

**Sermon for Sunday, March 6, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Our Laments: Hope in the Midst of Sorrow**  
**Psalm 13**

### 1. The Need for Lamentation

Don Draper is the central character of the television drama *Mad Men*, set in the world of advertising in the 1960s. Draper is talented, creative, handsome, ambitious, amoral, and possessed by a secret. His mother, a prostitute, died in childbirth and his father hated and abused him. So he ran from his home and his past and joined the army. When a fellow soldier died, he took that man's name and identity, to escape yet more. Since that day, he tried to hide his history and identity from everyone, even from himself.

Peggy, Don's talented young protégé at the advertising agency, suffers a trauma that leads to a breakdown. He respects her, so he visits her in a mental hospital and delivers his life-wisdom to her:

Don: "Peggy, why are you here?"

Peggy: [Speaking in a tranquilized haze] "I don't know."

Don: "Yes you do. You need to do whatever they say and get out of here. Get out of here! Move forward. This *never happened*. It will shock you how much this never happened."

Draper's counsel exemplifies a classic response to pain and trauma, one that dominated America at least from 1930-1965: Forget the past, escape it, and dash toward the future. *Mad Men* shows that this approach worked for Draper at a professional level, for he functioned well at work. But personally, it was disastrous. He is cold, impatient, impulsive, self-destructive. The script says this man will never be whole until he faces himself and his past.

At the other extreme, certain people bury themselves in their traumatic past. Perhaps they have chosen it, perhaps they cannot move forward. Their trauma doesn't influence them, it governs them and they cannot separate themselves from it. Years after their trauma, the wound is still bleeding, oozing, and festering. The flesh never closes. The comic novel and film *Cold Comfort Farm* created the character Ada Doom, an old widow who holes up in her room, barks at people at random, and avoids all responsibilities on the grounds of a vague childhood trauma: "*I saw something nasty in the woodshed.*" Because of her trauma, she does no work and has no duties, not even the duties of basic civility.

These fictional scenes distill the two errors people commit when they experience a trauma. Some ignore, detach, and minimize. They say, "Everyone faces hard times" or "That was long ago," as if platitudes resolve problems. By contrast, others stab themselves with regrets and self-condemnation. They say, "I was a terrible husband, a failure as a wife." A vocational setback, a strained relationship may lead them to withdraw into their grief. They may function well by day and withdraw into silent misery, even paralysis, at night.

In Jesus' day, the Stoics thought they knew how to counter life's sorrows: Be calm, disengage, feeling nothing. If we neither laugh nor weep, we will at least avoid pain. But Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn." It is a blessing to weep over the wounds of the world, for it is better to feel pain than to feel nothing. We must take time to grieve and lament and take our sorrow to God. But we also expect God's reply, even his relief, for Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" – by God (Matt. 5:4).

Solomon says there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" (Eccles. 3:4). Tears can't be hurried. No one can rush through grief over a divorce, a ruined career, a death, a ruined friendship. No one should even try. Yet there is a time to laugh and dance again.

Why let grief carry us away from the world? Why drown in pain? The psalms teach us to face the chaos and pain of life by lamenting. When we lament, we don't simply grieve, we grieve in God's presence, and hear how he comments on our expressed sorrow. The laments are candid, even raw, but almost every psalm of lament features a shift from gloom to light and hope. They teach us to hope in the midst of sorrow, to face harsh realities with candor, with anger and tears, but also with faith.

## 2. The Nature of Lamentation

### Israel's songs of lament

The Bible teaches us how to find hope in sorrow in the songs traditionally called "psalms of lament." A better term might be songs of lament and hope. To describe them:

Recall that the psalms are songs for worship which God gave Israel for both public and private worship. Psalms of private lament speak in the first person singular: I am afflicted, I weep, I hope. Public lament speak in the plural. In our affliction, we weep and hope. These are "model songs" – songs we actually sing and songs that teach us how to sing, how to write new songs, our own songs.

When we pray, we typically have lots of requests for help. In our songs, which so often are prayers, we typically praise. Psalms of lament are very different: They begin with evil, chaos and suffering, spread before God, the mighty and merciful. They say things like:

"God, you are able to deliver and I believe that you will do so" (thirty-eight psalms) or

"God you are able to help, please do so." (twenty-two psalms) or

"God, you are able to help, why have you not helped yet" (several times in Psalm 88).<sup>1</sup>

So the psalms of lament give us language and patterns as we take our sorrows to the Lord, and plead or summon him to listen, to help, to comfort. The laments are hopeful, expecting action from the Lord. We have a right to tell the Lord: would you look at this?! What are you going to do?

