

The Prayer of Lament: A Model for Praying Through Our Troubles

Psalm 56

We are all living a story. And for some of us, we love the story that we are living. Things are going great. We are encouraged by so many things. God's activity and blessings in our lives are readily apparent. Life is good. For others, however, it's a very different story we are living. Things are not going well. There's pain or suffering or difficulties that we never counted on. It might be the loss of a job and all the financial pressures that that has brought into your life. It might be some kind of health crisis. It might be that there is a person in your life that is making your life very difficult – maybe its opposition at work or some situation in your own family.

I would venture to say that if we had the time to tell our stories to each other this morning, many of us would say that we are experiencing some of the very things that I just talk about. Life is not great. Life is not going well. Life is disappointing. Life is full of struggle. If that's where you find yourselves, what do you do? Would God be most pleased if you just put on a happy face and act like all is well?

In the Psalms there is a category of psalm called a lament that would suggest that for the people of God we don't have to fake it and put on a happy face. Laments invite us to not ignore our troubles or to deny them, but rather they invite us to pray through our pain. As you may know, the Psalms were the prayer book of Israel. They guided Israel's worship and praying. And it is significant to note that in this prayer book there are more laments than any other kind of psalm (67). This ought to indicate to us that what is really best is to pray through our troubles.

One commentator (C.C. Broyles) says this about laments. He says:

Lament psalms can be numbered among the most disturbing passages of the Bible, until one actually encounters crisis, and then they can become the most comforting and helpful.

Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry & Writings, 394

This morning we are going to look at a psalm of lament that I trust will be comforting and helpful to those whose story is not going so well right now. We are going to look at Psalm 56. This particular lament is called an individual lament. It one man's experience and cry to God for help. At the heading of this psalm we find some introductory comments in what is called a superscription. Part of this superscription says that this is a . . .

A Mikhtam of David, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

The occasion of this psalm is likely 1 Samuel 21. At this time of his life David is on the run from Saul, who out of jealousy wants to kill David. Here's what 1 Samuel 21 says:

¹⁰ *Then David arose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish king of Gath.* ¹¹ *But the servants of Achish said to him, “Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, ‘Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands?’”*
¹² *David took these words to heart and greatly feared Achish king of Gath.*

And so David flees from Saul to Philistine territory, to Gath, and when he arrives there some of Achish’s servants know of David’s reputation of greatness and they report this to Achish. And so David feels threatened in this place to which he has fled to avoid Saul. Ultimately, we read in chapter 22:1 that David flees again and escapes to a cave. It seems that it is very likely that this is the setting of this psalm. David, on the run, cries out to God for help.

I. The Complaint (1-2)

David begins by addressing his prayer it to God and then he pours out his complaint. He says:

¹ *Be gracious to me, O God, for man has trampled upon me;
 Fighting all day long he oppresses me.*
² *My foes have trampled upon me all day long,
 For they are many who fight proudly against me.*

David cries out to God and asks God to *be gracious* to him. He is looking for God to intervene, because he is facing enemies – enemies who *have trampled upon* him. This word, *trampled*, can also be translated, *pursue*. The NIV says “my enemies are in hot pursuit.” It’s possible that given the fact that David is on the run from enemies, that *pursue* makes more sense in the context. Saul is after him. The Philistines are after him and David is on the run. David says that this is his experience *all day long*. He says it twice. The pursuit is relentless. There is no let up in the attack.

Do you ever remember as a kid having someone threatening to do something to you? Maybe it was just at the level of some kind of prank or maybe it was your brother who wanted to beat the tar out of you. Whatever it was, you ran. You ran as fast as you could to get away from them. You kept running and running, but so did they. Eventually, you got tired and wanted to stop running, but you couldn’t because they continued to pursue you. Do you remember that feeling? It is a desperate kind of feeling. That’s how David is feeling. His enemies keep pursuing him *all day long*. And so he cries out to God for help. *Be gracious to me, O God*. He doesn’t ignore it. He doesn’t put on a happy face. Rather, he brings his issue before the Lord and chooses to pray through his trouble.

