

From May 10th to June 21st, I am preaching through a sermon series called “How Long, O Lord?” about suffering, loss, lament, and trust. The longer you live, the more you suffer – death, racism, violence, unemployment, loneliness, depression, anxiety. There are many ways you can respond to suffering and loss, but the way that the Bible gives us is lament. Lament is “a prayer in pain that leads to trust,” as Mark Vroegop says in his book “Dark clouds, deep mercy.” It consists of four movements: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. In these movements, we resist the temptation to stuff down our emotions, on the one hand, or to be overcome by them, on the other hand. We do not simply resign ourselves to what has happened to us as our fate, but we ask boldly for what it is we need. And in the end, we choose to trust in God, that whether or not He gives us what we ask for, he is still good, and still loves us, and can be trusted.

Lament is very common in the Bible, much more common than it is in our modern collection of worship songs, which tend to be much more upbeat and celebratory. In fact, 1/3 of the Psalms are laments, while only about 5% of our modern songs fit that category. That is a staggering difference that shows among other things how uncomfortable we can be getting real about our suffering and pain. This morning, I want to look at one of those lament Psalms in particular, Psalm 51, and help you to understand why it is so important for us to lament our sin.

Let me give you the background to Psalm 51. David has been a very successful king over Israel – slayer of Goliath, man after God’s heart, writer of the Psalms. But in his success, he is growing spiritually complacent and lazy. In 2 Samuel 11, David has decided to stay home when he should have been out leading his troops in battle. As he is strolling on the roof of his palace, David sees a woman named Bathsheba bathing. Bathsheba is the wife of Uriah, one of his most loyal fighting men. But David is overcome with lust, and so he sends for her, sleeps with her, and impregnates her. He tries to cover it up by bringing Uriah home to sleep with his wife, but Uriah refuses. And so, David sends Uriah back to battle, and instructs the general to have Uriah killed in battle. And then David takes Bathsheba to be his wife.

David thinks he has gotten away with this, but he has not. God sends Nathan the prophet to confront him about what he has done. As David confesses what he has done, God spares David’s life, but the son he and Bathsheba have conceived will die. And this experience becomes a major turning point in David’s life. After this sin, David’s life is filled with heartache. Soon afterwards, David’s son Amnon rapes his half-sister, Tamar. Another son, Absalom, in response, murders Amnon. Over time, Absalom steals the hearts of the people away from David and conspires

to take the throne from his father. David has to flee for his life and only returns to the throne when Absalom is killed.

Just think about the chain of events that was put into motion by David's sinful decision not to be with his army, where he was supposed to be: **rape, incest, murder, suicide, betrayal, insurrection, war, and exile**. Do you think David would have gone back and done it differently if he could have?

So this morning, as we talk about lamenting our sin, we're going to look at Psalm 51, which David wrote after being confronted by Nathan regarding his adultery with Bathsheba:

***Psalm 51:1-19** - When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

Before we go any further, I want to define the word "sin," because in the first 2 verses he has already used three different Hebrew words for sin, which are translated as transgression, iniquity, and sin.

The first word he uses is **peshah**, translated here as **transgression** – **rebellion against God**, departure from God – you know what is right but you do the wrong thing knowingly. The second word is **chattach**, translated here as **sin** – **falling short of a mark** (archery). It's not necessarily willful rebellion, just not measuring up to the standard. Think of commands such as "be perfect, as my Father is perfect" or "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind" – you don't necessarily mean to disobey those, you just can't fulfill them perfectly. The third is **hawon**, translated here as sin and in other translations as **iniquity** – **corrupt, twisted, crooked in one's being** (relation to ourselves – we are twisted). Again, this isn't willful disobedience or falling short of a mark; it's more of an inward state, that we are at our very core corrupt, twisted, and crooked. That the things we do come out of a twisted, corrupt character. And this is critical, because the truth is that we are not sinners because we commit sinful acts; rather, we commit sinful acts because we are sinners.

So, to sum up, sin can be **rebellion, falling short, or just twistedness of person**. Let's continue:

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. ⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ⁶ Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. ⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. ¹⁴ Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. ¹⁸ In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Remember the first movement of lament: **turn to God**. After our sin comes the first decision: turn to God or turn away from God.

The truth is that many who sin will not respond by turning to God but by turning further away from God. Maybe we don't believe we are worthy. Maybe we don't believe God will forgive us, and so we give up. But here is the truth:

1 John 1:8-9 - *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

This is so important to know. **If you believe that the Christian faith is about being a good person, then when you do something terrible, you will feel like you have no right to go back to God, or go to church.** Many people fall away because of a misunderstanding of what this faith is all about. Look at David. There is forgiveness, even for a murderer and adulterer like David. Satan will try to convince you that you can not turn back to God, but you always can.

In the second movement, **we pour out our complaint to the Lord** as we lament our sin. This is more than just confessing in our mind, agreeing that we have done

something wrong; lament is a whole other level emotionally. What brings us to that level?

1) Lament how our sin has hurt others

For many of us in life, we are going merrily along doing our own thing until we are awoken to how our actions and words and attitudes have negatively impacted another person. As a spouse, as a parent, as anyone with responsibility for another human being, we inevitably find that the way we are living can truly hurt others. I distinctly remember the first time Michele told me how my attitude affected her. I remember how my easygoing attitude hurt others who needed me to take things seriously.

Either we don't care, we numb ourselves, or we recognize the reality of the hurt we have caused and learn to lament it.

