

In Tim Keller's book *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, he shares about a novel written by Elisabeth Elliot in 1966 called *No Graven Image*. The book tells the story of a young unmarried woman named Margaret who dedicates her life to translating the Bible for remote tribes in the Amazon rain forest whose languages have not yet been written down. She begins working with the Quechua people in Ecuador, and the key person to her work is a man named Pedro, the only man in the tribe who knows both Spanish and the unwritten language of the Quechuan people, which Pedro begins to teach to her.

One day, Margaret is praising God for all that he has provided for her to do the work, and she imagines what it will be like to bring the Bible to millions of people in the mountains. As she arrives at Pedro's home, however, she finds that he has an infected wound in his leg. One of Margaret's duties was to provide ordinary medical care, and so she gives Pedro an injection of penicillin. Within seconds, Pedro experiences an allergic reaction, and despite Margaret's prayers and frantic attempts to help him, Pedro gets worse and worse until he dies, while Pedro's mother accuses her of killing her son. And because the only connection she had to the tribe's language is now dead, her work comes to a screeching halt. As she says, "As for the translation of the Bible, of course, I cannot go ahead without an informant. God knew about that when Pedro died. I do not write prayer letters anymore, for I have nothing to say about my work. It seemed on the night of Pedro's death as though Finis were written below all I had done." The book ends with a thoroughly confused Margaret, standing at the grave of Pedro, wondering how God could have let that happen and how she can go on worshiping this God.

As you might imagine, this novel offended many Christians, who protested that God would never allow such a thing to happen to a woman who had dedicated her life to being a missionary. But the truth was that Elisabeth Elliot was writing out of her own life experience. She was a missionary in South America, and she had found a man who was the key to the whole language work, the only man who knew both Spanish and the native language. But then that man was murdered, and the translation work came to a complete stop. And then, soon after the murder, a flood and then a theft destroyed all the translation work that had been done. A short time after that, Elisabeth married a man, Jim Elliot, who took her along with four other missionaries and their families into the Amazonian rainforest to try to reach the Waorani people of Ecuador. One evening, they sang a hymn, "we rest on thee, our shield and our defender." The next day, they traveled into the forest, met the Waornai people, and the five men were all speared to death.

I thought of this story as I prepared to teach this new series, called How Long O Lord, on suffering, loss, lament, and trust. Over this time of quarantine, Michele and I decided to try a 7 day trial of PureFlix, the Christian version of Netflix. We ended up lasting about 3 days before cancelling. We couldn't even make it the whole 7. Every single movie we looked at was neat and tidy, simplistic and formulaic simplistic. If someone were to make a movie version of No Graven Image, Elisabeth Elliot's book, I don't even know what category they would file it under. Stories that threaten your conception of God, I suppose.

Why do I begin with this story? **Because life is hard, and often very confusing. More than that, faith is hard, and often very confusing.** Suffering and loss walk alongside many of us every day. God does not always make sense to us. And there are no formulas to faith that you can follow in order to achieve an easy road. What do you do when you have saved yourself for **marriage**, and then nobody wants to marry you? Or you save yourself, you marry someone, and the intimacy and love that you thought were promised never happen? What happens when you train up your **child** in the way they should go, and then they do depart from the faith? How do you make sense of things when you **give generously** to the Lord, and instead of being rewarded for your faith, you lose your job? How do you handle it when you pray fervently for years for someone's healing, only to have them die?

The truth is that life is filled with pain, and suffering comes to all. In fact, we are currently living through a particularly painful time. And this is a significant challenge to our faith for many of us. Most of you, I trust, have heard the philosophical problem of evil – if God is good and God is all-powerful, how can there be evil in the world? But philosophy aside, this is quite the personal challenge for most of us - **underneath our cries and complaints and anger and outrage are two fundamental questions: “if you are good and you love me, how can you let this happen?” and more bluntly: “Where are you God?”**

So what is the best way to respond to suffering and loss? Stoically resign yourself to it as God's will? Pray and believe for God's healing and deliverance until it happens? Rebuke and declare the pain away?

