

Dr. May Young, Recovering Biblical Lament

Session 1 - Introduction to Biblical Lament

AI Podcast Audio Overview

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Welcome to another Deep Dive. Today, we're exploring something pretty profound and honestly often misunderstood: biblical lament. But just before we dive in, I want to ask you, our listener, something.

When you're faced with pain, real suffering, or, you know, deep personal struggle, how do you typically handle it? If you're like a lot of us, maybe you try to ignore it, hope it just disappears. Or perhaps you distract yourself, stay super busy, anything to avoid facing it. Maybe put on a brave face, pretend everything's okay.

And sometimes people turn to, well, less healthy ways to cope, trying to numb the pain. Now, these might offer a bit of temporary relief, sure. But our sources today suggest there's a much better way, a healthier way, an ancient path, really.

Yeah. And guiding us through this is Dr. May Young, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Taylor University. Dr. Young is an expert in the Old Testament and historic Christian belief.

And she got into this topic partly because, well, she noticed it was kind of missing from her own church upbringing, which is interesting, right? Because it feels so relevant now with everything the world's grappling with: pandemics, wars, personal crises- you name it. Exactly. So our mission today for this deep dive is pretty clear.

We want to explore what biblical lament actually is, why it's such a vital act of faith, and importantly, how it's really different from just, you know, feeling sad or complaining. Let's unpack this. So when most people hear lament, I think the first thought is just, well, expressing sadness, suffering, that kind of thing.

That's the general idea, yeah. But Dr. Young really pushes past that surface understanding. She defines biblical lament as an act of faith.

It's where you cry out to God really honestly with your suffering, your sense of injustice, even your anger. It's like you're inviting God into the struggle. And she argues this process doesn't leave you stuck.

Actually, it leads to more resilience, greater hope. It's dynamic. An act of faith.

That's a really powerful distinction. Not passive sadness, but active engagement. Okay.

So if this is such a core practice, where do we actually see it in the Bible? Oh, it's everywhere once you start looking. For instance, about a whole third of the psalms are psalms of lament. Then you've got Job, his incredibly raw laments in the midst of his suffering.

The prophets too, they lament over injustice, sin, the nations opposing Israel or Judah. And of course, there's the entire book of Lamentations, which is just this heart-wrenching reflection on Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon back in 586 BC. Even in the New Testament, Jesus himself on the cross quotes Psalm 22, which is a psalm of lament.

It just shows how central this is. Wow. Okay.

So it's not just scattered verses. It's a major theme. What really struck me from the research is that this isn't just raw emotion spilling out.

It's actually a recognized genre in the Bible, especially in the psalms. And understanding genre, that's key for interpretation, right? Like if I start a story with once upon a time-exactly. You immediately know it's a fairy tale.

You adjust your expectations. You expect magic, heroes, maybe a happy ending. And scholars like Herman Gunkel back in the 1920s studied the psalms and noticed these patterns.

He was a forum critic. And he saw these prayers weren't just random. They had similar structures, similar wording, similar themes.

It was like a well-recognized way to talk to God in pain. Gunkel categorized them, identifying individual laments and communal laments based on things like the setting, the feelings expressed, and the style. Now he'd also say genres aren't always neat boxes.

Like a movie might be an action comedy. But the core elements, the patterns, are definitely there. So it has structure.

That's genuinely surprising. I always pictured lament as totally raw, unstructured, crying out. Right.

But think about it like this. Remember when Jesus caught his disciples, the Lord's Prayer? He didn't just say, "Hey, just say whatever's on your heart. He gave them a structure, a model prayer, one that could be prayed exactly as is or used as a framework to personalize.

Biblical lament is kind of like that. It's a divine blueprint for processing pain. God gave us this model.

A blueprint. I like that. So if it's a structured genre, what does that blueprint actually look like? Dr. Young mentions two main types.

That's right. We basically see individual laments and then communal or corporate laments. Individual laments are, well, personal.

One person expressing their own grief, their sorrow, bringing a specific need to God, asking for help. You see lots of themes like pain, sickness, suffering, things humans have always dealt with. There are about 39 of these in the Psalms.

