**Dr. May Young, Introduction to Biblical Lament
Session 1**

This is Dr. May Young in her teaching on Introduction to Biblical Lament, Session 1.

Hi, my name is May Young, and I am an associate professor of biblical studies here at Taylor University. I teach the Old Testament as well as some courses on historic Christian belief.

And today I'd like to actually talk about the topic of biblical lament. And I will have a couple of lessons that will deal with this topic specifically. But I'd like to begin our time here with just some reflection, and a question for you is, how do you handle pain and suffering? So, when we think about how we live in a broken world, we see and hear in the news all the time about suffering and tragedies and things that are happening all around us.

How do we process through some of the pain, justice, depression, or doubt that we experience? And I'd like you just to take a few moments to think about that, you know, how do you personally think about these topics and what you do with that? And as I think, as you think about that, I just want to kind of bring out some of the probably possible ways that people have answered that in the past or have thought about it, and perhaps they're familiar to you as well. And so sometimes when people are thinking about some of the pain or injustice or things that are happening around us, maybe there's some, you know, ignoring and hoping that it goes away. That could be something, you know, so it's just too overwhelming.

So, it's easier to do it. Another option could be just to share it, talk about it, and process it with a friend. Or we could actually be distracting or busying ourselves.

And so, we don't have to necessarily face the reality of the things that are happening all around us. And so, we just keep busy so that we don't have time to actually sit down and think about these things. Or we can also pretend that everything is fine.

So here kind of adjacent to kind of ignoring it, but just actually pretending that things are actually doing okay. Or another option is to try and numb it. And this is probably a very unhealthy way to do it through self-destructive habits.

You know, sometimes people might turn to alcohol or drugs or some ways of numbing just the pain that's all around in dealing with that as well. So, when we think about this, these actions or, you know, these possible inactions may bring temporary relief. And so, but I think that there must be a better way and there has to be a better way and how we process through that, because we live in a world that is full of suffering, that we do face trials, that there are things that are happening all around us in this way.

And part of this is reflection, which is why I decided to write this book called Walking with God Through the Valley. And this is published through InterVarsity Academic Press. And the reason why I did that was in reflection, when I was growing up in the church, I didn't necessarily hear too much on the topic of it.

When we think about the topic of lament, thankfully, the topic of lament has been brought to the forefront, perhaps because of the things that we've been facing in this world, dealing with a pandemic, even onward, and wars and things that were happening in the world right now. So, what I'd like to do is in our talk, in our lesson, is to learn a little bit more about biblical lament. You know, what is it, and kind of talking a little bit about how it's a little bit different from perhaps what we think about when we think about just the topic of lament in general, in general.

So, what is biblical lament, and why is it important? And to begin with, I do want to say here that I believe that the concept and practice of biblical lament goes beyond the general understanding of merely expressing the reality of suffering. So here, when we think about the general kind of notion of lament, we think of merely expressing the reality of suffering. We think about just being sad or, you know, dealing with pain or how that happened? But I think that biblical lament actually is a little bit different in that it's an act of faith.

It's an act of faith in which we cry out to God honestly with our suffering, our injustice, and our anger. And here it invites God into our struggle. So here it's actually turning to God, inviting to him into our struggle and helping us to become a people of resilience.

And so here through our lament, we're actually on the way to greater resilience and healing in our hearts in this way. And so it's not just kind of expressing our pain and suffering or feeling sad. It's actually an act of faith that will bring us to a greater hope in that sense.

And so what we find in scripture is that scripture gives us examples of lament. So, there are a lot of lament prayers for times when we face doubt or injustice or pain or difficulties that are all around us in this way. So, some of the lament prayers that we can find are particularly in the book of Psalms.

In fact, in the book of Psalms, you actually find that one-third of the Psalms are Psalms of lament found in that kind of genre. And we'll talk about that in just a moment. The book of Job also has expressions of lament here as Job laments what has happened to him in his own personal situation.

The prophets actually have a lot of laments as well. And so, lamenting the injustice that's all around, the sin, the people, the nations that are against the nation of Israel and Judah. And so, you have a lot of laments that come forward from the prophets and as well as the book of Lamentations.

And the book of Lamentations is actually written about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. And so here, as a result of that catastrophe, you have a reflection in the book of Lamentations on that as well. And even in the New Testament, you see that even Jesus's cry from the cross is a lament.

He's actually quoting from Psalm 22, which is a Psalm of lament here. And you know, kind of using that as he's on the cross here. And so, we see here that there is a lot of relevance when we think about the prayers and the laments that we find in scripture.