“Searcher of hearts,
It is a good day to me when thou givest me
A glimpse of myself;
Sin is my greatest evil,
But thou art my greatest good;
I have cause to loathe myself,
And not to seek self-honour,
For no one desires to commend his own dunghill
My country, family, church
Fare worse because of my sins”

Sometime I come across websites of people who have left churches and have stories to tell of how terrible the pastor was to them. The reality is that people could say the same about me. Despite my desire to love God and love others, my own sins – my self-centeredness, my struggle to work hard, my avoidance of difficult people and situations, my poor communication at times, and so many other sins – have hurt other people. And despite my efforts, overcoming them does not come quickly. And for that, I lament.

The recovery movement gets this. Consider step 4 of the 12 steps: **Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves**

Psalm 139:23-24 - Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting

I am guilty. I will own what I have done, without excuse. I will not blame others or my circumstances or my upbringing. I will clean up my side of the street.

2) Lament how our sin separates us from God

In fact, true lament for our sin does not come until we recognize that it is precisely because of our sin that Jesus died. That before a holy God, we stand guilty, and that the only way to save us was for Jesus to die in our place.

Acts 2:36-38 - "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." ³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We see that He died for us. We see the horror of what we have done, and the beauty of what He did for us. That is what cuts us to the heart, that brings true tears. True lament for our sins comes when we see Jesus dying for us.

Romans 5:6-8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And then, even when we know He died for our sins, true lament comes when we see how despite His sacrifice for us, we take advantage of it and are unwilling to sacrifice even the smallest things for Him.

*No poor creature stands in need of divine grace more than I do,
And yet none abuses it more than I have done, and still do.
How heartless and dull I am!
Humble me in the dust for not loving thee more*

Let's stop and ask the why question. Why would anyone do this? Why not just build yourself up about how great you are? Why not show yourself compassion – hey, nobody's perfect, you're trying the best that you can. The world teaches you to downplay it to feel better about yourself, because they are afraid that looking at your sin and guilt will harm your self-esteem. But that's not the case at all. Looking seriously at our sin, at how we have hurt others and how we have transgressed God's holy law of love, is not an exercise in self-flagellation. It is not just so we will feel terrible about ourselves. As Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 7:8-10 - Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it-- I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while--⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

There is godly sorrow that leads to repentance and life, and worldly sorrow that leads to death. Worldly sorrow does not bring life to us. We can't receive forgiveness. We can't get over our disappointment at not being better than we are. We can't get past the pain we have caused to others. But Godly sorrow leads us to confess, repent, and receive God's forgiveness, and we may end up better for it because of our experience of His grace.

Ask boldly

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

We come lamenting our sin and asking God for forgiveness, and just as importantly, that He would transform us. We repent.

You see here three aspects to repentance: emotion, mind, and will. Repentance involves sorrow for sin, a changing of mind as to sin and God, and a decision to turn from sin towards faith and obedience. **As the 12 steps put it in steps 5 & 6:**

Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs, and were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

And as we confess, we are forgiven.

1 John 1:8-9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

We see Jesus nailed to the cross, taking the punishment we deserved.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Often with this repentance comes the need to confess to others.

Apologize to those you have wronged – as it says in steps 8 & 9 – made a list of all persons we have harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all, and made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Make amends to those we have wronged. We don't have record of David making amends. But we do have Jesus' words:

Matthew 5:23-24 - "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Before you go to worship, get right with those you have wronged. They may not forgive you, but if you are resting in how God sees you, then you can be okay. If you've received the Lord's forgiveness and are resting in His appraisal of you, then you are at a better place to apologize, because you don't need to defend yourself or argue, and your identity won't depend upon whether or not they forgive you.

Trust in Him

We trust that we are forgiven.

Romans 7:15-25 - *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

We are forgiven. Nothing we have done or ever could do can change that. We have been given an identity that does not depend upon our performance!

Romans 8:1-4 - *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.*

No condemnation.

Trust that you are forgiven. Trust that one day God will make a final end to sin and suffering. And trust that in the meantime, God can use even the terrible things we have done to others as part of our testimony or instruction to others.

We trust that He can work all things together for good.

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

In David's case, the next baby born to him and Bathsheba is Solomon, the next king and the one through whom Jesus will eventually come. It seems so unfair, but

that is the grace and mercy of our great God, who brings good out of even the worse sins we commit. And there are others whose sins or mistakes caused others to suffer but for whom God worked good out of it. Peter denied Jesus but eventually became the leader of the church. Paul persecutes Christians but eventually becomes the foremost evangelist. Trust in the Lord and believe that he can bring good out of anything you have done. Do not turn away from God, but turn to God, pour out your heart, ask boldly for forgiveness and for Him to bring good out of even your sin, and trust that He is able.

Let me end with one last prayer from The Valley of Vision:

O God of grace,
 Thou hast imputed my sin to my substitute,
 And has imputed his righteousness to my soul,
 Clothing me with a bridegroom's robe,
 Decking me with jewels of holiness.
 But in my Christian walk I am still in rags;
 My best prayers are stained with sin;
 My penitential tears are so much impurity;
 My confessions of wrong are so many aggravations of sin;
 My receiving the spirit is tinctured with selfishness.

I need to repent of my repentance;
 I need my tears to be washed;
 I have no robe to bring to cover my sins,
 No loom to weave my own righteousness;
 I am always standing clothed in filthy garments,
 And by grace am always receiving change of raiment,
 For thou dost always justify the ungodly;
 I am always going into the far country,
 And always returning home as a prodigal,
 Always saying, Father, forgive me,
 And thou art always bringing forth the best robe.
 Every morning let me wear it,
 Every evening return in it,
 Go out to the day's work in it,
 Be married in it,
 Be wound in death in it,
 Stand before the great white throne in it,
 Enter heaven in it shining as the sun.

Grant me never to lose sight of
The exceeding sinfulness of sin
The exceeding righteousness of salvation,
The exceeding glory of Christ,
The exceeding beauty of holiness,
The exceeding wonder of grace.

Amen.