You'll notice lots of I, me, my, first-person singular. And they're often quite general, which means people throughout history could adapt them to their own situation, physical,

spiritual, emotional pain. And these individual laments often have about five common ingredients.

Though it's not rigid, they aren't always all there or in the same order. First, there's usually an address or invocation. Just simply turning to God, saying Yahweh, God, my rock.

That simple act marks it as faith, not just like yelling into the void. Okay. Starting by acknowledging God.

Exactly. Then second, the lamentation or petition itself. This is the core, the raw expression of the struggle.

It might include confessing sin or sometimes insisting on innocence. And crucially, it often includes complaints about God or to God concerning the situation. Real honesty.

Complaining to God. We'll have to come back to that. Definitely.

Third element: motivations. These are reasons the person gives for why God should act. They might remind God of his promises, his character, his past actions, kind of bridging the gap between the plea and who God is.

Fourth, and this is often seen as the turning point, is the confession of trust or assurance of being heard. This is where you often see a shift, maybe marked by a word like but or now. It's a move from despair towards hope.

This confidence might come from remembering past help or clinging to scripture. So a pivot point. Right.

Although, interestingly, Psalm 88 is famous for not really having this clear turn, which tells us sometimes the processing is messy, it's incomplete, and that's okay too. That's good to know. And finally, fifth, often there's a vow of praise, a promise to praise God later, maybe because the person has found that assurance or even after deliverance has come, like saying, I will yet praise him.

Address, lament, motivations, trust, vow of praise. Got it. And the other type, communal.

Yes, communal or corporate laments. This is when a whole community, a nation, a group cries out together. Think national crises, natural disasters, maybe military defeat, widespread injustice.

These use plural pronouns, we, us, our, and they often directly address God, reminding him of his covenant promises to his people. A really key feature here is often the rehearsal of history. They'll recount God's mighty acts in the past, the Exodus, for example, as a way to say, " You did it before, God; do it again for us now.

Using past faithfulness to appeal for present help. Precisely. And the elements are similar to individual laments addressing God, stating the community's pain, asking for help, sometimes those tough questions or accusations, but all with that collective we focus.

It's powerful stuff. It really is. So, okay, we understand the what and the where and the how, but let's bring it back to the listener.

Why should you care? Why is engaging with lament actually important for your life, your well-being? Well, Dr. Young brings up this quote from the 12-step program, and it's so potent. You've got to feel it to heal it. She explains that when we avoid our difficult emotions, when we stuff them down- which, let's be honest, is a super common coping mechanism- it creates this kind of energetic imbalance, a feeling that something's off, and we end up constantly looking for external things to fix it.

Feel it to heal it. That resonates. And the research backs this up big time.

Stuffing emotions isn't just ineffective; it's actively harmful. There was a study, I think, in social, psychological, and personality science that found bottling things up can actually make people more aggressive, like pent-up anger from work exploding into road rage. Anne Lamott put it beautifully in *Traveling Mercy*.

Only grieving can heal grief, but we're often scared of grief, so we stay isolated in it. And critically, the physical health impact is stark. Research, including studies from places like Harvard and the University of Rochester, shows that chronically suppressing emotions is linked to higher rates of disease and increased physiological stress responses.

One study from 2013 even found that emotional suppression increased the chance of premature death by over 30 percent and the risk of a cancer diagnosis by 70 percent. That's staggering. Staggering is right.

It's a serious wake-up call. God made us with feelings, didn't he? Not like unfeeling robots. Honesty seems key.

Absolutely. And that is why lament is fundamentally an act of faith, because it means choosing to turn towards God with the pain, the anger, the confusion, not turning away. Our instinct might be to hide, to pull back when we're hurting or doubting.

Lament resists that. There's research by James Gross at Stanford showing that suppressing emotions damages communication in human relationships. It shuts things down.

Well, apply that to our relationship with God. If we're dishonest, if we shut down emotionally, we create distance and alienation that can lead people to stop praying, maybe even drift from faith altogether. Lament, even messy lament, keeps that vital line of communication open.

That's huge. So it makes you wonder, doesn't it? How honest are your prayers? Are you just saying the right words, or are you really bringing your whole heart, the messy parts included, to God? Daniel Hayes made a great point that the psalmists were just brutally honest. They weren't trying to sound spiritual or mature.

