

Dr. May Young, Recovering Biblical Laments

Introduction to Biblical Lament

Session 1 – 6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

So today we're going to dive into something ancient, something really powerful, a way to process pain and suffering that you might not have heard much about. It's a practice that runs deep through the scriptures, and it offers this honest, structured path through our darkest moments. We're going to explore the lost art of biblical lament.

But first, let me just ask you a question. When life gets hard, you know, when you're facing injustice or doubt or just that overwhelming sense of pain, what do you do with it? Like, what's your go-to move? For a lot of us, our coping mechanisms probably look something like this. We might try to ignore the problem, right? Just hope it goes away on its own.

Or we distract ourselves, just get so busy we don't have time to think about it. Or, and this is a big one, we put on that brave face, pretend everything's totally fine, when it's not. And sometimes we might even turn to unhealthy habits just to numb it all.

And look, these things might give us some relief for a minute, but they don't actually heal anything. Because deep down, we all know that just stuffing it down, well, it's not a real solution. There has to be a healthier, more constructive way to navigate all the suffering that's just part of life.

And the good news is, there is. That better way is an ancient practice, and it's called biblical lament. Now I know that phrase might sound a little weird, maybe a bit old-fashioned, but I promise you, it's one of the most powerful and honest ways we can connect with God when we're hurting.

So what is it exactly? Well, biblical lament isn't just about feeling sad. It's an intentional act of faith. It's making the choice to cry out to God with complete, raw honesty, bringing him all of our pain, our questions about why things are so unfair, even our anger, and inviting him right into the middle of the mess.

And it's so important that we get this distinction. See, a general lament is just expressing sadness. That's a normal human thing.

But biblical lament is totally different. It's an active process. It's about turning to God with our pain, not running away from him.

It's an act of faith that actually builds the relationship instead of just, you know, venting into the air. And listen, this isn't some tiny, obscure idea tucked away in a forgotten corner of the Bible. It is everywhere.

Get this: over a third of the entire book of Psalms are laments. The whole story of Job is basically one long lament. You see it all through the prophets.

There's a whole book called Lamentations. And even Jesus on the cross, his words are a cry of lament from Psalm 22. This is absolutely central to the story of faith.

So how do you actually do this? Well, it's not just a chaotic emotional free-for-all. What's so amazing is that these biblical laments often follow a common structure, almost like a roadmap that helps guide us through our pain in a healthy way. You can think of it like this.

Remember when the disciples asked Jesus to teach us how to pray? He didn't just say, "Oh, just say whatever you feel. No, he gave them a model, right? The Lord's Prayer. It had key parts to guide them.

Well, the elements of lament work in the exact same way. The typical flow usually looks something like this. It starts with the address.

You're simply turning your attention to God. Then comes the lamentation. And this is where you get brutally honest.

It's the complaint. God, this is what's wrong. After that, you often see motivations, giving God reasons why he should step in, often reminding him of his own character.

Then, and this is so key, there's usually a confession of trust. This is the turning point, that pivot from despair toward hope. And finally, it often ends with a vow of praise, a promise to thank God when he comes through.

Now, it's super important to remember this is a guide, not a rigid formula. Not every lament has all five parts, and they're not always in this order. In fact, Psalm 88, which is maybe the darkest Psalm in the whole Bible, never actually makes that turn to trust.

And you know what? That's really comforting. It shows us that even when we feel completely stuck in the darkness, that raw cry is still a valid prayer. So why does this matter so much? Because being honest about our pain isn't just some spiritual exercise.

It's absolutely essential for our psychological and even our physical health. Trying to suppress it is actually dangerous. There's a saying you hear a lot in 12-step recovery programs that just nails it.

You've got to feel it to heal it. You can't get around the pain, pushing it down, ignoring it, pretending it's not there. That's a dead end.

It will never, ever lead to healing. And this isn't just a nice idea. The science actually backs this up in a big way.

Studies show that when we bottle up our emotions, that energy has to go somewhere. It can actually make us more aggressive, you know, causing us to blow up over something totally small. But the physical toll, that's even more shocking.

Okay, get ready for this. A 2013 study from Harvard and the University of Rochester found that people who habitually suppress their emotions increase their chance of premature death from all causes by more than 30 percent. That's huge.

And if that wasn't enough, the very same study found that their risk of being diagnosed with cancer increases by a staggering 70 percent. I mean, the message here is crystal clear. Our emotional and spiritual health are directly wired to our physical health.

Being honest is essential for our whole being. Okay, I know what some of you might be thinking, because this is a big hurdle for a lot of people. It just feels wrong, right? Disrespectful or like, you don't have enough faith if you complain to God.

We're taught to be grateful, so how could complaining possibly be a good thing? Well, this is where the Bible makes a really critical distinction between a lamenting complaint and just plain grumbling. A complaint in a lament is directed to God. It's an act of faith that's trying to start a dialogue.

Grumbling, on the other hand, is directed to other people about God. It just vents unbelief and tears down faith. So bringing your honest complaints to God, that's encouraged.

It actually builds intimacy. Grumbling about God to others, that's condemned. And you know, this powerful practice isn't just something we're meant to do alone in our rooms.

The Bible is also packed with examples of whole communities coming together to lament, reminding us that we are not supposed to suffer by ourselves. These communal laments were for those times of huge, widespread crisis, like a natural disaster, a famine, a military defeat. Any time the entire community was going through a collective trauma and needed to process it together, out loud, before God.

There's this beautiful Swedish proverb that I think just captures the heart of this idea perfectly. Shared joy is double joy. Shared sorrow is half sorrow.

When we share our burdens, the load actually gets lighter. And that's really the vision for a healthy community, isn't it? The idea that we're all connected, so if one person is hurting, we all hurt with them. The community is meant to be the safest place in the world to bring your pain.

A place where people will stand with you, not give you cheap, easy answers or just tell you to get over it. So that leaves us with a really big, important question to think about. In a world that so often tells us to hide our struggles, and in communities that sometimes value looking happy over being authentic, how can we recover this lost art? How can we create spaces where shared sorrow really can become half sorrow?