I believe the Bible gives us a better, more honest way to make sense of and respond to suffering and loss, a way that **includes** both genuine sorrow and tears as well as a sure hope and confident trust. That is the way of lament. I like Mark Vroegop's definition in his book Dark clouds, Deep mercy of lament as “a prayer in pain that leads to trust”. Lament contains four movements:

Turn to God
 Voice your complaint
 Ask boldly
 Choose to trust

The simplest lament in the Bible, one that lays out this four-fold pattern very clearly, is Psalm 13, which we will focus on today:

Psalm 13:1-6 - For the director of music. A psalm of David. How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? ³ Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; ⁴ my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. ⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. ⁶ I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.

Let me walk you through the four movements of lament to help you to understand how to handle your suffering and loss.

1) Turn to God

When we suffer, we are immediately and repeatedly faced with a choice. We can reject God, declaring that we will not believe in a God who could let our loved one die, or the cancer persist, or our situation not turn around. And there are many who choose to do this, many people who can trace their atheism back to a loss in their life that they can not accept or make sense of. Or, maybe we still believe that God is real, but we turn away from God in our sadness and voice our sorrow to others, inviting the pity and sympathy of others as we indirectly declare that God is not good or worthy of our trust.

On the other hand, we can respond to our suffering by turning to God and expressing our feelings, our questions, our doubts, and our pain to Him. In lament, we begin by choosing instead of turning away from God to turn to God with whatever emotion we are feeling. One of the prime examples in the Bible is a man named Job, who suffered the loss of his children, wealth, and health and was faced with the choice of whether to turn away from God or continue to trust in Him. As Michael Card writes in his book *A Sacred Sorrow*:

“In Job, we discover a person who will simply not let go of God in spite of death, disease, isolation from friends and family, and ultimately a perceived abandonment by God. Those around him, including his own wife, plead for him to let go and die. But Job, like Jacob, faithfully holds on in the wrestling match of his life. And like Jacob, he no doubt limped for the rest of his faithful and God-haunted life.”

Closely following movement 1 is movement 2:

2) Voice your complaint

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Listen to David in this Psalm lay out his complaint to the Lord: How long, O Lord? I feel forgotten. I feel like you are absent. How long am I going to be sad? In lament, we turn to God and lay out our pain, our questions, and our frustrations honestly to Him.

Some of you may feel objections rising up within you. I can think of two objections right away. **The first objection would be that it feels wrong to complain to God, disrespectful to accuse Him of being absent and unloving.** The idea of complaining to God just sounds wrong. So maybe your gut reaction is that you shouldn't have those feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, and disappointment with God. Maybe you're right. But if you do have those feelings, then what do you recommend doing? Stuff them down and deny them? They'll still come out somewhere. Vent them elsewhere? That doesn't usually bring healing but feeds the feelings of hurt and anger. **If you're going to have those feelings, those questions, and those frustrations, why not bring them to God?**

If you have believed that this kind of complaining is wrong, consider the brutal honesty of the Psalms and some of the other prophets of the Bible:

Psalm 22:1-2 - My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.

Psalm 44:23-24 - *Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. ²⁴ Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?*

Psalm 77:7-9 - *"Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? ⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? ⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"*

Jeremiah 15:18 - *Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?*

1 Kings 19:4 - *Elijah came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."*

Clearly they felt comfortable expressing their hurt, disappointment, and frustration to God. And sometimes there is even anger and vengeance expressed towards God:

Psalm 58:6-8 - *Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions! ⁷ Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. ⁸ Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun.*

As Michael Card wrote, *"We are a people in perpetual denial of the hidden hate we have for our enemies. Jesus showed us that hatred is a wound that must be healed, that denial is a paralysis only He can heal. Without lament these wounds continue to fester... is there any other way to handle my anger and hate but to bring them to God?"*

Do you hear that? Many of you, when you feel angry towards someone, instinctively say "I shouldn't feel that" and confess it or stuff it down. What if you brought it honestly to God and learned to lament? The bottom line is that the Psalms, along with the rest of the Bible, teach us that you can trust in God AND still voice your complaint. In fact, a third of the Psalms can be categorized as laments! Apparently trusting in God and still complaining to Him, voicing our pain, are not mutually exclusive.

