

This Sunday is my final sermon in my sermon series entitled “How Long, O Lord?” about suffering, loss, lament, and trust. During this series, we’ve talked about how to deal with all kinds of suffering that might be experienced in this life, from the death of loved ones to physical suffering, from the futility of life to our sin, and last week, the specific sin of racism. Suffering is inevitable in life, and there are many ways you can respond to suffering and loss, but the Bible gives us a way to face our suffering that includes emotional honesty but leads to a place of trust and hope, and that is the way of lament. This morning, I want to summarize some of the main points of this series, and talk about why it is so important to listen to lament and to those who are lamenting.

Lament is “a prayer in pain that leads to trust,” as Mark Vroegop defines it in his book “Dark clouds, deep mercy.” It consists of four movements: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. Think of it as a decision tree. It begins with suffering – you get a cancer diagnosis, or your marriage is not what you had hoped it would be, or you lose your job, a friend rejects you or you don’t like the way you look. How do you respond to that suffering? You can turn away from God. You can complain to others. You can turn to substances and addictions to numb the pain. But the way of lament is to turn to God, and then to voice our complaint. Instead of stuffing down our emotions, we vent our anger, our hurt, our disappointment, our fear, our doubts, and our questions to God. We protest against the way things are. Instead of being overcome by our emotions, we pour them out in prayer to God. **The feedback I have received throughout this series has showed me that this was a revelation to most of you, that you were unaware that you could speak so honestly to God without it seeming disrespectful.** And then, we ask boldly. Instead of simply resigning ourselves stoically to what is happening to us, saying “well, I just need to accept this as God’s will,” we ask boldly for what it is we need. We ask God to show up, to intervene, to bring justice, to relieve our pain, to heal our relationships.

And in the end, instead of deciding that if God does not do what we want, then we will reject him, we choose to trust in God no matter what. We remind ourselves that He is good, that He loves us, that He is always working everything together for good, that one day He will make a final end of evil. And we tell Him that we will trust Him whether or not He gives us what we ask for. That’s the way of lament. Turn to God. Voice your complaint. Ask boldly. And choose to trust.

Now, typically I like to end a sermon series with a brief summary followed by a testimony time, where I invite the people of NewLife to come up and share what they have learned through the series or what God has done in their life. But, as you

know, I'm the only one here. So I'm going to use this morning to talk about why I think it is so important to listen to lament, to listen to those who lament, to the sufferers, to those on the margins. In doing this, we follow the example of our God, as we read in Psalm 10:17-18:

*Psalm 10:17-18 - You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you **listen to** their cry, <sup>18</sup> defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.*

There are three reasons in particular that it is important to listen to the voices of lament:

**1) You will gain different perspectives on life and faith**

And these perspectives will give you a truer and more fuller view of God and the life of faith.

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you've probably attended a conference, something like Promise Keepers or Women of Faith or something like that. And if you're a pastor like me, you've seen many, many other conferences advertised. The lineup at these conferences is pretty standard: the speakers are supposedly the best and the brightest, the successful people, the overcomers. It is those with the biggest churches, the best-selling books, the most captivating stories, the largest online audience. The message is that these are the heroes, the examples, the one whose lives are worthy of emulation by us ordinary, struggling folks. If you want to win at life, pay attention to these winners.

I read a quote recently that hammered this home for me. It was by Dave Hollis, from his book *Get out of your own way: A skeptics' guide to growth and fulfillment*. If you don't know who Dave Hollis is, you are more likely familiar with his wife and business partner, Rachel Hollis, author of the bestseller *Girl, Wash Your Face*, a book that you will find sold in Christian bookstores. Dave & Rachel, among other things, have led marriage conferences over the past few years. Dave wrote:

*"I filtered other people's relational feedback based on their track records. Have you ever been in a situation where the person giving you relationship advice couldn't themselves hold one down? In the same way I wouldn't come to someone who was totally out of shape for advice on working out, the idea of giving weight to the opinions of someone who isn't excelling in their relationship is ridiculous.*

