THE BIBLICAL ART OF LAMENT

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What is going on inside your heart? How are you processing the range of emotions that you are experiencing? Without doubt, COVID-19 has impacted every person in some way. Many people report a sense of instability, of how the future is so unclear they feel immobilised. Others face job loss, income reduction, illness, family members who are at high risk of contracting COVID-19 and so on. Layered on that are possibly feelings of guilt, or shame, that you feel so bad, when others have far less than you do. Being unable to process these varied and strong emotions can leave you feeling overwhelmed and crushed. It is good news, indeed, that the scriptures give us a powerful tool to lift our hearts towards our heavenly Father.

THE BIBLICAL LAMENT

In the Psalms and the prophets, we read many laments. Somewhere between one third and one half of the Psalms are laments. This is striking: the longest book in the Bible is a collection of songs – many of which are fill with cries of pain, of injustice, of grief and fear. It is almost like God has given us a template of how to complain, to vent, to process, to pour out our hearts, to bring our whole selves to him. You may feel that you have to 'leave your baggage at the door' in order to worship him, that only people 'on the mountaintop can truly worship'. If you are not a person of faith, you may have the sense that you have to sort out all these emotions before God will take you seriously.

Laments teach us that the deep and powerful emotions, the valleys we are in, are not disqualifiers to pray, to worship and to meet with God. Instead, it is in the valley that the deepest praise is found, is nurtured and pursued. And for those who wouldn’t call themselves believers, the valleys may have stirred big questions of faith, certainty and hope that are intermingled with these strong emotions.

The ancient practice breathes life in us today

In Western culture there is typically a deficit of lamenting. There is a desire to focus only on the positive, to look forward, to be triumphant. And so, there is no space to cry out to God from the place of pain, to process real life. Strong negative emotions might be frowned upon, because ‘we are more than conquerors’, right?

Consider for a moment that when Jesus, the Son of God, hung from the cross, bearing the sin of you and me. He cries out “my God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He is quoting Psalm 22 – a Psalm of lament. The perfect Son of God used a lament Psalm to give voice to the profound emotions he was experiencing. I can too.
The biblical lament is transformative in nature and breathes life into the lamenter:

1. It allows you to pour out your heart to God, unfiltered. God is not afraid of what you are feeling. Do not bottle up what you are experiencing or thinking. He knows what is going on inside you already – this is you wrapping words around your experiences and feelings;
2. It directs your emotions towards God, not towards yourself or others;
3. It takes your heart on a journey – not to only focus on the ‘valley’;
4. By focusing on God, you are no longer at the centre, but positioned within his story;
5. It does not change the situation, but the very process helps you to have a different posture in the situation as you endure with hope.

HOW DO I WRITE A LAMENT?

There are three basic parts to a biblical lament. The order may be different, but for the sake of simplicity, let’s use Psalm 13 as a template:

**PSALM 13**

1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
4 But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
5 I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

**THE PARTS OF A BIBLICAL LAMENT:**

vv1-2: is all about the trouble, the pain, the distress, the injustice. It is what is being experienced or observed. Many times there is a list of the grievances, describing what is going on. This is often the easiest to write. It may include expressing fear, anxiety, a lack of trust in God in this time. This may be a little unfamiliar, as it might feel like you are accusing God of something.
vv3-4: is the request that is made of God, based on the experience of the person suffering, or grappling with the suffering of someone else. It is asking God to move, to act, to take action in the midst of the experience above.

vv5-6: the final part of laments focuses on a reminder of God’s character, his promises, his past actions. This process of looking at God’s character is hard to do in the valley and, many times, these declarations or reminders are aimed at our own heart. This declares what we can be certain of, even in uncertain times. If you are reading this and unfamiliar with the nature and character of the God of the Bible, you could read through some of the other Psalms that share many of his attributes.

THE PEN IS IN YOUR HAND

Ultimately the power of the lament lies in writing it. It isn’t about ‘getting it right’ or having something that someone else will even read. It is about processing what is going on inside you in the direction of your Heavenly Father.

We invite you: pick up your pen, lift your heart and go to your Heavenly Father.

Other Psalms to read and pray through as laments in this time include Psalm 6, 28, 31, 57.