And so when we think about lament here, I want to say first here is that we can also see that lament in the Bible is actually a genre. And so, it's actually a genre in the Psalms. And so you have a genre that is, you know, kind of, you know, what do we see about the importance of genre? What exactly is genre? So why is understanding the text genre important? And so why am I doing this? I want to root our discussion in this because we want to see what's coming from the biblical text as we think about this topic of lament.

And so what is the genre here? And so, genre, this is just a basic definition, here is a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content. So, you have examples like, you know, biographies, you even have, you know, manuals and instructions. That's a particular genre, or you have the genre of fairy tales.

So, if I was to say, you know, once upon a time, you actually know when I say that word, what kind of genre we're going to encounter. And so, the reason here is it helps us to understand what we're reading, what we're hearing, what we're looking at, so that we can actually interpret it correctly and think about that in that way. And so here, when we think about even the book of Psalms, you know, how do we interpret it? How do we look at the book of Psalms correctly? And so you have here Herman Gunkel.

He was a form critical scholar. He did some analysis of the Psalms back in 1926. And what he did was kind of looking at, you know, the Psalms, were there anything that kind of cohered together that you found similarities in some of the Psalms, some kind of forms and structures and wording and topics.

And so in his observation, he noticed that were similar forms and structure of expressions in the Psalms itself. And so his analysis actually categorized the Psalms according to different genre. So, his work actually found four main genres.

There's been a lot more work since his time upon that and actually identifying a lot of even subcategories within the genre. So the four that he had was like praise or hymns, thanksgiving, then he also identified individual as well as communal or corporate laments. And so our focus will really be on here, looking at the laments.

So both individual as well as communal or corporate laments, as we think about that in this way. So here, when we think about, you know, genre and how it's determined, what is kind of noticed here for us to even think about a genre. So for Gunkel, he was seeing here, did they have a similar setting in life? So, here, did they arise from a particular time, place, or kind of situation in this way? Did they have common thoughts, feelings, or moods that kind of come forward from that? Did they have a similar style and structure or even literary features that come forward from these particular genres? So, determining genre, then we want to make sure that it's not always cut and dry.

Sometimes you might have something that fits in several different categories in this way. We find that today as well. You can go and watch a movie.

It can fit under action and romance, or it can fit, you know, different kinds of genres. It's not always going to be clear-cut, and it's not always going to have every single element that you find in a particular genre in this way. But with those things in mind, I want us to think about lament prayers here.

And what were some things that were observed? You know, did they share specific styles or characteristics, communication, or kinds of feelings that are expressed here? That we do find them here in the Book of Psalms, and that the laments do have that. And so while each lament is different, they do share some similar literary patterns, forms, and structures. And I think that's really important for us to notice here.

So, when we're looking at the Psalms here, when people are dealing with pain, it's not just about raw expression of emotion that is there, but there's also some structure that's present. Some ways are instructive for us as we think about even lament for ourselves in this way. So, we can learn from these lament prayers and these lament as a genre and why it's important.

I liken it to how, when Jesus, His disciples looked at Jesus' life and noticed that He was a man of prayer, they came to Jesus and they said, Jesus, teach us how to pray. And the way that Jesus taught them was not necessarily like, you know, just pray to your heavenly Father and just say whatever is on your heart. Jesus didn't say that.

Jesus actually gave them the Lord's prayer. And here He gave them, you know, you know, so I'm sure you've probably heard of different sermons or different teaching where people have actually looked at the different elements of the Lord's prayer. And so where they would say, our Father who are in heaven, you know, so here that phrase itself is, you know, God is our Father.

He's not just this distant, you know, deity, but He's up in heaven. He's not like our earthly Father. And so here shaping how we think about who God is as we come in prayer before Him as well.

And so here it's very instructive. And sometimes people actually pray the Lord's prayer as it is in rote, you pray it together, and you recite it together. And at other times, you can actually personalize that prayer.

And so, looking at the different elements, personalizing it for daily use, and how we could pray that as well. And so, this is how I liken it when we think about the elements of lament and prayers of lament. What are some elements that are commonly found in these prayers? How can we personalize them for ourselves, for different situations of suffering and difficulties that we face? The Bible actually gives us these examples, and God knows that, you know, we will process through pain. There will be difficulties that we will face here, even as believers in this way and kind of understanding it in that sense.