*Plenty of people have tried to tell us the best way Rachel and I should be doing our marriage. If those voices come from people who are killing it in their own relationship, their thoughts are welcome. But... if the feedback you're getting is coming from someone who can't keep a steady relationship, you best filter out their feedback as it does not come from a credible source."*

In other words, the kind of advice you would get from this couple at their marriage conference is that listening to marriage advice from a struggling couple is ridiculous. Sadly, Dave and Rachel announced that they were getting divorced two weeks ago, and that they had been considering divorce for years, even while holding marriage conferences telling people that you should filter out relationship advice from couples who are struggling. My point is not to pick on the Hollis'. My point is that is typical of American Christianity. There is this thing we do where we prop up the successful and beautiful, the winners at life, those who are killing it, and tell everyone else to pony up the money to learn from them. And, well, the Biblical focus on lament shows us that there's something wrong about that.

Perhaps we need to listen more closely to the stories of those who are suffering. To those on the margins. To those who are lamenting. As Soong-Chan Rah put it in his book "Prophetic Lament": *"In the American Christian narrative, the stories of the dominant culture are placed front and center while stories from the margins are often ignored."*

The Bible is not the story of the best and brightest, the successful and beautiful, those who are killing it in life. When you read through the Bible and pay attention to lament, you see over and over how God gives voice to the hurting, the oppressed, and those on the margin. God consistently elevates the younger brother or sister like Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and David. He honors the barren woman like Sarah and Hannah, giving voice to their lament and honoring them for it. The Psalms are filled with the cries of those who don't understand why God would allow them to suffer. We read Jeremiah lamenting over the destruction of Jerusalem, Daniel lamenting over his people's sins, Naomi lamenting the loss of her husband and sons, Paul lamenting the thorn in his flesh, and Jesus lamenting his upcoming crucifixion as well as the impending destruction of Jerusalem. You can not read the Bible without listening to lament on almost every page.

One of the best things to come out of the recent increased focus on racism in America has been the call to listen to the stories of the oppressed. When the only history you know is the story as told by white Americans, you hear a triumphalistic narrative about manifest destiny and forward progress. You don't hear about the

devastation done to the Native Americans who first inhabited this land. You don't acknowledge that this country was built on the back of African slaves.

Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Peace*, contrasts the theology of the "haves" versus the theology of the "have-nots." The haves develop a theology of celebration; the have-nots sing the language of lament, crying out for deliverance out of their suffering. Why is it that 1/3 of all Psalms were laments, while only about 5-10% of songs today are laments? Why is it that we want to hear the upbeat inspirational songs? Could it be because we are the "haves," turning a blind eye to the have-nots? Are we out of touch with the suffering of the world, the suffering even of the members of our community?

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, *"Even if a verse or a psalm is not my own prayer, it is nevertheless a prayer of another member of the community."*

Throughout this series, I've been challenged to listen more to the voices of lament, the voices of those on the margins, the voices of the oppressed. I heard the story of a Hispanic rapper at the Christian Dove awards and what it felt like as the sea of mainly white people there looked at you like you were from another planet. I heard an Asian-American pastor friend lamenting how much it grieved him to hear the crowd at a church cheering as the president called the Coronavirus the Kung Flu, and sharing what it has been like as his children have been the target of racist slurs through these past couple of months. I've heard the voices of women in the evangelical church who struggle with the male chauvinism they have experienced and how these men in power have silenced their voices. Every voice matters, for every individual is made in the image of God and of immeasurable worth.

Listen to the voices of lament, to those who have struggled to trust God despite their suffering. You will gain a valuable perspective on life and faith. As Michael Card put it in his book *"A Sacred Sorrow,"* *"If you and I are to know one another in a deep way, we must not only share our hurts, anger, and disappointments with each other, we must also lament them together before the God who hears and is moved by our tears. Only then does our sharing become truly redemptive in character. The degree to which I am willing to enter into the suffering of another person reveals the level of my commitment and love for them. If I am not interested in your hurts, I am not really interested in you."*

A second reason we need to listen to lament is:

2) You will see where you need to humbly repent

Sometimes as you listen to the laments of the sufferers, you come to realize that your sin, or the sins of your people, have contributed to their pain.