The church doesn't lament very much. Yet there are about sixty psalms of lament. Bible history also shows God's people lamenting. Once, before he was king, David returned home after a battle and discovered that some marauders had found his village unprotected, burned the houses and took all the women, children and cattle as plunder. The Bible says, "David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep" (1 Sam 30:4). When Saul and Jonathan died in battle, David wept again for Jonathan his closest friend, but Saul too, though evil, because of the waste of a great life (2 Sam 1:17-31).

People call Jeremiah the "weeping prophet" because of his laments over the spiritual and religious sins of Israel. God commissioned Jeremiah to declare the hard truth. Because God's people had lost their love of Him, become God's temple had become a home for idolatry, Jerusalem and its temple would fall to the Babylonians. Jeremiah obeyed. As a result, when "the chief officer in the temple... heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks" (Jer. 20:1-2).

Jeremiah said the temple officer must not imagine that would change God's plan. Indeed, the priest would see the city smashed and plundered, would see his friends die, and then go into exile. Then Jeremiah broke down and wept! Why?

He took no pleasure in announcing judgment. It was misery to denounce the leaders of his nation, even if every word was true. The leaders and his friends hated him for it. Jeremiah never wanted to prophesy judgment, but he could not resist God's summons: "LORD... you overpowered me and

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Sklar, notes on Psalms

prevailed." Yet, because he proclaims the overthrow of Jerusalem: "Everyone mocks me... So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long" (20:7-8).

Perhaps Jeremiah could stop prophesying? No, for God's word, "is in my heart like... a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot" (20:9). So he must deliver his message (20:10). He was so miserable, he lamented life itself: "Cursed be the day I was born!" (20:14-18).

Now Prophets aren't supposed to say, "*I wish I had never been born.*" But they do. Lots of people do, at some point in life. We get angry and lament. Unless we refuse to feel at all, unless someone told us we should be happy and "victorious" all the time, we will cry with Jeremiah, "There is fire in my bones. I'm sick of holding it in. I've been overpowered. Some days, I'm sorry I was born."

In 1936 Robert Loveless wrote, "Every Day with Jesus is Sweeter than the Day Before." I understand that some people love that song, but some think: "Really? *Every day* is sweeter?" Never a dark turn? It certainly doesn't sound like the sixty psalms of lament. We don't lament very much. When we're low, we distract ourselves. Turn on the music, the video, call someone. Our hymns rarely lament. We prefer to praise, not without reason! We *ought* to celebrate God's redemption, his goodness, love and justice, his provision.

But there is much weeping and lamenting in the Bible, because there is so much so much to lament, such evil and chaos. Things are not the way they're supposed to be. How do people respond to chaos? There are several unhealthy patterns.

First, distract yourself. Entertain yourself. Find a crowd of people. Call a friend, just don't think about it. Second, become angry. Blame other people. Third, pity yourself and fourth, deaden the soul. Block the trauma of a death, a divorce, a great illness. To feel is too painful. Fifth, we can form an action plan, a way to defeat whatever happened.

That is why we need the psalms of lament.

We can see evil and praise God as an act of faith and "defiance in the face of disorder" for we know nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Rom 8.35-39). Despite appearances, God does govern the world in wisdom and justice.<sup>2</sup> It's good to praise God for that, publicly and privately.

We can lament. When we lament, we admit the world is broken and that we are part of it. We face our anguish and disappointment and attend to it. There is a time to transcend optimism and ask God, "Do you see this disaster? This outrage?"

Around 700 B.C., when Hezekiah was king, the mighty Assyrians invaded Israel. The great power of the day, they swept through petty kingdoms, through Israel's fortified cities and arrived at the gates of Jerusalem. Their general asked the city to surrender peacefully, and enjoy the bounty of Assyria. Then the general stood near the city walls and called out in Hebrew:

"Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad, of Sepharvaim [and] Samaria? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (Isa. 36).

Hezekiah got a copy of the general's speech, tore his clothes, went into the temple and said, "This is a day of distress... and disgrace. May the Lord hear these words and answer. For they mocked and ridiculed the living God." Later the general sent a letter saying the same thing. Hezekiah "went up to the temple of the LORD and spread [the letter] out before the LORD" and prayed –

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<sup>2</sup> Bruggemann, 51

Lord, please *read* this, the insults and mockery. But he thinks he has a point. After all, he *has conquered* kingdoms. He *has* burned gods of wood and smashed gods of stone. But their gods are idols. So show yourself to be the true God by defeating him. The Lord answered and routed the Assyrian (2 Kgs. 19).