And so when we think about the genre here, there are two types or two main types of lament, which I've already kind of identified earlier. We have the individual as well as the communal or the corporate laments. And so here, what are some elements that are found within these, and how do we talk about that in this way? And so for individual laments here, what we find is that a lot of times they're expressing a grief or sorrow.

So here they're very, you know, expressive of some of the things that the psalmist is facing, whether it be grief or sorrow, it presents a need to God to show that he may resolve it. And so here they're kind of bringing it to God here and asking God for this resolution. They're dominated by themes of pain and sickness and suffering.

So a lot of times, you know, dealing with, you know, some things that we deal with today, it hasn't really changed. The pain, the suffering, and sickness that plague our lives also plague the lives of the psalmist and the people in scripture as well. And so approximately 39 individual laments are found in the book of Psalms.

And so here, these are just some of the examples of them for you. And individual laments, kind of like the title, a lot of times is talking about the individual person. So, using a lot of individual first-person pronouns.

So you have here I and me, which is used a lot of times within the Psalms. And many of them are expressed in general terms. And so this is interesting in the sense that they're not necessarily for a specific situation per se, although they have some specific themes, but they're general enough for us to personalize it.

So, this is kind of where I'm saying is sometimes you may want to pray the Psalms, you know, as is, as which, you know, there are a lot of church patristic fathers have done that over the years. But you can also personalize it in the sense of, you know, recognizing certain situations that are more general in nature, and also personalizing it for yourselves. And so here, people can identify with the psalmist through this as well.

So, they can be applied to physical, spiritual, and emotional situations as we think about that in that sense as well. So, when we think about the common elements, here, we can find that there are about five that have been identified as we think about that. And so what I usually want to do here is kind of walk through a little bit about these five.

And actually, later in my book, in chapters five to 10, I offer different types of lament and walk through these elements in those specific examples. So, you have here lament and loneliness, lament and doubt, lament and anger. So, lament is not just a one-dimensional kind of feeling sad.

Although that's there and encompassed in there, there are a lot of different emotions that we struggle with, and lament can help us to process in this way. And so here, in a later lesson, I'll actually walk through one of the different ways of the Psalms and how it processes through loneliness in that way as well. So, but first off here, what we have here is the first element is the address or the invocation.

And so here, just like in the Lord's Prayer, it's about coming to God. And so here, this is the element of where it's turning to God. This is a prayer.

This is not just a venting of our feelings, our emotions into the atmosphere or into the universe, or even to ourselves. This is actually an act of faith and turning to God in this way. And so, this is an address or an invocation.

A lot of times, it's very simple. It's sort of, you know, turning to God and saying Yahweh or Elohim, God, my Father, or my Savior, or my Rock. So you can see that in the Psalms here and how it opens up in the prayer.

It's just very simple. It's turning to God, calling out to God, this kind of invocation or address, so that we know that this is a prayer, a kind of calling out to God in this way. Then you have here the second element, which is probably the part and parcel of a lament.

So here, it's a lamentation or the petition itself. And so here, a lot of times it could contain elements such as confession of sin or even assertion of innocence. So here, the psalmist is kind of doing some self-reflection, recognizing personal sin, or also even recognizing innocence, kind of having clean hands in particular situations.

There are also complaints about and to God that are in this section as well. And so kind of talking about what is the situation here that the psalmist is struggling with is what we're covering in this second element here. Then you have this third element, which is called the motivations.

And so this component gives reasons for God to act or move towards action. So here, as the psalmist is praying, as the prophet is praying, or as the one in the Bible is praying here, what is the motivation here for God to act? And so this element actually bridges the request with what the psalmist knows to be true about God and his character. And so here, you know, why should God act? And so here, this is kind of the psalmist, or putting it out there here, the motivations here for God in this sense.

Then you have this fourth element, which is the confession of trust or the assurance of being heard. And so, I want to say here that these five elements here, which are characteristic of the lament psalms here, and particularly a lot of individual laments, although some people can also apply it to some communal laments. What you find here is that not every single lament will have all five elements.

Sometimes they will be missing one of the elements, and they're not always going to be in the same order either, but you're going to be able to identify that as well. And you can see that within literature as well, even with different kinds of genres, you know, you're going to see certain things that will be identified, but it's not always going to be a cookie-cutter fit in this way. And so here, even with this, as we think about this confession of trust or assurance of being heard, not every lament is going to have that.

So, you have here, even in Psalm 88, which is considered probably the darkest of the psalms, it doesn't have that element in there. And so in some ways that's also, you know, kind of reassuring. So, it's always, you know, even within our laments, it's not always going to be the way that we see it here or how we process it.