He contrasts that with the sort of hard, stoic, like Spock model that Christians sometimes feel pressured to adopt. That's a real challenge to how many of us pray. Okay, so it's vital, it's healthy, it's an act of faith, but there are definitely misconceptions out there.

Let's tackle some of those. What does Dr. Young clarify about what lament isn't? Yeah, good idea. Misconception number one: lament is not self-pity.

Class Westerman, a major scholar on this, said lamentation isn't about wallowing for its own sake. It's fundamentally concerned with the removal of the. So it's a dynamic journey, not just sitting statically in misery. It pushes the person to seek a way out, to affirm that God can put it right.

It's ultimately rooted in promise, in hope, not just doubt. Okay, so it's active, forward-looking, even in pain, not just wallowing. What's another one? Misconception two: lament does not mean failure.

This hits on something often called triumphalism in some church cultures, where the only stories shared are the victory stories after the struggle is over. Right. The neat, tidy testimonies.

Exactly. And the unintended consequence is that people who are still in the middle of the struggle, still hurting, still doubting, feel like they're failing, like they're not spiritual enough. And the impact, people avoid church when they're hurting most.

They hide their struggles. They put on this artificial strength. The church, without meaning to, can sometimes send the message that grief or doubt equals spiritual failure.

We have to get better at saying suffering is real, doubt is okay, even within a life of faith. That's so important. We need space for the in-process stories.

Okay, third misconception. This one might be surprising. Complaining and lamenting is okay.

In fact, it's biblical. We mentioned earlier, nearly a third of the lament psalms contain direct complaints against God. Things about his perceived anger or indifference or him hiding his face.

They ask really tough questions like, why, Lord, do you reject me? Straight up. So complaining to God is different from just general complaining. Yes, crucially different.

Think about the Israelites in the wilderness. They were condemned for grumbling and complaining to each other about God, about Moses. It was characterized by faithlessness.

But as Dr. Tremper Longman points out, the psalmist and Job voiced their laments directly to God. That very act showed they hadn't given up hope in him. They were still engaged.

That direct, honest, sometimes difficult dialogue actually fosters intimacy. Think about human relationships. Sweeping things under the rug creates distance.

Honest, even hard conversations can bring you closer. Same with God. Venting to others might feel good temporarily, but lamenting to God builds the relationship.

Directness to God versus indirect grumbling. That's a key distinction. So let's bring this back to that communal aspect we touched on earlier.

What's the unifying power there? Well, pain isn't just an individual experience, is it? It often hits whole communities. And the Bible really emphasizes our interconnectedness. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, if one part suffers, every part suffers with it.

We're called to actually enter into suffering with others, not just observe it. There's a lovely Swedish proverb: shared joy is double joy, and shared sorrow is half sorrow. When we share sorrow, when we lament together, it genuinely lightens the load.

It builds bonds. Shared sorrow is half sorrow. I like that.

But you mentioned Dr. Young observes that unfortunately many churches today kind of struggle with this, struggle to identify with those who are suffering. Yeah. She notes that sometimes there's a kind of self-absorption or maybe just that discomfort with pain we talked about, the pressure for positivity.

And the result is people feel they can't bring their pain to church. They stay away when they're hurting because they don't feel like they or their struggles will fit in. They don't feel up for church.

That's a real loss for the individual and the community. It is. And it really presents a challenge, a call to action for the church.

We, the collective, need to learn how to do this better, how to truly listen without judgment, how to just sit with people in their uncertainty, how to speak truth and love, how to offer what's sometimes called a ministry of presence, just being there. A ministry of presence, that's powerful. Well, this deep dive has been incredibly insightful, unpacking biblical lament, seeing it not just as sadness, but as this active, structured, vital act of faith.

It's crucial for our own healing, for deeper honesty with God and for building real supportive community. It really does seem like that better way we started with. Absolutely.

And maybe a thought to leave our listeners with is this: how might actively, intentionally engaging with lament, both personally and perhaps corporately, transform not only your own inner world, but also your relationships with others and even your full understanding of what faith looks like in a hurting world? That's a great question to reflect on. Thank you so much for sharing all these insights today. It's been fascinating.

And thank you for joining us for another deep dive.