Hezekiah's prayer is both petition and lament. It's a lament because it says "Do you see this, Lord? You can help, please do so." It's good to lament.

I've seen this personally. In some sorrows, lamentation was natural, inevitable. In sorrow, I poured out my grief, and eventually found peace. But I've also refused to lament. I pretended evils never happened. I found that problems don't go away simply because we ignore them. They stay unresolved.

Some experiences are complicated, gray. A mother takes her youngest child to school for the first time. That's good, isn't it? Yes, but it's OK to lament.

Or we may be frustrated at work. Our tasks don't match our gifts or call. We have a toxic co-worker. It's a professional problem that merits a professional solution. But if there is sin and brokenness, it's fitting to lament too. We may begin to find peace and clarity that way.

We need the laments to unleash our sorrow. It does no good to say, "I'm happy all the time" and block the trauma of death, broken families, shattered careers and great illness. Don't deaden the soul, *lament*.

### **Superficial or natural lamentation**

Like anything, our laments can be genuine or superficial. Criminals lament their arrest and corrupt politicians lament their loss of power. God doesn't promise to hear shallow laments.

After he betrayed Jesus, Judas was filled with remorse. But remorse and self-recrimination, aren't lamentation. Remorse turns inward on the self, not Godward. Likewise anger is generally directed out, at the world, not Godward.

When we lament, we take our sin, our anger and we spread it before God, like Hezekiah or Jeremiah. We say, "Lord would you look at this - this sin, this outrage – and act? I know you can; I believe you will."

### **Deep, Spiritual Lamentation - Psalm 13**

Psalm 13 has three parts: an agonized lament, a prayer, a confident conclusion. It begins with a desperate cry, "How long?" that comes in five waves. Then four lines of petition and three lines of confidence. Psalm 13 advances in waves of decreasing length, until at last it's moved solely by joy and calm as the sea.

### **Lament**

David launches into his lament at once. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" David has an enemy. That enemy has the upper hand. He is facing death. Yet in the hour of supreme need, it seems that God turned his back. The psalm begins with a barrage of questions that are almost accusations.

"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? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (13:1-2). David doesn't seek information, he registers his distress.<sup>3</sup> There is no confession of sin, no sense he deserves his anguish. No, David thinks God's absence is a failure of covenant loyalty. Why is God hiding his face? Why must he face his distress alone? There is no polite warm-up. The psalm begins with a barrage of questions that are closer to accusations.

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<sup>3</sup> Mays, 78

- 1a He knows God has forgotten him; he wonders how long it will last.
- 1b God has hidden his face, looked the other way, abandoned rejected him.
- 2a He struggles, literally with "advice" or "plans" – he can't decide what to do.
- 2b His enemy rises over him and God doesn't intervene. The enemy has displaced God, to whom he turns for help. This is the worst news.<sup>4</sup>

### **Plea and petition**

The cry grows more urgent, more intense, with each repetition.<sup>5</sup> Yet David does address the Lord and expects a reply: "Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death."

First, look on me, instead of looking away.

Second, restore the sparkle to my eyes, the spark of life. Let joy and strength return. It's the same sparkle that literally is in the eyes of hungry soldiers, finding honey in 1 Samuel 14. Restore that spark, David says, or I'll die.

Third, God must act lest David's enemy boast, "I have prevailed over him" (Ps. 13:4). That is, David's distress is God's problem. If David, God's man, is vanquished and ridiculed, then God is diminished. So Lord, what are you going to do?

### **3. Resolution – the result of lament**

At the moment of most desperate need, the tone changes. The questions disappear; the gloom dissipates. In spite of the enemy's domination, in spite of his anguish of soul, in spite of God's absence, David says, "But I trust in your unfailing love... I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me."<sup>6</sup> What changed? There are three options, for David and for us:

First, did David change? Perhaps he found relief by telling God of his anguish. People ask, "If God is sovereign, he'll do whatever he will do, so why pray?" That question assumes that prayer equals asking God to do things. But that is just one part of prayer. *We* change, we find relief, when we honestly take our pain, grief and perplexity to God. Remember: he won't be surprised or offended.<sup>7</sup>

Second, if David was in the temple, perhaps a priest gave him relief or stirred his faith. Childless Hannah poured out her sorrow in the tabernacle and Eli told her, "Go in peace; may God grant your request." Those words changed her (1 Sam. 1:1-18).