II. Expression of Trust (3-4)

As David prays about his situation, he gets to a place of expressing trust in God. But that's not where he starts. He starts with his fear. Here's what he prays:

³ *When I am afraid,
I will put my trust in You.*

David doesn't deny his feelings. He acknowledges that he feels afraid. It makes sense that he would right? He has real enemies that are pursuing him to do him harm. But instead of being paralyzed by his fear he makes a choice to put his trust in God. He says *I will put my trust in You*. He goes on:

⁴ *In God, whose word I praise,
In God I have put my trust;
I shall not be afraid.
What can mere man do to me?*

The basis of David's trust is what God had said. God had spoken through people like Moses and Samuel. David's faith has content. He doesn't just express some kind of empty, blind faith but rather it is rooted in what God had communicated to His covenant people through His word.

As David trusts in God and what God has said, we see a progression. Now he says, , *In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid*. His situation hasn't changed. His pursuers are still after him. But as he chooses to trust God, he begins to see his situation in light of who God is and what God has said and that begins to drive out his fear. Ultimately he comes to the point where he can say, *What can mere man do to me?*

If you find yourself in some kind of tough situation right now, David's example suggests a couple of things. First, the way forward is not by denying your feelings, but rather by acknowledging them. Talk to God about them. Your situation might be causing you to feel fear or anxiety or hopelessness or depression or inadequacy. Whatever you are feeling, David's model encourages us to be honest about what we are feeling and to take those feelings to God.

Second, David's example suggests if we are going to get to a place of trusting God in our situation, our faith needs content. David put His faith in God who had spoken. He chose to cling to the promises of the covenant. His wasn't an empty faith; rather it was rooted in God and His word. When we are in desperate situations we need to cling to the truth of what God has spoken.

Now, as we come to verse 5, David continues to pour out his complaint about what his enemies are doing to him, but ultimately he expresses his core request.

III. The Request (5-7)

David prays:

⁵ *All day long they distort my words;
All their thoughts are against me for evil.*
⁶ *They attack, they lurk,
They watch my steps,
As they have waited to take my life.*

Part of David's struggle is the unrelenting nature of this ordeal. He says for a third time that his enemies are after him *all day long*. They twist his words. Their thoughts are against him for evil. They attack and when they aren't attacking they are lurking and watching his every step. Ultimately, he says, that they are waiting to take his life. Do you feel the oppression in this?

As we come to verse 7, David expresses his central request.

⁷ *Because of wickedness, cast them forth,
In anger put down the peoples, O God!*

David appeals for justice. These are wicked people and David knows what God has said about what will happen to the wicked. He wants God to *cast them forth*. He wants God's anger stirred up against his enemies such that God would *put down the peoples*.

If you have spent any time in the lament psalms in the Bible, you know that there are requests made by the psalmists at times that are almost hard to believe a follower of God could ever pray. They often ask for God to rain down strong judgment on the wicked. For us as New Testament believers it can be hard to reconcile what we read in some of the laments with Jesus' instructions for us to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Here's what we need to understand. Not every prayer against enemies found in the laments is holy and right. Rather they simply reflect the raw, honest emotions of the psalmists. Sometimes we think we can only bring nice, sanitized prayers to God. But the laments teach us that we can bring our raw, honest emotions to God in prayer.

Here's what Bullinger says about this aspect of laments:

In these prayers against the enemies, the worshipper does not destroy the enemy, but in a liberating act of faith, places the matter with God, the judge par excellence. God will decide, and the psalm pleads for God to decide against the enemies (*Psalms*, 54-55).

David's request teaches us that we can pray our raw, honest emotions about our situation. We can ask God act in a strong and decisive ways. This can be, as Bullinger says, "a liberating act of faith" as we place our situation in God's hands and then leave it in with Him to decide what He will do.

Now, as we come to verse 8, we see David's understanding of God's attention to him and his situation.

IV. Understanding of God's Care (8-11)

David prays:

*⁸ You have taken account of my wanderings;
Put my tears in Your bottle.
Are they not in Your book?*

This word, *wanderings*, can be translated a number of different ways. It can be translated, *a lamentation*. This sense is captured in the NIV, which uses the word, "misery." In that case David would be saying, "God you have noticed my complaint; my lamentation, my grief." It can also mean, *tossing*, as in the restless tossing in bed that one might experience when suffering. But, *wanderings*, fits as David has been on the run from one place to the next looking for safety. He says, "God, I know you have taken account of each and every step I have taken in as I've fled from Saul and from the Philistines."

He also says that God has put his tears in a bottle. God has taken intimate note of each and every one of David's tears. Or to put it another way, he says that God has written out a kind of heavenly memorandum of all his tears and sufferings. Obviously, David is using poetic language to say, "God, you have noticed. You care about what I have suffered."

