

How To Pray When Life Hurts

I am certainly not a prophet, but I predict that in your lifetime, individually and collectively, you will experience significant suffering. You need to know how to understand it. You need to know how to pray about it.

According to the biblical worldview, *everybody* suffers. But, learning how to pray during suffering is not a subject that is typically considered in many churches. It doesn't "sell" well. It does not always make us feel good about ourselves. In fact, I can imagine what some of you are thinking about this blog: "Oh great! We're going to learn how to be miserable and how unhappy we can be."

I will demonstrate, however, that many of you are suffering -- now. You *already* lament and some of you struggle with the intensity of your negative feelings about it. For example, how many of you personally (or you know someone who):

- has been physically, psychologically, or sexually abused?
- suffered bankruptcy?
- is chronically or terminally ill?
- has been raped or sexually harassed?
- has been robbed?
- lost a home or business due to fire?
- had a miscarriage or lost a young child?
- was hurt or killed in a tragic accident?
- has been rejected or persecuted for his/her faith?
- lost prematurely a parent or spouse or other family member or special friend?
- has been turned down for a job desperately needed?
- experienced periods when God seemed remote or silent?
- was unfairly rejected for an opportunity sought?
- married someone who turned away from the faith?
- experienced periods of extended waiting or answer to prayer for a deep desire or need?
- married someone who lived a double life or was unfaithful?
- experienced divorce?
- lived somewhere where economic and social conditions offer little hope of advancement?
- lived somewhere where economic and social conditions are unstable or dangerous?
- needed special medical care but could not get it?
- suffered a natural disaster?
- experienced criminal or political corruption?
- has children who make unwise and unhealthy choices?
- was addicted to a harmful substance or habit?

We *all* suffer and the causes are endless. Paul says: this is "the present *evil* age" (Gal 1:4). Ecclesiastes 1:14 declares: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind." Psalm 90:10 says: "the years of our life" are "but toil and trouble." Jesus, Himself, told us: "in the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33) and "sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matt 6:34). Paul tells us: "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:3).

Yet, no one suffered more than Jesus. He shows us, also, how to pray when we suffer. Jesus prayed honestly and He prayed the Psalms in the moment of His greatest affliction. We ought to learn to pray like Him, that is, how to lament as in the Psalms.* For example, on the cross Christ prayed:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" From Psalm 22:1 in Matthew 27:46
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?"

"Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have From Psalm 31:5 in Luke 23:46
redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God."

"They gave me poison for food, and for my From Psalm 69:21 alluded to in
thirst they gave me sour wine to drink." John 19:28

The lament genre in the Psalms has five elements which can occur in any order. Any element can also appear more than once and is sometimes omitted:

Cry to God: "Hear me, O God, as I voice my complaint" (64:1). The cry tends to be intimate and personal, and often uses the phrase, "my God."

Lament or complaint: The psalmist describes the crisis or reason for the psalm, such as, isolation, imprisonment, destruction, the psalmist himself (his own sin, thoughts, or actions), illness, or even God (His tests and trials).

Petition or request: The appeal is often spoken as a bold imperative. Sometimes, God is lamented as being absent, remote, unresponsive, not listening (why?: 10:1,13; 22:1; 42:9; 43:2; 44:23-24; 74:1,11; 80:12; 88:14; how Long?: 6:3; 13:1,2; 35:17; 74:9-10; 79:5; 80:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84; divine silence: 28:1; 30:12; 35:22; 83:1; 109:1; 18:41; 66:18-19; 27:9; 44:23-25; 77:7-9; 88:14).

Statement of confidence in God: The psalmist expresses hope and the assurance of being heard. There is a statement of trust, in spite of the problematic situation. Often, these laments transition from despair to hope by words like: "but," "nevertheless," "yet," "surely," and "still."

Promise to praise God: The laments often mention a future promise of praise or a payment of vows to honor God in public and private for blessings received.

Psalm 54 is a clear, brief example of each aspect of the lament form:

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| Cry to God | "O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth." (v. 2) |
| Lament or complaint | "For strangers have risen against me; ruthless men seek my life." (v. 3) |
| Petition or request | "O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might...in your faithfulness put an end to them." (v. 1, 5b) |
| Statement of confidence in God | "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my |

life. He will return the evil to my enemies." (vs. 4-5a)

Promise to praise God

"With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." (vs. 6-7)

To summarize, the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, expresses clearly the purpose for the biblical lament:

God is one who is present in, participating in, and attentive to the darkness, weakness, and displacement of life. Yahweh has the answer for chaos. So, the psalmist waits in disorientation. There is no other court of appeal. Yahweh is the one who delivers the weak and the needy who cannot deliver themselves...What can be accomplished only by Yahweh, who has the will, the resources, and the covenantal obligation to intervene...His greatness is revealed in terms of rescue.

Brueggemann also explains the motivation and faith inherent in lament, according to the biblical worldview:

Being confident of God does not lead to passive acceptance. It leads to vigorous pressing of the issues, an insistence on transformation that can only be wrought by God. Still in the midst of the disorientation, this persistent faith does battle towards newness. Trust in Yahweh leads to a zealous insistence on change, and change is wrought through lament.

So, we should learn how to pray like Jesus when we suffer using the lament genre: cry to God, complaint, request, statement of confidence, and promise to praise.

*Laments for the individual: 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142; for the community: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129