

Chaplain's Corner



Article by Dianne Stewart, Volunteer Chaplain

Healing Wounds of the Heart

Lament is a prayer searching for understanding and peace in the midst of suffering or disheartening circumstances. Lament is not a failure of faith, but an act of faith. It boldly reaffirms the trustworthiness of God, and confidence in God's trustworthiness is the destination of all laments.

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Much of our task as Volunteer Chaplains in the hospital setting involves the dynamic of grief. We see it almost every day. Patients and families don't need our clichés or a pat on the hand. We can't fix their pain, but perhaps we can provide them with some help in working through it. What they may need is to lament without feeling guilty. They may need our help in understanding that they can say anything to God and still be okay. He already understands their pain and knows the thoughts of their heart and mind. Nothing is out of bounds, and nothing is outside God's gaze and His grace.

For this reflection, I have pulled from the articles Chaplain Alex gave us on the issues of lament, and I have drawn even more heavily on the book by Mark Vroegop entitled "Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament." In his book, Vroegop, says that though it may seem unnatural for Christians to wrestle with God in this way, lament stands in the gap between pain and promise. To cry is human, but to lament is Christian. Lament is a minor-key song—a sad song. In a lament, we can vocalize our sorrow to the Lord while simultaneously reaffirming our trust. Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.

Lament does not always bring a quick or timely answer—grief is not tame and lament is not a simple formula.

Rather, it is the song we sing because we believe that one day God will answer and restore.

Lament typically asks at least two questions: (1) "Where are you, God?" (2) "If you love me, why is this happening?" Lament is not the opposite of praise; it is the path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment.

Laments typically follow a pattern containing at least four elements and they may be useful to us as we try to help those we encounter who are suffering with feelings that feel counter to their faith.

The Four Elements of Lament:

1. An address to God
2. A complaint
3. A request
4. Trust

ADDRESS: "It takes faith to pray a lament. To pray in pain, even with its messy struggle and tough questions, is an act of faith when we open our hearts to God. . . Prayerful lament is better than silence! Giving God the silent treatment is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief." Silence is a soul killer. Lament is how we learn to live between the poles of a hard life and God's goodness.

COMPLAINT: Lament is the language of a people who believe in God's sovereignty but live in a world with tragedy. Stacey Gleddiesmith provides a helpful explanation: "A lament honestly and specifically names a situation or circumstance that is painful, wrong, or unjust. . . a circumstance that does not align with God's character and therefore does not make sense within God's kingdom." Our struggles are no surprise to God. Our complaints are a path for reorienting our thinking and our feelings. As chaplains, we can assure the sufferer that God prefers honest words rather than words that withhold our true thoughts and feelings from Him. We are not whimpering or whining here—this is gut-wrenching pain!! The fact that we sometimes feel like yelling at God is reflective of the fact that we do have faith in Him. Help the sufferer find the words to begin to spill the emotions of their heart, encourage them to write a letter to God, or help them explore other ways to unload their feelings in a beneficial way. Emotions of this magnitude that are not dealt with can lead to despair and depression.

Check arrogance at the door and come humble. We need to come with our pain, not our pride. Pray the Bible, choose a psalm to read. Be honest. Don't get stuck with complaining—don't linger there. The purpose of the lament is to move us toward God.

REQUEST: Ask boldly! We need to stake our claim on what God has promised to do. Help the sufferer recall the attributes of God, but not too soon. They need to vent first. Then, when they are ready, recall His powerful acts of the past, restate that the same power is ours today, help them call upon God to be the God who has cared before, who is caring now, and the One we are trusting now. His character never changes.

TRUST: Trust is truly active patience. "Complaints are not cul-de-sacs of sorrow, but bridges that lead to God's character." As chaplains, we can help the sufferer recall God's faithfulness to His promises in the Bible, in the lives of people they know, and even in their own lives. Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God. Without lament we won't know how to process pain. Pain can become a platform for worship. Suffering can lead to trust. Lament is the language for this transition. Songs of sorrow are meant to move us from complaint to confidence in God." That is where God can be glorified through our suffering.

We look forward to serving you.

Blessings,

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Psalms of Lament: 3-5, 7, 9-10, 13-14, 17, 22, 25-28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41-43, 52-57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142

Example of a song of lament: "The Anchor Holds" by Lawrence Chewning

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