And the people are still in process sometimes as they're lamenting and bringing things up to God. And that's okay, even for us in our prayers as well. And so, this, when it is present, this is important because it marks the shift from lament to hope.

And so more specifically, it's this turning point of, from distrust to trust in the psalmist or within the psalmist. And so, a lot of times it's indicated through the grammar, through the vocabulary of the psalmist. And so, in Hebrew grammar, it's called the vav adversative.

It's actually here kind of translated as a conjunction with, but, or now is kind of how you would see it in the book of Psalms. And so here you see examples here, and it indicates this transition from lamentation to another kind of speech. So, to a confession of trust or assurance of being heard.

So, but I trust you or something like that, some kind of confession in this. And so, what's interesting about this particular element is that as scholars kind of looked at it, you know, how, how does that transition kind of take place? Sometimes we're reading and all of a sudden, you know, it's kind of really morning and kind of thinking about dark situations, but all of a sudden this psalmist or the psalm bursts off in this kind of confession of trust. Like, how does that take place? And what's interesting here is that there are a lot of different ways in which scholars have talked about how trust could happen.

Was it a salvation oracle? Was it something that, you know, they were reminded about, and that the character of God is not always uniform in this way. And I think that's really reassuring because that's how it is, that's how life works sometimes, even with our own prayers. Sometimes the way that God encourages us is through the ways that he's worked in the past or through scripture that he brings to mind, or, you know, so different things that God, you know, works and encouragement comes in different forms.

It helps to encourage our hearts and bring about that kind of transformation of, or trust or assurance of being heard. And I think that's actually a reflection of reality, even as we process these prayers before God in this way. And then here you have this last one, which is the vow of praise.

So, because the psalmist felt the assurance of being heard or experienced deliverance, he's now able to offer a vow or a promise of praise. And so here you can see some of that that comes, you know, I will yet praise him or, you know, some kind of vocabulary or some kind of things that kind of reflect that as well. And so, like I said here, not every single element will be found in all the laments here, but we do find these five common elements that are present in this way.

So now I want to talk a little bit about, you know, why prayer and lament prayers are important. Why is this important for us to even think about here and reflect on as we think about this topic? And so I'd like to kind of come back to this kind of understanding here that in order to heal emotional pain, we actually need to invite it up into our conscious awareness. And I like this quote here from the 12-step program. It's you who has to feel it.

You've got to feel it to heal it, you know, and sometimes, you know, we don't want to feel it. We'd rather actually stuff it away in this way, but here we're kind of bringing it into our conscious awareness to bring healing. And I'll talk a little bit about this later too, when we talk about the different purpose of lament here, but, you know, we don't want to be numbing or stuffing or denying our feelings.

You know, oftentimes we're pretty good at stuffing our stuff. Okay. So we would rather not deal with this, and we'd rather stuff it away in this sense as well.

So, some of us have become so good at the denial of emotional pain that we can function in our lives. And so there's too much going on in our lives. And so we kind of, you know, push that aside so that we can function, and we've unconsciously learned how to keep the pain at bay so that we can do our daily lives of some kind of balance.

So here we don't have time to be distracted by our feelings and our emotions. We have to have, you know, some way of coping so that we can deal with life and kind of balance. However, by doing this, sometimes we've created this energetic imbalance in our lives as well as in our hearts.

And we might not even realize this, that this is happening, but our only awareness might be this sense of feeling off. We don't know why we're not feeling ourselves. We're kind of feeling off, and we're living our lives with limited inner resources and constantly looking for something outside of ourselves to fix us.

And so this is something that we don't even recognize. And, but these are some of the indications here that maybe we're not dealing with some of the things that are in our hearts in this way. And so we won't find real healing until we actually face our pain and actually deal with it in that way as well.

And so I think here, oftentimes we push the pain down to put a mask on our face. And so here, you know, even though we're dealing with a lot of things internally, we put on a mask when we're facing the world in this way, and we think that ignoring the pain will actually make it go away. So, if we don't pretend that it's not there, it will go away here as well.

I think a lot of times we do that with our health as well. You know, we know that certain issues are ones that we have to deal with regarding our health. And we think that without, you know, dealing with it, we ignore it.

We think it's going to go away, but we don't realize that that's not going to solve the problems, whether it be emotional pain or even physical pain, in this way. And sometimes that can even make things worse for us when we do that, when we just pretend that it's not there as well. And so there's actually a published kind of study here in social, psychological, and personality science that found that when you bottle up your emotions, it can actually make people more aggressive.

