomfort or pain that we have, any loss that we must endure . . . it all gets resolved by the end of the program.

But look at Psalm 77. Look at how it starts out –

*I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.*

*²In 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.
³I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.*

Look at how Asaph, the author of this song, describes his lament at the struggles he's had to face. Notice what he does first in his prayer: "*I cry aloud to God.*" That may sound obvious to us. When we're struggling, we need to pray... to cry out to God. But what Asaph is doing is he's crying out to God – aloud ... so that God hears him! What? God only hears when we shout?? No, what Asaph is expressing in his lament is that he's not hearing God's answer so he thinks that God doesn't hear him.

*²In 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.
³I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.*

Have you ever felt like that? I have. Sometimes our pain, our loss, our fear, our doubts . . . they put us into a dense fog that prevents us from seeing God's presence, from hearing God's voice. And we struggle in the waiting.

Asaph teaches us here that the first thing we need to do is "cry aloud to God" – even when we doubt, even when we don't feel God's presence. The act of crying aloud to God is an act of faith.

But look at what Asaph then says in verses 11-13. He says --

*I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.
¹²I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
¹³Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?*

Notice how the Psalm shifts. Asaph says, "*I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord . . . I will remember your wonders of old... I will mediate on all your works and muse on your mighty deeds.*" In other words, even in my doubts, even in my questioning of whether God hears my prayers, even when I'm wondering if God cares at all about my situation . . . I am going to trust in God's faithfulness. I am going to trust that God is true to His word, that God indeed has the character of mercy and justice – regardless of whether or not I feel it or see it.

For those of us who are followers of Jesus . . . whenever we face those moments when we are forced to wait in this unresolved season of life, we look at the Cross of Christ. The Cross of Jesus Christ is the tangible reminder that God is indeed faithful. We name our pain. We name our struggle. We name our frustration. We name our questions and doubts . . .

. . . and we assert and affirm the character of God's goodness because of the Cross of Christ. Because of what God did in Christ, because of what Jesus endured on the Cross . . . we can choose to believe in the character of God's goodness in spite of our feelings in any given moment.

**By asserting what we DO know
in a season of what we DON'T know, God enables us to endure.**

That's a lament. Or how about **Psalm 10**. Look at verse 1 –

*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*

That's a strong expression of grief, of anguish. The Psalm writer is lamenting that he doesn't see God addressing his needs. He doesn't hear God answering his prayer. "*Why are you hiding, God??*" There's a sense that the writer is feeling helpless and hopeless, that he can't change his situation . . . and is desperately needing God to be the One who steps in and rescues. Yet, he wonders where God is. He wonders if God even sees what's going on.

But by the end of this song, this is what we read . . .

*¹⁴But you do see! Indeed, you note trouble and grief,
that you may take it into your hands;
the helpless commit themselves to you;
you have been the helper of the orphan. . .*

*¹⁷O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;
you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
¹⁸to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
so that those from earth may strike terror no more.*

The writer reminds himself – and all of us – that God's character can indeed be trusted . . . that God does see, that God does help, that God does strengthen, that God does pursue justice for the oppressed, that God is reliable.

All of these examples are prayers – or songs – of lament. And they model for us what we in our culture don't know how to do – namely, share our honest feelings with God followed by a genuine expression of trust in God's character whether He answers our prayer or not.

In other words, a typical lament has a specific structure. It has four basic parts:

1. We start with a situation of **pain** or loss and we bring it directly to God. Our words are honest, unpretentious and expressive of our grief or regret.
2. We **detail** why God should listen to our prayer, why He *should* address our situation.
3. We **engage the "yet"** – we choose to trust God's character and faithfulness.
4. We **praise** God – in both anticipation of God's providing for us, and also regardless of God's providing for us.

That's a lament. Complaining is not helpful to anyone. But a lament? A lament takes our pain and brings it into the presence of our Heavenly Father – the One who sees what we don't see, and knows what we don't know. When we do that – when we bring our pain into the presence of our Heavenly Father . . . we are changed.

In the New Testament letter of **2 Corinthians**, chapter 4, the apostle Paul reminds us how we can view God's faithfulness even in the midst of our difficult situations, even in the midst of our seasons of doubt. Starting in verse 8, he says --

⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Notice that Paul is changing his focus *within* his circumstances. He's looking not at himself, but at the greater mission that God is doing in the world, the greater witness that God is providing through Paul's testimony *within* his situations and struggles. Then Paul says --

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

"Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." When's the last time I looked at my struggles, my pains, my losses that way? Sadly, not enough. Way too many times, I end up becoming a complainer rather than a lamenter.

In truth, we have way too many complainers in our society right now . . . and not enough people who lament. I believe it's because we are a society that doesn't know how to grieve. We know how to get angry. We know how to get even. We know how to break up. We know how to get divorced. We know how to be distant . . .

But we don't know how to be honest with God about our pain AND stay connected to Him relationally when things don't go our way. We're that way in a lot of our relationships.

When we're feeling pain, when we're feeling abandoned, when we're feeling scared, when we're struggling within our losses . . . it's time for us to be intentional about the song that we sing.

Perhaps you can try it this week – or whenever you're in a situation when you're wanting to complain. Instead of complaining, try lamenting. Try putting into words the pain or anger or grief that you're feeling and share it directly with God. And when you've done that, share with God that you actually trust Him, that you trust in His goodness – even if He chooses not to answer your prayer or change your situation. And then praise Him just because He's God. If you need help doing it, just pick one of the Psalms that we just looked at and make that your prayer.

Trust me . . . He's listening. He's listening to the song you're singing.

Let's pray our prayer together . . .

Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear, what do You need me to know, and what do You need me to do? I am Your servant, in Jesus's name. Amen.

Psalm 42

¹ *As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

² *My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

³ *My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

⁴ *These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.*

⁵ *Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶ and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.*

⁷ *Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.*

⁸ *By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.*

⁹ *I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"*

¹⁰ *As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

¹¹ *Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*