The truth is that despite our triumphalistic, celebratory narrative as the American church, we do not reflect Jesus in so many ways by the way we treat other people. And the more you listen to the voices of those on the margins – to Muslims, to the LGBTQ community, to women, to racial minorities – the more you will hear stories of how the church has hurt others by not loving as Jesus does. What if instead of approaching relationships ready to argue and prove you are right, you enter ready to listen and to love? After all, why is it that those who were oppressed and on the margins loved to be with Jesus, while they often don't want anything to do with the church. There is a need for some honest self-reflection and repentance of how we have failed to love as Jesus loves.

As the author Ibrahim Abdul-Matin put it, *“People of faith have lost their moral authority . . . because they have lacked humility: they have failed to acknowledge the ways they are part of the problem.”*

Years ago, I used to attend an annual leadership conference put on by Willow Creek church and their pastor Bill Hybels. One of the messages Hybels loved to communicate was the local church is the hope of the world. As inspirational as that saying was, I was also always uneasy when I heard him call the church the hope of the world. **And when he resigned two years ago because of his inappropriate dealings with women at his church, I realized why that always made me so uneasy.** The church is God's vehicle in this world to bring the hope of the gospel, yes, but my hope will never be in the local church but in Jesus. For the local church is made up of sinful men and women, and if you're hope is in them, you will be disillusioned. Jesus, and His gospel, is the hope of the world.

### **3) You will see where you can love others as Jesus has loved you**

As you listen to the laments of the world, unless your heart is hard, you cannot help but see opportunities to love others as God has loved you. And you may just find that God will use your own suffering to equip you as you love and serve others, to make you more compassionate and able to speak into someone else's pain with the healing love of Christ. As Paul wrote:

*2 Corinthians 1:3-10 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our*

troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings **we suffer**. <sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. <sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who **raises the dead**. <sup>10</sup> He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,

Paul went through intense suffering, but as God comforted him, he was able to bring comfort to others out of those experiences. Similarly, God comforts us in our suffering so that we might minister comfort to others in their own suffering. Nowhere has this been put more beautifully than by the 19<sup>th</sup> century London preacher Charles Spurgeon in his book “The Soul Winner.”

*Some years ago, I was the subject of fearful depression of spirit. Certain troublous events had happened to me; I was also unwell, and my heart sank within me. Out of the depths I was forced to cry unto the Lord. Just before I went away to Mentone for rest, I suffered greatly in body, but far more in soul, for my spirit was overwhelmed.*

*Under this pressure, I preached a sermon from the words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I was as much qualified to preach from that text as ever I expect to be; indeed, I hope that few of my brethren could have entered so deeply into those heart-breaking words. I felt to the full of my measure the horror of a soul forsaken of God. Now, that was not a desirable experience. I tremble at the bare idea of passing again through that eclipse of soul; I pray that I may never suffer in that fashion again unless the same result should hang upon it.*

*That night, after sermon, there came into the vestry a man who was as nearly insane as he could be to be out of an asylum. His eyes seemed ready to start from his head, and he said that he should utterly have despaired if he had not heard that discourse, which had made him feel that there was one man alive who understood his feeling, and could describe his experience. I talked with him, and tried to encourage him, and asked him to come again on the Monday night, when I should*

*have a little more time to talk with him.*

*I saw the brother again, and I told him that I thought he was a hopeful patient, and I was glad that the word had been so suited to his case. Apparently, he put aside the comfort which I presented for his acceptance, and yet I had the consciousness upon me that the precious truth which he had heard was at work upon his mind, and that the storm of his soul would soon subside into a deep calm.*

*Now hear the sequel. Last night, of all the times in the year, when, strange to say, I was preaching from the words, "The Almighty hath vexed my soul," after the service, in walked this self-same brother who had called on me five years before. This time, he looked as different as noonday from midnight, or as life from death. I said to him, "I am glad to see you, for I have often thought about you, and wondered whether you were brought into perfect peace." I told you that I went to Mentone, and my patient also went into the country, so that we had not met for five years.*