Third, perhaps time passed and God delivered David. We don't know. Whether there was a ray of hope or not, whether David had reasons and evidence or not, David's faith took him higher.

Psalm 13 shows this: The cry of distress, "O Lord, will you forget me forever?" sound like anger or unbelief. But when we present our cry to God, it becomes an act of faith. The lament is an act of courage because we are willing to *experience the world as it really is*.

The lament is an act of faith because it shows that our brokenness is a "proper subject for discourse with God." Every topic, every feeling, can be a topic of heartfelt conversation with God. We withhold no

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<sup>4</sup> Futato, 66

<sup>5</sup> Alter, 65

<sup>6</sup> 13:5-6, Futato, Psalms, 68

<sup>7</sup> Futato, Trans. 18-20

part of life from him, for he is sovereign over all: "Everything must be *brought to speech*, and everything brought to speech must be *addressed to God*." We take all of life to him.<sup>8</sup>

We don't need to protect God's tender ears. We can expect God to hear our complaint. If we have to repent for bitterness or excess, we will. Meanwhile, we can tell God to wake up, listen and give the justice we deserve, the help we need.

So then there are three results of genuine lamentation: We change, someone (God, a friend, a leader) says something to encourage us, or the Lord acts to relieve us.

May I ask you to think a bit? Do you lament? What do you lament? What should you lament? Can you take that to God? Will you tell him your sorrow? Will you go to him and say, "Lord, look at this, please, and help?"

*Lament for a Son*, by Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff is even more moving. His son Eric died, at twenty-five, when he fell while climbing a treacherous mountain, alone. The very thing that made him unique – his love of mountains, his courage, his plans, his love of solitude, killed him. And it broke his father's heart.

In the book he writes, "It's wrong, so profoundly wrong, for a child to die before [his] parents." No parent expects to bury his children. They are the future, not the past... "There's a hole in the world." No one will take his seat at the table. No one can take his place in the world. No one will write his thesis. Only a void is left. O the father could bear it if his son were away for a year, even two years, even five, but forever? Only a hole remains, a void, a gap, never to be filled."

Augustine: "The tears streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them I rested."<sup>9</sup>

The funeral brought unexpected peace. The liturgy: "Into your tender hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your beloved servant, Eric... A lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming." They sang, they celebrated communion. By Eric's broken body, they remembered the broken body of Eric's Savior. They lit a candle that represented his life.

Then they gathered psalms and the words of wise Christians. That became the text for a requiem/lament they commissioned. The first part named the darkness of death, "Truly terrible is the mystery of death... Why are we delivered up to decay?" Job says "We die and disappear... our dwelling place remembers us no more (Job 14:7-10, 7:8-10). Then the lament itself:

Ashes are the bread I eat / I mingle tears with my drink (102:9)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord / O Lord hear my voice (130:1-2)

But God shares our suffering with us: "In all our afflictions, he is afflicted, and the angel of his presence saves us. In his love and pity he redeems us. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.... By his wounds we are healed (Isa 63:9, 53:4-5). Because he rightly lamented, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Ps. 22:1), because he was forsaken as he bore our sins and sorrows on the cross, we need never say "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Because Jesus carries our affliction, hope remains. He bore the great affliction, sin, that is the source of all others. He bore it and exhausted, so that we tasted some consequences of sin here, but never all (Ps. 103:15-17).

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<sup>8</sup> Brugman, 51-53

<sup>9</sup> Confessions 9.12. NW, 27

As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field;  
The wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.  
But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him.

But even in the valley of the shadow of death, God gives new life. "Those who sowed in tears shall reap with songs of joy" (Ps. 126). New life, not of our creation, breaks in upon us. And it will break in finally. "We shall all be changed. We shall be raised in Christ" who says, "I am making all things new."

So I commend the lament, for great sorrows and for lesser ones: work, relationships, a failing body, a wayward child, a disappointment. The Bible has a pattern. It begins with resolve to be honest with yourself and with God. Tell the truth, exactly what the woe is. Then, follow Psalm 13.

Address: Lord, hear my prayer 13:1

Lament: How long O Lord, must I endure... 13:2

Plead: See me, answer me, restore me 13:3-4

Trust: "But I trust in your unfailing love and will yet praise you" 13:5-6

Address, lament, plead, and trust that you will praise him one day.