So they actually had a study, they asked some participants to actually suppress their emotions as they're watching kind of disturbing scenes in a movie. And they had one group who could not express their feelings, and they had to suppress their feelings. And then they had another group that was allowed to show their feelings.

And so here, the subjects who were allowed to show their feelings actually were less aggressive afterwards. The ones who couldn't deal with it found themselves to be emotionally reacting more aggressively than they should have at certain situations. So here you have a clinical psychologist, Victoria Terat, who says the following when kind of commenting on this.

It says, so she's giving an example of daily life. So, kind of saying, for example, you might be angry at your brother, and after stewing in your anger, not saying a thing, you can encourage an emotional outburst. So, when you're driving the car a few weeks later and someone cuts you off, you get all out road rage, causing an accident.

And that explosion and that overreaction to a situation is your body's way of releasing that pent-up emotion. And so here, you know, have you ever kind of, you know, kind of overreacted to a particular situation? Perhaps, you know, your kids are, you know, young and they're, you know, kind of rambunctious and all of a sudden you have a lot of pent-up emotion or anger that could come up from work or other situations. And then you find yourself overreacting to how your children are reacting to certain things.

And so you have these pent-up emotions, and now you're kind of taking it out and overreacting to certain situations. So that's sometimes what we can see here is that our emotions, when we try and pent them up, they're going to actually come out in other ways and other forms that can be actually harmful for us as well, and how we deal with these things. Anne Lamott, in her national bestseller, Traveling Mercy, says the following.

She says, All those years I fell for the great palace lie that grief should be gotten over as quickly as possible and as privately. But what I discovered since is that the lifelong fear of grief keeps us in a barren, isolated place, and that only grieving can heal grief. The passage of time will lessen the acuteness, but time alone without the direct experience of grief will not heal it.

And so here, kind of, you know, how do we bring healing here? How do we kind of express these things to move forward here instead of, you know, letting it, keeping us trapped in the sense. And so, this is kind of where, you know, we have to recognize that we're not robots. God didn't create us to be robots.

We are human beings that actually have feelings, that actually have emotional, spiritual and rational elements as we think about it. And so here he doesn't expect us to suppress our feelings because he's created us with feelings. We're not here to be, you know, kind of stoic in this way as we think about it.

And so, actually, a question that I want to kind of ask, too, is, you know, do you try to avoid or suppress your pain? You know, why or why not, if not, how do you allow yourself to feel your pain? And so that's something to kind of consider here. You know, do you suppress your pain often, or are you allowing yourself to actually deal with some of the things that you have in your heart as well? And so we need to be honest with our pain in order to experience healing. And so we're whole beings, not just rational, physical, or emotional beings, but we're actually whole person beings with all these aspects in our lives.

And so if we don't deal with our pain, it'll actually come up in different ways. And so we saw that too. Here's another study that says that if we don't deal with our emotional pain, it could actually have adverse effects on our health.

Several studies have shown that people who chronically inhibit their emotions may be more prone to disease than those who are emotionally expressive. They also found that emotional suppression leads to heightened physiological reactivity, which makes one vulnerable to disease. And so, you have several studies here that kind of see that.

And so recognizing that we are whole person beings. So here, if we're not dealing with our emotions, it's also going to affect something in our health. In 2013, a study by Harvard School of Public Health and the University of Rochester showed that people who bottle up their emotions increase their chance of premature death from all causes by more than 30%, and their risk of being diagnosed with cancer increases by 70%.

I mean, that's huge here, kind of when people are not dealing here, even with their emotional pain, that it has physical consequences in that way as well. And so here is, I would also say here then, recognizing too that lament is an act of faith. And so this is, you know, kind of recognizing why lament is important? Because it's an act of faith.

So here, a faith in God. And so here, God can handle our pain. So here, when we're coming before God and we're expressing this here, we're lamenting and we're turning to God, not away from him.

So a lot of times when people are expressing pain or dealing with pain, they want to kind of hide or cloister themselves away or kind of distance themselves from people, as well as from God himself in this way. And so here, when we're lamenting, we're kind of resisting here within our own hearts to want to turn away from people and from God and actually turning to God, turning to him during our times of difficulty in this way. And another thing to remember here is that we only let those who are closest to us know our real thoughts.

And so here, that's important here as well. So, when we're kind of expressing lament here, we're also showing here, you know, that we believe in this close relationship that we have, this covenantal relationship that we have with God, allowing him to see our pain here. Because, you know, a lot of times, what we curate on social media is that we don't know the people very well.