A second objection that some of you might have is that complaining and giving voice to our negative thoughts, doubts, and questions is unwise because it will attract negativity your way. There are a whole host of Bible teachers, known as

Word of Faith teachers, most notably people like Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland, who are very popular on Christian television, who would teach you that we need to avoid speaking negative thoughts. They have a bad habit of misreading Bible verses like:

Proverbs 18:21 - *The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

They use verses like this to say that it means that our words have the power to create life or death for us, when it really means that we can build people up or tear people down by the words we say to them.

One prominent teacher in this movement is Joel Osteen, whose book “I declare” was all about the power of words to attract good and evil. In one section, he said: *“With our words we can either bless our futures or we can curse our futures. That’s why we should never say, ‘I’m not a good parent. I’m unattractive. I’m clumsy. I can’t do anything right. I’ll probably get laid off.’ No, those thoughts may come to your mind, but don’t make the mistake of verbalizing them. The moment you speak them out, you allow them to take root.”*

This objection, that by complaining to God and speaking negative words we attract negativity our way, is simply not Biblical, as lament clearly shows us. The truth is that this belief owes itself more to a philosophy called New Thought than to the Bible. Let me quickly explain:

When you examine the roots of the Word of Faith movement, you find that not only is it a recent development, but that its roots are not in orthodox Christianity but in a cult that originated in the 19th century know as New Thought, a philosophy popularized in Rhonda Byrne’s recent book *The Secret*. Phineas Quimby was the father of this belief system, and out of him came Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, a cult that is neither Christian nor Science, and which denies that there is such a thing as physical sickness or disease, believing that illness is simply a matter of unbelief. Also from Quimby came Essek Kenyon, a pastor who taught positive confession, that we can attract things with our words and speak things into existence. Kenyon influenced Kenneth Hagin, who plagiarized Kenyon and taught that we are little gods, and that God wants us to be healthy, wealthy, and victorious in every way. Hagin started the RHEMA Bible Training College in Oklahoma, and his most prominent disciple is Kenneth Copeland, a man who is somehow still on TV, and was in the news a few weeks ago for pronouncing judgment on COVID-19, blowing the wind of God on it and pronouncing America

healed. The bottom line is that the Word of Faith is a false, unbiblical, and dangerous theology that you would be wise to avoid.

The truth is that the Bible is filled with people voicing their complaints, giving air to their negative thoughts in prayer to God, and God does not respond by telling them to shush because their negative words will attract negative things their way. Prayers of complaint, directed to God, are very much prayers of faith.

As Michael Card wrote, *“Prayers of complaint can still be prayers of faith. They represent the last refusal to let go of the God who may seem to be absent or worse – uncaring. If this is true, then lament expresses one of the most intimate moments of faith – not a denial of it. It is supreme honesty before a God whom my faith tells me I can trust. He encourages me to bring everything as an act of worship, my disappointment, my frustration, and even my hate. Only lament uncovers this kind of new faith...”*

Can I ask you: Have you ever let out to God the full extent of your sorrow, your pain, your disappointment, your anger? Or have you mistakenly believed that you needed to stoically accept whatever happens to you as God’s will, or that by voicing your complaints to God that you are somehow in sin? Lament shows us there is a place for strong emotions, that we can talk to God about all of our pain. We can let out our sorrow that our marriage is not what we had hoped it would be, or our heartache that we are not married, or that we may never have children. We can lament our children’s lack of faith or the decisions they have made. We can lament the failing of our bodies, the loss of our vitality, our impending death. We can lament the things we missed out in life, how we never reached our potential. We can lament that we are stuck in a job that does not match the desires of our heart. There is nothing we can not lament. Pray out loud or journal quietly. Pray alone or with others.

