



CHRONIC JOY
chronic illness ministry



Exploring Lament

Reflections on Psalm 130



By Julie Sheridan Smith

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness;
therefore you are feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice.”

Imagine hearing these words through the deep tones of the bow pulled across the strings of a cello. You can feel this cry of lament reverberating through your skin, through your soul.

As we listen, we hear our own voices crying out to God from our own experiences of grief or pain, depression or illness, frustration or confusion.

This experience is common to us all at some point or place in our lives. These feelings can be isolating and lonely. In some way and at some time, I imagine this prayer has been spoken in each of our hearts, lifted to God and taken in.

Yet we are not left in despair, for we hear, even from the depths of chaos, a confidence, a deep sense of trust, a knowing relationship with God.

There is no sense of abandonment or absence of God’s presence in this lament. The psalmist cries out with insistence, proclaiming God’s character and passionate love.

The psalmist knows that God is not a punitive God interested in marking or keeping a tally of our failings. We hear the essence of God, spoken through the tone and experience of lament, at its core, the knowledge of God’s mercy and forgiveness, never abandonment, even in the deep and the dark.

When the psalmist speaks of the soul waiting for the Lord, it is not with impatience or passivity, for the Hebrew word translated here as *to wait* also translates as *to hope*.

Waiting and hoping – living expectantly.

Our spiritual life is like this. Our life with God is an unfolding process over time in which the depths of life breathe and communicate just as deeply as the heights. Lament has a role and a purpose in our relationship with God.

The Psalmist writes of those who watch for the morning. How often have you lain awake during the night, those hours seeming longer than any day? Yet when morning comes, even though we may be exhausted, there is the chance for renewal, trust that God has been listening with us in the dark.

We can imagine, in the time and place of the psalmist, a watchman waiting on the city wall, protecting the city through the night by watching for enemy. Yet also watching for the dawning light of day, knowing the light would come.

When we feel our own lives have been crucified with pain, we cry out from the depths of sorrow knowing God is with us, He has been to the cross, and we remember that sorrow and pain walk hand in hand with the sure knowledge of what God will do. Then we remember that even sorrow and deep pain can watch and wait and hope.

May you hear this in the depth of your own heart today, Amen.

What is Lament?

By Cindee Snider Re

Biblical lament is an honest, vulnerable expression of pain, a crying out to God in faith as we are suffering.

If I break my arm, I cry out in pain. If I experience the breaking of a relationship, my health, a job or finances, I cry out in lament. Both are natural responses to pain. Both are valid human emotions. Both are honest reactions. Yet we don't often make room in our lives for lament.

The Old Testament Israelites sang about the full range human emotion in the Psalms: anger, trust, sorrow, despair, celebration, fear, longing, thanksgiving, anguish, joy, loneliness, beauty, praise, protest, love, doubt, promise, pleading, weariness, gratitude, insecurity and hope.

Lament was a daily part of their worship, woven through the fabric of their lives, yet 2,000 years later, we've grown to believe that lament reveals a lack of faith or little trust in God. Instead of expressing it, we push it away or swallow it down. But refusing to acknowledge our pain doesn't mean it slips quietly into the night. Swallowed pain swells beneath the surface of our lives, bubbling up and out as anxiety, impatience, frustration or anger, separating us from God and sometimes sinking us into deep depression.

True lament isn't an expression of weakness, whining or self-pity. It's an authentic expression of faith.

Pushing our pain aside, covering it up or feeling shame *because* we feel it, diminishes our human experience. Even Jesus cried out in pain, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46b)

If Jesus, God in human flesh, cried out in anguish in the garden of Gethsemane and from the cross, if he wept over Lazarus' death, why do *we* feel it is faithless to lament? Why do we fear to embrace what God so clearly expresses in His Word?

Illness, pain and grieving are messy and complicated. Yet God says, "*Take heart.*"

Give yourself permission to lay down the shoulds – what you think you should feel or express – and the should nots – what you think you shouldn't feel or express.

Instead, set aside some time and space to sit quietly with these words from the Psalms.

Allow them to stir your soul. Don't write yet. Just read. Slowly. And give yourself permission to feel.