When we suffer it is so easy to begin to think that either God doesn't notice or that He doesn't care about what we are going through. Some of you might be in this place right now. The suffering that you are enduring goes on and on without any apparent answer or action on God's part and you are wondering if God notices. You are wondering if God cares. The story of the Bible is that God does care. God does notice. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt they cried out to God and God noticed. Exodus 2:23-25 says this:

²³ Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. ²⁴ So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.

Ultimately, as you know, God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. For the Jewish people this salvation-event became a bedrock truth of God's care and concern for them. As New Testament believers the greatest statement of God's care and concern for us is the fact that He sent Jesus into the world to rescue us. God has noticed our desperate need and has intervened for our good.

Whatever your situation, no matter how difficult, God has taken account of your struggle. He knows each tear that you have cried. If you are struggling with this, my encouragement to you would be to keep looking to the cross, where God most clearly stated, “I know. I care. And I intervene for good.”

David goes on and prays:

*⁹ Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call;
This I know, that God is for me.*

As David is calling out to God for help, he believes that there will be a day when God will intervene and cause his enemies to break off their pursuit of him. They will *turn back*. He believes that God will hear him and bring about justice. And then he makes this statement, *This I know, that God is for me*. Again, despite his current situation he comes to the settled conviction that God is for him.

We are told in Romans 8:31-32 that God is for us as well:

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

God is for you! No matter how difficult your situation Scripture says that God is for you. That is revealed truth. And when we are in difficult situations, we need to let revealed truth overrule our feelings, because our feelings are so often going to say, “God is not for me. He doesn’t care.” It might be helpful to remember that when David says that he knows that God is for him, he is still on the run for his life. He may be sitting in a cave hiding as he comes to this conclusion about God. His situation hasn’t changed, but his perspective has, as he trusts God and what He has said. Revealed truth trumps his feelings.

David goes on then and essentially repeats what he said in verse 4.

*¹⁰ In God, whose word I praise,
In the Lord, whose word I praise,
¹¹ In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me?*

As we come to the end of David’s prayer he gets to the place where he is actually able to praise God.

V. A Promise to Praise (12-13)

*¹² Your vows are binding upon me, O God;
I will render thank offerings to You.
¹³ For You have delivered my soul from death,*

*Indeed my feet from stumbling,
So that I may walk before God
In the light of the living.*

David promises to present a thank offering to God once he has been delivered. This isn't some kind of manipulation. It is simply an honest expression of devotion to God. In verse 13, we see his expression of praise. For David, the truest thing is not that man is seeking to take his life (v. 6), but that God has heard him and that he knows that God will act and will deliver him from death. His enemies sought to trip him up (v. 6), but he knows that God keeps his *feet from stumbling* all so that he might *walk before God*; that David might continue to live in relationship with God.

As David comes to the end of his lament he is a transformed person. His circumstances haven't changed, but by praying through his troubles, he has changed. As David prays we see a progression. He begins with his complaint and his fears; he then expresses trust in God; and then he makes his petition, which ultimately lets him move to praise. As he prays through his situation he becomes convinced that God is going to intervene. This truth is so real to him that he can actually begin to praise God for the answer that is yet to come.

Conclusion: Ed Dobson was the pastor of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, MI for many years. He has served as an advisory editor to Christianity today as well as *Leadership Journal*. In 2000, he was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), which is an incurable and fatal disease. He was given 2-5 years to live, but by God's grace, he is still living. In 2012 he published a book called, *Seeing Through the Fog: Hope When Your World Falls Apart*, in which he tells his story of living with ALS. In the introduction he says this:

I have learned that we all will struggle in life. There are no exceptions. It might be cancer. It might be divorce. It might be the loss of a child. It might be brokenness. It might be depression. Whatever it is, we all struggle with something. That's part of what it means to be human. The question then becomes, how can I find hope when I'm in the middle of struggle?

That indeed is the question that some of you are asking today as you are in the middle of your struggle. The psalms of lament remind us that the way to hope is not by ignoring our troubles; it's not by putting on a happy face and just gutting it out. Rather we find hope as we pray through our troubles in a way that helps us cling to God and to see our troubles in light of who God is and what He has said.

Amen.

Psalms of Lament: 3-7, 9-14, 16-17, 22-23, 25-28, 31, 35-36, 38-40, 42-44, 51, 53-64, 69-71, 74, 77, 79-80, 82-83, 85-86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 106, 108-09, 120, 123, 126, 130-31, 137, 140-43.