So, we're not going to put our real feelings out there in that sense. And so here, this is where we need to actually provide real feelings. And God wants us to bring our pain and our burdens and our sorrows to him.

He wants us to unburden our hearts to him. And that's why scripture says, you know, common to me, all who are weary, you know, and burdened. And so God actually invites us in this way.

Research has also shown that suppressing your emotions pretty well shuts down communication within that relationship. And so, this study by James Gross at Stanford University talks about how, you know, when you are suppressing emotions, you're shutting down communication within that relationship. You probably see that here, even in your own relationship with people.

When you are shutting down, when you're suppressing your emotions and you're not dealing with it either with your spouse or your friends, you're actually, a lot of times, cutting yourself off from those people as well. And so that doesn't only happen on the level of people and, you know, individuals here, but this can also happen in our relationship with God. So, as we're suppressing our emotions, we're kind of, you know, shutting down our emotions.

We're actually shutting down communication here, even with God in that sense. And so when we're not honest with God, we end up alienating ourselves from him as well. And so sometimes when people are going through really difficult times and they want to retreat to themselves, they're not expressing even their pain to God.

They actually sometimes come to a place where they even stop praying altogether or even stop going to church because they're mad at God. And so here is kind of shutting down that emotion here. And so lament is kind of helping us not to do that, not shut that down, but keep that kind of communication open.

So, we have to have the faith to come before God in our honesty and in our pain as we think about that. So, God knows and sees our pain. Why do we shut him out in that sense? And so here, kind of coming, recognizing that that's important here as well.

And then thirdly, here, remember that God wants us to be honest with him in our prayers. And so when we're praying here, our prayers are not just here kind of to be rote or kind of mechanical or very general in our prayers here. But honesty with God is an important lesson that we can learn from the Psalms.

So here we have Daniel Hayes, who says a psalmist tells God exactly how they feel. And it often does not sound very spiritual or mature. Christians today tend to pressure each other into suppressing any emotional outpouring about God.

The Christian model for many is that of the hard stoic like Spock on Star Trek. And so here we do not want to be like Spock in this way, kind of holding in our emotions here and even in our prayer, but learning to be honest in this way. And so a personal reflection that I'd like you to think about is, you know, how do your prayers sound? You know, are you honest in your prayers? Are you just saying words or expressing generalities in your prayer? How intimate are your prayers with the Lord? How honest are you in engaging with him, with the pain and things that are happening all around you in this way? And so something to think about in this way.

And so now I want to kind of address a couple of misconceptions about lament. So, what is not a lament? And so when we think about biblical lament, what lament, what is biblical? What is not what we find in biblical lament? And so here, first off, the lament is not self-pity.

I think that's probably this kind of misconceived notion here. This is where you have Klaus Westermann, he says, there's not a single psalm of lament that stops with lamentations. Lamentation has no meaning in and of itself.

What the lament is concerned with is not a description of one's own suffering or with self-pity, but with the removal of the suffering itself. And so here it's a display here, kind of bringing up to God, kind of bringing up the situation, but also asking for God to make a change. So, the Psalms of Lament display a dynamic journey.

It's not a static picture of self-pity. It's not just about wallowing in our sorrows. And so this is something that a lot of people think is lament here, but lament is a process.

And in fact, here you see that lament psalms invite the worshiper to vent their frustrations and pour out their feelings, but there comes a time to seek a way out. So, the psalms seek change, and they're based ultimately on promise, not on doubt. The promise of who God is, the promise of what God can do.

They acknowledge that something is wrong and affirm that God can put it right. And so here, kind of when we think about it again, it's all coming together to kind of realize it's really an act of faith as we're expressing these things before God. And second, here, lament doesn't mean failure.

So here, this is kind of the way that we think. Sometimes we're afraid to be honest for the fear of judgment from others within the church, or even from ourselves, as we think about, you know, am I not spiritual enough? Am I, you know, the one facing these questions or these doubts in my own head? Is this a failure here? You know, we all, and you know, this could be something that, you know, we grew up in the church. I know that when I was growing up in the church, I often heard only about how people, you know, overcame difficulties after the fact.

So, you have a lot of, you know, testimonies of how people were struggling and then they overcame. And that was a lot of the stories that we heard. And so here, sometimes that would shape those who feel like, well, how come I'm not overcoming, or how come it's taking so long? Is there something wrong with me? And so here, kind of we have created this dynamic of more of this triumphalism within the church here as well.