We can also lament the world. How long must we live in a world where an African-American young man like Ahmaud Arbery can be shot for jogging down the street? How long must we live in a world where women are sexually abused and mistreated, where innocent children are abused? How long must we live in a world of war and violence? Of orphans and foster care? Of abortion and broken families? Where the church often contributes to the hurt and disappointment of the world? Where we can not measure up to the men or women we want to be? Where sin continues to deceive us? Lament is the method by which we bring our honest pain, questions, and disappointment to God.

3) Ask boldly

In the third movement, we let God know what we need and what we desire. We ask boldly, holding on to the promises of God, even when they seem hard to believe, and calling upon God to be true to His character.

³ *Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;* ⁴ *my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

Please notice: this is not “declaring.” The Bible does not tell us to declare away sickness and suffering; that is another misreading of Luke 10:19, where Jesus gives his disciples – not us authority over the works of the enemy. On the other hand, this is also not resigning ourselves to what comes our way. This is bold asking of the one who has authority over everything and love us. We ask God to rise up and intervene. Come to our aid. Let justice be done. Restore us. Vindicate us.

One common refrain is “Remember, O Lord.” This is a phrase that calls upon God to intervene based on your love and promises.

Psalm 25:6-7 - Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. ⁷ **Remember** not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love **remember** me, for you are good, O LORD.

When we ask boldly, we stand upon the promises of God’s word. We are protesting the way things are and appealing to God to act in accordance with His loving-kindness, to restore His presence. God, intervene, that I might have a child. That my husband might come to faith. That my children might walk with you. That I might overcome this addiction. That racism might end. That wars would cease. That love would reign. That your kingdom would come and your will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Have you lost hope, and stopped praying boldly? Or are your prayers weak hopes, but not faith-filled requests? Continue to pray boldly and never give up.

Luke 18:1-8 - Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³ And there was a **widow** in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my

adversary.' ⁴ "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, ⁵ yet because this **widow keeps bothering me**, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

4) Choose to trust

Lastly, we choose to trust in God. In the lament, eventually comes the vav – “yet” or “but.” It is the turn, the line we cross over from complaint and pleading to trusting. From I to you, from focusing on my feelings to God’s character.

In this fourth movement, we decide that whatever comes our way, we will trust in what we know to be true. We move from pain to trust, and sometimes even to worship, to a renewed commitment to wait on the Lord and trust in Him.

⁵ *But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. ⁶ I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.*

I trust in your hesed, your covenantal love. I rejoice in your salvation. For you have been good to me. Think of Lamentations:

Lamentations 3:21-24 - *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: ²² Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."*

Choosing to trust is Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, complaining about the thorn in his flesh, asking God boldly three times to remove it, and then choosing to trust that God’s grace is sufficient for him, even if God never removes the thorn. Choosing to trust is Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, complaining that his soul is in anguish to the point of death, asking God boldly to take the cup of judgment from Him, and then choosing to say “not my will but yours be done.”

This is not denial, and this is not blind faith. This is choosing to trust, even when we can’t see what God is up to. Sometimes choosing to trust is like falling into God’s arms out of exhaustion, after we’ve lamented all we can. Sometimes it is

remembering what God has done in the past and finding the courage in that. Sometimes it is calling to mind what He has promised, remembering that He will be true to His Word. Sometimes it is like Peter in **John 6:68**, not seeing any better alternatives than to continue to trust in Him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? **You have the words of eternal life.**"

Choosing to trust is believing that God works all things for good, even when we can't see what He is up to, and that He will one day make a final end to suffering, that he will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or suffering, and we will have eternal joy.

As David wrote the Psalm, he had the mighty deeds of God in the past to help him to trust, even when he did not see what God was up to. We have so much more, for we have the cross. We see that at the cross, God seemed unloving and absent, but now we know that He was never more loving or present than He was there. And now we know that He loves us. We know that even when we can not see how God is present or good, He is.

***Romans 8:31-32** What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

What are we to do with our suffering and loss? Not stoically resign ourselves to God's will, nor try to declare the evil away. We can lament, by turning to God, voicing our complaint, asking boldly, and choosing to trust in the God who proved His love for us on the cross.

Let me close with the words of Elisabeth Elliot, who endured many tragedies in her life of devotion to Jesus:

God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.

Amen.