Psalm 5:1-2

Give ear to my words, O Lord,
consider my sighing.
Listen to my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.

Psalm 10:1

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of
trouble?

Psalm 13:1-2

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

Psalm 55:1-7

Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
at the voice of the enemy,
at the stares of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering upon me
and revile me in their anger.
My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest –
I would flee far away
and stay in the desert."

Psalm 57:1

Have mercy on me, O God,
have mercy on me,
for in you my soul takes refuge.

I will take refuge in the
shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed.

Psalm 63:1

O God, you are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.

Psalm 69:1-3

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come
up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail, looking for my God.

Psalm 77:1-2

I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress,
I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands
and my soul refused to be comforted.

Psalm 88:1-3

O Lord, the God who saves me,
day and night I cry out before you.
May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of trouble
and my life draws near the grave.

Psalm 102:1-7

Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry for help come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress.
Turn your ear to me;
when I call, answer me quickly.
For my days vanish like smoke;
my bones burn like glowing embers.
My heart is blighted and withered like grass;
I forget to eat my food.
Because of my loud groaning
I am reduced to skin and bones.
I am like a desert owl,
like an owl among the ruins.
I lie awake; I have become
like a bird alone on a roof.

Psalm 116:3-4

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;

I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord;
O Lord, save me!

Psalm 130:1-2

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for
mercy.

Psalm 141:1-2

O Lord, I call to you; come quickly to me.
Hear my voice when I call to you.
May my prayer be set before you like
incense; may the lifting up of my hands
be like the evening sacrifice.

Writing Your Own Psalm of Lament

WRITING LAMENT IN FIVE STEPS:

1. **ADDRESS/CRYING OUT TO GOD** – Address God, crying out specifically to Him.
2. **COMPLAINT** – Tell God honestly what is on your heart, what is causing you pain, with specific detail.
3. **TRUST** – Explore your understanding of who God is and what His promises mean. It's OK to wrestle with God here, to question, to doubt. God isn't expecting a prescribed answer, He's longing for an honest conversation.
4. **ASK** – Ask God for help, naming what you need.
5. **PRAISE** – It's important to pause here, shifting gears and allowing yourself time to name the things you're thankful for, writing them into your concluding lines.

Let's take a look at **Psalm 13** as an example of these five steps.

STEP

PSALM 13

Address/Crying out to God

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

Complaint

How long will you hide your face from me?

Complaint

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?

Complaint

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Ask

Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.

Ask

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

Complaint

my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

Trust

But I trust in your unfailing love;

Praise

my heart rejoices in your salvation.

Praise

I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.

TIPS TO HELP YOU BEGIN

1. Write honestly. This is a conversation between you and God, an opportunity to begin to explore lament.
2. Offer yourself the freedom to openly express your pain and struggle. No one ever has to read what you write.
3. Think in terms of emotion rather than facts – poetry vs. reporting, color commentary vs. play-by-play.
4. Think descriptively. The Psalmists used figurative speech.
 - Can you describe an emotion without naming it?
 - Can you use color, shape or texture to describe your pain?
 - Can you describe pain as an animal, an attribute of weather or man-made object?
 - Explore the five senses – touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing.
 - Can you describe your pain in metaphor? For example: My pain is a roaring lion.
 - Can you describe it with simile? For example: “...my bones burn like glowing embers.”
5. Think in terms of phrases rather than sentences. Play with line length.
6. Give yourself time to reflect on what you’ve written, time to sort through the experience and emotion. Read the words slowly. Read them aloud if you can. Listen to the sounds of the words as well as what they mean.
7. As you reach Step 5, shift gears. Begin to think about the things you’re grateful for and name them. Read your lament again. Add any new praises into your concluding lines.
8. The length of your lament doesn’t matter. The Psalms range from just two verses in Psalm 117 to a robust 176 verses in Psalm 119.
9. Can you praise God in the midst of pain? Can you praise Him if your circumstances don’t change?
10. Shielding ourselves from lament only increases our isolation by separating us not only from each other, but also from God.

Lament takes time. Step in slowly. Don’t rush. Sit with God. Allow yourself to feel. Then when you’re ready, take up your pen and begin to explore the grace of lament.