So, this is kind of where, you know, I say this in my book, here is that when authenticity is promoted in the church, many do not want to be vulnerable for fear of judgment and feeling humiliated by others. Some have even confided that when they voiced their struggle, they received pat answers and were expected to overcome these issues in a timely fashion. Sadly, what ends up happening is that when people face doubt or hardship, the last place they want to be is in the church.

Many have even abandoned their faith because they didn't see God working or bringing the same victorious outcome that others have testified to. There are also those who felt that their struggle was taking much longer than others to overcome, and have become disheartened. This pattern of sharing has caused us to hide our struggles because we're afraid that we would appear weak in faith.

And so here, the judgments of those around us often lead us to portray an artificial strength that God never called us to display. In its haste to communicate the triumphant message of Jesus, the church has inadvertently communicated that to experience loss, sadness, and grief is to be a failure. And so here, we don't want to jump to that and recognize here that, you know, it's okay to be suffering.

It's okay to be dealing with doubts or pain or things like that, even within the church. And that's exactly the place where we should be dealing with and processing that as well. And the third here is that complaining and lamenting is okay.

I've often heard a lot of times where people, you know, have this, you know, kind of this question, like, you know, well, isn't complaining wrong? I mean, we have, you know, how are we supposed to be dealing with this? And what's interesting here is that nearly one-third of lament songs, psalms, actually contain a complaint against God. That's very unusual here. So, how do we reconcile that as we think about complaints and in our prayers? Isn't that wrong? You know, they actually, in these lament songs, complain about God's wrath, his indifference, his rejection, his forgetting, and his hiding his face.

You have this example here. Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? And so here, the psalmist is being honest and being real in how he feels. We also see here that, you know, laments might also raise these honest questions to God.

And so here, you have in this here, Lord, where is your former great love in which your faithfulness you swore to David? And so here, kind of raising these questions here, honest questions to God in this way. So, this is kind of where I want to talk about the difference between complaints and lament versus grumbling and complaining. And so, there's a difference here, and we want to recognize here in this, there's an important distinction between laments and merely grumbling and complaining.

And so here, this is where in the wilderness generation, in Exodus 15 and 17, and in Numbers, they were condemned because they were grumbling and complaining against the leadership and against the Lord to each other. And so, this is important because they were, they kind of, it was basically not necessarily an act of faith, but it was actually cementing what they really thought about God and their leaders in this way. So, in other words, their complaints were not prayers.

They were merely grumbling to themselves or to one another. They were not bringing their thoughts and prayers before God. It was an important distinction because complaining against God to others is condemned, but bringing complaints to the Lord is encouraged.

And so here, grumbling to others was just a way to express what they believed to be true about God. It was not dialogical. It was not in conversation.

It was not a kind of communication with God, but it was only a way of venting out their grievances and unbelief about God to one another. And so here, you have here, recognizing too, this is what Dr. Tremper Longman says here. He rightly notes that whereas those who rebel complained about God to each other, the psalmists and Job voiced their laments directly to God.

The latter indicates that they have not given up on God or abandoned hope that God would eventually answer their prayers. We must distinguish between self-focused expressions of self-pity or frustrations from prayers, which are directed to the one who has the power to bring change. So, we don't have to hide here; it kind of talks about Habakkuk here.

And so here we want those closest to us to express their true feelings, even if they're not pleasant to hear, because it promotes greater intimacy. And so bringing our laments, complaints, and petitions before God functions in the same way. And so kind of you, you know, how, you know, when you think about your closest relationship, if there's kind of tension between you and your, you know, close friend or your spouse, you want them to bring that complaint to you.

You want it to be dialogical. It actually promotes kind of intimacy. And so here in Psalms and prayers of lament, God wants us to bring it before him to promote this kind of intimacy, you know, instead of shutting things down.

Because a lot of times, too, when you think about your relationships, if there's a problem and you don't even address it in those close relationships, sometimes that brings a breach as well. And knowing that it's not promoting that kind of intimacy that you could find in that way. So here then I want to come back now, and after addressing some of what lament is not, talk a little bit more about communal or corporate lament.

And so, this one here is, you know, the other kind of genre here that's kind of dealing with more of the community when the community expresses, you know, pain collectively. And so, what are communal laments, and why are they important as we think about this in this way? So here, when we think about communal laments, a lot of times what we find in the book of Psalms is that they're written for times that the community is struggling together. And so, times of national crisis, natural disaster, military defeat, something that they're feeling collectively here as a nation or as a people group in this way.