*To my enquiries, this brother replied, "Yes, you said I was a hopeful patient, and I am sure you will be glad to know that I have walked in the sunlight from that day till now. Everything is changed and altered with me."*

*Dear friends, as soon as I saw my poor despairing patient the first time, I blessed God that my fearful experience had prepared me to sympathize with him and guide him; but last night, when I saw him perfectly restored, my heart overflowed with gratitude to God for my former sorrowful feelings. I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit: it is good for me to have been afflicted that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary.*

*Suppose that, by some painful operation, you could have your right arm made a little longer, I do not suppose you would care to undergo the operation; but if you foresaw that, by undergoing the pain, you would be enabled to reach and save drowning men who else would sink before your eyes, I think you would willingly bear the agony, and pay a heavy fee to the surgeon to be thus qualified for the rescue of your fellows.*

*Reckon, then, that to acquire soul-winning power you will have to go through fire and water, through doubt and despair, through mental torment and soul distress. It will not, of course, be the same with you all, nor perhaps with any two of you, but according to the work allotted you, will be your preparation. You must go into the*

*fire if you are to pull others out of it, and you will have to dive into the floods if you are to draw others out of the water. You cannot work a fire-escape without feeling the scorch of the conflagration, nor man a lifeboat without being covered with the waves. If Joseph is to preserve his brethren alive, he must himself go down into Egypt; if Moses is to lead the people through the wilderness, he must first himself spend forty years there with his flock. Payson truly said, "If anyone asks to be made a successful minister, he knows not what he asks; and it becomes him to consider whether he can drink deeply of Christ's bitter cup and be baptized with His baptism."*

**Those of you who shared so openly about your pain and suffering, be encouraged that God will use you to reach others in a way that others can not.** And as you listen to the laments of others, you may find that God has equipped you through your own trials to bring comfort and hope to others.

Christ suffered for us, for our comfort, and in the same way we will suffer for others, for their comfort. The abuse you suffered, when given to God, will be used to comfort others who have been abused, to let them know that they are not alone, that they are loved, and that their abuse was not the end of the story. Consider another quote, from Brennan Manning about a play by Thornton Wilder:

*There's a scene in Thornton Wilder's play "The Angel that Troubled the Waters"*

*The scene is a doctor comes to the pool everyday wanting to be healed of his melancholy and his gloom and his sadness. Finally the angel appears. The doctor, he's a medical doctor, goes to step into the water. The angel blocks his entrance and says, "No, step back, the healing is not for you." The doctor pleads, "But I've got to get into the water. I can't live this way." The angel says, "No, this moment is not for you." And he says, "But how can I live this way?"*

*The angel says to him, "Doctor, without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of this earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."*

As Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote in his book "Lament for a Son":

*“The Stoics of antiquity said: Be calm. Disengage yourself. Neither laugh nor weep. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity’s mourning, weep over humanity’s weeping, be wounded by humanity’s wounds, be in agony over humanity’s agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.”*

A day of peace is coming. The good news is that our God is a suffering God.

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

Nicholas Wolterstorff again: *“God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering world is to suffer. God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering. The one who does not see God’s suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love. So suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For Love is the meaning. And Love suffers. The tears of God are the meaning of history.”*

Put your trust in God, our suffering God, this morning, brothers and sisters. Turn to God and voice your complaint. Pour out your anger, your doubts, your fears, and your pain. Ask boldly for healing, for deliverance, for help. And then choose to trust in our suffering God, who loved you so much that He suffered and died in your place to take away your sins and your punishment and to give you eternal life.

If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you can pray something like the following:

*Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who loves me so much that you suffered and died in my place on that cross, to take the punishment I deserve for my sins. I believe that by trusting in your death and resurrection, I can find complete forgiveness and eternal life, joy, and peace in a relationship with you. I know that the suffering of this world does not compare to the eternal suffering that awaits all who reject your offer of salvation to live without you as their Lord. And so, trusting in your love, I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I put my faith in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.*