



## Spiritual Discipline – Prayer of Lament

*“Lament is a cry of belief in a good God, a God who has His ear to our hearts, a God who transfigures the ugly into beauty. Complaint is the bitter howl of unbelief in any benevolent God in this moment, a distrust in the love-beat of the Father’s heart.”*

*Ann Voskamp*

**Desire:** Take my complaints, anger, sufferings, frustrations and heartaches to God.

**Definition:**

Prayers of Lament are ways to approach God with the realities of sorrow, frustration and angst that consume and distract.

Do you ever feel like life is full of unfixables? They keep you sleepless and threaten to swallow hope whole. Wonderful women grieve their singleness. Spouses grieve over their marriage or the cancer that ravages their beloved. Parents grieve their children’s choices. People we love move away or die. Sorrow can show up in a heartbeat. In *Help, Thanks, Wow*, Anne Lamott writes,

Even for a crabby optimist like me things couldn’t be worse...The planet does not seem long for this world...

What I wanted my whole life was relief – from pressure, isolation, people’s suffering (including my own...), and entire political administrations... I feel that I can’t stand one single more death in my life.

Learning what to do with our pain and grief is a large part of the Christian journey. Culture says, “Buck up. Get a grip. Control your emotions. Don’t feel. Don’t talk. Stuff the pain. Pretend or medicate if you have to—but get over it and move on.” Christian culture can say, “If you are full of faith, you won’t get hurt, confused and discouraged. You won’t feel hopeless or have a life filled with pain and loss.” This myth doesn’t do justice to our lives, to Scripture or to the life of Jesus.

The liquid entreaty of tears is a huge part of the biblical text. Orphans, slaves, widows, sinners, cities, prophets, priests, kings, the oppressed, sick, exiled, defeated and bereaved—all weep. Jesus weeps (John 11:35). And he’s in good company because God started grieving over the mess his best beloved had made just six chapters into

Genesis (Genesis 6:6). The Trinity seems quite at home in the watery world of tears. Jesus, the man of sorrows, teaches that those who weep and mourn are “blessed” (Matthew 5:4). The Holy Spirit prays for us with wordless groans (Romans 8:26).

Sometimes the best response to the brokenness of this world and my own life is a mixture of tears and prayers. Something about them puts us in solidarity with human misery. At the end of our resources we seem wired to weep and cry “help.” In fact, research on tears confirms that they wash away toxins and release endorphins that help restore psychological balance. Tears and prayers of lament won’t solve the problem of suffering, but they can stanch the raw nerve of pain by throwing us into the arms of God.

One of my favorite parts of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is when Sam wakes to find Gandalf alive. He says, “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What’s happened to the world?”

“A great Shadow has departed,” said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count.

One day God wipes every tear away (Revelation 21:3-4). Every sorrow is behind us. But until that day we have a place to go with our pain and a way to pray it out before God. Trust yourself and your tears to the One who is acquainted with grief. Lean into some of the laments of Scripture and find your own heart’s sorrow written in the book of life.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. What is your natural response to things that make you sad or mad?
2. What do you tend to do with your pain? How do you act it out? Rationalise it? Blame it on others? Deny it?
3. What messages about crying did you pick up as a child?
4. What does it mean to you that the Trinity is in solidarity with the pain and suffering of humanity?
5. According to Psalm 56:8, God collects your tears and puts them in a bottle (ESV). How does it feel to reflect on that?

## **Spiritual Exercises**

1. Choose one of the psalms of lament found below. Let the words of the psalm become your words as you pour out your heart to God.  
Praying the psalms of lament: community laments (Psalm 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129); individual laments (Psalm 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27)
2. Lamentations 3 is a graphic lament. Where does this lament clarify your own experience and turn you to God?
3. Practice feeling your sadness. Don't numb it; don't narcotize it. Bring the sadness to Jesus and ask him to help you with this load.
4. Turn to John 11 and imagine you are present when Jesus begins to weep (v. 35). Pay attention to him. What do his tears say to you?

## **Resources on Praying Laments**

*Finding God: Praying the Psalms in Times of Depression* by Thomas Lewis

*A Grace Disguised* by Gerald Sittser

*A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis

*Invitations from God* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, chapter 5, "Invitation to Weep"

*Talking in the Dark: Praying When Life Doesn't Make Sense* by Steve Harper

## **Reference**

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP Books, Illinois 2005) page 272- 274