Sometimes these laments were recited in some special ceremony for lament here, kind of recited in together collectively. And the number of communal laments that are present ranges from about 12 to 23 in terms of examples of how people kind of delineate this and categorize these in this way. And some of the things that characterize these, you know, corporate or communal, are definitely using here more first-person plural forms.

So here, instead of using the individual I or me, we're talking about we or us or our kind of community, and how we're dealing with this as well. They're also used in second-person singular forms to remind God of his relationship with Israel. So that we find in this communal laments actually, you know, addressing God directly, reminding him of his relationship, his covenant relationship with his people as well.

And so here you've rejected us, God, and burst upon us, and you've been angry. Now restore us. And so here, we are kind of directly talking to God in this way.

And so, a central feature in communal laments is this rehearsal of the history between God and his people. So, a lot of times citing about, you know, the ways that God has brought deliverance, the history of God and his people, the mighty deeds that he performed on behalf of the people. And a lot of this is kind of functioning as that motivation, you know, element that we saw earlier.

So motivating God for him to act and to arouse, to kind of bring deliverance to his people as well. So communal laments generally share these five elements here that we find here. Again, this address to God, which is common to both here, you know, oh God, or, you know, kind of directing, who are we directing this prayer to? And this is a prayer as well, communally as a corporate body here.

Then there are accusatory statements or questions directed to God. So, a lot of times here you'll see a little bit more of these complaints or these kinds of accusatory statements or questions that are brought up to God. You know, why have you rejected us forever? And then the lament over misfortune or the experience of the community.

Sometimes it's, you know, political in nature, kind of what the experience of the community is facing here in this way. And then petitions to Yahweh to deal with the misfortune. So, asking God to do something and to kind of deal with it and the reasons or the motivations for God to act upon that as well.

And like I said here, not all of those elements are going to be common to every single communal lament, but these are just some of the things that were kind of observed by scholars as what they see in this way. So why is communal or corporate lament important? I think first because we all universally understand pain. And so suffering and grief, sorrow, kind of sometimes, transcends the individual person.

So, it's not just us as individuals who experience these. Sometimes it's experienced by the whole community. And what, you know, is, you know, sin doesn't only affect us.

Sometimes it affects the whole community and those around us here. And so, it's not, it transcends, you know, just one person or culture or race in this way. And so, we all experience these emotions, and sometimes situations don't affect us alone, but a community collectively.

And what we find in the New Testament here is important as we think about us as a church being the body of Christ here, that in First Corinthians, it says that if one part suffers, every part suffers with it. And so here, standing together with our brothers and sisters who are dealing with pain and suffering, is important. And scripture calls us to do that, to stand and to suffer along with this.

So, there's this Swedish proverb that I think is kind of helpful here. It says that shared joy is double joy and shared sorrow is half sorrow. And so, you know, how does that proverb speak to you? Kind of thinking, you know, when we share, you know, a joy, we want to share with others because actually it increases our joy.

It doubles our joy. And when we share our sorrows with one another, it kind of lightens the load. We have someone carrying that load alongside of us as well.

And so here, recognizing the importance of communal lament, we stand together with our brothers and sisters in Christ in this way. So sadly, today, we don't know how to identify with those who are suffering. I wish that we could do a better job as a church.

We don't know how to stand on behalf of others. And perhaps a lot of times, we're concerned about our own lives, and we don't necessarily see those who are hurting around us. And so here, you know, we don't advertently do these things, but maybe we're so self-absorbed or thinking about ourselves that we don't actually realize, you know, those who are suffering around us here.

And so this is, this question is, you know, again, why is it that when people are hurting, the last place they want to go is to church? And so, a lot of times, you know, I hear people who would say, I don't feel like I'm up to church. I'm up for church today. Like, what does that mean? Like, do you have to be up in order to go to church? Or, you know, how about when you're hurting and when you're kind of dealing with a lot, that's primarily when you should be coming.

And so, this needs to change. So, we need to be people who can come alongside those who are suffering, and we need to learn to listen and to sit in uncertainty, to speak truth and love, and love through this presence of ministry. And so here, kind of even being present, even if you don't have the words to say, to be able to witness and to see your fellow brothers and sisters' pain in this way.

And so here, this is just a brief introduction to biblical lament. And in our next lesson, we'll cover some other topics as well. That's been addressed in my book.

Thanks. This is Dr. May Young in her teaching on Introduction to Biblical Lament, session 1.